

Comparative Analysis of Viola Playing from the Violinist's Perspective:

Addressing Violinistic Tendencies
when Switching to Viola



Professional Players and Teachers Consulted

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Sections

- I. General Information and History
- II. Mind, Body, and Execution
- III. Conclusion

Part I

General Information
History

General

- The viola is not just a big violin.

~*William Primrose*
Violin and Viola

- The four major differences exist in:
 1. Size
 2. Sound production
 3. Execution
 4. Clef

General, cont'd

- Many violinists play viola.
 - Secondary instrument
 - Switch altogether
 - Teach viola but not play
- Violinists may not be knowledgeable about the differences from violin to viola.

Perception

- The viola is slightly bigger.
 - Does one simply press harder?
 - Does one simply stretch fingers?
- Because the differences in execution are subtle, “a violinist switching to viola may have a more difficult time than if he/she switched to a cello or bass.”

~*Juliet White-Smith*

Making the Switch a Success

- Unless using proper viola technique, violists who were previously violinists “may never lose their violin sound.”

~Karen Tuttle

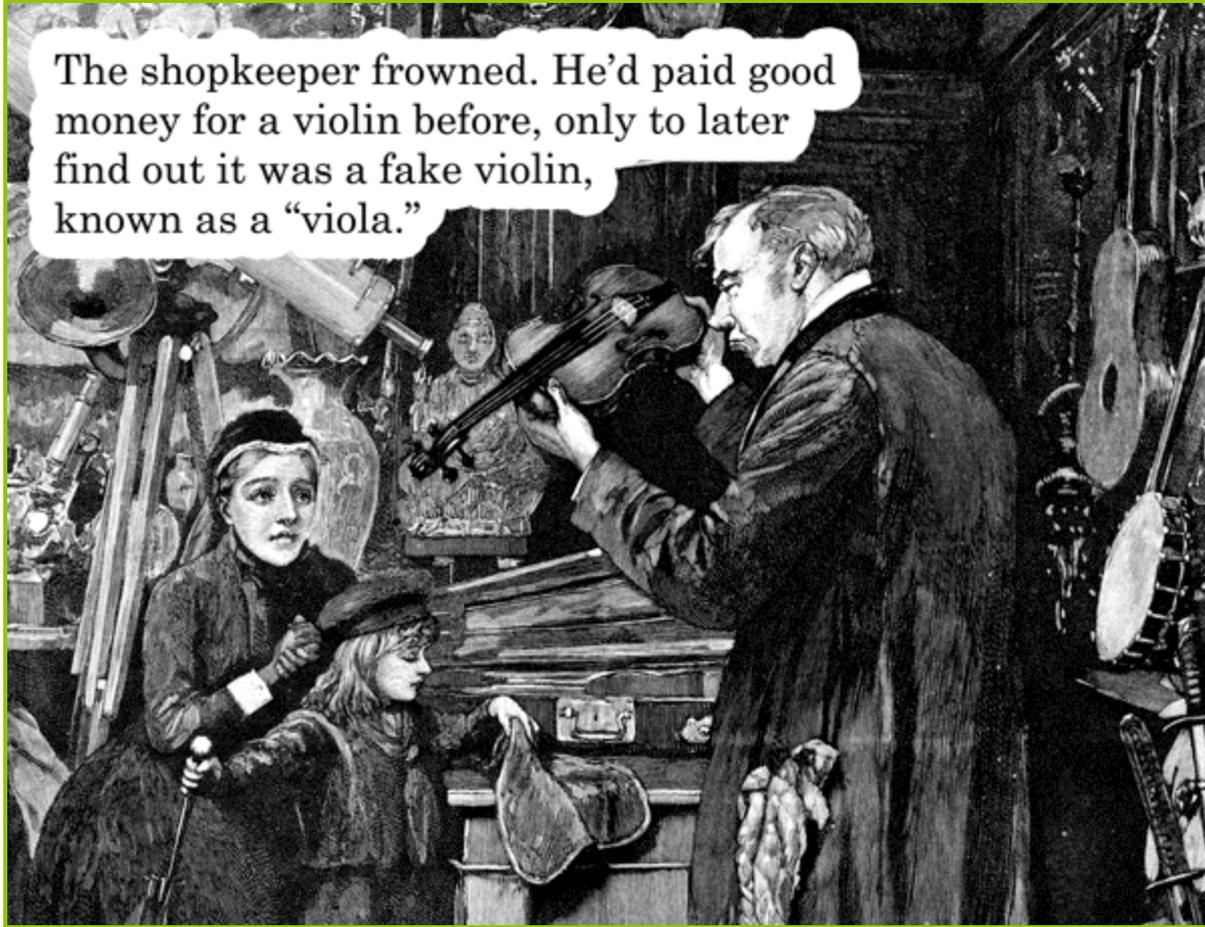
*Interview with Karen Tuttle
by Karen Ritscher*

- Timing, intonation, string crossings can also be an issue if not played correctly.

