

## **Making the Switch: Encouraging Good Violinists to Become Great Violists through Chamber Music Study**

**Dr. Christina Placilla<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

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In communities where violists are scarce, teachers can increase the number of violists by targeting violin students who have potential to succeed as violists. They can be encouraged to study the viola through a targeted approach by using chamber music. This article examines which students may be most willing to engage in chamber music study, the methods by which the student should be taught based upon developmental psychology theories, and the repertoire that would help the student successfully engage as a violist based upon graded rubrics of chamber music based upon the student's performance ability.

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As a professor and studio teacher in my community that is actively engaged in the promotion of the viola, I am constantly faced with the conundrum of how to ensure that our community has growing viola studios. My region, known for arts education, still struggles with low enrollments of students in private studios who choose to play the viola. So in this capacity, I am faced with the questions: "Why not the viola? Why do violists tend to gravitate to their instrument so much later than violinists or even cellists, or not at all?" Some of the conclusions I have come to regarding these quandaries is that many times when parents guide their children to choosing private study on a string instrument, young students (younger than fourth grade) are often immediately steered to the violin; their parents know what the violin is and the established early learning systems, such as the Suzuki method are something parents automatically associate with the violin. Small violins are more affordable and more readily available than fraction size violas and tend to sound better. The violin may be more appropriate in size for a young child, along with the other physical considerations of weight of the instrument and string width. Once a student is enrolled in private study and has chosen an instrument, they often stay with that instrument for the length of their musical studies, unless an intervention occurs at a later stage of their musical development. Therefore, young students enrolled in private lessons are more likely to be violinists than violists.

So, how can private studio string educators help to rectify this issue and encourage the development of more violists in a balanced manner? One method that works is to teach violin students to double on the viola once they are teenagers. Many of the world's best violists began as violinists and this mode of recruiting violists to the ranks is often how the serious viola student begins their studies. I would postulate that a method by which to draw these students to the viola is to allow them to experiment with it as part of the private lesson by using chamber music as the vehicle to grow a love for the instrument. If the student begins to develop a passion for the viola that makes them identify as a violist, they are likely to pursue the instrument in the future. This method does not require that a violinist give up on the violin, but rather encourages them to see if the viola is a better fit for them once they reach an age of both physical and musical maturity whereby a sound decision for their musical future can be made.

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<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor of Music- Strings and Musicology, Director of the Winston-Salem State University Chamber Orchestra at Winston-Salem State University, Winston-Salem, NC, USA

It also allows the violin teacher to remain as primary teacher for as long as both student and teacher think is good for the student's best interests. Not all students will want to be a violist, but many excel once given the opportunity. Here are some guidelines that have been used over the years that may help a studio teacher determine if the student may be a good candidate for making the switch:

1. the student prefers lower notes on their violin or a darker sound;
2. the student looks physically uncomfortable playing the violin because they have longer arms/fingers, or other physical considerations that may make the viola a better physical choice for their body;
3. the student has a keen understanding of harmony and likes to hear the middle voice in music; and/or
4. The student is frustrated with the competitiveness amongst fellow violinists.

These above guidelines are simply that, guidelines; there may be other reasons why a student may be a better fit as a violist than violinist that may stem from their personality or personal choice. Students who do not wish to play the viola should never be coerced into the playing the instrument if they clearly are opposed. To do so creates negative feelings about the instrument and contributes to the common misconception of the much maligned instrument. One only has to remind oneself of the famous Richard Wagner quote to understand where the disparagement of the viola arose from.

