

# Journal of the American Viola Society

Volume 35 Number 2



## Features:

Weinberg's Viola Sonatas

Viola d'amore in the Baroque

# Journal of the American Viola Society

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p. 3 **From the Editor**

p. 4 **From the President**

## *News & Notes*

p. 5 **Announcements**

## *Feature Articles*

p. 7 **Mieczysław Weinberg and the Future of the Viola**

Krzysztof Tymendorf illuminates Weinberg's career and compositional style, while offering an overview of his works for viola.

p. 11 **The Butterfly Effect: An attempt to understand why I recorded the Four Viola Solo Sonatas by Mieczysław Weinberg**

Viacheslav Dinerchtein thoughtfully considers his reasoning behind the monumental task of recording Weinberg's Viola Sonatas.

p. 13 **The Viola d'amore in Baroque Opera, Oratorio, and Cantata**

Lanson Wells, the first prize winner of the 2017 Dalton Competition, provides violists with an introduction and exploration of the viola d'amore and its repertoire.

## *Departments*

p. 21 **The Eclectic Violist:** David Wallace walks us through *Submerged*, an exciting new masterpiece for flute, viola, and harp by Uruguayan-American composer Miguel del Aguila.

p. 27 **With Viola in Hand:** Myron Rosenblum interviews violist Richard Wolfe about his long career as an orchestral musician, chamber musician, and professor in the Netherlands.

p. 31 **Music Reviews:** Lauren Hodges reviews music from the Russian orbit. Works by Shostakovich, Khachaturyan, Rachmaninoff, and Kapustin.

p. 35 **Recording Reviews:** Carlos María Solare reviews new recordings by Matthew Lipmann and Nokuthula Ngwenyama.

On the Cover:  
**Wang Dalin**  
*A Viola & a Drawing Stand in Field* (2012)  
Oil on canvas, 100x80 cm

Wang Dalin was born in Shanghai in 1949 and is recognized for his horse paintings, abstract figure drawings, and square apple sculptures. He is the art curator at the Shenzhen Art Museum, and designed the museum's interior. He has exhibited his works throughout Asia, North America, and Europe. He is represented by Alisan Fine Arts: <http://www.alisan.com.hk/en/>



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# Let's Play *Submerged!*

David Wallace

## Origins and Background

When my flute-violaharp trio, *Hat Trick*, began plans for our debut CD,<sup>1</sup> we resolved to commission a new work.<sup>2</sup> After much discussion, listening, and research we reached out to Miguel del Aguila.

Why del Aguila? As a group, we loved his chamber music and admired his skilled harp writing. We also knew that he could contribute a work to our genre that was authentically Latin American, modern, yet accessible to any audience.

The resulting composition, *Submerged*, did not disappoint! Miguel del Aguila's *Submerged* is a *tour de force* combining Andean traditional influences, haunting classical harmonies, compelling new instrumental techniques, and imagery from Spanish lyric poetry. The dancing rhythms, beautiful melodies, evocative birdsong, and drama consistently captivate every audience who hears it.

As the work continues to gain popularity with international performances, I wanted to share more insights into the work, its unique viola part, and approaches for successfully navigating its challenges and extended techniques.

## Poetic Inspiration

Because two works on our CD centered on poems,<sup>3</sup> we invited Miguel to consider choosing a poem for his inspiration. Without hesitation, he chose Alfonsina Storni's "Yo en el Fondo del mar" from her 1934 collection, *Mundo de siete pozos*.



Composer Miguel del Aguila. Photo by Donna Granata.

As Del Aguila comments in his program note:

On the surface, both the poem and music seem innocent and light-hearted, but one feels differently when the author's fascination with the sea, and her later suicide by drowning in it, are taken into consideration. The piece follows the form of the poem except for the lively introduction and coda, which illustrate the poet's childhood near her native Argentine Andes, and in Switzerland.

## Scordatura

The first challenge violists must navigate is del Aguila's scordatura. To obtain the maximum resonance and richness from the harp, Del Aguila composed *Submerged* in A flat minor. We must tune our violas down a semitone, which increases our tone's resonance and richness, but also helps us to imitate the sound of a charango.

“Yo en el fondo del mar”  
By Alfonsina Storni (1892–1938)

En el fondo del mar  
hay una casa  
de cristal.

A una avenida  
de madréporas  
da.

Una gran pez de oro,  
a las cinco,  
me viene a saludar.

Me trae  
un rojo ramo  
de flores de coral.

Duermo en una cama  
un poco más azul  
que el mar.

Un pulpo  
me hace guiños  
a través del cristal.

En el bosque verde  
que me circunda  
—din don . . . din dan . . . —  
se balancean y cantan  
las sirenas  
de nácar verdemar.

Y sobre mi cabeza  
arden, en el crepúsculo,  
las erizadas puntas del mar.

“Me at the Bottom of the Sea”  
Translation by M. del Aguila

At the bottom of the sea  
is a house  
made of crystal,

at the edge  
of a coral-lined  
street.

A big golden fish  
comes to greet me  
at five;

it brings me  
a red bouquet  
of coral.

