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Classical Music Reviews by John J. Puccio



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Beethoven: Violin Sonata No. 9 "Kreutzer" (CD review)

Also, Franck: *Sonata in A Major for Violin and Piano*; Kreisler: *Schon Rosmarin*. Lara St. John, violin; Matt Herskowitz, piano. Ancalagon Records ANC 144.

Lara St. John is not your usual violinist. She's more daring than most, more apt to take chances. Not that she reinvents the music she plays nor distorts it with pyrotechnics or virtuosity for its own sake.

Ms. St. John says about herself and the two violin sonatas on the disc, "I'm a bit of a strange violinist, and when I was a kid, supposed to be learning all these normal works that folks play, instead I was learning Bartok's solo sonata and Debussy, and Beethoven's concerto and 10th sonata, and I just sort of missed some of these more 'normal' pieces. I learned both of these sonatas rather late in life--in my late 20s. When I first asked Matt (Herskowitz) to perform the Franck, which we have been playing together now for many years, I had performed it once or twice before, but had never been entirely free of a normal pianist's ideas of 'tradition,' which I found hobbling and somewhat nonsensical. As for Beethoven's *Sonata No. 9 'Kreutzer'*, I had been waiting for a pianist who would be able to keep up the extremes I envisioned for this piece, tempo and volume-wise. Obviously, old Ludwig wanted the pianist to improvise, which is what Matt does in the piano cadenzas."

St. John began playing the violin at two years old and gave her first public performance as a soloist with an orchestra at age four. By five she was making frequent trips with her mother and brother to Cleveland, Ohio, where she worked under the instruction of Linda Cerone. By age nine, she won grand prize at the Canadian Music Competition. Then at age ten, she made her European debut with the Gulbenkian Orchestra in Lisbon, Portugal, after which she spent three years touring the continent, including Spain, France, and Hungary. At age thirteen she entered the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, where she later received her degree. At age sixteen, she moved on her own to the former Soviet Union, becoming the youngest postgraduate student at the Moscow Conservatory. In that same year, St. John traveled throughout the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, where she encountered the Romani people, a cultural experience that would later influence her musical performance projects.

Eventually returning to her studies, St. John attended three different academies: the Guildhall School in London, Mannes College of Music in New York, and the New England Conservatory. Since then she has appeared with major orchestras throughout the world and recorded over a dozen albums. She performs on the 1779 "Salabue" Guadagnini.



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Lara St. John

Her colleague on the current disc is pianist, composer, and arranger Matt Herskowitz, who, according to his Web site, "has produced a series of critically-acclaimed recordings, premiered his works in settings from New York's Central Park to Germany's Kohn Philharmonie, collaborated with top classical, jazz and pop artists, and has performed at music festivals across the globe."

So, first up on the program is the *Violin Sonata No. 9* "Kreutzer," Op. 47, written by Ludwig Van Beethoven in 1803. It's called the "Kreutzer" sonata because Beethoven dedicated it to the violinist Rodolphe Kreutzer, who hated it and refused to play it. Kreutzer called it "outrageously unintelligible." Maybe the composer was a whole lot before his day, and that's why Ms. St. John chose to record it? In

any case, like the Franck piece that accompanies it on the disc, the Beethoven sonata is in the key of A, which explains the album's subtitle, "Key of A." The sonata became even more famous after Leo Tolstoy published a novella called *The Kreutzer Sonata* in 1889, and it's been popular ever since.

One can hear from the outset why Kreutzer refused to play Beethoven's sonata. It's extremely complicated and takes virtuosic skill to pull off. Ms. St. John does it with seemingly effortless skill. Beethoven wrote the piece as he was becoming ever more acutely aware of his impending deafness. Maybe he was angry, and the often tumultuous music reflects it. Beethoven appears to structure the whole first movement as an argument between the violin and piano, with each instrument holding its own. Listening to St. John and Herskowitz play it, one can practically see the ensuing battle going on, and it's both a stimulating clash and a joy to hear. The central *Andante* and *Variations* come as a gentle, needed respite, with the performers at restful ease, even when the spirits get more lively. The work ends on a relatively brief *Presto*, so expect a sprightly and festive finish.

After the Beethoven is the *Sonata for Violin and Piano*, written by the composer, pianist, and organist Cesar Franck in 1886. It's a familiar sonata, one you may recognize, and it's considered by many music critics as one of the finest sonatas of its kind ever written. It became so popular, in fact, that it has seen any number of transcriptions for other instruments, as well as an orchestral version. But it's nice to hear the original.

Needless to say, St. John and Herskowitz have the measure of the work. Supposedly, Franck's four movements represent the four stages of life: birth, youthful passion, tragedy, and joyous acceptance. Unlike the Beethoven, the conversation between the violin and piano is rapt and rapturous. The performers create a mood that is totally captivating, wholly delightful, and, like the music, flawlessly triumphal.

The program concludes with the little *Schon Rosmarin* ("Lovely Rosemary"), published by the Austrian violinist and composer Fritz Kreisler in 1905. As expected, it's a charming rendition.

Producers Lara St. John, Stephen H. Judson, and Martha de Francisco and engineer Martha De Francisco recorded the music at the Fraser Performance Studio of WBGH's Educational Foundation, Boston, Massachusetts in November 2017. The violin sound is crisp and extremely well detailed; and the piano is big and warm, just as though they were in your listening room with you. The two instruments complement one another, and the sound does both of them justice. You can hear every nuance of the music with this kind of definition.

JJP

To listen to a brief excerpt from this album, click below:

[Beethoven - Violin Sonata No. 9 - St. John.mp3](#) ▾

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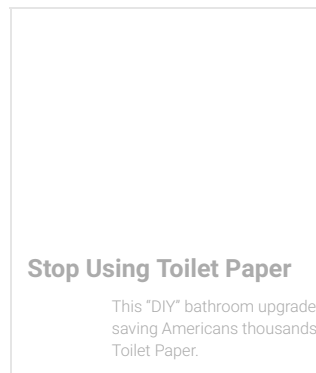
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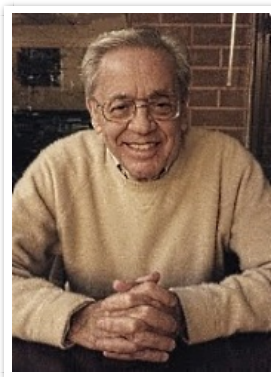


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Meet the Staff



John J. Puccio, Editor, Publisher, Reviewer

Understand, I'm just an everyday guy reacting to something I love. And I've been doing it for a very long time, my appreciation for classical music starting with the musical excerpts on *The Big John and Sparkie* radio show in the early Fifties and the purchase of my first recording, *The 101 Strings Play the Classics*, around 1956. In the late Sixties I began teaching high school English and Film Studies as well as becoming interested in hi-fi, my audio ambitions graduating me from a pair of AR-3 speakers to the Fulton J's recommended by *The Stereophile's* J. Gordon Holt. In the early Seventies, I began writing for a number of audio magazines, including *Audio Excellence*, *Audio Forum*, *The Boston Audio Society Speaker*, *The American Record Guide*, and from 1976 until 2008, *The Sensible Sound*, for which