



CHAMBER MUSIC

The Viola and Second Violin... the Unsung Heroes of Chamber Music Groups!

by Tom Rosenberg

When violinists are asked what part they prefer to play in chamber music, there are often just two answers. I wish more often that there were three common answers, but more on that later.

Some like to feel like they are the star, and so they want to play first violin. Others are either unwilling or unable to take on the first violin part, which often features the most virtuosic part writing in the strings, and so they choose second violin.

The irony in that decision is that playing second violin well in a chamber ensemble requires a skill set that is in many ways more difficult than what the first violin is required to do. And, it is very different than in orchestra, where the individual player can and often should blend into the section. In a chamber ensemble, the second violinist has tremendous responsibilities.

Here are some examples:

- Setting the tempo. Although the tune at the beginning of a piece may not be in the second violin, the inner rhythm is often in the second violin. In those situations, that player controls the actual tempo of the piece. A great example of that is Beethoven's *Quartet in F, Opus 59 #1*, where the cello has the tune, but the second violin and viola have the eighth notes under the tune, and therefore are really in control. By the way, the first violin doesn't play anything at the beginning of that piece!
- Having a very strong personality from the stage. In a good group, all the players have distinct and interesting personalities from the stage. But, because there is another violinist who sits in front of the second violin, *and* who has their part written in a better register for projection than the second violin, *and* whose part is often more "showy" than the second violin, the second violin needs to play with more character and power than would possibly make sense if they were

playing the first violin part. A great example of this occurs in the last page of the finale of Beethoven's *Quartet in C, Opus 59, #3*.

- Understanding the emotional context the harmony plays in a quartet. Often, this difficult task is placed upon the second violinist. A great example of this is the first movement of Schubert's *Quartet in A minor*. Many students only see the pages of running sixteenth notes and think they "don't have anything." While it may seem that they don't, what is more accurate is that they don't have much melody. What they do have is the heart and soul of the music. Every one of those sixteenth notes relates to and affects the melody in both subtle and bold ways. Those sixteenth notes are actually the most interesting part of the four in that very beautiful work.
- Understanding how to adjust thirds and sevenths in chords so that the group intonation works. The second violin more often than not is given a note other than the root or the fifth in chord writing. This means that most of the time, the second violinist will need to be the one to alter their note to fit the vertical intonation required of good ensembles. Take the example of a standard C Major chord. The cello will have the low C...an open string. The viola will have a low G, also an open string and (hopefully!) a perfect fifth above the cello. The first violin will have either a C or G in the melody and will have an open string in the cello or viola to match to. That leaves the second violin with an E natural to fill out the chord. If the second violinist plays an open E, or matches an open E, they will sound out of tune (quite sharp!). This is one of the great difficulties of quartet intonation. Thirds and sevenths almost always need to be slightly low to sound in tune in the chord. While

all four players need to understand this, it is the second violin part that usually requires this more often than the other parts.

Earlier in the article, I mentioned that I wished there was a third response to which part in a chamber ensemble violinists would like to play. That third answer, which is a choice that from my perspective is not heard enough, is: "*I want to play the viola!!*"

The viola is an awesome instrument that is fun to play, often has spectacularly gorgeous part writing, is uniquely colorful and is much like a good character actor in a movie...interesting...vital to the whole...but not the main star. Yet, the honest truth about most pre-college chamber ensembles (and youth orchestras) is that there simply are not enough good violists to go around. There are many reasons for this that are too complex to go into in this article with any detail. But some of the obvious ones include that many more students start on the violin (especially in Suzuki programs), there is more quality solo repertoire for the violin, the viola projects with more difficulty than the violin, and there are many more violin teachers than viola teachers.

There is a relatively easy solution to this problem, and some regions of the country have figured it out at the pre-college level.

In some ways, I have a unique window on the nation's pre-college chamber music scene. For over thirty years now, I have been the Artistic Director of The Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition. That competition remains unique in that it is the only major chamber music competition in the world with a pre-college division. As such, I have watched the amazing evolution of the nation's pre-college chamber music movement as it has grown both in scope and quality, and also have observed which cities and programs seem to always have wonderful violists for their pre-college ensembles. *The answer to this is often that the top violin teachers in those cities or programs not only allow their students to try viola, but*

often require it.

It is also very common at that competition for the top groups in the pre-college level to have players switch instruments from one piece to another. So for example, the second violin will move over to viola, the first violin will become second violin, and the violist will then play first violin. They will all take turns playing each part. Of course not all groups do this, but a surprisingly large number do. The result is equally strong players on all three parts, and students who learn and understand the differing but equally important roles those parts have in a good chamber ensemble. They are better musicians for it!

A well-coached group will get the best player on a particular piece in the most suitable chair. For example, if the viola part is especially dynamic, such as in the Smetana *E minor Quartet* or the Brahms *B-flat Quartet*, the strongest player will be on viola.

As a pre-college chamber music coach, I do often ask violinists to try the viola for a piece. I do this for several reasons, including the fact that in this region of the country, there are too few good pre-college violists. (It is true in the region's youth orchestras as well.) Of course, the results can vary. Some students immediately love the different sound and physical sensation the viola has compared to violin. Some enjoy being in a position of less audience scrutiny than first violin, and revel in the role they play in adding color and depth to the quartet sound. Some love the often quirky part writing that violas get to enjoy.

I find that most often, a student will start with reluctance, and usually end up enjoying playing the viola. Learning a new clef is challenging for the first week or two, but is almost always quickly overcome. Some end up permanently switching, or at least playing viola all the time in chamber ensemble or orchestra while still playing violin as their solo instrument. It is also wise to have students to start playing on relatively small violas, to minimize the slightly different issues that arise in left hand position. I have found that overall, intonation issues are not nearly as significant as people assume they will be—the ear leads the left hand to play in tune.

Students who learn to play both instruments well gain a lot. They not only become more versatile artists, but they can play leadership roles as violists in orchestra as well as chamber music. Music schools and colleges around the country often seek good violists and often offer scholarships to those who are violists or play both violin and viola. At the professional level, I believe many orchestra viola sections have players who started out as violinists. In many professional touring string quartets, including some of the greatest in the world, the violist was or still may be a violinist.

If you are a student who plays violin...I encourage you to give the viola a chance! If you are a violin teacher with students ready for a chamber music group and all the benefits that experience will give your students...I encourage you to urge them to try the viola.

Many violinists quickly learn to enjoy playing viola and happily play it some of the time. Of course, not all students who agree to try the viola (or are required to by their teachers) do well. Some never sound right or get comfortable. And...some truly fall in love with the viola, realize they were meant to play the viola and make the permanent switch. So remember...there are three parts every violinist can play in a chamber music group...choose that often overlooked third one and see what amazing things might happen!

Tom Rosenberg teaches chamber music and cello from his home in Saint Paul and at several local colleges. His students are frequent prize-winners and many have performed on NPR's "From the Top" program. His performing career includes being a member of several different chamber ensembles and a substitute performing with the Minnesota Orchestra and Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra. Since 1981, he has been Artistic Director of the Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition for which he was a co-recipient of the 2007 Indiana Governor's Arts Award. A three-time Naumburg Chamber Music Award finalist, he also is a recipient of the McKnight Performing Artist fellowship, the "Master Studio Teacher Award from MNSOTA in 2004, and the "Arts Educator of the Year" by the Michigan-Indiana Arts Council. You can contact Tom through www.tomrosenbergmusic.com 🐘