

Greg Stepanich

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Concerto celebrates wind turbine



At the top of this entry is a picture of the wind turbine on Australia's Kooragang Island, where I've never been, but which is the improbable inspiration for a new violin concerto.

In the mail the other day came a disc by [the Canadian violinist Lara St. John](#), whose Bach solo disc last year, which I much enjoyed, apparently did quite well on iTunes. St. John's new record is very different: It contains a violin concerto by [the Australian composer Matthew Hindson](#) (b. 1968), the *Red Violin* Suite of John Corigliano, and a new arrangement by St. John and British composer Martin Kennedy of Liszt's *Totentanz*.

If the Bach disc was a collection of landmark works of serious intent and deep expressivity, the current one is all high drama and huge emotion, one that spans the distance from the festivities following a sporting event to a dance with Death.



The music requires St. John to play a great many bravura passages, some of them that leap from the bottom to the top of the violin's register, others that require her to string out a blizzard of fast notes. The lyrical side isn't neglected, especially in the second movement of the Hindson concerto and much of Corigliano's music for the Francois Girard film *The Red Violin*. Here, she shows herself the possessor of a penetrating, emotionally charged tonal quality that offers effective contrast to the musical fire in which she is more often immersed.

For me, the best part of the disc is the Corigliano — which is a suite from the movie music, not the concerto and chaconne the composer later fashioned from it. Corigliano has crafted a haunting theme that works just as well on its own as it does with its cinematic melodrama, and the suite, which contains several of the virtuoso display moments from the film, is a highly effective 25 minutes of music that has narrative integrity of its own. St. John plays it with conviction, thorough technical command, and a compelling sense of style.

The Hindson, on the other hand, is something of a mixed bag. Its three movements are designed to evoke some aspect of Australian life — the first, the wind turbine at Kooragang; the second, economic downturn in a Tasmanian village called Westerway; the third, Grand Final Day, the biggest Australian sports celebration of the year.

Hindson's music is monumentally eclectic, almost to the point of confusion. The first movement features much of the buzzing you would expect from being near a furiously spinning turbine, and this alternates with snatches of themes that appear, then end with a note that drops off in theatrical fashion. The third gives much of its energy to a very cheesy pop-rock bluesy tune that sounds exactly like the kind of thing you hear when a symphony orchestra goes slumming on the Fourth, while the soloist does some very energetic, athletic fiddling.

In the second movement, easily the best of the three, Hindson's language wanders into the neighborhood of Ralph Vaughan Williams and Arnold Bax, and seems to like it there. He writes some very attractive, gently melancholy melodies and passages in a bid to express some of the abandonment felt in Westerway, which according to Hindson's notes is a logging town left desolate by the end of timber operations nearby. It's sweet, non-pretentious music, and St. John's tender approach renders it most effectively.

The final piece on the record is the *Totentanz*, written for piano and orchestra by Liszt and published in its final version in 1865. St. John's charming note on this transcription says she worked out the violin part while Kennedy reorchestrated the piece, and the result is most successful. While it has all of Liszt's short-attention-span style of compositional organization, it also has all of his razzle-dazzle, and the result is a violin showstopper with a very muscular orchestral part. It could be a nice addition to a solo violinist's repertoire, and St. John and Kennedy should be commended for fashioning it with intelligence and taste.



A word should be said here about the fine playing of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra under the direction of the Anglo-Australian conductor Sarah Ioannides. The group sounds excellent, and the CD itself, issued by St. John's own Ancalagon label, is a lovely piece of production: Two full booklets of notes (English, French and German), with plenty of pictures of Australia and the violinist in candid settings, and very fine notes.

Lara St. John shows an admirable spirit of risk-taking with this disc, and while some of the music is less than profound, it's still an exciting recording that tells us a lot about the ambition and independent-mindedness of this excellent violinist.

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