



VIOLA

Miscellaneous Musings

by J. David Arnott

Over the last few weeks I have been trying to solve a variety of issues for my viola students, including a 6' plus young man buying a new viola, really teaching students how to practice as opposed to simply teaching them how to play a piece, preparing college and summer festival audition materials, and preparing for competitions. This column will explore some of these issues.

On practicing

At the time of this writing, preparation for of the All-State Orchestra viola excerpts for this year is underway. This year's selections come from Borodin's *Polovtsian Dances*. There are three short excerpts, each with a specific technical/pedagogical value to demonstrate (including the reading of notes which clearly should be written in other clefs). There is a rhythmic excerpt, a finger dexterity excerpt, and a tone/phrasing excerpt. This is a great set of excerpts and it is really easy to show students why each one was chosen—which makes it much easier for them to practice. When you really know what the point each selection is trying to prove, it allows students to focus on the bigger picture than just learning the tunes. When we teach specific pieces at the expense of overall technique, we do our students a disservice. To paraphrase—teach a student to play a concerto and you could earn a superior rating. Teach a student how to practice a concerto—and you can know that you have changed their life.

I have one student who comes to each lesson having made a world of improvement every week and with whom it is a struggle to keep up. This young man has been very busy winning things this year. He was accepted to the National Youth Symphony for a second year, is a finalist for Minnesota Varsity, played for the Schubert Club, and just won the St. Cloud Symphony Concerto Competition. I'm happy to take all the credit for his success but that would be disingenuous. What I will take credit for is teaching him how to practice, which has allowed him to learn music as rapidly as I have ever seen any other student do. Teaching how to practice—making sure your students walk out the door with a specific

plan of attack—ensures that progress will be made every week. You can't just say "go home and practice this some more," you have to have a plan. Kids no longer seem to have the time to devote to practicing, so giving them the tools to get the most out of every minute they do practice is our new reality as teachers.

The value of an accompanist

One of the other things my student and I have discussed at length is the great benefit to having a top-notch piano accompanist/collaborator. When you can focus every ounce of your attention on what you are playing without having to worry even a smidge about the accompaniment, you are already three steps ahead. You might be used to playing with Aunt Bertha, but if you are trying to win something that really matters, you need a professional, someone who knows exactly how much of an orchestral reduction to leave out, someone who will be a true equal collaborator when playing either of the Brahms Sonatas, and someone who accompanies with sensitivity for any character piece. If you have a pianist who you can rely upon without hesitation it really is worth every penny of the cost.

Choosing the viola size

I have a student who just bought a viola in a size range that is so large it is hard to imagine or even describe (17 $\frac{3}{8}$ ") but it was exactly the right size for him. The string length, one of the main factors when choosing a viola, was not much longer than that of a somewhat smaller viola, but the size of the body of the instrument was daunting. It was a difficult decision for several reasons including the fact that there are few instruments of that size for sale in their price range (or for sale in that size in general actually), and that it was quite difficult for me to play/demonstrate it for him so he knew what it sounded like. How many of you have taught viola students who are well over 6' tall? For violinists it's not a problem—I've had a bunch of six foot plus fiddlers and they all have been able to play full size violins without issue. Once a student plays a full size violin there is nothing left to

chance as far as size. But as there is really no such thing as a full-size viola, how big is too big? Do you go by the size of the viola or by the sound? These days if you find a 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ " viola that sounds like a big viola—you are really lucky if it is affordable. The idea of fit is crucial to viola playing. Too small an instrument and you can hurt yourself trying to elicit more sound than it is capable of producing, too large a viola and you can hurt yourself trying to maneuver your way around the fingerboard.

Tech tools for teaching

As a teaching tool, I have begun having my students take videos of me playing things for them on their smart phones and tablets. It is such an easy way to send students on their way fully knowing that they have instant access to what you have asked them to practice and how you have asked them to practice. It has become the new wave of the future. Do you remember making cassette tape recordings of records for students? In addition, if your student has a smart phone or a tablet, there is an app for that. My "metro-phone" has better technology than my \$55 metronome and it might have cost me just a buck. No longer do students have any excuse to be without a quality tuner or a metronome. It's too easy today.

Minnesota Viola Society

A final note, the Minnesota Viola Society has a new president, Benjamin Davis, and we are currently seeking new members—especially student members!! For a \$4 student membership, it's the best deal money can buy. You can find the Minnesota Viola Society at www.minnesotaviolasociety.org. The MVS generally sponsors several events each year including potluck play-ins, guest recitals, and master classes with visiting artists.

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