



VIOLA

“Ten miles of heaven drop to the floor”

A pedagogical overview of *Sonoran Storm*

by Claire Davis

I first heard *Sonoran Storm* for solo viola by Nokuthula Ngwenyama (No-goo-TOO-lah En-gwen-YAH-ma) (b. 1976) as an undergrad looking for pieces by BIPOC and woman composers for my master’s audition. It seized my attention immediately and has yet to let go. An aerobic exercise in focus, the 10-minute, non-stop piece features satisfying resonance, rich double-stops, a strong pulse, an immersive soundworld, and dramatic emotional tension and catharsis. Centered in E \flat major with a few contrasting sections in related keys, the harmony swirls slowly around E \flat and echoes the thick, rolling clouds of monsoons. The program notes are equally evocative:

“Humidity rises in the desert. That scorch blaster hitting the face feels fuller and expectant upon exit. Haboob dust causes a metal gate to clang. It’s bulging brown outside. Feet scamper across parched earth as clouds approach. Expanding into the atmosphere, they amass to quench aridity’s obsession.

Anti-trades carry sea moisture across Baja California to the Sierra Madres during the monsoons. It drifts north across el Camino del Diablo and swirls above the Mogollon Rim. Cumulus giants, made stronger by el Niño, dwarf the eastern landscape. The sun sets, the earth cools, and the desert braces for thermal dynamism. Tree branches partner with updrafts while downdrafts pelt the land. Angular veins shoot through darkness.

Thunder rumbles with an abusive baritone’s vigor while the saguaro leads succulents in thirsty supplication, arms toward the sky.”

Composed and premiered in 2016, *Sonoran Storm* was released in 2018 by EDI Records. The full version is available for purchase on Ngwenyama’s website at <https://thulamusic.com/>. Ngwenyama has two recordings available online in which she plays the piece, an album recording on SoundCloud and

a live performance on YouTube (see the links at the end of the article). The past few years have also yielded several recital performances on YouTube.

In addition to a thrilling listening experience, *Sonoran Storm* provides pedagogical opportunities for advanced students in its technical and endurance challenges.

Pedagogical Methods

Sonoran Storm is an advanced piece. I recommend introducing it (abridged or in full) after the student demonstrates facility in the Stamitz D major concerto, as it is similar in technical requirements to Hindemith’s *Der Schwanendreher*. It is best suited to postsecondary and graduate study. Nevertheless, depending on the student’s skill set, excerpts or a significantly abridged version may be introduced in high school. Needless to say, it is important to develop proficiency and confidence in each component skill using exercises and etudes before starting a comprehensive study of the piece, which tests both physical and mental endurance. Studying passages of *Sonoran Storm* to isolate skills may comprise an intermediate step between exercises and focused study, or serve as challenging and satisfying short pieces for advanced intermediate students.

In addition to physical skills, *Sonoran Storm* offers the opportunity to engage the

student’s analytical skills. A “building block” method, outlined below, can be tailored to the student’s existing skill set and goals. *Sonoran Storm* is particularly versatile for this. Thanks to the work’s short transitions and harmonic coherence, it is easily sectioned and abridged. At the time of writing, the abridged version of *Sonoran Storm* (5 minutes) is not available on Ngwenyama’s website—another inducement for abridging it oneself.

This is a chance to foster a student’s analytical understanding. Ask them to develop their own practice road map by breaking down passages into their component skills, then review their analysis in lessons. If the student wants an abridged version, encourage the student to select passages and construct their own version, according to their interest as well as parameters and goals set in lessons. If the student wishes to study the full version, guide them to arrange a benchmark abridged version (i.e., cut the length in half and select sections based on their interest and proficiency) that they can perform while they add sections after gaining proficiency and stamina. In either case, the “building block” approach can bolster the student’s self-assurance and motivation by allowing them to perform the piece sooner, gain performance experience, and obtain short-term satisfaction in their work

Figure 1. Technical skills included in *Sonoran Storm*.

Left Hand	Bow
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relaxation and flexibility are key • Flexible left hand and strong proprioceptive awareness of tension and release • Octaves, 6ths, 5ths, 4ths, 3rds • Variety of double-stops: both fingers stopped, double-stops with open strings, double-stops with static bottom note • Harmonics (double-stops) • Shifting (octaves, distant positions, coordination of unusual handframes) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapid, large string crossings (double-stops) and efficient, compact string crossings • Coordination of arpeggios and multi-stops (slow practice) • Subtle inflection using varied staccato, détaché, and accents • Bow distribution: balance point for majority of piece, lower half in slurred sections, and saving the bow • Steady and consistent 1/16 notes, with rubato in some transitions • Attention to dynamics and changes, both sudden and gradual

Figure 2. Detailed structure of *Sonoran Storm*.

