

Lara St John

HINDSON: Violin Concerto;
CORIGLIANO: The Red Violin Suite;
LISZT: Totentanz
Royal Philharmonic/Sarah Ioannides
Ancalagon 133 [SACD] 70 minutes

Lara St John is back with another release on her Ancalagon label, recording for the first time with a modern symphony orchestra and making two premiere recordings.

Matthew Hindson (b 1968) is an Australian composer, and his Violin Concerto was commissioned by Ars Musica Australis to “reflect in some way the spirit of Australia”. Hindson has produced a set of three musical postcards depicting various aspects of his country. The first movement shows the power of the 600kW wind turbine on Kooragang Island in New South Wales near Newcastle. I’ve seen it on the Internet, and it is quite huge and must be an impressive sight in a strong wind. Hindson does some energetic impressionist writing to convey its power. The second movement is a great change of pace, representing the town of Westerway in Tasmania. Here is a small town (population 156) left behind by progress and gradually abandoned. The mood Hindson creates is of autumnal nostalgia rather than gloom. The finale is Grand Final Day and shows Australians’ enthusiasm for sports. Starting about three minutes into the movement, Hindson briefly burlesques the Geelong Football Club’s fight song, ‘We Are Geelong’, which borrows the tune of the ‘Toreador Song’ from Bizet’s *Carmen*. The Geelong Club, nicknamed The Cats, is the second oldest club in the Australian Football League (AFL) after Melbourne. I assume this quote was inserted to celebrate The Cats’ victory in the 2007 AFL Grand Final.

Next in the program is John Corigliano’s Suite from *The Red Violin*, the 1998 Canadian film that follows the “life”, if you will, of the masterpiece of a fictional Cremonese violin maker who used some of his recently deceased wife’s blood to formulate its brilliant red varnish. I only know of one other recording of the Suite, and St John has chosen to record it because she prefers it to the more often heard Chaconne. It is a very dark, brooding work, full of foreboding, and this performance is very atmospheric.

Last on the program is an arrangement for violin and orchestra of Franz Liszt’s *Totentanz*. St John noticed that, in the original version for piano and orchestra, nearly all the notes in the piano’s right hand fit into the violin’s range, so she and composer Martin Kennedy set about rearranging the work, apportioning the piano’s notes between the violin and the orchestra, St John seeing to it that the

violin part spoke in her instrument's idiom. The result is very pleasing, if I can use that word to describe a piece that deals with death and whose main theme is the 'Dies Irae'. The work sounds very convincing, not like a piece written for one instrument and forced into the service of another, and I think it could be a popular addition to the violin's repertoire.

St John plays with her usual intensity, the Royal Philharmonic is a very polished ensemble, and Sarah Ioannides provides precise leadership. Topping it all off, this is one of the very best sounding SACDs I've ever heard, with the option of 5.0 surround sound to boot, and it's hybrid so it works on regular CD players. St John was wise to schedule the recording sessions in Lyndhurst Hall, a vaulted church in London that has been converted to a recording studio, so the beautifully full and atmospheric sound was achieved without a lot of electronic gimmickry.

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