

Everybody Knew

On the documentary 'Dear Lara' and sexual abuse in fame-adjacent industries



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Lara St. John plays with Matt Herskowitz and David Gotay at Le Poisson Rouge in New York on September 21, 2010 (Lev Radin/Shutterstock)

(Trigger warning: this piece discusses sexual abuse of minors. Please read with care.)

Last week, former reality TV child Collin Gosselin, now 22, announced he's written an upcoming memoir with Hachette, detailing his suffering behind the scenes of *Jon & Kate Plus 8*. Collin was watched by tens of

millions of people for close to ten years, he and his siblings have huge name recognition. And though the publisher's description stops short of naming names, some verbal and emotional abuse was *filmed and aired on international television*. As close as it comes to a slam dunk where 'allegations' are concerned, right?

It took years, and tragic situations, for anyone to listen to him. Even though *everybody knew*.

I've confessed many times that I was a specific type of dork as a teen. Like many future writers, I was full-italics *dramatic* and *passionate* and *romantic* about the usual subjects: writers, actors, artists, and at one point, classical musicians.

Though a deeply average piano student myself (more on this later), I loved the subculture: young people work tirelessly to make their mark at special schools, in special competitions – this was my catnip. It was also the 90s, so I was primed to imprint on 'cool girls': phenoms like Vanessa-Mae or Lara St. John, massively talented singular performers with eye-catching album covers marketed as take-no-prisoners badasses I hoped to emulate in attitude, if not in music.

Fast forward a few decades – the marketing did not lie. Late last year, lurking on violin message boards as is my dorky wont, I learned about [Dear Lara, a documentary written and directed by Lara St. John about long-held secrets of sexual abuse in classical music](#). St. John is Canadian, from London, ON, but after studying around the world and touring internationally as a soloist from ages 10-13 (!), she and her brother were both accepted to the highly selective Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, with its "3% acceptance rate; about the same as Harvard", she points out.

At 14, she was raped and repeatedly abused by lauded professor Jascha Brodsky, who threatened to kick out both Lara and her brother if she complained. She was terrified of ending both their careers, but still

went to the dean of this august institution, who guffawed: *"Who do you think [the police] are going to believe? Some kid, or a teacher who's been with the school for decades?"* ...



So, like so many survivors before her, St. John picked up her life, tried to move on and distance herself from this incredibly painful story.



Press Stills: Dear Lara, LLC

She became even more successful - name a city in Europe, Asia, or North America, and she's soloed countless times with their symphonies. Her albums are international bestsellers; she's been on CNN and NPR (even done a Tiny Desk Concert). Despite not being 'mainstream' famous, she's a superstar...



Press Stills: Dear Lara, LLC

... yet here I am, outlining every beat of her incredible career to prove she's a big deal - because that's when we pay attention, historically. When people are a big enough deal.

The doc details how Lara told her story to a journalist, and in 2019, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* ran her account on the front page.

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AN ACCUSATION OF ABUSE

'They Wouldn't Believe Me'

Acclaimed violinist says she was sexually assaulted by her renowned teacher at the Curtis Institute, and then ignored and mocked when she reported it.



Violinist Lara St. John, who has performed with some of the world's top orchestras, says she was raped by Jascha Brodsky when he was her teacher at the Curtis Institute in the 1980s. Two friends remember the school dismissing her claims. *Associated Press*

By TRICIA L. NADOLNY and PETER DOBRIN | STAFF WRITERS

As a classical violinist, Lara St. John has cut a fearless path from child prodigy to international fame. She has performed with some of the world's greatest orchestras, founded her own record label, and challenged the norms for female soloists in the traditionally boys-dominated genre.

But long before that, she says, she suffered a tragedy that left her broken and her future uncertain.

St. John says she was repeatedly sexually abused by the man trusted to hone her talent, renowned violinist and teacher Jascha Brodsky. Then, she says, she was disregarded when she reported what had happened to an administrator at Philadelphia's elite Curtis Institute of Music.

In 1988, when she told the school's



Brodsky in 2006. He was accused as a student at Curtis in the 20s, then taught there for decades, until shortly before his death at age 89 in 1987. Four other women also say he pursued them at the school.

then-dean, Robert Fitzpatrick, that she had been abused, he mocked her, she recalls.

