

Interview: Melia Watras
By Sarah Jeffery

Performer, composer, director... these are terms we tend to pigeon-hole musicians into, but there are a growing number of artists today merrily refusing such limiters and walking their own path. And in doing so, the way we approach classical music both as creators and as an audience is continually refreshed. The Seattle-based violist Melia Watras is such an artist, actively commissioning new repertoire through working closely with composers, as well as writing her own compositions, improvising, producing concert events and recordings. Her latest CD *Ispirare (Sono Luminus)* is available on Primephonic, and features a programme of new works for the viola alongside the music that inspired them.

In this interview, I sat down with Watras (working around the time difference – a Seattle morning coffee alongside an Amsterdam nightfall) for a conversation about inspiration, collaboration, and the future of the viola.

Sarah Jeffery: Maybe we could start from the very beginning; what brought you to music, and what brought you to the viola?

Melia Watras: Well yes, that's way far back! My mother started me on piano when I was five, and then in third grade (I was in a very small school with no music programme) a string quartet came to my school. I thought the viola player was the coolest lady, and I wanted to be just like her. So, I actually started lessons with her. My parents contacted her and we went to a summer camp, where there were many violinists and I was the only violist.

SJ: I was going to ask if she realised the impact that she had, but then she became your teacher, so...

MW: Yes, and she was a lovely person.

SJ: Was it her personality that drew you to the viola?

MW: Definitely at first. I didn't mind that it was something unusual, I was kind of intrigued; why am I the only one playing this beautiful instrument? It fit my personality, you know, whilst the piano didn't fit. The viola was natural, and it was the clear voice for me.

SJ: At what point did you think, okay, I want to study this?

MW: Studying viola... I don't think there was a clear point. I ended up going to a performing arts high school and it was simply what it was going to be. There wasn't a point where I decided, it just was.

SJ: When you're studying music there's this whole huge repertoire you have to get to grips with, to understand all the history. As someone who has come out of this really active in creating new music, how did you find that?

MW: That began very early. I wonder if it's also because viola tends to be in that milieu. We don't have the repertoire that the violin and piano have, though we do have more than some people think. My teachers were composers, my high school teacher and orchestra director, so I have always been around composers. [My teacher] Atar Arad, who has always been my biggest musical influence, also composes. My string quartet started because of a composer. It has always been a part of my life. I have been composing for around four years too, so it's been naturally what happens.

SJ: The position of the viola; on one hand it's part of the orchestra and the string quartet, big institutions in the classical music world. On the other hand, it's not got the whole violin thing going on. I don't want to lead you too much, but where is the line between this freeing, and limiting?

MW: I don't think it's limiting in one bit. I've always found it to be completely freeing. I also feel with viola– in the history of violin playing there have been so many violinists, they can become codified in what makes a great sound. There have also been so many great violists, but they came a little later in history. So we're still at a point where we have many different types of what a great sound can be. In contemporary music that's useful as we can draw on all sorts of expressive tools, and still nothing is like oh, that's a bad sound.

SJ: Nothing is taboo, or banned.

MW: Right! It's a little more open.

SJ: I was interested about your former teacher, Atar Arad; he has written pieces for both your first and fourth CDs. Was it a decision to revisit his works, or do you have an ongoing collaboration?

MW: We have a collaboration that's going all the time. He is such an important part of my musical life, so even though he's not my teacher anymore, he is still my mentor. He's the most amazing violist, and he's still so active in writing more and more unbelievable compositions.

SJ: Was it different working on the fourth CD than the first?

MW: Yes, it was different. It could have been because I was further out of school, and I was exploring things on my own. A different perspective. We have another CD coming out next year, where we're playing his compositions together, and then he's playing a piece that I wrote for him.

SJ: I love this blurring of performer and composer; of course, in earlier times there wasn't so much of distinction between the two.

MW: I'm with you 100%.

