

*Time on your hands? Then add another string to your bow by learning a new skill from the best in the business. Jane Slade tells how she took...*

**W**hen I first picked up a viola three years ago I never imagined what a demanding instrument it would be. I wasn't even sure what it was when I lifted it out of its dusty case, having just inherited it from a family friend. Bigger than a violin and clearly much loved, I couldn't consign it to the charity shop so I decided to learn to play it.

I was determined to become as proficient as someone in her 50s can be with something new – and I achieved Grade 5 within two years, joined an orchestra and a quartet, and upgraded my viola to a much finer version.

I am lucky to live in London with great music colleges on my doorstep and have been inspired by top players at the Royal College of Music and the Royal Academy offering free masterclasses to the public. But now, wherever you are, thanks to online classes you can pick up a skill or hone an old one, helped by people at the top of their game. It's not just about exercising with Joe Wicks, you can explore your creative side too.

Tasmin Little, one of the nation's most popular virtuoso violinists, is holed up at home like the rest of us and she is offering online lessons to viola and violin players like me – amateur enthusiasts who would never otherwise get closer to this international star than from a seat at the Royal Albert Hall.

Her career began at the age of eight when she won a scholarship to the Yehudi Menuhin School. In 1982 she was a finalist in the BBC Young Musician of the Year. She has played with top orchestras all over the world and was given an OBE in 2012.

I visited the Royal Academy's recital hall last summer and saw the charismatic violinist, who is a visiting professor there, sitting at the front, looking younger than her 55 years in a bright floral frock, and listening to nervous students. Then she joined them on stage to dissect their

# LOCKDOWN LESSONS FROM A MAESTRO

wasted no time demonstrating techniques to improve my bowing.

We started with comportment. But instead of balancing a book on my head, I had to keep a table-top shape between my arm, hand, wrist and fingers. 'Imagine you have a ping-pong ball in your bow hand – grab it, then throw it away. Imagine your wrist is going towards your nose while doing an up bow, and seeing the back of your hand as you push your wrist away.'

I also had to think about flattening my knuckles and lengthening my fingers. No wonder it takes years for musicians to master technique. I wonder how many tennis balls Andy Murray had to strike before serving one over 100mph, and how often Darcey Bussell fell off her points before mastering a pirouette.

Our 30-minute lesson was intense but inspiring, and Tasmin never gave up on me.

As a student, Tasmin learned the violin and the viola, but since she is only 5ft 2in with small hands, it was hard managing the viola's long fingerboard so she focused on the solo violin.

A believer in removing barriers to classical music, Tasmin's classes follow her pioneering Naked Violin project in 2008, in which she offered a free download of pieces played by her unaccompanied, with her talking about the sounds a violin can produce. She followed that with workshops, No Strings Attached, to reach out to people regardless of their social background.

'I want to help people and I can get results quickly,' she says. 'I believe in

as her programme of farewell concerts has been postponed, she has deferred her retirement.

Since she started her classes in March she has attracted a range of students, from a 70-year-old in Wales who is missing his amateur orchestra, to a 12-year-old music student, a doctor in Vancouver – and me.

Tasmin's smiling face was beaming into my sitting room just days ago – with her 1757 Guadagnini instrument under her chin. Even though she was only virtually there (via Zoom), I felt nervous as I played the opening bars of the Russian composer Glinka's sonata for viola. She

working with what you've got, but I do still push people. What I have taught you today will transform every aspect of your playing.'

I believe her. But without practice, I will achieve nothing. There are no short cuts. But my beautiful viola deserves nothing less. ■

*The average price for a private 60-minute viola or violin lesson is £40. Tasmin's online classes cost £60 for a problem-solving 20 minutes, £80 for a 30-minute technical workout and £150 for an hour focusing on in-depth performance and technique. Email [dkantor.kaydar@gmail.com](mailto:dkantor.kaydar@gmail.com) or visit [tasminlittle.com](http://tasminlittle.com).*



Jane during her lesson with Tasmin. Right: Tasmin in concert finery

performances. She was always kind and encouraging, and modest in her demonstrations of dazzling dexterity.

But in January she announced her retirement from concerts. Practising daily for hours had taken its toll on

the single mother of two. 'I want to do other things,' she said. 'Like have a holiday, take a cookery course, have dinner with friends and enjoy concerts from the audience.' Of course life has since changed and,

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