

THE ECLECTIC VIOLIST

GET IN THE LOOP!

by **David Wallace**

What do Steve Reich, Les Paul, Igor Stravinsky, and Maroon 5 have in common? Among other things, they all know that a good idea bears repeating, especially when layered with other good ideas.

For centuries, layered, ostinato-driven music required an ensemble. Today, with just one viola and a little technology, you can accompany yourself, create multi-part polyphony, or simulate an entire pop band in real time. To help introduce the wonderful world of looping, I have consulted two of its masters: cellist Sean Grissom and electric violin virtuoso Tracy Silverman. This article is a distillation of wisdom and advice I have gleaned from them over the years. Many thanks to Sean for permission to paraphrase and quote entire sections of his looping clinic handouts!

What is a looper (a.k.a. “loop station,” “loop generator,” “phrase sampler”)?

A looper is an electronic effect pedal that allows a performer to play, record, and manipulate musical phrases. Think of it as a tape recorder that allows you to record and play back music while you are performing. Most loopers allow multiple layers to be overdubbed, much like multi-track recording.

Unlike multi-track recording, most loopers allow real-time adjustments to the loops you record. For example, in addition to starting or stopping loops at will, loopers can let you play them backward, double their tempo, erase them, or set them to play only once. Most loopers allow you to “quantize” what you record. (That is, you can set them to “even out” the rhythm of your loops ... sometimes when you record, your eighth notes may have been unsteady, but a quantizing looper can fix them.)

Each looper has its own “bells and whistles” and possibilities; some even come with built-in drum machines and metronomes. Price, portability, and capability are important factors in choosing the right looper.

What are the most common loopers?

For years, the most popular loopers have been the Boomerang Phrase Sampler, the Digitech JamMan, and the Roland Loop Station. Many digital delay pedals and multi-effects units include scaled-down loopers as well. As computers have entered into performance, a number of software applications have begun to include looping capabilities as well. For performers who enjoy collaborating with onstage computers, Ableton Live has been the looper of choice.

What gear do I need? Do I need an electric viola or a pick-up to use a looper? I’m interested in exploring this world, but I’m not sure I’m ready to invest in it yet ...

An electric viola or a pick-up will allow you to plug directly into the looper. (This will reduce the amount of ambient room noise that gets recorded.) However, you can effectively use a microphone to loop your acoustic viola. Many string players achieve good results by purchasing an inexpensive lapel microphone from Radio Shack or other electronics outlets.

While there is no substitute for real-time exploration, it’s possible to explore what it’s like to record, loop yourself, and play along with your sound by using free or inexpensive recording software like GarageBand or Audacity.

Guitar shops and eBay are littered with slightly-used loopers. This is one instance where second-hand gear is relatively easy to find and considerably less expensive than new units.

Allons Danser Colinda

arranged by
Sean Grissom

"Looping" zone

Allegro

Melody 1 viola

Melody 2 viola

Accomp. viola

Bassline viola

(All harmonics)

pizz.

D G D A

Melody 1 Vla.

Melody 2 Vla.

Accomp. Vla.

Bassline Vla.

A D

"Looping" Order:

1. After setting the tempo (and you can make it a brisk one), start with intro of viola 1 melody.
2. Start loop recording on downbeat of measure two, and continue recording through the pick-up of last bar You did it! You should hear the main melody line 'looping' around.
3. Play either along with melody again (not recording yet), or some other harmonic motif - to check for accuracy.
4. To record the remaining lines as you wish to build the arrangement, press the 'Overdub' function on your unit on the downbeat of measure two, stopping the overdub at the end of measure five. After this, you'll have a full viola chamber band! You can play solos, double previous lines (note: you can even hit the 'stop' function to play alone, and return to measure two by hitting the start function), and bask in the sonic glow of what you've done. *
5. Continue as long as you want, and to END, hit the stop function after playing the third beat of the last measure ... then take a well-deserved bow!

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Duende

for solo viola & loop machine

- 2011 -

JESSICA MEYER (b. 1974)

1 Dampen G-string and slowly drag the bow towards and away from bridge. Press pedal and record 4-beat loop.

2 pedal Play on G-string inside the peg box, randomly alternate between arco and tremolo.

3 pedal Dampen all strings around 8th position. Play random col legno up and down string behind left hand.

