From Violin to Viola: Effecting a Smooth Transition

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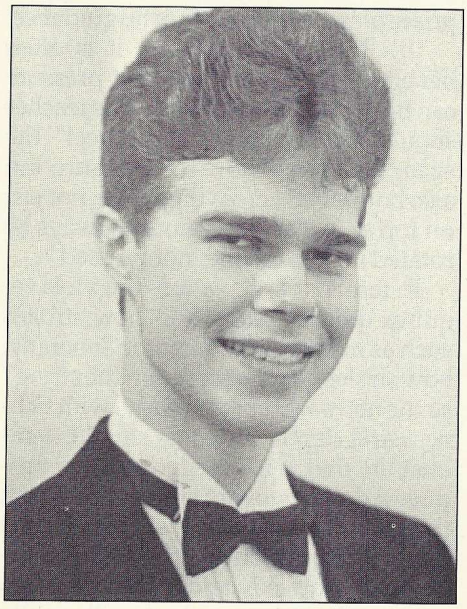
Wallace has taught privately since 1988 and has performed at numerous summer festivals, including Taos, MUSICORDA, and ENCORE. His former teachers include Kenneth Goldsmith and Lawrence Wheeler.



As viola teachers, we will inevitably have students who are in the process of switching from violin to viola. This transition is a complex procedure that entails subtle adaptations in physical technique, tone production, vibrato, intonation, and reading. Following the principals set forth in this article will enable teachers to guide students through these essential changes, thereby helping transform violinists into true violists.

Physical Technique

At first glance, the physical differences between violin and viola may seem inconsequential. The greater size and weight of the viola, however, necessitate several adjustments in physical technique. These adjustments primarily concern the physical approach to the instrument, the extension of the bow arm, and the position of the left hand.

One of the first issues teachers should address is the physical approach to the viola. Many students initially suffer discomfort from approaching the viola in the same (and often faulty) way they approached the violin. Specifically, most students with the physical length necessary for the viola have held the violin with considerable constriction in their neck and shoulder areas to compensate for their own excess length. Teachers should explain that this compensation is no longer necessary since the arms are farther apart when playing viola.

For a violistic physical approach, students can let the shoulders broaden, while keeping the collarbones free-floating and unlifted. The arms should come around the instrument in a hugging motion while the armpits remain open. (This will prove especially liberating for students who supported the violin from beneath while pressing downward with the bow.) These changes in physical approach will eliminate any contraction in the neck and shoulders and greatly improve tone quality.

Regarding how high the viola should be held, there is no reason why the instrument should be allowed to sag. If the viola droops, the bow will lose contact with the string and slide toward the fingerboard. Moreover, a sagging viola hinders shifting and strains the back. To hold the viola comfortably at an acceptable height, the arms must feel the support of the shoulder blades and torso. If a student still has difficulty supporting the instrument, a different style or placement of chin rest or shoulder rest may solve the problem.

Once the physical approach is adjusted, the bow arm can be repositioned. Because the sounding point is farther away for the viola, the right arm will need to be opened and extended forward. The elbow may consequently seem a little higher, and the wrist may form a flatter angle. These adjustments may require that the viola be angled more toward the right or left to maintain a straight bow.

The left arm, like the right, will be more open and extended, and the elbow will swing more to the left. The neck of the instrument will probably rest deeper in the hand (closer to the palm), and the wrist angle will usually be different in order to create a wider hand frame.

The left hand itself must be adjusted to a natural, flexible position, which provides the additional reach required for playing in the lower positions. To find the best position, it is useful to have the student finger an octave (or a four-finger pattern that encompasses a perfect fourth) while adjusting the student's hand to a more comfortable, flexible position. A good position can usually be found by freeing the thumb and index finger of any contraction and by slightly adjusting the wrist angle and thumb contact.

The additional spread required for playing in the lower positions should be

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felt in the palm of the hand. The fingers should not stretch at their extremities to gain additional reach; rather, they should lengthen from below, the student sensing that the fingers are an extension of the metacarpals.

When playing, the left fingers should be lifted from below the base knuckles and dropped forward with elasticity. For timing and articulation, this lifting motion will be quicker than it was for the violin. By making these adjustments in physical technique, the teacher will help the student adapt a natural, violistic approach to the instrument.

Tone Production and Articulation

In addition to helping students understand differences in physical technique, the teacher must also help them develop a beautiful sound and good articulation. On all stringed instruments, good tone production is based on a well-balanced relationship between bow speed, pressure, and sounding point. The viola simply requires a much more delicate balance of these three factors.

For students to develop consistent tone production, it is best for them initially to reduce bow speed and expenditure until the viola's tone production proportions become familiar. At this stage, students should be highly conscious of bow distribution and devote substantial practice time to long, sustained tones with and without dynamics. Once the proper proportions have become established, students can begin to expand their ability to vary speed, pressure, and sounding point. (Exercises listed under "sounding point" on pages 61-62 of Ivan Galamian's *Principles of Violin Playing and Teaching*, second edition, are useful in this regard.)

