

music

In the context of the devastation wrought on British classical music by Covid-19, this may seem like a small tremor. To her legion of loyal fans, however, it's an earthquake. After 30 years of nonstop music-making, Tasmin Little is hanging up her violin. A solo career encompassing thousands of concerts on every inhabited continent and 45 recordings — ranging from almost all the great violin concertos to some that nobody else has played — will come to an abrupt halt on December 16 when (pandemic permitting) she bows out with Beethoven's Violin Concerto in Luxembourg.

The London-born violinist is only 55 and still sounding fabulous. So why? "Well, precisely that," she says. "From my early twenties I always said I wanted to stop while still at the top of my game. It's horrible to watch a performer that you admire gradually deteriorate. I wanted to be in the driving seat. I didn't want the decision to be made for me by my diminishing faculties and facilities, or by people losing interest in me as a performer."

So nothing to do with the present disastrous state of concert-giving? "No, I actually made the decision two years ago and was originally going to finish back in June, but all my planned farewell concerts were postponed, like everything else," she replies. "I've lost 40 solo concerts this year, from Moscow to Malta."

One of the most industrious and conscientious soloists on the classical scene, Little has characteristically planned her next life as carefully as she planned her last. She will, she says, move into broadcasting and masterclasses, see more of her university-aged children (the product of her one marriage, which ended in 2004), and generally pursue the non-musical interests she renounced to make a career. "I live in London, I'm the daughter of an actor [George Little, best known for a long stint in *Emmerdale Farm*] and I absolutely love the theatre, yet I've hardly ever had time to see any plays."

The way she presents it, her decision seems very matter-of-fact. Scratch the surface, though, and you realise what sacrifices a classical soloist has to make to reach the top and stay there. "I have been glued to my violin since I was seven years old," she says. "Then from eight to eighteen I was boarding at the Yehudi Menuhin School in Surrey." She's now co-president of the school (along with Daniel Barenboim) and involved in opening a new outpost in China.

"And in my 30 years of performing I've never rested on my laurels. There are violinists who say, 'Well it's just the three concertos for me this year; if you want me it's Brahms, Beethoven or Tchaikovsky.' I'm not one of them. Every year has been full of learning, playing and recording enormous quantities of new and neglected music, and I'm proud of that. I mean, it's unlikely that anyone would want to hear, say, Eugene Goossens's Violin Concerto in the concert hall, but my recording is there for people curious about how it sounds."

"None of that, though, gets any easier as you get older. And I never took a break of more than about a week in 30 years. Until this year, of course." But won't she be tempted to pick up the fiddle again after a few months of "retirement"? "No," she replies emphatically. "I won't even have a violin. I'm selling it. I know if I don't practise every day, it won't be long before I don't sound my best and I don't want to hear myself like that."

'To tell us to just retrain is so insulting'

Tasmin Little is selling her beloved violin to focus on teaching, but she'll still speak her mind, she tells Richard Morrison

Yes, but what a life-changing step. Even though the sale might raise a handy million or so (the violin is a beautiful 1757 instrument by Giovanni Battista Guadagnini), Little is selling something that has been her constant companion since her early twenties. "Yes, it will be an emotional parting," she admits, "but I've always felt great instruments should be played, not locked in vaults. The important thing is that after I've played my last note, the instrument will continue to sing, maybe for centuries more."

And Little will be for ever part of the instrument's history — even its personality. "Yes I really feel you leave something of yourself in an instrument. It's a bit like when you tread the boards of Carnegie Hall and feel the ghosts of all the performers in history who have walked that same walk."

Little hasn't just been an indefatigable ambassador for British classical music. She has also been an outspoken campaigner for it.

In recent years she has attacked Spotify and other streaming services for passing on the tiniest percentage of their profits to classical musicians, and has waged a long campaign to boost music education in the face of political indifference or even hostility. "Particularly in hard times music and the arts keep spirits up," she says. "Yet classical music has been

more and more downgraded in schools and in the curriculum. It's a continuing tragedy."

Her determination to speak out in defence of music and musicians has never been more needed, or more eloquently applied, than in the past six months. As she admits, she has become "something of an unofficial media spokesperson for freelance musicians everywhere" as they battle for professional survival during Covid. That campaign culminated last week outside the Houses of Parliament

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when Little led 400 freelance musicians in a sombre, almost apocalyptic performance of Mars from Holst's *Planets*, followed by two minutes of highly charged silence.

"It was to bring home to people that, unless we find a way to rescue the 33 per cent of freelance musicians who have received absolutely no government support since March, we are heading slowly but inexorably towards a cultural desert," she says. "What's tragic is that the situation calls into question the whole value that's placed on music in this country. During lockdown everyone turned to TV or Netflix for entertainment, yet there's such ignorance

about the fact that everything from a blockbuster film soundtrack to the title music for the *Ten O'Clock News* is supplied by freelance musicians."

What does she think of government suggestions that musicians should simply retrain to do different jobs? "That makes me very angry," she says. "Most musicians have trained since they were seven years old. They and their families have made huge investments in instruments and tuition. Music has been their whole life. To be told, 'Oh, just retrain,' is so insulting."

We shall miss Little when she's gone, no question — but where to catch her while stocks last? That's a fraught question. Her final concerts with a British orchestra are theoretically the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic's programmes on October 31 and November 1. She is also scheduled to do an epic recital in the Royal Festival Hall in London on October 22 (no live audience, but live on BBC Radio 3), when no fewer than four of her regular pianist partners will join her in a typically trailblazing programme of women and minority-ethnic composers — Amy Beach, Roxana Panufnik, Lili Boulenger, Clara Schumann and Samuel Coleridge-Taylor. "And Brahms, a token dead white male," she says with a laugh.

And there are other recitals dotted round the country till December. Let's hope they all happen. Little has given British music so much for so long. She deserves a thunderous curtain call.

BENJAMIN EALOVEGA



Tasmin Little is about to have an "emotional parting" with her 1757 Guadagnini violin. Below: aged seven



Full updated details of Little's schedule on tasminlittle.org.uk