

Classical Music

TASMIN LITTLE

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DREAM JOB

As she approaches her fourth decade on the stage, Tasmin Little's enthusiasm for classical music remains boundless. She tells **Amanda Holloway** about her new Szymanowski recording, her love for lesser-known repertoire – and why she continues to challenge herself

An hour with Tasmin Little will restore your faith in the future of classical music. Her dedication to composers, audiences and the violin is undimmed after nearly 30 years on the concert platform – and she still loves what she does. Just back from adjudicating the ARD Music Competition in Munich, having left her Guaragnini untouched for three weeks, she feels energised and full of new ideas.

Her long association with the violin repertoire gives her performances a depth that (and she would never say this herself) new stars in the classical music firmament cannot match. 'I feel that right now is probably my best time. I've got all this experience from all these years of playing and the people I've worked with, all these fantastic conductors, have given me so much in terms of ideas and insight into how they think.'

Little is known for championing music that she thinks deserves to be heard, wherever she finds it. It's often by composers that lurk on the fringes, straddling centuries or musical categories – composers like Moeran, Haydn Wood, Coleridge Taylor, Delius and recently Szymanowski. 'Even now I have a big pile of music sitting on my music stand

that I'm currently learning,' she says, rushing off to find the latest score. 'Amy Beach, Rawsthorne, Alwyn, Ethel Smyth – my career has been marked by a desire to play pieces that people haven't bothered to play ... or just don't know about.'

It's a bit of a Szymanowski moment for Little. She first came across his music when she was about ten, on Radio 3. 'It was his

“I want to do things that stretch me”

Romance (Op 23), the most fantastic piece. It's a bit like a Polish *Lark Ascending* in places, but with a lot more overt passion in the middle! You have to float on top of a cushion of sound.' She has just released her second Szymanowski recording for Chandos: his two violin concertos paired with a little-known concerto by his countryman Karłowicz. She worked with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Edward Gardner, whose handling of orchestral colour is thrilling. 'What he can do to balance an orchestra and to bring out just one line somewhere that you've never heard before – it's breathtaking.'

The recording team at Chandos also

contribute to the success of this recording, which is best listened to in a quiet room because of the extraordinary dynamic extremes. 'In the first concerto I am often finely balanced on top of this panoply of orchestral colour. This is music that has to be overwhelming at some points; there can be a huge rush of sound and passion to knock you off your feet and then suddenly it disappears. There I am, still hovering, right at the top of the instrument, just hanging in there!'

'The second concerto is particularly virtuosic. You've got a huge showcase cadenza in the middle of it: marvellously, awkwardly, difficult but beautifully written by the violinist it was intended for, Paul Kochanski.' Little fell in love with it thanks to a recording by Wanda Wilkomirska. 'She really gives it some welly! I love that strong passionate playing of hers, just like I've always loved Ida Haendel's playing. I adore it when you get that very incisive rhythmic playing from a strong woman.'

Little herself is capable of forthright, powerful performances, but she's also remarkable for the delicacy and transparency of her top notes. Vaughan Williams's *The Lark Ascending* has been her calling card, on disc and in concert. Szymanowski revels in these almost otherworldly, hovering high notes, which must be fiendishly difficult to produce. 'You have to let your arm and wrist

undulate in a very natural way otherwise the strings crossings, especially in *Lark Ascending*, are going to sound very jerky. It's got to be seamless. When you are learning the violin you are taught how to maximise your sound, to use your muscles to draw the sound out of the violin. This is almost the complete reverse of that. I had to discover it for myself when I played Delius, which needs a lot of fragility in the sound.'

Her earlier recording of Szymanowski instrumental music with Piers Lane included his show-stopping Op 28. 'He combines a very smoky atmospheric 'Notturmo' with a demonic 'Tarantella'. We're doing it in our Rhinegold LIVE recital, along with part of Szymanowski's Sonata, an early piece that has the most beautiful slow movement and a rip-roaring last movement. I hope it gives people a taste of what these works are like.'

“ I'm like a magician with a hat of tricks that I pull out ”

Away from the concert hall, she's visiting Scotland as part of her RPS-award-winning project 'The Naked Violin', which she started in 2008 to demonstrate the huge range of styles and expressions that a single, unadorned violin can produce. In the past she has visited schools, hospitals, community centres and prisons. 'I go to places where they don't either have a lot of music, or it's a small venue with no piano. I talk about the violin, the music, and I tell people how I'm doing various technical tricks ... they really enjoy it. I'm like a magician with a hat of tricks and I pull out whatever is appropriate for the venue.'

She recalls being in a prison hospital in Ireland, where she talked and played for 40 minutes with no reaction from the men in the audience. 'Finally I said "If you don't ask me something I'm going to be forced to play some Bartók", which was more of a joke to myself. But I did play the slow movement of the sonata, and when it ended, a guy raised his head from his hands and said, "That was absolutely beautiful". You should never make assumptions about what people are going to like.'

► Challenging herself: Tasmin Little



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◀ Speaking out for music: 'Luckily I'm not a lone voice'

Little puts a lot of herself into these solo events, giving up her time in a way most international soloists would hesitate to do. 'It's part of my desire not to stay still. I want to do things that stretch me, in terms of repertoire and in terms of what I do and who I play for. That's why I still love my career, although it makes for quite a lot of hard work at times.'

Travelling the world she can see that audiences for classical music are growing, particularly in Asia, where a number of great performers are emerging. 'In the UK we are woefully inadequately supported, hence the fact that in many international competitions you will see very few, if any, British soloists. It is a source of huge sadness to me, particularly since I am only in this profession because I went to a state primary school in London that allowed me free music education and there was a full-time violin teacher in the school at the time.'

She is doing her best to bang the drum for music, making speeches in the House of Commons and writing articles in newspapers. 'Luckily I'm not a lone voice. Julian Lloyd-Webber, Nicky Benedetti, they're fantastic, but we never seem to get through to the right people.'

Someone should lock culture secretary Karen Bradley in a room with the irrepressible Tasmin Little for just ten minutes. I guarantee music would be back on the agenda. 🎻

Tasmin Little will appear at Rhinegold LIVE at Conway Hall on 14 November. Reserve your free ticket at bit.ly/2xCZm4H

Szymanowski and Karłowicz Violin Concertos, Tasmin Little, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Edward Gardner is out on Chandos. www.chandos.net

