

# Journal of the American Viola Society

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## Features:

2021 Dalton Competition Winner: *“To Christabel”*

Xian Shi: An Oriental Poem for Viola

Anna Bon di Venezia



# Concentric and Intersecting Circles of Connection: Two Compositions for Viola Solo

by Melia Watras

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the start of my journey as a composer.

In looking back at my work, I find that my pieces come from a place that is deeply rooted in community. They are my musical way of exploring shared perspectives and experiences, and honoring the way these concentric and intersecting circles of connection ripple out from the artistic influences, people, and nature in our world.

In my career as a performer, new music has always played a starring role: from my time as co-founder and violist of the Corigliano Quartet (named after celebrated American composer John Corigliano) to my work as a solo and recording artist and professor of viola at the University of Washington. It was a natural evolution of my musical path to add a slash and the word “composer” to the title “violist.”

My first compositions were for solo viola. Since then, I have written for violin, cello, string trio, string quartet, voice, piano, percussion, accordion, viola and harp with string orchestra, and three of the Harry Partch instruments. I am eternally grateful to the performers that have graced my works with their artistry. I have returned to composing for solo viola on several occasions, including the two pieces that are being presented here: *Prelude* for viola solo (2014) and *Black wing, brown wing* for viola solo (2019).

*Prelude* was written with two important figures in mind: Atar Arad and J.S. Bach. A renowned violist, Atar is my former viola professor at Indiana University and a mentor, who I am proud to call a friend. Atar has been a role model to me throughout my education and career. Seeing Atar compose his own works, and the excitement

of performing his pieces, had a profound influence on my decision to begin writing.

I cherished my lessons with Atar. At one of them, I began with the Prelude from Bach’s Third Suite. Atar told me his creative and unusual concept for the piece—which I share with my students even today as well as in program notes to the piece:

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 at the end of the movement, bringing us out of the dream state and back into reality, where we began.<sup>1</sup>

*Prelude* is dedicated to Atar and is an homage to both him and Bach. My work focuses on the pitch C, as does Bach’s Third Suite. To emphasize this, I use scordatura tuning, having the violist lower their D string a whole step to a C, giving them two C strings and creating powerful sympathetic vibrations.

With Atar’s beautiful image of the Bach Prelude in mind, I begin *Prelude* with my own daily warm-up: long tones on open strings. Scales, beginning in bar 2, signal an escape from reality. As the daydream reveals itself, I insert a six-note quote from Atar’s Sonata for viola solo (1992) in various ways. This quote, which I will call the “Arad theme,” first appears in bar 5, in its original form: C, D, E-flat, D-flat, D, E-flat.

Example 1. Melia Watras, *Prelude*, m. 5.

This final fantasy is an obsession with Bach's very famous bariolage, and his bowing pattern of three notes slurred and one note separated—used in his Prelude. We are left with the dreamer returning to reality in the final measure, and the return of the open string long tones.

What a gift to have Atar as the violist in the world premiere recording of *Prelude* on my album, 26.

The Arad theme is then the foundation for the coming measures. To point out one of the ways I incorporate it, in bars 8 and 9, I intertwine the Arad theme in prime with its inversion. The bass line is in the inversion (starting on beat two: B, A, Ab, Bb, A, Ab), and the soprano is in prime (starting on the second note of the triplet of beat two: Db, Eb, E, D, Eb, E). The Arad theme continues to float throughout the reverie until a retrograde of the opening scales return in bars 20-23 to drive to the finale, the *Largamente*, a dream within a dream.

*Black wing, brown wing* came about from collaborations with my dear friend Sheila Daniels, theater director and teacher, who is an integral part of the Seattle theater world. I first met Sheila in 2007, and since then, we have joyfully found many projects on which to join forces. A few of these include Sheila's use of music from two of my albums for plays that she directed: *Viola Solo* (for *Crime and Punishment*) and *Prestidigitation* (for *The Diviners*). In turn, she has lent her directorial prowess, and voice in performance and recording of my work, *String Masks* for voices, violin, viola, Harmonic Canon, Cloud-Chamber Bowls, and Bass Marimba (2017). We are currently

Example 2. Melia Watras, *Prelude*, mm. 7-10  
(*Suoni Reali* top line, *Tasto* lower line).

Example 3. Melia Watras, *Prelude*, mm. 23-25  
(*Suoni Reali* top line, *Tasto* lower line).



