



# VIOLA

## Ergonomically Shaped Violas

by J. David Arnott

*Ergonomic: an intention to provide optimum comfort and to avoid stress or injury.*

In looking into Lionel Tertis last year for this column (whose “Tertis Model” viola design shaved down the upper bouts but left the general shape of the instrument recognizable), I ran into the phenomena of oddly shaped violas. Though these violas have been around now for about four decades, and I’ve seen a variety of them played in the professional world, they do not seem to have gained much traction in younger players. It probably has something to do with cost.

There are several really good reasons for playing an ergonomically designed viola: for example if a violist has suffered an injury from playing too large an instrument an ergonomically designed viola can help. If a violist has a comparatively small hand yet seeks a larger resonating chamber whilst retaining a manageable string length, or if someone is simply seeking a slight shoulder cut out to make shifting to upper positions easier. Some models even indent the bottom of the instrument at the place where one’s neck meets one’s instrument to make it easier to reach the fingerboard. Though I’ve had several viola-playing friends who suffered physical ailments from the size of their violas, I’ve only known a very few who actually play ergonomically designed instruments.

In all my years of teaching viola I have had only

one student play an ergonomically designed viola and I’m not sure why. I’ve seen them many places and actually played on a few from time to time myself, but until recently I have never actually wondered why they have not become more popular as so many more of them are being produced.

How does one find one of these oddities? If you start with a google search and type in “ergonomically designed viola image” or the starting point I chose based on my previous knowledge which was “Otto Erdesz viola image” or “Hiroshi Iizuka viola image,” you will find a plethora of pictures of oddly shaped instruments which appear to have a bite taken out of the upper bout or even resemble a Salvador Dali surrealist painting of melting clocks. Though one of my classmates in college played a beautiful Otto Erdesz viola, it was a traditional shape, not one of the 35 specially designed violas he made in the 1970s for his then wife, Rivka Golani.

In addition to Erdesz (who is dead) and Iizuka (who is not), my research for this article uncovered a variety of luthiers such as David Rivinius, Joseph Curtin, and John Newton, all currently making interesting designs and all with lovely photographs. It was at this point in my research that I found an incredibly interesting dissertation dating from 2012 written by a student at The University

of Alabama. The title of the dissertation is *Viola Design: Some Problems With Standardization* by Sookyung Claire Jeong. The article I planned to write was apparently already a doctoral dissertation. So with a grand citation of this wonderful dissertation (which is available for free in its entirety here: [http://acumen.lib.ua.edu/u0015\\_0000001\\_0001041/document/u0015\\_000001\\_0001041?page=1&limit=40](http://acumen.lib.ua.edu/u0015_0000001_0001041/document/u0015_000001_0001041?page=1&limit=40)), this article is indebted to this wonderful work.

When it was discovered that a viola need not be made symmetrical, that opened up a variety of possibilities. According to Toronto maker John Newton (a student of Erdesz) <http://www.snowdenfine.com/david.html>, “The conventional wisdom in the craft of lutherie was that symmetry in construction was absolutely necessary for a successful result.” Though Iizuka’s designs are mainly symmetrical (“It is vital to balance acoustics with aesthetics”), Erdesz cut-away violas are not. Aesthetics and practicality are not necessarily mutually exclusive and the solutions created by these two makers leave viola players with a lovely choice.

The issue of price for an artisanal, handmade instrument is certainly a major roadblock for your above average high school student. Among the living makers Hiroshi Iizuka violas sell for around \$25,000 (though you can find a copy for as little as \$8,500). New violas by David Rivinius run \$11,900 according to his web site. Joseph Curtin violas start at \$44,000. You can find an Otto Erdesz at auction for \$10-12,000, and copies are also available for less. Erdesz



Pellegrina model viola by David Rivinius



Ergonomic viola by Hiroshi Iizuka

had a variety of students who are making violas. The shop of Ira B. Kraemer in New Jersey is currently making reproductions of Erdesz's violas. In addition to the cost of the instrument, a custom-fitted case is often required for such an instrument.

The big question is: Would it be possible to bring such innovative design to a more manageable price point for young violists? If there were an option for a 4' 11" budding violist to play an affordable instrument that sounded like a viola but played like a violin,

what would be the necessary price point? Could it be done for \$1,000? Perhaps \$800? How would access to such an instrument affect student's willingness to take on the viola? Hmmm, time to write some letters.

*J. David Arnott is an Associate Professor of Music at the College of St. Benedict/St. John's University where he directs the symphony orchestra and teaches viola and violin. He holds degrees in viola from The Philadelphia College of Performing Arts, The Curtis Insti-*

*tute of Music and The University of Southern Mississippi. Dr. Arnott is the violinist of Trio Benedicta, violist with Trio Pastiche, a violist in the Duluth-Superior Symphony Orchestra, and a member of the Stillwater-based chamber ensemble, Music Saint Croix. He is the director of MNSOTA's Upper Midwest String Camp and Chamber Music Conference and has coached the Minnesota All-State viola section for many years. †*