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BACH: Six Sonatas and Partitas for Violin Solo – Lara St. John, violin – Ancalagon Records

***** MULTICHANNEL DISC OF THE MONTH *****

These passionate, exquisite readings catapult to the very top of my list



BACH: Six Sonatas and Partitas for Violin Solo – Lara St. John, violin – Ancalagon Records Multichannel SACD AR 132, (2 discs, 56:02, 70:25) *** [Release date: Oct. 9, 07]:**

It has now been eleven years since Lara St. John exploded onto the classical recording scene with her album of Bach works for solo violin, forever stigmatized by the now-infamous cover where she was wearing only her instrument. As silly as that whole controversy was, many female performers have far surpassed any shock value that cover may have had. (Anyone perused Janine Jansen's *Four Seasons* album?) But the ruse, if indeed that is what it was, worked like a charm, and her playing has been very nearly universally acclaimed ever since. At least I have never seen a bad review of that album. It contained perhaps the two greatest works for the instrument by Bach, the D-minor partita and the C-major sonata, the latter for my money featuring the single greatest piece he wrote for violin, the magnificent 10-minute *Fuga*. In her second all-Bach album (the concertos and double concerto) she also included the first sonata in G-minor. Perhaps because of the high standard set for the first album, there were some grumblings in certain quarters about an extraordinary facility that was lacking a heartbeat. Personally I thought the second album to be a standard-setter, but it must be said that dazzling faculties often obscure the musicality that underlies them.

Having completed the halfway point in this series, you might think that St. John would be content to simply finish it off with the first and third partitas, and the A-minor sonata. But instead she has opted to record anew those works previously tracked, and to offer the set in Super Audio surround sound as well, a decision I can only regard as deliriously enlightened. In doing so she becomes the third violinist to achieve SACD stardom, the two previously being Julia Fischer (Pentatone) and Kazuhito Yamashita (RCA), the second obtainable on this side of the world but not distributed here.

After her initial forays into Bach, I was little prepared for what I heard on this new double-album. The first album was a brash, in-your-face, see-what-I-can-do sort of statement, albeit one that got straight to the heart of Bach's intensely personal music, and proved to the world that the middle-aged master could speak as easily to a twenty-something Canadian girl as he had to the greatest of the modern master violinists. When these works

were written Bach had just accepted the position of Kapellmeister to Prince Leopold at Cothen, and his duties at the Calvinist court included the production of some of his most famous music, including the *Brandenburg Concertos*. Around 1719-20 he penned these astounding sonatas and suites (the latter he called *partias*) that have never been surpassed in form or substance. Unlike some of the works by Biber and Westhoff for solo violin composed in the same era, Bach concentrates on the lyrical aspects of the music first, techniques like double-stopping only a secondary consideration in the service of the music. And even in the *partitas*, he continually varies the types of dance movements included, and demonstrates differing ways of approaching a fugue in each of the three sonatas.

Almost from the very first bars of the opening G-minor sonata, it is evident why St. John chose to re-record these works, for her approach is vastly different from her first two discs. There is enough here to either satisfy or irritate almost every partisan political crowd. Her use of ornamentation is varied, according to the dictates she perceives in the music and not from pre-established doctrine. Her articulation certainly displays some of the latest and greatest period-movement "progress", and her tempos can be quicksilver and fleet, but she is not a slave to any of this, and makes a few interpretative decisions that will drive periodists to drink if they are not there already. Her long-held last note of the famous *Ciaccona* from the D-minor partita is way beyond what most period specialists would tolerate. Her variance in rubato outdoes some of the more "romantic" players in certain instances, and she certainly does not take a cookie-cutter approach to this music, drawing out every ounce of emotion. Sometimes there is sparse vibrato, other times full-frontal. Even the articulation between individual notes is often varied (especially in the slow movements), at one time using more of an emotive "slide" and at other times a more detached separation, and she always brings out Bach's marvelous harmonies with rich, vibrant low notes. One of the more interesting things that I noticed is the idea of coupling many of the movements, implicitly suggested in the music but often ignored, and seeming to dovetail one into the other, an idea more performers should take note of, and one that I can't say I have heard since the early seventies when Christoph Eschenbach released his Chopin Preludes (DGG) doing this same thing.

Lara St. John's Bachian credentials are as fine as any violinist playing today, and she has given us a set that must be reckoned with. The eleven years since the last set are quite simply the difference between an intuitive and innately musical youth trying her hand at climbing Mount Everest and exulting when she reaches the top with nary a short breath, and one who now looks at the mountain and stops and pauses along the way to reflect on the beauty and greatness of it. Her respect for these works is palpable in this new recording, and you feel that she is presenting the master to us through more mature eyes. I did a comparison of the D-minor partita with three other favorite recordings, though I did exclude Nathan Milstein's EMI mono set because it was unfair to compare mono and modern stereo recordings. (I have always found his stereo remake on DGG vastly overrated.) St. John owns this work, and I have rarely been so convinced of the rightness of an interpretation. Rachel Podger's recording on baroque violin is excellent in every way, though she cleverly recorded with a lot of reverberation in order to enhance the length of the many double-stops and implied harmonies that Bach uses. And she does use some vibrato, which is very curious when you hear Rachel Barton Pine's rendition also on baroque violin with gut strings, sans vibrato. Hers is a reading that is almost uncomfortably intimate, ascetic, and personal, and utilizes more period instrument techniques than Podger's. Even the *Ciaccona* is a tame beast here, shorn of any emotive decoration. One of the greatest has to be Arthur Grumiaux's

Philips recording, surely one of the most immaculately styled, with heavy Belgian vibrato on every note, elegantly Gallic in his breathtaking virtuosity and simply beautiful playing. His is of the post-Romantic generation, a little cool in his approach, but so winningly gorgeous that you can't help but love it. One should not have only one copy of these seminal works, and if I was choosing among them it would have to be Grumiaux.

That is, next to this sterling effort of Ms. St. John. Her passionate, complex readings catapult to the very top of my list, and I am still discovering things with score in hand after hearing the set four times so far. Even as I write this, the buoyancy and lilt of the *Gavotte en Rondeau* from the E-Major partita are making it difficult to concentrate! The sound of this recording is wonderful. For those who question the need for SACD when recording a solo instrument, think again; it adds a wonderful life to the instrument that circles all around you in a most satisfying way. I can't claim how "natural" a sound it is, but I really don't care as the whole recording process can hardly claim to be "natural" in the first place. What is important is the result, and it is fine indeed, extra care taken with multiple mikes at Skywalker Sound in California to produce as close as possible a three-dimensional sound. St. John also records in complete takes (no patching), so these are very honest readings. If—and I hope I have convinced you otherwise—you are only in the market for one recording of these masterpieces, this is the one. Lara St. John has brought Bach back alive and well, in readings of sumptuous warmth and fervency.

By the way, these recordings are available on iTunes right now, and the SACD package in stores on October 9th.

-- Steven Ritter

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