

PLANET M
RECORDS

MELIA WATRAS

Firefly Songs



Firefly Songs

Frequency

MICHAEL JINSOO LIM *violin and voice*

MELIA WATRAS *viola and voice*

SÆUNN THORSTEINSDÓTTIR *cello*

ATAR ARAD *voice*

ARTURO ALTO *voice*

CATHERINE CONNORS *voice*

VINA VU VALDÉS *voice*

MELIA WATRAS (b. 1969)

Firefly Songs

for various voices and instruments (2015-2018)

- ① **Mozart Doesn't Live in Seattle** for voice (2017) 1:29
Vina Vu Valdés, voice
- ② **Vetur öngum lánar lið** for violin and cello (2017) 2:52
Michael Jinsoo Lim, violin; Sæunn Thorsteinsdóttir, cello
- ③ **Berceuse** for violin and viola (2015) 2:51
Michael Jinsoo Lim, violin; Melia Watras, viola
- ④ **The Lesson** for recorded voice, violin and viola (2017) 6:09
Aar Arad, recorded voice; Michael Jinsoo Lim, violin; Melia Watras, viola
- ⑤ **Lament** for viola solo (2016) 4:03
Melia Watras, viola
- ⑥ **O. Reverie** for narrator and violin (2018) 4:14
Melia Watras, narrator; Michael Jinsoo Lim, violin
- ⑦ **(one)** for voice(s), viola and cello (2018) 4:17
Michael Jinsoo Lim, voice; Melia Watras, viola; Sæunn Thorsteinsdóttir, cello
- ⑧ **William Wilson** for voice and violin (2016) 3:51
Michael Jinsoo Lim, voice and violin
- ⑨ **Wise Tentacles** for violin and cello (2017) 2:34
Michael Jinsoo Lim, violin; Sæunn Thorsteinsdóttir, cello
- ⑩ **Lontano** for violin and viola (2017) 3:43
Michael Jinsoo Lim, violin; Melia Watras, viola
- ⑪ **Viola** for narrator and viola (2017) 4:10
Arturo Alto, narrator; Melia Watras, viola
- ⑫ **Remembrance of O. Reverie** for violin solo (2018) 0:57
Michael Jinsoo Lim, violin
- ⑬ **Firefly** for voices and cello (2018) 4:03
Melia Watras, voice; Michael Jinsoo Lim, voice; Sæunn Thorsteinsdóttir, cello
- ⑭ **Seeing Cypresses with Catherine C.** for recorded voice (2017) 5:19
Catherine Connors, recorded voice

World premiere recording

Total time = 50:29

Program notes by Melia Watras

FIREFLY SONGS is a collection of pieces about life and connections. Fireflies were a magical part of my youth, providing fantasy and mystery. Each song can be seen as a symbolic firefly. While the stories, artistic influences, and people are interconnected points of light from my personal folklore and perspective, at the root, these compositions celebrate community, and the art and nature in our world that help bind us in shared experiences.

Written from 2015–2018, the thirteen *Firefly Songs* can be performed individually, in different combinations, or as a complete set. As one collective work, the order is based on each song's pitch center, creating a descending chromatic scale, ending in *Seeing Cypresses with Catherine C.*, which has no intended pitch center.

The order when done as a collective piece:

Mozart Doesn't Live in Seattle for voice (2017)

Vetur öngum lánar líð for voice and cello (2016) [or violin and cello, or violin and viola (2017)]

Berceuse with a Singer in London for voice and viola (2015)
[or *Berceuse* for violin and viola (2015)]

The Lesson for recorded voice, violin and viola (2017)

Lament for viola solo (2016)

O. Reverie for narrator and violin (2018)

(*one*) for voice(s), viola and cello (2018)

William Wilson for voice and violin (2016)

Wise Tentacles for violin and cello (2017) [or violin and viola (2017)]

Lontano for violin and viola (2017)

Viola for narrator and viola (2017)

Firefly for voices and cello (2018)

Seeing Cypresses with Catherine C. for recorded voice (2017)

Mozart Doesn't Live in Seattle for voice (2017)

text by Michael Jinsoo Lim

Mozart Doesn't Live in Seattle was written for Miss Vina Vu Valdés, the lovely and talented daughter of my dear friends and fellow Seattle musicians, Cristina Valdés and Cuong Vu. Cristina shared with Mike and me a story about a trip to Salzburg, when a then 4-year old (almost 5) Vina found out that Mozart was from Austria. Somewhat dismayed, she exclaimed, “but Mozart lives in Seattle!”

