



# VIOLA

## From Student to Life-Long Musician

by J. David Arnott

As I write this I am listening to my 12-year-old daughter's first real chamber orchestra rehearsal (outside of summer string camp) as she plays with a group of people working their way through Messiah movements and English string music and some *Peer Gynt*. The group consists of several advanced Suzuki students, some community members, a few college students, local string teachers, the local violin repairman, and the ensemble is conducted by a retired string teacher here in St. Cloud. It is a disparate group indeed. What these people all have in common, though, is their love of music, which is the truest meaning of the term "amateur." To do something purely for the love of it.

On the other side of the music world from this group, there are two other groups of people who also, one assumes, love music, but are idled by stalled contract negotiations and have been locked out by the corporate overlords who manage their organizations. Will we hear the likes of these world-class musicians playing in our state anytime soon? Hopefully by the time you read this all will be settled. It's hard to tell at this time—but we will still be able to hear orchestral music in Minnesota from border to border, east to west and north to south. Though it will not necessarily be played at the level of the SPCO or the MNO, orchestral music is alive and well around here.

Varying levels of orchestras may be found not just in the greater Twin Cities but also in Fargo-Moorhead, Duluth-Superior, Mankato, Rochester, Austin, Albert Lea, Grand Forks, Mesabi Community Orchestra, Alexandria, Itasca, Cherokee Symphony Orchestra, Willmar, St. Cloud, Little Falls, and Brainerd. Who plays in these groups?

Will your students be able to participate in a community orchestra by the time you get done with them? Are you teaching them with the goal that their next concert turns out great, or are you teaching them with the goal that music will always be a part of their existence? It is so easy to fall into the former and so hard not only to teach but to model the latter that it bears a bit of pondering. I admit the liberal arts institution for which I work has clouded my vision as far as the level of musician I am trying to produce, but I do try to ensure that the musical skills they take away with them from here be enough to keep them interested for the rest of their lives.

What skills will your students need to be able to participate in a community orchestra after high school/college? How big a jump is it from high school to community orchestra? Clearly it depends on the community, but there are necessary skills that cross all boundaries.

Comfort in at least 1<sup>st</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> positions. Comfort up to 5 sharps or flats (major and minor) with ability to figure out the rest. By "comfort" I mean effortlessness in these positions, to be able to play in these keys without having to think twice about them. There is a difference between comfort and minimum ability. Of course, we need to be able to play all the way up the fingerboard—in all keys—but a minimum ability level of "comfort" is what we should be developing in our students.

The ability to execute a variety of bowings from molto legato all the way through saltando is something we can instill in our students. Knowing where to be in the bow is crucial in any orchestral playing. Knowing to watch where the principal player bows is easily overlooked. Marking

any bowings arising from the front stands should be second nature.

Do we make sure our students have an excellent appreciation for dynamic levels from *pppp* through *ffff*? I myself have played Tchaikovsky and Mahler in community orchestras—and both composers use these dynamic levels frequently.

Orchestral etiquette is another set of skills we can impart to all our students. Tuning quietly and carefully is important and greatly appreciated. Having the discipline not to talk needlessly during rehearsals is of value at every level.

It is never too soon to become familiarized with major orchestral repertoire. How many of your kids would recognize Beethoven 5? That's too easy? How about Beethoven 6 (sure...some might have seen *Fantasia*). What about Beethoven 4 or 7? Are there opportunities to play recordings of symphonic music in your classes? Do you have a composer-of-the-month where you might play 5 minutes of a half dozen different works?

Whether or not we get to hear the Minnesota Orchestra or the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra again this year is not exactly the point. Hopefully by the time you read this they will be merrily making music again. We need to be encouraging our students to attend concerts at this level of musicianship, but we also need to encourage them to continue to play after they are done with school. What we are offering them is a lifetime of opportunities in music.

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