



MAKER'S BENCH

Observations and Reflections on Small Violas

by William Robert Scott

As a violinmaker, I often hear, “Well, isn’t a larger viola going to have a better sound?” That question is more difficult to answer than one would think. There is plenty of evidence that a larger, comparably made viola will have a darker, richer C-string and probably more volume output. The question is really, “Are there smaller instruments that will truly fill my needs as a violist?” I would like to reflect on what a player might consider when thinking about getting a smaller instrument: things to be careful about and a vocabulary that should help in narrowing down your options when talking to a dealer or maker. Searches for small violas (16” and shorter) are more common among musicians wanting to avoid or recover from playing injuries and violinists looking for a viola which is “comfortable and playable” for them.

The size of an instrument is quite relative; body length isn’t the only thing to consider. One has to look at the shape of the upper bout, the height of the ribs, the string length and neck shape. The upper bout shape and rib height affect shifting to the higher positions. Also, body width can bring challenges to the playability of a viola. For example, if the middle bout area is very wide on an instrument, the bow hand can have difficulty clearing the instrument and the frog can hit and damage the edge or corners on the treble side. This is especially a problem if the setup hasn’t accommodated this. Correct tilt on the fingerboard and bridge can help mitigate this. Asymmetrical adjustments to the outline of the viola can be made to resolve some of these issues. Some of these designs are quite extreme at which point we lose the “traditional shape” of the instrument, which may or may not be appealing to players.

A musician may not be aware of what is causing “an awkward feeling,” but nonetheless, he or she is very conscious of something not being right for them. The feel and response of an instrument is every bit as important as the perceived sound output;

in fact they are, in my opinion, inseparable. Confidence affects sound quality in a performance, and confidence comes from the player’s connection to the instrument and music being performed. The feel and response of the bow and viola are equally important.

Smaller violas can have a very good alto sound quality, an even tonal color range from the low to high register and be considerably less tiring to play. Design and outline of the instrument, selection of wood and arching shape play a key role in this. The performer also has numerous choices of strings that can enhance preferred tonal qualities. The recurring question is, “Will the viola carry well in a hall and with other instruments?” String length affects sound output. Longer strings have more tension and therefore more energy and projection. A shorter string length on the other hand can produce a warmer, more intimate sound. The difficulty is finding a happy balance between these and matching the player to an instrument. Any string player who has compared numerous bows and instruments knows that how they may play on a given instrument produces a different sound than a colleague playing the same instrument and bow.

The best-known schools of viola design originated in two towns in northern Italy, namely Cremona and Brescia. Although they are less than an hour apart by car, the design and aesthetical differences are enormous. These small cities were the birthplaces of the violin family of instruments nearly 450 years ago—Andrea Amati in Cremona and Gasparo da Salo in Brescia. Many examples of these makers are still around today. Notable differences that affect the sound and playability are the arching and string length. The Brescian arch is extremely puffy and very full to the edge of the outline with a sudden drop towards the purfling. The typical Cremonese arch has a much more graceful “re-curve” before it reaches the purfling near the edge. The

arch height can vary but it will generally have this re-curve, especially with the Amati family of makers. The string length is determined by where the f-holes are placed on the belly and the neck length, which is proportional to the position of the f-hole notches and upper edge. (On a modern instrument this is a 2 to 3 ratio.) Of course, there are variations of each of these styles, which can help affect the sound, and with considerations for the size and shape, the performer has numerous choices. There is always room for innovation, but looking at the historical record, since not much has changed in 400 years of violin making, patterning violas after these masters seems like a good starting point.

Tonal characteristics vary as a result of these differences. I find in general, the Brescian model will produce plenty of sound, be very playable because of the shorter string length and narrower body but may have a slightly restricted tonal color, albeit very pleasant, warm and inviting. The Cremonese models seem to have plenty of tonal color and maybe a little more carrying power. Violinmakers often compensate the shorter models by adding width. This is something the violists will want to check, looking for clearance for the right hand and bow from the treble C-bout.

The search for the right instrument can be a daunting experience and take some time. I hope that some of this information will assist you or a colleague in understanding what you already might intuitively feel as you play a viola. Also, as you talk to players, dealers or makers, understanding some of these differences may help you in describing that “perfect instrument” for which you may someday be searching.

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