



VIOLA

A Painful Confession

or

How Playing First Violin in Symphony for Two Years Has Made Me a Better Violist.

by J. David Arnott

Let me begin by saying that I am a violist. All of my degrees are in viola. Until last summer (2004), the most recent violin lesson I had was in 1982. Truthfully though, there has not been a time over the last 20 years that I have not taught violin and even played the occasional gig on violin.

With my first college teaching job in 1996 came the concertmastership of the Bethany Oratorio Society Orchestra (Lindsborg, KS), which included two *Messiah* performances and a *St. Matthew Passion* every spring. While playing the violin solo in *Erbarme dich* the very first time, it was difficult to stifle either a smirk or a chuckle. The absurdity of a violin solo in my hands was just too much. It was a very small school and not terribly difficult to keep a step ahead of my more advanced violin students. At that time, I was lucky to have a student working on the Mozart G Major concerto or the Monti *Csardas*. When I came to Minnesota, I inherited a pretty empty violin/viola studio, which has since grown, and I now find myself practicing to keep up. Recently, I have had students playing Bach, Mozart, Mendelssohn, Bruch and Kabalevsky concerti, some Brahms sonatas, several Vivaldi *Four Seasons*, and, without exception, everyone plays Bach sonatas and partitas. As a teacher who believes in demonstration as the best example, this stuff forces me to practice — a lot! Last summer I went so far as to take violin lessons with a fabulous Minnesota Orchestra violinist.

My musical heritage goes through my last violin teacher, Charles Rex and my first viola teacher, Joseph de Pasquale, who studied with William Primrose (originally a violinist), Max Aronoff, and Louis Bailly. Primrose studied with Ysaye and Ysaye studied with... you get the picture. There are a lot of violinists in the old woodpile, which might imply that there is a lot of violin technique in the background as well.

I have always approached the teaching of violin and the teaching of viola differently, mainly reasoning that the larger size of the viola required a different technique.

Vibrato is certainly a different animal on the violin and I have always taught it differently than on the viola. For years I worked on “slow and wide” on the viola, always trying to avoid that tight, fast, and nervous violin vibrato. With a violin in my hands, the “slow and wide” vibrato covers about a step and a half anywhere above 6th position! What I have discovered after spending so much time with the violin is that a tighter and quicker vibrato sure makes the opening of the Walton viola concerto sound great!!

My approach to shifting on the viola has always been very different than on the violin. There is so much more real estate to cover on the viola. I actually find myself giving students the occasional “viola fingering” in something like Sevcik Op. 8. That is, the “creepy-crawly” method of “exchanging position” rather than the big leap bounding shifting. My students all know that shifting is best applied to a transmission rather than to a stringed instrument.

Because I have large hands, solid intonation on violin in upper positions is difficult and often requires the use of “alternative” fingerings (for example, the last 3 or 4 notes of a 3-octave scale might all be played with the third finger if it is not too fast). Obviously, playing in tune with the rest of your section is crucial. This critical attention to upper register pitch has helped my intonation at the top of the viola register. Since the violin parts usually lie an octave above the highest viola part, it makes the viola part seem not so high.

As a young student, I was never required to play the Flesch scales and it was not until college that I was given the Primrose scale book (now sadly out of print). As a latter day penance, I have been forcing my violin students (and now also my viola students) to play Flesch and like magic, all of a sudden my thirds and octaves (and theirs) are better on viola!

To return to the original point of this article, in the fall of 2002, I won a chair in the viola section of the Duluth-Superior Symphony. That year I played 6 out of 7

concerts in the viola section. As some sort of sick, twisted, and misguided experiment, they asked me to play first violin for a concert that included the 5th symphony of Sibelius. I have returned only once to the viola section since that concert and it has been quite an experience. In the last two years I have had to “learn” the first violin parts to such standard works as Shostakovich 5, Tchaikovsky 4 and 6, Brahms 1, Beethoven 6 and 9, and *Carmina Burana*. Of course this is all standard repertoire, but it is in the “other clef,” so to speak.

The time and effort spent preparing this violin repertoire has had an amazing effect on my viola playing including the following phenomena:

- The high stuff on viola does not seem so high any more and intonation up top comes much easier.
- I now crave on the viola the crisp pointy-finger articulation that comes so easily in the upper register of the violin.
- For some reason, I am now able to play scales on the viola faster than before (go figure).

Let’s face it; we can all agree that orchestral violin parts are usually more challenging than most viola parts. There are, of course, exceptions including, but not limited to: *Don Juan*, Tchaikovsky 4, Shostakovich 5, and Mendelssohn *Scherzo*.

Why did violin playing improve my viola skills? I’m not sure; it was quite a surprise. Could it have been all the extra practicing? The viola requires so much more strength to make a good sound. Did playing so much on violin weaken my muscles? Did it adjust my sensitivity to bow pressure? I don’t know. The viola generally requires larger spaces between half steps, as violas are (supposed to be) larger than violins (my viola is much larger than my fiddle). Did the adjustment to closer half-steps help in some way?

If any of you have shared this experi-

ence, I would love to hear about it.

There are many violinists who also play viola. There are multitudes of violists who began as violinists. What is the point of all of this? If you are a violist who never played violin, you should try it some time. See what makes it tick. If you are a violinist who

plays viola, there is a competition just for you: *The Alexander Schneider Competition for Violinists who Play Viola*. If you are a violist who began on violin, well, drag it out once in awhile. See what comes out of it. If nothing else, you will gain (or regain) your perspective on why you chose the noble

instrument in the first place.

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