

Review: Melia Watras — Play/Write

By Ron Schepper

Earlier albums by violist Melia Watras (b. 1969) garnered accolades for the originality of their vision and realization of their creator's audacious sensibility. To create *String Masks*, for example, she utilized Harry Partch instruments; 26, on the other hand, was deemed by *The Strad* "a beautiful celebration of 21st century viola music." The latter as aptly describes Watras's latest collection *Play/Write*, a splendid addition to her discography that, as its title intimates, explores fusions of music and poetry. Once again Watras is shown to be an extraordinary solo artist and keen collaborator. The recording impresses for reflecting the deep bond she shares with people who are colleagues, yes, but also friends and family.

The project is distinguished by, among other things, the variety of its programme. Five of its eight pieces are Watras compositions, with one by Frances White (b. 1960) and two by Pulitzer Prize finalist Leilehua Lanzilotti (b. 1983) the others. Arrangements change throughout, with solo violin and viola pieces augmented by ones coupling narrators with strings, harp, and electronics. Performers joining Watras on the release include her husband, violinist Michael Jinsoo Lim, violinist Rachel Lee Priday, harpist Valérie Muzzolini, and the Brazen butterfly ensemble, with voice contributions coming from Carrie Henneman Shaw, Sheila Daniels, and Herbert Woodward Martin. The latter is both narrator on Watras's *Hertabuisse* and the author of the texts Shaw recites on the violist's eight-part *5 Poems of Herbert Woodward Martin*. Seven pieces are world premiere recordings, with Lanzilotti's *ko'u inoa* the outlier. The material is almost all new, with six compositions created in 2020 and 2021 and the earliest, White's *As night falls*, 2012.

Testifying to the close relationship Watras has with her guests, one of the parts in *5 Poems of Herbert Woodward Martin*, "Song: An Endless Flight," formed part of the recitation the poet gave at the violist's wedding. After receiving permission from Martin when she asked him about setting the words to music, she decided to expand the piece with four other poems. Accompanied by Watras and Lim, Shaw delivers the texts with theatrical flair, her parts interspersed with three brief voltas. Here and elsewhere, the modest number of participants bolsters the intimacy of the performance, with the violin and viola beautifully swarming and arcing alongside the narrator's hypnotic

renderings. Martin's words in "In Pandemic Times" are particularly vivid in capturing the fraught mood of that recent time.

A through-line is created from the opening piece to the second, Watras's *A brazen butterfly alights*, when the title of the latter derives from a line in "Song: An Endless Flight." In coupling viola with harp and the Brazen butterfly ensemble, the piece is the most elaborately scored of the eight and suitably evokes the creature's unpredictable movements during its seven minutes. A third Martin-related piece, Watras's *Hertabuisse*, accompanies him reciting his own verse with Lim's violin, the poet's delivery slightly reminiscent of Ginsberg's. Rendered spellbindingly by Priday, a University of Washington colleague of Watras's, *Echo* was created by the violist as a set of cadenzas that could stand alone as a single piece for a violinist. Elsewhere, Watras gives as commanding a performance of Lanzilotti's swoon-inducing *ko'u inoa*, as does Shaw in the loop pedal-enhanced, vocals-only *Weeping Pendula*. Packed with quivers and owl-like vocalizations, the drone meditation is realized spectacularly by Shaw.

As beguiling as the album is in general, its *pièce de résistance* is White's *As night falls*, a transfixing, eighteen-minute odyssey featuring Lim, Watras, and Daniels. She narrates evocative texts by James Pritchett that muse on a long marriage that with the woman's approaching death is reaching its terminus, but narration is also heard in an electronic recording of a man's voice designed to suggest her husband surfacing in her thoughts as she drifts between different states of awareness. Adding to the methodical work's hallucinogenic effect, the entwining of the viola and violin mirrors the interactions between the voices and the relationship between the couple. The sound world's enriched by other details, including sprinkles of piano, softly glistening electronic tones, and water sounds, that intensify the work's entrancing, dream-like effect.

For two decades, Watras performed as the violist in the Corigliano Quartet, which she co-founded, and is currently Professor of Viola and Chair of Strings at the University of Washington. With its inspired solo and collaborative performances, *Play/Write*, a special recording whose impact's strengthened by its affecting personal dimension, reminds us again of the great impact she's making as a recording artist.