

ALTERNATIVE STYLES

GOING ELECTRIC, PART ONE: ELECTRIC CAREERS

by David Wallace

Since the *JAVS* Alternative Styles column began in 2003, it has broadened our horizons by increasing our knowledge of repertoire, styles, pedagogy, and violists who have broken new ground. In this spirit, I hereby declare 2009 The Year of the Electric Viola and invite you to venture into a powerful realm that is exciting for teachers, students, and performers alike.

Once again, I have a confession to make. I never had any plans to be anything other than an acoustic performer. For that matter, as a student, I didn't know that the possibility of electronic bowed instruments existed. Sure, I had heard a few of the plugged-in classical/pop crossover projects that were making the rounds in the late 80s and early 90s, but I could not correlate them with my dreams, ambitions, or sonic identity as a classical violist.

The four violists you are about to meet opened my mind, broadened my perspectives, and made me a true believer in the incredible potential electric performance offers all string players and teachers. Moreover, each has made a primary impact on the musical world as a performer, pedagogue, or com-

poser. As they share their stories in their own words, I encourage you to think about how you might incorporate a little more electricity in your careers.

I first met **Martha Mooke** in the mid 1990s when we shared a ride to a regional orchestra gig in New Jersey. Neither one of us said much, but she caught my attention because she definitely had the

coolest hair and clothes in the entire orchestra. My stand partner told me that in addition to being a top-level New York freelancer, Martha was a composer, a fearless new music champion, and an electric violist. Soon afterwards, I spied her *Enharmonic Vision* CD at a record store, bought it, and went home to bask in some of the most haunting and ethereal timbres I had ever heard. Martha's original



Martha Mooke

harmonic language, emotional scope, and her ability to layer complex rhythms demonstrated a profoundly creative voice and an entirely original musical vision. Like many electric string players, Martha's inspiration to plug in came from legendary jazz violinist Jean-Luc Ponty:

The first time I heard Jean-Luc Ponty's album A Taste for Passion, I was impressed and captivated by his playing and the sonic landscape that he created. It opened up a new musical universe, and I saw the unlimited possibilities available to me that I hadn't realized before.

Mooke began buying recordings by Ponty and other jazz violinists who were using electronics, including Didier Lockwood and Michal Urbaniak. She also started listening to the Turtle Island String Quartet and studying their approach to jazz on acoustic instruments.

I gradually got up the nerve to go into my room; close the doors, windows, and shades; and start playing along with the recordings. From there I started improvising and ultimately composing: first for solo electric viola and growing from there.

Rather than view electric viola as a separate discipline, Mooke views it as a complimentary outgrowth of her new music work:

I think that my expanding into the electric field came hand in hand with exploration of extended techniques and experimentation of non-traditional performance practice on an otherwise "traditional" instru-

ment. Along the way I've discovered some perhaps subtle ways of approaching improvisation or extended techniques depending on whether I'm playing an acoustic or an electric instrument.

Martha's explorations ultimately led her to extensive commissioning, collaborating, and composing. Yamaha's design teams in Hamamatsu, Japan, have since sought her services as a consultant to help them develop new electric instrument prototypes.

In 2001, she created and subsequently has produced ASCAP's *Thru the Walls* contemporary music series, which features composer-performers like her who defy genres and boundaries. Currently, Martha writes for all combinations, including acoustic, electro-acoustic, and electric instruments.

When asked about her performing career, Martha responded:

I've had the great fortune of playing in many diverse venues, from private homes, to clubs, to outdoor amphitheaters with my electric setup. While I enjoy the act of performing, it's sometimes the after-show—where the audience comes up and asks questions, or tells me how my music has affected them, or that I just introduced them to something totally new (in a positive way!!)—that is the most rewarding part of the event.

There was also the time David Bowie happened to be in the audience when she was performing one of her solo shows at The Cutting Room in New York City. Bowie

was so impressed that he hired Martha to perform with him in Carnegie Hall and play on his recording of *Heathen*. Good things come to those who rock ...