Why the misconception?



The shopkeeper frowned. He'd paid good money for a violin before, only to later find out it was a fake violin, known as a "viola."



This misconception originates from a long history of neglect that resulted in ignorance about the viola.

The Violin

- Enjoyed a life of superiority in the string family.
 - Considered the King of the orchestra
 - Was an instrument that could rival the human voice
 - Perfectly suited for solo, instrumental, and dance music
 - Was popular with every group of people from peasants to royalty

Viola History

- In the 17th Century, the viola was typically used to double the bass or used to fill up harmonic material.
- It was considered a “necessary utility” in the orchestra.
- Wasn't considered a solo instrument or capable of carrying melodic material.

Poor Reputation

- Who played viola initially?
 - Beginners
 - “Second-rate” violinists

- Violists developed a poor reputation regarding their playing levels.

Viola size was an issue...

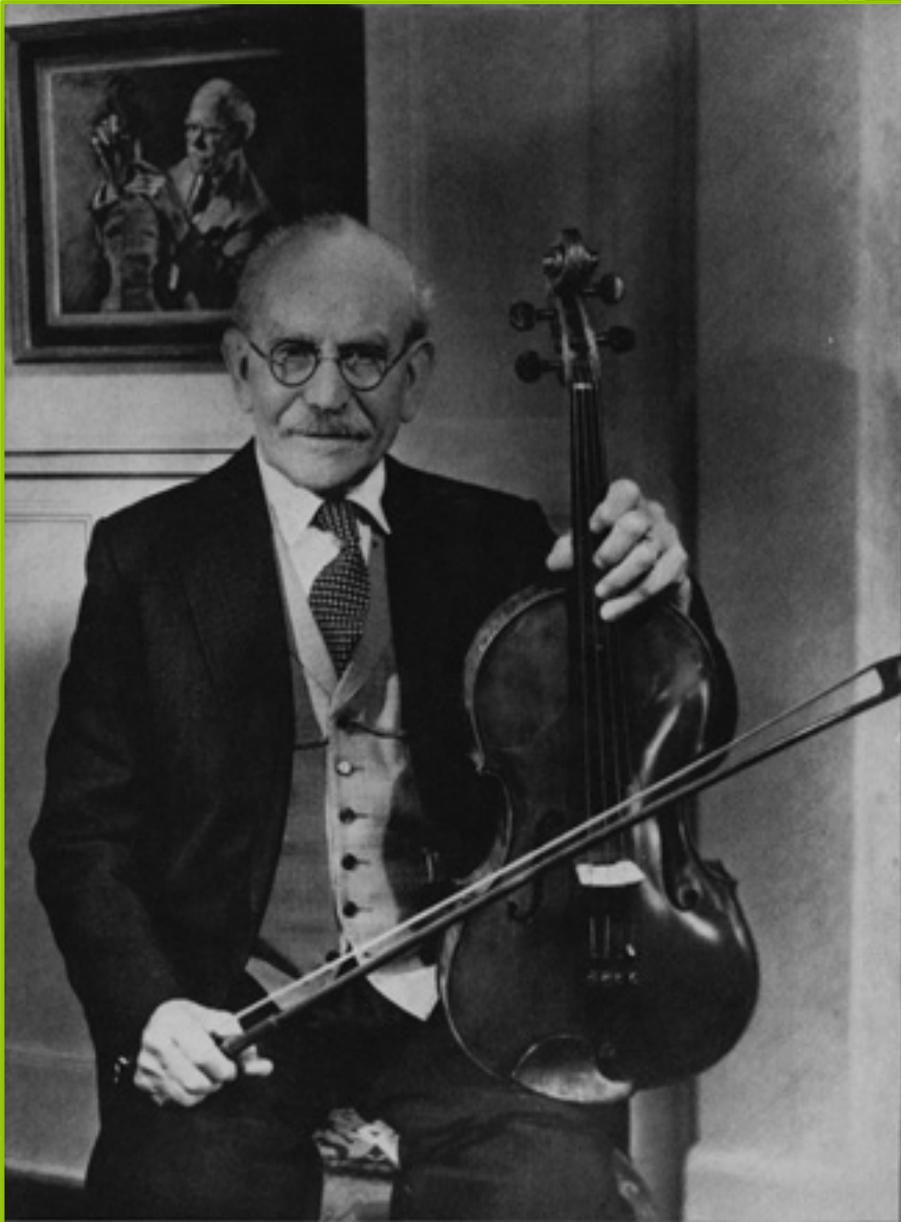
- The size of the viola is not proportional to the actual range of pitches it should support (C3-G6).
- Suitable specifications?
 - 18-20 inches in body length
- Luthiers built “large pattern” violas in the 16th and 17th Centuries.

