

Melia Watras's "String Masks" Ties Us Together

By Anna Heflin

How do our physical instruments connect us to the musicians who have come before us? Often this question points to instruments with older histories, but violist/composer Melia Watras's album *String Masks* (Planet M Records) taps into histories both old and new. These ties have a specificity, often communicated through sound, that pay homage both to Watras's pedagogical lineage as a violist and the composers who fundamentally shifted the traditional string repertoire. In many ways, the album is a beautiful collage of transformational figures in Watras's musical practice. The concept that instruments help us connect with those who came before us could be considered kind of general, but this idea becomes irrevocably relevant and specific when the instruments in question are one-of-a-kind microtonal masterpieces that currently reside in a storage space: those of the ingenious American composer Harry Partch.

Those who know Watras's and Partch's work and those who are unfamiliar are both in for a treat. The title work of Watras's album is a theatrical piece for strings, Harry Partch's awe-inducing instruments and actors. The album comes out 2/11/22 and I had the pleasure of speaking with Watras, who has very generously given *Which Sinfonia* the exclusive world premiere of the stunning video *Crossing* and access to the performance video of *String Masks* in its entirety.

String Masks is wonderfully cohesive as an album in the sense that every work is tied to a musical or literary reference, each of which is spelled out in the program notes. Program notes are a gift, but more often than not, I'll listen to an album before reading them to experience new music with a blank slate. To my delight, some of the musical references jumped out at me on the first listen – Janáček's spirit is ever present in the first movement of *Kreutzer*. I shared this with Watras, who said, "I'm so grateful that you heard Janáček because he's a huge hero of mine. He has such a visceral language. Everybody quotes everybody in music, it's a way to honor things without words in a beautiful way. I was really taken with the way Janáček quotes Beethoven while slightly nudging things further. That's kind of what he did with his Moravian poems – taking his tradition and adding his own angle."

This practice of tying musical works to existing musical and literary references extends throughout the album as a whole. While some were relatively obvious, especially to a string player's ears, others were more mysterious and

abstract. For example, Watras uses formal elements of Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* to compose the solo viola track *Black Wing, Brown Wing*. "I definitely like to have connections with other things because we don't live in a bubble," says Watras. "We can't survive without one another and that transfers into music."

Watras's desire to showcase our interconnectedness comes to the forefront in the title work, *String Masks*. The three-movement work is set to a text by Sean Harvey and the characters include Josef Gingold, Eugène Ysaÿe, Ginette Neveu, Arcangelo Corelli, William Primrose, Niccolò Paganini, Giuseppe Tartini and Death. The theme? They are all violinists or violists (I'd argue that Death is a violist). Furthermore, they can all be traced back on Watras's musical tree. Throughout the work, the three actors embody various characters. Stage director Sheila Daniels created visual cues for the staged version of this work to indicate when said characters transformed — switching masks, so to speak — to see what I mean, watch the video below. The recording, on the other hand, has an amorphous quality which lends itself nicely to the subject matter: the transition into the underworld.

Musically, the ensemble for *String Masks* consists of three vocalizing actors, a singer, traditional violin and viola, and three Harry Partch instruments: Harmonic Canon, Cloud-Chamber Bowls and Bass Marimba.

A little background for those who are unfamiliar with Harry Partch: Partch (1901-1974) was an American composer, philosopher, author, violist, inventor and instrument builder. He devised over 28 instruments that sound in microtonal tuning systems of his own invention, which he details in his prolific theory book *Genesis of a Music*. His works are inherently theatrical, due to the physicality of the instruments themselves, his repertoire ranges in subject matter including Oedipus, Lewis Carroll, Li Po, the occult and his experience as a transient worker during the Great Depression. Following the Great Depression, he found support at the University of Wisconsin and later developed a studio in Petaluma, California. Up until recently, his instruments were housed and supported by the University of Washington, which is how Melia Watras (who is on faculty) was introduced to them. However, as of very recently the instruments do not have a permanent home. Partch specialist and director of the Harry Partch Ensemble Charles (Chuck) Corey takes care of

the instruments and is featured as a performer on *String Masks*.

I've been increasingly interested in Partch's music over the past few years. Last year, while reading *Genesis of a Music*, I had a few questions about a few of Partch's larger works and reached out to Corey, who was incredibly helpful. Since speaking with Watras, I've confirmed with Corey that the Partch instruments are currently in storage and in need of a home. If anyone has a lead regarding an institution/community who may be interested in housing the instruments, please email me at anna.heflin@whichsinfonia.com and I will get you in touch with Chuck Corey.

While the instruments were at University of Washington, students, faculty and community members benefited greatly from their presence. Partch's theatrical works were regularly programmed at the University, making it a unique cultural destination, and Watras's *String Masks* is a testament to the creative power that the instruments inspire in those who have access to them for extended periods of time.

