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Richard Morrison

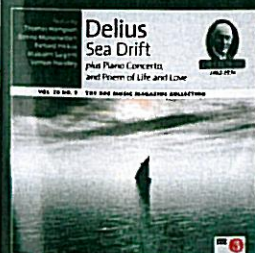
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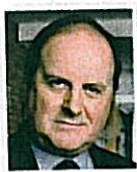
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THE JAMES NAUGHTIE INTERVIEW

# TASMIN LITTLE



Whether she's discovering new works or searching for the keys to unlocking old concerto favourites, the renowned British violinist's unstoppable energy is matched by a constant musical curiosity

PHOTOGRAPHY ROB SCOTT

Tasmin Little describes her Guadagnini violin, made in 1759, as her best friend. Her 1708 Stradivarius, on the other hand, is her Latin lover. She giggles.

The attractive thing about this conversation is that she can throw away a line like that without any risk of it appearing contrived or arch. As she laughs about her Latin lover, her children are getting something in the kitchen, the coffee is on the hob, the house in west London is calm and easy, perfectly relaxed. I conclude that she likes a good laugh.

So it proves. She mingles talk of her passion for music with a bubbling enthusiasm for the life it has caused her to lead, without any self-aggrandisement and no hint of a request for sympathy. In her late-ish forties now, she has the brightness of someone who's just starting out: there's so much still to discover. On the music stand is the score for Roxanna Panufnik's *Four World Seasons*, whose world premiere she is about to give with the London Mozart Players. She's clearly attracted by its dream-like mood.

Panufnik plays with the seasons in an unlikely combination of places – 'Autumn in Albania', 'Tibetan Winter', 'Spring in Japan' and 'Indian Summer' – and it's a natural piece for Little, because her feeling for

STYLISH SOLOIST:  
Little with conductor  
George Hurst in 1996



'My sound is my own. It simply is. Immediately obvious'

mysticism in music is one of her most obvious characteristics. Her recordings of Delius have a sinewy allure – the Violin Concerto and Double Concerto (with cellist Paul Watkins) were a notable release from Chandos last year, surpassing even her earlier recording with Sir Charles Mackerras. You can't talk to her

without recognising that she sees music as an exploration that throws up a new mystery round every corner, and inspires her because she knows its questions can never be answered.

While we're balancing our coffee cups on our knees, I ask her what she had wanted to do when she was a child, before music took hold. A nurse, she thought. Or maybe a psychologist. I understand why: she is intensely curious about people. That's why she started her Naked Violin project four years ago, the kind of scheme that risks criticism (and ridicule in some quarters) on the grounds of the name alone, but which became an instant

success in its efforts to assemble new audiences for classical music.

The idea that still guides the concerts is that the core violin programme, which she's played for so long – her concerto list is as long as anybody's – can be enlivened and deepened by unfamiliar work. So to audiences who aren't burdened by expectation, and therefore unconstrained by convention, she gives them Albéniz and Ysaÿe alongside Bach and Telemann. This summer, as well as touring in the US and Australia, she'll be at churches and small venues across England with programmes that are quite different from the familiar fare for concert goers in big city halls. ►





**NATURAL COMMUNICATOR:**  
'Music is an innate way of  
connecting,' says Tasmin Little



CONTEMPORARY THOUGHTS:  
 'We've got an obligation to  
 new work as musicians.  
 It's as simple as that'



And in July she'll take part in the Wallace and Gromit BBC Prom at the Royal Albert Hall (with, more conventionally, Delius in an August Prom).

'We've got an obligation to new work as musicians,' she says. 'It's as simple as that. I can't think about it in any other way. And it has always been like that. Look at the Ligeti Concerto, and how it speaks about its time – so radical for so many people when it was first heard. For as far ahead as I can see, it's going to be essential in the repertoire. When people discover it, they can't forget it.'

In conversation, it's obvious that the scope of her repertoire, wide and adventurous, is a consequence of the way she sees music as a quest as well as a mission. She's always on the hunt for work by contemporary composers.

In talking about the music she likes to play, a theme starts to emerge. Her affection for Delius goes back to her early days, and she's clearly never been affected by the tide of fashion that has tended to bypass him in recent times. Speaking of the Concerto, she says, 'It's so difficult to sum up. If you look for a couple of words, what do you say? Dreamy? Fantastical? The reason that I love its complexity is that you can't compare it with anything else. The sounds are so diverse.'

And Delius the man has her admiration. 'There's an absolute courage there, and I find that very moving.' Her recording of his Violin Sonatas won the Diapason d'Or award, she produced a documentary on his life for

BBC Two, and the Delius Society recognised her contribution to scholarship with her work on the Violin Concerto.

The sound palette is the clue to her taste, I suspect. I notice that when she appeared on *Desert Island Discs* on Radio 4 she chose as her favourite recording music by Ravel from *Daphnis and Chloé* – and that's the sort of territory where she seems happiest, whether in the company of Respighi or Strauss or Elgar, or her old friend Delius.

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## 'Delius is so difficult to sum up. The sounds are so diverse'

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'He worked against trends,' she continues. 'I think that may be it. I feel it in the music, and for me playing is trying to discover the essence that seems at first to be hidden. You know it's there – you just have to work away until you find it.' This is, of course, an attractively emotional approach to playing: it's as if Little is waiting to meet someone whom she knows to be there but hasn't yet hove into view, and feels the necessity of getting in the right frame of mind for the encounter. That it will happen is never in doubt. You just have to wait... and work. Then, sooner or later, it will happen.

