

The Naked Truth

Tasmin Little will stop at (almost) nothing to engage her audience

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By Andrew Palmer



What keeps the name of a famous soloist in the public's mind? It used to be the release of CDs, but these shiny discs in reality were but occasional "events" in careers characterized by the routine slog of concertizing and touring. So if you've wondered what English violinist Tasmin Little is doing these days, the answer is: what most musicians concentrate on—performing live. "Recordings are still important," she says, "and I'm very excited to be making one of the Elgar Concerto [for release by Chandos this fall]. But I've always felt that they're the least of the more important aspects of the career. Playing live to people is where it's at. And in one way, not being able to make so many recordings is good, because it makes us think how we're going to reach audiences."

Has any soloist of her caliber dared to go further in finding a solution?

Two years ago, she launched the Naked Violin project in order to challenge prejudices against solo-violin music, and offered from her website free downloads of recorded works by Bach, Paul Patterson, and Ysäye, each with a spoken introduction.

Offering an opportunity "for anyone . . . to experience the huge range of styles and expressions that a single, unadorned violin can produce," she presents visitors to the website with her three-step challenge: "First, listen to my free recording and download the CD. Second, take some time to listen and get to know these pieces. Then write to me and tell me what you like (or don't like) about each piece. And, third, go to a concert, buy a CD, or write and tell me what barriers still remain to prevent you from wanting to do either!"

Within days her website had received 250,000 hits, prompting the Independent newspaper to comment, "No musician has ventured down this path before—not even the rock band Radiohead." But she's gone even further: she now presents 30-minute No Strings Attached workshops in venues

other than traditional concert or recital halls—such community centers as schools, prisons, and homes for the disabled.

A few other high-profile classical soloists do similar work, but the vast majority don't. I ask her why. "Going out to communicate with people who might at best have no idea about classical music, and at worst feel positively resentful at being lectured about its benefits, involves an element of risk," she replies. "When you walk onstage into a hall full of people who've paid money because they want to be there, you're in a relatively safe situation. Unless you play really badly, you're guaranteed some applause at the end of it. But when you go into the areas of the community I want to explore with the Naked Violin, you're not guaranteed anything. People might even be aggressive or violent towards you.

"That's the only risk I face. Anything else—people being left unmoved—I can cope with. And at the other end of the spectrum, where I've positively changed somebody's life, the benefit is so much greater than anything I could have lost in the process. Every time I've gone into the community there's been somebody whose day or week or year has been made by experiencing something that they perhaps didn't even think they were going to enjoy.

"That's why I'm doing it."

However, Little is keen to emphasize that she finds traditional concerts and recitals as fulfilling as ever. "That aspect of my life is still crucially important to me," she says. "I wouldn't want to do full-time community work even if it were practical financially, which it isn't, because I still love walking out onstage to a public who have experience of concert-going. But when I can schedule a community visit or workshop alongside a concert, I can have the best of both worlds.

"I'm still very much a concert violinist, but one with a more varied musical lifestyle than I've had in the past."

She recently took the project abroad for the first time and, while in Seattle, gave a Sunday morning family concert—essentially a two-hour version of the Naked Violin. When she asked if anybody present was attending a classical concert for the first time, between 60 and 70 per cent of the audience raised a hand.

I ask about the public's response to her Three-Step Challenge, and she replies, "I know for sure that it's had a very direct impact. A lot of people have written to say that because of the download they'd realized they could appreciate classical music and were going to begin buying CDs and going to concerts. Others tell me similar things personally—only three days ago a man came up to me to say, 'This is the first concert I've ever been to, and I'll be going to more now.'

"I'm very happy that there are new audiences out there, and that I'm right to think you can reach them. For that, the Internet is the most amazing tool. But I want to take people to the next stage, because for me it's all about encouraging people to experience live music. A CD's fantastic, but anybody who can get to a live event will appreciate the fact that, like sport and theatre, it's happening right in front of their eyes."

But, she stresses, it's not enough to merely bring in new audiences: the musician must then engage with them. "We need to remember that they're a crucial part of the performance," she says of the audience. "They must be made to feel first that you're happy they're there, and second that they're included in the experience, either by the way you introduce the music or simply by the manner in which you walk onstage. I've seen performers who barely look at their audience, and I

think this sends a rather difficult message, particularly to people who aren't sure whether they're going to enjoy what's being played."

