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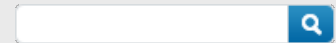
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Violinist Lara St. John keeps herself guessing

By John Terauds
Entertainment Reporter



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Violinist Lara St. John may have spent most of her adult life outside Canada, but there are some things a London, Ont., native can't shake.

"Do you know that there are 15 Tim Hortons in Manhattan now?" she says from her apartment in the Big Apple. Last time she walked past the doughnut-and-coffee outpost in Pennsylvania Station, there was a long lineup, she adds with a note of pride in her voice.

She wishes there were a Roots store in her adopted city. Instead, she'll have to do her shopping in Toronto over the next few days.

St. John is in town for a concert Friday night with the all-string Sinfonia Toronto at the Glenn Gould Studio.

The program will allow the 38-year-old to show off her wide-ranging repertoire, including Ralph Vaughan Williams' lovely "Lark Ascending," and Argentine composer Astor Piazzolla's tango-suffused "Four Seasons of Buenos Aires."

Music director Nurhan Arman has rounded out the program with a string-orchestra arrangement of a quartet by Joseph Haydn and a Serenade by Peter Ilytch Tchaikovsky.



Lara St. John has a wide-ranging repertoire, from tango to Tchaikovsky. SUPPLIED PHOTO

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On Oct.30, St. John performs the *Violin Concerto* by Wolfgang Korngold with the Stratford Symphony Orchestra.

In between, she'll visit her mom in London and hopes to hook up with Venezuela's Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra during their Glenn Gould Prize residency in Toronto next week.

It's all part of an incredible professional career that began more than a quarter-century ago. St. John has mastered all the great concertos of the violin world, while tirelessly exploring new musical possibilities. She even founded her own label, Ancalagon Records, in 2000, giving her the freedom to pick her own material.

An ideal example is her most recent album, made with 22 members of the Simón Bolívar orchestra. It pairs the Piazzolla piece from Friday's program with the always-popular Baroque-era *Four Seasons* by Antonio Vivaldi.

"You know, because everyone wants to hear the Vivaldi, some orchestras get very jaded. But, playing it with the Bolívar, there was so much energy. I really enjoyed that," she says.

The recording sessions were so tight that she had only an afternoon to go to the outskirts of Caracas, the Venezuelan capital, to see children learning music in the state-sponsored "El Sistema" program. But seeing the progress the young people make from kindergarten through high school impressed her.

"It's the first time I've ever seen a miniature tuba," she says of the smaller-scale instruments the younger children learn on.

The violinist says she is returning to Venezuela to perform next year. This season, she is alternating symphonic music with smaller-scale gigs. She kicked things off last month at Brooklyn's intriguing Poisson Rouge, a club that has become a destination for alternative classical programming.

There, she played with her mates from the three-month-old album *Polkastra*, which has fun with central European party music.

St. John enjoys the variety. "It's unpredictable, but that's nice," she says.

"There are some performers who travel playing the same two concertos over and over again. If I had to do that, I think I'd shoot myself," she declares. "Change is always a good thing."

Just the facts

WHAT: Lara St. John with Sinfonia Toronto

WHERE: Glenn Gould Studio, 250 Front St. W.

WHEN: Tomorrow @ 8 p.m.

TICKETS: \$19-\$49 @ 416-872-4255 or www.roythomson.com

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