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## SACD & Other Hi-Res Reviews

**\* MOZART: Sinfonia Concertante in E-flat, K 364; Violin Concerto No. 1 in B-flat, K 207; Violin Concerto No. 3 in G, K 216 – Lara St. John, violin/ Scott St. John, violin and viola/ The Knights/ Eric Jacobsen, conductor – Ancalagon**

\*\*\*\*\* MULTICHANNEL DISC OF THE MONTH \*\*\*\*\*  
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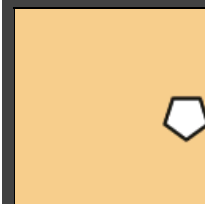


**\* MOZART: Sinfonia Concertante in E-flat, K 364; Violin Concerto No. 1 in B-flat, K 207; Violin Concerto No. 3 in G, K 216 – Lara St. John, violin/ Scott St. John, violin and viola/ The Knights/ Eric Jacobsen, conductor – Ancalagon Multichannel SACD ANC 136, 74:08 \*\*\*\*\* [Release date: iTunes 8/3/2010; SACD 10/12/2010]:**



I was wondering when Lara St. John would get around to Mozart, and here she and brother Scott tackle one of the best. Pinchas Zukerman said years ago that the "K. 364" designation shouldn't fool anyone as it is one of Mozart's most mature and absolute best compositions of any genre, and he was right. St. John herself thinks it his best concerto, maybe his most outstanding work period. Well...I don't know about that as when one deals with Mozart there is so much quality that it is difficult to select anything as the greatest, and I am sure lovers of his last concerto for clarinet and the Requiem (unfinished as it is) would have strong arguments to the contrary. But wherever one stands on this there is no doubt that it is a towering work of genius that deserves its widespread popularity.

Mozart's five violin concertos were composed before he reached the age of 20; for whom and why they were written we really don't know. *Concerto No. 1* was long thought to have been composed at the age of 19, but many scholars now think it as early as 17. For those who think the composer a late starter, they should pay more attention to this early marvel. This is my first exposure to Scott St. John, and it is a positive one; his enthusiasm for this work comes across in every bar, sporting one of the sweetest tones you can imagine when digging into the lovely slow movement. Sister Lara says that the *Third Concerto* is her favorite of the bunch, and most people would agree with her—it is without doubt the most frequently played, also mainly because of the extraordinary slow movement. St. John's tempo here is faster than most—many violinists turn this into a taffy pull—but I have a feeling that her ideas about this movement are more in accordance with Mozart's. Brother and sister are both rather mainstream in the outer movements of each work, lively, spirited, and authoritative.



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With the *Sinfonia Concertante* we encounter the composer's last concerto for strings, and he would have been hard pressed to surpass the sublimity found here; if any concerto can truly be called "double" this is it, and Mozart's conversation between the violin and viola surpasses even what Brahms was to accomplish with the violin and cello a hundred years later. What strikes me right off the bat is the marvelous viola playing of Scott St. John; this piece actually rises or falls according to the viola, not the violin, and many "name" violinists have tried their hand at the viola and failed miserably. Scott's sound is robust and plump, cheerily dashing off technical hurdles (including the D-major *scordatura* tuning, done so the composer could take advantage of an open-string sound in the written key of E-flat) while remaining remarkably attuned to the needs of the pair as opposed to the one—something his experience in the St. Lawrence String Quartet surely aids. Lara's qualities are exactly what those who have heard her before would expect—a finely-wrought tonal opulence, lots of energy, and a sense of one musician sharing equally with a favored partner. This is superior music making on all levels.

There is competition of course in these works. For those seeking a bargain in the concertos, there is no finer version than that of Emmy Verhey, cheaply found on Brilliant Classics. Anne-Sophie Mutter (EMI and DGG, the early recording with Karajan) and David Oistrakh recorded classic sets also. Hopefully either Lara or Scott St. John will see fit to finish their series with 2, 4, and 5. For the *Sinfonia*, there are almost 100 versions available. My benchmark has always been the incandescent old Columbia recording with Rafael Druian on violin, Abraham Skernick on viola (both member of the Cleveland Orchestra at the time) conducted by George Szell. Many have approached this mountain and few have made it halfway to the top. The St. John's are very close, and amazingly enough their accompanying band The Knights, match the legendary Clevelanders in execution. In other words, this catapults to near the top of the list, and while I am not about to throw away the Cleveland recording, they didn't have the luxury of this sterling SACD sound which easily outclasses the version on Pentatone with Julia Fischer and Gordan Nikolitch, fine though that one is. Couple all of this good stuff with a terrific color booklet and excellent packaging, and you have another first-class production from Ancalagon.

-- Steven Ritter

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