"The viola is commonly (with rare exceptions) played by infirm violinists, or by decrepit players of wind instruments who happen to have been acquainted with a string instrument once upon a time."<sup>i</sup>

To begin introducing students to the viola, studio teachers may wish to consider incorporating duets in their lesson study with students who have reached the level of Suzuki Book 3 or solo works in the ASTA Certificate Advance Program level 3. Using chamber music as the tool by which to introduce the viola to these students allows the student to hear that the viola part is much more integral to the overall composition of chamber works than in an orchestral setting. Duos involving the viola, in particular, allow the viola to shine in solo, harmonic, and bass line capacities in ways that otherwise may not be obvious to a student in either the orchestral or solo viola literature. In addition, with the teacher as the duo partner there is an emotionally safe environment created for the student as they learn alto clef. Teachers may wish to begin this introduction to the viola by first choosing violin and viola duos. The student should first be prompted to learn the violin part. During this study, the teacher will need to assign alto clef reading exercises between lessons so that the student may become ready to begin to play the viola part at a later time. Once the student has mastered the violin part, with the teacher playing the viola part, the teacher and student will then switch parts. The student will have had time to learn the notes and figure out the fingerings and will have the viola part in their ear from having already played alongside it as a violinist.

The key to having this work well is for the teacher to choose the correct repertoire level. When possible it is encouraged that the first work that the student may be assigned would have a more difficult violin part and an easier viola part to allow for the adequate transition of the student from treble to alto clef. In studying chamber music pedagogy and repertoire with various research partners, a system has been created that systematically grades chamber works by movement based upon a performance rubric and the solo repertoire grading systems of the ASTA Certificate Advancement Program<sup>ii</sup>. In using this rubric and these guidelines, I have constructed lists of recommended literature for each of the duo groups discussed in this article. The recommended works are all available through the International Music Score Library Project ([www.imslp.org](http://www.imslp.org)). These are not the only works that may be suitable, but all have been evaluated using this common grading system. To determine the level of the student, please see the below suggested list of selected solo repertoire:

Chamber Music Levels by Solo Literature Studied for Violin (select list) <sup>iii</sup>	
Level 1	Suzuki: Book 3 Dancla: 12 Easy Fantasias on Celebrated Melodies, Op. 86, Nos. 1-6 Rieding: Concerto in B Minor, Op. 35
Level 2	Suzuki: Book 4 or 5 Corelli: Sonatas, Op. 5, Nos. 7-11 Dancla: Airs Varies, Op. 89, Nos. 4-6 Seitz: Pupil's Concertos No. 2, 3, 4, or 5
Level 3	Suzuki: Book 6 or 7 Accolay: Concerto No. 1 in A Minor Corelli: Sonatas, Op. 5, Nos. 1-6 Fiocco: Allegro Massenet: Meditation from "Thais"

### Suggested Violin and Viola Duos for Students and Teachers<sup>iv</sup>

Suggested Violin and Viola Duos for Students and Teachers		
Violin Level	Viola Level	
1	1	M. Grayson: Anthology of Pieces for Violin and Viola- Loeillet's Sonata No. II, Movement 4
2 <sup>v</sup>	1	P. C. Humanus: Musica Theoretico Practicus, Example 38 W. A. Mozart: Twelve Duos, K. 487/496a, Number 10
2	2	M. Grayson: Anthology of Pieces for Violin and Viola- Croft Sonata Op. 3, No. 2, Movements 1, 2, and 3 M. Grayson: Anthology of Pieces for Violin and Viola- Finger Sonata Op. 2, No. 1, Movements 1, 2, 3, and 4 W. A. Mozart: Twelve Duos, K. 487/496a, Numbers 2, 8, and 11 C. P. Stamitz: 6 Duos, Op. 34, No. 2, Movement 1 E. de Valderrabano: Seven Variations on 'Guardarme Las Vacas'
3	2	L. Florczak: Duet for Violin and Viola, Mn. 84 L. C. Ragué: Six Duos for Violin and Viola, Op. 11, No. 1, Movement 2
3	3	N. Aliani: 3 Duos for Violin and Viola, No. 1, Movement 2 G. M. Cambini: Six Duos for Violin and Viola, Op. 14, No. 5, Movement 1 E. Eichner: Six Duos for Violin and Viola, No. 6, Movements 1 and 2 R. Fuchs: Twelve Duets for Violin and Viola, Op. 60, Nos. 1, 2, 4, 5, and 8 C. Koechlin: Idylle, Op. 155bis L. C. Ragué: Six Duos for Violin and Viola, Op. 11, No. 6, Movement 1

