

Washington Uni professor narrates through her viola

By Donald Rosenberg

Melia Watras appears to possess an insatiable curiosity about solo music for her instrument, the viola, which is known best as an ensemble player. On her new disc, Watras serves up an eclectic menu of pieces from the 19th century through several years ago. These “Short Stories,” as the disc is titled, not only present the viola as a charismatic musical voice on a level with its high-flying and usually more extrovert colleague, the violin, but the music also reveals Watras to be an artist of commanding and poetic personality.

The most extended work is Anna Weesner’s *Flexible Parts* for viola and piano (2008), seven brief movements linked by charming and playful thematic ideas that give the musicians opportunities to interact in intriguing ways. Another recent score, Andrew Waggoner’s *Elle s’enfuit* (“She flees”), makes vigorous and menacing use of fugal elements as viola and piano scamper, insinuate and stand momentarily still.

Watras and her superb pianist, Kimberly Russ, invest these scores with plenty of vinegar and honey, and they’re equally compelling in the sweeping, tender and folksy worlds of diverse fare by Rebecca Clarke, Georges Enescu, Quincy Porter, Henryk Wieniawski and Henri Vieuxtemps.

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The viola player has ample time alone in the sun. Watras is as vibrantly alert to mood and detail in Betsy Jolas’s *Episode sixième* as she is to the enterprising rhythmic activity in György Ligeti’s *Loop* and especially, the jazzy inflections and extended techniques that make Dan Visconti’s *Hard-Knock Stomp* such a whimsical delight.