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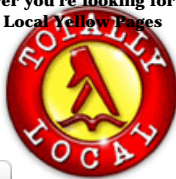


Violinist Lara St. John tests limits with 'Seasons'

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Journal Star
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Lara St. John, who performs with Heartland Festival Orchestra next weekend, is a Canadian.

But the 38-year-old violinist has a certain affinity for all things south of the equator. Iguanas, for instance. She owns one and dotes on it with organic vegetables - a habit that actually has helped improve her own eating, she says.

Then there's her lifelong fascination with *porteno* music of Buenos Aires, a fascination that bloomed recently when she visited Venezuela two years ago and performed with the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra.

The result was a recording on St. John's own Ancalagon Records (named after the aforementioned iguana) that paired two contrasting, highly listenable pieces: Baroque composer

Antonio Vivaldi's "The Four Seasons" and 20th century master Astor Piazzolla's tango and jazz-inspired "The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires."

Separated by about two and a half centuries, and embodying vastly different musical styles, the two pieces nevertheless share certain traits: A certain exuberance and theatricality, an opportunity for the soloist to take chances and test limits - which is exactly what St. John intends to do when she performs June 12 at Washington's Five Points and June 13 at Mackinaw Valley Vineyard.

"You can really wear your heart on your sleeve with this stuff," St. John said recently. "But then I think the same for Vivaldi."

St. John's biography reads partly like that of a variation on the traditional theme of child prodigy on the path to world-class player. But it has its unusual aspects, too. On the one hand, she's done the kinds of things you might expect from a world-class artist: Early studies on her instrument at the age of 2, a European debut at the age of 10, studies at the Curtis Institute of Music at 13, followed by further study at the Moscow Conservatory. Yet she displays a maverick side as well: Traveling and living with the Roma people, for instance, or ranking traditionalists with album covers whose style share more in common with popular music than classical.

It's a trait that makes her open to unusual pets (like her beloved iguana) and unusual projects like her 2008 collaboration with what she called the "creme de la creme" of the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra for her Vivaldi-Piazzolla project.

"Everybody has got to do a 'Four Seasons' at some point in their life," St. John said. "And also I had this amazing opportunity with the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra in Caracas. So we actually recorded it in Caracas. It just seemed like a no-brainer to do Piazzolla because these guys play it like they were born doing it.

"And funny for a little Canadian girl - my dad was a Argentinean-ophile and a language teacher. I actually grew up hearing a lot of Piazzolla and a lot of Argentinean musicians. It just seems like a really good fit."

The pieces by Vivaldi and Piazzolla not only share a similar concept - a musical evocation of the seasons as experienced in Europe and South America - but also a certain exuberance in the sheer possibilities of sound that borders on the childlike.

Piazzolla shifts meter and drastically alters tempo; some movements end quickly, some slowly. The bow is sometimes used percussively to imitate the sound of the South American guiro, a hollow, ridged gourd that's scraped with a wooden stick. (Piazzolla originally wrote the piece for bandoneon, violin and a small group of musicians; a Russian, Leonid Desyatnikov, arranged the piece for solo violin and string orchestra.)

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Poems in Italian (perhaps by the composer himself) served as inspirations for Vivaldi's music, which uses all the resources of the instruments to imitate the various moods and spirits of each of the seasons.

Any performance of the piece, then, should strive to capture the urgency and immediacy of the weather itself - a quality that's missing in more pedestrian recordings.

"Do these people know what they are musically, sonically describing?" St. John said. "Because it doesn't seem like it. For me, it's very important that that comes across. Spring is one thing, it's quite pastoral and there are birds and there's this little storm. But then there's this crazy heat of summer and the cuckoo and not being able to get away from the gnats and flies and the mosquitoes. And there's this huge summer storm.....And winter! He actually says 'teeth chattering.' We're able to make that sound on violins."

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