

Shulamit Ran: Perfect Storm for viola solo (2010)

Program Notes:

When violist Melia Watras approached me about composing a solo viola piece for her, she presented an idea that added an intriguing extra dimension to this commissioning project. Her hope was to have me create a work that, in some way, alluded to, or made use of, an existing work of my choice from the viola repertoire, enabling both works to be performed side by side.

As I began reviewing, in my head, an imaginary strip of “famous viola licks” (harder to do than with violin or cello...), along with some favorite 19th century music I found myself returning time and again to the central motif, played by viola, from the first song of Luciano Berio’s *Folk Songs* for singer and instruments. This gesture was playing in my mind also through another “filter” – an instrumental ensemble work composed in 1985 by my friend, the Israeli composer Betty Olivero, who was a student and protégé of Berio’s and who made recurring use of that particular fragment in her composition *Presenze*. My memory of her rendition, though quite faint now, seems to have helped etch that lovely little “viola moment” into my mind.

It is always an interesting experience, composing music that aims, from the start, in a pre-determined direction – in this case the Berio motif – yet also aspires to have its own life, quite independently from the source of the quotation.

In the resulting solo viola work I composed for Melia, *Perfect Storm*, the Berio motif serves as a focal point that, once established, is used as a “return” moment and the point of departure for extended new elaborations. The architectural sweep of the piece may suggest to some a “ritornello” form. In addition to the lyricism and sweetness of the opening materials – mine and Berio’s – the landscape covered in the piece includes stretches of music that are intense, dance-like, ferocious, and for a while even suggesting, to its composer at least, “fiddle” playing style.

At the end, I believe that the borrowed materials, the “found object”, is thoroughly integrated into my composition, spawning music not readily suggested by the original point of inspiration, yet obviously enabled by that miraculous alchemy that is part of the process of creating music.

--Shulamit Ran