

Melia Watras Reveals the Power of '26' Strings

By Erica Miner

The much-neglected viola finally gets its due in this fascinating new recording featuring performances by multitalented composer and violist Melia Watras and three colleagues: Atar Arad, former Cleveland Quartet violist; Garth Knox, former Arditti Quartet violist; and Michael Jinsoo Lim, concertmaster of Pacific Northwest Ballet. Also included is a work by composer and digital arts pioneer Richard Karpen.

The pieces contained herein were written since 2008, some as recently as 2014, and all are world premiere recordings. The works themselves provide a wealth of contrast in their nature, from ancient and tuneful to starkly contemporary.

Watras, currently Professor of Viola and chair of Strings at the University of Washington in Seattle, composed 5 of the 9 works compiled for the CD, which are sprinkled throughout in combination with works by Arad, Knox and Karpen and performed by Watras and Arad on viola, Knox on the viola d'amore, and Watras's violinist husband Michael Jinsoo Lim.

In *Toccatina a la Turk* (2008) for 2 violas, Arad and Watras combine their well-matched, crystal clear tones to portray a polyphony influenced both by the rhythms of Dave Brubeck's iconic *Blue Rondo a la Turk* and by the mood and character of the Balkans. One also hears definite rhythms and melodic patterns reminiscent of the 2-violin duets of Béla Bartók. Originally written by Arad for two violins, the violist was so pleased with the results that he arranged it for two violas. Played so deftly, the piece works beautifully in its present incarnation.

Arad was Watras's viola teacher, and she credits him for her interest in composing. Moreover, his concept of the Prelude to the Bach Unaccompanied Suite No. 3 in C major served as inspiration for her 2014 piece, *Prelude*, for viola solo. The improvisatory nature of the work shows off Arad's velvety sound and keen sense of phrasing.

Watras and Arad join forces for Arad's *Esther* from 2008. Dedicated to Arad's Bulgarian-born mother, the piece evokes his mother's spirited singing of songs from her native land during his childhood. The work makes full use of the lyrical qualities of the viola, from top to bottom of the instrument's range, and the players expertly weave and

intermingle their sounds to create a nostalgic atmosphere.

An ancient Irish tune believed to have been written by a 17th century "harper" was the basis for Knox's 2014 *Stranger* for viola and *viola d'amore*, which he dedicated to Watras. Knox and Watras collaborate in this traditional-sounding sentimental tune, which is enhanced by bits of *col legno* technique and gentle *pizzicati*. Watras proves her mettle in the swaying, wistful melodies of this piece. One can almost visualize the mist of Ireland hanging over the instruments as they are played.

Watras writes that her *Liquid Voices* (2013), performed by her and Lim, was inspired by the short story, *The Fascination of the Pool*, of Virginia Woolf. Indeed, the ethereal nature of the piece, punctuated by "special effects" of which stringed instruments are capable, gives the work a certain elusive quality; and the half-step-apart dissonances cast the work in a definite modernistic mode. The two players' sounds meld perfectly together - which, as Watras points out in her notes, is a good thing, since they are married.

Lim demonstrates his polished technique and glowing sound in Watras's 2013 violin solo piece, *Luminous Points*. The arpeggios, recalling those in Eugène Ysaÿe's solo sonatas, are executed with flair and gentility, the leaps smooth and effortless, and the left-hand *pizzicati* are impressive. Likewise, Watras's writing and playing in both her *Sonata* and *Photo by Mikel* (2012) for viola solo demonstrate a clear command of the technical capabilities of the instrument. Each of the four movements communicates its own individual emotion, from tenderness to introspection, with thoughtfulness and grace.

The meditative quality of Richard Karpen's 2014 *Bicinium* for violin and viola, composed for Watras and Lim, provides a highly contemplative finale to this varied program. Karpen has proved to be a forward thinking force in the world of computer applications for music composition, yet this piece shows his versatility in more traditional contemporary modes.

Taken individually and together, this collection of works gives the listener a wide range of textures to assimilate and enjoy many times over.