

**Review: Melia Watras - 26**

By Jeremy Shatan

Once upon a time "classical" music was not only popular culture, it was also family culture. Mother taught you piano so you could accompany her violin; father's baritone sounded fine alongside sister's cello, especially after a few brandies; and you might meet your future husband across the spinet during a parlor duet. This is the world violist Melia Watras would call us back to, if in a thoroughly 21st century fashion, on her latest album for Sono Luminus. The number 26 refers the total amount of strings on the instruments used by Watras's collaborators, who include her husband, Michael Jinsoo Lim and her teacher, Atar Arad. See what I mean - a family affair. Another participant is Garth Knox, who plays viola d'amore alongside Watras on his composition, *Stranger*, which ups the string count a fair bit.

But Watras is the main focus, and she really is a remarkable musician. The sheer tone of her playing, often a honeyed ribbon of sound, is so rich that 26 never feels spare even when she is playing solo, as on a number of pieces here, including her own Sonata, 20 enthralling minutes of melody and rhythm that has the spontaneity of an improvisation. But the album opens with *Toccatina a la Turk*, a viola duet written by Arad that is pure charm. Yes, there's a reference to Brubeck's *Blue Rondo*, which is slightly ironic as Arad's own inventions

reference his Turkish heritage, but it's all in good humor. The Knox piece is based on a 17th century Irish folk song, with all the haunted melody you could imagine, amplified beautifully by the resonating strings on Knox's antique instrument. *Liquid Voices*, a duet for Watras and Lim, has a visual flair that allows you to picture the sounds of the violas intertwining in the room. Those are just some of the more notable tracks, but overall this is a more consistent album than her last, *Ispirare*, which was quite fine.

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26 is wonderfully recorded, with a full sound that feels very natural and neither too close nor too distant. So, an exemplary musical experience awaits you, with additional inspiration to be found in Watras's entrepreneurial spirit. She's not waiting for new viola music - she's commissioning it, or writing it herself. Artists in any medium could learn from her energetic example. Long may she reign!