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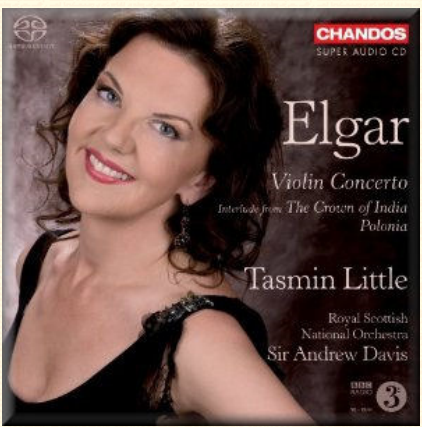
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INTERVIEW

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**Tasmin Little records the Elgar Violin Concerto - an interview with Nick Barnard**



With the major release of a long-awaited recording from one of Britain's best-loved and finest violinists imminent, Tasmin Little very kindly found an hour in her busy schedule to talk about this important new disc ... and other things

**Nick Barnard [NB]:** In researching this interview it amazed me to realise that it is now some twenty-one years since your breakthrough recording.

**Tasmin Little [TL]:** Yes, absolutely which was the Bruch and the Dvorák for EMI. I recorded it in 1989 and it was released in 1990, the same year I made my debut at the Proms. So 1990 is probably the year that I consider that my career began. The Prom was the Janáček concerto – it had only recently been discovered and was a Proms premiere. Because it was a curiosity and my debut I got an enormous amount of publicity which was wonderful. That coupled with the release of the Bruch and Dvorák disc which got tremendous reviews ... it really set me on the right path as it were. After which the recordings came in fairly thick and fast including the Delius Violin Concerto and Double Concerto.

**NB:** But before this new disc of the Elgar concerto there has been a gap of about seven years since your last concerto disc – the Moszkowski?

**TL:** That's right, with the Karłowicz. Since then I began my naked violin project and also released the follow-up CD Partners in time. I had been wanting to record the Elgar for many years and had had in fact many offers to do it. Quite a few early on when I was making my way. I really felt it wasn't the right timing; the Elgar for me was a piece I needed to live with and grow into. Not that my performances weren't valid then, I'm sure they were very fine but I think they would have been 'young Tasmin' kind of performances. Now I've had so much experience of playing that piece – 20 years, more actually, and worked with so many tremendous conductors and also lived since then! I do feel it is a piece that requires you to have the sense of occasion, of wonder and awe for this monumental work as well as quite an experienced head on your shoulders. Not just with regard to playing the piece but also to life. He was not a young man when he wrote the violin concerto – it's a piece of someone who had also lived so I feel you need to be able to associate with some of that.

**NB:** Was it a work you studied at the Menuhin School or the Guildhall School of Music?

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**TL:** No it was after I came back from private studies in Canada, the RPO asked me to play it with Yan Pascal Tortelier. They gave me quite a lot of notice which was jolly good because I certainly needed it – I think I had about six months which at that point in time I hardly had anything else to do and it was one of the first things that I did starting out as a fully-fledged professional.

**NB:** I was surprised to realise that it was the first time Chandos have recorded it as well.

**TL:** It is quite a surprising thing isn't it. Perhaps they felt much as I did that the perfect set of circumstances had to come together in order to make the recording which was certainly how I felt. I'm incredibly glad that I listened to my instinct to wait to make the recording that I believe I have made and the one that I really am sure I will listen to in the years to come and be incredibly proud of.

**NB:** The Elgar seems to have had a recent burst of recording popularity. What is it in Elgar that is so currently appealing to a crop of young non-British violinists?

**TL:** When I was growing up the Elgar was not particularly well known. Then there was the 'batch' of Zuckerman, Perlman and the like. That was the era that set the seal on the popularity of the concerto because it had been relatively neglected up until that point. Perhaps the current group of recordings comes from the generation of violinists who have grown up after that group of recordings and now feel ready to record the work.

**NB:** One of your other great loves is Delius; why is it do you think that his music resolutely refuses to enter the mainstream repertoire or indeed be promoted by many players?

**TL:** I'm sure there are two aspects which are perhaps joined. The one is that there is not an enormous call for it therefore orchestras and soloists are reluctant to spend time learning it but then it's a case of the chicken and the egg where if the works are not programmed how will audiences get to the stage where they know they like it. Another reason is because as far as a soloist is concerned you have to be a particular kind of temperament - to not mind not having the 'whizz-bang' ending. Because, almost without exception, the major works of Delius end quietly and that's not the circumstance that's going to elicit rapturous applause. If you are looking to create a sensation Delius' music is not going to provide that. Its much easier to turn to concertos that are obviously difficult where people will feel that you worked very hard, you did an amazing job and they'll reward you with lots of applause. The Delius [concerto] is incredibly hard and yet it doesn't *sound* hard. For some people that's not going to be any good. A lot of soloists do like to feel that the audience is aware of the difficulty and therefore be impressed by that. We have 2012 coming up [the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth] and I'm really hoping there will be an opportunity for people to experience a wider range of Delius' music.

