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Melia Watras, viola

By Elaine Fine

Watras is a terrific violist. The oldest piece is an *Elegie* by Igor Stravinsky (1944) that is written for the viola to play as a two-voice instrument. It is almost constant double-stops. The *Fancy on a Bach Air* by John Corigliano, a piece originally written for cello, has a single line of lovely sustained notes strung one after another. It sounds sort of like a violist practicing solo Bach out of rhythm in order to get each note to ring perfectly in tune.

Andrew Waggoner's *Collines parmi étoiles* is a somewhat restless piece that flows like a fantasy and takes advantage of the harmonic possibilities of the viola. Paola Prestini's *Sympathique* is kind of a mood piece that flows like a monolog through varying levels of intensity. It seems like a great amount happens in this piece in the space of just under six minutes. Krzysztof Penderecki's *Cadenza* concentrates on gestures like falling appoggiaturas as its thematic material. It sounds a lot like Prestini to me, except for the main material and the lovely and spare ending.

The two pieces that impress me the most are Kodaly's transcription of Bach's *Chromatic*

Fantasy and Atar Arad's solo sonata. Arad was Watras's teacher at Indiana University, so she clearly approaches the piece with special insight.

Watras is a terrific violist.

The piece begins like an improvisation. Arad uses all the viola's best notes and best tonal qualities. In I there are a few pitches that are to be played as not-quite-quarter-tones, and Watras manages to place them in such a way that the pitch sounds deliberate and decided. II, a quicker movement that uses Bulgarian material in a Bartok-like way, is very interesting and exciting; and III, played ponticello (with the bow very close to the bridge), is an amazing feat of bow control and virtuosity.

Kodaly's transcription of Bach's *Chromatic Fantasy* (yes, the one written for harpsichord) is astounding. No matter how perfectly tempered a harpsichord or piano is tuned, there is little that can compare with the beauty of this piece played with the natural intonation Watras uses.