



CLASSICAL



David Mellor

Elgar: Violin Concerto

Tasmin Little

Chandos **£12.99 inc p&p**

★★★★★

The Kingdom

Halle Orchestra

Halle (Two CDs) **£13.99 inc p&p**

★★★★★

Elgar's Violin Concerto was 100 years old last Wednesday, a milestone marked by celebratory concerts in London and Birmingham, and a superb new recording from Tasmin Little that goes right to the top of the class.

This concerto is now enjoying an extraordinary international revival. Little's is the third recording this year alone, but for much of the past 100 years it has been virtually ignored.

When first performed, by the celebrated Viennese violinist Fritz Kreisler, it gave the composer what turned out to be his last great first night. Kreisler then took it on a nationwide tour, and it was much played abroad. Then the rot set in on Elgar's reputation. The following year the Second Symphony was tepidly received, while the premiere of the cello concerto a decade later was a fiasco.

Curiously, it was the cello concerto that recovered first. For many years now it has ranked alongside the Dvorak as the greatest of all romantic concertos for this noble instrument; its autumnal elegiac atmosphere entirely right for our times.

The violin concerto languished. Kreisler refused to record it, or even to play it. It was left to the Englishman Albert Sammons to keep the flame alive between the wars, helped by an extraordinary recording by the teenage Yehudi Menuhin partnered by Elgar himself.

The neglect continued post-war. But over the past 20 years young violinists have queued up to play a piece that runs to more than 50 minutes and is fiendishly difficult. It now sits alongside the



POLISHED PERFECTION: Tasmin Little has played the concerto 70 times in concert

not the kind of schmalz that I increasingly find disfigures the recent recording by Nikola Znaider.

The concerto has big moments only a true virtuoso can bring off. But it was also the product of Elgar's intensely complicated feelings for Alice Stuart Wortley, daughter of the painter Millais and wife of a Conservative MP.

'Here is enshrined the soul of....' wrote Elgar on the score, and it's surely significant that he marks the omission by five dots, signifying Alice, rather than printers' customary three.

Quite what went on between them it's hard to say. Not a lot physically, I suspect, but the deep emotions she triggered off as his muse allowed him to dig so deep within his own personality, it requires a true musician to bring out every nuance. And Tasmin is just such an artist. All the understanding perfected by so many live performances is brought to bear to produce a recording that for me sits alongside Nigel Kennedy's first effort and Menuhin's youthful foray.

Elgar's last oratorio, *The Kingdom*, premiered four years before the violin concerto, is full of good things musically, but sprawls and sags dramatically, thanks to Elgar's own woeful libretto. But its great merit is that it can't be missed, and most of them are well brought out by another distinguished Elgarian, Sir Mark Elder, and the Halle in a live recording from the Bridgewater Hall, Manchester, in October last year.

One of Elgar's finest inspirations, the Wagner-influenced scena for soprano and orchestra *The Sun Goeth Down*, is sung with compelling abandon by Claire Rutter, who rises magnificently to the challenge of Elder's brisk tempo. Elsewhere, the less than first-class recording and the limitations of the male soloists confine enjoyment somewhat.

But the well-trained Halle choir sing their hearts out, and true Elgarians won't want to miss a rare new recording of a cinderella piece. Flawed it may be, but it is a masterpiece, with musical insights of a sophistication well beyond anything in the much more popular *Dream of Gerontius*.

After the first night, the critic Ernest Newman summed up the appeal of *The Kingdom* thus: 'Time after time we feel that we are in the presence of a musical gift of the first order.' Just so.

Discover the secret of Elgar

Beethoven, with which it shares an opus number, and the Brahms as the deepest, as well as the longest, of all violin concertos.

Tasmin Little has played this concerto 70 times in concert, and it shows. Part-

nered by that most understanding of Elgarians, Sir Andrew Davis, and a Royal Scottish National Orchestra playing out of their skins, she strikes exactly the right balance between power and sentiment. By sentiment I mean deep feeling,

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