Once a student has mastered some of these duos and they are feeling more comfortable reading the clef, a teacher may choose to move the students on to playing viola duos, first with the teacher, but then, when at all possible, with another violin student who is also studying the viola. This peer interaction will allow the student to feel more engaged in the music making process. Developmental psychologists Newman and Newman talk about this importance of building peer relationships between two adolescents in the development of identity: "dyadic friendships become an increasingly important source of social support."<sup>vi</sup> Because this method intends to introduce the student to peer chamber music relationships, it is important that the students be of a relatively similar level, and that the literature chosen also be equivalent in level between the students.

Suggested Viola Duos for Students <sup>vii</sup>	
Viola Duo Level	
1	E. Fine: New Year's Greeting for Two Violas E. Kreuz: Progressive Studies for Viola, Op. 40, no. 12 G. Lüne: Etudes for Viola Duo, T. 4, No. 1 G. Telemann: Six Sonatas TWV 40: 106, Movement 2
2	W. F. Bach: Sonata in G Minor, F. 62, Movement 2 G. M. Cambini: Six Duos for Two Violas, Livre 1, No. 2. Movement 2 G. Lüne: Etudes for Viola Duo, T. 4, No. 3 A. Rolla: Duo for 2 Violas, Bl. 3, Movement 2 H. Yilmaz: 50 Educational Duets, Nos. 2, 10, 12, 17, and 20
3	W. F. Bach: Sonata in G Major, F. 61, Movements 1 and 3 G. M. Cambini: Six Duos for Two Violas, Livre 1, No. 1, Movements 1 and 2 A. Rolla: Six Duos for Two Violas, No. 6, Movements 1 and 3 T. St. George Tucker: Serenade for Two Violas, Movement 2 J. C. Stumpf: Six Viola Duets, Op. 15, No. 2, Movements 1 and 2

If the student enjoys playing the viola after mastering several of the above works with another student and they are interested in playing the viola in a larger ensemble, it may be advantageous to arrange for the student to participate in a string quartet or trio with other students. Based on Erikson's (1968) theory of identity development, Newman and Newman postulate that "as a young person prepares to engage in the larger social world, a positive sense of group identity provides confidence that she is meaningfully.

Connected to society, has a cognitive map of the characteristics of the social landscape, and the skills or tools to navigate the terrain."<sup>viii</sup> This society and societal landscape can be applied to the world of chamber music, and helping the student to understand the different role they serve now as a violist within the ensemble, as they explore this instrument. Working alongside our cellist colleagues, a suitable group could be formed from just two studios. To help define the chamber music level of the cellist in the group, please consider using the following guidelines:

Chamber Music Levels by Solo Literature Studied for Cello (select list) <sup>ix</sup>	
Level 1	Suzuki: Book 3 Popper: Gavotte in D, Op. 23 Squire: Fairy Tales for Cello and Piano
Level 2	Suzuki: Book 4 or 5 Goltermann: Concerto No. 4 in G, Op. 65 or No. 5 in D Minor, Op. 76 Marcello: Sonata in G Major, Op. 2, No. 6 Vivaldi: Sonata No. 5 in E Minor
Level 3	Suzuki: Book 6 or 7 J. S. Bach: Cello Suites 1-3 Eccles: Sonata on D Minor Saint-Saëns: Allegro Appassionato, Op. 43

The following repertoire ideas will help teachers and chamber music coaches choose suitable repertoire for the ensemble based upon level. Please note that although many combinations of levels are possible within these ensembles, it may be best to keep the performers at the same level of each other when possible so that students will be paired by both technical ability and musical maturity. Again, these works may be found as part of the International Music Score Library Project are commercially available. Many other works are also suitable for these ensembles commercially and are graded by the publishers in various manners.<sup>x</sup>

