

## Violinist St. John probes music's layers

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TROY -- There's something different about violinist Lara St. John's playing. St. John made her debut Sunday afternoon at the Troy Savings Bank Music Hall as part of the Troy Chromatic Concert series. The concert was part of her seven-city North American tour. It's not just that she has phenomenal technique that sizzles and sears, or that her tone is lush, or that she has an imaginative musicality. It's that the notes provide merely the framework within which she explores, tests, or questions the work's meaning. She plumbs the depths with complete commitment to find the many layers that she then evokes on her violin. If there's drama, she'll find it. If there's piquancy, she'll spin it out through her fingertips. The resulting interpretation is like a conversation: multi-layers of nuances, subtle shadings of dynamic levels, and technical wizardry that allows her to toss off phrases as light as cotton candy.

Her program, which was heavy on brilliant show-stoppers, showed off her varied levels. Her pianist, Martin Kennedy, provided strong and empathetic support bolstered by a big and sometimes bold tone. They began with Debussy's Sonata in G minor (1916). The piece suited St. John's idiosyncratic approach with its insinuating and sensuous phrases, bent notes, and flashes of high technical demands. The piece needs to be freely felt as there is a lot of give and take between the players, much like a discussion. St. John applied her own sense of adventure to the task with highly nuanced but very refined phrases and the sweetest tone.

At first in Beethoven's Sonata No. 5 in F Major ("Spring"), St. John was still in the high-nuanced mode. She's still absorbing the work, as she has said that before this tour she'd never performed the work. Her manner was appropriately vigorous for the first movement and thoughtful for the short, slow second movement. The last two movements were especially well done as she captured Beethoven's earthy humor, his exuberance and his demand for precision.

She was on more fanciful ground with Heifetz's splendid arrangement of three of Gershwin's preludes. She was playful and splashy in the first; found great focus and drama in the second; and swirled through many double stops in the third.

Last month, St. John and Kennedy gave the world premiere of Kennedy's "Trivial Pursuits." Written with St. John's capabilities in mind, it's bluesy, bouncy, virtuosic and offbeat with interesting violin lines supported by a solid and sometimes big piano part. St. John played the dickens out of it. Other show-stoppers included the romantic "Legende" by Henryk Wienawski; an inventive medley of Stephen Foster's tunes by Matt Van Brink; and Ravel's stormy "Tzigane," which St. John performed with gutsy and fiery abandon.

Her encore was no less fabulous: a Romanian hammered dulcimer tune, "Ca Labriaza," that she took at such a breathless, non-stop tempo she wore her arm out playing all the notes, she said.