

'I wanted to say I've been there, I've climbed that mountain'

She may be better known for mastering Romantic repertoire and forgotten British gems, but Tasmin Little isn't afraid to step outside her comfort zone, as her new recording of the complete Beethoven violin sonatas proves, writes Charlotte Gardner

The Beethovens are probably the most important works for piano and violin in the repertoire,' says Tasmin Little. 'They're works that I always wanted to record, just for myself, so that I could say that I've been there, I've climbed that mountain. And now was a good time to do it. I've always enjoyed playing unusual repertoire, but I don't want to only ever be thought of in terms of that because I would feel that I was only half a player.'

I'm sitting with Little in the kitchen of her west-London home, sheet music strewn across the table in front of us, as she tells me about her new Chandos recording of Beethoven's complete piano and violin sonatas, made with her regular duo partner Martin Roscoe. Little, who recently turned 50, has been releasing new discs at an impressive rate in recent years, notching up at least two a year and sometimes more. However, the fact that she has now recorded the Beethoven sonatas – following on from Schubert chamber works last spring – feels particularly momentous in a discography that has previously reflected her career-long natural musical habitats of the Romantic repertoire and forgotten British gems. Indeed, her last release was classic Tasmin Little territory, featuring the violin concertos of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor and Haydn Wood.

'When I was younger, my natural expression came through best in big Romantic concertos and sonatas,' she observes. 'Certainly in my early twenties it wouldn't in any way have been right to record Schubert or Beethoven, nor any of that really complex Classical repertoire. I didn't quite have the colours at my fingertips, or the finesse that is required. That was

something that developed and developed, and then through my forties I also found more of my own personal voice in that style.' She then adds, laughing: 'Before, it would have been, "Oh my goodness, that's Tasmin Little and I think she's playing Beethoven!" Whereas now I really hope that it will be, "Oh my goodness, that's Beethoven, and it really sounds like Tasmin!"'

Little's on top form, full of energy and enthusiasm, and we're soon engaged in discussion over the idea of storyline in the sonatas. 'Take the *Spring* Sonata's opening melody,' she enthuses. 'If you start on the E string it could sound tinny. There's an open string to consider. And yet if you begin the movement on the A string that's very covered. So, I elected in the opening to play it in not too overt a way, but still on the more overt E string for that lighter feel. Then, I chose the A string for the repeat of the exposition section, for a more thoughtful quality. Then, when it comes back in the





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recapitulation I chose the E string again, but this time in a more open way because I have the scale that leads me up to it so I could blossom quite naturally. So I brought, hopefully, three very different ideas to the same notes.

There's always a reason why Beethoven has given us that possibility to go back and to do it differently, to make the second hearing an alternative universe to the exposition – and I love that. The repeat is only the same order of notes but at a further point in time.'

The recording process itself was done to a tight schedule, all 10 sonatas being recorded in just two three-day sessions, but, rather than this making the atmosphere tense, Little describes how it contributed to an 'it's now or never' sense of freedom that saw her and Roscoe pushing themselves to

new heights – with the C minor Sonata for instance. 'Out of all the 10 works, it's one of the very hardest,' she explains, 'because it's not just a question of everything you have to do technically – you've got to do it together, too. And it was just going so well! So, I pushed myself more to make it as explosive, dangerous and unpredictable as it could possibly be, and Martin picked it up, and at the end of the movement we just looked at each other, kind of shocked! And listening back to it I'm very, very happy; when you listen to a first edit you wonder whether that atmosphere is going to hit you in the same way, but I think it is extremely exciting, and the same thing happened again in the *Kreutzer* Sonata.'

So, in terms of overall sound, what can listeners expect? 'I wanted to bring a really rich texture to it but in a classical way,' she explains. 'Big bold colours, big contrasts, drama, and I also wanted to bring out something of this rather wild element. I think anybody who knows my playing will know that I'm not really going to be making it "mono", but they also won't think, "Oh, she's playing it like she plays Brahms or Elgar". I've changed my vibrato very much on purpose, conscious that I didn't want that amplexness of vibrato I'd use for Brahms but that I still wanted at times to have a really full sound.'

Her vision for the recording balance itself was equally clear. 'Obviously they are works for piano and violin, so we wanted to make sure that this was an extremely equal partnership,' she says. 'Luckily Martin's a big player as well, so there was no danger of it being a violin work with piano accompaniment.'

I must confess that I had worried I'd find Little's interpretation a tad 'too much', bearing in mind her expansive tone and the fact that the sonatas had been recorded with a modern violin set-up and a Steinway grand. Yet, listening to the early edits, what strikes me is just how right they sound. Still, I can't resist asking whether a period set-up would pose any attraction to her, now that she's treading Classical pathways.

'I think the thing is, it isn't my style, and other people are busy doing it,' she replies, not remotely put out at the question. 'If people are going to like my version of it, it's because it is my version, and there will be people who no doubt won't like



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it, and that's absolutely fine. But I couldn't possibly do it in any other way – this is the way that excites me. The big difference between who I am now and who I was, player-wise, in my twenties is that I feel that I absolutely can play these pieces, and I feel I absolutely can make a case for them with my own style of playing the violin.'

Little's relationship with the people at Chandos has been crucial in the nurturing of this confidence and development, sending out a powerful message regarding the value of the smaller specialist labels. Not only are they supporting her in the setting down on disc of a huge amount of repertoire, and even allowing her to re-record works such as the Bruch and Walton concertos, but they're also embracing her tremendous variety. Other

recent recordings include works by Lutosławski, Fauré, Lekeu, Ravel, Strauss and Respighi. 'They haven't said to me, "We want you, but we only want you doing English music",' she says with gratitude, 'and that's a fantastic thing for me at this stage in my life, because I do feel now that I don't just want to be remembered for everything I've hopefully given to British repertoire.'

With the sheer number of recordings and performances on Little's plate, there isn't all that much time left for side projects at the moment. However, she is one of the group of arts lobbyists we have to thank for music being retained in the 2014 National Curriculum, and she remains in close contact with the Incorporated Society of Musicians, which co-ordinated the classical music arm of that battle. 'Whenever there are MPs to be seen or people to be lobbied I'm right there,' she says. 'It's all gone quiet at the moment so hopefully we're all right, but you've just got to keep your eye on it.' In fact, shortly after our interview she's back in Parliament, delivering a speech to the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Music Education on the importance of music education in our schools.

Mostly, though, it's all about playing. This month, Little and Roscoe launch their Beethoven recording with a performance of Opp 23, 24 and the *Kreutzer* at London's Wigmore Hall. In May, the second volume of her 'British Violin Sonatas' comes out. She also reels off to me a dizzying list of other repertoire currently piquing her interest, from brand-new works to older, little-known concertos. 'So I consider myself still exploring, still developing,' she concludes, 'and I don't suppose that will stop because I've still got the appetite and the energy for it.' In fact, as our conversation makes a final loop back to the Beethoven, her words sum up my entire impression of what ends up being an invigorating two-hour marathon session together. 'I feel in a way, here I am,' she says thoughtfully. 'I'm probably, at the moment, at the peak of my powers; young enough to have good stamina – and I needed it for this – but not so young that I haven't got my own thoughts on it. They are hopefully mature performances. So now's a good time.' **G**

Gramophone will review Tasmin Little's Beethoven sonatas next month