
THE GATHERING NOTE

Sunday, October 24, 2010

The Five: Melia Watras plays new music by Shulamit Ran

By Zach Carstensen



Melia Watras (photo by Michael Lim)

Just because I can't hear Melia Watras perform on the 25th, doesn't mean you shouldn't. In case you don't know, Watras is one of Seattle's talented crop of violists (a hard instrument to play because of its size.) She teaches at the University of Washington and is 1/4 of the Corigliano Quartet. She's good. And she is performing a recital at Meany Hall on Monday night which pairs contemporary pieces for viola and the works that inspired them. George Rochberg's Viola Sonata along with works by Luciano Berio, Atar Arad (Watras' viola teacher) are on the program as well as others.

One of the main attractions on the program is a brand new work, written for Watras, by the Pulitzer Prize winning composer Shulamit Ran. Watras approached Ran about her idea for a concert program that paired contemporary works with the pieces that inspired them, hoping Ran might be interested in the project. To Watras' delight she was. Inspired by Luciano Berio's folk song *Black is the color*, Ran wrote *Perfect Storm* for solo viola.

The seed for *Perfect Storm* was planted in Ran's mind when she began thinking about famous viola licks. As she says in her program notes for the piece: "harder to do than with violin or cello." The main theme from *Black is the*

color, played on viola stuck. Ran had found her inspiration. Ran uses this theme as both a return moment and a point of departure for the piece's development and architecture. What results is a piece with architectural sweep, and intensity which moves between sweet lyricism to episodes of ferocious music.

In advance of her concert tomorrow night, Melia Watras participated in TGN's series *The Five*.

Zach Carstensen: What piece of music do you identify with as a violist?

Melia Watras: *One thing I love about playing the viola is the process of creating different voices, characters and sound worlds. So, for me, I really identify with variety. Getting to perform a very diverse repertoire is one of my greatest joys. It gives me inspiration to explore different facets of sound.*

ZC: Is there any work that you associate with strong memories?

MW: *One of the most memorable performances for me, so far, was when I was studying at Indiana University. I performed Bach Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 with my teacher Atar Arad. Atar is such a special person to me, and to get to be a soloist alongside someone I admire so much is something that I'll never forget. So, I have strong memories associated with that particular piece.*

ZC: What piece of music would you like to play, but haven't, or like to hear live for that matter, but haven't?

MW: *I'm very interested in playing works that haven't been created yet. I love pushing the frontier of viola music. Of already composed pieces, currently on my radar are Morton Feldman's Rothko Chapel, Berio's Voci, and the Arad Viola Concerto.*

ZC: Are you able to point to a piece of music that changed you as a musician or made you want to play the viola professionally?

MW: *From the first time I picked up a viola, I knew that I was a violist. For some reason, I never questioned this. It just was. I can point to one concert that was pivotal for my musical growth. In college, I performed the Suite by Ernest Bloch and the Rebecca Clarke Sonata on a recital, with Jeremy Denk on piano. It was in this performance that I first experienced the feeling that it was possible for me to eliminate the distance between the artist and the work, and to actually be the work, to inhabit its space. It really changed the way I perform, and what I strive for as a musician.*

ZC: In addition to George Rochberg's Sonata, which I hope you agree should be performed more often, is there another composition that you feel should be played more regularly?

MW: I hope and expect that Shulamit's new piece will be performed regularly and assume its place in the viola repertoire. It's an amazing work, and I know violists everywhere will want to perform this composition from one of our most important composers.

Henri Vieuxtemps has a wonderful sonata for viola and piano that is not often played, but should be. Sometimes we are too quick to dismiss works by virtuoso violinist/composers. Vieuxtemps' viola sonata is a beautiful, lyrical work that audiences enjoy and violists love to play.