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# STRINGS

## Lara St. John

Going to Extremes  
in Two Beloved Sonatas

5 Pros on  
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of Quartet  
Literature



# GOING TO EXTREMES

Lara St. John emerges from a trying year with a new album of the Franck and 'Kreutzer' sonatas

By David Templeton

**V**iolinist Lara St. John has a certain dream of the future. The far, *far* future. It involves scorpions. And survival.

More on that later.

After recently completing a two-night appearance at the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews, in Warsaw—where she performed with pianist Matt Herskowitz—St. John is now in Brussels, where she's been conducting research and meeting with other women musicians. She's taking a break to talk about her upcoming CD, to be released on April 17, a recording of the Sonata in A major for Violin and Piano by César Franck, and Beethoven's Violin Sonata No. 9, aka the "Kreutzer" Sonata. Both pieces are performed on the recording with Herskowitz, a frequent and longtime collaborator of St. John's.

"We've been doing the Franck Sonata for about eight years," she guesses. "Both of these are pieces I learned in my 20s and thought, 'Hmmm, I think I'll just kind of wait for the right partner to come along.' I don't think there's any kind of music Matt can't do. He's classically trained, of course, but he's better known as a jazz pianist, which is really interesting to me. Because he has no preconceptions about these pieces, whereas every other pianist in the world would have already played them 2,000 times in school, or whatever."



Herskowitz, she says, approached the famous composition from an entirely fresh, unfussy perspective.

“It was fun,” she says with a laugh. “Like, *really* fun. We were able to approach them asking, ‘Well, what if we played them *this* way, or this *other* way, or what if we completely exaggerate here?’ Working together, we came to some new ideas that we think really, really work, though they are not necessarily in the preconceived traditions of most classical musicians of today.”

Beethoven’s Kreutzer Sonata was premiered by Beethoven on piano and George Bridgetower on violin, on May 24, 1803, at the Augarten Theatre, in Vienna, Austria. It was Bridgetower to whom the piece was originally dedicated. Franck’s sonata was composed in 1886 as a wedding present for the violinist Eugène Ysaÿe. St. John, who was born in London, Ontario, in Canada, and now lives in New York, says that she first encountered the Franck and Kreutzer sonatas as a student, and found them engaging—“I actually thought they were pretty cool,” she says—but recognized she’d need the right pianist partner to ever feel up to tackling them with any seriousness.

“I basically set them by the wayside and did other things,” she says. “When Matt and I started doing a lot of stuff together, I one day, sort of spontaneously said, ‘Hey! Let’s do the Franck.’ Then a couple of years ago I said, ‘Hey! Let’s do the Beethoven!’ Basically, it just sort of felt like the right time to bring these pieces onto the stage.”

Asked what separates her and Herskowitz’s recorded performances of the pieces from other recordings of the same compositions, St. John pauses before laughing and pointing out there is no way to answer such a question without sounding at least a little bit pompous. “Well, OK. For one thing,” she says after a moment, “in Beethoven’s time, he would definitely not have done the variations part of the sonata without, you know, variations—especially not with a violinist like Bridgetower, whom he had in mind when he

wrote it. So we kind of went back into that tradition, of doing variations on the variations, doing some improvisatory stuff. Not like John Coltrane or anything, but very much in the style of the time. That’s another reason I needed Matt before I could do these.”

It’s something she couldn’t have done with just anybody.

“There’s a certain ‘extreme’ in that piece, the Beethoven, and I’m kind of an extreme player, and so is Matt,” she says. “Unlike the tenth or the eighth or the other sonatas around it, which are very different, very pastoral and sweet, this one is really not so sweet. It was very influenced by Bridgetower, who by all accounts was a completely crazy guy. I think we are somehow able, through the extremeness of our personalities, to bring out that element and bring it to life.”

As for the Franck, St. John admits that the reaction people have had to the way she and Herskowitz have been performing it has been “pretty tremendous.” She remarks that John Corigliano, who grew up listening to his father play it often, has said that he could never stand the Franck Sonata until he heard St. John and Herskowitz do it.

