

Scholar to superstar

As she retires from the concert stage, Tasmin Little tells **Clare Stevens** how an audition for the Menuhin school led to a stellar career and a lifelong relationship with the institution

Tasmin Little was not yet eight years old when she auditioned to study at the Yehudi Menuhin School (YMS) in Cobham, Surrey, but she can vividly remember the experience of playing for the school's legendary founder and 'a great long table full of other people'. A natural performer even at that early age, she recalls that it was 'very exciting and I really enjoyed it'.

Little had discovered music almost by accident when struck down with chickenpox aged six – off school and bored, she asked for a recorder, which came with an instruction book. 'I was a very precocious reader; by the end of the afternoon I had read the book, had taught myself the treble clef and could play all the tunes.'

Early promise

Soon she was also learning to play the piano, and her musical talent was nurtured by her North London state primary school, where she was offered one-to-one violin lessons with the late Peter Watmough. 'You weren't supposed to start until you were eight, but I was keen to learn. The school let me take an ear test, discovered that I had perfect pitch and made an exception for me. I made really fast progress – before long I was playing the Mozart E minor sonata – and after about nine months Peter told my parents that he thought I should go to a specialist music school.' Watmough, who played a crucial part in Little's career, passed away in July. Little says of him: 'I feel a huge sense of loss. All his pupils liked him – he never got cross, but was always encouraging and kind.

I am full of gratitude at the kindness and selflessness of this dear man who gave so much to a little girl all those years ago.'

Little's father George is an actor (most famous for playing a vicar in *Emmerdale Farm*), so the idea that their younger daughter might train to be a musician was not as unexpected as it might be for some parents. They understood the implications of what might turn out to be a precarious freelance career. 'Both of them are very musical. The bulk of my father's theatrical work was in musicals – he played the big roles like Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*, and Fagin and Bill Sykes in *Oliver!* – but he could never read music, he learned all his parts by ear. My mum had piano lessons as a child. They loved music and belonged to a record subscription scheme – they were always exploring new repertoire and I grew up listening to lots of different styles of music.'

A dream come true

Everything happened very fast with the Menuhin School audition: 'It was the first one I did – I had missed the preliminary audition, but they said I could come and play for them in the morning and then if they thought I was ready I could play for the main entrance selection panel in the afternoon. So that's what happened. I started in September 1973 as a weekly boarder and the youngest pupil in the school, with a scholarship from the government's Music and Dance Scheme.'



She admits that she was homesick at first and missed her family, but she says she quickly got used to being away from home and loved being at school, the environment and 'being part of that amazing musical community.'

'It was very strange to be transplanted to the Surrey countryside from a top floor flat in London, but I thought it was wonderful. And it genuinely was a very caring community, like being part of a very big family, with lots of brothers and sisters.'

'There were just 35 of us then, aged eight to 18 – people think it must have been a real hothouse, but Yehudi was very, very keen that musicians should be rounded human beings, aware of people in different circumstances from themselves. There was a whole programme designed for us to go and play for people in hospitals and hospices and other schools.'

Little's first teacher at YMS was Jacqueline Gazelle, the elderly Belgian widow of the school's first director of music, but when she left due to illness it took the school a while to find the right person to replace her. Little admits she floundered a little until the arrival of Pauline Scott when she was 14. 'She took me on and was immensely caring, though she had a philosophy of "tough love" and was quite strict about my training, putting me back to scales and studies to sort out my technique, which was very frustrating at the time; I felt I was eight years old again. She was also very careful about not letting me play particular pieces or undertake engagements until I was really ready for them. But I had enough grit in me to follow her advice without complaining, and it really paid off – within about 18 months Pauline had given me the tools I needed for my career.'

'For a music student of any age, your relationship with your teacher is crucial – if your instrumental lessons are going well everything else falls into place. I enjoyed studying with Pauline so much that after I left the Menuhin School I moved on to the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, where she also taught, in order to continue my lessons with her.'

Asked how closely Menuhin himself was involved with his school, Little says that he was still very busy with his own performing career, so his visits were not that frequent. 'But he heard us all play a couple of times a year, and of course because I was there for so long he knew who I was. He took a very keen interest in everyone; he took as much care over a junior pupil's bow hold or fingering as he did over a senior pupil's interpretation of a concerto.'



Leaning into teaching: Little will take an increasingly hands-on role at The Menuhin School

Giving back

Many aspects of life at YMS have changed since Little was a pupil – boarding is no longer compulsory, there are around 80 pupils on the register (around half from the UK, the other half from all round the world), the modern facilities now include a 300-seat concert hall which hosts commercial events by visiting artists as well as school performances, and tuition and pastoral care are supported by a raft of policies on issues such as behaviour management, health and safety, and safeguarding.

But the ethos remains reassuringly the same, says Little, who has stayed in touch with her old school as a musical patron and is now co-president along with Daniel Barenboim. 'I was delighted to discover that they still maintain the one-minute silence for reflection after assembly every morning that Yehudi instigated – he felt it was very important to have that thoughtful moment before we all went off to start our working day. I felt very privileged to be asked to lead that silence once or twice during lockdown, when the school continued to function as much as possible online, with virtual assemblies two or three times a week.'

YMS has recently appointed a new headmaster, Ben Gudgeon, and director of music, Ashley Wass. 'They have faced the unenviable task of managing a school that was forced to close its doors during their first year, and Little says that they have risen to the challenge magnificently and she feels very confident that they make an excellent

team, complementing one another's skills and personalities.'

'Ashley is an inspirational musician and a very experienced educator, who has great integrity; Ben has a great deal of experience and a very deep understanding of what support young musicians need to help them thrive.'

After the concert platform

Little had intended to retire from the concert stage in December 2019, but a hand injury meant some of her planned performances had to be cancelled, so she delayed her retirement for a year. Now, of course, Covid-19 has prevented most of this year's concerts from taking place. This time she has decided to stick with Plan B, while hoping that one or two of her final recitals can take place before the end of the year. After that, she is looking forward to having more time to devote to the Royal Academy of Music, where she is a visiting professor, and to building relationships with other conservatoires, not to mention writing, broadcasting, adjudicating and exploring some extra-musical interests.

She is also looking forward to being 'much more hands-on' in her involvement with YMS. 'As a former pupil who knew the founder well, worked with him and came to count him as a friend, I can provide a real connection to Yehudi.' ■

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