

Tasmin Little: Playing great music in unexpected locations

But it was. To see if the British can recognise great music in an unexpected setting - and whether they're prepared to pay for it - we took Tasmin Little and her Strad on to the streets. Jessica Duchen went along to watch the show

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The railway bridge beside Waterloo station is a busy pedestrian cut popular with buskers, Big Issue sellers and the homeless seeking shelter. This week, it also played host to the most unusual buskers in London as Tasmin Little, protégée of Yehudi Menuhin and former prizewinner in the BBC Young Musician of the Year competition, and now one of our leading violinists, set up her pitch with her Stradivarius.

The Independent decided to give Little one of the more difficult challenges of her career - to test how people would react to a great artist giving a performance in a totally unexpected setting.

When we enter the tunnel's draughty shade, fresh from a blazing spring afternoon, there are no other musicians, no hawkers, and just one diminutive beggar sitting cross-legged with a baseball cap in front of him.

Little, dressed down in grey fleece and black slacks, tunes her Strad. We put a few coins in the violin case, just to start the ball rolling. Feeling a tad guilty at invading the homeless man's patch, we approach him to explain. He gives Little's violin the once-over, then asks, in an Italian accent: "Is that a Stradivarius?" He, like the violin, is from Cremona.

Little launches into "Spring" from Vivaldi's The Four Seasons. Passers-by are marching purposefully to and from the station. Some glance round. Some look insistently the other way. Some, spotting our photographer, walk carefully round behind him. Nobody stops. The homeless man from Cremona looks on, arms folded. What does he think of buskers? After all, they're on his patch. He doesn't mind them at all, he says. "Busking's good," he remarks. "She's really good.

There's a cellist who plays here often, but he plays the same stuff every day. She's much better."

The first donation arrives after two minutes of Vivaldi, from a woman of about 60 who has just been to the National Theatre. But still nobody actually stops to listen. These punters are an international collection: a mixture of businessmen in suits, tourists, families having a day out (some school terms haven't begun yet) and workmen on their way to and from nearby building sites.

Then there's a sign of things to come: three young lads, no more than 13 years old, wearing baggy jeans and baseball caps, slow in their tracks, gaze at Little, then fumble in their pockets, flushed with self-consciousness. They're determined to give her anything they can, out of their pocket money.

Towards the end of the first movement, Little is recognised for the first time. A couple in their early thirties do a visible double-take: their legs almost buckle with astonishment. "It's Tasmin Little, isn't it?" they cry. "What's she doing here?" Then they plough on. Did they recognise her straight off? "Yes - but actually, we're members of the Philharmonia Orchestra..." But wouldn't they want to stop and listen? "We'd love to - but we've got to catch a train!" That's the trouble with train stations. Everyone is en route, with schedules to follow, dependent on the vagaries of the railways and their timetables.

Little's tone echoes beautifully under the bridge, if occasionally drowned out by a passing train. A businessman hums along, but doesn't stop, still less contribute some cash. Now a young mother arrives, with toddler in tow. The infant stares up at the fiddler, intrigued. Little catches his eye and switches straight from Vivaldi to "Postman Pat". Now she has her first real audience of the day: mother and child listen, beaming, then thank her with enthusiastic applause, popping a coin in the case. Busking isn't only a matter of giving an impromptu recital; a little interaction with the audience goes a long way.

"I want to see whether what I play makes a difference," Little remarks. She begins Bach's Chaconne, the meatiest movement of his Partita in D minor and the most famous piece ever composed for solo violin. You might expect that the greater the music, the greater the response would be - but no. Five minutes in, and it's clear that the Chaconne is, * * unfortunately, a turn-off. Smiles fade, heads turn away - plenty of people are trying to save themselves the embarrassment of catching the eye of the busker they're about to pass by.

A French businessman heading for the Eurostar glances at Little admiringly, but doesn't break his journey. Why not? The music, he says, doesn't fit the context. "This is a busy place, people are coming and going, there are trains on the bridge; it's hard to listen to a piece like this in such circumstances." But he adds that he often does stop to listen to buskers in Paris and frequently gives them

money. Little cuts the Bach short and begins Monti's Czardas, a showy virtuoso favourite.

A group of youths, aged 17 or 18, are the next to place coins in the case. Two small boys aged about seven want to stop, but their dads usher them on. Several people pass, apparently without registering much interest, but at the far end of the tunnel they turn round, lurk and listen, presumably thinking that they can't be seen and therefore don't need to worry about giving money. A young man with a cigarette dangling from his lips slouches by, walking slower and slower. He's captivated, and finally defeated. He turns round, mooches back towards Little and puts down a coin. "I love your violin," he says.

Tourists seem relatively receptive, no doubt being the least likely to be hurrying for a train. A tall Swedish woman approaches and donates with a broad smile. Next, a middle-aged Asian man puts in a coin with a flourish and an enthusiastic thank-you; as he strolls away, a spring in his step, he waves one hand, conducting.

But as the time passes, it becomes clear that it's the young people, children and teenagers, who are the most interested, responsive, willing to stop and likely to give their money - even though they, no doubt, have the least resources. As for the well-heeled, grey-haired clientele that we are always told make up the majority of audiences for classical concerts, they are the most likely to turn away, lips pursed in snobbish disapproval: busking, one may infer, is equivalent to begging and shouldn't be encouraged, even if the busker does happen to be a world-famous violinist.

Little has played for half an hour now. The tunnel is a wind trap, the sun can't reach us and she's feeling chilly. She decides to put on another layer of clothing. It happens to be a full-length trenchcoat in bright scarlet leather. There's a change at once: The Four Seasons, in red, draws more looks, more comments and much more attention. But, interestingly, not more cash.

