

**Classical**  
**Tasmin Little**  
**Elgar**

Chandos  
★★★★☆



If ever a violin concerto deserved the feminine touch, it is Elgar's. Written in 1910, this magnificent piece was directly inspired by a particular and special woman — Elgar's close friend and artistic soulmate Alice Stuart-Wortley. Using a Spanish literary quotation, Elgar cryptically wrote in the score: "Here is enshrined the soul of ...." The five dots, by

general consent, refer to Alice.

A talented amateur pianist, the daughter of the painter Millais, and the wife of a Conservative MP, she enjoyed a friendship with the married Elgar that had nothing whatever of the "affair" about it. They bonded through love of his music and the English countryside; he called her "Windflower", and her spirit blows through the concerto's three substantial movements of exultant beauty, delicate yearning and sweet regret. She has her own theme, too — the first movement's second subject, achingly tender. Male violinists gave the earliest performances, beginning with the legendary Fritz Kreisler, the concerto's official dedicatee. But women have usually revealed special insights in the work, from Marie Hall, once taught by Elgar, to Tasmin Little.

Much of Little's energy recently has been focused on encouraging new audiences for classical music through ventures such as *The Naked Violin*, her imaginative solo recital only available as a free download from her website. All necessary and worth applauding, though it's good to get a solid concerto performance from her, and her devotion to Elgar and early 20th century British music on this Chandos disc can be felt in every bar.

In keeping with musical fashions in the Edwardian period, she displays a healthy vibrato on her violin and doesn't shun the portamento glide. This isn't the concerto for lean cuisine: the notes need contours, a velvet sheen, a touch of plumpness and pomp. They also need emotional heat: iceberg violinists need not apply. Little couldn't be cold if she tried, and equipped with her marvellous 1757 Guadagnini violin she knows just how to make her violin sing, subtly swelling and fading through the solo part's lyrical lines as Elgar penetrates the mysteries and wonder of the feminine soul.

Little is tender, velvet, winsome, always beguiling, never *de trop*, with complete mastery of the pianissimo caress — a gift essential for the slow movement's intimacies and the finale's stupendous accompanied cadenza, the concerto's imaginative peak. Elgar cherished an idealised, romantic view of woman and beauty; Little does nothing to disturb it. Nor does Andrew Davis, her conductor, and the Royal Scottish National Orchestra. Throughout they offer sensitive support, wrapped in a warm studio acoustic that might cloud a little fine detail here and there but entirely suits the work's ardour.

The performance is followed by a novel coda. A separate track offers an alternate version of the cadenza, prepared in 1916 for Marie Hall's abridged recording of the concerto, with Elgar himself conducting. Aware of the limited sound spectrum picked up by the

**More power to her Elgar:**  
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period's primitive technology, he replaced some of the accompanying strings' quiet pizzicato sounds with louder ripples from a harp. In truth, the changes make little overall difference. Still, the remodelled cadenza, carefully reconstructed, is an interesting footnote to history, at least for devotees. I hope they're also interested in the 13 footnotes to the booklet's programme note. It's like reading an academic thesis.

Concerto done, the CD continues fittingly with a reflective interlude from *The Crown of India*, then moves on to *Polonia*, Elgar's wartime tribute to the Polish people, which had its premiere in July 1915. This "symphonic prelude" — no solo violin here — is always pleasant, finally rousing, and certainly

has the merit of novelty.

Yet the 14 or so minutes that it occupied could have been better used. And the ideal replacement would be a new CD transfer of Marie Hall's original recording. The cuts made to squeeze the concerto on to four sides of shellac 78s now seem alarming; only the cadenza was saved from butchery. There's also background hiss, and a soloist who keeps swooping. Yet there's an attractive dark passion about Hall's playing that even Little cannot quite match. They'd have made a good pair, these ladies, fiddling side by side.

**Geoff Brown**  
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