



# VIOLA

## Intonation

by Annette Caruthers

Intonation is one of the most basic elements of playing the viola, and for some students it is a never-ending quest. I do believe that intonation can be taught; here are a few of my thoughts or tips on how to help students do their best with intonation.

Be sure student can hear the difference between pitches that are close — have them turn their back and tell you which note is higher... or which one rings better... make it a game. Then when you are sure they hear which pitch is really accurate, they can learn to change their finger placement to match what they know is correct.

Listen for the “ring” the viola gives when a note is exactly right. If the pitch matches an open string, you can actually see the matching string vibrate with the note being played; or feel the string vibrating if you touch it with a finger while it is moving. Students love feeling the vibration and watching it happen.

Look for a repeated note in a passage... be sure it is exactly the same pitch each time it is played. You can improve a passage dramatically by correcting that repeated pitch, and this will help the student correct other notes in the same passage.

Be careful what you tune to... an E with first finger on D string often should not be tuned with the open A because that will cause the player to raise the pitch. Listen to the tone quality of the note and the interval from the previous pitch, and if possible, with accompaniment. As we do not play with tempered tuning, pitch does

change in various keys.

Play in 1st position, then the higher position. When shifting is involved, if the passage can be played in 1st position, often I find the student's comfort with 1st position can be used to help them play in tune in the higher position.

Play an octave lower, then in the higher position. This is a help when students are not confident that they hear intervals correctly for higher notes. When they hear the correct pattern in the lower octave, I find they usually can also hear it in the higher octave as well. Often I think this works because they have to figure out what the notes and intervals really are — which they may not have taken the time to do previously.

Play an octave lower while the student plays the upper octave. This gives students a basis and it is amazing how particular they can get when they hear that octave!!

If a passage looks somewhat like an arpeggio, try playing it as double-stops. If it looks like a scale, figure out which scale and play it as a scale. These attempts can be eye-opening. Once you hear the scale or double-stop it seems so much easier to play....probably because we recognize what we're trying to do so much better.

Play a passage backwards. I only recently discovered that once a player takes the time to figure out a passage backwards, it usually is much easier to play going forward. It may have something to do with figuring out what the notes actually are...

that careful second look at what we're doing.

“Feel” for the notes. If we correct the pitch of a note to match what our ear tells us, we have played it out of tune first, then made the correction. I like to point out the feel of half steps and whole steps with the adjacent fingers, and also steps across strings. Students sometimes love this when I explain that this way they can find the notes and play in tune even before they hear the note, and therefore no one will hear them correcting! Of course, with any of these suggestions, once the student makes corrections, they need to practice playing the corrected pitches... and our sense of touch helps us find the corrected pitch repeated times. Still, some students need to have this pointed out to them.

Faith Farr uses singing as an intonation tool. Go phrase by phrase, in 5 steps: play, sing, play, sing, play. You play first to learn how to sing. Then sing. Then play again to learn to sing better. Then sing again, and play again. It is always true that even for the most terrible singers, the effort to sing seems to focus the inner hearing and what they aim for on the instrument becomes more precise.

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