

# All-State: Some Helpful Viola Tips from a Master Teacher

by Sonja Elling, Betsy Neil, Elizabeth Becker, and Liz Deger

What a privilege it was to attend Stella Anderson's session at the 2000 All-State Summer String Teachers Seminar. She is a delightful teacher who is quite experienced and very enthusiastic. Anderson teaches viola at MacPhail Center for the Arts in Minneapolis and Macalester College in St. Paul.

Here are some tips Anderson shared with us about playing and teaching the viola. While the violin and viola are extremely close relatives in the string family, it is important to remember the subtle differences in playing each instrument.

Obviously, the viola is larger and is a slower responding instrument because of its thicker strings. A clearer more resonant sound can be obtained by keeping the bow placement (between the bridge and fingerboard) more central and by playing more in the lower part of the bow. Bow weight is also an important element. Anderson emphasizes the importance of feeling the motion of pulling the bow. If using proper placement and bow weight, the violist should not need to use as much bow to produce a good sound.

Playing with different bowing styles may also need special attention when playing the viola. Staccato, a "stop" articulation that seems simple enough according to Anderson is, in reality, quite difficult. It requires the player to have the coordination to start and stop the note on cue. When playing staccato, the bow needs to remain on the string from the moment the note begins to when it ends. The staccato stroke is most effectively taught in the lower third of the bow.

Once a student has mastered staccato, he or she should be able to learn the martelé stroke. Martelé is defined as "an effect obtained by releasing each stroke forcefully and suddenly." To achieve a martelé stroke, one needs to start the note with the bow on the string. The initial attack should be percussive in nature. The student should feel the bow pressing into the string (using the index finger to give the bow additional weight) at the onset of the stroke. While staccato and martelé bowing begin with a very similar attack, the martelé stroke ends with the note ringing. This is accomplished by releasing the weight of the

bow from the string.

Spiccato, a stroke where the bow comes off the string, is an articulation widely used in both orchestral and solo literature. One can find appropriate passages in which to use spiccato even in beginning pieces. There are two steps in teaching spiccato. The first is to practice moving the bow arm up and down vertically, allowing the bow to lightly touch the string and really feeling the upward motion of the bow. The next step is to move the bow more horizontally in a "U" shape, gradually allowing the bow to stroke the string. The more sound you want from the stroke, the more weight and bow length you add to the stroke. It is also crucial to keep the bow thumb relaxed and flexible to maintain control of the spiccato stroke.

Since violas and violists come in all shapes and sizes, Anderson stressed the importance of finding a balance between all of the body's needs and was reluctant to single out one method pertaining to instrument hold, shoulder rest, or chin rest that would be optimal for everyone. However, here are some hints that may help guide you in finding a productive combination.

Anderson began by reminding us of the importance of sitting correctly (not twisting the torso) and holding the viola in such a way as to balance the needs of both left and right arms. Those who convert from violin to viola need to be careful not to have the viola too far to the left, stressing neck muscles. We also need to be mindful of our bow arms getting too far to the right trying to avoid bumping the knee while bowing the A string. It is also important to make sure the instrument is placed where the left elbow is able to stay under the instrument.

One way to look at filling in the gap between the shoulder and the chin is to build up from the instrument rather than down. Adding height to the chin rest may work just as well or even better than adding height to the shoulder pad. Cliff Johnson in Minneapolis (612-377-2446) will custom make a chin rest with the additional height necessary to place one's head comfortably on the instrument. These have been very successful

with long-necked players. For others, an additional towel wrapped and set under the shoulder rest might provide the proper support. The goal of course, is to avoid neck strain and a raised shoulder that adds tension to the neck and back.

Another consideration is the type of chin rest and its placement. Anderson recommended a chin rest that fits more in the middle of the instrument over the tailpiece for students who are playing violas that are a little too big for their physique. Also, be careful of very flat or low chin rests. If there is not enough of a lip on the chin rest, players may contort their body in an attempt to find another way to "grip" the instrument. On the flip side, a chin rest that is cut too deep in the cup will "jab" uncomfortably into the neck.

Proper placement of the left thumb is also important to consider when playing the viola. Anderson suggested having the student put all four fingers on the fingerboard and tap the thumb to find where it naturally lies on the neck. It is generally closer to or across from the second finger. With shorter fingers, the thumb tends to lie low, with longer fingers it tends to lie high. A high thumb must be careful not to grab the instrument. It is also important to remember that the thumb should remain flexible enough to move forward with the placement of the 4th finger.

The final technique Anderson addressed was vibrato. She suggests teaching big motions first working your way down to the more fine muscle movements. Anderson says she values teaching all vibrato types: arm, wrist and finger. Wrist vibrato is needed more when playing in higher positions and finger vibrato is necessary when very high up the fingerboard.

A large part of Anderson's session involved examining, performing and discussing viola repertoire, especially for ensembles. Here are some examples from her recommended list:

Sheila Nelson, *String Songs*, Boosey & Hawkes. Upper elementary/Middle school; duets.

Lynne Latham, *15 Duets for Two Violas*, Latham Music. Middle

school; taken from Baroque  
keyboard works.  
Pleyel, *Duets*, Peters. High school.  
Mozart/Dishinger, *12 Duets for Violin  
and Viola*, K.487, Medici Music.  
arr. by David Levenson,  
*Quatrabratsche*, Latham Music.  
Middle school/high school; viola

quartets.  
*Tanzbucklein Fur 2 Bratschen*,  
Schott's Shone. Viola duets.  
JoAnne Martin, *I Can Read Music*,  
Summy-Birchard.  
Joseph Schmitt, *Sonata in G*, Medici  
Music.

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