

The musician who bares her soul

The violinist on the much-misunderstood composer Delius and music's social rewards

Photograph by John Millar

WHEN you've already done 17, you might imagine that a further Proms appearance is just another day at the office. Not for violinist Tasmin Little, for whom this year's principal date has special resonance. The music of Frederick Delius has charged, inspired and soothed her throughout her career, and at last—in the 150th anniversary year of his birth—she is fulfilling an ambition to see his concerto played on the most famous stage.

Tasmin ranks Delius beside the two other English greats, Elgar and Vaughan Williams. Her father, the actor George Little, was a devotee, so she heard Delius from the cradle, although she acknowledges he isn't everyone's cup of tea—neither the man nor his music. He was a lifelong sponger and womaniser, ending his days in 1934 as a paralysed syphilitic. And although many people enjoy his tone poem *On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring* and *Brigg Fair*, the greater body of later work seems alien and thus neglected.

'He's not the easiest composer to perform successfully,' Tasmin explains. 'You can't pigeonhole him at all. He doesn't sound like anybody else, so there's nothing similar that people know. Then, there's the problem of structure, which is so seamless that it appears there is, in fact, no structure. The end of the concerto drifts off rather dreamily, and the audience is left in a somnambulant state. If you go on stage in a mood that's dependent on finishing with rapturous applause, it's Tchaikovsky you need, not Delius!'

Tasmin trained at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, winning its principal gold medal in 1986. This was a decade before the commercial phenomenon of classical 'pops' and the arrival of marketers bent on fast-tracking

the more pulchritudinous prodigies, which is ironic, for she did glamour well ahead of her time. The teenage Tasmin was an instant hit at regional music clubs, in London and in the recording studio, but in her twenties, she was in the shadow of Anne-Sophie Mutter and Nigel Kennedy, her contemporary at the Yehudi Menuhin School. By her thirties, it looked as if she had hit a plateau as the Lesley Garrett of the violin. However, in her forties, she defied the norm and stepped up to become a virtuoso superstar.

Amid the commercial hyperbole that's now a necessary evil of the classical scene, it's a comfort that insightful musicianship still prevails. Tasmin has recorded more than 25 CDs, but her maturity was clear in a landmark recording for Chandos of the mighty Elgar concerto, which she had allowed to gestate in her fingers for half a lifetime before deciding she was ready to record it. Experts agreed it was worth waiting for—it won the Critics' Award at the 2011 Classical Brits. Nowadays, any UK appearance is a hot ticket, but it's not all cerebral. Her appearance in the children's prom to be hosted by Wallace and Gromit on July 29 sold out in an hour.

Tasmin is an ambassador for the Prince's Foundation for Children and the Arts, a Guildhall fellow, president of the European String Teachers Association and has four honorary degrees, including one from Bradford—Delius's home town—where the university music centre bears her name.

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She was also awarded the OBE in The Queen's Diamond Jubilee Honours and, by coincidence, her long-time duo partner, pianist Piers Lane, was appointed an Officer of the Australian Order. When accepting her Classical Brit last year, Tasmin wasted no time on fawning thanks, instead grabbing the microphone to remind a captive audience of industry movers and shakers about their responsibility to education.

She meant it, too. In 2008, she launched The Naked Violin project—provocatively named with careful intent—to open up

classical music to new audiences. She was the first classical artist to put a free downloadable recital on her website, and also took the project into prisons, hospitals and underprivileged communities—anyone who would have her. It won the Classic FM/Gramophone Award for Audience Innovation, and Melvyn Bragg gave it a *South Bank Show* of its own. The Naked Violin is the achievement Tasmin would most like to be remembered for.

'I'm firmly of the opinion that the Arts and learning an instrument fosters a sense of belonging and self-esteem,' she enthuses. 'Music is proven to tackle behavioural problems, and gives a sense of discipline to children. It isn't just about instruments, but we'll be doing ourselves a disservice if we don't continue to be aware of the importance of music in society.' Much of Tasmin's appeal lies in her accessibility, and once her Stradivarius is safely in its case, she has an enviable ability to switch into an easy conversation style.

Back to Delius, then. 'His father was dead against music, so he persuaded Delius to buy an orange grove in Florida. Needless to say, once he'd escaped, he spent no time looking at fruit and all his time listening to African-American music. Imagine how different all this joyous lushness must have seemed to a lad from the industrial North! The violin concerto isn't easy to shape. It's a bit like meeting a family's oddball for the first time—they feel comfortable, but you haven't a clue what to make of him. It takes time to get into Delius, but when he speaks to you, it can be absolutely magical. Composers go in and out of fashion. I'm hoping the Prom will remind people how remarkable he was.'

She's sold him to me. 
Pippa Cuckson

On the record

Tasmin Little is in recital at the City of London Festival, Plaisterers' Hall, London EC2 tonight (July 11, www.colf.org). She will play the Delius violin concerto at the Proms on August 23 (www.bbc.co.uk/proms) and *The Lark Ascending* at Classic FM Live at the Royal Albert Hall on September 24 (www.classicfm.com)

Where is your favourite place? London

What is your favourite building? Chrysler Building, New York

Book? *Little Dorritt* (Dickens)

Music? *Daphnis et Chloé* (Ravel)

Food? Strong coffee

Holiday? A beach, anywhere

Who is your hero? Ida Haendel, violinist

Alternative career? Nursing and/or psychology