

ANYONE who saw her recent TV profile on the South Bank Show but wasn't paying attention might be disappointed to know that when Tasmin Little appears at the Proms next Monday she'll be living up to her legend as one of the sharp dressers of the concert platform. In other words, fully-clothed.

The reason why you might expect her to be otherwise is that she spends much of her time these days on a project of her own devising called *The Naked Violin*. But, as the SBS revealed, it's more about exposing music than flesh.

The idea is to take herself and her instrument out of the normal confines of classical music and onto the streets – quite literally in her next *Naked* assignment in August when she'll be playing on a bus in Cambridge. Previous outings have included oil rigs, prisons, fishing boats. And in her diary for November is a Southampton curry house where she'll play to members of the local Asian community.

Why?
"Because it's hugely worthwhile," she says. "I'm making contact with people who would never think of going to a classical concert. Very often it's their first experience of Bach, Vivaldi or whatever. And I get tremendous feedback, which is why I keep on doing it."

Who pays?
"Well, I do really in that I do these dates pretty much for expenses only. It's hard to get sponsorship for an individual performer. But I try to tie it in with places where I'm already booked to give a conventional concert, so it fits in with my schedule."

Tasmin's schedule these days is formidable. There was a time when she was thought of a local English talent: feisty, fun, a Lesley Garrett of the fiddle. But she moved on. She acquired sophistication, depth, assurance, class. By any reckoning she ranks, now, with the international stars, the Venegerovs and Mutter. And there's arguably no violinist anywhere who so effectively communicates the joy of playing. Even when she talks.

"I had a date not long ago at the Musikverein, Vienna, and it was one of those nights when everything was perfect: the hall, the conductor, the orchestra. I felt absolutely confident. And in those circumstances you feel free as a bird. I love that feeling."

"As a musician you spend years learning the notes, dealing with the technical difficulties; but the thing is to get beyond that, to the point where you don't have to think about technique. Then you can really play. And that's the difference for me now. I'm not apologising any more for wanting to be a soloist."

If the idea of ever having to

Naked truth about violinist Tasmin Little

... is that she loves to get out and play her music to wherever there is an audience – be it in a curry house on the south coast or a bus in Cambridge

apologise sounds strange, you have to know that Tasmin Little grew up at a time when there were few role models for an English violin virtuoso. In this country we produced superb orchestral leaders but not first-rank soloists, and her admission to the club was gradual. There was no overnight success in a competition. No overnight anything.

But she started young – and more to the point, started in Hampstead where she first took up the violin as a child at New End school. Home was across the Finchley Road, where both her parents still live. And it was very much a north-west London childhood: slightly bohemian in that her father was an actor, but stabilised by a mother who did beauty therapy at Fenwick's, Brent Cross.

At the age of eight, though, she was off to Surrey as a weekday boarder at the celebrated Yehudi Menuhin School – which at that time was an experimental hothouse with just 35 pupils, not too much discipline, and a



Tasmin Little.
Picture by Melanie Winning

reputation for screwing up more young performers than it succoured. Nigel Kennedy was there when Tasmin joined: he used to pull her hair.

That she emerged at 18 with her sanity intact was largely thanks to the supportive closeness of her family, and their insistence that she didn't turn into a prima donna.

"Because dad was in the business, the idea of being a performer was something we took for granted. I had no special treatment. I could never skive off the washing-up to protect my hands. Nothing so precious."

After Menuhin she moved on to the Guildhall School and into concert-life, making her mark with repertoire beyond the mainstream: lots of Delius, lots of new concerto premieres. And when she made her Proms debut in 1990 it was with the little-known Janacek Concerto – "Which was a godsend, because there wasn't likely to be anyone in the hall who knew it better than me and who'd complain, 'She didn't get the tempo in the 2nd Movement.'"

The Proms made Tasmin's reputation. Immediately after that debut, EMI issued her first CD (the Bruch and Dvorak Concertos) and since then she's been an Albert Hall regular, taking off the odd year to have children, but otherwise a predictable and much-

loved presence in the season. Which is more than you can say for the repertoire she sometimes turns up with.

Next Monday, it's the profoundly obscure Concerto for Horn and Violin by Dame Ethel Smyth, the suffragette composer who earned notoriety with pieces like her *March of the Women* (which she conducted with a tooth-brush as a prisoner in Holloway) and serious esteem with her opera *The Wreckers*, although music history tends to look back on her as a curiosity rather than a creative giant.

For Tasmin, Smyth is a strong and serious personality "who you can only admire for her determination to do things differently. She came from a grand military family where the idea of their daughter going to study music in Leipzig was unthinkable, and she practically had to go on hunger-strike before her father gave in.

"Then, having got to Leipzig, she decided the lessons were useless. But she gathered round herself some useful friends and allies. She met Brahms and Clara Schumann. And Brahms became a big influence on her music – including this Violin and Horn Concerto, which is a late work [written in 1927 when the composer was 70] and a strange one in that I can't think of another concerto for that combination.

"In fact she holds the two instruments together beautifully, and in a very Brahmsian way, full of those hemiola cross-rhythms – two against three – that he liked and that leave you not quite knowing where you are in a piece. Though I hope that won't apply to the two soloists on Monday.

"I have to say I've never played the piece before, although I've often played Smyth's Violin Sonata, which is why I was happy when the BBC asked me to dig deeper into her output. It's distinctive music but with plenty you can easily absorb on a first hearing, and I think that for many listeners it will be a real discovery. This is a major anniversary – 150 years since she was born – so it's a good time to discover her."

Not literally, though. Dame Ethel won't be going *Naked* to the curry house or on the buses: Tasmin's outreach audiences are probably not ready for that kind of thing. And judging by historic photos of the dame where she looks rather like a prison warden who does all-in wrestling on the side, it's understandable. I'm not sure I'd be ready for that kind of thing myself.

□ Tasmin Little plays *Ethel Smyth's Concerto at the Albert Hall, Mon 4, 7.30pm. Booking: 0845 401 5040. Also broadcast live on BBC Radio 3.*

COMING UP

□ **PAUL LEWIS**, Albert Hall & R3, tomorrow, 8pm. Proms appearance by one of the outstanding younger-generation Beethoven specialists, playing the composer's 4th Piano Concerto with the Royal Liverpool Phil. 0845 410 5040.

□ **STOCKHAUSEN DAY**, Albert Hall, Royal College of Music & R3, Saturday, from 1pm. Not everybody's pin-up, but indisputably one of the most charismatic figures in 20th Century music whose recent passing is celebrated in ten hours of films, talks and Prom concerts that include the monumentally hypnotic *Stimmung*. 0845 410 5040.

□ **KINGS SINGERS**, Albert Hall & R3, Tuesday August 5, 10.15pm. Apparently deathless vocal ensemble marking their 40th anniversary with a late-night Prom of madrigals, part-songs and close-harmony arrangements. 0845 410 5040.