A few years after Martha's *Enharmonic Vision* CD convinced me that electronic performance offered viable options for the serious classical violist, I met **Mark Wood**. We were both teaching at the Mark O'Connor Fiddle Camp in Tennessee, and he was generous enough to spend an afternoon helping me try out his hand-built instruments and take my first steps into the world of effects pedals. I was hooked! Electric performance now became an aesthetic and a compositional need. I commissioned him to build me a six-string fretless Viper viola that he expertly designed to the same length and specifications as my modern Alexander Tulchinsky acoustic viola. Since that time, Wood has been very open about his own journey and struggles in becoming an electric musician, a patent-holding instrument builder, an Emmy-award winning composer, and a multi-platinum-selling recording artist.

Mark grew up in a classical-music-loving family where he played viola in a string quartet with his three brothers. At the age of twelve, Mark experienced "a major colliding of passions":

I was in love with the Beatles, the Allman Brothers, Frank Zappa, Igor Stravinsky, and Franz Schubert. I naturally wanted to blend what inspired me. I started to play songs

from records on my viola by ear. Led Zeppelin's "Kashmir," that was the tune that did it for me: a great rock tune that fits the viola like a glove!

Mark's viola teacher did not share his enthusiasm:

He wanted to execute me at dawn! As an excited music student, I wanted to share everything with my teacher. I quickly found out some people were receptive; others were not. Fortunately, I was able to study privately with Eugene Becker from the age of fourteen to sixteen. I adored him; I could tell him anything. But the second I walked into Juilliard as a college student and switched to a new teacher, the party was over!



Mark Wood with a Viper

Mark kept his non-classical passions to himself and a few trusted friends, including his roommate Nigel Kennedy and violinist Schlomo Mintz.

Although Mark valued his experiences and training at Juilliard and the Tanglewood Music Festival (as a scholarship student under Leonard Bernstein), he ultimately felt compelled to leave the exclusionary environment of the conservatory.

During my second year at Juilliard, I realized I had to pursue my own vision. I left Juilliard and studied with John Graham and Walter Trampler privately, just to give being a classical violist one more shot. It was the best way for me to experience a peak of the viola world—the last remaining few moments of my classical viola pleasures were those moments with Graham and his phenomenal approach to contemporary music and Trampler's incredible insights on Hindemith. Let's be really clear, I'm a pure violist. I never played violin; never studied it. I think and feel in the midrange. I think and feel as a violist—I have a violist's ear for harmony. I think it's important that the reader understand the commitment I made, but thank God I got real about what I wanted to do with my life.

Mark began to experiment with building his own electric instruments since “there were really no cool-looking [or great-sounding] electric violins to buy” at that time. Eventually, he began to expand his electric viola's range by building prototypes with five, six, seven, or more strings:

Expanding the range of the electric viola was repertoire-motivated. All my heroes were guitarists (they still are). The viola was the perfect start-

ing place for me because the guitar is not really a bass instrument, and it's not a mandolin. I added an E-string because I needed the additional treble range to do Hendrix and Van Halen riffs, and I wanted the full depth of the guitar and bass, so I added strings below the C-string.

In terms of timbre, Mark drew inspiration from hard rock guitarists, as well as his brother's drag motorcycle:

If you hear early recordings of me, you will hear the roar of that motorcycle in my sound, because I was my brother's pit crew man; I changed the tires and everything. He would race on his motorcycle, and he would fine-tune the tone of his engine. That sound became part of my first explorations of tone.

Gradually, Mark began to build a career that would include recording, performing, touring, composing, producing, arranging, scoring for television, and developing his own line of instruments and effects pedals. In 1989, Mark released his first solo album, *Voodoo Violince*, which led to appearances on *The Tonight Show* with Jay Leno, CNN, CBS, ABC News, and other television networks. Soon afterwards, Mark had the opportunity to compose arrangements, record, and tour with Billy Joel, Celine Dion, and Mariah Carey. As a co-founder and arranger for *The Trans-Siberian Orchestra*, Mark tours extensively and has sold several million CDs.