Her technical accomplishments, of course, have long been celebrated. From her early days at the Yehudi Menuhin School she's been able to call on a dazzling set of skills, and by the time her career was fully-fledged, in the early '90s, she was in demand as a virtuoso performer. This doesn't explain, however, the particular quality of her approach. There is a spiritual aspect to her thinking about music which becomes very clear... and sits happily with a manner that isn't at all other-worldly – better described as bubbly than serene.

Yet it is there, a questing for the inchoate quality of music. The more mysterious it is, you suspect, the happier she is. Listening to her recording of the Elgar Violin Concerto under Sir Andrew Davis, with whom she has had many fruitful recording experiences, is to hear someone who has come close to cracking the code: the piece can so often become cold in the wrong hands, and she appears to have discovered how to reach inside and let it breathe warmth. The lyricism in that recording, the sense of the rhythmic arch of the whole piece, and the moments of tenderness are truly moving. It was last year's critics' choice at the Classical Brit Awards.

'You can play it in a virtuosic way,' she says. But what appeals to her more is the 'intimate, personal style' that is the mark of the concerto, and that's what she's trying to find. She associates that process with the composer's own, making the assertion that the piece suggests he is reaching for something ►





WINNING FORM:  
Little and Andrew  
Davis perform Elgar  
at The Proms in 2011

that is just out of reach, or searching for a place that is shrouded in darkness – ‘and just can’t rest – can’t – until he has found his way through and got there.’

The same lesson is applied to her instruments. She speaks about violins who refuse to reveal themselves fully for a long time, take coaxing to open their secrets and let their sounds mature. ‘We as musicians have to let it come. Perhaps you may find it one day when you’re playing close to the bridge or something, and you hear the spirit of the instrument coming through. It’s very exciting.’ She’s grinning, almost playing with her fingers as she speaks.

I suspect that the willingness to speak about her instruments and her music in such personal terms – as extensions of her own feelings and desires – is not something that has come to her in mid-life, but has always been there. It’s part of her objective in the Naked Violin series – such a break when it came, but such a revelation to so many of those who opened themselves to serious music for the first time. She remembers some happy performance moments: a performance of Vaughan Williams’s *The Lark Ascending* at the BBC Proms which was followed by 16 seconds of silence – ‘quite a long time, really’ – and tries to define what she wants to communicate to audiences. ‘Here’s what I believe. Music is an innate way of connecting, and we are all yearning for connections. All of us. We are individuals, and we treasure that, but we want much more. When music works, those connections are made.’

It’s a pretty good description of what happens when a performance works, whether

it’s in the Royal Albert Hall, or in one of the small Norman and Saxon churches around England where she’ll be playing intimate concerts in the course of the rest of this year, between international tours. ‘I know,’ she says, ‘that creativity is something innate, that we have inside. Learning to play, and to get better, is one thing, but what matters is bringing to life what is in there, and often

## ‘What matters is bringing to life what is often hidden’

hidden. From the moment I started to play, I think that’s what I wanted.’

This makes her embark on a kind of collection of secret expeditions, some of which may go on for years. Along the way there will be revelations, and no doubt some surprises, but as far as Little is concerned, when she has reached the place for which she is bound, she will know; it will feel right.

That conviction is deeply ingrained, and is linked to a belief that each individual has to make the journey in a different way in order for the connection with others to be established. Talking to her is not at all a mystical business, full of grandiose pseudo-philosophy, but it is remarkably personal. She can’t do it any other way. The reason, above all, is that she prizes the unique quality of every musician and every instrument. ‘The violin has a powerful personal quality.

And the sound each player makes is so independent: you can’t sound like anyone else. ‘My sound is my own. It simply is. Immediately obvious.’

No one else plays her instruments, the *Regent Stradivarius* having been lent to her as a partner for her own Guarneri, and there is no doubt that she believes that the sound that comes from each of them is one that has been created by she and the instrument working together, testing each other out, feeling the way forward.

Twice a year or so she takes a break from playing, and tries to get some physical rest, leaving the violins in their cases. The first few days are fine. ‘Then I find that my fingers are starting to move in certain ways. They want to play. After a while I know that’s it’s time to get back to work.’

Perhaps it is now. We’ve spent time with some of her favourite 20th-century composers, and I’ve been able to get a flavour of the commitment she brings to the Naked Violin project, herding together like a Pied Piper schoolchildren who’ve never had the chance to discover the difference between a sonata and a symphony. She talks about the importance of a balanced life – and of how she’ll know, when it comes, that it’s time to slow down – so that work doesn’t become everything. But without it she’d be missing the excitement of that never-ending journey, which she realises she can never complete. The discoveries along the way, however, are what matter. From them, she gets the encouragement she needs to try to bring her instruments, and their music, to life.

We go our separate ways, and I expect she’s turning again to Roxanna Panufnik’s *Four Seasons* – still balanced on her music stand.

But who will it be today? The old friend or the Latin lover? ■



TIME OUT: ‘After a while, I know it’s time to get back to work’