

# THE ECLECTIC VIOLIST

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## THE CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP VIOLIST

by David Wallace

The biographies of America's great jazz, country, and pop musicians reveal two common paths to becoming a seasoned performer and improviser:

- 1) Play countless club dates and dances
- 2) Be a church musician

Artists like Miles Davis, Willie Nelson, and Whitney Houston did both.

While many of us play a seasonal *Messiah* or *Kol Nidrei*, growing numbers of violists have found opportunities for creative, versatile, advanced musicianship within today's Christian church—meet the contemporary worship violist!

Typically, worship violists perform with a band that leads congregational singing on Sunday mornings, in addition to providing music for seasonal dramatic productions and outreach events. While contemporary Christian praise songs and choruses form the core repertoire of most worship bands, a typical week's set list can run the gamut from classical to country, Latin to jazz, rock to hymnody, and gospel to hip-hop.

The typical worship violist is fluent in all contemporary styles, not only as a player, but also as a listener, composer, and arranger. In every style, the worship violist must be able to improvise solos, harmonies, and rhythmic accompaniments from a piano-vocal score or chord chart. Well-versed in transposition and playing by ear, contemporary worship violists embody numerous skills expected of a Kapellmeister in Bach and Handel's day.

The viola's range provides tremendous flexibility within a worship team. The violist has the freedom to harmonize or to provide counterpoint above or

below most singers. Similarly, if the congregation needs help finding the melody, the viola can double it in unison or with octaves. Double-stops can provide the illusion of a string section and can fill out missing vocal harmonies. If a team lacks a rhythm guitarist, the viola's riffing and grooving capabilities provide the rhythmic backbone. In rare instances, a violist can even cover bass lines. In other words, the diverse roles a violist enjoys in a string quartet lend themselves naturally to the praise band.

Of course, classical skills and repertoire have their place in a church, too. The worship violist may be the person who introduces congregants to masterworks by Bach, Brahms, Hindemith, Pärt, Gubaidulina, or any number of composers whom we typically program in recital. Classical repertoire is particularly suited for preludes, offertories, and moments of prayer or repentance.

On a more metaphysical and spiritual level, pastors frequently compare the role of the worship team to the priestly role of the Levites, the Hebrew tribe dedicated to temple service and music in biblical times. Taking a cue from Psalm 22:3,<sup>1</sup> congregational worship serves to usher in presence of God. For this reason, serving on a worship team brings the expectation of maturity, personal accountability to pastors and fellow team members, an active devotional life, and a high and often clearly stated standard of conduct.

While some congregations do pay their worship teams, the vast majority of musicians volunteer their time and talents. In working with amateurs,<sup>2</sup> professionals on a worship team must apply tremendous patience in bridging the gaps between diverse instrumental skills, degrees of musical literacy,<sup>3</sup> and comprehensive knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

Worship violists require strong interpersonal skills, in addition to maturity. The blunt or impassioned

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discourse that feels comfortable and normal in a professional chamber ensemble can easily bruise fragile egos, sensitive souls, and team members who are insecure about their musicianship.

Meanwhile, congregants are seldom shy about voicing their musical likes and dislikes. Today's multi-genre, multi-cultural worship styles can provoke strong reactions. People may lack knowledge or tact when expressing their distaste for efforts to be inclusive (or when demanding greater inclusivity). By the same token, love, praise, forgiveness, acceptance, and appreciation for musicians flows infinitely more freely than it does in the typical professional environment.

To bring a personal face and voice to the topic, I would like you to meet pioneering contemporary worship violist Diana Christine Clemons. Diana began her professional career as a section violist in the Boise Philharmonic at age fourteen and current-

ly performs as a soloist, chamber musician, and Principal Violist of the Coeur d'Alene Symphony and Chamber Orchestra. A rancher with a therapeutic riding center for special-needs children, Diana has served as a church musician for twenty-five years and currently performs as a worship violist at Real Life Ministries in Post Falls, Idaho.

### **Diana Christine Clemons: Living Life in a Giant Cadenza**

*DW: How did you become a contemporary worship violist?*

DCC: I have been serving as a worship musician since I graduated from Juilliard in 1987. After I graduated, I taught piano and strings privately and gigged for a living, but I loved playing in a Christian rock band and on my worship team at the Aurora Vineyard Church in Aurora, Colorado. I love God, and I love to play the viola; it was inevitable!



*Diana Christine Clemons*

I have been extremely fortunate. I currently play at Real Life Ministries, a non-denominational mega-church that has 8,000 members. We have five services every weekend. Because everyone expects me to improvise, I never have to play the same thing twice.

