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MUSIC REVIEW: LARA ST. JOHN AND MATT HERSKOWITZ — 'KEY OF A' (VIOLIN SONATAS BY BEETHOVEN AND FRANCK)

👤 Jon Sobel 🕒 6 days ago 👁 120 Views

With live concerts cancelled indefinitely, we're at least lucky we live in the age of recorded music. After all, for most of human history, there was no such thing. Now there's an effectively infinite amount of the stuff. And as one who's been on the receiving end of music press releases for many years, I can assure you that plenty of new projects are coming out during the COVID-19 pandemic (though some releases are being delayed). One I'm especially happy to welcome is the new album of sonatas by Beethoven and Franck from violinist Lara St. John and pianist Matt Herskowitz.

Though busy with varied interesting projects on their own, the two have also worked together for years, achieving a remarkable artistic synchrony. *Key of A* presents them at their most fervent, offering deeply felt performances of Beethoven's Violin Sonata No. 9 (the famous "Kreutzer" Sonata) and César Franck's beloved Sonata for Violin and Piano, plus a Fritz Kreisler encore.



What I want ideally from a classical recording is to hear a piece of music as I've never heard it before. Great musicians can filter a composer's distinct emotional language and intellectual force through their own creative spirits to produce something uniquely enlightening. In this performance, the Kreutzer Sonata makes me smile unexpectedly, open my eyes wide, breathe more deeply. Beethoven lives through St. John's voice-like tone, Herskowitz's brutally crisp left hand, the singing tunefulness both musicians bring to music that's unusually melodic for Beethoven.

The duo are excellent guides to the madness of the opening movement, which despite its friendly key, accessible melodies, and coruscating major key arpeggios takes the listener on a journey that feels downright hazardous. After that *tour de force* of stormy virtuosity and eccentric passion, the second movement's variations feel timeless – as if Beethoven had just written them – and comfortable too, offering a modest theme and an extended form we're familiar with. At times St. John's swooping inflections even bring Heifetz to mind as the sweet theme evolves through a boundless landscape of pure delight and points toward the Romantic.

The form may be familiar, but you can't help appreciating the feats Beethoven asks the musicians to perform here, particularly the violin. He didn't ask his interpreters to smile while doing it, but a smiling warmth comes through from these performances.

Then, in the finale, the sheer virtuosity, both individually and combined, astounds. All you can do is wear an involuntary smile of your own and shake your head. The movement takes on an orchestral richness

that makes me think about what joy it would have given Beethoven to hear (to the extent that he could hear) his piano music played on a modern grand.

The Romanticism Beethoven gestures toward is in full flower in Franck's sonata, brilliantly realized in this resplendent performance. St. John's ability to evoke the human voice is especially effective here when linked with Herskowitz's multicolored fullness of tone. The internal dialogue inside the stormy Allegro is as eloquent as I've ever heard it, even – or especially – when the two instruments dance in the same frequency range; St. John's expressiveness in the violin's lower register is second to none. Listen, for example, to the start of the coda in that second movement.

The duo gives full measure to the Recitativo-Fantasia movement's almost unbearably haunting quality, and to the sheer beauty of its wanderings. The optimistic finale is a relief, but seriously impassioned as well as joyful. Like Beethoven, Franck was not going to let the listener off the hook; the blood is still running hot at the end.

St. John and Herskowitz kindly give us Kreisler's "Schön Rosmarin" as a playful, somewhat tongue-in-cheek encore, bending it this way and that with rubbery tempos and musical laughs. Close your eyes and you might just be able to imagine you're at a concert listening to a live encore. Or maybe not. But those times will come again. In the meantime, great recordings like this can keep us going.

Key of A is available now through Lara St. John's website and at Amazon.

Cross-Border Franck! ft. Lara St. John and Matt Herskowitz from NYC and Montréal.





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