Now, though, Little is about to make someone's day. Two little girls, one wearing a rosette, trot up with their parents, staring up at her in wonder. Little appraises the rosette. "Is it your birthday?" she asks its wearer, Rosie. Rosie nods: she's 10 today. Tasmin plays a spirited rendition of "Happy Birthday". Rosie listens, pink-faced. Afterwards, when we tell the family who the violinist is, the girls rush back to have their picture taken with her. Rosie's dad had reached for his wallet the minute he heard the music. He hadn't recognised Little, but says he's not surprised to learn that she's a famous soloist: "She sounds absolutely amazing."

Little's got the hang of the job, and she's enjoying the interaction. Some builders start whistling along, jigging about to the music. "Give us a copper!" Little shouts to them. They call back, ogle her and wave. A man remarks disparagingly: "Oh, Vivaldi." Two women stare and nudge each other, whispering: "That's Tasmin

Little..." Recognition No 2. Not a lot in 40 minutes. On the other hand, one doesn't expect to see Little busking, and all too often, people only see what they expect to see. I once walked right past my favourite actor, Gérard Depardieu, without seeing him.

We're about to call it a day, when the most striking incident of all takes place. Another family is passing, with two children aged about six and four. The four-year-old girl stares at Little and wants to stop. Her mother pulls her hand. The child seriously wants to stop. A veritable tug-of-war ensues. The little girl plants her feet solidly on the ground and won't budge. She's absolutely determined to stop and hear the music. In a desperate last-ditch attempt to catch the family train, her mother simply scoops her up and carries her away. We watch, jaws dropping. If this is all the encouragement children get when they want to sample good music, no wonder the country's classical culture is in dire straits.

After 45 minutes, it's time to wrap up and retire to a café to count the takings and take soundings. Tasmin has made £14.10. Eight people had stopped to listen to her, of whom one was under the age of three, out of an estimated 900 to 1,000 passers-by.

As busking in London goes, that isn't a bad result. Location makes a difference, as do other factors. One fiddler who busks around central London reports making between £10 and £20 per hour, depending on the weather. A gifted and unusually gorgeous teenage girl of my acquaintance recently spent a Saturday playing her violin in Sloane Square; she went home with £500.

"That was fascinating," Little remarks. "It was definitely the young people who were the most open to the music and the most empathetic to the situation." The response of some of the older people had seemed almost mean-spirited, while the majority of the "men in suits" had been deep in their own worlds, hurrying for trains, talking on mobiles or simply mulling over the contents of their latest meetings. "I was also startled by the number of people wearing iPods who didn't so much as hear it," Little adds. Still, she insists: "I didn't feel remotely uncomfortable. It was surprising, in fact, how many people acknowledged me and complimented me."

Wasn't she disappointed that more people didn't stop? "Sometimes we're guilty of giving ourselves a goal, even if it's only catching a train, and leaving very little room for spontaneity in our lives," she reflects. "We don't deviate from our pattern. People forget to take into account that something different might happen." This could be why the children had the mental space to respond and the instinct to listen - every one of them.

Are our lives in the rat race too hectic to let us appreciate an unexpected dose of great music in a surprising context? In a similar experiment, The Washington Post sent another celebrated violinist, Joshua Bell, to busk on his Stradivarius in

a Washington DC underground station. Would people there know that they were hearing an international soloist playing an instrument worth \$2m? Would they give money? Would a crowd gather? Were American commuters any more capable of making time in their lives to appreciate an unexpected moment of transcendental beauty?

The answer there, it seemed, was a resounding "no". Josh played for 45 minutes and made \$32. Out of 1,097 passers-by, just seven stopped to listen. One knew his name. Overall, the outcome was similar to Little's experience in London.

But I suspect there's more to it. First, people don't like being asked to part with their cash, and in London they're asked constantly. On an average hike from Waterloo to Covent Garden, one usually passes three or four Big Issue sellers, two or three beggars, a team of people collecting for a good cause or a petition, and at least one normal busker, if not more. If someone doesn't stop to listen to a violinist, however fine and famous, it could be because compassion fatigue has effectively pre-programmed them to screen out any busker on the spot.

Next, context does matter. The Waterloo railway bridge isn't the most salubrious of venues. The ground is amply layered with pigeon shit, blankets belonging to the homeless lie scrunched in a corner, and no doubt the place is used as an impromptu loo by Friday night binge-drinkers. It's also windy, cold and, with the passing trains, a bit noisy. Not an ideal place to linger and enjoy Bach's greatest violin music.

And there's one factor that shouldn't be entirely discounted: our chronic national tendency to embarrassment. We just can't possibly be seen to stop and listen to a busker. There's no way we could interrupt our lives and stop in our tracks, crying "It's Tasmin Little!" - just in case it isn't. Because then we'd look silly.

It's certainly ironic that the senior citizens who passed Little by with heads deliberately turned away were of the same demographic group that flocked to hear her play a concerto at a sold-out Queen Elizabeth Hall just two months ago, booking and paying months in advance.

Nevertheless, the saddest part was watching children being forcibly removed from the suddenly discovered thrill of international-quality classical violin-playing by parents who just didn't have the time for it. Even if our own lives are too driven to let in great artistry, spiritual excitement and the revelation of the sound of a Strad, shouldn't our kids have the chance to experience them? Because they do want to; and that fact made the saddest revelation also the happiest.

It was evident, too, that many of the accidental listeners sensed that this was something out of the ordinary. They might not have recognised Little (or not admitted to it), but most could tell that her playing was damned good. Eyebrows went up, compliments flew and there were smiles galore, if not money to match.

The Strad, played gloriously on a spring day, had brightened life a little for everybody. The takings, incidentally, are going to Cancer Research - with a cut to our friend from Cremona.