



VIOLA

Getting Creative with Harmonics

by Annette Caruthers

I have always introduced harmonics fairly early with young students, usually for something fun in small groups. *Allegro* in Suzuki Book I can be a great piece for introducing the idea of shifting and harmonics and freeing up the left hand if it needs that. I show students how the mid-point of each string will give them the octave harmonic, place a small sticker on that spot, and have them use that instead of the fingered D the piece starts with, and continue with the G etc. Some students love this and try to find other notes they can play as harmonics in new pieces. Of course, I do have to watch how they move their hands/arms for this type of shifting, but I love the way they enjoy this while really freeing up the left hand.

In working with a few older students who seem to have a death grip on the neck of their instruments I am finding use of harmonics to be an interesting, engaging way to help them. I first tried this by working with the octave notes again, but have now expanded it to using harmonics with third and fourth finger notes. Because the third finger always seems to be less independent than other fingers, many students will grip with the left thumb when they use the third finger. Trying to get a ringing harmonic instead of a stopped note seems to encourage a more relaxed hand, and most students enjoy the odd notes they will get this way.

Fourth fingers also can play harmonics, if they reach exactly the right spot on the string and lower fingers are lifted, and this does get students listening and feeling very carefully for the correct finger spacing. Two of my students have really improved their intonation by doing this!

Another idea I love to work with is using harmonics as part of vibrato development. This is easier done in higher positions where the strings are just a bit higher off the fingerboard. I have students roll their fingers on the string, one at a time, without pushing down the string for a stopped note, and using exactly the same motion needed for a good vibrato: rolling from the note to a bit below it, and then back up to the note again. Over time this can train the muscles needed for the vibrato motion and it really seems to be helping the ones who have previously been too tight to move smoothly. I love it! This is a silent activity, with no bow at all, so it can even be done while watching television—or during commercials if the program demands too much attention. Again, how the movement is done is the most important part of this work.

Learning octaves is another project that can be helped by harmonics. The left hand has to be shaped exactly the same way for octaves as for artificial harmonics (the type we play by stopping the string with the first finger and placing the fourth finger lightly

on the string) but the tension is released by playing a harmonic rather than playing both notes stopped, and the finger spacing has to be really exact to get the harmonic to ring. Offering another way to work on the same problem helps students stay motivated, and many love the unexpected notes harmonics add to their practice.

I do explain as we go which notes they will get from each type of harmonic, but don't get bogged down too much in the theoretical basis of the harmonic series. Mostly, I love finding creative ways to get my students to work on their music, and this is turning out to be one of my better ideas! Any ideas I get from readers I would love to add in a future article; please do email me if you have creative practice ideas you've used.

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