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## Classy approach to classical marketing

### Violinist St. John creates a stir with approach to image

BY BOB CLARK, CALGARY HERALD    MAY 27, 2010

#### Spotlight

Lara St. John performs tonight at 8 p.m. in the Calgary Philharmonic's Hear & Now -New Music Festival at the Rozsa Centre. Tickets: Call 403-571-0849.

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Canadian superstar violinist Lara St. John says there's really no point in being musically creative if no one hears it.

And whether people hear it or not may depend as much on album packaging and image as on the actual music-making that lies between the covers.

Long gone are the days when tuxedoed pianists, great or otherwise, could spur record sales by staring soulfully out at the imagined buyer from the pictured sanctity of their keyboards. Or when elegantly gowned and bejewelled divas could provide incentive for a prospective album purchase by looking heavenward on the jacket, as if to say we, too, will be moved by the beauty of their own interpretation of the music contained within.

Stuffy? Remote? Dated?

"It's something I've always been aware of," says the engaging, forthright, and decidedly unstuffy St. John, 39, who performs tonight at the Rozsa Centre as part of the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra's Hear & Now new music festival.

"Even as a kid, I was kind of put off by the marketing for classical (music) and how boring it was -- and just how much it really didn't connect with anybody except for those who are 85 and up."

Accordingly, when St. John made her first recording about 14 years ago -- a CD of Bach solo pieces -- she set out to change the perception of classical music as the province of the dull or the blue rinse set.

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"I don't think anybody has sort of put themselves in some sort of innovative idea on the cover of an album before -- especially not a completely solo (album)," St. John says.

The CD cover in question, controversial at the time, depicted the comely violinist in a sheer body-suit with her violin held across her chest.

It may have created a lot of stir -- the allusion to bareness was meant to suggest the exposed nature of performing solo Bach works -- but the disc inside was a platinum seller that garnered rave reviews.

So where does sex appeal leave off and real talent take over in to-day's marketing of classical music and musicians?

For St. John, the idea is to "get it out there, and ideally get it out there to more than your converted choir."

The formidably gifted violinist now has seven recordings to her credit -- the cover art featuring her posed dramatically in a variety of adventurous settings -- with the majority released by her own label, Ancalagon, which she founded in 2000.

"I think the whole visual and marketing idea is very interesting," St. John says. "I've never seen why we can't take a leaf out of the book of pop and rock -- of that kind of 'visceral' marketing -- in order to get this stuff out there."

Does she ever worry that she might go too far, that she might turn off a segment of the serious, classical music-buying public by straying into electro-classical violinist Vanessa Mae territory, for example -- or the territory of Finnish violinist and Playboy pinup Linda Brava -- where sexiness verging on nudity is a major selling point?

Not really, St. John says. "First of all, I don't think you can necessarily lose people if you have complete conviction in what you're putting out there. That's one reason I own my own label. I'm in control of every single aspect of whatever goes out there.

"And the other thing is, you always have to be 'classy.' "

She laughs.

"I'm not putting something from Hustler out there," St. John explains, pointing out that while her album jacket, Internet and video personas may venture into a sort of glamour that's on the wild side, her stage persona adheres pretty close to the traditional -- or as she herself puts it, "traditional, with an edge to it."

Which doesn't mean "going out there in ripped jeans or that sort of thing, at all," she says.

Indeed, at the time of the interview, St. John had just returned to her home base of New York from Toronto, where she purchased two new designer gowns.

For someone who sounds so unassuming and down-to-earth, "designer" might seem a little, well, out of place.

St. John laughs again, her candour still reassuringly intact.

"I'm six feet tall, so I really can't get them 'off the rack,' " she says. "I have to get them designed.

"Otherwise, it looks like I outgrew them."

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