

# No more VIOLAtions!

## Tips for improving your viola section



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Too often, the violas play the role of “second fiddle” in the student orchestra. They get lost in the middle between the bright-sounding violins and the bass voices of the cellos and bass. Yet, a lively and engaged viola section can transform your orchestra. While the viola is similar to the violin, some of its unique features cause specific challenges that can be difficult to perceive by non-violist educators. Here are some ideas about transforming your viola section into the energetic and sonorous engine of your orchestra.

## I. Instrumental Issues

### Acoustics

- The viola is proportionately undersized for its range
- Ranges of the violin and cello correspond proportionally to their body size
- Viola is too small for its range
- Should be around 20-inches—far too large to play under the chin
- Viola as “acoustically compromised”
  - Causes difficulties in sound production
  - Leads to viola’s unique tone
- Violists must be more thoughtful and creative in crafting their sound

### Instrument Quality

- Majority of student level violas sound bad
- There are only a few major manufactures that make small, student-sized violas that sound like a viola
- C string is especially challenging
- Seek out makers of these instruments; encourage students to try them
- Use positive “peer influence” to your advantage

## II. That Big Violin

### Viola ≠ violin

- While the viola is not the violin, the two instruments share about 90% of their technique
- Foundational principles of balance, freedom, and flexibility are all the same
- Setup principles are very similar
- Repertoire is quite different, leading to different demands on the players

### Violin and Viola Technique

<u>Similarities</u>	<u>Differences</u>
Setup	Instrument geography
<b>Sound production</b>	<b>Sound production</b>
Bow stroke vocabulary	Articulation and bow control
Left/Right hand coordination	Physical release of bow arm
Vibrato	String size and tension
Shifting	Left-hand spacing

## III. Instrument Setup

### Principles of tension-free setup

- Instrument sizing (three ways to measure)
- Viola rests on collarbone
  - Actual bone, not a muscle
- **Viola balanced between collarbone and left hand**
  - Different proportion for each player
- Loose neck/no excess pressure from head
  - Freedom especially on right side of neck, leading to free bow arm
- Relaxed and free shoulders
- Statue of Liberty pose
- Beginning viola/violin—start standing up
- Swinging setup—Paul Rolland

**Because the viola is larger than the violin, any flaws in the setup become even more pronounced, resulting in even greater physical problems.**

## IV. Problems and Solutions

<u>Problems</u>		<u>Solutions</u>
Unfocused tone	→	Principles of sound production
Out of tune	→	Left hand setup
Too slow/behind the beat	→	Articulation and bow control
Limited dynamic range	→	Physical release of bow arm

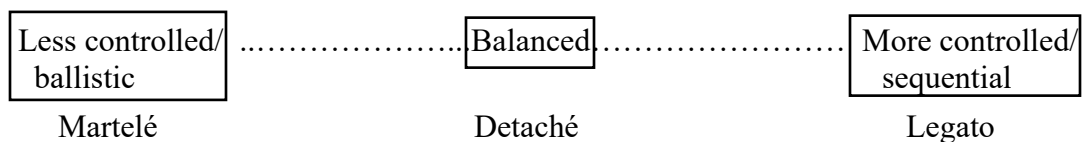
### Sound Production

General principles:

- Three aspects of sound production
  - Bow weight
  - Bow Speed
  - Contact point
- Vibration of the string: horizontal, not vertical
  - More bow speed, rather than weight, encourages this motion of the string
  - Especially important for viola!
- Energy and release

Categories of bow strokes:

- Three main strokes: martelé, détaché, and legato



### The most important bow stroke for violists is Martelé

Martelé Qualities:

- Distinct beginning
- Speaks instantly
- Ringing tone
- 2 parts: **grab and release**
- *“Martelé is a pizzicato of the bow”*
  - Bow activates the string first, then allows it to ring
- “Hammer” stroke

### Physical motions for Martelé:

- Arm motion (not hand or fingers)
- Grab of string—arm weight, felt through index finger
- Release—open swinging of arm
  - Produces ringing tone, allows string to vibrate
  - “Zoom” feeling

### Martelé Exercises:

- DAD song—rolling arm, upper half, forearm
- Twinkle rhythms
- Upper half scales: 1 octave, invent rhythms
- World’s Shortest Note!
- Wiggle strings

From *Sound Innovations: Sound development for intermediate string orchestra*, by Bob Phillips and Kirk Moss. Alfred Music Publishing, 2012.

**57 LEARNING TO PLAY MARTELÉ**—During each rest, wiggle the string back and forth using flexible fingers on the bow. Use the martelé stroke on each quarter note.

The image shows two staves of musical notation for a martelé exercise in 4/4 time. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. Both staves contain a sequence of quarter notes and rests. The notes are: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), B4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), F4 (quarter). The rests are: 1/2, 1/2, 1/2, 1/2, 1/2, 1/2, 1/2, 1/2. Bowing directions are indicated by arrows: up for notes and down for rests. A 'V' mark is placed above the first note on the treble staff. The exercise concludes with a double bar line.

### Other Sound Production Ideas:

- Suzuki’s Tonalizations
  - Swinging bows, ringing sound
- Ring-tone exercise: 4x martelé bows on each ring tone in first position
  - Ring-tone: fingered note that is same as open string
  - 9 total in first position (plus one “bonus”)
  - Order of fingers: all 3<sup>rd</sup> fingers, 4<sup>th</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1<sup>st</sup>
- Clarity in bow strokes leads to greater rhythmic integrity

### General Bow Technique

- Right hand setup – fingers tapping and a loose thumb
- Division of the arm: Forearm in upper half; upper arm in lower half
- Hand balance changes throughout the bow
  - “Down 4, 3, 2; Up 2, 3, 4, 1”
- Enables student to use the lower half—extra sound and weight here

## **Intonation: Left Hand and Arm Setup**

Reasons for playing out of tune:

- #1. Incorrect left-hand setup
- #2. Shifting
- #3. Misunderstanding of finger spacing

### **Left hand set-up:**

- Tapping over the high-dot
- The use of “Magic X” to demonstrate the proper positioning of the hand
- Slides on the “Magic X”
- Left elbow level
  - Correspond to bow levels
  - Swinging left-hand pizzicato
  - Exaggerated on viola (as opposed to violin)



*Magic X is too high*



*Magic X is too low*

### **Left Hand Balance:**

- Centered over the third finger
- Prioritized the weaker fingers (third and fourth)
- Wrist tilted slightly in—toward the bridge
- First finger extends back, always
  - Practice with high 1 and low 1 extensions

### **Finger Weight:**

- Excessive pressing can lead to injury
- Finding the minimum amount of weight needed to stop the string
- Fuzz-tones, in 3 stages:
  - All fuzz, ghost note, just enough
  - Scales with various finger weights



*Wrist tilted too far towards pegs—common with many violists*