“Which is pretty cool,” she allows. “He still calls Matt ‘the Franck Sonata pianist.’”

In describing her approach to pieces like these, especially when working with Herskowitz, St. John says there is a lot of open and constant conversation. “At some point one of us might say, ‘You know, this is not quite working for me. Can we do something else?’” she explains. “And then there are questions about why:

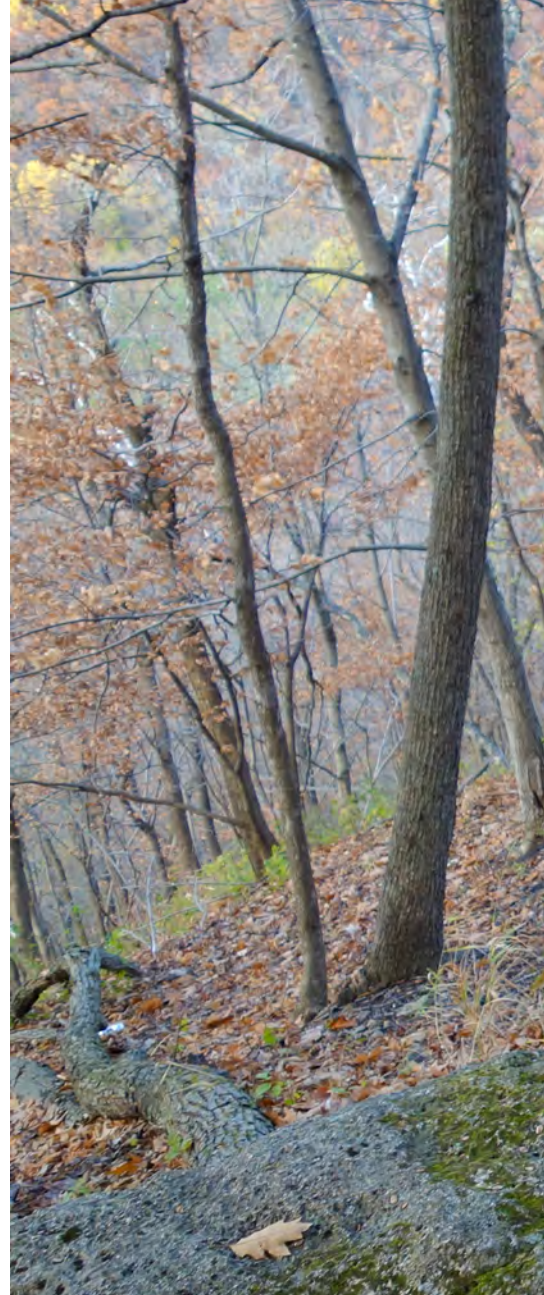
*why* isn’t it working? Sometimes it’s a very simple thing. We got loud too fast. Or we lost the momentum somehow. And we somehow always find a good happy medium.”

Not that one should assume, she adds, that the new recording is in any way compromised by any compromises she and Herskowitz came around to. “In this case,” she laughs, “given who we both are, what we

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came up with is *pretty* intense.” Continuing, she says, “It’s not the difficulty of the pieces that was the challenge for us so much as that they are so well known. For me, I’m always into trying new ideas, and new ways of doing things. Obviously, you can’t go way off what the composer wrote, but you can find new ways of presenting it.” In this case, she believes they did.

Example please?

“Okay, Beethoven’s piano did not have 88 keys, right?” she says. “I have the feeling that in doing the Ninth Symphony and stuff, he was going down to the low B, low B-flats. I’m quite sure that if he had had a Steinway D, he would have used all of the keys. So, ahem, we made that 21st-century decision for him and used some lower octaves. So that’s one thing that we



discovered, and that we probably do differently from other people playing that piece. And I don't have any question about the fact that both of these composers would have wanted that had they had these instruments at their disposal."

Having decided some time ago to begin playing these pieces in concert, it was a no brainer that they should eventually record the two pieces on a single recording. "After all, there are a lot of not-coincidental connections between these two pieces," she points out. "There is this thread that links them, and it's all about violinists. Beethoven wrote his Kreutzer Sonata for George Bridgetower."

