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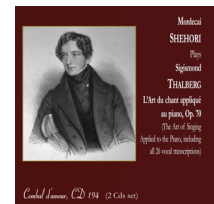


## Lara St. John, Violin — Key of A — Ancalagon

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**Cembal  
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**“Key of A” = BEETHOVEN: Violin Sonata No. 9 “Kreutzer”;  
FRANCK: Violin Sonata;  
KREISLER: Schon Rosmarin –**



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## Lara St. John, violin/ Matt Herskowitz, piano – Ancalagon ANC 144, 60:38 \*\*\*\*\*:

Even though the eminent French violinist Rodolphe Kreutzer, also a composer of some 40 operas, was known as the finest player of his day, it is one of history's great ironies that his fame resides almost solely on the fact that Beethoven dedicated the most spectacular violin sonata of his opuses to him. It was not always so and is still a little strange to us even today. The Polish-born Afro-European violinist George Bridgetower was to receive the honor, and in fact gave the premiere; but afterward, at post-concert drinks, the violinist committed the ultimate faux pas in making a rather derogatory comment about a certain lady's morals, one whom Beethoven felt rather fondly. Furious, Beethoven then dedicated the piece to Kreutzer, who refused to perform it and disliked it intensely. Nevertheless, the dedication stuck, and such are the important vicissitudes of musical history.

It is a very aggressive work, easily the most intense of all the composer's violin sonatas, and equally the most popular. It's not hard to see why—the opening cadenza grabs you by the throat and proceeds to take you on the wildest gallop possible, leaving one gasping for air. The second movement variations are marvelous, a bit of respite yet still forceful in its own way. The concluding *presto* continues the promise of the first movement's furor, and brings us to an exciting, if exhausting, ending.

There have been many fine recordings of this sonata, starting perhaps with the Szigeti/ Bartok reading on Vanguard from so many years ago. As to the coupling, one need only look to the Perlman/ Argerich EMI effort for an excellent rendition, and there are many in various complete sets. But honestly, I think this one from St. John and her wonderful partner Herskowitz proves the topper to any I have heard. It has everything—wonderful tonal qualities, unparalleled energy, and palpable enthusiasm. Quite a ride, and we're just getting started.

The Franck sonata, his most famous composition along with his D-minor symphony, knows no dedication angst or drunken arguments over female morality. In fact, the beginning was rather born in quietude, written for the composer's friend Eugène Ysaÿe as a wedding present, and performed before the ceremony in the morning by the intrepid violinist. The first public performance took place later in Brussels. Though often paired on discs with the Beethoven, it is worlds away in sound and structure, every bit redolent of the hothouse passion



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sweeping Europe at the time, and certainly foretelling of the gnarly post-romanticism heating up the continent, and even the first fleeting harmonic experiments of the impressionists. It is also marked by the idea of thematic cycles where the movements—slow, fast, slow, fast—show a consistent yet transformed use of ideas all in the context of sonata form. The piano part is perhaps even more difficult than the violin, a truly virtuoso exercise in digital dexterity for any keyboard player, with Herskowitz deftly navigating the difficulties.

There are well over 150 recordings of this piece, many of the utmost quality. You can almost throw a dart at any of them and come up with a winner. While I can't say that St. John and Herskowitz are best of breed here—there are simply too many—I *can* say that they easily equal the best I have heard, impassioned, fiery, and wonderfully relaxed in the moments that call for such geniality.

Kreisler's famous *Schön Rosmarin* make for a nice curio.

It has been a while since Lara St. John put out a new release—2015 if I am correct—and this new disc is very welcome indeed. I must admit to being a little disappointed when realizing it was not a SACD, but when I heard the thing, with the gorgeous violin and extraordinarily rich and vibrant piano sound dancing between the speakers, I'm not sure how much SACD would have improved it, as the sonics are superb in every way, as is the always-phenomenal St. John. Production values are high as usual, with an excellent booklet and notes. You will want this disc; you *need* this disc, and it provides an hour of exceptional pleasure and illuminating insight into the worlds of two very different composers.

—Steven Ritter

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