

Duet with a computer is part of violist's debut
By Nancy Wick

In her debut recital Oct. 19, the UW School of Music's new violist, Melia Watras, will perform duets with a pianist, a violinist and a computer — and she's thrilled about all three.

The pianist is Music Professor Craig Sheppard, who last year completed a series of seven concerts in which he played all 32 Beethoven sonatas. The violinist is her husband, Michael Jinsoo Lim. As for the computer, it will be operated by Richard Karpen, composer and director of the UW Center for Digital Arts and Experimental Media.

Watras will pair with Sheppard on two pieces. They'll open the concert with J.S. Bach's *Sonata No. 3 in G minor*, a piece she says will provide "a nice, warm way to welcome the audience." They'll also play Henri Vieuxtemp's *Sonata in B-flat for Viola and Piano*. "This is one of my favorite sonatas," Watras says, "and it's a pleasure to be able to play it with Craig."

The violist will perform Karpen's piece, *Solo/Tutti: Variations on an Irrational Number for Amplified Viola and Computer*, for the first time. Watras says she toured Karpen's center on her arrival in Seattle, and was immediately fascinated.

"He gave me a recording of this piece and I decided to play it," she says.

How does a computer perform in a duet? It works like this, according to Watras: During the performance, the computer processes what the viola is playing as it is happening in real-time. The computer's "part" in the piece is completely based on the input from the viola so that every sound the audience hears the computer produce is a direct result of what the viola has played. Thus, the music that the computer makes will vary from performance to performance, depending on what the violist plays.

Watras describes the composition as technically difficult but fun to rehearse.

The other piece on the program is Mozart's *Duo in B-flat major, K.424*, played with Lim.

Watras joined the School of Music this fall as an assistant professor. It's her first full-time teaching post after a number of years touring as a soloist and chamber musician. A graduate of

Indiana University and Juilliard, she taught part time at both institutions.

"I was attracted to this job because of the amazing viola teachers before me," Watras says. "It's such a prestigious chair — an incredible legacy." She adds that she had heard many positive things about Seattle and was finding that the city lives up to its reputation.

A violist since age 8, Watras says she loves the instrument because "it's such an individual voice." Unlike a violin or a cello, she explains, there are no set dimensions for a viola; it can vary in size.

"And there's also no set sound for a viola," she adds. "There have been many great violists and they all have their own sound. A violist isn't tied down to a particular way of playing."

In addition to her teaching, Watras will remain a member of the Corigliano Quartet, a group named after Pulitzer Prize-winning contemporary composer John Corigliano.

"There was a music festival featuring Corigliano at Indiana University, and a group was brought together to play one of his quartets," Watras explained. "We only had two weeks to get ready, so we rehearsed eight hours a day, and we pulled it off. When Corigliano heard us, he told us we really sounded like a quartet and that we should stay together."

So they did, taking the name of the composer who had brought them together. Now the group — which includes Watras' husband, Michael Lim — focuses on American composers in its performances. They are currently involved in a recording project that will feature mostly music by Corigliano.

But Watras' immediate plans revolve around getting settled in at the music school and working with students she describes as "fun and eager to learn."

The concert is at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 19, in Meany Theater. Tickets cost \$12 (\$10 for students and seniors) and are available at the Arts Ticket Office, 206-543-4880, or at the door.