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GIVING THE POLKA KING A RUN FOR HIS MONEY

Why is Lara St John, a virtuoso violinist fresh from a series of well-received concerts and an acclaimed new recording of Vivaldi, so happy about appearing on the "wurst album of the year"?



Since rocketing to fame with her bracing performances of Bach, St John has increasingly strayed from the traditional canon. Her furthest detour to date is surely her membership in the Polkastra, a seven-piece oompah band that indulges enthusiastically in polka-related puns. In addition to some furious fiddling, St John is executive producer of the group's debut album, "Apokalypse Now".

St John isn't the only member of the band with serious classical chops; Mark Timmerman, the bassoonist, is also in the New Jersey Symphony and Yuval Edoot, the percussionist, has played with the Israel Philharmonic. As one might expect from such an erudite ensemble, bass notes are supplied not by tuba but contrabassoon, and Beethoven melodies crop up now and again. Oh, and some songs also feature a didgeridoo.

Is this all a bit too clever? Not to these ears. The group attacks the genre with genuine gusto, evoking the dizzy, sweaty revelry of a Bohemian beer hall. Advance copies of the recording even encouraged connoisseurs to wonder whether St John and her merry men would challenge polka king Jimmy Sturr at the next Grammy Awards. Sturr has won 18 of the past 24 awards for best polka album. Some say that one of the reasons for assembling St John's polka supergroup was to knock Sturr off the podium.

It is a shame, then, that last month the Recording Academy announced the cancellation of the Grammy's polka category. The move was due to dwindling submissions and "to ensure the awards process remains representative of the current musical landscape," the organisers said. Although this may drain the beer from their barrels, the Polkastra is still performing a vital service. After all, the world is a happier place when songs end with a hearty "Hey!"

"Apokalypse Now," by the Polkastra, is out on August 11th. The group makes it first public appearance at Le Poisson Rouge in New York on September 14th.

~ JASON KARAIAN

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