

The Viola in Everybody's Life By Deryk Barker

A simple web search will quickly reveal dozens, if not hundreds, of jokes about the viola. You may even chance upon an academic paper (Carl Rahkonen's "No Laughing Matter: The Viola Joke Cycle as Musicians' Folklore" from the Winter 2000 edition of *Western Folklore*). Clearly the viola is not the most respected of instruments. And yet, as anyone old enough to recall the Avis ads of the 1960s can testify, when you're only number two, you try harder — and the viola is actually, in terms of popularity, number three in the string family; only the double bass has more to prove. I would, however defy anyone who was present in the Phillip T Young Hall on Friday to continue to uphold the notion that the viola is an inferior instrument, certainly not in the hands of a player like Melia Watras.

The gorgeous sounds, clearly audible, of Watras warming up offstage were a harbinger of things to come. From the opening notes of her own Lament, composed for her own father's memorial service last year, it was clear that we were in the presence of a major talent.

Firstly, and defying the conventional wisdom, she produces a huge (perhaps, in acknowledgement of the other events of the day, I should call it "yuuge"), rich tone, which ranged from a whisper to a most impressive fortissimo. The work opened gravely (no pun intended) and became increasingly anguished as it progressed before closing with a quiet gesture which seemed to combine loss with acceptance. Watras played with remarkable intensity, riveting the audience's attention.

Her own *Luminous Points* for solo violin followed, written for and played by Michael Jinsoo Lim. In her programme note Watras writes that she hoped to "imbue the work with his gentle character and *molto dolce* E string playing". I cannot attest to the former, but his playing on his top string was indeed very sweet, with not a hint of the metallic. The music contains several technically challenging moments (such as when the player is required to bow with his right hand and pluck with his left, the kind of thing Sarasate specialised in) which did not seem to be present simply for show and which Lim handled with aplomb. Without the programme note, would I have realised that this piece "began with the image of a mysterious, secret garden" and its night sky? Probably not; but it was enjoyable, superbly played and did not outstay its welcome.

Atar Arad was one of Watras's teachers and his *Esther*, for violin and viola, revealed a distinct stylistic connection. This work was

inspired by Arad's mother, a "woman who could never stop singing: joyful and lively Bulgarian songs...or melancholic, tender, sweet Sephardic tunes". This proved to be a lyrical, almost rhapsodic work, full of nostalgia, but distinctly lacking in anything that sounded (to me, at any rate) like a lively Bulgarian song. Which is not necessarily a criticism; the music was beautifully played with notable rapport between the players.

It was sometime in his early twenties that Paul Hindemith made the switch (some would doubtless say he "saw the light") from playing the violin to the viola, an instrument with which he would be associated for the rest of his life. One of the first signs of this sea change was his Op.11 set of sonatas; it begins with two for violin and piano, then one for cello and piano; then we get two for the viola, one with piano accompaniment, the other for solo viola (Hindemith would go on to compose another four solo viola sonatas).

Watras closed the first half of the recital with the final movement ("in the form and time of a passacaglia") from Op.11 No.5, that first solo viola sonata. The model for the movement was presumably the final chaconne from Bach's second partita and there was a similar stateliness to the Hindemith, which perhaps bolstered the composer's reputation for composing in an academic style, but not that for dryness, for the music — at least in Watras' hands — was florid and engrossing, at times contemplative and lyrical. A performance to leave one wanting to hear the remainder of the work and, indeed, Hindemith's other solo viola sonatas.

The second half opened with the third piece by Watras (and the third whose title began with the letter "L" — significant?): *Liquid Voices*, for violin and viola. Watras' basic concept for the piece, she tells us, is "voices floating on top of each other", which is by no means a bad description of this volatile, attractive piece. That it was beautifully played should, by now, be a given.

The final work on the programme was an undoubted masterpiece: Mozart's Duo K.424. Mozart was, of course, a violist as well as a pianist and already had the Sinfonia Concertante for violin and viola under his belt by the time he composed this duo and its companion, K.423. (Although composed in 1783, they were not published until 1792, the year after Mozart's death.) From its exquisitely poised introduction to its exuberant final coda, both the music and its performance were a perpetual joy. The charming first movement allegro, with its moments of almost Haydnesque playfulness; the delicious

second movement, which I had been about to describe as "all cantabile" before realising, looking at the programme, that Mozart had beaten me to it; and the endlessly inventive theme-and-variations finale, with its perky, almost striding theme and delightful variations: all were imbued with tremendous style, panache and knife-edge ensemble.

Morton Feldman may have written "The Viola in my Life"; I venture to suggest that everybody needs some viola in their life, especially played by Melia Watras.