

**Q2 Music Album of the Week: Violist Melia Watras Spans Earthy and Luxurious Sounds in 'Ispirare'**  
By Doyle Armbrust

If ass-kicking in classical music could be likened to that of late-80's-to-early-90's action heroes, Melia Watras is a Jean-Claude Van Damme of the viola – which is to say (sonically) muscular in all the right places, elegant in delivery of a solar plexus punch, and lousy with narrative-driving passion. A new recording called "Ispirare" showcases the American violist, who teaches at the University of Washington and as a soloist and member of the Corigliano Quartet has premiered dozens of works for her instrument.

Her mastery is immediately evident in the George Rochberg Sonata which opens the record – a piece that might be charitably called Recital Music™ in its craftiness and Prokofiev-light aimlessness. One can almost smell the stale, reception room cookies and punch in this score, and yet Watras injects these pages with beguiling, long-range phrasing and relentlessly luxurious tone. If and when the zombie apocalypse is upon us, and surgeons are in short supply, wounded listeners would do well to line up for the steady hands of this violist.

The breathy, g-string-prioritized Caprice Four: George by Watras's former teacher and viola magnate Atar Arad may be an homage to

its tracklist predecessor, but fares far better in its economy of means. Our violist Van Damme pulls the furthest reaches of this single-string palette into a cogent transmission before diving into the true revelation of *Ispirare*, Berio's *Black is the color...*, from his *Folk Songs*. Diverging from any previous performance or recording we've ever heard, the unforgettable lyrics here are unmasked through the arrestingly unadorned voice of Atar's progeny, Galia Arad. It is so infrequently that a cemented piece of the literature receives such a transformative reimagining...so we'll be the first to kick in for an all Watras-Arad album Kickstarter.

The overflowing font of creativity known as Shulamit Ran provides the other CD highlight, with her commission, *Perfect Storm*. Unlike the film of the same title, this number is chock-full of nuance, effortlessly moving from sweeping vistas to earthy, foot-stomping tirades. Watras requested the Berio as a point of departure, and Ran departs indeed, bringing her own outbursts of incendiary virtuosity and expansive reflection into the mix. Shulamit tells us she views this recording as "authoritative in the way it settled into Melia's mind and hands," and we couldn't agree more.