



VIOLA

Drawing that Great Deep Viola Sound

by Annette Caruthers

Often violists are violinists who decide they like the deeper tone of the viola, or don't enjoy the upper range of a violin. One of the biggest challenges they face is the difference in response of the instrument, due to its size and mass of the strings. We definitely have to let the bow sink into the string more, and pull it a bit slower than a violinist does, at least on the lower strings. This magnifies the difficulties of trying for a really smooth tone at the point where the balance in the bow hand and arm shifts on long strokes. If this last sentence did not make sense to you, try this: pull a long slow down bow with your first finger lifted from the bow stick; at about the middle or just above it, you will have to have that first finger back on the stick, just at the point where the balance shifts!

To work on this, try having students use a metronome set at 60 and count the number of seconds they can keep a continuous sound for each bow stroke. In a group, a "slow bow contest" can be a great way to do this! For private lessons, I sometimes have a "contest" with the student myself; they love winning, and sometimes do. The key point here is that they have to keep a

continuous sound. Once they can make a bow stroke last 15–20 seconds, I start working for volume. Emphasizing that the viola holds up the bow, and that their arm should hang from the bow (it doesn't really, but it can certainly feel that way) helps, and so does keeping the right shoulder and upper arm from lifting or being "held." Everything has to work freely, with the upper arm (not shoulder) moving up just a bit at the very frog, and with the bow close to the bridge.

For many students there is a stage at which they can make a sound and keep it going, but it is not pretty. It is more of a "creaking" sound. I give them permission to drive their families nuts with this, which they enjoy, as long as they are keeping the bow into the string and moving.

To refine the tone, once the bow arm is working properly, students need to listen to the tone they're getting and experiment with the distance from the bridge that the bow is tracking. Integrating vibrato also helps remove the "creaking" from the tone. The problem here comes from the fact that our brains want our hands to work together! Having a smooth, fast vibrato while drawing a deep slow bow can be a real

challenge. We've all seen the student whose bow vibrates along with their left hand when they first try vibrato! A metronome can help with this, too. Try setting it at 60 again, and having the students give two complete vibrato motions per beat as you increase the metronome speed. You want as many seconds per bow stroke as you can get, even as you increase the metronome speed, but if you've been working on the longer deeper bows all along, this will get better quickly. Within just a few weeks, if the student already has a developed vibrato, they should be excitedly showing everyone their beautiful new true viola sound and really loving it.

Annette Caruthers is a violist and teacher of violin and viola in the Twin Cities. A former member of the Minnesota Orchestra and Utah Symphony, former Principal Violist of the Minnesota Opera Orchestra for many years, she is now teaching full-time from studios in St. Louis Park and Southwest Minneapolis. Her students have gone on to careers in music and often play on the first stands of the youth symphonies. To contact Annette email Annettemusician@gmail.com. †