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Tasmin Little

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OF GETTING THROUGH TO PEOPLE'

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A CHRISTMAS HAMPER

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Another way

It has taken Tasmin Little more than 70 performances of the Elgar violin concerto to be ready to put it on disc, and the result comes with a surprise attached. But surprise is a constant feature with an artist who goes out of her way to take music to unexpected places. She talks to **Tim Homfray**



Over the last 20-odd years violinist Tasmin Little has built up a substantial discography, with highly praised recordings of standard repertoire like Bruch and Brahms sitting alongside less familiar works, many of them British. Delius and Finzi are there, as well as Robert Saxton. But until now there has been one notable absence, and that of a work with which she is particularly associated, Elgar's violin concerto.

Now she has put that right, with a new recording on Chandos coinciding with the hundredth anniversary of the work's premiere. By her own reckoning, since the late 1980s she has performed it more than 70 times, which prompts the question, why has she left it so long before putting it on disc? One reason is that, perhaps oddly, she didn't know the work at all when she was young. She knew the great

concertos, and some of the lesser known as well – she mentions Locatelli and Delius – but Elgar passed by the Little household. 'I think perhaps it wasn't so regularly played,' she says, 'and there weren't that many recordings, so maybe it just hadn't come to my parents' attention.'

Even when she went to the Menuhin School the concerto didn't feature, which seems strange as it was, and still is, so closely associated with Menuhin, whose recording of it with the composer in 1932 still holds a special place in the Elgar discography. 'What we did at the Menuhin school centred around chamber music. We did Elgar's violin sonata and piano quintet. But I think it would have been idiotic for anyone to learn the concerto there, just because it was so closely associated with Menuhin.'



'Music is such a deep way of getting through to people'

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Cover story

TASMIN LITTLE Q&A WHAT DO YOU LIKE FOR BREAKFAST?

My coffee-making skills are better than my violin playing so my favourite breakfast is a cup of fabulous coffee

WHERE DO YOU BUY YOUR SHOES?

I like Dune for their gorgeous colours and outrageous platform shoes

HOW DO YOU COPE WITH BEING A WORKING MOTHER?

Lots of coffee to keep me full of energy!

WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOU WON THE LOTTERY?

I don't like the idea of having so much money and just sitting on it, so I'd probably give most of it away to charities, particularly those supporting children and education with particular emphasis on using music to help children learn

right for the Elgar, and I don't think it will be heard vastly different styles of interpretation. I can hear very different performances of Brahms or Sibelius and be happy with them all, but I will hear a performance of the Elgar and just think that it's wrong. I'm just very fussy about Elgar.'

Her performance on the CD, with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra under the direction of Sir Andrew Davis, another seasoned Elgar interpreter, certainly carries the conviction of mature understanding. It is by turns intimate and grand, surely paced through its great spans of narrative, with Little, her tone rich and endlessly expressive, playing with free-flowing eloquence. It was worth the wait.

The disc is generously filled. Elgar's interlude for violin and orchestra from *The Crown of India* is here, along with *Polonia*, the conception of Polish themes for large orchestra which he put together for the Polish Victims Relief Fund in 1915.

It also incorporates a *varias*, taken from the very first recording of the concerto that Elgar made, in 1916. The Columbia Company had already made one, heavily cut, with Henry Wood and Albert Sammons (their second recording, from 1929, remains one of the

finest on record). HMV, miffed that Columbia had beaten them to it, proposed that Elgar should make one for them. The violinist was to be Marie Hall, whom the Elgars had known for over 20 years (Elgar had even given her the occasional lesson when she was young), and who was later to be the dedicatee of Vaughan Williams' *Lark Ascending*.

The concerto would necessarily have to be severely truncated. Elgar cut it down to fit on four single-sided 78 discs, one for each movement and the fourth side for the cadenza. Together they ran to barely a third of the concerto's true length. Elgar was worried about the cadenza, which is scored, very unusually, with an accompaniment for tremolo pizzicato strings, marked *ppp* and instructed to be 'drummed with the soft part of three or four fingers across the strings'. It was an effect unlikely to survive the crackle and hiss of early recording technology, and Elgar decided to add a harp, which is not otherwise used in the concerto, to strengthen the sound.

