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Vivaldi: The Four Seasons; Piazzolla: The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires [Hybrid SACD]

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Review

by Uncle Dave Lewis

Violinist Lara St. John also serves as chief executive of her own Ancalagon label, and she takes an interest in unusual and challenging couplings. It seems every violin player has to come to terms with Antonio Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* at one time or another, but rather than mate it with other Vivaldi concertos or similar Baroque fare, here she combines Vivaldi's oft-recorded cycle with Astor Piazzolla's *The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires*, in a shimmering arrangement for violin and strings by Leonid Desyatnikov. She is not the first to do so — that may have been *I Solisti Italiani* back in the 1990s — but it remains a striking combination in the face of the usual fare that comes along for the ride with most issues of *The Four Seasons*. Rather than recording this disc at Skywalker Sound as has been the norm in previous Ancalagon releases, this one was recorded on the road in Caracas with the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela under the direction of Eduardo Marturet. They are very well disciplined for a youth orchestra and play with astonishing precision and professionalism for such a group.

The Piazzolla is certainly one of the best things Lara St. John has ever recorded; she plays with unbridled passion and a kind of sexy ferociousness, and dips into interpretive effects more common to long ago violinists than they are in this post-Heifetz era; swooping portamento, a beautifully weighty projection of the melodic line and a very high level of expressiveness, edge and passion maintained throughout the performance. Her Vivaldi is very personal and intriguing; the trend since the 1990s has been towards individualization and extremes of effect in these works, whereas before the general approach was tied into an observance of a kind of received, semi-romantic tradition common to most Vivaldi interpretation, albeit one developed in the twentieth century. St. John's recording is an interesting blend of both; "La Primavera" and "L'estate" are respectful and reasonably conventional, but by no means complacent, interpretations, whereas "L'automno" and "L'inverno" push the envelope. St. John has taken Vivaldi's *Descriptive Sonnets* to heart — and they are printed with considerable prominence in the booklet — and in the latter two concerti she portrays the music, much as would an actress, following Vivaldi's dramatic cues. Her turtledove and goldfish truly "sing;" St. John's violin sounding nearly like the birds Vivaldi represents in both his music and written text; it is astounding to think that there was a time that violinists played this cycle without ever having read Vivaldi's sonnets, or regarding them with no more than curiosity value.

With Ancalagon's *Vivaldi-Piazzolla: The Four Seasons*, Lara St. John will surely please her many admirers and those who regularly attend her concerts, but this disc also reaches out to the casual listener not well acquainted with her artistry in an effective way. As with all Ancalagon products, the production value of the CDs two booklets and outer jacket is extraordinarily high, the SACD sounds great, and even in tough times St. John's product is

Featured Artist

Lara St. John

Performance

★★★★★

Sound

★★★★★

Time

64:09

Label

Ancalagon[134]

Genre

Concerto

AMG Album ID

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Corrections to this Entry?

of such quality that it can be regarded as keepsake, an object of precious and true value. While her Ancalagon releases seldom, if ever, disappoint, this one is particularly outstanding.