

Blending tradition and innovation: Faculty compositions to be performed in Feb. 16 Meany Hall concert
By Peter Kelley



Violist Melia Watras commissioned *Nada*, a piece for viola and electronic sounds from Juan Pampin, and they worked together on it in this Raitt Hall studio. The piece is part of the Composition Faculty Showcase, playing Feb. 16 at Meany Hall. Photo by Mary Levin.

When composer Juan Pampin teamed up to create music with violist Melia Watras, what resulted was an innovative piece "for viola and electronic sounds" that neither could quite have achieved alone.

That spirit of experimentation is very much at the heart of the Contemporary Group's *Composition Faculty Showcase*, a concert featuring music written by School of Music faculty, that will be presented at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 16, in Meany Hall. The evening will include works by Pampin, Huck Hodge, Diane Thome, Joel-Francois Durand and Richard Karpen, who is now the school's director.

Karpen said the audience can expect a wide range of music from more traditional, note-based pieces to his own work with the "aural cinema" of computer-realized sound, much of it created from pre-existing recordings. "We are composers who are very rooted in traditional knowledge of composition, but are extremely experimental," he said.

He added that you might even compare them to a group of experimental physicists -- steeped in traditional theory yet open to and searching for "the future of what music will be."

Since much of their work is presented outside the Northwest, Karpen said, the Contemporary Group concert is a rare opportunity for local audiences to hear UW-composed music played by top students and faculty.

Program selections are:

- Durand's *...d'aisles déchires...* for piano, and *In the Mirror Land* for flute and clarinet
- Karpen's *Life Study #4* for computer-realized sound;
- Pampin's *Nada*, for viola and electronic sounds.

--Hodge's *Efflux* for clarinet and violin, and *Apparent Motion* for two pianos and two percussions.

--Thome's, *FireRhythm, Flowing* for piano and computer-realized sound

"It's been an incredibly joyful experience for me," said Watras, a world-class violist, of the process of creating *Nada*, the piece she commissioned from Pampin and recorded for a recent CD. "Juan is a fantastic composer and I feel like the end result is something that pushes boundaries and techniques. It's an amazing piece of art, and that's thanks to Juan."

For his part, Pampin called the creative process with the performer a sort of pleasant "feedback loop." He said he has worked with many talented performers. "The difference with Melia is that she was open to explore new territory and to try new things that I wanted to try, so I could really get into -- almost like quicksand in places" -- knowing they could find their way back out. "That's what we call the artistic method," he added. "You try until you feel it sounds appropriate to your artistic goal."

Pampin said their collaboration was almost like an academic research project, with the two getting together monthly and then weekly as they neared the end. "My role was both writing the viola part and writing the computer program that will process it. ... The main goal of the piece is to explore the harmonics of the instrument."

He said during the piece "there is a computer processing the viola ... so the electronic part changes the sound of the viola. In between the electronic sound and the viola, it's almost as if you were to create a new thing of the two."

Watras said she enjoyed investigating "all the possibilities of the viola that are not used frequently, and definitely not used in this way -- I have no experience with creating the electronics." Such work, she said, broadens her view of what sound qualities are possible with the viola and even "informs the way I perform traditional classical music -- I look at it with a fresh viewpoint."

She said the piece is "beautifully expressive" and plays on notions of silence and stillness. It starts with "as high a note as you can play" using only about an inch of viola string, which briefly changed the way she held the instrument. She said it felt liberating to return to her usual grip. "I felt stronger with my bow control because suddenly I had a lot more string length -- it required more control to play Juan's piece."

Pampin called the piece "very ethereal" and said it was a challenge to record for Watras' CD. He said it will be interesting for the audience to get to see how she plays it, and how she uses her left hand "to find the high harmonics" necessary for the work.

Clearly, Pampin and Watras have something of a mutual admiration society going. Watras said, "I feel lucky that I can be at a university that has this kind of collaborative spirit."

Elsewhere on the program, Karpen's *Life Study #4* uses archetypes of sound to create images in the minds of the beholder. The piece, he said, "is composed using recorded sounds, not musical instruments." Though he carefully composes the entire work, he said, the sounds still express their own story lines. He added, "I'm delighted when people tell me the stories they hear from my music."

Violist Watras said, "Sometimes it's fun to think that when Beethoven or Schubert were writing, it was as innovative as what Juan and Richard are doing now."

Karpen, who like Pampin hails from the DXARTS, the Center for Digital Arts and Experimental Media, thinks along similar historical lines.

"It's like hearing the music of 200 years ago when it was new. Beethoven was not traditional - he was just doing what composers did 200 years ago, discovering new knowledge."

Tickets for the Contemporary Group's Composition Faculty Showcase are \$10. Call 206-543-4880 or visit online at www.music.washington.edu.