

Review: Melia Watras – Schumann Resonances
By Ron Schepper

Melia Watras's *Schumann Resonances* impresses on so many levels, it could function as a prototype for all artists aspiring to make an ambitious solo statement. At its core, it features a powerful reading of Schumann's *Märchenbilder* (*Pictures from Fairyland*), Op. 113 by her and pianist Winston Choi. But in place of a full album of Schumann material, the recording builds on that foundation with world premiere recordings of works by Cuong Vu, Richard Karpen, and Watras herself, the result a recording of considerable imagination and accomplishment. The singular guideline she set for the new material was that Schumann's composition be treated as a point of departure or inspiration. In coupling the *Märchenbilder* with duet settings that pair viola with Vu's trumpet (*Porch Music*) and folk singer Galia Arad (*Berceuse with a Singer in London*), *Schumann Resonances* achieves a remarkable degree of, well, resonance.

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The sequencing of the album's six settings is also effective, with Watras choosing to precede *Märchenbilder* with a self-penned piece and interesting contrasts appearing thereafter. A vaguely mysterious quality shadows the five-minute intro, which is intensified by the startling accents Choi generates from the piano's insides. Schumann's four-movement work immediately disarms with the elegance of its romantic melodies and lilt, Choi and Watras combining to give lyrical voice to the opening "Nicht schnell." Sprightly by comparison, "Lebhaft" exudes a joyous, dance-like spirit, while the dramatic "Rasch" is as animated. It's the closing "Langsam, mit melancholischem Ausdruck" movement, however, that resonates most

memorably for the lullaby-styled beauty of its expressive outpourings.

The title of Vu's piece acknowledges the folk dimension that's central to *Porch Music*, the trumpeter having determined at the outset to integrate improvisation into the piece and write his own version of a folk song that would be the seed from which the playing would blossom. Consistent with the desired tone of the work, Watras's playing exudes a fiddle-like quality that's worlds removed from the classicism of her Schumann playing, and a laid-back, even woozy spirit infuses the duo's performance. All such details aside, the thing that recommends the performance most is the pleasure derived from hearing Vu's trumpet communing with the leader's viola.

Inspired by the fairy tale dimension of *Märchenbilder*, Watras composed her five-movement *Source*, on which she's joined by percussionist Matthew Kocmierski and violinist Michael Jinsoo Lim, with women characters in mind. The hand percussion that opens "Creusa" immediately sets *Source* apart from the album's other pieces; also distinguishing the movement, titled after Creusa, the first wife of Aeneas in *The Aeneid*, is the brief inclusion of lines from the text spoken in Latin. Kocmierski's prominent on "Grandmother Spider" too, his ghostly marimba instrumental in establishing a cryptic mood. The folk element so much a part of *Porch Music* re-surfaces for the central part "Lass: Variations on a Theme by John Jacob Niles," improvisation present here also in the thoughtful, explorative dialogue between Watras and Kocmierski. *Source* culminates with "Rawiya," an Arabic word meaning "she who tells stories," and with hand drums accompanying melismatic strings, the movement does, in fact, imbue the material with a vaguely Middle Eastern character.

Shifting gears dramatically, Watras's *Berceuse with a Singer in London* follows, with Arad singing lines written by Lim and the haunting setting providing an arresting if brief excursion into folk territory. No less

dramatic is Karpen's *Tertium Quid*, whose three parts (each one about seven minutes long) pair Watras with Lim and Choi. Noticeably more dissonant than anything else on the release, its urgent opening movement barrels forth with locomotive intent, the collision of the instruments' pitches destabilizing in effect. The pace slows for the second, but its tone is no less foreboding than the first, and the third roils at a similarly intense level. Karpen himself describes each movement in the work, certainly the darkest and most contemporary-sounding of the six featured, as "perhaps a version of an archetypal dream."

Throughout the almost eighty-minute recording, Watras's virtuosic command of her instrument is fully evident, especially when it presents her in duo and trio settings. Of greater significance, however, is the fact that in combining works of such diverse character, she's produced a collection of remarkable stylistic breadth and daring.