

Melia Watras's Play/Write Looks Toward a Musical Future

By Erica Miner

Composer and violist *extraordinaire* Melia Watras seems limitless in her creativity, constantly generating new and unique material. Her new album, *Play/Write* showcases her many facets as both a writer and performer of new music. Always innovative, the Seattle-based Watras utilizes her partnerships with writers, poets and other composers and musicians to portray the joy that is generated when words and music coalesce. The entire effect is one of spirituality and introspection that enables the listener at once to concentrate deeply yet take their consciousness to a meditative level.

Included in this joint effort are luminaries of the Seattle music world: Sheila Daniels, narrator; Leilehua Lanzilotti, composer; Rachel Lee Priday, violin; Michael Jinsoo Lim, violin; Herbert Woodward Martin, voice/poet; Valérie Muzzolini, harp; James Pritchett, writer; David Alexander Rahbee, conductor; Carrie Henneman Shaw, voice; Frances White, composer; and the Brazen butterfly ensemble.

The CD is “a reflection of my work as a violist and a composer (one who wields both bow and pen!) and the joy that exists in the overlap between words and music,” says Watras.

All of the compositions, those covered here and others that appear on the CD, are well thought out, beautifully performed and show a great deal of understanding of the nature of the instruments and the human voice, both by the composer and by the artists. A number of pieces are world premiere recordings.

5 Poems of Herbert Woodward Martin for narrator, violin and viola (2021) stems from the composer's long-standing relationship with poet and scholar Martin, an associate of her father. Thus, *Song: An Endless Flight* for narrator, violin and viola has special significance for Watras. Her setting of this poem and others of Martin evokes a bright, optimistically sunny outlook, with a perfect balance between the words and the obbligato-like violin and viola: light, airy, and pleasant to listen to, the piece evokes sunniness and pleasant meditations.

Watras introduces *A brazen butterfly alights* (2021) with a monologue of great depth to which is added harp and other strings. A fairy-like fantasy, it is reminiscent of Ravel's *Introduction and Allegro* in its orchestration and atmosphere. The harp effects are striking and beautifully played. Another Watras composition, *Echo*, features a cadenza-like violin solo that gently transports the listener

to other worlds with its improvisatory character and captures the essence of what makes the violin the most multifaceted of instruments.

Roses are the theme for *As night falls* for violin, viola narrator and electronic sound (2012) by Frances White and James Pritchett. Written for Watras and her violinist husband Michael Jinsoo Lim, the piece stands out for its captivating ambiance describing a charming and unique love story told from the woman's point of view. The dialogue is interspersed with arpeggios that evoke the ever-changing nature of relationships and morphs into a background for the narrator's introspection, along with the echoes of the male voice and crashing surf.

The multitalented Lim wrote the poem that is the basis for *Weeping Pendula* (2021) for voice and loop pedal:

Weeping Pendula
Reaching to the ground
Asking to be found.
Casting penumbra,
Waiting to be crowned.

The music Watras writes for this poem is otherworldly; minimalist, yet full of special vocal effects that take the listener on a journey to a far-off place.

The title of Native Hawaiian composer/sound artist Leilehua Lanzilotti's *to be two* for violin and viola (2021), also written for Watras and Lim, is taken from the book by philosopher/linguist Luce Irigaray. The instruments utilize fluttering, strumming and arpeggiated passages to create an atmosphere that reveals a duality between mysticism and reality. Irigaray writes:

“Thanks to perception, we can become, the one for the other, a bridge towards a becoming which is yours, mine, and ours...While I become me, I remember you.”

A 2022 Pulitzer Prize in Music finalist, Lanzilotti uses what is called “radical indigenous contemporaneity” to explore new paths in timbre. As the finale to the entire collection, the piece ends with an arpeggiated passage on open strings, trailing off into the beyond.

Watras and her colleagues have created an unusual spectrum with *Play/Write*. There is much to unpack here in the way of unique sounds, colors and vibrations, giving the listener insight into musical possibilities that look into the future.