4 pedal

♩ = 60

pp

5 pedal

6 II

solo
no pedal

p

7 pedal 8

mp [bow circles]

[bow circles] *mp* *accel.* *a tempo*

mf *accel.* *a tempo*

p random bows pedal

Olive Branch

Tracy Silverman

A

Record Loop 1 (5 bars)

Viola



Overdub 1 on Loop 1

6



Overdub 2 on Loop 1

11



End Overdubs--Play Loop 1 (with Overdubs)

16



24



29



B

End Loop 1

Record Loop 2 (4 bars)



40 Play Loop 2

Distortion



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How can I use a looper to create a one-person rendition of a pop song?

Listen to the song and map out the form (e.g., “Intro, verse 1–chorus–verse 2–chorus–guitar solo–bridge–chorus–chorus, outro). Figure out the chordal patterns of the different sections—are there repeats? Try playing some of the different layers on your instrument. Can you play the bass line? The rhythm guitar strums? The singer’s melody?

Once you know the form and have figured out how to create the layers, set your looper to the tempo of the song. (Most loopers will let you set a tempo by entering its metronome number or by tapping it in with your foot.) Loopers generally will display the tempo via a flashing light, and most will allow you to create a one-bar count-off, if desired.

Okay, now you’re ready to record.

Depending on the riffs of the song, you may want to record a bass line, a melody, or the rhythmic groove

first. To record, hit the appropriate foot pedal and play in tempo for the length of the “looping” selection. (If you have a short riff, remember that you may need to repeat it so that the loop is at least a measure long. Otherwise, the unit will not record a seamless loop, and the meter will be off.) Hit the appropriate pedal(s) to stop recording and start the loop playing.

There ... you did it! You made your first “loop.” Now for some fun!

Once the loop is going, you can play along or improvise with it. If you wish to layer more parts, you can overdub them by stepping on the appropriate pedal. When creating your arrangement, keep in mind that you should have a loop that covers the longest part that you want to play in one pass. Otherwise you will have out-of-sync overlapping loops (which in some cases may be a nice effect).

Remember that most loopers have an “undo” feature, much like on many computer software pro-

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grams. Clicking “undo” allows you to redo any overdub before you move on. This feature lets you erase a bad loop or eliminate a loop you want for only a short time.

Okay, I’m sold! I’ve got the gear, do you have any arrangements or pieces to get me started?

An introduction to looping would be incomplete without a few tried-and-true plug-and-play arrangements.

Tracy Silverman’s *Olive Branch* is a metrically sophisticated, tuneful, joyous piece that was originally composed for his six-string, electric violin. Tracy kindly arranged a rendition to be played by either electric or acoustic viola. Visit <http://americanviolasociety.org/resources/recordings/> to hear an audio recording of a version for violin.

Jessica Meyer’s *Duende* is an edgy, contemporary composition that uses a looper as an overdubbing tool to create a layered, “sound-on-sound” composi-

tion. As you will see from her sheet music, the layers gradually accumulate, building textures and intensity as the piece progresses. The world premiere performance is on YouTube at <http://youtu.be/m8Cni794GJw>.

Looping also has tremendous potential for performing traditional music. Sean Grissom regularly uses his loop station to create the multi-layered textures of Cajun music. *Allons Danser Colinda* is an uptempo tune, which lends itself naturally to the viola. While Sean’s arrangement may be played by one looping violist, it can also be realized “unplugged” by a viola quartet.

For an example of how looping can be used within the context of ensemble performance, see my performance of *I Will Arise!* a trio for two violas, Arabic percussion, and looper. You can find a recent performance on YouTube at: <http://youtu.be/wi9w8tzXkK4>.

You can check out YouTube for some examples of how performers have used loopers to create solo performances of rock and pop songs. For starters, check out Tracy Silverman’s lesson on how to loop The Who’s *Baba O’Riley* (<http://youtu.be/VJRd9PKQzLE>) and Sean Grissom’s solo cello rendition of U2’s *With or Without You* (<http://youtu.be/H0YI18Ia8vI>).

Alright, violists, let’s get loopy!

To download the complete sheet music for Olive Branch, Duende, and Allons Danser Colinda visit: <http://americanviolasociety.org/resources/scores/javscores/>.

David Wallace encourages his students to get loopy at the Juilliard School, Nyack College, The Mark O’Connor / Berklee College of Music Summer String Program, and the Mark Wood Rock Orchestra Camp.

SCHOOL OF MUSIC

The Ohio State University School of Music is pleased to announce the full-time appointment of

Juliet White-Smith as Professor of Viola

Violist Juliet White-Smith is an active international soloist, chamber musician, clinician, adjudicator, and is past president of the American Viola Society.



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- Kia-Hui Tan**, violin
- and **Leonid Polonsky**, violin, visiting artist

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