"Oh, for God's sake, who do you think they're going to believe? Some 15-year-old kid or someone who has been here for decades?" St. John, 65, remembers him saying. "And I agreed with him totally. They wouldn't believe me."

Three decades on, two friends who were with her say they, too, remember Fitzpatrick dismissing St. John's claims.

Fitzpatrick, who served as the school's dean for more than two decades, retired from Curtis in 2009 and now lives in Paris. In an interview, he adamantly denied St. John's recollection. He said she told him that she then 79-year-old Brodsky had

See **ENRIG** on A16

'SQUANDERED' HOPES

Jefferson cannabis hub takes a hard fall

It was to be a global research center. But a sex-harassment case against its founder set in motion a series of issues.

By Sam Wood and Erin Arredondo | STAFF WRITERS

When Charles Pollock created a marijuana research center in 2008 at Thomas Jefferson University, his idea was considered visionary.

It was a chance to fashion Philadelphia into a global hub for marijuana education and innovation, and would help drive Pennsylvania's ambitions to become the "Silicon Valley" of cannabis research.

Three years later, the center is in shambles.



Charles Pollock was forced to resign in April after he self-reported that he had sexually harassed a female subordinate. He had sent her numerous emails and slipped notes under her door, overwhelming her with unwanted attention, according to documents reviewed by The Inquirer. She rebuffed all his advances.

His departure set in motion a series of changes and revelations that have tarnished the university's reputation and threatened the future of his creation, the Lambert Center for the Study of Medicinal Cannabis and Hemp.

A chorus of detractors, from former employees to key donors and leading marijuana researchers, are calling the center's explosion "a tragedy" and "a disaster."

Former advisers accuse the center and Jefferson of ethical lapses completely unrelated to Pollock's personal foibles.

Pollock held lavish conferences, gave a key contract to a friend who never delivered, and grew uncomfortably close to industry.

Then after his departure, the center revealed two research grants with elite institutions that shattered its credibility in the research community.

"They've squandered and p-od off the entire cannabis community," said Marcel Bonn-Miller, who served

See **LAMBERT** on A13

Philadelphia Inquirer, July 28, 2019

The statute of limitations in Pennsylvania, however, meant that St. John had no immediate legal recourse. She got no justice, at least as of press time.

What she did get were hundreds of letters from musicians and students saying the same thing happened to them. They'd never told anyone - or they had, and nobody listened. *"Dear Lara... I had a similar experience at a similar age..."*

She decided to meet the musicians who wrote to her, and, despite never having made a film, recorded their stories to share, despite not knowing *how*.



Lara St. John films in Philadelphia, 2020. Credit: Dear Lara, LLC

Which is when the story got personal for me, not that I knew it yet.

Despite my aforementioned deeply average music ability, I had a truly gifted teacher in my teens. Lusiana Lukman was funny and talented and demanded excellence even from students not on a professional track. She was a professional artist who 'spoke' music and saw me as musical. Incredibly buoying to a yearning, dorky teen, not that I let on what an

impact she had on me. Not that I could have known how remarkable that was, considering the kind of teacher she'd had instead.

One morning in February I opened social media and was floored to discover Lusiana would appear in *Dear Lara*, revealing that she was abused by her piano teacher, Boris Berlin, at the Royal Conservatory Of Music, beginning when she was 15. Just like Lara, she was an immigrant on scholarship, having moved from Indonesia alone. Like Lara, she eventually confessed her abuse – and, like Lara, she was ignored. The director of education at the RCM neither condemned what happened nor did he apologize (he did briskly offer to switch her to another teacher) and would eventually become president of the school for 33 years.

We hadn't been in touch since I was a teenager, and obviously the reality of Lusiana's time at the RCM wasn't up for discussion back then - but she'd remained one of those towering figures in my memory. I talked about her often, as someone whose moral and musical compasses was absolutely unimpeachable. Looking back now, I see someone not much older than me who somehow had the balls not just to call out what was happening to her, but who refused to let the compounding casual cruelty of one arrogant man after another affect her love of music, or her students' love of music.

It would have been so – not easy, but understandable – to walk away. To have her passion, not to mention her career, crushed by a manipulative predator operating under the pretense of education. But - we've heard this before - people find strength in art. Lusiana has remained the badass I knew as a teen. She's the owner of a celebrated music school in Toronto, one where massive windows and live cameras mean no child will ever have to face what she did – making things better in the culture of classical music, even though the Royal Conservatory *still* hasn't reached out to her, and at least one faculty member has resigned over the RCM's refusal to address allegations

from Lusiana and others who have echoed her complaints about Berlin (now deceased) and others.