SJ: You commission a lot of works, and also develop pieces through a workshopping process with the composer – improvisation, no score. How do you see the ownership of such pieces? Do you have a discussion with the composer about the ownership of the piece?

MW: I've never had a discussion about that, but I think it is present. It could possibly be a difficult thing, though it hasn't yet for me, as I've had a personal relationship with all of the composers that I've worked with. With Shulamit [Ran, on her piece Perfect Storm] it wasn't personal in the beginning as I didn't know her, but it became personal. I think that that dynamic changes from piece to piece. With Richard Karper's piece [Aperture for viola and electronics] I thought, if I'm improvising, how is this your piece? But it truly was, and is, Richard's piece. In my mind it's his language. He simply was guiding me through improvisation to get at what he wanted.

SJ: So, he was setting a guideline, you were providing material, and then you were setting it into a structure, is that about right?

MW: That's right, and then the way he would use the electronics to respond to what I was doing also controlled things, so he was able to get at it from that point too. He could get at the viola and say no, I want it like this, even though he can't play the viola.

SJ: Do you have a general way you usually work with composers?

MW: Every process is a little bit different. It's sort of like chamber music with my colleagues.

It changes with that as well; the personalities have different ways of infecting what happens musically.

SJ: Do you feel a different relationship to a piece that's a score that you received and learned, than one you created yourself through workshops?

MW: Oh yes, most definitely. Either way is fine. But sometimes... I'm thinking of Juan Pampin's piece Nada. It's a gorgeous piece, but if I'd just received that as a score I would have cried [laughs.] It's so intense, so specific with so many different lines, and still so quiet. I might have been overwhelmed, but working with him throughout the process I could understand it exactly, so it never was an overload of information.

SJ: This is a very vague question, but how do you choose the composers you work with?

MW: That's an interesting question, I'm not sure! Well, Shulamit was a little different, it was a gamble. I didn't know her, I simply admired her work and I thought to just try, and I'm so grateful she accepted because it's been so amazing to get to know her. It was the same with my quartet, the Corigliano Quartet - I didn't know [John Corigliano] before we played his piece, so we met him that way. Generally it's people in my life whose work I admire, where there's a personal connection. The musical world is not that big, everybody eventually knows everybody.

SJ: You tend to meet people organically, and think 'let's make a project together'.

MW: Exactly, exactly.

SJ: With a particular project, CD, programme, is it more the people that come first, or the concept for you?

MW: I think generally it's the people who come first, but that isn't the case all the time. It would be an idea together with a person, or a person inspires an idea or a piece... It's definitely the root of people, who they are, some piece we find intriguing, some solution that we want to explore, then a concept, a beginning.

SJ: About your own compositions and that process. I read you are active in improvisation, and working with composers – how has that influenced your own compositional process?

MW: Hugely, improvisation for sure. I guess I've been doing it for 10 years now, and it's composing on the spot. For me it was getting comfortable with that, and then transitioning into

actually writing things down. Working with composers is huge on that point; you can see their processes while you're working with them. Not only their processes in constructing their piece but how they notate the music, how they get their thoughts onto paper, how they communicate ideas.

SJ: Can you describe your own compositional process?

MW: I take inspiration from something specific, either a problem I see musically, or a concept, an emotion, or some feeling that I want to express. Then I spend a long time thinking about what form would best suit this idea. Either that or I might have a person in mind. I often write for myself, but if I write for my husband [violinist Michael Jinsoo Lim], then the piece is going to reflect him very much. I'm a performer, so I think about the performer involved. Then I spend probably the most time thinking about what form would best suit the overall concept, and it goes from there.

SJ: By 'form' you mean the setting, the structure, or the instrumentation?

MW: Mainly the structure. A little bit of instrumentation, but that's usually pretty quickly taken care of by practicalities; does the performer want to play alone or with someone. That's pretty quick, and then it's about movement and time, and the structure within that time.

