

REMEMBERING
SIR NEVILLE MARRINER

HOW WOOD GRAIN
AFFECTS TONE

ANNE AKIKO MEYERS'
NEW 'FANTASIA'

STRINGS

CHARGAUX
FINDS SUCCESS
IN SOUND
AND STYLE

MELIA WATRAS
THROWS A
VIOLA PARTY

DETECTIVE STORY:
WHO MADE THIS
MYSTERY VIOLIN?

THE ENDURING GLORY OF G.B. GUADAGNINI

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VIOLA PARTY

MELIA WATRAS ON
THE JOYS OF RECORDING
WITH FRIENDS, AND
HEARING YOUR OWN
WORKS COME TO LIFE

Melia Watras and her mentor Atar Arad

I owe a lot to Atar Arad. My beloved viola teacher when I was a student at Indiana University, Atar has had a profound influence on me, as a musician and as a person. He always pushed me to explore, to search for something deeper, to ask more from myself and from those around me.

Of the many memorable experiences I had at IU, performing the world premiere of Atar Arad's String Quartet had a particularly lasting effect. One of his first compositions, the quartet is intelligent, emotional, and idiomatic. It challenges the performers, and his intimate knowledge of the workings of stringed instruments allows the piece to go deeper, for performer and listener alike. It made me keenly aware of the potential that performers with knowledge and curiosity have as composers. It was a lesson I haven't forgotten.

Over the past five years, I've been bitten by the composing bug myself (admittedly trying to fulfill my goal of being like my hero Atar when I grew up). I decided to put together an album of music—including some of my own—that gave me the same sense of excitement that Atar's quartet had many years ago: the thrilling sound and feel of pieces written from a performer's point of view.

As the project took form, it became centered around violists sharing their

compositions with each other: a kind of viola party to which I invited friends and heroes, from both within and outside the realm of alto clef. These included Garth Knox on viola d'amore, violinist Michael Jinsoo Lim (my closest musical collaborator—and husband!), composer Richard Karpen, producer Judith Sherman, and of course, Atar Arad. I called the album *26*, the title drawn from the collective number of strings on the instruments used: two violas, one violin, and the viola d'amore, which has 14 strings (seven played and seven sympathetic).

COMPOSER COLLABORATORS

Performing with Atar is always special for me. We've played together on the Brandenburg Concerto No. 6, performed duos here and there, and Atar has collaborated as a guest artist with the Corigliano Quartet (the ensemble I co-founded with my husband Mike 20 years ago). For *26*, we recorded two of his duo pieces, *Esther* and *Toccatina a la Turk*, and Atar does me the honor of performing my solo piece *Prelude*, which he inspired.

In one of my lessons with Atar many years ago, I began with the *Prelude* from J.S. Bach's Third Suite, and was taken with Atar's creative and personal concept of the piece. Bach begins with a simple scale, which Atar described as a string player warming up; the movement then unfolds as a daydream

before returning to the same scale at the end, leaving the dream state and returning to reality, where we began. I decided to compose a solo viola piece, dedicated to Atar, with his vision in mind. My resulting *Prelude* is an homage to both Atar and Bach.

My first exposure to the playing of Garth Knox was hearing recordings of his work as violist of the Arditti Quartet. When he embarked on his solo career, I became fascinated with his recordings of extraordinary repertoire, played with virtuosity and understanding. I finally met and worked with Garth when he visited the University of Washington, where I teach, and I've since had the pleasure of performing with him on a number of occasions, including a memorably sweltering summer evening performance at the Stone in Brooklyn, and a video shoot of us playing his duos, *Viola Spaces for Two*.

The piece he wrote for us to play on *26* is *Stranger* for viola and viola d'amore—an instrument I had never played alongside before. I loved its timbre, and the experience of experimenting with ways to blend and contrast with it.

Our recording of *Stranger* was a natural outgrowth of our previous work together. Over the past few years, I've grown familiar with Garth's compositional language, and have been grateful to personally experience his inventive and expressive ways of looking at viola technique.