Playing the viola before the 19th
Century might have looked
something like this...



Hopeless future?

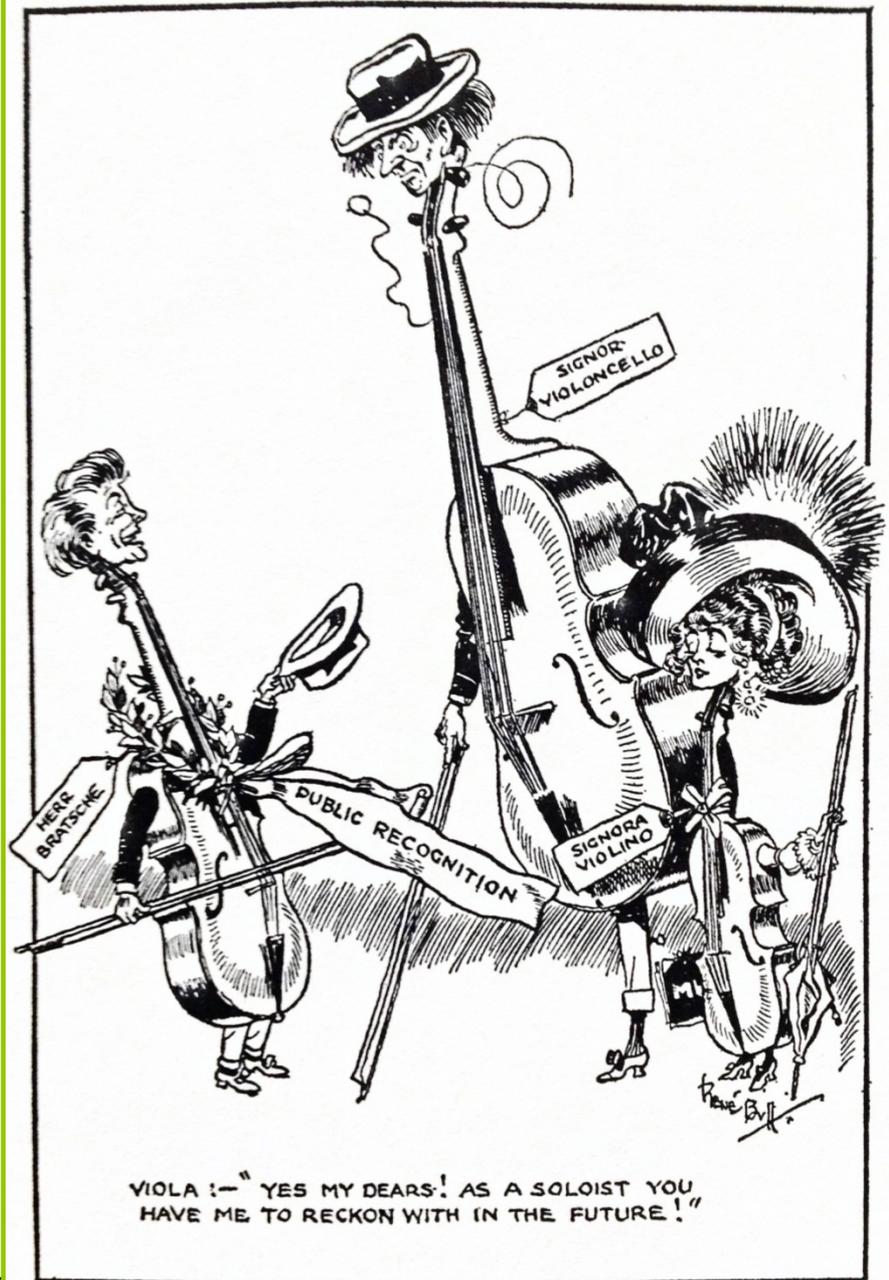
- Advocates of the viola emerged in the 18th and 19th Centuries and wrote solo music for the viola.
- The viola assumed a more important role in the orchestra and ensemble because of its new role in the string quartet.
- Its dark “melancholic” sound was captivating to composers like Stamitz, Mozart, Gluck, Weber, and Berlioz.



