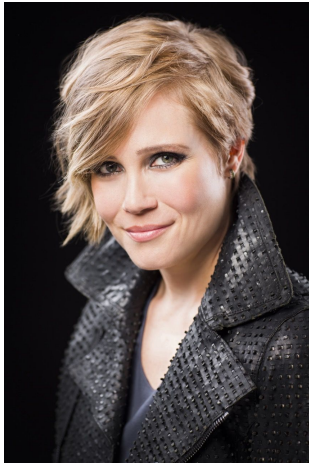


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Violinist Leila Josefowicz brings intensity to John Adams' 'Sheherazade.2'

By John Huxhold Special to the Post-Dispatch Feb 19, 2016



Leila Josefowicz. Photo by Chris Lee
Chris Lee

St. Louis Symphony Orchestra

When • 8 pm Saturday

Where • Powell Symphony Hall,
718 North Grand Boulevard

How much • \$25-\$111

More info • 314-534-1700; slso.org

Violinist Leila Josefowicz is a frequent guest with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra and has carved out a career profile as a fierce champion of ambitious, technically difficult pieces by contemporary composers. One of those is Steven Mackey, whose “A Beautiful Passing” she performed here in 2008.

Friday morning at Powell Hall she came to town with another friend, composer John Adams, who has written a piece for her that she premièred with the New York Philharmonic in 2015.

“Scheherazade.2” is Adams’ response to an art exhibit of Arabian folk tales he viewed in Paris, in particular about Scheherazade who delays her death at the hands of a Persian king by telling him engaging stories for 1,001 nights. Adams recalls being struck by “the casual brutality towards women” that forms the basis for many of these stories, and each of the symphony’s four movements has a title suggestive of his reaction. His music envisions a strong, intelligent woman (represented by the violin) in conflict with an oppressive, male-dominated culture. The prominence of the violin is also reminiscent of the way it appears, but in a less acrimonious context, in Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s tone poem of the same name.

The first movement, “Tale of the Wise Young Woman — Pursuit by the True Believers,” starts with an exotic atmosphere that soon morphs into some aggressive orchestral grumbling set against an equally assertive solo violin. The second movement, “A Long Desire [Love Scene],” is more lyrical and relaxed, but then is followed by a wild “Scheherazade and the Men with Beards” expressing more nastiness from the orchestra contrasted with the violin pleading, unsuccessfully, its case. Finally, “Escape, Flight, Sanctuary” gives a sense of the heroine having fled to a serene, exotic place, the orchestra ending on a high, soft note that fades into a lush orchestral background.

Josefowicz was her typical animated, virtuoso self, standing for nearly an hour, and playing the complicated score from memory. She stormed through thorny passages without breaking a sweat

and became tender or aggressive as the score demanded. Conductor David Robertson and the orchestra (with Chester Englander doing an expert turn on the cimbalom) were at home in this complicated score, sometimes juxtaposed to the violin as a foil, sometimes providing an atmospheric backdrop for it, and at other times being a strong antagonist.

Nonesuch Records is recording "Scheherazade.2" live this weekend; eventually it will be joining the symphony's two other Adams CDs — the Grammy-winning "City Noir" (coupled with his "Saxophone Concerto") and the "Dr. Atomic" Symphony."

The first half of the concert was the beginning of the SLSO's "Shakespeare Festival" programming, opening with a sparkling performance of Berlioz's "Overture to Beatrix and Benedict." Before intermission there were excerpts from incidental music for "The Tempest" by Sibelius, interspersed with spoken dialogue from the play performed by four costumed members of Shakespeare Festival St. Louis. The verbal parts were delivered with great force and character, but most were too long and made the music seem even more unsubstantial than it is.

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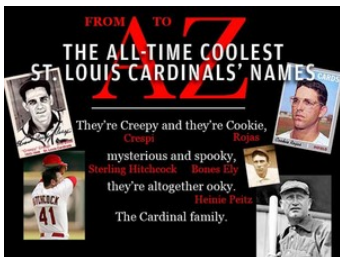
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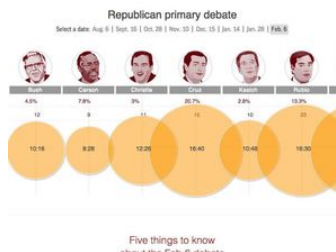
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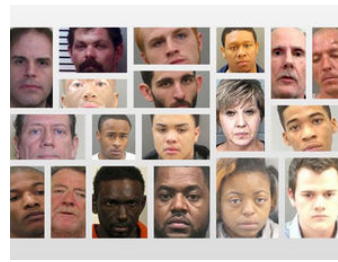
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