Atar Arad (left) and Melia Watras (right) in performance.  
Photo credit: Geoffrey Wong.

focused on recording her narration for *As night falls* by Frances White that was written for my husband, violinist Michael Jinsoo Lim, and me; additionally, I'm providing music for a documentary Sheila is making titled, *Hidden Bodies: Stereotyping and Shaming of the Femme Body in American Theatre*.



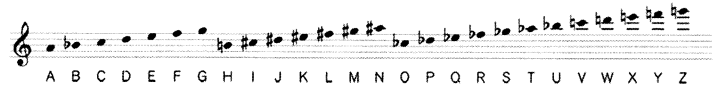
Sheila Daniels, Michael Jinsoo Lim, and Melia Watras (from left to right) in performance.  
Photo credit: Michelle Smith-Lewis.

*Black wing, brown wing* is based on Joan Didion's play *The Year of Magical Thinking*, which chronicles the author's experiences in enduring the tragic deaths of her husband John Gregory Dunne in 2003, and daughter Quintana Roo Dunne in 2005. To give my piece a quasi-stream of conscious feeling—to reflect Didion's work—I oscillate between, and blend, five recurring elements.

Didion writes, "Life changes fast. Life changes in the instant."<sup>2</sup> I took the letters from this quote and translated them into musical notes, using Arthur Honegger's cryptogram system. Improvising on these pitches, I

created the material that would be used in the opening and throughout the piece.

*Example 4: Honegger's cryptogram.*



The "vortex effect" is how Didion describes her paralyzing memories, in the aftermath of her husband's death and during her daughter's illness, brought on by everyday happenings. To evoke this, I use quotes from my work *Firefly Songs* for various voices and instruments (2015-2018), which represent my own musical memories. Songs from this cycle that are quoted are *Berceuse*, *Lontano*, *Firefly*, and *Mozart Doesn't Live in Seattle*. One can find this material throughout the work easily as it generally appears with a pedal tone or in ponticello.

*The Year of Magical Thinking* uses symbolism of eyes and waves. For Didion, her husband John's eyes represented his soul, and she used waves to reference the ebb and flow of emotions one experiences through grief, as well as the constant change that is life. I use fermatas as a visual representation of eyes in my score and depict the waves through arpeggios.

T. S. Eliot's poem "New Hampshire" (from *Landscapes*) held deep meaning for Didion and her daughter; Didion read the poem, as well as one by Wallace Stevens, at Quintana's funeral. In her book, *Blue Nights*, Didion writes:

I read the poems by Wallace Stevens and T.S. Eliot, "Domination of Black" and "New Hampshire," with which I had put her to sleep when she was a baby. "Do the peacocks," she would say once she could talk. "Do the peacocks," or "do the apple trees."

"Domination of Black" had peacocks in it. "New Hampshire" had apple trees in it.

I think of "Domination of Black" every time I see the peacocks at St. John the Divine.

I did the peacocks that day at St. Vincent Ferrer. I did the apple trees.<sup>3</sup>

Beginning at the *molto parlando*, the solo violist "recites" "New Hampshire," playing in the rhythms and cadences of Eliot's words. While this recitation ends the piece, it

is foreshadowed throughout, making its first appearance in the opening material, the *mf* in line 3. The title, *Black wing, brown wing*, comes from a line in this T.S. Eliot poem. Eliot's poem is below:

Children's voices in the orchard  
Between the blossom- and the fruit-time:  
Golden head, crimson head,  
Between the green tip and the root.  
Black wing, brown wing, hover over;  
Twenty years and the spring is over;  
To-day grieves, to-morrow grieves,  
Cover me over, light-in-leaves;  
Golden head, black wing,  
Cling, swing,  
Spring, sing,  
Swing up into the apple-tree ... <sup>4</sup>

I'm always looking for ways to connect with audiences by bringing new pieces of music to the stage and as a violist, I've been lucky to work with many fabulous composers; now, as a composer myself, I'm thrilled to have the opportunity to contribute to our ever-growing viola repertoire, to have the honor of artists performing my works, and to write music that is for and from a community forged by artistic experiences and meaningful relationships.

—Melia Watras

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Melia Watras, program notes for *Prelude*, <https://www.meliawatras.com/prelude>.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (Vintage Books, 2007), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Joan Didion, *Blue Nights* (Vintage Books, 2012), 163.

<sup>4</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (Harcourt Brace, 1963), 138.

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