

100 Degrees at Midnight

A Blog on Culture and the Arts by C. Michael Bailey

100 Degrees at
Midnight...

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I am a Senior Contributor to the premiere on-line source covering Jazz, [All About Jazz](#).

About Me



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Saturday, August 7, 2010

Johann Sebastian Bach - The Six Sonatas & Partitas for Violin Solo by Lara St. John (2007)



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Johann Sebastian Bach

The Six Sonatas & Partitas for Violin Solo

Lara St. John

Ancalagon Records

2007

Canadian violinist and Bach specialist Lara St. John has been called many things, both positive and disparaging. After ten years on what can only be described as the brutal 21st Century Classical recording scene, this writer chooses to describe St. John as a musical Valkyrie. From the Old Norse Valkyrja, meaning "Choosers of the Slain," St. John can be seen as a rejuvenating force in Bach circles, reviving and providing youthfulness and contemporary interpretation of the supreme of the Bach canon:

The Six Sonatas & Partitas for Violin Solo, BWV 1001-BWV 1006.

Or, if the reader/listener is so inclined, he or she may see St. John as the true supernatural deity described as a warrior goddesses, riding in the ranks of the gods and serving victorious drinks in Valhalla. This perhaps best depicts St. John's steely determination to both make music and record it (on her own terms and recording label Ancalagon) thumbing her nose at the major music distributors like the Valkyrie Skogul ("Raging" against the corporate machine) producing rarified Bach, easily the best in the past 20 years.

Ten years in the making, St. John's Bach: **The Six Sonatas & Partitas for Violin Solo** has not been without its preludial teases and promises. In 1996, St. John released Bach Works of Solo Violin bisecting Bach's Six with crisp and impassioned performances of the Partita no. 2 in D Minor, BWV 1004 and Sonata no. 3. in C Major, BWV 1005 (Well Tempered Productions). Following another Well Tempered Production, 1997's Gypsy, which focused on show-stopping incendiary devices like Waxman's "Carmen" Fantasie," de Sarasate's "Zigeunerweisen," and Kreisler's "La Gitana,"

In 2000, St. John elected to go it alone, forming her own record company, Ancalagon Records, named for her pet iguana who was in turn named for the greatest dragon of Morgoth as documented by J.R.R. Tolkien in The Silmarillion. This major endeavor resulted in The Concerto Album recorded with the New York Bach Ensemble, where St. John teased us once again with the Bach solo violin of the Sonata no. 1 in G minor, BWV 1001, whose fuga alone could disarm the Spartan 300. In 2004, St. John was approached by Sony for a project that resulted in Re: Bach which featured Bach-like confections from composer Magnus Fiennes.

Disillusioned (or disgusted) with her experience with Sony, St. John returned full time to Ancalagon Records, electing to produce her first magnum opus Bach: *The Six Sonatas & Partitas for Violin Solo*. It was only natural that St. John record Bach's fractured monolith as she had been preparing for this recording all of her life in the same way Eric Clapton had prepared for his Robert Johnson tribute *Me and Mr. Johnson* for the better part of his career.

St. John's Bach: *The Six Sonatas & Partitas for Violin Solo* is quintessential Bach for the 21st Century on a number of levels. One, she has lost none of her youthful and daring enthusiasm for the time-worn pieces while gaining a certain gravity that allows her to reveal additional treasures contained in the Master's scores. Her Sonata no. 1 in G minor Fuga shimmers like the dancing dimes of a hard rain on a lake, each note individual, all collected as one. The corresponding Partita no. 1 in B minor, while plaintive remains playful and full of dance while still possessing that dark roasted minor-key character. St. John's intonation and approach are flawless.

Of further note are the newly recorded Partita no. 2 in D Minor, BWV 1004 and Sonata no. 3. in C Major, BWV 1005, reprised here from her debut recording which, like her original Sonata no. 1 in G minor, retains its fresh vibrancy buoyed by the gravity of experience and understanding the past ten years of having to do it all have provided the violinist. While maturing as an artist, St. John refuses to smother the repertoire, allowing it to breathe and breathe properly in today's modern environment.

The technical aspects of Bach: *The Six Sonatas & Partitas for Violin Solo* are also impressive by any standard. St. John had a very specific idea of what she wanted regarding the miking and engineering of these performances. For the task, the violinist tapped Martha de Francesco to produce the recording. St. John desired a perfectly natural sound for her 1779 "Salabue" Guadagnini not to be marred by saccharine reverberation or other artificial effects. Engineer Leslie Ann Jones elected a microphone setup that used a variety of microphones arranged in specific locations with respect to St. John during the recordings.

The goal was to capture the violin in a unique three-dimensional manner. In an ingenious combination of old and new technology, DPA and Neumann microphones in cardioid and omni-directional presentation were arranged for depth while the plushness of the instrument was amply captured by an AEA88 ribbon microphone and the warmth by vintage M50 Neumann microphones run through tube amplifiers. This methodology is similar to the contemporary attempts to capture the blues harmonica sound of Little Walter Jacobs by using a combination and analogue and digital methods. The results for St. John are spectacular in the hybrid SACD-CD form of the final released product. When played on super audio equipment, Bach: *The Six Sonatas & Partitas for Violin Solo* is more than one could possibly sonically ask for.

In total, Bach's solo violin corpus has been carefully considered and performed con brio by St. John on this special release that can only be considered the finest performance of these pieces in this new millennium.

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