

## Classical music with no strings



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**IT must be almost 20 years since I first encountered violinist Tasmin Little.**

We met in Orkney where she was a resident artist at the St Magnus Festival. We've popped up on each other's radar on numerous occasions since then: I remember (and so does she) a chill night at Culzean Castle, an awards ceremony in London and numerous concert occasions. And she has dropped me the odd note or postcard from time to time.

I have long been an admirer of this superb musician. She is a consummate performer. She has flawless presentation and the most winning smile in the business. Her confidence and entirely natural manner onstage, from the second she walks on, radiates to an audience, which is then totally relaxed and itself confident with what it is about to hear.

She is completely reliable: I have never heard her give an insecure performance. She has an enormous repertoire of 50 violin concertos at her fingertips, from the most seasoned and well-worn stuff to more rarefied contemporary concertos by composers such as Ligeti.

She is a figurehead on the international music scene, where she is among the best-known and most respected musicians.

Just a few years ago she turned the musical world on its head when she launched a one-woman assault on what she called "the mystique and stuffy preconceptions" about classical music.

She put a new album, *The Naked Violin*, straight on to the internet, totally free. It was a first. The reaction became a genuine phenomenon. It had half a million downloads, globally, with a quarter of a million in the first three weeks. She was gobsmacked at the response. She was overwhelmed with letters from all over the world. The South Bank Show pounced and made a programme about it.

"It was to remove as many barriers as possible and let people try classical music," Little reflected on a recent visit to Glasgow. "Nobody could say it was expensive; nobody could say it was inaccessible; nobody could say they couldn't get hold of it."

**“You can't stop to smell every rose; you've got to get through the garden”**

Tasmin Little

It was just part one of a project. The experience was life-changing. She took it out directly into the community. She now devotes a quarter to a third of her time to working in hospitals, hospices, schools and centres for people with learning difficulties. "I'm very big in prisons," she grinned, explaining that she now aligns this work in parallel with her touring schedule.

But all the while, and for the past 20 years, she has had her eye on a precipitous peak of the violin concerto repertoire: Elgar's immense Violin Concerto. Over the years Little, who is a specialist in English repertoire, has been invited and exhorted on many occasions to commit her performance of the Elgar to disc. She has always declined.

"For one reason or another it has just never felt right, whether it was the timing, the team, the conductor, whatever. This piece is so special to me. I really wanted to do it with a UK orchestra and a UK conductor; and it had to be a conductor with a real feeling for this repertoire, tremendous experience with it, and also a real freshness."

The concerto itself is a Cinderella piece. It just doesn't rate in the repertoire alongside performances of the composer's Cello Concerto. In Scotland the RSNO hasn't played it for 20 years. I put it gently to the violinist that the concerto can sound a bit of a mess and, indeed, not a very good piece at all.

"There are many pitfalls with this piece; a huge number of problems. And the main issue to resolve, with the conductor, is the shaping of the piece. At 50 minutes it's the longest concerto there is, and you have to know how to sustain a work of this length. You must know where the main focus is going to be; you must know the important places where you can linger.

"But you can't stop to smell every rose; you've got to get through the garden. There's got to be enough light and shade, ebb and flow, with moments of great impetus followed by moments of great reflection. And if you don't get the right balance between these elements, the piece can sound unintelligible. Actually, it can be boring.

"And another huge problem with the piece is that of technique. Not only is it immensely virtuosic for the violinist, it's also incredibly virtuosic for the orchestra. There is some string writing that is hard enough to give to the soloist, never mind to a whole string section, and then expect them to get sparkling passages together.

"And yet another issue is that the conductor has to know how to shape the piece with the soloist while bringing the orchestra along: there are times when there is almost an ad libitum situation, where the soloist gives the impression of being spontaneous; but your spontaneity has got to be supported by the orchestra with the aid of a sympathetic and expert conductor."

So for these and many other reasons Tasmin Little has avoided recording the piece. Until now. She took a proposal to Chandos Records, which put together what Little considers a dream team, with conductor Sir Andrew Davis and the RSNO. It was recorded in the early summer, has just been released and is absolutely awesome, making total sense of the piece in a performance that is immaculately structured, full of passion and warmth, with Little in towering form, intellectually and musically; Sir Andrew Davis seamlessly moulding the vast shape of the piece into a coherent entity; the RSNO musicians playing out of their skins, and the whole thing wrapped up in that characteristically big, vibrant Chandos sound. It represents one of those rare moments in music where you can actually sense that everyone involved has pulled out all the stops, is totally committed and convinced, and all parties have piled their resources into a communal project. It is a fantastic achievement.

But that's not the end of the story. There is a historic element to the new recording. Elgar chose to place the cadenza, traditionally a climactic point where the orchestra stops, allowing the soloist to display his or her virtuosity, in the finale of the work.

"That wasn't all that was unusual," said Little. "He threw away the usual, standard idea where the cadenza features the soloist alone, and made it an accompanied cadenza, asking the strings to 'thrum' softly for a particular effect."

But when Elgar recorded the work in 1916, he was worried that the magical thrumming effect would be inaudible (the acoustic recording process couldn't pick it up). So he wrote an optional harp part to wrap around and bolster the thrumming. After the recording the music was lost. Little decided to find it. And the source was that hissy, crude 1916 recording.

With Welsh harpist and music producer Gwawr Owen, Little went back to that recording, listened to it and evaluated it, then Owen transcribed it as closely and accurately as possible.

"It reinforces the violin parts and is astonishingly beautiful," said Little. "And nobody's done it or heard it for almost 100 years. So we decided to record it, and include it as a separate track on the recording to celebrate the centenary of the concerto, which was first performed in November of 1910."

The recording and performance is a monumental achievement; and the alternative cadenza with harp is absolutely ravishing. Surely a live performance in Scotland, with these forces, is an imperative?

Tasmin Little's recording of Elgar's Violin Concerto with the RSNO and Sir Andrew Davis is out now on Chandos Records.