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## SEATTLE WEEKLY: REVERB

Wednesday, October 31, 2007

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### Middle Child

By Gavin Borchert

To draw a crowd of a couple hundred for a viola recital (the string choir's neglected middle child), as UW faculty member Melia Watras did last night at Meany Hall, should be counted a success. Opening the evening, and an apropos choice to precede Bach's Sixth Cello Suite (arguably the hardest of the set of six, and transcribing it for viola doesn't make it any easier) was Dan Visconti's brief blues-inflected soliloquy *Traveler's Jam*, a stylization of a country fiddle idiom not far from Bach's stylizations of dance forms. The Bach was notable not just for Watras' fluent negotiations of the suite's intricacies but for the attention-holding tempo and dynamic variety she brought it. Bach left no dynamic indications in his score, so you can basically do what you want, and Watras tried out some pianos and pianissimos that really pulled you in and created a sense of intimacy, even in a space as large as Meany.

Also on the program were two very tasty and well-chosen desserts by Kreisler and Wieniawski, but the beef was Shostakovich's Viola Sonata (played with pianist Kimberly Russ), written in the summer of 1975 just a month or so before he died. Shostakovich's

health was failing, though it's unlikely he intended this as his last piece; still, it's easy to hear the slow third movement as a letting-go, with its quote from Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata. The viola repeats the dotted rhythm, *dum-de-dummm*, sounding very much like a funeral march (or a memory of one, as if humming absent-mindedly to oneself) while the piano takes the serene triplets, which slowly begin to slide all over the place harmonically, losing firm footing. The movement's slow fade is simple as can be, typically reticent (for a composer who'd spent his life, as everyone in Soviet Russia had to, keeping his head down and his true thoughts and feelings undercover) and devastatingly moving: the viola holds a dying low E for several bars while the piano alternates C and G, imitating, it sounds like, muffled timpani. Here and in the following piece by Wieniawski, Watras made a great case for the viola's coloristic range, underexploited (except for its usual rich throatiness) in orchestral and chamber music: silky-sweet in the 1885 *Reverie*, Watras's viola snarled and growled in the Shostakovich sonata's middle Allegretto.