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## THE GATHERING NOTE

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### She Flees

By Zach Carstensen

If Gabriela Montero's recital was a demonstration in the long forgotten art of classical improvisation, the night before, violist Melia Watras showed us that music written out on paper can be fresh and seem improvised when she premiered two new pieces for viola and piano and played a series of short works for viola and piano. The premieres were played as part of the violist's recital, "Short Stories," which emphasized brief, mostly 20th Century music.

Watras, one quarter of the Corigliano Quartet, shifted effortlessly between Rebecca Clarke, Gyorgy Ligeti's *Loop*, Joan Tower's *Wild Purple*, Betsy Jolas's - effective but inelegant - *Episode sixième*, and other pieces. Filling the middle of the recital were two world premieres written for Watras - Andrew Waggoner's *Elle s'enfuit* (She Flees) and Anna Weesner's *Flexible Parts*. Watras was also joined by Seattle Symphony pianist Kimberly Russ.

Watras's relationship with Waggoner and Weesner stretches back nearly a decade, to 1999 when the three were in residence at the Summit Institute in Utah. Waggoner wrote *She Flees* after Watras asked for a piece of music that was "over the top." The work is a double fugue, and Waggoner explained, it was the first fugue he wrote after a self imposed separation from the form. Waggoner returned to the form after he heard a violin recital by Christian Tzetzlaff.

Waggoner described the material for the piece as blocks of sound rather than separate melodies. Yet, the melodic material was easy to extract from the overlapping, intertwining voices. Waggoner's galloping material seemed remarkably casual and approachable. The likability of the piece was outdone by Watras and Russ's command of the music. Their interplay was lively and execution superb. Like his one time mentor Joan Tower, Waggoner is part of a new breed of composers who is unafraid of crafting music that immediately appeals to listeners. Despite his divorce from the

fugue, *She Flees*, confirmed that there is still life left in the reliable fugue.

While Waggoner returned to a form he had banished from his compositional vocabulary, Weesner came at *Flexible Parts* differently. After intermission, the soft voiced composer shared with the audience that *Flexible Parts* was much different than her previous works because she normally writes longer pieces. The piece she composed for Watras was made up of seven miniature movements that were Webern-like in their economical use of notes and material. Weesner relied on one idea for each of the first six movements and each movement had a distinctive beginning and ending. It was with the final movement that she combined material from everything that had come previously.

Waggoner and Weesner's new pieces were surprisingly organic. *Flexible Parts* seemed the most spontaneous with the composer's use of fairly simple melodic material, seven digestible parts, and the purposeful interruptions in the piece. Sometimes there were spaces between movements and other times the performer migrated into the next miniature. The spontaneity of the evening was also helped by Watras's own enthusiasm for the music on the program. Watras even seemed to enjoy probing Jolas's study for viola which exhaustively explored the timbral qualities of the viola. She gave shape to the piece's varied sounds.

Large forms might be the norm for classical music - sonatas, concertos, symphonies. But, like with literature, we shouldn't dismiss stories or music, for that matter, which fill only a few pages and a few minutes. Watras, Russ, Waggoner, and Weesner helped the cause of shorter works immensely. Waggoner's double fugue confirmed music can be exciting, intellectually rigorous and brief. For Weesner, shorter can be better even if brevity is outside her own musical paradigm. "Short stories" - whether in print or being told by a viola - can be interesting even when the exposition is succinct.