

Review: Rose Wollman – LOOP: Ligeti’s Inspiration and Legacy

The word brilliant should never be thrown around casually, yet it comes naturally to mind when presented with the conceptual strategy Rose Wollman adopted for *LOOP*. Rather than simply couple Ligeti's *Sonata for Viola Solo* (1991-94) with other composers' works, she decided to bookend each of its six movements with a baroque piece and a newly commissioned one that draws inspiration from its baroque-Ligeti pairing. In presenting the fifty-five-minute release as a set of six triptychs, Wollman has devised an uncommonly original way for the Ligeti sonata to be experienced in a way it never has been before. It's safe to say no other project arriving in 2023 to celebrate the centenary of the Hungarian-Austrian composer's birth will do so as imaginatively.

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Of course presenting the work in such a staggered form means it's not heard straight-through, but that's a small price to pay when Wollman's innovative treatment is so rewarding. The concept didn't arise out of thin air. Instead, when she immersed herself in Ligeti's sonata during the pandemic, she recognized that as modern in its harmonic language as his music is, it's also strongly influenced by the past and particularly music of the baroque era—that the *Sonata for Viola Solo* includes both a chaconne and passacaglia suggests as much. That prompted her to consider precursor pieces that would work well as lead-ins; subsequent to that, the decision to commission companion pieces for each of the baroque-Ligeti sets crystallized.

On the baroque side, *LOOP* includes material by J. S. Bach, Tartini, Gabrielli, Corelli, Telemann, and Biber; on the other are contemporary composers Garth Knox, Alexander Mansour, Atar Arad, Melia Watras, Natalie Williams, and Wollman

herself. Naturally, the greatest degree of contrast emerges between the baroque pieces and the two other sets when each of the new works has been created as an outgrowth of the others in its triptych.

The stately “Prelude” from Bach's *Cello Suite No. 5* makes for an arresting start, especially when Wollman's command of the material and her instrument is so assured. We witness early on the effectiveness of her programming when the Bach prelude segues seamlessly into the first movement of Ligeti's sonata, “Hora lunga,” a plaintive meditation played entirely on the viola's C string and described by the composer as an evocation of the spirit of Romanian folk music. With his own haunting setting *Ritorno*, Knox does something similar in picking up where “Hora lunga” leaves off and returning to the open C string at the end. Centuries separate the writing of the framing pieces, yet when presented in this triptych arrangement they feel strongly connected.

LOOP takes a livelier turn with the onset of the second triptych and the gigue-like “Furlana” from Tartini's *Violin Sonata No. 17*. A discernible shift occurs with the advent of Ligeti's second movement, “Loop,” which is lively too but harmonically acerbic compared to “Furlana”; that said, it's undeniably Ligeti-esque in character, even while evidencing a trace of baroque music in its DNA. Mansour's similarly titled *Loop for Solo Viola and Electronics* expands on the album's sound world when electronics shadow the solo viola line before splintering off to form their own textural field.

After a short yet still explorative *Ricercar for Solo Cello No. 1* by Gabrielli, Ligeti's “Facsar” appears, the longest movement of the sonata and its passacaglia. A ten-measure melodic line acts as a nucleus around which clusters of increasingly complex material appear, the result an expression serpentine in nature. For *Wanderlust*, the violist herself wove elements from the other two pieces to create a bookend where the baroque and Ligeti elements are both audible. Corelli's

"Allegro" from his *Violin Sonata Op. 5, No. 6* initiates the fourth triptych effervescently, after which Ligeti's equally breathless "Prestissimo con sordino" perpetuates the incessant motion of the opener. Arad's *Caprice Fourteen (György)* is pitched at a high velocity too, though here the material unfolds in long slurs, with silences offsetting the buzzing swirl.

A lamenting tone is established by the dramatic "Moderato" from Telemann's *Fantasia for Solo Violin No. 12*, which is in turn complemented by Ligeti's own "Lamento," an enigmatic movement that Wollman smartly compares to an organ for the way wildly different timbres combine. In *Blue Rose*, Watras frames a solemn folk episode with two aggressive ponticello episodes that see the viola take on a needling, electric guitar-like quality. Introducing the final triptych is Biber's beautiful "Passacaglia," the bewitching last movement from his *Mystery (Rosary) Sonatas*. Whereas Ligeti's own closing movement, "Chaconne chromatique," maintains the rhythmic thrust of Biber's, Williams' album-ending *Ciklus* opts more for a contemplative, lamentation-styled treatment.

While the recording features no other instrument than Wollman's, never does the listener feel as if the music's wanting when her viola sound is so rich and her playing so compelling. Technical virtuosity is in abundant display, necessarily so when the eighteen parts demand from the performer a broad arsenal of viola techniques. To that end, the total range of sounds she coaxes from the instrument on *LOOP* verges on staggering.