*DW: Describe your role as the violist of your worship team.*

DCC: I usually take on the role of soloist/lead instrument when I play, even though I can chord and harmonize on the viola as well. The team that I play on currently does not have a lead guitar, so I take all of the lead spots. I also play melodies whenever there is an instrumental interlude. I am fortunate to be able to play by ear; so, when there is something extravagant to be played, I usually get to play it!

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*DW: How do you balance solo viola with a contemporary worship band?*

DCC: I am amplified. I have used everything from a lapel microphone strapped around my viola to every form of stand or boom microphone. Currently I am using Headway's The Band Violin Pickup System, which straps around the belly of my instrument and is completely size-adjustable.

*DW: What are some of the challenges (musical, personal, or otherwise) of being a contemporary worship violist?*

DCC: Occasionally someone ignorant tells a viola joke . . . but they only do it once.

*DW: What skills outside of the standard classical strings training have you developed, and how have they impacted your performing career?*

DCC: In retrospect, it is interesting to me that everything in my formal education was about preparing me to play in a viola section, but I never really wanted an orchestral career—I just wanted to be a really great player. At Juilliard, I remember standing in the hall practicing quietly while waiting to go into an ensemble rehearsal. The conductor walked up to me and very rudely snapped at me, “Why are you practicing Bach? You are a violist—you should be practicing orchestra parts!”

I am a theory fanatic. I teach basic jazz chording and improvisation on the piano, and I am also a published writer and composer. I have a production that I do as a fund-raiser for local charities where I play a dozen or so different styles of music; I play that show all over the place.

My life has experienced some drastic changes that I could not control. Those things always impact our plans, but not our callings. I have a twenty-year-old son who has autism. It has caused me to stay home a lot, so I have continued to study even though I am no longer a student.

Honestly, there are very few venues that call for middle-aged solo viola players, so in the past few years, I have just had to create places to play. Last month I played improvised tango music for a hip-hop CD. It was a blast! I have even taught myself how to be a contest fiddler (violins are so dinky . . . they are easy to play). Now I am trying to find a bluegrass or jazz band. I am always looking for something fun and new to do with the viola. I am never bored because there is too much new to do. I play at a lot of nursing homes, and they don't mind if I bring my son along when I play . . . so it's all good.

*DW: What do you personally see as the benefits or advantages of being a worship musician?*

DCC: I get to enter into a realm of freedom as a performer that few classical musicians will ever get to experience. I have been at my current church for about ten years. Now, most of the time they don't even give me music, charts, or mp3s to study ahead of time; they just set up a microphone, tell me when to show up, and let me do what I do. I live in a world of improvisation that is like living life in a giant cadenza. There is little that I do as a musician that is as fulfilling as the time I get to worship.

Almost every time I play, someone comes up to me afterward and says, “Wow, I have never heard a violin sound like that before. It is so deep, and I could feel it resonating in my heart!”—or something to that effect. I used to explain, “Thanks, but this is not a violin; it is a seventeen-inch viola and the viola is . . .” I learned from the glazed looks that came over their faces to just respond to their gracious words by saying, “Thank you! I'm so glad you enjoyed it.”

*DW: What else would you like to share about your experiences?*

DCC: In recent years I have begun teaching improvisation to classical musicians at summer camps and at colleges. It is REALLY fun. It has come directly from my time as a member of a worship team. I have two new works for viola that will be released

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this year: a concerto and seven unaccompanied pieces. Both works have come from my diverse background as a musician. I would not change anything!

*The sheet music for the first movement from The Viola Canon, seven unaccompanied pieces based on hymns, by Diana Christine Clemons can be found at: <http://americanviolasociety.org/resources/scores/jav-scores/>.*

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel.
- <sup>2</sup> In this context, I am using amateur not as a slight, but as a reference back to its Latin origins, which refers to people who are not professional, but who zealously pursue something for the love of it.
- <sup>3</sup> Worship team members typically have diverse and disparate skills relative to understanding theory, playing with stylistic fluency, running a sound system, and reading sheet music or chord charts. Moreover, there is a need to develop a common vocabulary as each musician or genre may have its own idiosyncratic jargon.
- <sup>4</sup> A frustrated singer-guitarist worship leader may need help understanding why an E-flat alto saxophonist is struggling, when all the charts are in keys with many sharps.

*Dr. David Wallace enjoyed a seventeen-year tenure as a worship violist. He teaches the requisite principles and skills to violists and music majors at Nyack College when he isn't stirring up creativity at the Juilliard School, the New York Philharmonic, Mark Wood Rock Orchestra Camp, and Mark O'Connor/Berklee College of Music Summer Strings Program.*