

## Album of the Week: 26 by Melia Watras

By Geoffrey Larson

If you've ever witnessed a live solo or chamber music performance by Melia Watras, you are familiar with the sense of immediacy that her playing involves. It's this immediacy of beautiful tone and hard-charging energy that seizes the listener in her live performances. I was hoping that her new album on Sono Luminus, titled 26 after the total number of strings on instruments played in the recording, would yield the same ear-grabbing experience. On the whole, it does not disappoint.

---

**This is an album that does more than just show off virtuosity: it showcases Melia Watras' bravery as a performer and composer.**

---

The album's selections are all world-premiere recordings of new works of music, the majority of which are Watras' compositions. The program of music here is smart for a couple reasons. First, let's be honest: an album of contemporary viola solos and duets may not be everyone's cup of tea, even fellow musicians. But for those in search of interesting discoveries of great new music and those eager to discover the far reaches of a viola's soloistic capabilities, this album presents a vibrant range of music that refreshingly eschews mainstream-appeal fluffiness. Watras' personal connection to the composers and performers also strengthens the performances immeasurably: her former teacher Atar Arad performs his and Watras' compositions, and she is also joined by her husband, violinist Michael Jinsoo Lim and longtime collaborator Garth Knox on viola d'amore. For these reasons, it definitely deserves a listen.

Watras' compositions on 26 present a style with foundations in improvisation, rounded out with high amounts of technical difficulty. *Liquid Voices*, with its shimmering harmonics, crunching dissonances and angular, Stravinsky-like melodies, was inspired by a Virginia Woolf short story. *Prelude* and *Luminous Points* are both intensely personal portrait-like works, the first inspired by Bach and Watras' relationship with her former teacher and the second by Lim's evocative high playing. *Photo by Mikel is*

possibly the album's most energetic work and sounds especially improv-driven, evoking all sorts of different characters from the instrument.

The Sonata for Viola Solo seems like a real repertoire piece, just jam – packed with musical content that utilizes a huge range on the instrument and some interesting techniques. Though the speed at which ideas move by is occasionally jarring, this is great musical storytelling, and I am left feeling like I've been along with Watras on a real journey of some sort. Its message is slightly uplifting, with the theme of a "timeless positive force" from the second movement returning at the very end in offstage playing.

*Bicinium*, a composition by Watras' UW colleague Richard Karpen, presents two long, winding lines that succeed in creating a lush, enjoyable texture from only two instruments. Lim's violin and Watras' viola are tightly wound together, never resting in this marathon 20-minute composition until the viola gets the last word at the end. The piece's general idea is varied in expressive ways, evoking shifting pastel colors, but this work is straightforward overall, producing no sounds that seem particularly new or different.

The two works by Arad and the one by Garth Knox are more instantly accessible than the other pieces on this release, for better or for worse. In the album-opening *Toccata a la Turk*, I could feel a bit of Brubeck even before I heard the direct *Blue Rondo* reference. The short, fiery variation at the end left me wishing that this brief composition was longer, and took that theme further into Turkish territory. *Esther* contains some of the most lyrical writing on the whole album, and is a wonderful showcase for the richness of Watras' and Arad's viola sounds. Knox's *Stranger* is possibly the album's most tonal work, but not one of simplicity, cycling through some arresting sonic elements that are easy to love and stay with the listener.

The crystal-clear Sono Luminus sound only serves to strengthen the impact of 26. This is an album that does more than just show off virtuosity: it showcases Melia Watras' bravery as a performer and composer, and clearly translates the power of close personal relationships in great chamber music performances. The only thing better would be seeing these musicians perform this program live in person.