Suggested String Trios for Students <sup>xi</sup>			
Violin Level	Viola Level	Cello Level	
2	2	2	U. Baldenecker: String Trio, Op. 1, No. 1, Movement 2 U. Baldenecker: String Trio, Op. 1, No. 6, Movement 3 F. Nussen: String Trio No. 2, Movement 2
3	3	3	C. F. Abel: String Trio, Op. 16, No. 1, Movements 1, 2, and 3 L. Beethoven: String Trio, op. 9, No. 1, Movement 3 L. Boccherini: String Trio, Op. 14, No. 2, Movement 3 S. Hennessey: Petit Trio Celtique, Op. 52, Movement 2 F. Nussen: String Trio No. 4, Movements 1 and 2

Suggested String Quartets for Students <sup>xii</sup>				
Violin 1 Level	Violin 2 Level	Viola Level	Cello Level	
1	1	1	1	W. A. Mozart: Quartet in B-flat Major, K. 159, Movement 3
2	2	2	2	L. Boccherini: Quartet in C Minor, Op. 2, No. 1, Movement 3 J. Haydn: Quartet No. 59 in G Minor, "Rider", Op. 74, No. 3, Movement 3 W. A. Mozart: Quartet in C Major, K. 157, Movements 1 and 2 D. Shostakovich: Quartet No. 8 in C Minor, op. 110, Movements 1 and 5
3	3	3	3	L. Beethoven: Quartet, Op. 18, No. 4, Movement 3 J. Haydn: Quartet No. 54 in B-flat, Op. 71, No. 1, Movements 2 and 4 F. Mendelssohn: Quartet in E-flat, Op. 12, Movement 3 W. Mozart: Quartet in A Major, K. 464, Movement 1 F. Schubert: Quartet in A Minor "Rosamunde", Movement 3 D. Shostakovich: Quartet No. 11 in F Minor, Op. 122, Movements 1, 2, and 3 P. Tchaikovsky: Quartet in D Major, Movement 3

This article obviously cannot completely solve the issues faced by the viola communities where low enrollments exist in private studios. It does, however, begin to address the issue by encouraging teachers to identify potential violists and develop their love for the instrument in a strategic manner, through chamber music study. It does not require the student to stop studying the violin, but rather opens their minds to other possibilities that they did not realize could exist for them through the beauty of chamber music making.

## References

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<sup>i</sup> Ian Crofton and Donald Fraser, *The Dictionary of Musical Quotations* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1985, p.152).

