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Tasmin educates and entertains

Kings Place residency for violinist: etcetera p5

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Thursday April 4, 2013, H&H Series

music Michael White

Leading violinist will educate as well as entertain

Kings Place residency for Tasmin Little will show how her instrument has developed

There was a time when concert-giving was straightforward: a musician had his programme for the season, turned up, played it through, and moved on to the next engagement. Some still do. But there's an expectation these days for more thoughtful, narrative-style programming that gives more context to the music. A good example is the three-year residency Britain's leading violinist Tasmin Little is about to make at Kings Place.

As she told me when we met up recently, the various concerts in the residency are designed to give some sense of how the violin has developed through the centuries as a chamber-music partner:

"I did something similar three years ago at Kings Place," she says, "and this is an extension of the same idea but different – showing how the violin starts off in the shadow of the piano but then grows in virtuosity. Develops its own shoulder-pads and takes off."

"Every programme focuses on violin and piano, but brings in an extra instrument – a horn in the first concert, a cello in the second, a clarinet in the third – that joins us for a final trio. So it's quite structured. And every programme illustrates a time-span in music history: Bach to Brahms, then Schubert to Ravel, finishing with

Strauss to Bartok."

If that sounds a mite didactic, it should be a pleasurable kind of learning, with gems like the Ravel piano trio (one of my own desert island choices) and the magical Brahms E flat trio for violin, horn and piano among the highlights.

The chance to hear an artist of the calibre of Tasmin Little in the intimacy of Kings Place is worth seizing – not least because way back, before she rose to fame, she was a Hampstead girl who first took up the violin as a child at New End School.

Home, then, was just across the Finchley Road and it was very much a north-west London childhood: slightly bohemian in that her father was an actor, but stabilised by a mother who did beauty therapy at Fenwick's, Brent Cross.

Hothouse

At the age of eight, though, she was off to Surrey as a weekday boarder at the celebrated Menuhin School for music – which at that time was an experimental hothouse with just 35 pupils, not too much discipline and a reputation for unsettling more young performers than it succoured. Nigel Kennedy was there when Tasmin joined – he used to pull her hair.

That she emerged at 18 with her sanity intact was largely thanks



■ Tasmin Little

Picture: Paul Mitchell

to the supportive closeness of her family and their insistence that she didn't turn into a prima donna.

After Menuhin, she moved on to the Guildhall School and into concert life, making her mark with repertoire beyond the mainstream: lots of Delius, lots of new concerto premieres. When she made her Proms debut in 1990, it was with the little-known Janacek Concerto, "which was a godsend because there wasn't likely to be anyone in the hall who knew it better than me and who'd complain 'she didn't get the tempo in the 2nd Movement'. Like they do".

The Proms made Tasmin's reputation. Immediately after that debut, EMI issued her first CD – the Bruch and Dvorak Concertos – and she's been one of the most visible violinists on disc ever since, thanks to a mutually committed relationship with the Chandos label. A recording of the

Richard Strauss sonata (which features in her Kings Place series) came out recently. A new Britten violin concerto with the BBC Philharmonic is due to issue any day and, in June, there's a disc of British violin sonatas, with pianist Piers Lane. In other words, she's not idle.

But one thing she's cutting down on these days is the endless travel world-league virtuosi are expected to endure. In fact, she's just back from America and goes to China later in the year. But with a growing family, she's starting to allow herself more time in the UK. Time for things like three-day residencies at Kings Place – the days in question being April 11, 12 and 13. Check the website, www.kingspace.co.uk, for details and booking. If you've never made it to Kings Place before, it's in York Way, to the north of Kings Cross Station.