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Violinist.com interview with Lara St. John

August 19, 2009 at 4:31 AM

We were in the [middle of Kansas](#), falling asleep at the wheel. We'd listened to everything on all of our iPods and were passing hundreds of miles of green corn and prairie in silence.

"I'm falling asleep," said Robert. The kids were already snoozing in the back. I opened my eyes grudgingly and groped for the CDs.

"How about this?" I asked, handing him a new CD sent to me by violinist [Lara St. John](#).



"Polkastra?" he said. "'[Apokalypse Now](#)'?"

"Why not?"

And thus the atmosphere in our quiet car shifted.

"What is this, Laurie?"

"I don't know!"

Soon we were laughing, reading the liner notes out loud, laughing more. Wide

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The summer's not over yet, and here is one last excuse to have a little fun: [Winning a copy](#) of Lara St. John's latest project - Polkastra's "Apokalypse Now."

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About Laurie

Laurie Niles is from Pasadena, California.
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awake. There's everything but the kitchen sink in this album: quotes from Beethoven and Paganini, Gypsy licks, impressive contrabassoon solos, and laughter. It's a lot of fun.

Lara St. John, whom we know for her recordings of [Gypsy](#) music, the [Bach Sonatas and Partitas](#) and most recently, the [Vivaldi and Piazzolla Four Seasons](#), pulled together friends from all over the globe for this project: Canadian folk fiddler Daniel Lapp, the Met's contrabassoonist Mark Timmerman, Israeli accordionist and percussionist Ronn Yedidia, jack-of-all-trades bassist Jack Campbell, California French hornist Andy Doe, percussionist Yuval Edoot, and even [didgeridoo](#) artist [William Barton](#).

I definitely wanted to talk to Lara about how she came up with this idea and made it a reality. And so we spoke, mostly over e-mail, and here's what she wrote:

Laurie: How did the musicians for Polkastra come together for this project? Were you all friends beforehand? How did you meet?

Lara St. John: All the members of Polkastra are friends of mine - but a lot of them met each other doing this project. When I first started putting together the core of the idea, I needed to introduce [Ronn Yedidia](#) (accordion) and [Yuval Edoot](#) (percussion) to [Daniel Lapp](#) (fiddle, trumpet, guitar, voice), so naturally, I had a lasagna party at my apartment, as one does. They all brought their instruments, got on like a house on fire, and I am still insanely proud of the fact that I finally got a complaint (around midnight in Manhattan - not bad) from five floors below about noise (all the other floors were enjoying it immensely).

Once that was set, I realized I didn't know any bass player well enough to be part of such a wacky project for nothing but home-cooked food. Thence entered [Mark \(Timmerman\)](#) on contrabassoon - a friend I have had since I was 13. He was game, and man, does that crazy instrument sound amazing on this sort of music.

Laurie: What fired your interest in the genre of the polka? Do you have a favorite polka? What do you find most compelling about the polka? What's most challenging for the violinist?

Lara St. John: We did a Polka album because we decided that polka was a genre that needed something new. In the past many years, in the U.S., it's become a rather insular and somewhat 'same-old' (or, at worst, 'old') idea. We decided to bring in the real origins of this dance, which spans almost every country in Europe, and also has a strong New World tradition to this day, as anyone in the Midwest knows well. Many Classical composers, from Beethoven to Smetana (and especially Strauss) were inspired by it at one point or another, thus our Classical 'tributes'. With this amazing group of musicians, we could have done almost anything, but decided to dance, laugh, and make folks do the same.

Laurie: Did you all collaborate on the ideas for the various polkas? I noticed that various members of the band composed most of the polkas for this album; what was that process like? Did you get together and try things, or did each composer go home, write one, then everyone tried it?

