

Melia Watras



## OF THE SAME MIND

Melia Watras draws inspiration from fellow violist-composers, and Hindemith is no exception

**P**aul Hindemith's works for viola are important staples in the repertoire of the violist. He is one of many composers throughout history who played the viola (along with Mozart, Dvorak, and Mendelssohn, to

name but a few). Hindemith is a personal inspiration to me, both when I play the viola and when I compose.

About a year ago, I was giving a master class at Indiana University, and the Passacaglia (last movement) from Hindemith's Sonata for Viola Solo, Op. 11, No. 5, was one of the works being played. Having experienced Hindemith's viola works over a long period of time (studying them as a student at Indiana University and teaching them as a professor at the University of Washington), I found it refreshing to look at this work with the additional

perspective of being a composer now as well. It gave me a chance to look at the piece in a new light, and to rediscover how amazing it is.

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Hindemith's Passacaglia  
is powerful, beautiful, and  
transformative.

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**PLAYER** Violist-composer Melia Watras is an accomplished recording artist who has released five albums, while performing on 13 others as a chamber musician. She has appeared in major venues such as Carnegie Hall, Weill Recital Hall, and Alice Tully Hall, and serves as professor of viola at the University of Washington School of Music. Her most recent album, *26*, is available on Sono Luminus.

**TITLE OF WORK BEING STUDIED**  
Sonata for Viola Solo, Op. 11, No. 5

**COMPOSER** Paul Hindemith

**DATE COMPOSED** 1919

**NAME OF EDITION STUDIED**  
Published by Schott Music  
© B. Schott's Söhne, Mainz, 1923  
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I'm studying this sonata in preparation for an upcoming concert by my chamber group Frequency. The program, titled *Bach Refractions*, is a look at different perspectives on Bach, through transcription and improvisation, and through the eyes of other composers. Among other pieces, I'll perform Hindemith's *Passacaglia*, in which you can hear the influence of the famed Bach *Chaconne* for solo violin. There is an improvisational feel to the movement that I love, particularly in its transitions from one variation to another. Like the *Chaconne*, Hindemith's *Passacaglia* is powerful, beautiful, and transformative.

As a performer, it's important to show the audience the structure of the piece. I like to find moods and colors for specific variations, and then look for ways to either elide or delineate them. Performing a Hindemith solo sonata presents many of the same challenges for a performer as playing solo Bach: You need to be aware of voicing, and find a

way to present four-note chords with strength, but always keeping in mind the quality of the sound.

With any piece of music, I like to understand the source as much as possible. From there one can make interpretative decisions armed with information. I asked Judy Tsou, the amazing music librarian at UW, for help in trying to track down the manuscript. She was able to find out that the movements of Op. 11, No. 5, exist in different locations: A facsimile of the first movement can be found in a journal called *Melos* (published in Berlin from 1920–34), while the second and third movements are in the Hindemith Institute in Frankfurt. I have, so far, not been able to track down a manuscript of the fourth movement, but would be interested to hear if any *Strings* readers have any information!

In 1922, one year before the first publication of his Op. 11, No. 5, Hindemith entered into a contract with Schott, and the company became the sole publisher of his works. ■

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