



VIOLA

Need a Violist? — Make One!

by J. David Arnott

In looking over the last dozen issues of *String Notes* to prepare for this article and to ensure that I not cover a previous topic, it is easy to see why it regularly wins the ASTA award for best state publication! As this is my first official Viola Column, I would like to take this opportunity to discuss not just particular musical aspects of the viola and its adherents, but some of the ways of creating viola players as well. You can't just make a violist out of thin air, but you can definitely make a violist out of a carefully chosen violin player.

I recently had a conversation with a high school orchestra director regarding the process, dare I say, evolution, of turning a violinist into a violist. I recommended a book that has lived in my library for a number of years, something that was purchased, I believe, at an International Viola Congress. The book is by Dwight Pounds and is titled *Viola for Violinists: The Conversion Kit*. The dedication page includes an ASTA luminary, a past president of the American Viola Society, and a well-respected studio teacher. The acknowledgment page is a veritable who's who from the viola world.

The book focuses on the similarities between violin and viola playing and a method for learning to read the new, more centrally located, clef—while at the same time retaining knowledge of the treble clef for continued use without benefit of an E-go string. An allowance is made so that both violinists comfortable up to third position may benefit from this book and also advanced violinists with experience at greater altitude—say through 7th position.

At first glance the book is a daunting challenge, but after a careful reading, including perusing the suggested accompanying etudes by Wohlfahrt, it makes sense, though I believe it does take the services of a dedicated studio instructor to make it all work as it involves pedagogically intense exercises. It moves methodically from violin to viola using the same material played on both instruments. It is truly intended for the serious minded player wishing to seriously play the viola.

An alternative and simpler method of moving violinists to viola, which I have (mostly) successfully used in the past, is quite simple. It involves handing a kid a viola and the first 2 or 3 *Essential Elements* books. *Strictly Strings*, *All For Strings*, or just about any beginning pedagogical series will work. Begin right at the beginning with the first open string “notes on the clef exercises” (not the “letter names in note heads” which lack the benefit of a clef for reference). From this point it is really just a matter of re-training both eye and finger. All books begin with open strings—which are our four visual reference points. Work on connecting open strings to their respective homes on the clef and you are well on your way. The first couple Suzuki viola books are also a good place to start also clef reading as the tunes within are familiar to most students—though it is necessary to ensure that budding violists are actually reading the notes from the page and not playing by ear.

If you do have Suzuki trained violinists then you might also start your newly minted violists on the first book or two of the Suzuki violin series. Again, they are tunes most students know very well and they will immediately force new violists to become familiarized playing in their familiar register without the distraction of an E string. Students will immediately realize that moving up and down the A string to reach once easily played notes on the E string are not so difficult. For this exercise, reading the notes from the page is not as important as the logistical enterprise of moving up and down the A string comfortably. This is also a good opportunity to add a shifting exercise or two to the mix (Sevcik Op. 8 works fine for this). I suppose you could just remove the E string of a violin and achieve the same results. As a matter of course, I make sure all my viola students are able to read treble clef well.

Is this the best way to create violists? It depends on the level of violinist with which you begin, and the level of violist you wish to develop. If you are looking just to fill a spot in your orchestra viola section

with a capable player, you should start with a capable violinist. If you are looking to strategically move a student to viola for practical and permanent reasons or to fill out a string quartet, then start with the best student you have who is eager to participate in such a venture.

Of course the most important thing to keep in mind when creating violists from violinists is to ensure that each student is properly fitted with the larger, new, and improved instrument in terms of the length of the instrument and combination of shoulder pad/chin rest. Proper fit enables encouragement without the physical damage resultant from playing an instrument that is too large. Keep in mind the basics: string length, body length, overall length, and width of the upper bouts. In my studio I use a regular wooden yardstick from Knilling that has measurements on both sides—one side for violin size and the other for viola size. In all the years I have been teaching I have found this method to be accurate. It's a good excuse to attend an ASTA conference to acquire a stick of your own! A proper viola bow is also a must-have item for new violists.

Don't forget that demonstrations of great viola playing are readily available. A YouTube.com search for such alto clef luminaries as William Primrose, Joseph de Pasquale, Atar Arad, Kim Kashkashian, Nobuko Imai... will earn students an opportunity to easily and freely hear some of the great violists of the last 50 years.

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