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 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 etoiles, Igor Stravinsky’s Elegie, Paola Prestini’s Sympathique, and Krysztof 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 leant his fiddle to albums by Loreena McKinnet 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.