

Melia Watras: Prelude for cello solo (2014)

World Premiere:

Sæunn Thorsteinsdóttir, cello; June 5, 2016, Seattle, WA

Duration: 3:19

Program Notes:

When I was a student at Indiana University, I had the great honor to study with the renowned violist and composer Atar Arad. I vividly recall a lesson with him where I began with the Prelude from Bach's Third Suite. Atar's concept for this movement was creative, unusual and very personal. I think of it every time I hear or play the piece, and I share it with my students today. Bach's Prelude begins with a simple descending C major scale, which Atar described as a string player gently warming up, a sort of private ritual that we do every day. It then unfolds as a daydream, before returning to the same C major scale to end the movement, bringing us out of the dream state and back into reality, where we began.

I decided to compose a piece for viola solo, dedicated to Atar, with this vision of his in mind; my resulting *Prelude* is an homage to both my dear professor and J.S. Bach. The work opens with long tones on open strings, which is my daily warm-up. In my daydream, influences of Arad and Bach float into the piece. The work focuses on the pitch C (as does Bach's Third Suite), which is emphasized by the use of scordatura tuning in which I ask the violist to tune the D string down to a C. *Prelude* is infused with a 6-note quote from Atar's solo viola sonata. The end of the piece, with its sixteenth-note arpeggio figures, is another nod to the Bach Prelude that sparked the imaginings Atar described to me in his studio in Bloomington, Indiana years ago.

As violists, we borrow the Bach suites from cellists. It seems fitting that cellists could borrow this Bach-inspired piece from violists, so I made this version for them. Thank you to the brilliant cellist Sæunn Thorsteinsdóttir for her insight.

—Melia Watras