
THE ART MUSIC LOUNGE
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Melia Watras's Far-Out Music
By Lynn René Bayley

Once again, we take a left turn from normality into the world of offbeat music. Melia Watras, born in 1969, is an American violist and composer who works primarily on the fringes of the classical world. Although she has played and recorded the music of J.S. Bach, Zoltán Kodály, Georges Enescu, Rebecca Clarke and Robert Schumann, her main field of performance is in the more modern scores of Atar Arad, Luciano Berio, György Ligeti, Shulamit Ran, Diane Thome, Juan Pampin, and her own works, some of which are the feature of this new recording. She is a member of the string trio Frequency, in which she plays with violinist Michael Jinsoo Lim and cellist Sæunn Thorsteindóttir, and a Professor of Viola at the University of Washington.

The highlight and climax of this particular CD is her theater piece *String Masks*, in which actors pretend to be famous violinists (and one violist) from the past—Josef Gingold, Eugène Ysaÿe, Ginette Neveu, Arcangelo Corelli, William Primrose, Niccolò Paganini and Giuseppe Tartini—and in this work she uses three instruments designed by Harry Partch, the Bass Marimba, Cloud-Chamber Bowls and the Harmonic Canon. The latter is probably the strangest, two resonating boxes with 44 strings across the top which are set in a redwood tray. Bridges are placed under the strings so that they can be re-tuned for each composition; Partch also referred to this instrument as “Castor and Pollux.”

Her string trio, *Kreutzer*, is an homage to Beethoven's ninth violin sonata. It's a very modern piece albeit one in which lyricism is mixed with bitonal harmonies. This is played by Watras and her own string trio, which goes under the name of “Frequency,” and they give it a very impassioned reading. In the first, slow movement, the development is also rather slow-paced yet highly inventive and never mindless or Romantic in style. On the contrary, Frequency's use of a thin, shallow tone (I believe they're also using straight tone) keeps the music sounding a bit edgy at all times, and this edginess comes to the fore in the second movement, “Danza,” the asymmetric rhythm of which never really settles into a dance. In the third movement, another slow one (“Lento”), she extends the harmony from bitonality to atonality and uses many strange rhythmic figures which, though played softly, continue the feeling of edginess, while the fourth and last movement, “Allegro agitato,” uses a great deal of polyphony as the three

strings all play counter-figures against one another. A fascinating piece!

Black Wing, Brown Wing, a solo viola piece played by Watras, is a rather moody piece in line with the opening movement of *Kreutzer*, although the composer states that she based it on her cycle *Firefly Song*. It is a musical tribute to those who have lost loved ones and suffer from the pain of their loss.

The solo vocal piece *Vetur öngum lánar lið*, is based on a poem by the singer's great-grandfather, Bjarni Jónsson. Although a very short piece, it is entirely lyrical and has great feeling. This is followed up by *Vetur* for solo cello which is based on this song. The amazing thing is that the same person, Sæunn Thorsteindóttir, performs both pieces. How rare is it to find a cellist who can also sing? Whereas the song was simple, the cello piece is complex, with some very virtuosic passages in it. At nine minutes, it is certainly much longer than the two-minute song it is based on.

In conclusion, we get a major work by Watras, her three-movement theater piece *String Masks* for voices, violin, viola and three Harry Partch instruments: his Cloud-Chamber Bowls (large Pyrex glasses turned upside-down), Bass Marimba (which looks like 10 or 12 slabs of wood picked up from Channel Lumber, strung together in a marimba shape, and apparently played by croquet mallets) and the Harmonic Canon, two resonating boxes with 44 strings across the top which rest in a redwood tray. Bridges are placed beneath the strings specifically for the tuning of each composition. In addition to these, Watras uses string instruments (violin and viola) playing atonally.

The interesting thing about *String Masks* is that it appears to be partly humorous, a “loving tribute” to these string players but not meant to be taken entirely seriously, and Watras' group has fun with it, though I did find the male actor's lines somewhat pretentious. They put me in mind of the late Ernie Kovacs' spoof of modern poetry, a string of pretentious and inane non-sequiturs titled *Dearth* (“the title alone took me three years!”), but perhaps this in itself was meant to be tongue-in-cheek. The music certainly has a Harry Partch-like feel to it, more a collection of ambient sounds through which one gleans the slow-moving and complex structure. Perhaps the Bass Marimba and viola duet that opens the second movement is the most consistently musical section of the work, and here Watras maintains a surprisingly tonal and lyrical melody for her instrument.

With music this far-out, it made sense that it was released by a label called Planet M Records. Beam me up, Scotty!