Vetur öngum lánar lið for violin and cello (2017)

Springing from my friendship with the amazing cellist Sæunn Thorsteinsdóttir, *Vetur öngum lánar lið* (Winter aids no one) found its beginnings with Sæunn's generosity in sharing her feelings about Iceland, her homeland. The work's title comes from a poem by Bjarni Jónsson, Sæunn's great-grandfather. That poem and an additional Jónsson work, *Ævidansinn* (The Dance of a Lifetime) provided the text for the original version of the composition, which I scored for voice and cello.

Berceuse for violin and viola (2015)

Berceuse for violin and viola is an arrangement of *Berceuse with a Singer in London*, which I wrote for the fantastic folk singer Galia Arad. Galia and I share a number of connections, including spending formative years in Bloomington, Indiana, where Galia grew up, and where I went to college, studying viola with Galia's father, the distinguished violist and composer Atar Arad. The piece first took shape while I was practicing the exquisite fourth movement of Schumann's *Märchenbilder*. Galia's singing style was very much in my mind as I composed.

The Lesson for recorded voice, violin and viola (2017)

Anyone who knows me knows how meaningful Atar Arad is to my life. My former professor at Indiana University, Atar inspires me as a performer, composer, teacher and human being. I am grateful to have

been his student, and to be his friend.

The Lesson is an homage to Atar. As a teacher, Atar is second to none. He is a supreme violist and musician who knows what each of his students needs to become better. He delivers words of wisdom and encouragement, often with a touch of his trademark humor. I decided to write a piece that would feature audio clips of Atar's voice (from viola lessons in his studio at Indiana) that would be played back alongside a violinist and a violist performing live.

I travelled to Bloomington in the fall of 2017 and spent two days recording Atar's lessons. As I observed his teaching, I saw remarkable transformations in each student, in just the one hour they spent with Atar. Atar's patience, generosity and relentless pursuit of excellence truly make him a master teacher. Many thanks to Atar and his outstanding students, for allowing me to observe and record their lessons.

No matter how many times I listen to the recordings of Atar's teaching, his words always fill my heart, and put a big smile on my face.

Lament for viola solo (2016)

Lament was written in memory of my father, Joseph Watras, who passed away in 2016 after battling cancer. It is impossible for me to express how much my father meant and continues to mean to me and my music. My dad was a philosophical man, and following his lead, the piece became not only a lament for him, but an expression of a shared sense of mourning that we all feel as part of humanity.

O. Reverie for narrator and violin (2018)

text by O. Henry

O. Henry grabbed my attention the first time I read *The Gift of the Magi* in my junior high English class. After that I couldn't get enough. Who

can resist an O. Henry twist? When I had a weekly commute from New York City to Pennsylvania for a couple of years, time seemed to vanish as I listened to O. Henry audio books in the car.

In *O. Reverie*, I contemplate memory with six of my favorite O. Henry stories (*The Cactus, The Gift of the Magi, The Furnished Room, The Reformation of Calliope, The Dream* and *A Blackjack Bargainer*) and melody. I was considering the way independent lines can seemingly float, stretch, disintegrate, or warp and intermingle in our minds. In addition to being a play on the author's famous pen name, the title of my work references O. Henry's unfinished, final story, *The Dream*, which marked a new direction he planned on taking with his writing before his untimely death.

(one) for voice(s), viola and cello (2018)
text by Michael Jinsoo Lim

soul sewn together through time and place,
intertwining oak and linden.

being, expressive strands of destiny,
binding Baucis and Philemon.

light catapulting reflection,
joining fascination and future.

journey, whispering celestial songs
for Jupiter and Mercury.

William Wilson for voice and violin (2016)
text by Edgar Allan Poe

The arabesque works of Edgar Allan Poe hold a special place in my heart (which generally starts palpitating, or rises to my throat as I read his Gothic tales).

Vivid in my memory is a hot summer evening from my childhood when I was up very late, hours past midnight, reading *The Fall of the House of Usher*. The windows were open, and although the evening was at first calm, as the unreal seemed to become real to Poe's narrator in an accelerating pace, a wind kicked up, blowing over things in its path as it entered my room. It felt as if the book had come to life!

The idea of doubles in music and literature led me to using excerpts from another of Poe's doppelgänger stories, *William Wilson*, as a text for this song, which was written for my kindred spirit, violinist Michael Jinsoo Lim.

Wise Tentacles for violin and cello (2017)

Wise Tentacles

poem by Michael Jinsoo Lim

Infinity arms,
Infinity tentacles,
Kusama, Y not?