Lara St. John: We are a very far-flung group -- from Australia to California to South Pender Island (Canada) to Nashville to Manhattan. No one had any time to go home and write anything - most of the album was done when we were all together only once, for a great three days in February, so everything was figured out in our two days of rehearsal. Daniel, our Polka expert, had a whole bunch that he had written. The Classical numbers were done in advance, arranged by [Matt Van Brink](#), and rehearsed in the same short time. Ronn Yedidia is more of a composer and pianist in real life than an accordionist, so he also wrote some tunes for the group. Honestly, I still can't believe the whole thing actually worked out. It was utterly mad, and fantastically fun.

Laurie: There's definitely a feeling of fun in the music, the program notes and in the whole nature of this project, but I suspect that you all took it pretty seriously, because there's some great stuff in here. Am I right that you did not record this at a drinking party? What is the band's favorite polka, from these that you recorded, and why?

Lara St. John: There was certainly no drinking going on (although I will admit it sometimes sounds like it), and we were very serious about the whole thing. I think it's good music to have a few cheers and beers to, and we sure did when all was finished! That's not to say that we didn't laugh our heads off constantly

during recording, especially at the expense of the contrabassoon. Poor Mark. But he's used to it.

And, can I just say - it's far harder to write a short, fun-to-read 100-word bio than it is to write a huge, boast-y 1,000-word bio full of facts that no ever reads, yet it's so much more satisfying in the end! Everyone should do it.

Laurie: Did you record "Apolkalyse Now" on your 1779 "Salabue" Guadagnini?

Lara St. John: Yep. I don't have any other violin. The greatest extant Guad has been mine to play on for the past 10 years and is an open-ended loan, from an anonymous donor and [Heinl](#) of Toronto. I well know how lucky I am.

Laurie: Tell me about the name "Apolkalyse Now." Is it just a cute play on words, or is it possible that the Polkastra will actually bring about the end the world as we know it?

Lara St. John: It's a really sweet pun from our Horn player Andy (Doe), and should this disc for some unfathomable reason bring about the end of the world, at least folks will be Dancing [Neros](#). Very few people (unless they are hardcore [Joseph Conrad](#) or Coppola/Brando fans) get 'the Hora! the Hora!', but I personally think that is the coolest pun by far.

Laurie: Your [bio](#) says that you spent time with the Roma people -- the Gypsies - - after a frustrated Cold-War stint at a Russian conservatory. This sounds totally fascinating to me. What did you learn? How did you change? What kind of perspective did this give you on the violin? What is most compelling for you about Gypsy music? What is its biggest challenge, for the violinist?

Lara St. John: Well, I was 16, frustrated at Curtis, and having known only Classical music and very few people in my life, I decided to go far away - to Moscow - and learn something about life in general. I succeeded.

I don't know which bio you read, but what I do know is that one of my best friends there was a Roma, and I learned a lot from her, and others, about music, songs especially, and how to live in the present, and not just past and future.

This did give me a perspective violinistically, but not in the way you might think. Russian Gypsy and Folk music is very voice-oriented - unlike Hungary and Romania which has a lot of violin. I heard vibrato used vocally in ways I had never even fathomed, and worked quite a bit to reproduce that sound on violin. (Although I always sing in tune, I am a crap singer and sound like a 10-year-old boy).

I always encourage students and young folks to listen to voice as much as possible - in fact, I even brought in a boombox to my 'Sound Production and Vibrato' class at Mark O'Connor's camp and played them a bit of [Romica Puceanu](#) - a Romanian Gypsy singer- just to show them how much you can do with vibrato.

Laurie: You have recorded so much Bach, I wondered how your perspective on those works has changed over the last, say, 20 years. Or has it? Does the music of Bach ever get old, or does it just keep opening up for you?

Lara St. John: In 300 years no one has even come close to that kind of solo violin writing, and I doubt anyone ever will (for all those Ysäye fans out there - yah - fun, neat, violinistic and interesting pieces, but they cannot be compared...). There is always something new to discover in the Bach 6. I particularly like when he plagiarizes himself and one gets to hear what he really meant (for example in the [G minor fugue, which is also for organ \(BWV 539, in D minor\)](#), - and suddenly you hear this huge 4/2 chord in the organ version when we only have one note - and it is such a revelation). Same goes for the E major - everyone should study [the lute version](#). And the Cantata that the the C major fugal subject came from. And the diminished 7th leap downward which meant so much to him... (from Agnus Dei of the Mass and the C major Largo, for example). I will now stop myself from going on 'til doomsday in manner of a blithering idiotic fan.