I sleep on a bed  
a little bluer  
than the sea.

Through the glass  
now an octopus  
winks.

In the green forest  
that surrounds me  
sway mermaids who sing  
—ding, dong . . . dong, ding—  
in their nacre and aquamarine.

And above my head  
glow in the twilight  
the prickling pins of the sea.

In a way, though, we “have it easy” by playing scordatura. Instead of navigating and fingering a part written in seven flats like our flutists do, we simply read and play *Submerged* as though it were written in A minor. With the looser tension, we are also less likely to break a string, which may not be the case for scordatura pieces for which we tune up.

In concert performance, the scordatura creates a few minor logistical issues. If you are retuning your instrument mid-concert, allow time for your instrument to settle into the new pitch. Usually a minute or so is adequate, but tune twice: once to adjust the instrument to the lower pitch spectrum, and a second time to fine-tune or readjust for any string stretching or pitch changes that may result from retuning.

When *Hat Trick* plays *Submerged*, I usually tune as flutist April Clayton introduces the piece. We typically program *Submerged* as a concert finale or the last work before intermission. That said, *Submerged* works very well as a concert-opener, and starting the concert with scordatura allows ample time for the instrument adjust. If you need to tune back up to concert tuning, follow the same process, i.e. tuning twice and allowing a minute or two for the instrument to adjust.

Playing in scordatura may initially pose mental blocks for violists who are unaccustomed to it. Violists with absolute pitch or limited experience with transposition, microtonality, or alternative tuning systems tend to experience the most difficulty, but take heart!

Because the noteheads are in the same place on the staff as they would be without scordatura, we do not experience quite the same visual cognitive dissonance that we can when reading Mozart’s scordatura part for *Sinfonia Concertante* in D major.

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Simply invest some time in the new tuning. Play some scales, and listen to the new timbre of your viola. Play some familiar etudes or pieces down a half step. Before you know it, your ears, eyes, and fingers will gain comfort with navigating a fingerboard with a different pitch spectrum.

### “Like a charango”

Del Aguila uses the viola to evoke the charango, a South American plucked instrument that traditionally used an armadillo shell as its resonating chamber. For most of the piece, we hold our violas in “guitar position,” leave the bow down, and strum. If you are unfamiliar with Andean folk music or the charango, your first task is to do some research, watching, and listening.

You quickly will discover a variety of traditional and contemporary styles, as well as differing techniques according to country and region. In realizing del Aguila’s instruction “Pizzicato molto sul tasto downwards with the thumb, upwards with the index. Like a charango,” I found videos of Oscar Miranda and Jaime Torres particularly helpful in understanding the strum. By now, many excellent video examples are available of both strumming and fingerpicking charango playing.

Practice the strum on a single chord, until the rhythm becomes free, grooving, and automatic. Keep the right wrist and fingers loose, and allow your forearm to rotate with the strum.



*The trio Hat Trick. Left to Right: harpist Kristi Shade, violist David Wallace, and flutist April Clayton.*

In terms of left-hand chords and intonation, you will have better luck with the fifths and double-stops by supinating your left forearm so that your fingers are more perpendicular to the strings than in your usual playing position—almost like a guitarist playing barre chords. Using the left thumb to slightly dampen the C string will help you to realize Miguel’s instruction, “IV corda always softer than the others.”

As is often the case with chamber music, the violist’s rhythm drives the piece. As Miguel wrote me when first he sent the parts, “It’s not about the beauty of your sound; you are the entire ‘percussion section’ here.” Just go for it!

### Calluses and fingernails

When Miguel sent the first draft, he warned “You may get blisters from practicing this too much at the last minute, so start slowly.” I have to admit, I was so excited by his music that I quickly developed a thumb blister on the first night. Undaunted, I continued playing until the blister’s demise, then spent the two weeks wishing that I had followed his advice. Please take the time to develop proper calluses!

These days, I spend enough time strumming chord changes on my viola that the skin on my thumb and index finger don’t need too much help getting back into shape. Still, I usually give myself a week or two of building up my calluses before a *Submerged* performance.

If you are new to strumming, a good rule of thumb is to practice strumming only up to the point that your fingers are feeling tender, but never past it. Come back the next day. If you still need to rehearse, but you feel a hot spot developing, substitute a thin guitar pick or a felt ukulele pick to give your skin a rest.

Some violists have opted to use a plectrum for the duration of *Submerged*. However, I strongly recommend using your fingers and skin. You will be hard pressed to find a traditional charangista using a plectrum; the thumb and forefinger generate an entirely different strum. Nonetheless, I discovered that Miguel’s introductory chords speak much more clearly and are easier to project when I use a thin guitar pick (see fig. 1). Miguel incorporated this option into his final score.

On the downbeat of bar nine, you can see that I've penciled in a different voicing. This was Miguel's original chord. When I was still trying to navigate his opening with the thumb and forefinger charango strum, I had told Miguel that this particular chord was not "playable." That is, it seemed impossible to make it speak well so high up the neck. Admittedly, I also was still struggling with the intonation challenges of this voicing. However, when I experimented with strumming the opening nine bars with a plectrum, I learned that Miguel's original voicing can speak very well. I actually prefer Miguel's original resolution to his revision, but either voicing is acceptable.