Lontano for violin and viola (2017)

size-mology

poem by Michael Jinsoo Lim

my glasses have no lenses
do they make me look good
is a ruler with no markings
just a flat piece of wood

i can't tell time
but maybe it can tell me
what happens to
the half that I can't see

Viola for narrator and viola (2017)

text by Arturo Alto

I composed *Viola* for narrator and viola after coming across a text attributed to Arturo Alto: man of mystery; equal parts legend and enigma. I admit that I know very little about the man himself, but I was able to gain permission from him to use his words for my musical composition. How happy I was that Arturo also agreed to perform as the narrator for the premiere and video of the work!

In *Viola*, I generated some of the pitch material for the viola part using a cryptogram system based on one created by Arthur Honegger. I spelled out words related to the text, as well as variations on the name of Arturo's alter ego (an in-depth analysis of the pitches may reveal the true identity of the subject!). At one point, I reversed the order of the words, so that the narrator speaks the poem backwards (with the permission of Mr. Alto, of course). Arturo Alto would now like to say a few words:

“Arturo Alto, the writer and narrator of the text wishes to offer a disclaimer: NOT A POET. NOT AN ACTOR. A few years ago I had a box full of magnetic words, which I whimsically spread on my fridge door. I then copied the resulting ‘poem,’ and titled it *Viola*—some of my best friends are violists and after all so is my identical twin brother—adding but a very few out-of-the-box words (such as ‘horsehair’—didn’t our viola need a bow?).”

Firefly for voices and cello (2018)

Growing up in the Midwest, fireflies were a source of beauty and wonder on lazy, humid summer nights. Just outside of Bloomington, IN, home of Indiana University (my alma mater), lies Brown County State Park, a favorite destination for nature lovers. One evening on a lakeshore in Brown County, my friends and I were treated to a symphony of fireflies, outlining the horizon of trees, and filling the sky with

their majestic glow. That bewitching vision has stayed with me and still fills me with awe.

Seeing Cypresses with Catherine C. for recorded voice (2017)

text by Virgil, Ovid and Martial

Seeing Cypresses with Catherine C. was inspired by the extraordinary scholar Catherine Connors and her essay *Seeing Cypresses in Virgil*.

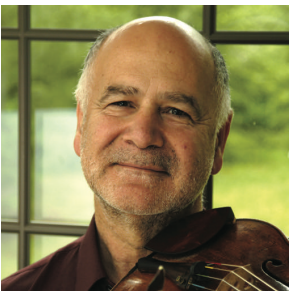
I came to know Catherine, head of the Classics department at the University of Washington, in 2015, after asking her for some assistance with speaking Latin in a piece I was writing at the time that drew from Virgil's *Aeneid*.

Catherine's essay and our conversations excited my imagination and desire to explore ancient worlds, echoes through time and the ancients' thoughts on music. I was taken by their belief that we don't create music, we remember it; it already exists beyond us.

This became a central idea in *Seeing Cypresses with Catherine C.*, in the form of whispering roots: ancient words from poems that helped shape parts of civilization and continue to have a presence today. These "roots" are spoken, *sotto voce*, throughout the length of the piece. The number seven is an important figure in this work, corresponding to the number of strings on Orpheus's lyre. To the ancients, each string represented a different sphere.

The text for this composition was generated from Catherine's essay: from Virgil, Ovid and Martial, as quoted or referred to by Ms. Connors.

Hailed by *Gramophone* as “an artist of commanding and poetic personality” and described as “staggeringly virtuosic” by *The Strad*, violist/composer **MELIA WATRAS** has distinguished herself as one of her instrument’s leading voices. She has released seven albums, while performing on thirteen others as violist of the Corigliano Quartet, an ensemble that she co-founded and toured with for 20 years. Watras has helped expand the viola repertoire, through composing, commissioning and debuting new works. Compositions written for Watras include Shulamit Ran’s solo viola piece *Perfect Storm*, duos by Garth Knox and Cuong Vu, and a viola concerto by Richard Karpén, which Watras premiered with conductor Ludovic Morlot and the Seattle Symphony. As a composer, her works have been performed throughout the United States and in Europe. Her music has been heard on National Public Radio’s *Performance Today* and can be found on Planet M Records and Sono Luminus. She is currently Professor of Viola at the University of Washington School of Music.