L-R Duana, her sister Sheena (also Lusiana's student), and Lusiana Lukman, May 2026

Lusiana is among many survivors who tell their stories in *Dear Lara* (and several told by loved ones of those who didn't survive.) Across the U.S., Canada, Europe, and the U.K., that damning tagline comes back over and over again. *Everybody Knew*. Which teachers to avoid. The whispers about *that* person. Certain teachers who kept transferring, somehow winding up with new, cushy jobs with unfettered access to a fresh crop of vulnerable children.

Still, though, my personal connection to Lusiana aside, this is outside the purview of *LaineyGossip* and *The Squawk*, isn't it? We're about reading pop culture and celebrity; classical music has its own

celebrities, but the world is so self-contained, I doubted any crossover... until I (mis)heard something damning in the film.

After accusations about violinist and music teacher Stephen Shipps recurred at several schools over 30 years, the story was finally broken by a 19-year-old student journalist at the University of Michigan* where Shipps was a professor. He was arrested, placed under federal prosecution, and pled guilty to charges of child exploitation.

Which is when the penny dropped for me.

Contrary to my initial confusion, that's not the same university that employed Larry Nassar, the serial sex offender who abused hundreds of gymnasts including Olympians Simone Biles and Aly Raisman – Nassar was employed at Michigan *State* University. (It *is*, however, the same university that employed opera singer David Daniels, who pleaded guilty to drugging and raping a graduate student in 2010.)

But Nassar didn't become a horrifying household name until many, many then-anonymous survivors came forward, from initial complainant Rachael Denhollander to 'Athlete A', a.k.a Maggie Nichols, the subject of the Netflix documentary who told USA Gymnastics about Nassar and saw that abuse covered up for *years* before they were finally forced to investigate.

Those aren't household names. Not celebrities. Nor is Ambra Gutierrez, the first woman to go on the record about abuse from Harvey Weinstein in 2015, despite years of knowing headlines in the press or 2005 warnings from Courtney Love. But Denhollander and Nichols and Gutierrez and St. John and Lukman and so many others told their stories over and over, so nobody could, and nobody can, say they didn't know. *Everybody Knew*.

Yesterday, St. John appeared on CBC's Q to promote the doc, which is available for Canadians to stream on Kinema from now until July 1st for

a nominal PWYC fee. When host Tom Power asked what might account for the apparently rampant abuse in classical music, she pointed out that it's a tiny profession, blackballing can and does still happen, and that "There aren't very many professions where...men are given enormous amounts of power over children and young women".

Which is already an oooffff – but what kills me? That steady supply of young vulnerable victims are the same ones keeping eyes on the professions in the first place! Which is what's keeping their abusers employed! Gymnastics coaches, music teachers, reality TV producers, high-level movie producers – *all* rely on a steady supply of young talents who need training and access. Many simultaneously abuse them to feel a modicum of power, because they need these young, bright faces full of talent and determination, so people still care about their professions.

But none of us are naïve enough to think abuses are only happening in circles we've already heard about, are we? Even as I write this, abuse is happening in youth sports, academia, schools and hospitals and venues of every kind, where hopefuls put themselves in the paths of those in power, hoping they won't regret it because what other choice do they have?

Even as I write this, your mother or landlady or grandfather or cousin or favourite teacher, or you, are shrugging off memories of abuse because 'that's how things were' or 'it wasn't as bad as what happened to some' or because it stopped short of being prosecutable, or believable.

Do we care less because the people we love aren't famous? Let ourselves believe it's less systemic outside the arts, or sports, or other celeb-heavy industries? Do we think because so much time has passed, or the perpetrators are dead, that it doesn't matter? Are rhetorical questions the laziest writing device?

We all know it matters, we just think there's nothing we can do. But *Dear Lara* proves no matter how long it's been, or how niche the world, we can still bear witness and help people carry their stories, eradicate shame by airing them in the sunlight, and proving that everybody finally knows.

***Dear Lara* is available to stream now on Kinema for Canadians - partial proceeds go to The Gatehouse, a nonprofit for victims of child sexual abuse. U.S/International readers can expect news of further screenings in the coming weeks.**

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