Another highlight was getting to be in Kanye West's hip-hop Pepsi com-

mercial version of “The Devil Went Down to Georgia” featuring rapper Nas and violinist Miri Ben-Ari. My role? The Devil, of course!

Recently, Mark has gained widespread attention for his Electrify Your Strings residencies, which enable string educators and orchestra directors to provide electric pedagogy and performance opportunities for their students.

Around the same time I began playing one of Mark Wood’s electric violas, violist **Asha Mevlana** was also beginning to explore the world of amplified viola. Asha has always been willing to share her insights, as well as thought-provoking questions that have led me to new discoveries in pedagogy and performance. Although Asha is the newest person of our four to plug in, her reason was the same as Stuff Smith, the first known violinist to amplify: she was fighting to be heard above a loud band.

After years of classical training, I began to explore alternative styles. When I graduated from college, I moved to New York City and joined a rock band that played several times a week at smoky clubs around the city. I was worried about putting my expensive viola in danger from spills or theft. Besides that, the sound of my acoustic viola was not cutting through the hard-hitting drums and electric guitar, so I bought my first electric: a five-string Zeta. I loved being able to be heard over the rest of my band and “compete” with the electric guitar.

Like Wood, Asha turned to guitarists as role models for her new musical approach:

I’ve always loved classic rock. When I went electric, I began listening to a lot of the guitar greats’ solos—B.B. King, Chuck Berry, Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page—and began to translate that type of music and soloing to my instrument.



Asha Mevlana

Asha also studied many of the classic string solos from the rock repertoire, like the violin jam at the end of the Who’s “Baba O’Riley,” which she has performed with Roger Daltrey.

Asha’s time studying the rock and pop repertoire was well spent as she has gone on to perform with several of her own bands, as well as Gnarlz Barkley, the Black Eyed Peas, Alanis Morissette, Mary J. Blige, Cheap Trick, and for Dee Snider’s *Van Helsing’s Curse*, a rock

opera with an electric string section. She is probably also the only violist to perform a solo rendition of “The Star-Spangled Banner” for a Boston Red Sox game at Fenway Park.

Although Asha is best known for her performances on her seven-string Wood Violins Viper, she still teaches and performs extensively on her acoustic viola and believes

that her unplugged playing has benefited from going electric:

After a strict classical upbringing, playing electric has allowed me to explore the different sounds and effects that I didn’t know were possible on a violin or viola. When I go back to playing my acoustic viola, I have a lot more freedom in my playing and am much more experimental—trying to figure out how to imitate some of the electric sounds, using slides, different bow pressures to obtain different sounds, etc.

Playing electric has made me realize that all sounds can be cool. For example, I never would have dreamed of playing "distorted" on my acoustic viola, but now in certain gigs and situations, I will adjust my bow pressure to get a more distorted sound on purpose and don't feel the need to play "pretty" all the time.

Asha's discoveries are echoed by **Daryl Silberman**, whose excellent work I came to know through collaborating on workshops and serving on ASTA's alternative strings committee. A Knilling Master Clinician, Daryl has taught for numerous organizations including MENC, ASTA, Yamaha, the Alan de Veritch Viola Institute, Suzuki festivals, and the Australian Strings Association Convention, for whom she was also a featured performer. She has also directed her own alternative styles string camp at the Crowden School in Berkeley, California. Given Daryl's tremendous contributions to the alternative strings scene as a teacher, clinician, and high school orchestra conductor, it comes as no surprise that teaching was what inspired her to plug in:

I started doing clinics for string teachers and students, K-12 and college, for Knilling String Instruments in '95. Though I knew that exploring contemporary styles on a traditional instrument was motivating to me, I wanted something motivational and exciting to the students—using electronics turned out to be that extra something I needed. I created a clinic program where I would

show them classical and contemporary styles, first on my traditional instrument (violin or viola) and then would amplify (usually using a five-stringed acoustic/electric or full solid-body electric) using sound effects. The electronics really helped to boost creativity.



