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Violinist.com Interview with Lara St. John: On Mozart

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Lara St. John doesn't really go for the idea that Mozart is "really hard to play" and that a great deal of worry, fret and fear should go into it.

After all, she's been playing Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante with her brother, Scott, ever since they were little kids.



Lara St. John is well-known for her solo and recital appearances around the globe, and for her recordings of [Bach Sonatas and Partitas](#) and [Gypsy music](#), not to mention her [Polkastra](#). Scott St. John won the Avery Fisher Career Grant in 2003, is the violist of the [St. Lawrence String Quartet](#), ensemble-in-residence at Stanford University, and teaches in the Bay Area.

After some 20 years of playing Mozart together, the sibling pair decided to make [a recording of Mozart works](#), which includes the Sinfonia Concertante – for which Scott plays scordatura viola – as well as Mozart Violin Concerto No. 1 in Bb Major, K. 207, played by Scott, and Mozart Violin Concerto No. 3 in G Major,

K. 216, played by Lara. They are joined by The Knights orchestra of New York City.

Lara spoke with me over the phone last week about what it's like to work with your brother, about why Mozart would ask to tune the viola a half-step higher for the Sinfonia Concertante, and about why she loves Mozart Concerto No. 3 so much.

Laurie: I've been listening to some Mozart, thanks to you, and your brother. When did you start playing together?

Lara: We did our first concerto when I was four and he was six – we did the Bach Double. So it's been a long time! We've been playing together all our lives.

He's not a violinist who plays viola, he's a violist. He started playing the viola at eight years old, very early. At first, he was pretty little, so he played a re-strung violin. As he got big enough, it was a real viola. Even as a kid, he was so into chamber music. And of course, when you're kids, the one thing that's always lacking in the string quartet is the viola. Everyone plays violin or cello! He's so quick; he taught himself the clef and everything. Then he was in incredible demand, chamber-musically, and that has continued to this day.

Laurie: When you say he was so into chamber music, how did that manifest when he was eight?

Lara: He wanted to play more chamber music, and I think that's a good part of why he took up the viola. Also, our first chamber music coach, Ralph Aldrich, was a violist.

I thought of learning to play the viola as well, and he was like, no way, man! (she laughs)

I can't sight-read to save my life. You do sort of need to be able to read at least one clef before you start another; it's probably a good thing I never took it up! Once, when I was teaching I had to play viola because they didn't have enough violas. I had to finger every note, do it by ear. Then I sounded like a trumpet!

You really have to do it from a young age. I can tell when it's a violinist, playing viola. The vibrato's a bit chainsaw, and it's just not the same thing.

Laurie: How long have you been playing the Sinfonia Concertante together?

Lara: We toured Europe with the Sinfonia when I was 11 and he was 13. I remember going to Portugal, Spain, Hungary, France... We've done it with a lot of orchestras since, I'd say an average of once a year. That actually means in a specific year we'll do it four times, and then not for four years.

I've got [my own label, Ancalagon](#), and I've been thinking for a while that this is definitely something we needed to record. So for the last few years I've been casting about for the right orchestra, and when [The Knights](#) came around, I knew, that's it!

Laurie: Did you ever have any sibling rivalry?

Lara: Funny enough, not really.

For example, all over Canada, they have these little [Kiwanis competitions](#), so even at the age of six, it was a way to perform the pieces that you learned. We were always doing these, and other competitions. Sometimes we'd end up in the same class, because we're pretty close in age, and if he would win, I would think that was about the same as me winning, because it was my family. If I would win, then he would think that way as well. We've been really supportive of each other – never against each other.

I also have the distinct advantage that my brother is one of those people who just has no enemies. He's one

of the nicest, most genuine guys in the world. I'd really have to be a nasty piece of work to pick a fight with him.

We're really different players and individuals. Obviously when you're doing a little contest when you're a teenager, then I guess the objective is to win first prize. But later on in life, we didn't really have the same objectives all the time, or the same interests. We didn't even play the same repertoire quite a lot of the time. That's one reason why, for example, I learned the Mendelssohn Concerto in my mid-20s. Growing up, that was his. It made sense that I didn't learn it; I never needed it for one reason or another. So little funny things like that come from the sibling-ness, but there's not anything wrong with that.

Laurie: Do you find it different to work with him than to work with other collaborators?

Lara: Of course, because I know exactly what he's going to do, and vice-versa. We don't really rehearse, exactly. We just play through things. If he does something that I think is stupid, I'll stop and say, 'I think that's stupid.' And there will be this little fight and then of course he'll say, 'Well all right, I won't do that,' and vice-versa. But in general, on stage, even if somebody does something completely different than has been rehearsed, somehow we know. It's a connection.

People always ask, are you guys close? I guess we're close, but... I know some siblings who talk every day. We talk every couple weeks, maybe. And he calls me up when he needs a place in New York. (she laughs)

Laurie: I didn't really know there was a scordatura in the Mozart Sinfonia Concertante, that Mozart asks that the viola be tuned in a different way than usual. What's up with that?

Lara: We knew about it, but since nobody really does it except for maybe a few period recordings, we always had that impression that it's just for period instruments, just if you're going to do some historically correct performance. Then we started thinking about it, and... I think Mozart did (the scordatura) in order to make (the instruments) more equal. Mozart's not an idiot; he knows what he's doing.

