



VIOLA

Alice's Insights — Vibrato for Viola

by Annette Caruthers

At the MNSOTA summer Teachers' Workshop this year, I attended Alice Preves' session with the All-State Orchestra viola section and her presentation to the teachers. She began the session by talking about the joy teaching brought to her, and the wonderful students she had worked with over the years. She stated several times what an honor it has been for her to work with students and other teachers.

In working with the All-State students, she emphasized feeling the phrasing of a section solo together, and really worked to help them keep their sound going on crescendos through the bow changes. Her work was very positive and effective. Then she asked the students where they wanted help, and suggested fingerings that might help them.

With the teachers, Alice began by discussing how to help a student switch from violin to viola. She really emphasized the need for instruments that have a narrow neck, with the strings not too high off the fingerboard, so the instrument will be easier to play. Some violas are heavy, with thick necks or high strings, and the extra effort needed to play them will hold the student back. Note-reading can be a problem for new violists, and she recommended having students write out their scales and arpeggios in the correct clef.

With a smile for us all, Alice then stated that her "pet subject" was teaching vibrato to violists, and then gave us a great step-by-step process for working on arm vibrato, which she has found to be more reliable and

natural, and which gives a tone she prefers. (I have recently begun teaching some of her students, and I can see that her method really gives them a beautiful tone!!) She emphasized that teaching vibrato almost always involves "re-teaching" — every student tries vibrato on their own, and virtually none of them have an effective way of doing it, so we have to undo their work by showing them that our way will give better results that they will love.

Begin the vibrato with the viola in banjo position, with a straight left forearm and wrist, and fingers sliding on the strings. (Picture to yourself how people show "air guitar" and you'll have it just about right.) Then anchor the thumb, with the palm of the hand facing the body of the instrument, hand hanging from neck of the viola. For this step the hand and arm move the fingers over the strings, but the thumb stays still. The base of the thumb will have to be very flexible for this to work — and that is the point of this step.

When the thumb is used to moving well, have the student put their second finger on the string, or between strings, and let it slide. Then add some weight to the finger, as if playing an actual note. The arm and hand continue to move just as before. The back of the hand can touch the A string peg when it slides down, and the first knuckle will have some "give" to it.

The next step is to have the viola in "shotgun" position — like banjo position, but instead of having the instrument down by your waist, the end button is up on

the right shoulder. The viola can be facing out or more facing up, depending on the student's progress, with the scroll reaching out in front, sort of centered on the body. Have the hand and arm moving and a bit of weight on the finger and the left arm starting to come around the front of the body a bit more. Then gradually move the instrument up to the left shoulder, moving the arm and hand slowly and narrowly for the vibrato. At all times the base knuckle of the left thumb must be freely moving, even though the ball of the thumb stays in one place. This freedom of motion is especially important. Also important is the evenness of the movement: this must be a controlled motion, not a "tight wiggle." If the student gets too tight at any point, the exercises can be slowed down, and previous steps can be re-worked to remind the body how to move. Keep checking to be sure the left hand stays open and that the fingers touch the strings in a normal playing position.

Some students can take months to work through these steps, but Alice told us about one student who did it all in 5 minutes!! I have not had a student like that, ever; but wouldn't that be fun?

Annette Caruthers teaches viola and violin at her private studio in Minneapolis and St. Louis Park. She is a former member of the Minnesota Orchestra and currently serves as violist with many organizations including the Minnesota Opera Orchestra and VocalEssence. †