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## Passionate St. John shows her mettle with violin concerto

**By Herman Trotter NEWS MUSIC CRITIC EMERITUS****Updated: 07/08/07 6:47 AM**

With Saturday's performance of Sibelius' Violin Concerto and Holst's "The Planets," the Buffalo Philharmonic served notice that its July Summerfest Series at Artpark will not, like the summer programming of many other orchestras, lose sight of the fact that the primary purpose of a symphony orchestra is to play the great orchestral repertoire.

It's an extraordinarily varied and rewarding series of 10 concerts that Music Director JoAnn Falletta has concocted for Summerfest. Offerings run from the eternally popular Kingston Trio to Beethoven's mighty "Choral Symphony," with other programs devoted to such diverse attractions as the Neglia Ballet, Christopher O'Riley's engaging "From the Top" (to be taped for NPR broadcast), great Italian opera arias, and the best in Argentine tangos.

Lara St. John's career blossomed in the 1990s, but it took some time for the press and the public to see beyond the statuesque violinist's early, seductive press photos and to hear that she was actually a high-level artist.

Any remaining doubters should have been convinced Saturday by her performance of the dark and captivatingly lyrical Sibelius Violin Concerto, with good partnership by Franz and the BPO. It's a work that often contrasts icy upper register serenity with precipitous descents into the violin's brooding low end, all of which St. John negotiated with great technical skill and searing lyrical intensity.

The long first movement sets the spiritual tone of the work, with memorable and well-developed themes plus a mesmerizing solo cadenza in which the soloist passionately attacked and played with great expressiveness. This was mirrored by slinky gestural body English that seemed integral to the performance, not showy.

She was equally expressive in the slim-lined intimacy of the slow movement, successfully projecting both its nobility and its Nordic reticence, mostly in her very mellow middle register.

The rhythmically spirited finale, characterized by Tovey as "a polonaise for polar bears," concludes with some extraordinary octave leaps for the violin, played with great rhythmic thrust, frequent pointed accents and unusual but tasteful phrasing. The overall performance projected a strong sense of urgency and destination.

Franz and the orchestra concluded the concert with a highly characteristic, if occasionally dynamically, unbridled performance of Holst's seven-movement suite "The Planets." The composer asked listeners not to look for any hidden meaning in this music beyond the subtitles he gave to each movement.

And so we had the pounding, war-like rhythms of “Mars,” the soft horn and flutes bringing a countering sense of peace in “Venus,” the skittering “Jupiter” offering the jollity Holst ascribes, and fascinating ostinato figures undergirding “Saturn.” The suite concludes not with a blaze of glory, but with the pianissimo impression of the remote, mystic “Neptune,” joined at the end by the women of the Philharmonic Chorus in wordless, ethereal cantillation.

The BPO Summerfest continues at 3 p.m. today, with an all-Gershwin program featuring the incomparable Piano Concerto in F.

Concert Review

Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra

Holst’s “The Planets” on Saturday night in Artpark Mainstage Theater.

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