
STRINGS

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Soaring Solo

By Greg Cahill

Stepping up as a solo performer is a double-edged sword, offering absolute creative freedom as well as the opportunity to bear the full force of failure. I applaud any musician with the courage to fail as a soloist. Here are two whose fortitude has led them not only to succeed marvelously, but also to soar.

Melia Watras' *Viola Solo* (Fleur de Son Classics 57962) showcases the rich timbre of this often neglected solo instrument in a varied yet seamless program. Watras, co-founder of the Corigliano Quartet, is a young player in possession of stunning virtuosic talent and deserving of the growing acclaim. She leads off

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this fascinating solo debut with Atar Arad's striking *Sonata for Viola Solo* (1992)—a wonderful, often acrobatic blend of melody and rhythm—before visiting Bach's *Chromatic*

Fantasy (transcribed for viola by Zoltan Kodaly), Corigliano's breathy and beautiful *Fancy on a Bach Air* (which Watras adapted for viola), Andrew Waggoner's ultra-modern *Collines parmi étoiles*, Igor Stravinsky's *Elegie*, Paola Prestini's *Sympathique*, and Krzysztof Penderecki's ominous *Cadenza per viola sola*.

Violinist Oliver Schroer walked 1,000 kilometers during a 2004 pilgrimage to reach Camino de Santiago, an ancient hermitage in Northwest Spain where St. James the Great is reportedly entombed. As a session player, Schroer, who in the liner notes refers to his violin as a wooden relic, has lent his fiddle to albums by Loreena McKinnit and others. And while he unabashedly plays what he calls new-acoustic music (a euphemism for New Age), the original compositions on *Camino* (Big Dog Music 0601) resonate with authentically ancient overtones, both literally and figuratively (check out the high flute-like harmonics on *Camino Overture*). The result is an uplifting spiritual travelogue, complete with such incidental sounds as tramping feet, sort of a musical journal of his pilgrimage made all the more beautiful by the ambient quality of the church's acoustics.