Israeli-born violist and composer **ATAR ARAD** is a faculty member at the Jacobs School of Music, Indiana University, Bloomington. A First Prize-winner at the Geneva International Music Competition (1972), he has performed worldwide as a soloist with major orchestras and as a member of the famed Cleveland Quartet. Arad’s compositions include a Solo Sonata for Viola, two String Quartets, a Viola Concerto and more. His *Tikvah* for viola solo was commissioned for the 2008 Munich International Viola Competition by the ARD. *Epitaph*

for cello and string orchestra was written for cellist Gary Hoffman who premiered it in Kronberg, Germany, with the Kremerata Baltica Orchestra. Arad performed and presented his Twelve Caprices for Viola on several USA, Canada, Israel and European concert tours. Atar Arad is a recipient of the American Viola Society's Career Achievement Award and the International Viola Society's Silver Alto Clef 2018 "in recognition for his outstanding contributions to the to the viola."

CATHERINE CONNORS is Professor in the Department of Classics at the University of Washington, which she joined in 1990. Her courses in Latin and Ancient Greek and in Greek and Roman literature and culture encourage students to develop their own intellectual and artistic responses to the stories, ideas and events of classical antiquity. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan and her research projects explore representations of nature and geography in Greek and Roman literature, the study of women's experiences in Greek and Roman antiquity, and the ways that people have responded to classical Greek and Roman texts over the centuries since they were created. Along with Cindy Clendenon she is author of "Mapping Tartaros: Observation, Inference, and Belief in Ancient Greek and Roman Accounts of Karst Terrain," *Classical Antiquity* 35.2 (2016), 147-188, an interdisciplinary study of the geological context of ancient narratives of journeys to the underworld.



A "dream string trio," according to King FM-Seattle's Second Inversion, **Frequency** is composed of Michael Jinsoo Lim (violinist and artistic director), Melia Watras (violinist) and Sæunn Thorsteinsdóttir (cellist). Frequency is a modular chamber music group, breaking into different parts to present solos, duos and trios, while also expanding with renowned guest artists to perform in a variety of formations.



Ensemble members have performed as soloists and chamber musicians worldwide, in leading concert halls such as Carnegie Hall, Alice Tully Hall, Weill Recital Hall, Suntory Hall, and Disney Hall.

Violinist **MICHAEL JINSOO LIM** has been praised by *Gramophone* for playing with “delicious abandon,” and lauded by the *Los Angeles Times* as a “conspicuously accomplished champion of contemporary music.” Concertmaster and solo violinist for the internationally acclaimed Pacific Northwest Ballet, Lim is featured as soloist with the company in concertos by Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Bach and others, and has toured with PNB to Paris and New York City. For two decades, Lim performed with the Corigliano Quartet, a group he co-founded and with whom he appears on over a dozen albums. Among the final pupils of the legendary Josef Gingold at Indiana University, Lim has served on the faculty of the Banff Centre, taught at Indiana University as a guest professor, and currently serves on the faculty of Cornish College of the Arts. Please visit www.michaeljinsoolim.com for more information.

Icelandic-American cellist **SÆUNN THORSTEINSDÓTTIR** enjoys a varied career as a performer, collaborator and teaching artist. She has appeared as soloist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchester, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Seattle Symphony, Toronto Symphony Orchestra and Iceland Symphony, among others. Her recital and chamber music performances have taken her across the US, Europe and Asia. Sæunn has performed in many of the world’s prestigious halls including Carnegie Hall, Suntory Hall, Elbphilharmonie, Barbican Center and Disney Hall. The press has described her as “charismatic” and



“riveting” (*New York Times*) and praised her performances for their “emotional intensity” (*Los Angeles Times*). Born in Reykjavík, Iceland, Sæunn serves on the faculty of the University of Washington in Seattle, teaching cello and chamber music. For more information, please visit www.saeunn.com

Seattle native **VINA VU VALDÉS** has been playing the cello since age 7, and singing and playing the piano almost from day one. She attends The Meridian School, and enjoys ballet, reading, skiing, and pogo-sticking. Her favorite food, unequivocally, is broccoli. As of now, future plans may include acting, being a veterinarian, teaching arithmetic, and/or becoming the President of the United States.



Recorded June 19, 21 and 22, 2019 at Bastyr Chapel, Bastyr University, Kenmore, WA, except *Mozart Doesn't Live in Seattle* and *Seeing Cypresses with Catherine C.* recorded by Doug Niemela.

Producer: Judith Sherman

Engineer: David Sabee

Engineering assistant: Dave West

Editing: Judith Sherman and Jeanne Velonis

Editing of vocal tracks on *The Lesson*: Doug Niemela

Photography: Michelle Smith-Lewis (cover, back, inside panels; Watras, p. 10; Lim, p. 12), Hideki Isoda (Arad, p. 10), Emily Hinds (p. 11), Lisa-Marie Mazzucco (Thorsteinsdóttir, p. 12), Cristina Valdés (p. 13)

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