

Virtuoso violinist Tasmin Little is coming to a PC near you

The musician reveals how her experience of busking for The Independent sowed the seeds of Little's latest project, The Naked Violin

Interview by Jessica Duchon

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When the celebrated violinist Tasmin Little went busking in London last spring as an experiment for The Independent, she little thought that it would spark a ground-breaking initiative. But that afternoon sowed the seeds of Little's latest project, The Naked Violin. This month, she releases a new recording of three works for unaccompanied solo violin as a download from her website, completely free of charge.

No musician has ventured down this path before – not even the rock band Radiohead, who asked buyers to pay what they thought the recording was worth. Though it may initially strike terror into the hearts of record-company executives and retail outlets, there's a far bigger concept behind it than simply making waves. The dynamic violinist hopes that it could prove a way of breaking down barriers, reaching a whole new audience that might enjoy music if only given the chance. And, with the wealth of possibilities offered by the internet, Little considers that the feedback she receives might inspire change in the concert world, too.

"Busking for The Independent, I realised that there are still large sections of the population who feel that classical music is not for them," Little says. "But also, there was an enormous number of people who would have been interested if the circumstances had been more conducive to stopping and listening – if they didn't have to catch a train, say, or if it was less cold and windy."

She wants to meet the challenge of reaching those people who tend to switch off at the words "classical music", explaining: "I wondered what it takes to get through to people, to get past their discomfort with the idea. And it struck me that people are comfortable with their computers. Online, you might try something you'd never dream of doing anywhere else, such as chatting to strangers. It offers a sense of protection."

That led Little to the idea of releasing a free recording online: "You can just click on it and listen while you're doing something else at your computer. It's so easy that you might just give it a go. And it will be as accessible in remote parts of the world as in a busy city. And you don't have to go to a shop or wait for delivery – it's immediate."

She chose three pieces that are totally different from one another: Bach's Partita No 3 in E major; Ysaÿe's Solo Sonata No 3, written in 1924; and a contemporary work by the British composer Paul Patterson, his Luslawice Variations. Listeners can experiment and discover which style appeals to them the most. But the recording is only the beginning. For years, Little has been speaking to her audiences about the pieces she plays, and she's decided to provide spoken introductions for download alongside the music. She also gives classroom suggestions, which she hopes teachers will use to plan lessons around each piece.

Then there are the violins – plural. Little plays two beautiful Italian instruments, a Guadagnini of 1757 and the "Regent" Stradivarius of 1708, which is on loan to her from the Royal Academy of Music. Their contrasting sounds provide an intriguing extra dimension. "I tried this concept at a concert I gave to an audience of bankers, many of whom later told me not only that they didn't go to concerts but also that they thought they didn't like classical music," Little says. "In the event, they loved it, and were fascinated by the violins, both of which are wonderful but completely different. Everybody could hear the difference and had strong ideas about which of the two they preferred and why."

So, in one of her online introductions, Little talks about the violins and plays scales on both so that listeners can make a comparison.

The title *The Naked Violin* was, she admits, inspired by Jamie Oliver. "I love his Naked Chef idea, that cooking is something for everyone: you don't need tuition to enjoy good food. And likewise, you don't have to take a degree in classical music or be a particular kind of person to enjoy it. Busking, I found that every single child who went past wanted to watch and listen. Any child, even a baby, can enjoy classical music."

Next, Little would like to extend the concept far and wide. "I believe passionately that live performance is the best way to experience any art form or sport – it's always more exciting than a CD or TV," she says. "I hope that if the recording intrigues people, they'll want to see me play."

That's why Little and her violins could be coming soon to a tepee near you. "I want to take a tepee around the country, setting up shop in places where you wouldn't normally hear live music. I'd like to take it to festivals, but also to malls, schools and so on – to remind people that classical musicians don't come from a different planet, to get rid of the ridiculous mythical aura that surrounds the musical world, and the notion that you have to be a certain kind of person to appreciate this music."

Here, the inspiration isn't so much Jamie Oliver as Father Christmas. "People queue up with their kids to see Santa in his grotto and chat with him. In the tepee, I'd play to people, but also talk to them about the violin – they can ask any questions they like without being patronised or made to feel stupid." Little intends to do all of this free of charge, too.

For the moment, feedback is being invited through the internet, in "Tasmin's Three-Step Challenge". First: download the recording. Second: contact her through the website and give her your views on the music and the violins. Third: "Challenge Tasmin" and make a suggestion: what would make you go

to a live concert? If you never go, why not? What would tempt you in through the door?

Little's long-term aim is to kick-start a world in which classical music can have as big an impact on people's lives as pop. "When people ask me what I do and I say I'm a classical musician, I'd like them not to look blank or scared. I meet taxi drivers who listen to classical music on the radio all the time, but when I ask if they've been to a concert, they often haven't and wouldn't. I'd like to understand why that is, and change it."

Little and her webmaster will be monitoring carefully the number of downloads from the site, but she has no idea how many listeners to expect. She is venturing into largely uncharted territory. But change has to start somewhere, and a violin (or two), a violinist and a computer could just be the perfect place.

The Naked Violin can be downloaded free from <http://www.tasminlittle.net>