Laurie: As a violinist, I find that I sometimes encounter a "No-Can-Do" attitude when it comes to the violin. The perfectionism, the rules, the traditions of classical music can sometimes feel totally suffocating. You seem to be having fun. How do you keep the fun in your playing? Do you have any advise on this subject?

Lara St. John: Well. This is a great question, and I encounter it all the time.

I think the reason why we do this, is often, if not always, lost, in the ever more preposterous world of competitions and the idea of competition banged into young folks' heads, when this could not be farther from the ideal.

Bela Bartok once said, famously, that competition is for horses. I totally agree. Beethoven would not have even understood the concept, and would have lost every single one, had they existed in his time. I understand healthy competition, and having a goal, but it has become ridiculous - and I think that's a big problem for this, and even the former, generation, because people feel they are forced to follow certain rules.

Music is not something one can measure, and it never will be.

Here is now a small list of items that help me manage to have 'fun' performing:

My first and foremost advice is to learn to think for yourself. Ask questions all the time. Think long and hard about what it is you are playing, and if you don't agree with a teacher, say so. Whatever ideas you might have are never wrong as long as you have a good reason, are convinced, and therefore convincing. Teachers are only there to help along the way, not to make you a copy or slave of what it is they are used to (which happens far too often).

Secondly - be a perfectionist in the practice room, and not onstage. All bets are off the minute you walk out there - then, it's all about the audience - and they are there to hear how you interpret this music, and to have a great or intense or even tear-inducing time.

As my good friend Mark Timmerman told me years ago as he fetched me from the warmup room to play my first ever Curtis concert (it was Ysäye 6; I was 13, and rather nervous): "When all else fails, lower your standards!," and although that hardly sounds like advice, it's actually quite good. The little foibles no longer matter on stage, and the best thing you can possibly do is relax. It is impossible to perform relaxed unless you practice relaxed, so that is of supreme importance. I cannot, to this day, have any fun at all if I am even slightly tense - and that all came from the practice room.

Thirdly, do not lose sight of why this exists in the first place. We are bringing to life and sound the unspoken words of great composers who wanted individualistic approaches to their work. Unlike visual art, music takes two, and if they wanted us to sound as though we were just spat out onto a conveyor belt by some smoke-belching factory, they would have all written for player piano and stopped at that.

Laurie: What is next for you? (Concerts, recording projects, other projects, life in general?)

Lara St. John: Well the first thing I have when I come off holiday on September 9th (and cut my left hand nails), will be our fabulous Polkastra show with all of us together again at [Le Poisson Rouge in NYC on September 14th](#) (at 7 p.m., in case anyone is in town!) What a great way to start the season. After that, it's life as usual again.

As for recording projects, I have many in mind, and at least one, if not two, will have come to fruition by this time next year. However, my little label has just released four big recordings in the last two years, all of them completely different, so I think I'm due a little holiday.

From Vincent Sun

Posted on August 19, 2009 at 1:25 PM

Awesome interview, she's my fav!!!! thanks Laurie!!!!!!!!

From Royce Faina

Posted on August 19, 2009 at 2:55 PM

Love the list of how to make performing fun!

Thanks for the interview!

From Bart Meijer

Posted on August 19, 2009 at 8:01 PM

"When all else fails, lower your standards!"

Such a daring and wise thing to say.

From Karen Allendoerfer

Posted on August 19, 2009 at 11:45 PM

I like "be a perfectionist in the practice room, not onstage."

And I liked "the hora! the hora!" much better than I liked having to read Heart of Darkness in high school . . .

Thanks, this was a really fun read!

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