As the strumming intensifies, Miguel asks for a change of texture: "With the thumb's fingernail." While charangistas often use their thumbnails for strumming, I found growing out my thumbnail and strumming with it problematic on a number of grounds. Specifically, we need a shorter thumbnail for holding our bows, the wide curvature of our bridges puts more stress on the thumbnail, and our strings are thicker and provide more resistance than a charango.

As a compromise and solution, I developed a technique using my index finger. I brace my thumb against a fairly stiff index finger and use my finger as a makeshift plectrum. On the downstrokes, my fingernail engages

the string, and on the upstrokes, the index finger callus and the rigid support of the underlying bone create a similar strum, even without engaging the fingernail. This approach generates the fingernail timbre, but without the risks of using a thumbnail.

### The Underwater Section

In my interpretation of Storni's poem this underwater world is that special place of isolation where many artists withdraw to create, a place and mood that can easily turn into depression.

—Miguel del Aguila

While Miguel's instructions for the mysterious "submerged" middle section are quite clear, I'll share a few helpful details and answers to questions violists have asked me.

When flutist April Clayton and I first performed the antiphonal, offstage birdsong in measures 145–160, we endeavored (as always) to make exact polyrhythms and to line up our parts, almost metronomically. Miguel advised us that his instruction to the flute—"tempo and intonation quasi ad lib do not match harp's tempo"—carried over to our dialogue.

corrected 12/1/2013  
 VIOLA  
 TUNE ALL STRINGS  
 A MINOR 2nd. DOWN  
 Cb Gb Db Ab

## Submerged

(Sumergida)

Op. 108 for flute, viola and harp  
 Commissioned by Hat Trick and Brigham Young University

Miguel del Aguila  
 2013

♩ = 68

Put bow away  
 Hold viola like a guitar

pizz. secco, molto sul tasto  
 with thin guitar pick ad lib.

ff f

pizz. molto sul tasto downwards with thumb  
 upwards with index. Like a charango. IV corda  
 always softer than the others. Hit strings or fingerboard ad lib  
 to produce a slap tone, mainly on off-beat chords

Figure 1. The opening measures of *Submerged*, with the author's markings.



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Here, we should be birdsong, not metronomes. The time, and even the birdcalls should be natural and free. However, when the viola rejoins the harp at measure 160, the rhythm must come into stricter alignment as the composite rhythm hearkens back to the dance section.

For the “woodpecker” effect in measures 154–155, Miguel asks the violist to tap the knuck (screw) of your bow against the tailpiece. If you wish to tap along the length of your tailpiece, you’ll be able to change the pitch of the tapping. For a larger or less resonant hall, tapping your bow on your chinrest may achieve better projection.

The most difficult part of the “submerged” section for me is navigating the switch between the arco figures and the behind-the-bridge plectrum birdcalls. If you’re extremely quick and have a sturdy stand, you can leave the plectrum on your stand and switch between your bow and your plectrum. I usually feel safer holding my bow more like a club, as I simultaneously hold the plectrum. However, successful arco playing with this technique takes practice! For the behind-the-bridge plucking, I find that a hard guitar pick works best.

### Transcriptions

Due to popular demand and commissions from other groups, Miguel del Aguila has made arrangements of *Submerged* for flute and viola duet; flute, violin, and harp; two harps; and three harps. According to Miguel, flutists are the ones who have been spreading the work and programming it. You can purchase parts and a score to *Submerged* by contacting Miguel del Aguila directly at [miguel@migueldelaguila.com](mailto:miguel@migueldelaguila.com).

When Hat Trick performed *Submerged* in a showcase at the 2019 National Flute Association convention, I was surprised at the number of flutists who commented, “I would love to play this work, but I’m not sure I know a violist who could do that. . . .”

I’m hoping that as more of us master these totally reasonable and possible techniques, we, too, will spread the word and do our share to see that Miguel’s wonderful contribution to our repertoire becomes widely loved and known.

*Dr. David Wallace serves as Chair of the Berklee College of Music String Department. For a video tutorial demonstrating the techniques required to play Submerged, visit his YouTube channel. [www.youtube.com/docwallacemusic](http://www.youtube.com/docwallacemusic).*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Garden of Joys and Sorrows* (Bridge 9472), 2016.

<sup>2</sup> We are grateful for a generous grant from Brigham Young University, which co-commissioned *Submerged* and contributed towards the recording costs of our CD.

<sup>3</sup> Toru Takemitsu’s *And Then I Knew ‘Twas Wind* (based on Emily Dickinson’s “Like Rain it Sounded Till it Curved FR# 1245) and Sofia Gubaidulina’s *Garten von Freuden und Traurigkeiten* (based on the homonymous poem by Francisco Tanzer).

# THE AMERICAN VIOLA SOCIETY: A HISTORY AND REFERENCE

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