

OPINION COLUMNISTS



These strings made for bows

LOCAL LORE: Violin, or fiddle, call it what you want, but call it sweet music

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COLUMNIST

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My London definitely includes the fiddle. Or the violin. Or whatever you want to call the stringed instrument three London-region aces have used to make three of the magical albums of 2008.

The three are former Londoner Lara St. John, a violinist now in New York, and a pair of fiddle stars -- Lambeth's John P. Allen and Dorchester's Shane Cook.

Each has a new album -- and that sounds like a story to me. (Details are elsewhere on this page). The playing on each album is extraordinary -- which is no surprise if you know anything about their careers. They are all excellent at pushing the boundaries of their respective genres -- classical with an edge (St. John), bluegrass-roots-folk (Allen) and Don Messer for our era (Cook).

What startles and delights me as I've been listening to all three albums is the imagination and all-star teams on each project. St. John's CD with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Sarah Ioannides, is being called World Premieres. It follows her Bach album, 2007's best-selling double album on iTunes.

"Well, here's the latest (and hugest) project my little label has undertaken," says St. John in a hand-written personal note about the deluxe package.

Her label, Ancalagon, is named for a fire-breathing dragon in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings.

Breathe fire? Any London-tied disc with two world premiere recordings -- (Matthew Hindson's Violin Concerto) and Liszt's Totentanz in an arrangement for violin and orchestra by Martin Kennedy and St. John -- is hot.

Listen to John Corigliano, whose Suite from The Red Violin receives its first major recording, on the St. John disc. "She is a real maverick, as a performer and in her choice of repertoire," says the American composer. "An opulent and virtuosic new violin concerto (Hindson) and my Red Violin suite are coupled with a newly-arranged version of a 19th-century pianistic tour de force (Liszt) in her latest stunning release."

As you may detect, I am probably a little overawed by St. John's brilliant fire -- and am overwhelmed every time I play this recording. She'll be in London next May to play the Corigliano suite with Orchestra London.

As for Allen, he'll be out on the road with multi-Juno winners Prairie Oyster soon. The Bachelor Farmers -- the name he's given to the supergroup on A Canadian Portrait -- deserve a Juno themselves. "The musicians are a who's who of roots pickers," Allen says with pride of his Bachelor Farmers. "I haven't worked with (banjo player) Dave Talbot since our days with the Dixie Flyers 25 years ago, so it's about time. He's been living in Nashville for the past 10 years and has risen to be the No. 1 call for sessions down there. He presently plays in Dolly Parton's band.

"Mike Stevens is to the harmonica what Ian Anderson is to the flute . . . his solo on Teepee Shuffle is one for the ages."

Also helping Allen on such True North classics as Snowbird, Four Strong Winds, Bud the Spud and We'll Sing in the Sunshine are bassist Dennis Pendrith, dobro player Allan Widmeyer, the Good Brothers, a young singer called Joanna Dockrill and other all-stars.

On Allen's last CD, he posed naked (pretty much) for the cover which was funny and cool. He played witty jokes on the disc inside. He's naked this time, too, singing lead on songs you probably know pretty well. That exposure also works. Allen and the Bachelor Farmers should reunite -- if possible -- for a gig.

Cook's new album, *When Here Meets There*, has the name of his frontline collaborator -- Nova Scotia-based fiddler and pianist Troy MacGillivray -- just above Shane's on the cover.

That's all right. He's great, too.

In Free Press country, we'll concentrate on Cook. The band -- including East Coast legend Ray Legere -- is fantastic. Their old-time is uptown right now.

The only thing missing from the jigs, reels, two-steps and strathspeys is Cook's quiet, sweetly timed humour. I've written about *When Here Meets There* before. If you never heard of Don Messer, this one's for you.

All three London violin aces make beautiful music. Their remarkable stories would sound perfect on CBC Radio and everywhere. Are you listening?

LONDON VIOLINS

What: New releases by three London-tied violin players, Shane Cook, John P. Allen and Lara St. John.

John P. Allen and the Bachelor Farmers -- *A Canadian Portrait*. www.johnpallen.com

Shane Cook (and Troy MacGillivray) -- *When Here Meets There*. shanecook.com

Lara St. John and Royal Philharmonic Orchestra -- *World Premieres*. larastjohn.com