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MOZART Sinfonia Concertante for Violin and Viola in E flat major, K.364; Violin Concertos – No.1 in B flat major, K.207*; No.3 in G major, K.216

By Lawrence A Johnson

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Lara St. John (violin), Scott St. John (*violin; viola), The Knights / Eric Jacobsen.
Ancalagon Hybrid SACD ANC 136



This new release on Lara St. John's Ancalagon label pairs the gifted violinist with her equally talented brother in Mozart concertos, individually and together.

In Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante, Scott St. John tackles the viola part, using the *scordatura* tuning – up a

semitone from D major – that Mozart specifies in the score to give greater presence to the instrument. Conductor Eric Jacobsen sets a stylish introduction with the New York-based chamber orchestra, The Knights, though some may find the orchestral image a bit weighty for this repertoire. Lara St. John sounds more fluent on violin than her brother on viola, but both could be more precise at times about note values.

Yet, for the most part, this is a spirited and delightful performance of K.364. Characteristically, Lara St. John brings individuality to Mozart, bending a phrase here and throwing a slight pause in there. Purists may find her a bit idiosyncratic but she largely keeps good rococo style, with pure tone, light rhythms and sparing vibrato, and delivers an especially fine cadenza. In the *Andante*, the bass line seems too prominent in the introduction, but the expressive quality of both soloists compels attention, their interplay individual and elegant without veering into anachronism.

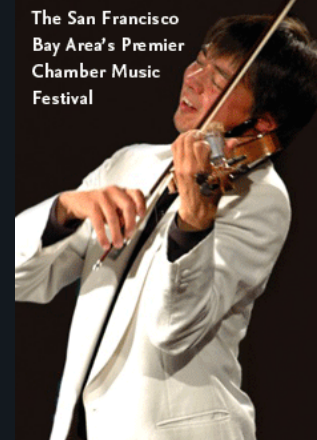
The finale sets off at a notably fast tempo (great horns), the Canadian siblings clearly enjoying themselves, bringing out the spirited back-and-forth of phrases delightfully in one of Mozart's wittiest movements. Both solo instruments are closely miked, but that leads to greater involvement with the music.

Back on his usual instrument, Scott St. John – second violinist of the



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St. Lawrence String Quartet – tackles the First Violin Concerto with a chaste tone and youthful vitality if not always the individuality and fantasy the music requires, as in the rather literal cadenza. The orchestral accompaniment has its bland moments as well in the slow movement, though there is terrific verve in the *Presto* finale, with Jacobsen and the soloist throwing off sparks.

Lara St. John elects the G major Concerto (No.3) for her solo vehicle. She is a more quirky and individual solo personality than her brother, and while you don't always buy everything, she makes you listen to every phrase. The slow movement is especially beautiful with gleaming tone and artful dynamic shading, and her cadenza is a high point of the entire disc, rendered with a fresh, extempore quality and deep, searching expression. To the Rondeau finale, St. John brings an uninhibited joyousness, "whooping" passages thrown off with huge panache.

So, even with quibbles, this is consistently stylish and individual Mozart playing from the engaging St. John siblings, and a disc that all Mozartians will enjoy.

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