SJ: Are you recording your own compositions as well?

MW: Yes! On my next CD it's violists/composers. Garth Knox wrote a piece for the two of us, I recorded two of Atar Arad's pieces and he recorded one of mine, and then playing my own compositions with my husband as a duo.

SJ: Another area of your artistic realm, I saw were also performing as a dancer, in the work *At Home* by Kathryn Sullivan.

MW: Yes, that was when I was living in NYC. My younger sister was taking ballet seriously, but it was too late for me, which I think was a good thing as I don't think it was a good fit for me. But I love dance, and so I was taking dance classes in New York with Kathy Sullivan as my teacher. She was making pieces and she knew I played, so she utilised my movement with the viola.

SJ: How was that for you, embracing space and movement?

MW: Oh my gosh, I loved it. I found taking dance really affected my viola playing in a positive way too. On the simple practical level of muscle control, being able to relax while playing, fine tuning those things. Listening to music in a different way, for example having strong beats in the air sometimes!

SJ: So my questions are getting bigger and bigger... In my experience I meet a lot of classical musicians for whom improvising, moving, or dancing is terrifying! I'm interested in how you see yourself within the classical music world, in relation to your colleagues. Both as a viola player, and also as a classical musician?

MW: I think living here in Seattle I'm a little bit removed from the traditional East Coast-centric classical culture here in America. Living out west, there's a sense of freedom and exploration that I really enjoy. I'm a professor, and my colleagues and I teach improvisation, I see it becoming more and more important with many performers. They're embracing improvisation, so I feel like I've seen a shift in the past decade and a half.

I definitely have fondness for my fellow violists. I feel everybody has their own way of contributing to music that's important, and so if someone doesn't improvise, I don't have a problem with that at all. I feel like we're all part of the bigger picture. I agree with you that in the past there wasn't such a gap between the performer and composer, and indeed now the role of performer-composer is coming back around. You really can't exist one without the other. That relationship is so important, so I'm glad there's a lot more activity in that realm.

SJ: In your work as a professor, are you lecturing or teaching the viola?

MW: I teach the viola at the university of Washington, so I'm teaching viola and chamber music. So we do improvisation in my studio class and in lessons. I encourage my students to put improvisation on their recitals, and they're great! It's really amazing with young people who don't have any boundaries of this needs to be this way, it's wonderfully creative.

SJ: How do you feel you stand within the more traditional world? Do you feel that the string quartet world is ready for a musician like you?

MW: Sure! [laughs.] I think there are more and more people like me too, I don't see myself as a lone wolf. In my quartet, Elisa [Barston] is principal 2nd violin of the Seattle Symphony, Amy [Barston] teaches young people as well as her solo career. They don't do as much improv,

but what they bring is insanely good. Then my husband improvises with me. So that group is a mixture, and that dynamic is so important to us all. We're also members of other groups that improvise a lot, with improvised and written works on the same concert. So I think the world definitely is not only ready but is getting there. Like anything, there's good and bad, we'll keep working to make it all good.

SJ: How do your audiences generally react?

MW: People are almost always interested in improvisation. A lot of time they wonder if it was written, not quite believing that it was something we are doing on the spot. But I've never had a negative reaction to improvisation.

SJ: On a programme of composed works, I see you mix big name composers like Berio, Penderecki, with new works.

MW: Yes. That's really important to keep. Especially as a violist, we want to keep the repertoire expanding, and it's our connection to either our community (like Seattle), where you are, or to the musical world as a whole.

SJ: I have a big question: where do you see your legacy?

MW: Oh my! That is a big question! I hope I haven't determined that yet, but I definitely see it in the young people. My mentor Atar is so important for me, so one thing I do with my students is an ancestry chart for music. I can show them how our lineage of teachers goes back to Vivaldi and Corelli; they studied with me, who studied with Atar.... I feel that is extremely important, so if I am part of that chain, that would be great.