



## VIOLA

### Transcription Fever!

by Korey Konkol

One of my many musical passions is discovering new arrangements of works for viola or viola ensemble. Transcriptions of my own creation have also become a favorite pastime. I listen to art and pop songs as well as instrumental works and often think, “This would sound terrific, if not better, on the viola!” One of my first realizations of the better on viola phenomenon was teaching Brahms’ scherzo from the *F.A.E. Sonata* “Sonatensatz,” originally for violin with an intriguing background history. The Viola World edition I was familiar with sounded very muddy, the viola grumbling, literally playing the work an interval of a fifth below the original violin part. This methodology is not always the best solution when transcribing a work from violin—perhaps Bach’s *Six Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin* are some of the exceptions. Once I determined that the viola could play the opening of Brahms’ work in the same register as the violin, being able to double the opening note “G” with the same fingered note on the C-string, this enhancement brought a whole new level of vibrancy and richness to the piece. Then it was a matter of choice to which other passages would remain in the original octaves or whether bringing some of those “nose-bleed” sections down would be more applicable. The result was a successful, personalized approach to the piece which could be adapted to each performer’s needs. In fact, several violinists that have heard the work on viola commented to me that they emphatically *prefer* the scherzo on the viola!

The concept of “picking and choosing” which passages of a viola transcription to go up, down or stay in the same register is not a foreign concept. Violists have had to make these kinds of decisions for quite some time. A few examples of pieces that immediately come to mind are Bach’s cello suites and viola da gamba sonatas as well as Schubert’s “*Arpeggione*” *Sonata*. Myriad editions of the aforementioned works can cause a bit of confusion when it comes to matters of authenticity. After all these are only editions, not manuscript or urtext scores. When in doubt, always opt for a publisher such as Henle over International, which will ultimately

save you a considerable amount of angst! On the other hand, one shouldn’t be afraid to add their own personal stamp to any edition by changing a bowing, fingering, phrasing, register, etc., especially if there is a strong argument for the alteration. In more recent times, violists have been exploring their own takes on violinist’s repertoire such as De Falla’s *Suite Populaire Espagnole* and Stravinsky’s *Pulcinella Suite*. I specifically wanted to mention these works as I’ve had doctoral students use them as the focus of their final thesis papers/projects. Borrowing from the cellist’s repertoire is likewise fair game. Although many cello-to-violita renderings are quite effective, the jury is still out (at least for me) on Elgar’s *Cello Concerto* and Rachmaninoff’s *Cello Sonata*. Regarding the consideration of art songs, there are gorgeous, readily available arrangements of lieder by Faure and Debussy for viola and piano. The possibilities are endless, especially since vocal transcriptions are well-suited to the humanlike quality and range of the viola.

I would be remiss not to mention that two great giants of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century viola pantheon, British violist Lionel Tertis and Scottish violist moved-to-America William Primrose, not only encouraged composers of their era to produce works for the instrument, but were also very active in creating, performing, and publishing transcriptions of their own making. Their invaluable contributions to the elevation and evolution of the viola are being celebrated to this day.

Now onto what really gets me excited about writing this article. It is thrilling to work on an original transcription and have it come to fruition with a well-received performance. I’ve had the privilege to perform in several University of Minnesota School of Music *Collage Concerts* in which various faculty, students and ensembles are showcased. One of the first performances was a transcription of Piazzolla’s *Primavera Porteña* from *Las Cuatro Estaciones Porteñas* “The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires” violin concerti transcribed for solo viola with viola ensemble accompaniment. What a hoot that was! The next year we programmed a viola ensemble transcription

of Copland’s *Fanfare for the Common Man*. Minnesota Orchestra conductor Osmo Vänskä attended that concert, and I recall him enthusiastically praising the violas! At another collage concert, a transcription of Bach’s d-minor violin chaconne for four violas was programmed showcasing my talented doctoral students. I know this begs the joke, “How many violas does it take to play Bach’s chaconne?”, but it truly is a magnificent arrangement, expertly crafted by Japanese composer, concert pianist and conductor Ichiro Nodaira. Nodaira offers two versions of the 4-violita chaconne: one with a more straightforward style, and another resplendent with modern techniques including an abundance of artificial harmonics. Another stunning transcription of a Bach work is the viola/piano adaptation of the poignant chorale prelude *O Mensch, bewein’ dein’ Sünde gross* by Toshio Hosokawa. My own students were treated to a glorious rendition of this gem by the spectacular, renowned violist Nabuko Imai at the conclusion of a master class she presented.

My last venture was a foray into the music of Freddie Mercury/Queen when I staged a viola and cello ensemble version of *Bohemian Rhapsody*, complete with technical lighting (imagine a spotlight on four viola soloists during the opening phrases unfolding to psychedelic lighting with drum accompaniment as the music wildly develops!). That performance was the unexpected highlight of the program for many audience members. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to top such an extravaganza, but I do have my sights on concocting an arrangement of Schubert’s *Der Erlkönig* for viola ensemble. The music’s turbulent quality, vocal register and imagery speak to me.

In conclusion, I’d like to reveal to the reader the most current endeavor I am diving into, a transcription of Piazzolla’s *Café 1930* for viola and violin, where the viola takes on the guitar part. This undertaking has been on my back burner of ideas for a while now. Maybe I won’t be able to finish this and other ventures until my next sabbatical, but the process inspires me to

think outside the box when it comes to the soundscapes and scope of what the viola is capable of.

*Korey Konkol is celebrating his 29th year as Professor of Viola at the University of Minnesota. Having received numerous teaching awards, he has also enjoyed performing over the course of his tenure as violist of the*

*acclaimed string trio Ensemble Capriccio as well as the year-long substitute/guest viola section positions with the Minnesota Orchestra and St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. †*