

Violist Watras to perform new compositions in Prestidigitation

By Peter Kelley

Faculty violist Melia Watras will perform new, cutting-edge music by five composers, including three from the UW, in a concert titled *Prestidigitation*, at 7:30 p.m. Monday, Oct. 23, in Meany Hall.

Prestidigitation will feature music by the UW's Richard Karpen, Juan Pampin and Diane Thome, as well as works by composers Heinrich Taube and Brent Michael Davids. The three UW composers themselves will appear in the concert, as well as Vancouver tenor William George.

Watras is a virtuoso on the viola -- a sort of deeper-voiced bigger sibling to the violin, played in the same pose -- and has played in many of the nation's leading venues, including Carnegie Hall, Alice Tully Hall and the Kennedy Center. She has also performed extensively in the United States and abroad with the Corigliano Quartet, including an appearance on NPR's *All Things Considered*.

Her debut solo CD, *Viola Solo*, was critically acclaimed, and a CD of the pieces in *Prestidigitation* will be her next release.

After briefly studying piano in her early childhood, Watras switched to the viola and made her debut, with the Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra at 16. Her studies later took her to Indiana University, where she earned her bachelor's and master's degrees. From her time as a visiting lecturer at Indiana, Watras went on to study chamber music at the Juilliard School, and taught there as an assistant to the Juilliard String Quartet. She later served as a musical artist in residence at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania, and on the faculty of the New York Youth Symphony Chamber Music Program.

The compositions were commissioned by the UW Royalty Research Fund especially for this concert and its subsequent recording.

"Each piece is very different, and I love that about the program," Watras said. "Each composer really came with their own voice and it's an incredible range of sounds." She said she did not dictate what the compositions should be like; the composers each followed their own muses as they wrote their works. Watras added,

"To have a piece of music written for you is pretty thrilling."

Watras said these new pieces "will be unusual for the listener in that they have a lot of electronic components." Helping to create these audio effects will be a device created by Karpen, a pioneer in computer-assisted music, which he calls the accelerometer.

Karpen said the accelerometer was created around a pre-existing computer chip, which is built into a small device Watras will wear on her wrist. The device acts as an extension of the instrument, but enables Watras to change the speed and tone of the music, adding a second component of performance. Karpen said the accelerometer uses "some pretty advance algorithms to process (her motions and music) in real time."

Watras described it simply, saying, "I have it on my arm, and the speed with which I move my arm and the direction I move my arm all cause the computer to react in different ways."

Karpen is chair of the new Digital Arts and Experimental Media Department, called DXARTS for short. His composition for the evening is titled *Aperture*, and like the piece by UW colleague Juan Pampin is described as a piece "for viola and live electronics."

Pampin came to the UW in 1999 and is an assistant professor of music composition. His composition is titled *Nada*.

Watras also will perform the pieces by Karpen and Pampin in a concert titled An Evening of Experimental Music the following evening, Oct. 24, also in at Meany Hall.

Diane Thome, the former chair of the School of Music's composition department, retired in 2006 after 29 years with the school. Her composition is titled *And Yet...*

Tickets for *Prestidigitation* (and for the DXARTS show the following evening) are \$15 for general admission and \$10 for students, available at the UW Arts Ticket Office, 206-543-4880, online at www.meany.org/calendar/, or at the door.