In terms of pressure, the teacher should avoid the common espousal that the viola requires more pressure than the violin. While the thicker strings do require slightly more resistance in the bow arm, overemphasis on this point usually causes unnecessary tension and a gruff tone. It is generally more effective to turn students' attention to bow speed and expenditure; if the teacher has properly adjusted the physical technique, the student will usually discover the appropriate pressure with little or no guidance.

If a harsh tone persists, it is often beneficial to demonstrate that pressure can be applied horizontally. The teacher should ask the student to "peel" the string and sense how the pressure can also be applied across the string, not just on top of it. The bow should always be rotated into the string, not pressed.

In terms of articulation, the viola requires quicker releases in bow strokes such as martelé and staccato. Generally, bow strokes will be more "on the string" so the notes will speak clearly, with richness and depth. Teachers should demonstrate that it is even possible to produce a clean, buoyant spiccato in which the stick bounces vigorously without the hair leaving the string. By releasing articulations quickly and keeping strokes more on the string, students will rapidly achieve clarity of articulation.

By initially reducing bow speed and expenditure and emphasizing fast releases, teachers can help students obtain a beautiful tone and clean articulation.

Vibrato

Producing a violistic vibrato poses another challenge to the new violist. The majority of students will err to the extremes: they will produce a vibrato that is either too fast and narrow or too slow and wide.

Most new violists initially produce a shallow, narrow, and fast vibrato that does not project. This problem can usually be remedied by centering the fingers more on their pads (less on their tips) and by letting the elbow relax and swing more to the left. The fingertip joints must be free and supple to allow a greater range of horizontal and vertical oscillation. These outermost joints should passively collapse during the "flattened-pitch" part of the vibrato cycle.

This passive fingertip collapse can be developed away from the instrument with a simple exercise. After the student makes a circle with any left-hand finger and the thumb, the fingertip joint is rhythmically flexed in and out while the hand rocks sympathetically.

In contrast to students who vibrate fast and narrow are those who approach the viola with an exaggeratedly slow and wide vibrato. These students will need to discover "vertical vibrato." Whereas "horizontal vibrato" oscillates pitch, vertical vibrato oscillates the amplitude of the string's vibration. Vertical vibrato results from regular releases of finger pressure, which give the vibrato throb, intensity, and projection. To experience the concept of vertical vibrato, the student can finger any note without pressing the string all the way to the fingerboard. Then, while bowing the string, the student rhythmically presses the string to the fingerboard and releases to the original position. The result is a steady wavering of the note without altering the pitch.

In actuality, vertical vibrato does not require such drastic motions; it naturally results from releasing the vibrating finger at the extremities of its motion. Another set of exercises can develop the vertical vibrato pulse. Without the instrument, the hand is held in playing position. One finger is rhythmically lifted from the base joints and dropped. After a designated number of pulses, the violist switches fingers. The student can practice a similar exercise where one finger contacts the palm of the hand while the other three are pulsing. When playing the viola, the impetus of this

pulsing motion creates a vibrato that can oscillate amplitude in conjunction with pitch.

Violists will still generate the same physical motions involved in arm, hand, and finger vibrato as on the violin. The motions will not necessarily be larger; rather, they will be more interrelated. The student should think of vibrato as a pulse continuing throughout the entire arm that can be centered in different parts to product corresponding results. In effect, a violist "places" the vibrato in various parts of the arm, just as a singer "places" the voice in various parts of the head and chest.

Intonation

The adjustments in physical technique will help to expand the hand frame, but until the new position and external note locations become second nature, intonation problems will still exist. For new violists to play in tune, they must become accustomed to the new hand frame and note locations, wider half-steps, and harmonic intonation.

If students have developed considerable octave technique on the violin, practicing scales in octaves provides an excellent means of solidifying the new hand frame. For the student lacking octave proficiency, fourth-finger exercises by Shradieck, Dancla, and Sevcik will accomplish a similar result. Once an accurate hand frame exists between first and fourth fingers, second and third will adjust quite naturally.

Within the hand frame itself, fingers will initially have sharp or flat tendencies. Until the hand frame expansion is set, first and second fingers will likely be sharp, and third and fourth fingers will tend to be flat. Teachers should observe the tendencies of students' individual fingers and make the students aware of them. When students become aware of these tendencies, they will begin to correct them.

New violists will also be inclined to play their half-steps too close together. These students must learn that half-steps are not "squeezed." In 1st position, some half-steps may even require space between the fingers. To learn proper placement of half-steps, students should practice chromatic scales.

Aurally, the student will need to grow more accustomed to harmonic intonation. Violinists generally think in terms of melodic intonation. They temper their half-steps to create expressive leading tones and to make certain notes sharper or flatter to create melodic direction. Violists, certainly in chamber and orchestral music, play fewer non-harmonic tones. Consequently, they must develop increased awareness of what part of the chord they play so they may adjust to the other voices.