I met Richard Karpen when I was interviewing for the viola professor position at UW. He is a digital-arts pioneer, and his creativity and experimental nature captured my attention immediately. Mike and I were thrilled when he agreed to compose a duo for us, *Bicinium*, to play on *26*. While Richard is known for his work with computers (I recorded his work *Aperture* for viola and computer-realized sound on an earlier disc), *Bicinium* is decidedly unplugged. It's an expressive work that flows in an improvisational way, and meshes the violin and viola beautifully.

I know I may be biased, but I think Mike is one of the most beautiful violinists, and I wrote my solo violin piece, *Luminous Points*, for him, with his character and playing firmly in my mind. As a string-playing married couple, we've come to know each other's playing quite intimately—you get to know your partner's strengths in music, and in life.



GEOFFREY WONG

Watras with Cuong Vu and Judith Sherman



MIKE LIM

THE IMPORTANCE OF A GREAT PRODUCER

I was so lucky to collaborate on this project with the amazing Judith Sherman. Judy is the best. Months in advance, I sent her live concert recordings and scores of the pieces we were to record. She is always prepared for recording sessions, and comes in with a thorough understanding of the music, and what you are trying to express. Her knowledge of acoustics and microphones guides us toward the best possible set up. During the recording, I depend on Judy's ears—the way things sound coming through the microphones can be quite different from the way it sounds to your own ears as you perform. She is simply an exceptional musician who knows great sound, and how to get it.

He also plays with me on my duo piece *Liquid Voices*, a programmatic work influenced by Virginia Woolf's short story, *The Fascination of the Pool*. Woolf is an artist I have long admired, and as I read her story for the first time, I was struck by how musical and powerful it is. She is expressive in a very personal way, reaching far within the reader. I searched for these qualities while I was writing the duo.

I also performed my solo viola sonata, and my solo viola piece *Photo by Mikel*, both influenced by photography. The solo sonata has a sort of inward feeling, examining emotional states, and is based in part on the time I spent as a young child growing up in West Virginia. In the first movement, I include a quote from the Appalachian folk song "O Death," an example of the type of music that was part of my experience there. My father, an amateur photographer, took many beautiful photographs that captured that time and place in our lives. Another photo that influenced my work was taken by my cousin Mikel, a wonderful artist. Her shot of an

olive grove in Turkey inspired *Photo by Mikel*. As a composer, my hope is to create a vivid world for the listener that has depth and emotional value. I want to connect with the audience on a shared journey, tapping into experiences and feelings that we share. I'm hopeful that music can play a part in helping us look at the world in a different way.

THE PERKS OF BEING A PERFORMER/COMPOSER

As a performer, working on the music of Atar, Garth, and Richard for this album was a joy. They are all tremendous musicians, and all very different. Artistically, I'm drawn to variety, and like the wide range of styles and sounds represented here. I hope it gives those who listen to *26* a fulfilling experience.

As a composer, I was thrilled to have such amazing performers playing my works. When you have artists of that level playing your music, they find the meaning and center of a piece and bring it out instinctively. There is a beautiful artistic richness that comes from performers bringing their own

concepts of the work into the mix. Collaborating with people whom you can trust musically—and who trust you in return—is the experience musicians are all searching for. It makes the work flow with no fear and no boundaries.

And so I'm finding more opportunities to extend this "viola party" into the rest of my performing career. I'm composing for my new chamber-music ensemble Frequency, in which I play viola with Mike and the wonderful cellist Sæunn Thorsteinsdóttir. And my next CD, *Schumann Resonances*, will feature more of my pieces, in addition to works from composers as varied as Schumann and jazz innovator Cuong Vu.

26 is the first album I've made that includes my own compositions, and the experience has strengthened my commitment to composing, and gives me a chance to see my pieces in a new light. More and more, I'm adding a slash and the word "composer" to my previous title of "violinist." And I'm loving it!

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26 is available on Sono Luminus.