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Mozart

Scott and Lara St. John / The Knights / Eric Jacobsen | Ancalagon (2010)

By C. Michael Bailey

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Ever since the consumptive and mysterious Nicolo Paganini took the stage, breaking three of his four famous fiddle strings, playing on the remaining G, and declaring "the Artist as Hero," the cult of personality of the artist has become as important and, indeed, compelling, as that of the composer and the music composed. Today we would call this *personality*. Canadian violinist Lara St. John is not wanting of personality; her Bach, as evidenced by her earliest releases up to her watershed *Six Sonatas and Partitas For Solo Violin* (Ancalagon, 2007), is pristine, effervescent and instructing.



Now the violinist records Mozart and makes it a family affair. She shares the stage with brother Scott St. John on viola for Mozart's orchestral duet favorite, *Sinfonia Concertante* for Violin and Viola in E-flat Major, K. 364. Scott St. John is currently serving as violinist for the St. Lawrence String Quartet, which is currently in residence at Stanford University. He made his Carnegie Hall debut in 1988 on the heels of winning first prize in the *Alexander Schneider Competition*, and is the recipient of the 2003 Avery Fisher Career Grant.

Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante* has enjoyed many inspired pairings, but none sharing the passion, empathy and genetics of the St. Johns.' This is the first recording of the piece by siblings, who began playing the piece together at ages 10 and 12 (Scott is the elder). The *Sinfonia Concertante* is technically challenging in the viola part because it is scored in D Major rather than the signature E-flat major, the viola being tuned a semitone higher, *scordatura*, sharpening the brilliance of the tone. Most famously, Biber's *Rosary Sonatas* were composed for the violin tuned *scordatura*, as was Nicolo Paganini's Violin Concerto No. 1 in D Major, Op. 6, one of that violinist's show-off pieces. Scott St. John tackles the technical head on, achieving a tight, slightly humid tone with his viola melding beautifully with Lara's sharp and imaginative playing..

It is apparent the two violinists have played together their lifetime as there is an organic sweetness to the pair's combined tones, especially in the andante movement during the quietest passages. Mozart is never so transparent as in his slow movements. Often overshadowed by the bright and emotive first movement (*Allegro Maestoso*), the pensive second is where the St. Johns lock and load, giving Mozart the proper wherefore.

The two fiddlers split the concerti making up the remainder of the disc, Scott addressing the youthful Concerto No. 1 in B-flat, K. 207, while Lara controls the slightly more mature Concerto No. 3 in G Major, K. 216. The Knights, led by another sibling team in conductor Eric Jacobsen and concertmaster Colin Jacobsen, are a crack band to the St. Johns. Let's hope there is a completion of the concerto cycle with all present members in attendance.

Track listing: *Sinfonia Concertante* for Violin and Viola in E-flat Major, K. 364: 1. *Allegro Maestoso*, 2. *Andante*, 3. *Presto*; Violin Concerto No. 1 in B-flat Major, K. 207: 4. *Allegro Moderato*, 5. *Adagio*, 6. *Presto*; Violin Concerto No. 3 in G Major, K. 216: 7. *Allegro*, 8. *Adagio*, 9. *Rondeau* (*Allegro*).

Personnel: Lara St. John: violin (Guadagnini, "Salabue," 1779); Scott St. John: viola (Holmberg, Boston, 1890); The Knights, directed by Eric Jacobsen.

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