



SCHOOL ORCHESTRA

Minnesota Youth Orchestral Longings: Fewer Violas in their Midst?

by J. David Arnott

This column comes to you from my perspective as president of the Minnesota Viola Society as well as from my background as an orchestral conductor. The focus of this piece is to help shed light on an “issue” dear to my heart: the orchestral viola player. This year, due to declining viola enrollments in both the Minnesota Youth Symphony and Greater Twin Cities Youth Symphonies, the Minnesota Viola Society hosted “viola days” for each group. These events consisted of Minnesota Viola Society members bringing a wide selection of violas in a variety of sizes to youth orchestra rehearsals and putting them in the hands of (hopefully) interested violinists. First, we had the students play tunes they already knew from the violin to get them used to the larger size. We then presented the alto clef as a sort of central station between treble and bass clef and then had the students “read” a couple tunes in alto clef that they immediately recognized (thank you, Dr. Suzuki!).

We demonstrated some orchestral excerpts, especially those favoring the resonant C-string as well as some solo viola excerpts and we discussed the opportunities available for violinists who play viola (the ability to cover 3 out of 4 parts in a string quartet for example). I am not sure we converted anyone to the viola (and that was never really our intent), but we did expose a bunch of kids to the pleasures of the C string. All involved determined it to be a successful event for both the youth orchestras and the Minnesota Viola Society (whose mission is “to promote, study, and further the research and performance of

the viola and its repertoire”). I am confident that the Viola Society will be asked to run this program again and hope that there might be interest among the ranks of middle school teachers to invite us to provide such a service in their schools!

The burning question we must ask is: why do we have so few viola players at the middle school and high school level? Minnesota (especially the Twin Cities) seems to be especially rich with professional viola players. From the viola pages of the musicians union directory to the number of violists who show up for local auditions, I believe it is fair to say that, at the professional level, we are flush with super viola players. But from where will the next generation of quality violists originate? We must continue to produce players in elementary and middle school. We must find a way to convert appropriate high school violin players to the viola. What seems to be the issue? I can only assume several things: a) we are not starting enough violas early enough in school programs — either by not convincing them that the viola is a viable choice or by not presenting it in as fashionable light as it could be; b) middle school size violas sound lousy and nobody wants to play them; c) we are not doing enough to actually promote viola playing at a young age; d) viola parts are not challenging enough to hold the interest of young players; e) we are reluctant to suggest to high school violinists that they consider the viola — for fear of alienating private teachers or the students themselves.

We can easily solve these issues in a

timely manner (though I am willing to grant that small violas usually do not sound very good). Viola parts in school orchestra music are better than ever (the MNSOTA Summer Teachers Workshop reading sessions prove this every year). We now have a state chapter of the American Viola Society ready, willing, and able to promote the viola on any level from beginning student to adult professional. I also concede that we must be careful when trying to promote viola playing to older students, especially when private teachers are involved.

What are the benefits of viola playing? At least at my collegiate institution, a viola scholarship is easier to win than a violin scholarship. As a professional musician, I get more work because I play both violin and viola. As a chamber music coach, I do not ever have to worry that I am ignoring the violist just because I do not read the clef (please do not consider this an accusation!), and violists, in general, are the salt of the Earth.

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