



## PERFORMER CORNER

### Mads Tolling

by Colleen Bertsch

When I heard that the Turtle Island String Quartet was going to present workshops and concerts at the All-State Teachers Workshop in August, I knew exactly whom I wanted to interview. Mads Tolling, the quartet's violist, is the youngest, newest member of TISQ, having joined in 2003. I was intrigued by the idea of someone using the viola, traditionally an inside, essential, but taken-for-granted instrument, in a musical genre other than western classical.

In Mads' case, he started out on and still professionally plays the violin. He grew up in Denmark, began playing when he was six, and delved into jazz in his teens. After his award-winning secondary school years, he graduated from the Berklee School of Music in Boston, and had performing stints with Jean-Luc Ponty and Joe Lovano among other big names. In addition to his current job with the Turtle Island String Quartet, Mads is in Stanley Clarke's band, the world-renowned innovator of jazz bass, and also records with vibraphonist Dave Samuels.

This busy man learned how to play the viola in less than two weeks in order to audition with TISQ. When he won the audition, he had to decide between playing the viola with the famous Turtles, and continuing his education at the prestigious Thelonious Monk Institute where he was offered free tuition, room, board, and a stipend, as a master's degree candidate. Mads made the choice sound easy when he said, "I usually just say 'yes' to any performing opportunities that come along."

In actual experience, Mads is a second-year violist. In terms of musicality and ability, he is well seasoned and fully competent on the world's stage. Readers who are violinists understand that the basic switching to the viola is only a couple of steps away. Like many of us, Mads started out reading alto clef by transposing from treble clef. Other than that, a little time might be needed to adjust to the difference in size.

But the stakes are higher when switching between the two instruments at a professional level. Mads never took lessons

on the viola. When he made the switch, he did so by playing in a way that made sense to him, adapting violin techniques that did work, changing the ones that did not. For example, although a bigger instrument would give him a bigger sound, he uses only a 16-inch viola. "What you gain in sound on a bigger instrument is diminished by the pain and suffering you go through," Mads said. "I'm a jazz improviser; I like to be virtuosic in a certain way when I'm soloing; I like to have the freedom on my instrument and that gets harder on a bigger instrument." Instead, he handles the issue of projecting sound by using a stiffer, heavier stick than what he normally uses on his violin. To avoid strain, he shifts more and uses the 4<sup>th</sup> finger less, and slightly bends the left wrist in.

Virtuosity and soloing are two words that most violists sorely miss in their everyday vocabulary. Lucky for him, Mads plays viola in a group that relishes the fact that they are breaking boundaries within the most traditional genres of Western music — the European string quartet and American jazz. "The viola's role in a classical string quartet is obviously to play the inner voices; you don't hear a lot of solos. In this group, it's so different. I obviously don't play melody all the time, but definitely much more. And I get to improvise solos just as much as the violins, if not more, because it has its own voice. Two violins will sound the same, but there is only one viola."

TISQ is a band. They take solos, comp, chop (a vertical, downward stroke at the frog to create a percussive effect), and rhythmize. They even do things that your teacher tells you not to do — like drumming on your instrument as if it were a bongo, or using a ridiculously wide and sliding vibrato — as long as it serves a musical purpose. Since he has a C string, Mads even gets to pull

off bass lines when cellist Mark Summer is soloing because the viola has more body to the sound than a violin.

I asked Mads to explain the process of learning how to improvise. It is a big question, so we decided that comping would be a good place to start. Short for "accompany," comping is when you create chords and follow the chord changes in support of what is happening in the melody. Mads' first tip is to always start by playing the chord's 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> tones. These two scale degrees give the real characteristic sound of each chord. The root of the chord is usually

covered by the bass line. After that, you can experiment with  $b_9$ ,  $\#_9$ ,  $\#_{13}$ , and other color tones — just let your ear decide if those notes sound good or not. "A practice tip for a player who is interested in this is to arpeggiate chords. Take a tune you like, like *Autumn Leaves*... the first chord is  $A_m7b_5$ , so play A-C-E $b$ -G; then D7: D-F $\#$ -A-C. Play that in time with the tune.



Then play them as double stops — try just the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of each: C/G to F $\#$ /C to B $b$ /F (the next chord is Gm7). It's about finding an easy way on your instrument to voice lead to the closest tones between chords."

Doing this exercise naturally leads to improvising melody lines. For someone like Mads who has built up experience and has a library of jazz sounds in his head, 50% of his solo improvisation is led by ear; then his brain kicks in to lead his fingers through scales and chords. Listening to recordings is the best way to develop that jazz ear, he says, but be sure to listen more to other instruments and less to your own. Especially as a string player, it is important to listen to trumpet, sax and piano recordings since these instruments are deeply rooted in jazz. Because of the instrument range, Mads thinks of tenor sax and guitar when he is playing jazz on viola.

Mads also continues to improvise on his violin. Traditionally, violinists are given the spot light — virtuosic, fast-note runs and stand-out melodies. Mads deals with this pressure on the viola like it is second nature. That is one leg up he has on viola-trained violists. Many developing violists get trapped into the mindset of being an inner voice. It is difficult for them, and others, to see that instrument as a lead voice.

The role of the bass went through the same growing pains until Stanley Clarke and Jaco Pastorius came along. Perhaps Mads Tolling, along with Svend Asmussen and Jean-Luc Ponty (who plays a 5 string violin) will do the same for viola.

In the mean time, for those of us just wanting to get our feet wet, Mads says, “If you are asking the question ‘am I ready to play jazz?’ the answer is ‘yes’. I say yes to

most things just to get experience. Playing jazz is a big task, so it’s better to start now rather than later. It doesn’t matter if you are still developing, technically.”

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