

CD Review: Melia Watras: Short Stories

By Margaret Cary

This *Short Stories* album, by Melia Watras, viola and Kimberly Russ, piano, is a thoughtful and diverse collection of twenty-first century viola repertoire. Described as “staggeringly virtuosic” by *The Strad*, violist Melia Watras proves herself in this album to be a leading soloist with an ability to interpret an impressive array of styles. Watras serves as Associate Professor of Viola at the University of Washington, is a co-founder of the Corigliano Quartet and plays a viola by Samuel Zygmuntowicz.

This album showcases beautiful and virtuosic viola works, including four world premiere recordings, with a rare technical and musical mastery. Each and every piece is a polished gem. This CD is worth a listen.

1. Rebecca Clarke, *Passacaglia on an Old English Tune* for viola and piano (1941): This interpretation of Clarke’s piece makes dramatic contrast between the dark richness and intimate tenderness of the viola. The emotional depth of this performance leaves a lasting impression. Great start to the CD.

2. Georges Enescu, *Concert Piece* for viola and piano (1906): Watras and Russ encapsulate a beautiful atmosphere, with cooler and light textures contrasting the virtuosic sections. Even in the more brilliant passages, it maintains a lithe quality, and never has a forced sound.

3. Betsy Jolas, *Episode sixième* for viola solo (1984, world premiere recording): This piece has sharp dynamic contrast, textural and character shifts (glissando, ricochet, accents, harmonics, pizzicato, double stops). It is difficult to predict where it will move next, but this unpredictability is precisely what keeps the listener fascinated.

4. Quincy Porter, *Speed Etude* for viola and piano (1948): Amid a rather simple piano part, the viola line is moving at a breakneck speed, and probably outnumbers the total number of notes of the piano. It is refreshing to see such precision and clarity.

5. Henryk Wieniawski, *Rêverie* for viola and piano: Beautiful performance.

6. György Ligeti, *Loop* from Sonata for viola solo (1991-94): Excellent left-hand and bow control, with every note speaking with consistent resonance. Even though the same notes repeat, it doesn’t sound repetitive, due to the distinctive way in which she differentiates each repetition.

7. Anna Weesner, *Flexible Parts* for viola and piano (2008, world premiere recording): She successfully captures the atmosphere of each short movement – from the reflective, dancing to the lyrical moments.

8. Henri Vieuxtemps, *Elégie* for viola and piano, Op. 30: Expressive within a gentle dynamic range at the beginning and recapitulation, she likewise thoughtfully expands the lyrical and virtuosic sections with polished ease.

9. Andrew Waggoner, *Elle s’enfuit* for viola and piano (2008, world premiere recording): In this piece we see a more violent, explosive and dramatic side, in contrast to much of the other repertoire of this CD. Despite this, it does not sound jarring or ugly.

10. Dan Visconti, *Hard-Knock Stomp* for viola solo (2000, world premiere recording): This piece, with its groove and swing, is an entertaining treat. Great performance!