What Tasmin Little Plays

"My own instrument is a Guadagnini made in 1757, which I've had for 21 years. I also have, on kind loan from the Royal Academy of Music in London, the 'Regent' Stradivari of 1708. I have two bows: a Sartory, and one made about 15 years ago by Charles Espey [of Port Townsend, Washington]. From a practical point of view, it's a good idea to have a spare bow—particularly when you're traveling. For example, when I was in Seattle recently, I began to tighten up my Sartory before a rehearsal, only to find that the screw had gone and it wouldn't tighten. So I picked up my Espey! They're both great bows, both really enjoyable. The Espey is for when you really want to project into a huge hall, but I also love the Sartory because it has a slightly mellower sound." —*T.L.*

How to Build an Audience

You don't need to be a famous soloist to make a difference locally. Here, Tasmin Little offers her top tips for getting your music out there.

Who It's For

"Classical music can touch almost anybody," Little says. "I have to say almost, because somebody might be so far away from their own emotions that it's impossible to reach them, but I do think it can reach deeper than many other forms of music. For example, people who aren't able to express themselves verbally can do so through nodding and moving in time to music."

How to Begin

"There are places in your own community where you can make a real difference just by going in and playing. So look immediately around you and see where you can go—maybe a local hospital, library, old people's home, hospice. It feels good to see the joy you bring to other people, and if more people did it, there would be far greater community spirit."

What to Say

"I believe in talking to an audience, not in a patronizing way, but just to explain what I feel about this piece of music and what they might find interesting in it. I'm then engaged with them, because they have a very basic road map of what I'm going to do."

What to Play

"It's important to provide a range of pieces, because then people will hopefully find something, if not many things, that they enjoy. But no matter who I'm playing to, I usually include a piece just because I like it. I recently played in the hospital wing of a prison, to a very small group of people, and it was very difficult to get anything out of them. They were my quietest ever group, and when I asked if anybody had any questions, they just looked down at the ground. I told them, 'I'd like to

play for you a piece by a Hungarian composer called Bartók,’ and explained about the night-music aspect of his writing and the hint of birdsong. Then I said, ‘You might not like it at all, but I’m going to play it anyway.’ And it was so interesting, because after that, I got the reaction—and a really good one. One of the nurses said that she closed her eyes and was just off in a different place. She loved it. So you shouldn’t make too many assumptions about what people are going to enjoy.”

Encourage Your Audience

“I’ve lost track of the number of people who’ve said to me, ‘Oh, I’m sorry, I know nothing about classical music.’ I hear this all the time, and usually reply, ‘Great! You don’t need to know anything about it. All you need to do is listen.’ But this can be a difficult message to get across.”

Be Open

“I always go in with no expectation. And this doesn’t mean low expectation; it means having as open a mind as possible. I try to find the right things to play (this is only an instinct), try to judge the situation, and then move in whatever way it’s going. When I recently visited a center for young people with communication disabilities, the staff warned me, ‘People might not respond. You might get nothing from them, or they might just want to leave.’

“I replied, ‘This is not for me; it’s something I’m trying to do for them, and if they don’t like it, that’s absolutely fine.’

“But we were all taken by surprise. As I was playing some Bach, one of the girls got up and started to dance, moving and swaying in the most beautiful way; then more people got up to join her, and there was an incredible feeling in the room. There was another girl who does nothing all day except sort plastic beads on a tray; she never touches anybody or talks. While I was playing she wanted to touch me and speak to me because the music had got to her. These might seem very small things, but they’re incredibly significant and they mean a huge amount to me.”

Remember Other Types of Music

“Although we need to keep classical music firmly on the agenda, we must be careful not to give the impression that it’s the only type that can be appreciated. One man in the US who downloaded the tracks from the Naked Violin website described himself to me as an aging rock and roller in his 50s who’d never before had an opportunity to experience a note of classical music. He wrote to say, ‘Oh, it makes me want to throw away my rock ’n’ roll collection.’ I wrote back very quickly to say, ‘Please don’t throw it away! This is not an either/or situation—now you can love both, and that’s absolutely brilliant.’”

Believe in Yourself

“Every time I go into a prison or somewhere daunting, I say to myself, ‘I’m going to play. They don’t have to like it, and it’s okay if they don’t. I’ll simply play the best I can.’ But you know what? I’ve always, always had a response. So when I tell myself it’s OK, I can really believe that it is. I know I can play and I know I can reach people, although I won’t necessarily reach everybody.”

Don't Make Excuses

“Actions speak louder than words, and we all need to take responsibility for doing something. A lot of people might say, ‘I’ve got so many commitments,’ and I’d agree with them—I’ve got commitments, too. But for things that you believe strongly about, you try to make time. And it’s very important to keep sending this message, because unless we all feel strongly about it and do it, it’ll remain a dream. You can do something if you really want to.”