**NB:** I read on your website that you feel performing live has the highest priority with recording slightly lower down the list. But if it *weren't* for your recordings of the Delius and Rubbra concertos to name but two we as willing concert goers would not have had the chance to hear the music let alone hear you playing them.

**TL:** Recordings are extremely important to me. I plan and hope to continue making recordings. But at the end of the day I really think there needs to be a reason to record something and it goes back to what I was saying earlier about the right circumstances; the right team, the right record company, the right repertoire all have to come together. I don't believe in making a recording because somebody says "I've got a free date here, we could put that together pretty quickly". That is so far from my ethos and so that was probably why I had a little bit of a gap as far as concerto recordings were concerned. There are too many recordings out there now; if I'm going to make my version its got to be the best version that I can make. Which is why I feel so happy about the Elgar Concerto. Not only do I feel that I was absolutely at the top of my game but everybody else was too. I'm sure that that makes itself felt – I hope it does. I feel that there is so much spontaneity, so much excitement, so much commitment on this recording and that's what I want – its absolutely imperative to me

**NB:** In the recording environment the demands seems to be not for the danger, risk or spontaneity of live performance but instead a kind of superhuman perfection.

**TL:** Yes, and that is a huge danger in making a recording. Obviously you don't want to have mistakes glaring out at you but you can go completely the other way and get so ridiculously worried about every single note. Whereas in fact it is the sweep of the music, the performance itself that will make people come along. Which is one of the reasons I always liked to work in large takes. To play complete movements of the piece and to really get that sense of performance before starting the nit-picking. Of course when you hear your first edit when everything is put together I think it is incredibly important to let yourself be carried away by the music. After that you can

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listen again to see if there is anything that jumps out as not being what I wanted. On the Elgar recording I had extraordinarily few comments. On a piece that lasts fifty minutes I had ten comments to make. You hear sometimes of artists who come back with five hundred 'corrections' – sometimes of just one tiny note. I will say my Elgar is *not* completely perfect but I think it can't be better than it is. Because if there is one note that might have just been a tiny bit sharp or a tiny bit flat I'm prepared to let that go in the vast sweep of the atmosphere that I believe I was able to create alongside Andrew Davis and the orchestra. For me its much more about 'is the shape of that phrase exactly what I hoped to create' and I can really put my hand on my heart and say that on this recording the shape of the phrases, the colour of my sound, the atmosphere and the sweep of the piece is exactly what I wanted.

**NB:** Which violin did you use on the recording? [Tasmin plays a 1757 Guadagnini violin and has, on loan from the Royal Academy of Music, the 1708 "Regent" Stradivarius]

**TL:** The Guadagnini. It's the Strad I often use in performance because the nature of concertos in big venues is that that suits the Strad which has the awesome carrying power my Guadagnini doesn't have. What the Guadagnini does have is a superb ability to shine in recordings because it has so many colours available and a really velvet sound that comes over superbly on disc. Most of the concerto recordings have used the Guadagnini although I used the Strad on the Moszkowski/ Karłowicz disc. On the 'Naked Violin' and 'Partners in Time' recordings you have the opportunity to experience both

**NB:** Obviously the – awful phrase – 'Unique Selling Point' of your Elgar is the Marie Hall Cadenza. How genuinely valid do feel this is?

**TL:** I think that its completely valid in terms of an historical document . I probably wouldn't think of replacing the actual cadenza with that version of it but what I think it does provide people with is the opportunity first of all to hear how effectively Elgar brought the harp into a piece that hasn't got a harp. I don't think it suddenly sounds like another world at all. From the point of view of just adding an extra colour to the atmosphere that's created by the thrummed strings I do think its interesting to hear it. I really love the way it becomes a more glowingly romantic version of the cadenza.

**NB:** Doesn't the harp sentimentalise the gentle reflective nostalgia of the original?

**TL:** It does sentimentalise it and I agree that that's why I don't think it would be appropriate to replace the existing cadenza in a normal performance. But I do like it, I really do. I love the different colour and its interesting to hear it that way in exactly the same way it was interesting to hear the Sibelius Violin Concerto in its original form. I wouldn't dream of playing the Sibelius that way but to hear the original you can understand why it was that he then decided to revise but it is fascinating to hear what he thought was 'right' at that time. I think there will be plenty of people who will be enthralled to hear how Elgar solved what was a very real problem in the early days of recording. It is a pragmatic approach but there is one bit where I think he gets rather carried away and enjoys having his harp there; there is quite a 'declaration' from me and although it is quite unnecessary to have anything else at that point he decides to emphasise my declaration with a harp chord.

