



VIOLA

Not the First Scale Book, but Maybe the Last?

by J. David Arnott

It's not often one gets a chance to advocate for something no longer available to the general public, something of great value but that has settled to the dustbin of history (think New Coke, Apple Newtons, and Betamax videos). We all play scales (or should) and we all probably have our default scale fingerings, but do we practice scales with great intention and with practical application in mind?

As a non-native violist, I would like to take this opportunity to advocate for the exploration of a set of native viola scale fingerings devised by William Primrose in his book *The Art and Practice of Scale Playing on the Viola* published by Mills Music in 1954. As we all know, Primrose was not a native violist either; he began his musical career on violin and studied with Eugène Ysaÿe (who convinced him to take up the viola). His approach to the viola, however, was not just to play it the same as a violin but a fifth lower; it was to approach it as a unique instrument with its own set of challenges and attributes.

Like many violinists, I cut my teeth on Ivan Galamian scales and eventually on Carl Flesch, and when the time came to transition to the more noble instrument, I took with me the scale fingerings of my previous lifestyle and applied them directly to the larger instrument thinking that I was done. When I arrived at college however, my viola teacher, Joseph de Pasquale (who was a student of Primrose), started me (as he did all his students) on the Primrose scale book. Though I am not sure what year the book actually went out of print, when I first encountered it as an undergraduate student in 1983, it had already been unavailable for some time. My first taste of it was in the form of what were probably either mimeographs or low-quality (by our current standards) photocopies, copies of copies (of copies). Sadly, the book remains out

of print—though there have been rumors that it might be available again someday. Until that day arrives...there is always inter-library loan...or you have to know someone.

Most scale books follow a fairly proscribed regimen of major and minor scales, one, two, three octaves (also scales in thirds, sixths, octaves, and tenths in the case of Flesch). Some are organized following the chromatic scale, and some following the circle of fifths, each demonstrating a methodical finger pattern (or two), and each suggesting rhythms and bowings as well. Primrose followed a different path. He recognized and made allowances for the real estate differences between violin and viola, demonstrating that the viola neighborhood is not just the same as the violin neighborhood but with larger yards. Primrose's scale studies are unique for several reasons that I will discuss below.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the Primrose book is the introduction in which he makes his case for his method of shifting, his use of the link finger, his belief that students should be capable and comfortable playing a variety of finger patterns, and his belief that scales are a means to an end. His belief that descending scales are more troublesome than ascending scales has always led me to make my students play their descending scales thrice for each time they ascend. It's a good plan and it works wonders.

The actual patterns Primrose chose for the book follow a different pattern than any other method book I have encountered. Instead of beginning simply with C major and C minor, Primrose also includes three-octave scales from C to C in A flat major and also in D flat major, thus showing the importance of being able to navigate scales within a key, but outside the realm of convenient 8-note tonic to tonic packets. This is exactly the kind of material we see in just

about every Tchaikovsky symphony or tone poem—where we might have a dominant to dominant scale or an octave and a half scale starting on a note other than tonic. It seems simple enough—but do we ever methodically practice these scales? Moving up a half step to low first finger, Primrose includes D flat major, C sharp minor, A major spanning C sharp to C sharp, and D major also spanning C sharp to C sharp. It does seem simple—but it still makes you think.

The fingerings Primrose espouses are violistic in that they are geared towards navigating the larger spaces between notes on the viola. When possible, Primrose advocates semi-tone shifting, and also a generous use of open strings wherever possible. For cases where a larger shift is necessary, Primrose advocates what he called “the link-finger,” an ear training exercise in which the last finger employed in the previous position is moved (audibly at first, less audibly as mastery ensues) to its place in the new position. This virtually eliminates any and all guess-work in shifting, allowing for much greater accuracy. It works. The second half of the book is devoted to the shifting method (link finger) and is quite clear about how to negotiate this technique.

If your interest has been piqued, email me darnott@csbsju.edu and I will be happy to lead you to a copy of this most wonderful pedagogical masterpiece.

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