Tasmin Little heard of this bearded up cadenza from Ralph Couzens, the managing director of Chandos, and dug out a recording. Unfortunately the manuscript hasn't survived, so Little decided to transcribe it. She called on an old friend since Menuhin School days, Gwawr Owen, harpist, arts manager and radio and television producer, to help. 'Gwawr and I had always been top of the class in music dictation at seven in the morning at the Menuhin School, but I knew I couldn't write this down in a million years. Gwawr did a magnificent job of recreating it, and of course she could write it out properly for the harp.'

'It's a fantastic sound. I hadn't thought it would sound as beautiful as it does. It gives the cadenza a more romantic, perhaps a more earthly quality. The drumming strings by themselves sound very ghostly, not quite of this world, whereas with the harp it sounds more like a romantic violin concerto, with the harp providing a cushion of sound.'

'The harp does more than just boost the strings. At one point there's a bold chord, as if to say "Yes, that's right!" Obviously he must have decided that having got the harp there he was going to have fun with it.'

The cadenza with added harp is the fourth track on the disc, following the concerto. After some thought, Little decided to keep in the few cuts which Elgar still had to make to fit it on one side of a 78 record.

The Elgar concerto is the first in a number of projected recordings with Chandos. The second recording is complete and a third is in the pipeline, but the details are still under wraps.



Courtesy of Chandos, we have five copies of Tasmin Little's new Elgar recording to give away. To be in with a chance of winning, please email your name and address to production2@rhinegold.co.uk quoting 'CM Little'. Deadline for entries is 20 December 2010

Away from the recording studio Tasmin Little is still engaged with the projects she set out when she was guest editor of *Classical Music* in March last year. Her concern to bring music to people who haven't experienced it remains at the centre of everything she does. Wherever she gives a concert she tries also to give a workshop, or visit a school. She recently visited a centre for people with communication disabilities. 'It was immensely moving, to see people who normally cannot communicate even with body language respond to the music in a powerful way, getting up and dancing and wanting to touch me.'

The Naked Violin, with its free downloads of works by Bach, Ysaÿe and Paul Patterson, is still on her website, with her spoken introductions and her challenge to visitors to listen, decide what they like and write to her, and to go to a concert or buy a CD. *The Naked Violin* was at one time, and maybe still is, the most downloaded album on the web.

She continues to tour her programme *Partners in Time*, with pianist John Lenehan, a chronological exploration of the relationship between violin and piano which grew directly out of *The Naked Violin*.

The Naked Violin project is also spreading abroad. Last June she took it to China, where she played at a school for the children of migrant workers in Beijing. 'Most of them would never have heard any kind of music, and certainly not western music. They all arrived early and stood waiting in the baking heat, just to make sure they were on time. I played a wide variety of repertoire, Bach, Kreisler, Mozart, and everything was greeted with this awe-inspiring response.'

Little has played in Seattle to an audience of whom 80% had never previously been to a concert. Next May she goes to New Zealand for a series of *Naked Violin* concerts and outreach work in schools and a centre for disadvantaged youth. 'There is talk of a concert in an airport.

Before that, in February she will be directing a mini-festival at Kings Place in London, which takes the *Partners in Time* programme as its starting point. 'Over three days there will be various musical journeys,' she says. 'On the first day there will be the *Partners in Time* programme. On the Friday there will be another programme of repertoire explored chronologically, to let audiences hear how the relationship between violin and piano developed. On the Saturday there will be workshops all day, and I hope young people will come from all over the country.' She has also invited a violin maker, Judith Barker, to spend the three days of the festival making a violin in the foyer. The final concert will feature the Trout Quintet and, appropriately for a chronologically themed event, Messiah's *Quartet for the End of Time*.

As ever, she wants the festival to inspire people who don't normally listen to music. 'Music,' she says, 'is such a mysterious and deep way of getting through to people.'

www.tasminlittle.org.uk