**NB:** How important or significant to Elgar or listeners and performers is a comprehension of the dedication of the concerto "herein lies enshrined the soul of \*\*\*\*\*"

**TL:** It helps but is not absolutely essential. If somebody understands music they just understand it without necessarily knowing what it is that has caused the feeling. When I first heard the Elgar performed live when I was about 19 or 20 I was a poor student. So I didn't have a programme so I did not know anything at all about the extraordinary placing of the cadenza or the idea of the soul enshrined. But I absolutely knew that there was a journey there, a spiritual searching and I had an innate understanding of the work without knowing exactly why it was written as it was.

**NB:** When playing this piece do you have a non-musical narrative that you are following?

**TL:** It's a curious thing; when I was first preparing the Delius Concerto I did have a kind of narrative going on. I do that less and less now but instead I think more and more now in terms of colours and characters. So, I can often find an adjective that will describe what I am aiming to do with one particular passage of a work. So whether it is 'restless' or 'turbulent' or 'peaceful', 'joyous' I can very often sum it up like that but I won't create a storyline.

**NB:** So who do you think the \*\*\*\*\* are?

**TL:** I think it must be Alice Stewart-Wortley. He was so blocked trying to write this piece and it was her urging him on. He writes things in letters "this is *your* concerto",

“the windflower theme is coming on well”. We know that the soul is a feminine one. Elgar was so fond of his enigmas. Perhaps he was a good businessman too and he knew it would keep everyone talking a hundred later – and it has!

**NB:** Do British audiences have the opportunity to hear you playing the Elgar live in the near future?

**TL:** Yes, but I’m not allowed to say! All of my concerts are listed on my website [[http://www.tasminlittle.org.uk/pages/02\\_pages/02\\_set\\_concerts](http://www.tasminlittle.org.uk/pages/02_pages/02_set_concerts)] and as soon as I can the information will be there.

**NB:** Are there any plans for any more recordings?

**TL:** I have just recorded something else for Chandos that is rather wonderful and major and there are plans for more next year but at the moment the details of exactly what will have to stay hush-hush. It is scheduled for a 2011 release with a very similar creative team to the Elgar.

**NB:** If I was able to wave a magic wand and make any project possible what would you like to do?

**TL:** Oh my goodness, that’s very hard because the nice thing is there’s always lots more to do so pinning myself down to one is tricky. I’d love to play the Brahms in the Carnegie Hall with Simon Rattle and either the New York Phil or the Berlin Phil. I have played in the Carnegie Hall with Simon and it was an absolute highlight – I played the Ligeti and I have done the Brahms with Simon and that was another highlight of my career so to put the Brahms in the Carnegie Hall with Simon would be wonderful.

**NB:** Is there a particular piece that you feel cries out for rehabilitation that you feel promoters won’t risk programming?

**TL:** There’s quite a few actually, I still think that even the Walton concerto doesn’t get quite the attention that it should. The Karlowicz which I recorded is a superb piece and definitely should be played more often. I’ve just been playing the Howard Ferguson 2<sup>nd</sup> Sonata which is absolutely divine.

**NB:** I saw on your website that you named Ida Haendel as one of your violin heroes – why?

**TL:** first of all because she was someone who was playing all sorts of repertoire – a lot of it British – when no-one else was. Ida Haendel was playing the Britten Violin Concerto when no-one else did. She also played the Elgar, Walton and Delius. I love the fact that she was an incredibly strong woman. So as a strong passionate characterful woman violinist she was a great role model for me and someone I aspired to being like. And I loved her ability to hold a long musical line. For example nobody plays the second movement of the Sibelius concerto like Ida Haendel – this is the recording [Haendel/Berglund/Bournemouth SO] that turned me onto the Sibelius. No-one else had managed to make it work for me emotionally before her – and this was when I was very young.

**NB:** One last question - of your back catalogue what recording are you proudest of?

**TL:** That’s a very good question. When you make a recording it’s a snap-shot in time of how you were then and so quite often when I listen – which I don’t with terrible regularity – to recordings I have made I often feel oh gosh yes wasn’t I young then but I would play it very differently now. I think my Sibelius concerto is still very good indeed as is my Bruch Scottish Fantasy and all the Delius Sonatas which I think is a record I think I will always listen to and be very proud of.

**Nick Barnard**