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- ii "ASTA Certificate Advancement Program", ASTA Certificate Advancement Program, July 16, 2014, [http://www.astaweb.com/Public/Member\\_Resources/Certificate\\_Advancement\\_Program/Public/Member\\_Resources/ASTA\\_Certificate\\_Advancement\\_Program.aspx?MemberResources=1&hkey=d8aeac5a-20cf-47f6-b414-bc3ad2d2acdc](http://www.astaweb.com/Public/Member_Resources/Certificate_Advancement_Program/Public/Member_Resources/ASTA_Certificate_Advancement_Program.aspx?MemberResources=1&hkey=d8aeac5a-20cf-47f6-b414-bc3ad2d2acdc) (Accessed September 2, 2014).
- iii This select list is compiled from a more complete list. Christina Placilla and Kenneth Law, *We Are the Music Makers: A Graded Guide to Chamber Music, Volume I String Quartets* (Charleston: Createspace, 2012, pp 5-12).
- iv This list was compiled after a thorough analysis of over 400 violin and viola duets per movement based upon the updated rubric developed for chamber music grading by Christina Placilla and Kenneth Law. Christina Placilla, Alexander Hollowell, and Kenneth Law, *We Are the Music Makers: Graded Guide to Chamber Music, Volume II String Trios* (Charleston: Createspace, 2013, p. 22).
- v As this chamber music grading system places the student's chamber music level at one level below their solo repertoire level, students who fall in level 1, should also be able to perform the violin parts in level 2, particularly the first two suggested duets in the Violin and Viola Duet table (Violin level 2 and Viola level 1). Once the student progresses to the viola part, it is suggested that they follow their appropriate chamber music level as can be found in the "Chamber Music Levels by Solo Literature Studied for Violin" table.
- vi Barbara M. Newman and Philip R. Newman, *Development Through Life: A Psychosocial Approach* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2012, p. 367).
- vii This list was compiled after a thorough analysis of 157 viola duets per movement based upon the updated rubric developed for chamber music grading by Christina Placilla and Kenneth Law. Christina Placilla, Alexander Hollowell, and Kenneth Law, *We Are the Music Makers: A Graded Guide to Chamber Music, Volume II String Trios* (Charleston: Createspace, 2013, p. 22).
- viii Ibid.
- ix This select list is compiled from a more complete list. Christina Placilla and Kenneth Law, *We Are the Music Makers: A Graded Guide to Chamber Music, Volume I String Quartets* (Charleston: Createspace, 2012, pp 6-13).
- x The following publishers have grading systems available that determine the overall level of the work: Latham Music, a subsidiary of Ludwig Masters Music, Hal Leonard, VerlagDohr, Alfred Music, Editions Marc Reift, Edition Peters, F.C. Music, BaerenreiterVerlag, String Letter Publishing, Mona Lisa Sound, and Alfred Music.
- xi Christina Placilla, Alexander Hollowell, and Kenneth Law, *We Are the Music Makers: A Graded Guide to Chamber Music, Volume II String Trios* (Charleston: Createspace, 2013, pp. 30-31).
- In this study of 212 String Trios, no string trio movements were found to have parts that were at a level lower than a level 2 in all parts where the parts were all within one level of each other.
- xii Christina Placilla and Kenneth Law, *We Are the Music Makers: A Graded Guide to Chamber Music, Volume I String Quartets* (Charleston: Createspace, 2012, pp. 30-32).

I have talked to several violinists who were supposed to play viola but were told to start on violin first, then switch later. They never switched, because by the time they were old enough, switching seemed like too much hassle. I myself learned... They are very good violists for their age now, love their instrument, appreciate its unique place in the string family, and have no desire to return to violin. I find this a better scenario than having a batch of ex-violin students who got turned off by the sound quality of the too-small instrument early on. Learning to read music on any musical staff is a challenge. Finding the proper placement for your fingers on the fretboard and learning the right amount of pressure and how to create a good vibrato is a challenge. Weak violinists become weak violists. Violists who succeed after switching over from violin were already good violinists. Nothing in the OP's post suggests that he is remotely close to professional level; he is, as Lydia said, at best intermediate and he would be an intermediate (at best) violist should he decide to go down the fifth. I agree with Lydia's long and thoughtful post 100%. Lydia Leong. More than most violists, more than most teachers, my professional circles overlap a myriad of disciplines and include professional performers, college and university professors, administrators at all levels, public school classroom and music teachers, and the movers and shakers in a variety of professional organizations in the music and educational communities. The music we love is created with inspiration, craftsmanship, and skill. In addition, it requires artistic creativity to bring the music to life. The performers we hear at this magnificent congress are in this category and have earned our esteem, appreciation, and respect. After resigning to her fate with great difficulty, deciding to become a rich family's esteemed mother and residential big boss, she didn't expect that the scenario would change again. That husband of hers who had died on the battlefield was now the cultivation world's deity, and sent people to pick her up for celestial cultivation? Fine, she'll cultivate, but how did she accidentally cultivate into someone else's body? Changing old patterns up and playing swapping the frame! Michael and I soon became good friends. He was funny, quirky, boisterous, a great storyteller, and highly opinionated, especially about music. For me, seventeen years old, Michael was a most intriguing fellow. As he was the older, more experienced boy, I began to follow his lead in all kinds of ways. String quartets have often invited me to perform with them as guest violist. This has put me in the unique position of seeing how they operate first hand, and how every one of them seems to have a distinct personality. One group was overly polite and could hardly muster criticism.