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- **Mainstream**
- **Chinese**
- **Ethnic**
- **French**
- **German**
- **Italian**
- **Mexican**
- **Seafood**
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Seduction of the violin

Lara St. John brings a different look to classical music

Sunday, September 9,
2007

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BY GARY PANETTA
OF THE JOURNAL STAR

She's a curvy, six-foot blonde who has a penchant for sensuous and sometimes revealing CD covers.

And she has one aim: To seduce the distracted masses into loving classical music.

It's a strategy that might be working.

More than 35,000 people bought Lara St. John's 1996 release, "Bach: Works for Violin Solo," whose black-and-white cover displayed an apparently nude St. John holding a violin discreetly over her breasts. (In reality, St. John wasn't topless.) Such sale numbers may not be very impressive by pop standards, but they're pretty good when it comes to a classical release by an up-and-coming artist.

Her soon-to-be-released CD, "Bach: The Six Sonatas and Partitas for Violin Solo," also tries to give the viewer an eyeful: St. John appears barefoot on a Hawaiian beach, the wind pressing an orange-gold evening dress tightly against her body. A well-timed wave dramatically crashes in the background, sending up spray.

"I saw that wave on the background on the proof, and I thought, it's gotta to be

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- What: Violinist Lara St. John will be the featured soloist at the Peoria Symphony Orchestra's "Red, White and Blue!" concert. St. John and the orchestra will perform John Corigliano's "The Red Violin" Suite. Also on the program is Leonard Bernstein's Symphony Dances from "West Side Story"; Charles Griffé's "The White Peacock"; and Jennifer Higdon's "The Blue Cathedral."

- When: 8 p.m. Saturday.

- Where: Peoria Civic Center Theater.

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good. This is an incredible photo, just in its intensity and that one small moment and the fact that I'm completely sunburned," said St. John, who performs Saturday with the Peoria Symphony Orchestra.

"That was literally on the beach in Hawaii - on a volcanic black beach. ... I personally don't really see how anyone could call it at all unusually sexy. I'm in a concert dress. That's what I wear to perform on stage. Except for the fact that my feet are bare, it's exactly what I do in an evening gown. No matter what I do, everyone has a problem. It's a good photo. The whole is nature, wind, sun, sky and also the intensity."

"Intensity" also applies to St. John's performances. Her new recording, "Bach: The Six Sonatas and Partitas for Violin Solo," is nothing if not intense. And like St. John's choices about marketing and packaging, it's also fresh and new. There's a brilliance and sparkle to her playing, an energy and momentum. The album compares favorably with recordings with that other master of Bach, Itzhak Perlman.

But where Perlman sounds relatively slow and soulful, St. John is brilliant and relatively fast; where Perlman is pronounced and stately, St. John is light and delicate. Both approaches are equally valid. Yet it's hard not to walk away from St. John's efforts without feeling that she has found a way of making Bach speak afresh to a new generation.

Such lively, seemingly spontaneous playing is the fruit of long hours of practice - stretching all the way back to when this 35-year-old soloist was mere 2 years old and picked up the violin for the first time. Recognized as a prodigy, she was studying at the prestigious Curtis Institute by 14.

"I have vivid memories as a child of feeling trapped within a never-ending grind of scales, arpeggios and etudes for what purpose I could never fathom," she writes on larastjohn.com. "I thought it was a punishment for something I had done wrong."

She credits her teacher, Jorge Corpus, with finally making her understand that classical music is mostly made up of scales and arpeggios. Master these, and you are on your way to tackling the big pieces of the repertoire.

Whether or not John Corigliano's "The Red Violin" Suite, which St. John will perform at the symphony concert Saturday, will become one of the lasting pieces of the repertoire is impossible to say. Certainly, it has a head start: Music based on Corigliano's score for the 1999 movie about a mysterious red violin's three-century odyssey has been performed by orchestras nationwide in one form or another, even before the movie opened.

"The Red Violin" Suite constitutes Corigliano's final

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soloist-and-orchestra version of the soundtrack. As such, it's different from "The Red Violin: Chaconne for Violin and Orchestra" popularized by Joshua Bell (who happens to perform with the Peoria Symphony Orchestra later this season). Unlike the Chaconne, the Suite has been recorded only by St. John in a soon-to-be released CD, and its lush string sound, beautiful melodies and shimmering cadenza passages are likely to be audience pleasers.

"I prefer it," St. John said. "I've done both many times, but I've always been so struck by the Suite. It's more intense (than the Chaconne). Sometimes it just literally makes you want to cry. I don't say that about too many pieces. The theme is just heart-wrenching. What (Corigliano) does with the Suite is just fantastic."

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