



VIOLA

Catharsis: A Violist's Journey to Fiddling

by J. David Arnott

For the last seven years I have been dabbling in Celtic music—mostly Scottish—but certainly some Irish, Cape Breton, Galician, Finnish, Swedish, Danish, and even some Norwegian. It's a wonderful repertoire and I'm sorry I came to it so late in life. I've never met a soul who comes away in any way unhappy from an experience playing or listening to this music. It is expressive, joyous, lively music which makes you want to move your feet even if you grew up in a household where dancing was forbidden.

For the first time in my 16 years teaching at my current institution, the breakdown of my studio members is 12 violins and 6 violas. Granted—the violas are at a variety of playing abilities; this is a sea change in my comfort and happiness as a violist. As part of our studio class experience, as well as to reinforce material taught in both ear training and music theory, we learn several tunes each semester as a group—by ear. I've never actually thought much about the level of difficulty or the range of the tunes we have covered before as the few violists in the studio were always advanced enough to find ways to struggle “all the way” up to third position (and the occasionally necessary high B in emergency

position), but with this new crop of violists, it has been necessary to find material that tops out at an E on the A string.

In searching for the first tune to teach this term, I would like to say I spent countless hours poring over hundreds of tunes to find just the right one—but sadly I must admit to a) picking a tune I already knew, and b) picking the first tune in my jam book that looked about right. As it turns out—it is a fabulous tune for our studio purposes (both on the “classical” side as well as on the “fiddle” side).

The tune is called *Catharsis* by New England composer Amy Cann, who teaches at The Putney School in Putney, VT. (*Catharsis*: from Greek and defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “the process of releasing, and thereby providing relief from, strong or repressed emotions.”) A number of years ago Amy Cann explained the genesis of the tune, which is posted on The Session web site (www.thesession.org):

Regarding the name: my boyfriend at the time had asked me to save a certain Saturday for us to have some quality together time, and I had loyally turned down a lucrative wed-

ding gig...come Friday night I find a phone message... “an old friend of mine is in town and we're going hiking — I don't remember if you and I had anything planned, but you can join us if you want.” I knew that if I called him right back I'd prob. kill'em, so I played the fiddle first. The tune pretty much wrote itself in about 2 minutes.

It's a really cool tune, fairly new in terms of traditional music (27 years old or so), and has enough going on to make it a valuable experience for the whole class (or orchestra).

The tune is in G Aeolian (better known to the “classicists” among us as “natural minor”) and includes good portions of the scale, cool string crossings, sequential material, and a really sweet hemiola. The way I began teaching it was to have the class play a 2-octave G Aeolian scale up and down. We then excerpted two portions of the scale that occur frequently in the piece: G A B \flat C D on the D string and D F G A B \flat starting on open D. The former is a simple tonic-dominant scale; the latter is almost pentatonic and makes for an interesting bass line as well. I then had them drone the first four notes (D G G F) a bunch of times.

There are several instances of 3+3+2 grooves which are easier to teach by ear than read as you can show the feel better when your audience is listening to the rhythm instead of reading it off a page (measures 4, 7, and 23).

The big hemiola is in the B section and consists of a series of four sets of three eighth notes followed by the G A B \flat C D scale which elides into the second statement of the hemiola (now over an F instead of the G in the first statement), the G A B \flat C D scale again eliding into the third statement (now over an E \flat which is special because it is the very first E \flat in the piece). We covered each statement separately (12 notes at a time—each of the 4 sets of three—and slurring the first two of each set of three notes over the string crossing to make the accent easier and on a down bow every time). We

Catharsis by Amy Cann

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made note of the descending scale in the top voice (D, C B^b), which is the same in all three statements. We then made note of the descending scale in the bottom voice (G, F, E^b) as it carries through the whole statement. You could certainly count it as a two-bar 3+3+3+3+4 figure (which I'm sure traditional players and those more jazz-oriented than I am would likely do). Either way—it's the feel of the hemiola that is important.

Both the first ending of the A section and the first ending of the B section are the same (ms7, 8 and ms23, 24). After that there are only a few notes not accounted for. The chords in the version here can be played as long notes or you could use some of the predominant rhythms from the tune. Undoubtedly you have already realized that this tune is also an easy tune to teach cellists!!

There are a variety of versions of this tune available on multiple sites including one of the top traditional sites called The Session (<https://thesession.org/tunes/703>) and a nice version from a group in Corvallis, OR (Celtic Jam Tunes, <http://celticjam.puckette.com/>). Having contacted Amy Cann directly (there really is nothing better than a living composer with email and Facebook!!) and she said *The Portland Collection, Vol. 1* by Susan Songer, had the most accurate version by her account. (That is the version that is printed here and used with her most gracious permission.) I would also encourage you to seek out the J. W. Pepper orchestra version of it by Bob Phillips. In fact—teaching the tune first by ear and then playing the Phillips version would be a really solid way to bring together both worlds and make ensure that the interpretation is what

comes through in the performance. It's hard to play eight even eighth notes after learning them as 3+3+2!

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