

Review: Melia Watras – Firefly Songs

By Ron Schepper

Written between 2015 and 2018, *Firefly Songs* features violist Melia Watras (b. 1969) distilling rich life experiences into strikingly original musical form. The fifty-minute work comprises fourteen compact pieces performed by a rotating array of instrument combinations in solo and duo formats. She's joined by fellow members of the Seattle-based ensemble Frequency, cellist Sæunn Thorsteinsdóttir and violinist Michael Jinsoo Lim, and blends instrumental playing with the voices of Catherine Connors, Vina Vu Valdés, Arturo Alto, Atar Arad, Lim, and Watras herself. As that brief overview might suggest, *Firefly Songs* is never less than interesting. The title, incidentally, derives from the magical feeling Watras had upon encountering fireflies as a young girl, and each song in the work is thus a "symbolic firefly" of sorts.

All of the violist's solo releases have been deeply personal expressions, from 2019's *Schumann Resonances* to her 2004 debut *Viola Solo*. Her discography includes more than the seven albums she's issued under her own name: for two decades, she was a member of the Corigliano Quartet, which she co-founded and which released thirteen albums. It's the solo recordings, however, that present the Honolulu-born Watras in the most revealing light, so much so *Firefly Songs* can be broached as a selective catalogue of personal memories, events, and encounters rendered into musical form.

Background for each piece is provided in detailed liner notes by the composer in the release booklet. We learn, for example, that the voice in "The Lesson" belongs to Watras's one-time viola teacher at Indiana University, Israeli-born violist Atar Arad, whom she recorded over two days during a 2017 Bloomington visit. That association developed into a teaching stint as his Associate Instructor and eventually a faculty position as a Visiting Lecturer and her current post as Professor of Viola at the University of Washington. The esteem with which he's held by her is evident throughout this affectionate tribute, which augments audio clips of his teaching

instructions (e.g., "Legato for us is like line for someone making a drawing") with live viola and violin.

Most settings possess an equally personal resonance for Watras. "Vetur öngum lánar lið" (Winter aids no one) originated out of her friendship with Thorsteinsdóttir, accompanied on the piece by Lim, and specifically the cellist's feelings about Iceland, her homeland. Originally written for the folk singer Galia Arad (Atar's daughter), "Berceuse," an elegiac duet for violin and viola, was composed with her

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singing style in mind, and "Lament," a moving solo performance by Watras, was written in memory of her late father, who succumbed to cancer in 2016. A few pieces were inspired by literary figures, "O. Reverie" by O. Henry (the piece coupling Watras's expressive narration with Lim's violin) and "William Wilson" Poe (Lim accompanying his reading of the text with violin); "Seeing Cypresses with Catherine C." features a multi-layered Catherine Connors, head of the Classics department at the University of Washington, reading text from an essay about Virgil, Ovid, and Martial, and adding even further to the literary aspect of the project, Lim recites his own text during "(one)."

As commendable as the recording is, a few minor tweaks might have made *Firefly Songs* even better. As much interest as the voice dimension brings to the project, I occasionally find myself longing for a greater amount of purely instrumental playing; to these ears, it's strings-only settings such as "Berceuse," "Lament," "Lontano," and "Wise Tentacles" that reward most. And as cute as it is, "Mozart Doesn't Live in Seattle," written for and voiced by Valdés, the young daughter of two Watras friends, might have been better placed at album's end rather than the beginning. Such complaints are minor, however, when a recording is so original and imaginative.