Scott had always done it in E flat, on a normal viola. About a month before the recording, I said to him, "Why don't you just try it?" To me it's just unfathomable, but he said he thought he'd probably be able to do it. He said that, actually, even though he had played it for decades in E flat, the scordatura makes it so much easier, clearer, brighter – even though he had to re-learn every note. It makes perfect sense to play it in D major.

Laurie: How is the viola tuned?

Lara: The viola is tuned exactly a half-step higher. Instead of C-G-D-A, it's D-flat-A-flat-E-flat-B-flat. Here you are playing in E-flat major, and all of a sudden you have two open strings that you didn't have before. Not only that, but the whole thing is just a little bit brighter. It makes it just about equal, if not completely equal, to the brightness of the violin.

Laurie: And he could do that.

Lara: It took him a week or so, to really get it down. He sight-reads so well; the guy never misses a note. He's Mr. Perfect. But every once in a while, when we were recording, he came in like a ton of bricks, a semi-tone off. I think it happened twice. Somehow I was so happy! (She laughs) Made a mistake, ha-ha! It was funny.

In the last movement, that's got to be one of the most awkward A-flat major solos in the world. It's very difficult to do on both the violin and the viola. But if you have a violist play scordatura, you've never seen a happier guy! It just comes in open A-flat, open E-flat. Just watching him play it, the string crossings are in different places.

Even playing the octave passages that are together with him were slightly different because I had a different open string. We did have to go through it, so I could get used to this new timbre. It feels a little different, even for the violinist.

Laurie: The violin is not scordatura.

Lara: Exactly, so we no longer have any open strings that correspond. There's quite a lot of octave work here and there, in the cadenzas, and it does change things a little bit. But once again, Mozart knew what he was doing, and I think it works absolutely fabulously; it's great.

Laurie: I didn't even know about this.

Lara: For years and years, people used another edition. But now there is a Barenreiter, and that has two parts, one in D and one in E-flat. I think for a while, the tradition was to not think about how he wrote it. The original manuscript is written in D. It's probably no problem to do the scordatura, if you don't have perfect pitch. But if do you have perfect pitch, like my brother, I think it would be quite difficult.

[The Barenreiter](#) is one of those great editions that are really expensive. They have the normal, viola scordatura arranged for normal tuning. And then, they have the original notation. I guess the editors transposed the manuscript, so that you could play it in E-flat, so you could play it not in D-major. Mozart apparently only wrote the one, he wrote it in D major.

The whole thing is really fascinating.

It's hilarious whenever we play it the oboe has to give him a B-flat. At first we wondered, how do we tune to each other? We had to figure out these weird major sixths, okay I think we're kind of about right...

Laurie: Have you done it live like this?

Lara: We will – I think there are a couple next year.

Laurie: But it was the recording that made you try the scordatura.

Lara: Yeah, it's always possible to experiment.

Laurie: It's kind of cool to be able to do something new with Mozart.

Lara: Well, actually, old!

Laurie: Exactly! You have also recorded the first and third Mozart violin concerti – with Scott doing the first. The first concerto is not one I'm terribly familiar with; like a lot of people, I know the third, fourth and fifth.

Lara: I don't know it that well, either, I've never performed it. For some reason, my brother's done it quite a bit.

The point of this recording was the Sinfonia. Then I thought, I'll make an album of it. I told him, I'll take number Three, and you can have your choice of the other four.

To me, One is this little genius going "Hey look, I can write a violin concerto!" There all these flashy runs. To me it sounds almost on that cusp between the Baroque and the classical. The Third - not at all any more, but the First and the Second, you can hear the Vivaldi and the Bach. You can't really hear that in the last three Mozart concerti and in the Sinfonia. I think it's a lovely piece.

Laurie: What made you pick Three, since you got first choice?

Lara: I love Three. The first time I ever read number Three was with harpist [Marie-Pierre Langlamet](#), in a practice room in Curtis. We were sight-reading the last movement, and she was playing the piano part on the harp. She's now principal harp in Berlin, and before that was principal harp at the Met. But this was back when we were kids and students. Even though I was a pretty bad sight-reader, I could usually pull off Mozart, which was usually familiar.

We got to the little Andante (m. 252) – this beautiful moment, just so gorgeous and so heartbreaking, in the midst of all this laughter. The first time I ever played it was with harp. Of course the orchestra has pizzicato strings there, I found out much later. I thought maybe it was the most beautiful moment I'd ever experienced, up until that point. My most beautiful Mozart moment! It was just one of those moments that you always remember. So because of that, the Third has always kind of held a soft spot for me. Like most people, I've only done the last three, really: Three, Four and Five.

The second movement of the Third is so gorgeous, just one of those perfect arias he wrote for violin. And it's so joyful!

Laurie: At least for me, in the early days that I studied Mozart, people had a very Romantic take on it, the bowings were even kind of Romantic, and then lately people seem to be going back to the urtext, streamlining a little more. I wondered what your approach was. Did you change things? Have you changed things over the years? Or maybe playing it exactly the same for 20 years?

Lara: I got pretty tired, early on, of people saying, 'Mozart is so difficult.' I don't agree with it. Yes, there is a certain delicacy, and it's usually very exposed. Maybe if you miss one note in Mozart, it means a lot more than if you miss one note in the Shostakovich Concerto. But if you think that way, it makes people play Mozart butt-clenchingly. The whole genius of Mozart is how, with such simplicity, he was able to get so much emotion and so many ideas across. It's not good to over-think or over-analyze. Of any composer, this is the one where it's all laid out, right there! You just have to enjoy yourself and love it. If you're having a lot of fun, that comes across to an audience. And if you're super, super worried, that come across, too.