To develop a better sense of harmonic intonation, students should practice double stops. In all double-stop practice, the students should listen for Tartini's tones, tones which result from two tones sounding simultaneously. (For example, if B below middle C is sustained in tune with an open D, the viola will softly resonate a G one octave below open G.) By listening for Tartini's tones, students will develop a keen sense of harmonic intonation, which will serve them well in solo and ensemble playing.

The Alto Clef and Fluent Reading

The alto clef initially poses one of the most annoying stumbling blocks to the new violist. Even an advanced musician with exceptional reading ability can be paralyzed by the simplest passage in alto clef. Fortunately, teachers can offer numerous strategies to expedite learning the clef and reading fluently. Teachers can help students develop a new eye-hand correlation, a comprehensive knowledge of the alto clef, sight-reading skills, and an enhanced awareness of pulse and the field of vision.

The student is commonly advised (usually by violinists who have had only minimal experience with the viola), "Just read it like 3rd position on the violin." This "advice" will cause only further hindrance. First of all, students will not learn to read the clef; they will learn a method of transposition that causes additional mental effort and confusion and consequently, a slower reading speed. Second, this crutch limits students to 1st position. Thus confined, they will abstain from fingerings that would prove more musical or efficient, and they will be unable to play notes out of this range. Finally, students will not develop other reading skills or progress as quickly in all areas of development.

So, what measures should the student take? One of the first steps toward fluent reading is learning the new eye-hand correlation. This ability is best developed by having students read transcriptions of works they have studied on violin. Teachers should instruct the students to practice the piece at moderate tempi, consciously correlating the previously learned finger patterns with their new positions on the staff. Through this method, students will learn the new staff locations of fingerboard intervals through the promptings of their kinesthetic memory.

Students must also know the pitch names and fingerboard locations for any note on the staff. Flash cards and the mnemonics "FACE G" and "Good Boys Do Fine" will simplify learning the clef. Staff-fingerboard "footholds" will help transfer this knowledge to the fingerboard.

The open strings will provide the easiest footholds on the staff, and their note locations should be immediately

memorized. Students should then recognize that middle C is in the middle of the staff and that the top space F in alto clef is the bottom space F in treble clef. These two notes are easy to perceive visually, and they may be easily correlated to their new fingerboard positions by relating the G and D strings to the G and D strings of the violin. This sort of string relation will also facilitate learning the new placements of treble clef notes. To develop fully the staff-pitch-fingerboard correlation, students can play any piece at a deliberate tempo while saying the note names prior to playing them.

Of course, reading must transcend fastidious attention to every note if complete ease and speed are to develop. For this reason, the student should immediately undertake a daily sight-reading program. Teachers should encourage their students to actively pursue opportunities to read chamber, orchestral, and solo music.

Orchestral playing provides ample opportunity to practice reading. Students will also learn from playing with other violists in the section. Orchestral playing proves particularly beneficial for students who read more confidently when playing with other people.

Chamber music is the ultimate reading situation because students bear sole responsibility for their parts. They must continue to play and keep their place because the ensemble will not pause for an error. For the less-advanced student or the uncertain reader, early Haydn quartets or the William Primrose transcription of Bartok's 44 Violin Duets, Book I, are excellent material for reading.

In the absence of other musicians, students should practice sight reading by themselves. Etudes provide the ideal solo reading medium because they are rhythmically, harmonically, and melodically independent works that frequently address a single technical problem. Through reading etudes, students can learn to recognize harmonic progressions, scales, arpeggios, and technical difficulties at sight.

When sight-reading music, students must pay strict attention to the pulse and continue to play without stopping or looking back. Most reading breakdowns are actually caused by inattention to pulse, not technical or reading difficulties. If the student stumbles frequently despite a good sense of pulse, the teacher should suggest a slower tempo or easier repertoire.

Reading deficiencies can also result from a limited field of vision. When students read only one note at a time from left to right, their focus is constricted and they cannot read more than a few notes ahead. Students who read in this manner should be encouraged to maintain a relaxed focus that allows awareness of the entire page in the peripheral vision. A student using this type of focus will enjoy clear perception of the entire phrase while playing, awareness of clef, key, and meter changes well before they occur, increased awareness of dynamics and motivic patterns, and decreased physical tension and eye strain.

The foregoing methods of learning the alto clef should be employed according to students' individual needs. Students who quickly establish the eye-hand coordination need not devote as much energy to reading transcriptions. On the other hand, students who have approached the clef carefully and thoroughly would do well to develop speed through transcriptions and sight-reading practice. For all students, fluent reading will result from a strong correlation between the eyes, staff, and fingers, a thorough knowledge of the alto clef, and substantial reading experience.

I have written this article based on my own transition and my teaching experiences. I have found that these issues and solutions are relevant not only for recent converts, but they are also pertinent for students who never played violin or who switched years ago. In closing, I would like to thank Ken Goldsmith, Larry Wheeler, Toby Appel, and Karen Ritscher, all of whom contributed to my own transition and to the ideas and exercises contained in this article. I trust that this information will give other teachers success in guiding students from violin to viola.

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