Colleen Jennings, violin, joined the Apple Hill String Quartet this fall. Read her bio. Here, she talks with Amelia Perron, Summer Coordinator, about joining the quartet, going on tour, and getting “quartetified.”

1) What has been like to transition from being a freelance musician and teacher to being a member of a full-time string quartet?
It’s been pretty awesome, I have to say! The process of rehearsing every day is really different from freelancing. When you’re freelancing, you have to work quickly and there is rarely time to get in depth. But with the quartet, we’ve been working things up slowly, using the metronome a lot. We’re building our sound and stability, which is really rewarding, and we can get to new depths with the music. I played a gig recently with a pick up group, and it felt really unstable — I felt like I was playing extraordinarily out of tune when really I’d gotten used to a different level of listening with the quartet. I told a friend who used to play in a quartet herself about that experience, and she laughed and said, “You’ve been quartetified!” I’m also really liking the consistent rehearsal routine that comes with this job. It’s really nice for my body, my nervous system, and my playing, to get up at the same time every day, do my stretching and warming up, and then still have time to take a long walk after rehearsal.

2) For you, what were the highlights of the recent Ireland tour, your first tour with Apple Hill?
Everything was so exciting and so new. I think what made the biggest impression was the experience at the weekend workshop in Donegal. It was a little bit more familiar since it was similar to the summer workshop. What was important there was getting to know the Apple Hill family, which I’m starting to realize is a very big family. I grew up going to Greenwood Music Camp and that was like a family, too, but it moved in generations, so you would mostly know all the other people in your generation. At Apple Hill, though, it’s simultaneously multi-generational and multi-cultural, and people keep coming back for decades. There are a lot more people to know who remain actively involved.
I coached a Borodin trio at the workshop, and two of them had come to Apple Hill for a number of years. We had a great working relationship and a true collaboration as we were all getting to know the piece together. They worked so hard and improved so much over a very short period of time. I think we all felt very rewarded by the experience.

3) What is it like to go on tour and perform the same program several times in different places?
This goes back to the first question – it’s very different from freelancing. With all the in-depth work we’re doing in rehearsals, it would be ridiculous to just play a program only once. We did
three concerts in Ireland in three very different venues. I think the first public performance of a piece is like a first draft as it begins to live and breathe and respond to the venue – the acoustics, the audience. [Ed. note: According to Lenny, all three concerts were wonderful.] It was also a chance to get to know each other on stage, which is very different than rehearsing – there are other factors, like getting nervous, and how we deal with that. Up until now, we’d been playing in more intimate venues, like a house concert or the Harrisville Store. Although settings that you expect to be low-pressure can end up being higher pressure – a lot has to do with the acoustics. Sometimes a more formal hall gives you more back.

4) As an undergrad at Oberlin, you were classmates of Mike and Elise. What is it like to reconnect with them now as fellow quartet members?
It’s really fun. We were just talking about that, and we realized that it’s been 17 years since we were in college! I knew Mike – I actually met him through Jesse Holstein (long-time Apple Hill summer faculty) – and I was in the same studio as Elise, and we actually lived together senior year. So we knew each other socially, but we never played chamber music together. It’s a good basis for our friendship now, now that we’re getting to know each other as adults. Things happen for a reason, and I think there is a reason we’re playing music together now instead of when we were at Oberlin.

5) Not only do you come from a musical family, where both your parents and your siblings are musicians, but your father was a founder of the Concord String Quartet, the quartet in residence at Dartmouth College. Now that you are a member of a string quartet, and doing a mini-residency at Dartmouth, do you feel like you are carrying on a family tradition? What is that experience like?
Yes, I have an older sister who is a flute player and a younger sister who is a violinist. You know, a lot of people respond to our family, the fact we’re all musicians, as if it’s a novelty. I think it’s the opposite. Music was so much a part of life for us. The Concords were so much a part of the fabric of the community both at Dartmouth and in the whole local, Upper Valley community so that music was sewn into all parts of our lives. We grew up with so much admiration for our parents as musicians. It’s no wonder that we just loved it and wanted to pursue music. We wanted to emulate what we were seeing and feeling. I actually always wanted to be in a string quartet, all through school. That changed when I finished school. I could see a lot of quartets were struggling. It wasn’t as glamorous as it seemed as a kid and there were a lot more groups out there. Plus I was more restless then; I wanted to travel, but I didn’t want to be bound to one group. So I was surprised on one level when I started to consider joining the Apple Hill String Quartet. But Apple Hill is different than other quartet jobs. There is support, an infrastructure. You can do a lot of things because you’re not burdened with trying to make a living. And then once I sat down to play with the quartet, I remembered how much I liked it and how natural it felt to play with those guys.

6) What are your impressions of Apple Hill, including the summer workshop, teaching, work environment, and being a representative for Apple Hill’s mission?
As a teacher, I was always grateful that AH existed. I had students who were not at a level that they would get accepted to more competitive camps. But music camp was where I made music my own, found motivation to practice on my own, and got to play chamber music with kids at
my level so I want that for all my students. Apple Hill is one of the only places that provide that opportunity for all levels. It’s the same for adult beginners, too.

Apple Hill fills that niche. When I was on faculty, I enjoyed the work, especially coaching chamber groups with adults and mixed generations. The Apple Hill Playing for Peace mission fits my ambitions and interests really well. I had heard about AH when I was living and working abroad in Switzerland. I was inspired and actually wanted to do something similar over there with my chamber group. When I came back to the US, I connected with a relief organization that was going to travel to the Dominican Republic.

I brought my fiddle and played for the kids in the villages, and let them try it out themselves. Apple Hill has a good infrastructure for doing this work, and it does a great job at being ambassadors for music.

7) **When you’re not playing violin, what else do you enjoy doing?**

I’m someone who just enjoys life, just being, and I tend to have reflective ways of spending time. I think playing the violin and performing are very extraverted activities, so I find that I need rest from that. I like to walk and hike, meditate and I love to write. I study and practice body awareness techniques that help me in my playing and teaching and in everything I do—Alexander Technique and Body Mapping are two of these. Body Mapping is studying how the body is put together and makes movement and then creating visual maps to counter the false ones we have created subconsciously.