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Q&A with Lara St. John: Geek violinist

Posted in [The Volume](#) by [Olivia Giovetti](#) on August 3rd, 2010 at 5:50 pm



Canadian violinist Lara St. John has been blazing a sexy course through classical music ever since her infamous 1996 recording of Bach solos (the cover for which features her topless, her instrument strategically placed). But behind the looks are considerable smarts in music and beyond: She's been running her own record label, Ancalagon, for more than ten years and celebrates its latest release—an all-Mozart disc recorded with her brother Scott and knockout chamber group the Knights—August 4 at the Apple Store Soho. Click past the jump to read how the violinist feels about sibling rivalry, West Side versus East Side, and cats who look like Hitler.

The Volume: There seems to be a growing trend of classical artists starting their own labels, but you were one of the earliest adoptors.
 Lara St. John: Yeah I started mine in '99, actually, so I like to think I inspired all these people. [Laughs] It's only really been in the past seven, six years that I feel like I hit a stride and came into my own with it, but I actually did start it way back then. I guess I like being in complete control, having absolute decision-making power. And also if it's yourself that you're presenting, then you tend to care a hell of a lot more. At least in my case I certainly care more about what I put out there than a label might.... I try never to shirk on quality. For example, all my CDs are done in Super Audio, SACD. That's a rather expensive process, but it is an amazing thing for audiophiles. If you have a surround system, the sound is incredible, it's really something else. So you get used to that and it's really important to me.

Wasn't your music also used for *LonelyGirl15*?

[Laughs] Yeah, that's right.... They licensed, I think it was, one of the Bach sonatas, the G minor I think. And it was her episode when she was in a hotel room or something like that, zipping around, and there was my depressive for the G minor sonata. Yeah, so hey, why not?

You could start your own series: *LonelyViolinist*.

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I have a YouTube video where I'm playing Bach with an iguana on my head. I have an iguana, so I'm thinking of, like, giving him his own little channel, cause he's a funny little guy.

Sort of like the website Stuff on My Cat.

Yeah yeah yeah, that's cool. I happened across a website the other day called CatsWhoLookLikeHitler.com.

The Kitlers!

The Kitlers! Have you seen that?

They have a whole merchandising arm now with Kitler tote bags. This one Kitler, it's even got the weird side-part! The hair, like the top-of-the-head hair. I mean, this cat just looks so much like Hitler it's unbelievable.... Yeah, *LonelyGirl* was just kind of cool. There's another one called *Snapecast* and they used my Bach concertos as well. I don't know, people get fixated. And I got a call from MGM, actually, a couple of months ago. I don't think they ended up licensing it, but they asked if they could license some of the Bach solo stuff for a new, I think it was for *Battlestar Galactica*, one of those things. Apparently it was something in the future and this guy, one of the characters, was going to have flashbacks to his wife who played the violin. I think they ended up not using that character something like that, but still, it was cool.

So you're sort of the go-to violinist for geeks.

For the geeks! Yeah, I'm a total geek. Maybe also it's easy because here again I have control. People know that I have my own label, so if I wanna do something, then I can. It's pretty neat.

You recorded your latest CD with your brother, with whom you play a lot. What is that relationship like?

Well we've been playing together our whole life. I started because I was jealous, because he had a little violin. I was two and a half.

So already there was sibling rivalry.

There's never really been a rivalry, mostly because we're such different players and different people. It's kind of like, in a weird way, we're almost so close that we don't really have to talk. Somebody was asking, "Oh, do you ever argue during rehearsal, do you criticize each others' playing?" And it's like, if you have a sibling, you know what they're going to say before they say it. For me, I know what my brother's going to play before he plays it, so there's no chance of not being with him or being together with him. It's a feeling; it's like an extension of yourself, almost. We just sort of play, we don't really rehearse. We don't really have to.

So there's no calling mom when you can't decide on how something should be played?

[Laughs] No. The one thing we did do with this recording, since we've been playing the Sinfonia [Concertante by Mozart] since, like, I was ten and he was 12. Sometimes when you're a kid, you do some dumb stuff, and you get into bad habits and things like that. You know, so we did sort of go through and ask ourselves, Why are we doing this? Is there a good reason? So we did actually have a couple hours of rehearsal before the recording just to make sure that we agreed as to why we were doing every nuance. But yeah, it was great fun. And the Knights, I don't have enough superlatives. My God, I was lucky to be able to have gotten them for this project.

They're fantastic.

I know! I mean, everybody is so into great music-making. Nobody in that group—of course, they're all under 35—is jaded. Everybody's so enthusiastic, so much energy and life and enthusiasm. Where else are you going to get that?

And you're playing with them at the Apple Store.

Yeah, on Wednesday. That's going to be the Apple Store's first orchestral event.... We're going to be a little bit squished. The stage of that little theater was not built for an orchestra. But we're going to be able to make it work. It should be a lot of fun.

You can defy the laws of physics and get a little cozy.

We might have to sort of set them up a little differently or something like that. We're going to do it without sound, actually. I think Apple usually does mics, but we said, "Nope, we'll use the natural acoustics of your store, folks!" And if you get bored you can look around and play with computers.

You have an insanely busy schedule this month. How do you balance it out?

Well, normally I always take August off. This year, though, I was unable to because so many things came up, like the Apple Store and stuff, but I will take two weeks off in the middle of August.... Some people have to do concert maintenance, but for [my brother and me], we can take off a month, two months, three months, and go back to it and two days later play a concerto. We don't have to do the maintenance that sometimes people have to, and that makes it kind of cool because when I do have a couple weeks without concerts, I absolutely do not pick up the violin. Like it goes completely out of my life for a little while. And I think that's healthy. 'Cause otherwise, if I were one of the folks who had to maintain four hours a day, I think I would go bonkers.

So what do you do when you're not playing?

Well, it's funny, I mean, I travel for a living so for me the ideal thing is to stay home.

Staycation.

Yeah, a vacation is like staying home. I usually do end up traveling and going somewhere with my sweetie 'cause we don't see each other too often.... He's in business. We're a very New York sort of thing. When we're in town together, I often stay over there, but I'm West

Side and he's East Side. So not only do I have my own space, I have a park in between! It's like that old story about Woody Allen and Mia Farrow, who'd wave at each other across the park. We can actually see each other or something.

But the question is, do you go with the American Museum of Natural History or do you go with the Met? Natural History! Well, I do. I think the East Side is just too loud and the sidewalks are too small. I'm thinking right now of Lexington, but I don't know what's going on. Do they just spontaneously combust over there all the time? There are sirens, like, constantly. And I'm very, very noise-sensitive, I guess it comes from being a musician or something, but I find it very difficult over there. It's funny, only one mile away. [Laughs]

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