



# VIOLA

## How Composing Made Me Love the Viola: Introducing Composition to String Players

by AJ Isaacson-Zvidzwa

It was Halloween 2003. I was 13. I had sprained my ankle so I couldn't go trick or treating. My grandpa had recently purchased Finale music notation software to arrange Dixieland band music and let me download it onto my computer. So, on Halloween of 7<sup>th</sup> grade, I wrote my first piece of music: "Dance of the Goblins" for string orchestra.

I started playing the viola 3 years prior, when I was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. It was okay. But once I started composing, my viola suddenly became a means as to which I could express myself. In the next years I wrote countless symphonies and chamber works, none of which were overly playable or developed in any way, but I had found my connection to music. I'm indebted to my middle school choir and orchestra teachers who took my passion and helped me run with it. I got a basic college theory textbook and started working through it with them. In high school, I attended my first Junior Composer's camp (now Composer's Institute) where I got to meet other kids who composed.

I feel like I'm unique amongst composers in that I don't play piano. When I compose, I sometimes use the piano, but typically I compose directly into a music notation software (I use Finale) or on my viola or violin.

I think there are two approaches to composing as a string player: starting by playing around on your instrument (improvisation) or starting writing something down, then playing it to hear what it sounds like.

The first method, starting on the instrument, can be broken down into rhythmic or pitched improvisations. I would suggest playing an accompaniment ostinato on your (the teacher's) instrument or the piano. This will give the student a structure in which to improvise. I like to stick with just one chord (or frequently I'll just use an open fifth to make it less tonally centered) as opposed to a chord progression, to eliminate a level of complexity. It may also be helpful to be less focused on a key or mode in the improvisation and more focused on exploration. Below are some examples of basic ostinatos that could be used to improvise over:



To start, one can (with the ostinato) play around with rhythms on an open string pizzicato. In any improvisation, encourage the student to explore sounds both that "fit" and sounds that "don't fit." I think this helps get rid of the "right" vs. "wrong" that many worry

about when improvising. It also opens the door to other sounds, rhythms and tonalities one might not normally explore.

Starting with one string, open string, pizzicato improvisations, one can progress to multiple open string pizzicato improvisations, then add open-1 finger, and so on. I've used pentatonic scales in group composing exercises, but it has been pointed out that this can be confusing to the student to try to improvise while remembering which notes are the "right" notes to use. When doing these exercises, the most important part is to have fun and learn a tool for self expression, not to worry about how to do it.

As a teacher, I think it's important to model improvisation as well. Teach the ostinato line to the student and improvise yourself. That may be a big stretch for you! One method I use to practice improvisation is putting on a metronome to various tempos and let the metronome give the structure as an ostinato line would. For me, having some sort of structure helps my improvisation. One exercise my composition teacher would have me do is to just sit in quiet with my metronome on and let my mind explore ideas. Same principle can be used to explore with your instrument.

In addition to the metronome, another method of practicing improvisation alone (this might be dating myself) but when I was a kid I would use a small keyboard with built in drum tracks to play around with improvisation on my own. That would be one option if the student has access to a digital keyboard. Another option would be to use a DAW (either you (the teacher) or a motivated student) to create some "beats" to play along with. I will touch on DAWs more later in this article.

Improvisation is often associated with non-classical styles of music, but it can be fun to do classical improvisation, too. For an advanced student, I always enjoyed picking a composer that I was familiar with and tried to improvise a melody in the style of that composer. If you have a student that takes to this style of composing, the next step would be to record the improvisations and teach melodic dictation to turn the improvisations into compositions.

For the second method, starting with writing, one way to introduce this would be to take flashcards for the notes you want to use and have the student arrange them in different orders and play each arrangement to see what it will sound like. Doing this helps develop the inner ear to connect the notes on paper to notes played.

For a more advanced student who knows the basics of written notation, I recommend looking into a music notation software. I highly recommend MuseScore which is a free software. If a student would like to upgrade to a paid software, there are three main programs: Finale, Sibelius, and a new one called Dorico.

To use a notation software to explore composition, I typically start in 4/4 time in the key of C or G, but really you can use any key because you won't need to use accidentals to make it fit the key because the computer automatically applies the sharps and flats that are in the key signature. I would start with just quarter notes using

any pitches that can be played on the instrument. The computer will play back what the student composes, but I like to encourage having the students play their own compositions as well in order to help connect the written music to the practical music. If you have a student that takes to composing in a notation software, have them begin to compose duets for the student to play with you!

One question that was raised while editing this article was when do you start adding in theory? My philosophy is get the student hooked on composing/improvising (if they do!) then add theory as they go along. Not going to lie, I had many unresolved leading tones back in my early days of composing, but I loved what I was doing and to start off, I just wanted to write as much as I could get on paper. The technique and “rules” would come later.

Now, as I promised earlier: DAWs. While this is outside the scope of my expertise, I would like to mention that more and more composers are working in what are called DAWs (digital audio workstation) where you can mix music and do all kinds of fun stuff. Some free DAWs include GarageBand (Mac only), Cakewalk (Windows only) and Audacity (Mac/Windows, more an audio editor than a DAW, but still useful to mention). Another fun way to use a DAW would be to create tracks to improvise to.

If the student falls in love with composition, like I did, I always recommend finding a composition teacher, but even if the student doesn't take to it, I feel all string players can benefit from being introduced to the basics of music composition and classical improvisation.

#### Resources:

- Composers Institute: <https://www.composersinstitute.org/#/>
- Music Notation Software
  - MuseScore FREE: <https://musescore.org/en>
  - Finale: <https://www.finalemusic.com/>
  - Sibelius: <https://www.avid.com/sibelius>
  - Dorico: <https://www.steinberg.net/dorico/>
- DAWs
  - GarageBand (Mac only) FREE: <https://www.apple.com/mac/garageband/>
  - Cakewalk (Windows only) FREE: <https://www.bandlab.com/products/cakewalk>
  - Audacity FREE: <https://www.audacityteam.org>

*AJ Isaacson-Zvidzwa, violist, violinist, composer and historian, has a BM in viola performance from Augsburg University. She has published in the Journal of the American Viola Society, the American String Teachers Journal, and has lectured at the International Viola Congress. For fun, she is editing an eighteenth-century viola concerto by unknown composer Georg Schultz for its first publication. She has taught in an El Sistema inspired program and with the Eden Prairie String Academy. As a composer, her collaborations include members of the Minnesota Orchestra, Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, and the Artaria String Quartet. †*