



# Viola

## Minor Problems

by Annette Caruthers

Many students struggle with pieces written in minor keys, and about two years ago I began a major effort to prepare them better for minor tonalities. With some theoretical study and a careful search of materials, I hit on a progression that seems to help a great deal. I hope that writing about what I do now with my students will be useful for some of our readers.

The Suzuki Method books contain "Tonalization" exercises in every volume. Beginning in Volume Two, minor arpeggios are introduced as part of tonalization (just before the middle of the book) and are wonderful preparation for the pieces in this book. I spend very careful time on these, and all tonalizations, because they help develop the student's ear for major and minor; and if played in tune, contribute to a great tone quality. If a student seems bored doing them many times, bowings and dynamics can be varied infinitely.

The *Royal Conservatory of Music Viola Syllabus* requires major and melodic minor scales and arpeggios at Grade 2, which correlates reasonably with the Suzuki Volume Two level.

But how to teach this to young students? I introduce note-reading to my students as soon as they can play a few Suzuki pieces well and maintain good position, so that they can read and understand at least simple songs and scales from the page, as well as by rote. I introduce scales by rote, and have them play one melodic minor scale by rote before beginning any explanations of theory. Students do best if they have experienced and listened to the minor first. Then I begin pointing out where they feel the half steps and hear them, doing a little testing as well. One test is to have the child turn their back to me while I play, then have them tell me whether I played a whole step or a half step. Some will need to find the notes on their own instrument before they can answer, and this helps them to identify what they hear. As they progress, I may

play several notes and have them tell me whether the half step is between notes 1-2, 2-3, or 3-4. When they do well with this, they are ready for more formal explanation of major and minor scales and how they relate to the key signatures. It is very easy to show them that on a D major scale they have half steps between F# and G, and also between C# and D; which are scale notes 3-4 and 7-8.

For melodic minor scales, I begin with the Major Scale Pattern and Melodic Minor Pattern shown in the chart. (Remember, they have already played this.) For some students we may go through only one key this way for several months, reviewing it all the time. When we have done several different keys of major and melodic minor scales, and they have progressed a good bit in their repertoire as well (maybe around the end of Book 3 or beginning of Book 4), I begin to explain and have them play harmonic minor as well. It helps most if I make a chart showing major and several minor scales directly under each other, so the similarities and differences are very clear.

I work through several keys this way, using keys in which their pieces are written, and showing them how the scales relate to the intervals they

play in the pieces — this is not dry, boring, theoretical stuff!!

There usually is a dislocation of some sort when students have to read in treble clef and have more advanced shifting. To help get through this, my favorite aid is Neil Mackay's *Position Changing for the Viola* published by Oxford University Press, and available from [www.oup-usa.org](http://www.oup-usa.org). This thin book of 13 pages has some great shifting exercises and short pieces using various shifting patterns, many of them in minor tonalities. I use this book with all my viola students.

When the students understand these and can play any of them when asked, they almost always can hear and play accurately music written in minor keys. When there are mistakes, it usually is simple for them to make a correction by showing them how the notes they are struggling with fit into one of the scale patterns which they already know!

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### Scale Charts

Numbers represent notes of the scale. ^ shows where the half steps are.  
+ shows the step and a half interval in the Harmonic Minor.

Major Scale	1	2	3^4	5	6	7^8^7	6	5	4^3	2	1
Melodic Minor	1	2^3	4	5	6	7^8	7	6^5	4	3^2	1
Harmonic Minor	1	2^3	4	5^6	+	7^8^7	+	6^5	4	3^2	1
Natural Minor	1	2^3	4	5^6	7	8	7	6^5	4	3^2	1