

Recording Review: Viola Solo

By Sel Kardan

The young American violist Melia Watras has a passion for contemporary viola music and this debut solo album certainly delivers on that account. The disc begins with the Sonata for Viola Solo by Atar Arad, with whom Watras studied. Other new works include Andrew Waggoner's *Collines parmi étoiles...* (Hills Among Stars), written for Watras, John Corigliano's *Fancy on a Bach Air*, and Paola Prestini's *Sympathique*. Also included are Stravinsky's *Élégie* and Penderecki's *Cadenza per viola solo*.

This is an interesting and ambitious program of solo works performed at a high level of polish and technical assuredness. Atar Arad's Sonata evokes middle-eastern and eastern European music through its use of pitch bending, modal melodies, and improvisational style. The second movement, *Alla Bulgarese*, is particularly memorable and was influenced by Arad's childhood spent in a Bulgarian émigré community in Israel.

Kodaly's transcription of Bach's Chromatic Fantasy has long been regarded as one of the most difficult solo viola works. Here Watras provides an ending more in keeping with Bach's original intention by playing Arad's revision.

She navigates the work's technical hurdles with ease and makes musical sense of the numerous arpeggiated chords.

Fancy on a Bach Air began life as a single variation from a set by a group of composers. Originally for solo cello, Watras has transcribed it for her recording. It is a beautiful extended cadenza stretching Bach's Goldberg theme into almost one unending six-minute phrase.

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Andrew Waggoner's recitative-like evocation of the cosmos shows off Watras' lush sound, expressive phrasing, and facility. She also sounds perfectly at home in Paola Prestini's rhapsodic and challenging *Sympathique*. Penderecki's *Cadenza*, based on elements of his viola concerto, and Stravinsky's *Élégie* have both become standard viola repertoire and Watras' informed readings make a nice addition to this disc. Despite an overly live recording quality that obscures some clarity, this is an attractive and rewarding collection of solo viola works.