

MATTHEW HINDSON: Violin Concerto; CORIGLIANO: Red Violin Suite; LISZT (arr. Kennedy/St. John): Totentanz – Lara St. John, violin/ Royal Philharmonic Orchestra/ Sarah Ioannides, conductor – Ancalagon

A new concerto from a terrific composer played by one of the best and most interesting violinists around today.

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Lara St. John seems to have fully committed herself to the SACD format, and the results are most gratifying, showing her to be an enlightened performer indeed, as so many of her fellow artists seem out to sea when it comes to concerns about audio production and high quality sound. Since this is her own label she is able to go full out in the production values, and this outstanding disc shows how much care went into the production. The booklet is actually two (with French and German notes in a separate copy), and the issue is a completely full-color edition with pictures, text, bios, and recording information. St. John obviously thinks enough of this [music](#) to announce it with a great deal of splash, and the recording does justify that sort of presentation. [Rather a contrast to a typical [MP3](#) digital download - compromised stereo, no notes in *any* language and no photos/cover, eh?...Ed.]

The main course is the new concerto by Australian composer Matthew Hindson, a name I knew before but had not actually heard any of his music. I shall certainly rectify that omission if this Violin Concerto is any sort of representative example of his abilities. He has taken three principle non-musical ideas to portray the “spirit of Australia” in his piece. *Wind Turbine at Kooragang Island* thrusts us into the first movement, as the concerto opens with a growling, low pitched engine of great size that serves almost as a leitmotif for the turbine (and these things can now get as tall as the Washington Monument, just for some perspective), while other parts of the movement felt to me as a fantasy taking us through the air itself as it was pushed through the great blades into the sky. Well, at least that’s what I thought. You may have a different reaction, but suffice it to say that this is an exhilarating movement, even reminiscent of Philip Glass in spots (but far more effective and non-static than him).

The second movement *Westerway* reflects the lives of those living in a small village in Tasmania, where economic times are harsh and the populace challenged to make the transition to an uncertain future. The music portrays the various moods and struggles of these people with an uncanny atmosphere and highly lyrical bent. The last movement *Grand Final Day* is an impression of one of the most important celebrations of the year for any sport, sort of a “national championship” day where excitement runs high and parades and other accoutrements of revelry take place. It is a suitably uplifting conclusion to this important and very engaging concerto, and if I say that parts of it sounded like a film score I mean no

disparagement—this is terrific music of a very evocative nature, and deserves a place in the hard-to-crack modern repertory.

I doubt that any composer has milked so much from any piece than John Corigliano and his *Red Violin*. I count now four available “versions” of this wonderful music: the original film score, the *Chaconne*, the newly-fashioned *Red Violin Concerto*, and this 1999 Suite that takes music directly from the original score. There is nothing new here; if you like this music (and if you don’t know it you really should) then you will find that there is lots of pleasure to be had from St. John’s lyrical and sometimes even mysterious reading. This is probably the easiest way to hear the music aside from the soundtrack itself, as the Concerto and *Chaconne* are composed pieces based on the film score, whereas this Suite provides us with the composer’s very first thoughts.

Franz Liszt battled with his *Totentanz (Dance of Death)* for almost 20 years, finally completing the work around 1865, based on the *Dies Irae* and comprised of the theme and four variations. Most people don’t hear it that way, instead focusing on the typically Lisztian pyrotechnics and phenomenally difficult piano part, descriptive and ferociously romantic music of the most telling order. Lara St. John bemoans the lack of a violin concerto from the composer (and it is a strange oversight on his part), and so has arranged this work as a sort of concerto with her comrade Martin Kennedy. Having heard a preview of this several years ago, I can tell you that it works beautifully, and if you don’t know the piece you would never guess that it wasn’t written for violin, so adept is the scoring and adaptation.

The surround sound on this release is stunning, and the Royal Philharmonic and its conductor, the young Sarah Ioannides, provide energetic and rapt accompaniment, if that is even the word for these complex works. Lara St. John plays as she usually does, no one finer in my experience, and has done a great service in bringing the Hindson concerto to light. The other stuff’s not half bad either. Highest recommendation!

-- Steven Ritter