According to the stories, in what St. John calls "typical Beethoven fashion," the ink was still wet on the last movement of the

piece, and Bridgetower had to sightread it during the premiere of the sonata. "It sounds like a carnival of clowns, in a way," she says. "Then there was some sort of moment when Bridgetower offended Beethoven in some way—people think he insulted a woman Beethoven was in love with—so Beethoven basically took the piece away and gave it to the French violinist Rodolphe Kreutzer, who hated it and never played it. Then Kreutzer had various students, and there were various connections over the years, which eventually led to Eugène Ysaÿe, for whom Franck wrote *his* sonata. So that's more-or-less the thread—and the thread is the violin and violinists."

Eventually, she adds, the Kreutzer Sonata inspired a novel by Leo Tolstoy (*The Kreutzer Sonata*, published in 1889), followed by a book

of poetry (*Sonata Mulattica: A Life in Five Movements and a Short Play* in 2009).

"So the whole thing is quite interesting," St. John says, adding, "but the Kreutzer *also* just happens to be one of the towering pieces for violin and piano. The Franck is, too." After another pause, she says, "The CD's liner notes for this are pretty awesome, by the way." She is, in fact, quite a fan of this particular album's liner notes. A few minutes later, in response to a question about the recording process, St. John explains that the CD was recorded in late 2017.

"But," she says, "because of other matters that I knew were on the horizon—some of the stuff that was happening last year—I didn't want any of that to be part of the release of this album. So we held onto it till now."



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She is referring, of course, to a *Philadelphia Inquirer* article that came out in July 2019, in which St. John said she was the victim of a series of sexual assaults and rape, at the age of 14, while at the Curtis Institute of Music, and named violinist Jascha Brodsky, her instructor at the time. Brodsky died in 1997. In the article, St. John described her depression and attempted suicide as a result of the traumatic experiences, which were compounded, she said, by a school administrator refusing to take action when she reported the abuse. In response to the article, St. John found herself in the middle of a #MeToo firestorm.

Since then, it has been, to say the least, a trying time for St. John. But she's stayed focused on a number of projects, including preparations for the release of the Kreutzer/Franck CD (Ancalagon). "It's been kind of heavy, yes," she says of the last several months, adding that the best part of her going public when she did is that, unlike when she first approached leaders at her school, she now knows what it feels like to be believed and supported. "Part of the reason I'm over here in Brussels," she says, "is to do some research about similar things over here. It's not a lighthearted, happy thing, obviously, but it's important."

St. John has been very open about the depression she's been fighting. "I'm doing okay, but I do have to watch it a little bit. Whenever I feel like darkness might be looming, I have to take a few days off and watch *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* all the time or something.

I love that show. I do have to work to get my mind off of it sometimes, because it's been hard. The whole last couple of years have been pretty hard, leading up to me going public, and then everything that came after. It's not been easy, but on the whole, it's definitely been a positive thing."

Since the article, she's heard from many women who've thanked her for speaking up, thanking her, as it's since empowered them to do the same. "That's part of the reason for this European trip, to meet some of those women," she says. "So in that respect, it's been great. I'm very happy to have done what I finally did, so that other women can have maybe a different experience than I had. But it's still a whole lot

of weight to carry on one's shoulders."

After a pause, St. John can almost be heard to slowly smile over the phone as she adds, "But there's always music. That's the great part. For me, there's always music."

And *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*.

And thoughts about the future of the whole world.

Inspired by a short conversation about the coronavirus, which was just then beginning to shut things down in the United States, St. John admits that she's always had a fascination with science fiction-y visions of survival and transformation against all odds.

"I always used to tell people," she says, "that scorpions are able to resist 10,000 times more radiation than humans can. So, my whole idea of Earth in a couple million years is that the planet will be populated by these really awesome scorpion people. And maybe some tarantula people, because tarantulas are survivors, too. I know, it's a long, long time from now, but hey, it would be really cool." ■

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