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Zing will go the heartstrings of viola and violin lovers (Excerpt)

By Melinda Bargreen

It's going to be an interesting week for string fans.

First we have the Tuesday debut of the newest University of Washington string faculty member, violist Melia Watras, who plays a recital at 7:30 p.m. in Meany Theater.

Then, two days later, the celebrated Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg brings her violin to Benaroya Hall for a 7:30 p.m. performance Thursday with the Seattle Symphony.

Watras follows in some illustrious footsteps at the UW: Previous faculty violists have included such names as Donald McInnes, Paul Coletti, Yizhak Schotten, Milton Katims and (most recently) Helen Callus.

"That's one of the reasons I jumped at the chance to come to Seattle," says the thirty-something Watras (whose first name is pronounced Ma-LEE-a). "The tradition of viola teachers here is amazing. I also have an uncle I really love who lives in Seattle, which is great."

Watras got her start at Indiana University, where violist Atar Arad was among her most influential teachers. (Music lovers here will remember Arad's performances with the Seattle Chamber Music Society's Summer Festival.) Atar helped to launch the Corigliano Quartet (named for American composer John Corigliano) in which Watras is a founding player, along with her husband, violinist Michael Jinsoo Lim. That quartet moved on to the Juilliard School as assistant to the esteemed Juilliard String Quartet,

and has gone on to considerable critical acclaim. (The New York Times described the quartet as "Musicians who seem to say 'Listen to this!' ")

Watras has just released her new solo CD of all unaccompanied viola works: "I'm pretty excited about it. It's on the Fleur De Son label (www.fleurdeson.com), and it includes world premiere recordings of pieces by Andrew Waggoner and Paola Prestini, as well as the first recording on viola of John Corigliano's 'Fancy on a Bach Air.' "

With the Corigliano Quartet, Watras also has recorded for Albany, Bayer, CRI, Riax and Aguava labels. The quartet's new CD of all Corigliano's works for string quartet will soon be released on the Naxos label.

"In Seattle, I want to focus on the studio, of course, but I also want to foster a love of new music, and work closely with the composers on the faculty," Watras says. "I think that's very important."

Her Meany Theater recital will be in partnership with one of the faculty's best-known performers, pianist Craig Sheppard. On the program: J.S. Bach's Sonata No. 3 in G minor for Viola da Gamba and Cembalo (performed on viola and piano) and Henri Vieuxtemp's Sonata in B-flat for Viola and Piano. The recital also includes UW faculty composer Richard Karpen's "Solo/Tutti: Variations on an Irrational Number for Amplified Viola and Computer" and a duet with Lim.