

Melia Watras: *26* and *Ispirare*

By Carlos María Solaire

Taken together, these two latest recordings are an eloquent testimonial to her ever-enterprising, imaginative approach to music and music making. To couple a piece of music with another one that inspired it is always illuminating. The use that the Pulitzer Prize-winner Shulamit Ran makes of a short motif from Luciano Berio's *Folk Songs*, from which she extrapolates a 10-minute unaccompanied piece, is the most obvious example here. Not only does the distinctive three-note figure permeate the whole composition, but also some of the colors employed by Watras appear to derive from those used in the song by Berio that immediately precedes it on the CD. An eerie mixture of screaming interjections and mysterious flautando passages, *Perfect Storm* is an effective showpiece that has already, and deservedly, been taken up by other prominent soloists.

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Berio's *Naturale* is itself derived from his own orchestral-accompanied piece *Voci* (Voices), which carries the subtitle *Folk Songs II*. It makes a suitable conclusion to this trio of closely related pieces, and Watras performs it with remarkable exactitude in the implementation of the vocally inspired portamenti and glissandi, drumming pizzicato effects, microtonal passages, and perfectly pitched harmonics. Interaction with percussionist Matthew Kocmierski—and with the recorded voice of a singing Sicilian peasant—is perfectly gauged. Only the very end sounds slightly matter-of-fact when set besides the devastating readings of, say, Kim Kashkashian or the work's dedicatee, Aldo Bennici.

A comparable coolness of approach characterizes Watras's reading of the Viola Sonata by George Rochberg, a classic of the viola repertoire stateside but still too little known elsewhere. The heart-on-sleeve expressivity of this repented serialist's music is astutely held in check by Watras and pianist Winston Choi in an understatedly eloquent, well-paced reading. Atar Arad's Caprice Four, inspired by Rochberg's Sonata, makes for an ideal encore to it.

While the previously discussed recital placed Melia Watras decidedly in the limelight, the

second CD features her as one of a team of player-composers performing mainly their own music; the only exception is Richard Karpen's somewhat long-winded *Bicinium*, which is dedicated to the present interpreters, Watras and violinist Michael Jinsoo Lim. The mysterious figure that serves as the CD's title is revealed, after having "done the math", as the sum total of the strings heard during the course of the recital, although never do they all play together. More importantly, the occasion was obviously a labor of love for all involved.

Atar Arad was Melia Watras's viola teacher at Indiana University but he influenced her as a composer too, as this juxtaposition of their music shows. Watras's *Prelude*—lovingly performed by Arad—was inspired both by the opening of Bach's Third Suite and the composer-player's warm-up routines. Her unaccompanied Sonata begins with a bang before going on to a soulful folk song that builds the main body of the first movement. Soft percussive effects punctuate the "semplice" slow movement that, heard from off stage, also ends the work after an angst-ridden fast section. Watras's Virginia Woolf-inspired duo *Liquid Voices* takes its material from the series of natural harmonic that the violin plays at the beginning. *Luminous Points* (for solo violin) wistfully contrasts the instrument's extreme registers before and after a playfully Paganinian intermezzo. The eponymous *Photo by Mikel* shows a landscape in Turkey that is evocatively translated into sound in Watras's short sketch.

Arad's impish *Toccatina a la Turk* was inspired by Dave Brubeck's similarly styled piece (*Blue Rondo a la Turk*) but its sprightly rhythms placed it in the tradition of Bartók's folk-based duets. *Esther* is a "nostalgic reflection" on the Sephardic songs that the composer's mother used to sing, and as such ideal material for the viola (let alone, as here, two of them!). Garth Knox's *Stranger*, based on an ancient Irish tune, makes typically imaginative use of the sympathetic strings of the viola d'amore, which are alternatively struck, plucked or just left to do their job of resonating supportively to the music. This is a most rewarding addition to the repertoire—smaller than one may think—of duos for viola and viola d'amore. This CD, fabulously played, vividly recorded and lovingly presented, demonstrates triumphantly that the tradition of virtuoso player-composers is still alive and well in the 21st century.