

The Washington Post

Lara St. John at Wolf Trap

Tuesday, March 24, 2009;

Canadian violinist Lara St. John brought a heavy meal to the Barns At Wolf Trap last Friday evening and devoured it before our eyes. Playing with absolute security, and entirely from memory, she delivered the Beethoven 3d and Bartok 2d sonatas, the Schönberg Phantasy, a world premiere by Matthew Hindson, her own arrangement of the Liszt "Totentanz," and Ravel's finger-busting "Tzigane" -- a stunning feat.

We hear about cookie-cutter players from the top conservatories all sounding alike. This isn't one of them. St. John trained at Curtis, one of the most notorious offenders, but she has forged a unique, edgy style far outside the mainstream. Her tone is relatively small, and sounds somewhat pressed at high levels. Her biggest weakness, which particularly marred the Beethoven and a Fritz Kreisler encore, is an inability or disinclination to draw long lyrical lines; rarely did a phrase bloom logically and naturally, with a beginning, middle, and end. Her violin speaks more than it sings. But her technical equipment is unassailable, and nothing ever sounded difficult, all evening.

She was at her best in the Schönberg and Bartok works; 20th-century masterpieces that suited her hyper-detailed parlando style perfectly; the jazzy rhythms of the Allegretto from the Bartok shimmied and boogied. The Hindson work (a Wolf Trap commission), "Maralinga," was a threnody to a disastrous nuclear testing program in Australia during the 1950's. While we've heard this sort of piece before -- the keening sound effects, obsessive telegraph-style ostinatos, and soulful lament at the close -- the violin writing was original and interesting. Pianist Martin Kennedy was a superb collaborator.

-- Robert Battey

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