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.