



Viola

Vive la Difference!

by Annette Caruthers

There is controversy, misunderstanding and joking in the string world regarding the viola. Isn't it really just a big violin? Can't any violinist play viola too? Should children who are attracted to the lower sound of the viola start playing one at age 5? What are the differences between the violin and viola, from the viewpoint of a player and teacher? And why all these questions and jokes?

The viola is really just a bigger violin, proportioned slightly differently, plays one fifth lower than the violin does, and therefore has the same string letter names as the cello, but an octave higher. The larger size gives it a deeper tone that is wonderful, but requires a slightly deeper, slower bow stroke. This is a major difference because it means the player has to work harder than a violinist does, and, in fast passages, is a handicap which modern composers have chosen to ignore; modern repertoire requires violists to play just as fast and brilliantly as violinists. I find it really helps to keep the bow arm lower and the bow hold less pronated, so the weight of the arm helps to give the tension needed for the best sound, rather than the player using extra muscle strength to accomplish this.

The larger size of the viola also makes the distance between notes farther and changes the fingering choices players make. Violists use more second and fourth positions and fewer extensions than violinists usually do, and often choose to use separate fingers for each half step rather than sliding such a short distance. (For example, many violinists will play ascending chromatics: 1-2-2-3-3-4-0, but most violists will finger it: 1-2-1-2-3-4-0.) The size of the viola also makes it the heaviest instrument anyone in the orchestra has to hold up while playing!! Strength is needed, and many fine players are moving toward

smaller violas in recent years because of the weight and unwieldiness of larger instruments.

Because of the lower pitch of the strings on the viola, they really do not sound good on smaller, beginner-sized instruments. Therefore, I much prefer to start students on the violin unless they are already around nine years old. (I disagree with teachers who maintain that you have to start violists right from the beginning for them to develop their "identity" on the instrument.) Students starting on violin learn the treble clef, which violists have to learn anyway, and are missing only the lowest four notes of the viola, but get to play on an instrument that sounds and responds much better. There is so much available repertoire for student violinists that I see no need to play viola to develop technique — it does transfer remarkably well at a later time when the student is larger and stronger and can play a larger instrument. While students are on violin only, I recommend "third violin" to round out ensembles!

I also find that some violin students decide on their own to explore the viola when they begin working in really high positions on the violin; they discover that they do not care for the highest notes, or have difficulty hearing them, and gravitate toward the viola. Those choosing to play predominantly viola will have very little difficulty making the switch, learning the easier repertoire while they learn the viola clef. They will then progress very quickly to the same level on the viola that they had on violin. Some violinists love playing both instruments because of the variety it gives them. I do!

The viola section of an orchestra, or the violist in a quartet, is usually positioned in between the violins and celli, a position that can be uncomfortable

if the other two instruments do not agree on pitch or exactly how to place the beat. This sometimes means that the violas are the central voice that the others can compromise on in many situations, but not the soloists. This leads violists to become more adaptable and forgiving than some other instrumentalists need to be — and allows others to poke fun at them. (It can be risky poking fun at volatile people.) I also find that violists are usually a very cohesive section in an orchestra and make solid friendships with each other, rather than competing with each other. Over the years, there has been much speculation and theorizing about the personality differences between violinists and violists, and I do think those who love the spotlight usually stay with the violin, and may not even be aware of the wonderful viola repertoire that is available. There is plenty of repertoire to keep one interested for a lifetime!

I encourage violin students, as does Mimi Zweig at Indiana University, to play viola for a while during their later years of study. It gives them a broader perspective from which to choose tone colors, a better understanding of and ability to listen for the inner voices in groups, more options in the teaching studio, a better understanding of harmony, and a broader view of the musical world in general.

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