

**VIVALDI: 4 Seasons;**

**PIAZZOLLA: 4 Seasons of Buenos Aires**

Lara St John, v; Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra/

Eduardo Marturet

Ancalagon 134 [SACD] 64 minutes

Lara St John has produced another recording on her Ancalagon label. She returns to the baroque era for a shot at *The Four Seasons* by Vivaldi. Perhaps the most remarkable thing here is her choice of orchestra: the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela. They invest the performance with plenty of youthful enthusiasm and a good deal of mature polish.

St John plays with imagination, carefully distinguishing the various sections in the score that have programmatic indications relating to the sonnets that introduce each concerto. Her performance is heavily nuanced and lightly ornamented, and following the score while listening to her playing is an education in how to take music that supplies only the most basic indications of pitch and rhythm and create a highly variegated aural landscape.

The program concludes with Leonid Desyatnikov's arrangement of *The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires* by Astor Piazzolla. Desyatnikov's arrangement is very clever and colorful and strengthens the connection with Vivaldi's concertos by adding quotes here and there, most cleverly in 'Winter', where a passage appears from Vivaldi's 'Summer', the joke being that it's summer in Venice when it's winter in Buenos Aires. The quotes are intelligently integrated into the music, so they don't feel intrusive. While the Venezuelans aren't Argentinians, you wouldn't know it from the way they play. I can imagine no suaver, more atmospheric performance. A sultry atmosphere pervades this reading that feels just right. I have no doubt that a great deal of credit for its success goes to the conductor, Eduardo Marturet.

I will do something now that I don't think I've ever done before, and that is discuss packaging and design. Naturally, since this is Lara St John's label, she can do what she wants, and she wants to give her releases the very best production values, both sonically and visually. The box is a deluxe, gatefold package with gorgeous photography of the violinist in Venice. The booklets are multilingual and peppered with quaint images that appear to derive from old prints. The full texts of Vivaldi's sonnets are here with the usual highly informative notes by Graeme Skinner. The whole is a feast for the eyes and a delight to read. This is the

most beautiful packaging that I've ever seen. If there's any justice in this world, this release should win a prize for that alone.

There are MP3 downloads of these recordings online, but the lavishness of the packaging may seduce some to invest in it. Of course, there is also the superb SACD sound, stereo and 5.0 surround, that MP3s cannot duplicate. My point is that she is doing everything the major labels should be doing if they want to continue selling CDs.

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