

Quartet returns for show

By Zachary Lewis

The Corigliano Quartet has accomplished more in the last year than some musical performers accomplish in their entire careers.

In the months since leaving Dickinson College, where it served as musical ensemble in residence, the quartet has fanned out across the country, taken on a new cellist, won a meaningful award, presented dozens of concerts and recorded two CDs.

All that's left, perhaps, are a benchmark Beethoven cycle and a retrospective documentary for public television.

Something that hasn't altered is the members' mutual commitment to the quartet.

"I feel like we're continuing to move and grow," said Corigliano violist Melia Watras, by phone from her home in Seattle. She lives there with her husband and colleague, violinist Michael Jinsoo Lim.

"It feels like we're still evolving, and I hope that never ends," she said.

Followers of the group will have a chance to catch up on all that's new and different when the Corigliano Quartet performs Saturday night at Franklin & Marshall College. The concert marks the group's first return to central Pennsylvania and its debut at F&M.

"It's always good to come back," said Watras, who has returned to the midstate once on her own. "It's like holding court in our former home."

Its program on this occasion consists of Haydn's B-Flat String Quartet Op. 64 No. 3, Schumann's Quartetto I and the String Quartet No. 2 by contemporary American composer Shafer Mahoney.

Mahoney wrote the quartet for Corigliano on a commission from Chamber Music America.

The three-movement work features a theme and variations; a slow center movement; and a spirited, rhythmic conclusion. That it regularly performs contemporary works is what earned the group an award for adventurous programming in

2004 from the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers.

"We've taken this around, and we've found that audiences have responded pretty positively," Lim said. "Shafer was originally a percussionist, and you can definitely hear that in the piece."

Watras and Lim recently moved to Seattle after Watras was appointed a professor of viola at the University of Washington. Lim, meanwhile, is performing on occasion with the Seattle Symphony Orchestra and with an orchestra that records movie soundtracks.

The quartet's second violinist, Lina Bahn, remains in Washington, D.C. The new cellist, Amy Sue Barston, lives in New York City. Barston replaced the Corigliano Quartet's founding cellist, Jeffrey Zeigler, who left the group in October.

The departure of a founding player, and Watras' and Lim's move to Seattle, were not cause for the group to disband, Lim said. He added that they might rule out -- for now -- another long-term residency, such as the one at Dickinson.

"We were spread apart even when we were at Dickinson, so the distance between us is just bigger now," Lim said. "It just takes careful planning and determination. We decided when we formed the group that we all wanted to have some freedom in our situations, too."

Watras is the featured artist on "Viola Solo," a new solo recording on the "Fleur de Son" label. The disc is available through Amazon.com.

At the same time, the quartet (still with Zeigler) recently completed its first album, featuring music by its namesake, John Corigliano, and music by one of his students, Jefferson Freedman. The disc could be released on the Naxos label as early as next year.

"There's never a dull moment with us, but the quartet is something we all love," Lim said. "As long as we have that, we should be fine."