



VIOLA

An Uncommon Combination: Music for Viola and Wind Ensemble

by Justin Knoepfel

Most recently I had the privilege of giving the Minnesota premiere of James Syler's *Love Among the Ruins*, a viola concerto with wind ensemble (Nov. 10, 2018). It was a sincere pleasure to work with the Gustavus Wind Orchestra led by Dr. James Patrick Miller. At first, I must admit I was fairly skeptical to its possibilities. "Would I really be heard over the band? Is this just some 'pie in the sky' idea of a piece? Or, just perhaps, maybe it's a brilliant combination?" In fact, the combination is almost too perfect as I quickly discovered. There are only three known/rare works for viola and wind ensemble, including this one. The other two being *Concerto for Viola and Chamber Winds* by Jerzy Sapiyevski, and Houston Dunleavy's *Concerto for Viola and Wind Symphony*.

James Syler teaches at the University of Texas-San Antonio and the University of the Incarnate Word-San Antonio. He has published numerous works for strings, chamber, orchestral, choral, and wind ensembles. In my preparation for the work, I had a chance to connect with Mr. Syler. This following is a portion of what was discussed.

Justin Knoepfel: What led you to write for viola and wind ensemble?

James Syler: This project started with a phone conversation with Dr. Matthew Schloemer, the Director of the Wind Ensemble at the Interlochen Arts Academy in Michigan. I mentioned how interesting it would be to write something for his band and their faculty violist, Renee Skerik, who is a friend of both of ours. And then we laughed—viola and wind ensemble—no way. But the more I thought about it, the more I got interested. All those rich colors. So, he gathered a consortium of universities to commission it and I got to work. One of the best phone calls of my life.

JK: Can you talk about the difficulties/challenges when writing for this rare combination? It is such a unique sound!

JS: The balance between the viola and wind ensemble was the biggest concern. I very consciously tried to carve out a niche in the ensemble orchestration whenever they play

together. I also avoided almost all doublings in the wind ensemble. It's very similar to writing for a singer and wind ensemble. It's very easy to bury the soloist. The second concern was to find a way to feature the viola's unique color, especially the outer C and A strings. I think of the viola, not as a big violin, but as soprano cello—the strings are the same, just an octave higher. This led me to write material that was darker and expressive in nature, as opposed to a more traditional virtuosic concerto.

JK: *Love Among the Ruins* was a poem by Robert Browning (1812-1889). Can you tell me more about the inspiration for using this poem as the foundation of your work? Basically, why this poem?

JS: Many of my works are inspired by words—I think I'm really a frustrated writer. I relate more to concepts and meanings of words, than I do to images or pictures. I started to think of the viola as more of a thread, and one that is continuous. I was also sketching dark lines, low in register, which seemed to lend themselves to the idea of a line that is like a never-ending force. I remembered the Browning poem and its theme of love as a timeless force among a mighty long-lost city. So, it slowly developed, not as a retelling of the poem, but inspired by the ideas in the poem. Love as a transforming reality over space and time. It's a great poem. The title also has a dramatic contrast, which you always need as a creator.

JK: What can the listener expect the first time they hear this piece? What should they be listening for?

JS: I think if you allow yourself to follow the viola line it will take you to many places—some very dark and some mysteriously beautiful. But in the end, it is a solo accompanied by darkly colored woodwinds and brass. Unlike an orchestral accompaniment, the viola doesn't have to compete with the texture and color of other strings. Because of that, I think this setting allows the viola to sing out of a unique accompaniment. Not to mention there are only three known works for viola and full wind ensemble, which makes it a rare sound.

JK: Any other compositions down the line for you, or past works, that feature the viola prominently?

JS: None at the present. I have a *String Quartet No. 1* that was written for the Artaria String Quartet in St. Paul, MN and I would like to complete a No. 2 in the future. I would like to write a viola sonata. The viola is a real gem and I thoroughly enjoyed writing this music.

In the end, the piece is one of the most transformative, emotional, and inspiring works I have ever come across. For eighteen minutes the work leads the listener through the depths of the instrument, a quasi-cadenza moment in the middle, and a slow wind down to the end, finishing just the way it started. After the performance, Dr. James Patrick Miller had this to say: "I've had the great fortune to be around James Syler's music multiple times, always finding it captivating and deeply emotional. He is a master at capturing the elements of space and time while holding a listener's attention closely. *Love Among the Ruins* is no exception. I find the combination of wind ensemble, piano, and percussion with solo viola to be as chilling and serene as it is brilliant. I believe the work not only highlights the ensemble and soloist, but also stands alone as an excellent work of art—not merely as a concerto. As a conductor, I never felt like I was conducting a 'concerto' led by a soloist; I always felt like soloist, ensemble, and conductor were collaborating to create emotional art."

I urge you to prompt others about this piece. It needs to be heard; it needs to be performed; it needs to be known! James Syler's music can be found through his website: jameslyer.com

Dr. Justin Knoepfel is Assistant Professor of Music at Gustavus Adolphus College where he is the conductor of the Gustavus Philharmonic Orchestra and primarily teaches studio viola, music theory, and chamber music. As a violist he performs frequently with the Minnesota Opera, South Dakota Symphony, Mankato Symphony, and numerous other ensembles. ‡