If it hasn't come across by this point, I'm a bit enthusiastic regarding Partch. "I'm with you. Harry Partch and his instruments...it's so special," says Watras. "I can't believe how he created such a personal sound world and reinforced that sound world in every possible way. He created his own instruments, intonation systems and got people on board to invest in this world. Of course, he wrote his pieces, but other people could (and did) write for the instruments as well. It's extraordinary what he accomplished."

Watras began interacting with the Partch instruments 2-3 years before writing for them. She saw their presence at University of Washington as a "once in a lifetime opportunity".

To my ears, the Partch instruments and tuning systems are as distinct as a yellow elephant – they're something that you simply never expected to exist. "I wanted to embrace that, and I use Partch's Greek Studies tuning system in *String Masks*," says Watras. "Chuck actually creates his own scales for the Harmonic Canons, people can do that. I use one of Partch's scales which then seamlessly blends with the Bass Marimba and Cloud-Chamber Bowls because they're all in that same tuning system. Because we string players are so flexible, we can adapt our intonation to be with them. I did not notate the strings in tablature or ratios – I did normal string writing, but all of the intonation is such that you can just listen and match. All of us can do that, we are all trained."

I loved that Watras framed microtonal string playing in this way, which is how I have always felt given my background as a violist. In response, I pointed out how all chamber music is in fact microtonal for string players, which she agreed with quite vehemently. Her microtonal

string players in *String Masks* are equivalent to what string players naturally do in Haydn. Just nudging things a bit further, like Janáček did with Beethoven.

While the traditional string instruments in *String Masks* are matching the Partch tunings, they anchor the work in Watras's overall musical language. The voices, on the other hand, sound like they could have been snatched from a Partch recording because of their inflection, timbre, and rhythms. Interestingly enough, this was all the actors. "Theatre is huge in Seattle, there's a deep pool of amazing actors," says Watras. "All of the actors have very musical ears. All that pitch – all of that is them. The actors took it to another level. Rhonda [Soikowsky] as Paganini is hilarious. It definitely is supposed to be funny and a lot of that comes from Sean Harvey. He is funny as all get out and dark."

The piece neatly balances the macabre and surreally humorous on a tightrope. At its core, however, the story is an homage to Watras's line of teachers. Watras and Harvey (who wrote the libretto for *String Masks*) went to school together at Indiana University, along with Watras's husband, violinist Michael Jinsoo Lim, who is also featured on the album. "Mike studied with Mr. [Josef] Gingold. Sean and I would go with him to Mr. G's masterclasses. Everyone went whether you were his student or not. The classes would be packed," says Watras. "It was an atmosphere that all of us were part of. So when Mr. Gingold died, Mike and I were still in school at that point, that was a huge thing for us. I love honoring my teachers. I feel so privileged to have this connection. Every moment I can, I'm talking or working with Atar [Arad]. Mike and I not having Mr. G or Mike's teacher before that – Mr. [Vartan] Manoogian – it feels like you don't have your parent anymore."

Speaking with Watras, I wondered when exactly it became clear to her that the story and the Partch instruments belonged together. Watras shared, "It was learning his language, reading his darkly funny *Genesis of a Music*, working with Chuck, playing the Bass Marimba, and my connection with Catherine Connors, the classics professor at University of Washington. All of these people are so generous with their time. I had worked with Catherine on another piece of mine called *Source*, at the end of which the violist speaks text in Latin. I wanted the instructions in the score to show a person who doesn't know how to speak Latin how to speak it properly. She helped me a lot with that and showed me connections between Virgil, music and the underworld. The ancient Romans had such a huge connection with different realities. Her time teaching me about all of that connected with my time spent with the Partch instruments – that's when the instruments started to merge with the story. I keep a teaching tree in my studio for my students where we can trace our line back to

Corelli and Vivaldi. It's like ancestry.com in a way."

Watras reminds her viola students at University of Washington of their ancestry by keeping a musical family tree in her studio. As a teacher, Watras prioritizes improvisation and composition as an essential part of music education for string players. Improvisation is often a component of recitals for her students - a surefire way to get them to take their improvisation practice seriously.

Thinking about Watras's musical ethos, there is something undeniably empowering. Central in the album is a solo vocal track sung by cellist Sæunn Thorsteinsdóttir. Thorsteinsdóttir had never sung before. "She did amazingly. I originally wrote it for her to sing while she played, which she has done, but at the session we went a cappella," says Watras. "I liked it a lot and we kept it for solo voice. All of us string players sing a lot better than we think we do. My husband is singing on *String Masks*. He's pretty great at karaoke, so I recruited him to the concert hall. I love string players singing."

Thorsteinsdóttir had never sung, Watras had never played Bass Marimba, Paganini permanently shifted how composers write for violin, many of Watras's students had never improvised before joining her studio and Partch (a violist) never had any formal training. Yes, I'm quite sure string players are capable of more than we know.