Daryl Silberman

Some teachers have expressed fear that electric performance or alternative styles might have a negative effect on their students. Daryl's experience has caused her to conclude otherwise:

I've always maintained that by exploring improvisation and contemporary music, you can unlock your inner musician, which can make you a much more expressive classical player. I know that my Bach became ten times better once I allowed myself the freedom to explore in different styles! Interestingly, my exploration into contemporary music coincided for a few years with an exploration of Baroque music.

To underscore the symbiotic connection between her classical and electronic work, Daryl has been known to play Telemann's Canonic Sonatas as electric viola solos by using a Boss digital delay pedal.

In addition to classical and contemporary music, Daryl's electric performance and teaching encompass many different styles, including blues, rock, jazz, and fiddling. Though she is highly experienced and accomplished as a performer (performances and/or recordings with Guns N' Roses, Depeche Mode, and Al Stewart, to name a few), Daryl prefers to consider herself "an eye-opener who loves inspiring and motivating players and teachers."

When asked what advice they would give students and musicians who wish to explore electric viola, all four of our violists had helpful advice. Daryl suggested:

Consider going five-string! You get all the advantages of going electric on a viola, but you can add one extra string—low F or high E. When the instrument is a little smaller, you can get around it so much easier, and unlike an acoustic, length and size don't have as big of an impact on tone. Just add a little more bass or treble by adjusting the EQ settings on your amp or sound system.

I like to say, 'Leave your classical attitude at the door' when going electric. An electric instrument is never going to feel or sound like your classical ax. You have to embrace the new world of electrics in order to find the

right one for you—consider budget, fit, weight, and the type of sound you're looking for. It's very important that you try out instruments from a maker or dealer who understands the equipment and how to set it up. When this isn't the case, it sounds terrible, and people falsely assume that that's how electric violins and violas sound.

I also recommend taking time to explore effects! I always find myself fascinated by wanting to create music appropriate to the sound effect I am exploring.

Asha Mevlana recommends a social approach:

Talk to everyone you know who plays an electric instrument. Talk to electric guitar players. Try out electric instruments before you buy them to see what works for you. There is a lot of trial and error and asking advice in the beginning. There is no right or wrong rig, just what sounds good to you. Also, once you've purchased an electric instrument, take your instrument to a Guitar Center or Sam Ash or another music store that has equipment that you can use. I've done this many times, and the peo-

ple who work there are extremely friendly and helpful.

Mark Wood underscores the importance of entering a new, creative mindset:

First and foremost, view it as electric playing. Don't think of your electric instrument as a loud viola. You want to look at it as a vehicle that can explore sounds, textures, and techniques that you cannot achieve on your acoustic instrument. See it as an opportunity to expand your imagination as an artist.

If you find you or your students are just spinning your wheels by trying to replicate your acoustic experience on an electric viola, turn on a drum machine. When you hear drums playing in a jazz, country, or rock way, it puts your headspace into an area that's outside of your classical experience. That's always a good trigger point to start exploring non-classical technique and styles.

Martha Mooke advocates the "Nike motto approach":

Do it!!! Ask questions (I'm available by e-mail); search the Internet (sites like www.electricviolinshop.com), and go out to your local music store. Decide your budget, then what kind of instrument (maker, how many strings, etc), and then what gear to add (if any) between the instrument and amplifier or PA.

To contact any of these artists, hear their music, or learn much more about their remarkable careers, please visit their websites:

Martha Mooke: <http://www.marthamooke.com>

Mark Wood: <http://markwoodmusic.com>

Asha Mevlana: <http://www.ashamevlana.com>

Daryl Silberman: <http://www.daryls.com>

Be sure to tune in to this summer's online *JAVS* issue, which shall include Martha Mooke's extensive discography of electric violists!

David Wallace will be teaching electric viola and other alternative styles at the Mark O'Connor Strings Conference in New York City this July.

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