Section	Measures	Notes
Section A		
Introduction	1-2	Octaves “Static tendrils demand audience: jagged voltage constructs melody in joyful obeisance...”
a	3-26	Main motive in E \flat M “Virga stop teasing as ten miles of heaven drop to the floor...”
b	27-34	“And the rain fell”
a1	35-51	Main motive with expanded range Left hand will likely need modification in m 36, in which the printed fingering requires an octave stretch between 2 nd and 4 th fingers
b2	52-55	
c (transitional)	56-59	<i>mf</i> cantabile Begins in cm, descending scalar outline from middle C ₄ to F ₃ , arrives on CM
	60-65	Neapolitan progression: I-II \flat (V \flat /V)-V \flat (II \flat /IV)-I
	66-67	Arpeggiated transitional harmonic passage: fm (vii ⁶ ₄ of cm)→FM (V/B \flat M)→B \flat M (V/E \flat M)
d (“broad”)	68-75	Grand cantabile character (characteristically larger version of section C) Fingering for mm 71-72 (Red Rocks performance by Ngwenyama): last note of m 71 (C ₄) uses octave harmonic sul C with 3 rd finger in 5 th position, 2 nd finger on B \flat (still sul C), remain in 5 th position until open D in m 73
a2	76-82	In E \flat M
e (interjection)	82-83	Sudden chromatic shift (F \sharp M-BM-EM-B \flat M)
a2	84-93	In E \flat M
Section B		
“Big weather enjoys a snail-paced game of bumper cars, reforming whilst arboreal cards stand empty. It’s calm. Is it over? Abated leaves bathe in temporary starlight...”		
f (Meno mosso)	94-105	In cm
c1 (transitional)	106-109	Arpeggios transition from cm to CM and recall mm 66-67
	110-113	Harmonics
	114-117	Arpeggios: D \flat -E \flat -A \flat -B \flat -CM
g (forte cantabile)	118-133	In CM Emotional climax of piece
c2 (transitional)	134-144	
Section A1		
a3	144-165	In E \flat M “But summer westerlies do not relent, and another thunderhead descends. The romp resumes...”
c3	166-167	Repeats mm 66-67
d2 (“broad”)	168-175	
a4	176-179	EM variation of main motive in mm 176-177
h (interjection)	180-181	cantabile
f2	182-184	Variation on Meno mosso (mm 94-95).
j (transitional)	184-187	Mm 184-185 function like a grand pause
a2	188-204	
e (interjection)	194-195	
Coda	204-209 (end)	Strong E \flat M resolution “The romp resumes, culminating in a celebration of renewal and life.”

while pursuing a long-term goal.

Pedagogical Features

So what are the component skills in *Sonoran Storm*? With over 10 minutes of practically continuous 1/16 notes, the overarching challenges are stamina (physical and mental), monitoring and releasing tension, and coordination. The technical skills in the piece are manifold (Figure 1).

Additionally, the piece is optimally structured for memorization with clearly delineated sections and multiple instances of repeated sections within a sectional rounded binary form. *Sonoran Storm* is also programmatic. Ngwenyama includes an elegant narrative in her program notes:

“Static tendrils demand audience: jagged voltage constructs melody in joyful obeisance. Virga stops teasing as ten miles of heaven drop to the

floor (section A). Big weather enjoys a snail-paced game of bumper cars, reforming whilst arboreal cards stand empty. It’s calm. Is it over? Abated leaves bathe in temporary starlight (section B). But summer westerlies do not relent, and another thunderhead descends. The romp resumes, culminating in a celebration of renewal and life (section A1).”

The larger structure contains multiple motives that principally sit in E \flat major and travel through c minor, C major, f minor, F major, B \flat major, and E major. (Figure 2).

Sonoran Storm for solo viola by Ngwenyama enhances the advanced violist’s repertoire. Uniting musically satisfying composition with technical virtuosity that displays the capabilities of the viola, the piece also has multiple pedagogical applications. Violists of all levels will find in

Sonoran Storm an exciting piece to add to their playlist.

Composer Recordings

Ngwenyama, Nokuthula. “Sonoran Storm for Solo Viola - Nokuthula Ngwenyama.” On *Sonoran Storm*. Nokuthula Ngwenyama. EDI Records, 2018. Streaming audio, SoundCloud. <https://soundcloud.com/thulamusic/sonoran-storm-for-solo-viol-a-1>.

Ngwenyama, Nokuthula. “Sonoran Storm.” Red Rocks Music Festival. YouTube. September 15, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JYhiDCOuJuA>.

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