“When I first began to play the viola as a solo instrument (in 1895), prejudice and storms were my lot. The consensus of opinion then was that the viola had no right to be heard in solos... It was not only a despised instrument, but its cause was far from helped by the down-and-out violinists who usually played it.”

*-Lionel Tertis
My Viola and I*

Viola:
“Yes my dears!
As a soloist you
have me to
reckon with
in the future!”



“There was a widely-believed, mistaken idea which held that the viola was played exactly like the violin.”

~*Maurice Riley*
History of the Viola, Vol. I

Part II

Mind, Body, and Execution

Assisted by Michael Graber, violin

General accommodations for the viola from the violin...

- Different execution of the arm weight
- Flatter bow hair
- Slower bow than violin
- Left hand position and execution
- Vibrato is slower

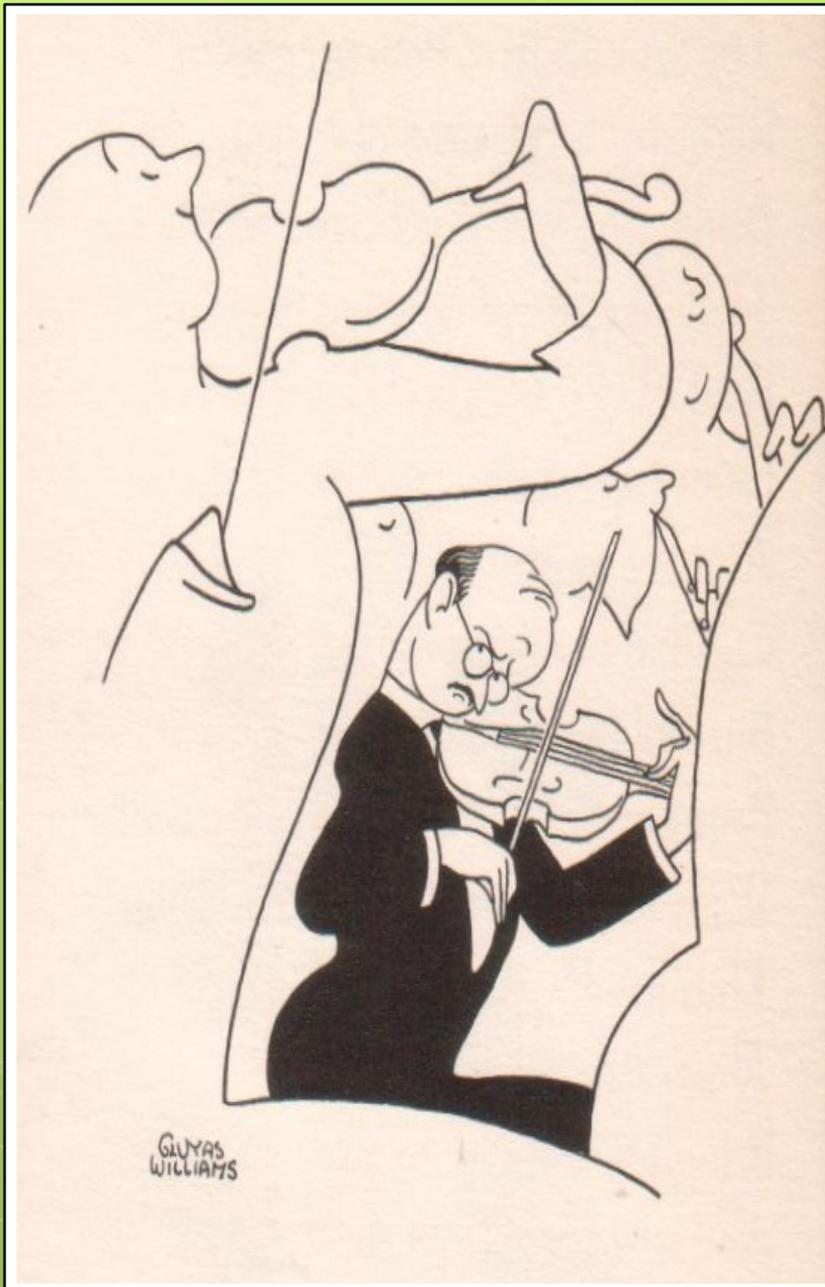
Cerebellum



- Important in the use of motor control and balance
- Involved in coordination, precision, and accurate timing
- Some actions carried out without conscious thought
- Directs automatic processes in relation to past experience or to what has been learned

Violinistic Tendencies

1. Using fast bow strokes
2. Playing with fingers too high above the neck
3. Use of tilted bow hair
4. More active use of the right wrist
5. Fast vibrato



“When played like a violin, the viola produces a shallow, flautato tone that is unpleasant and unsatisfying.”

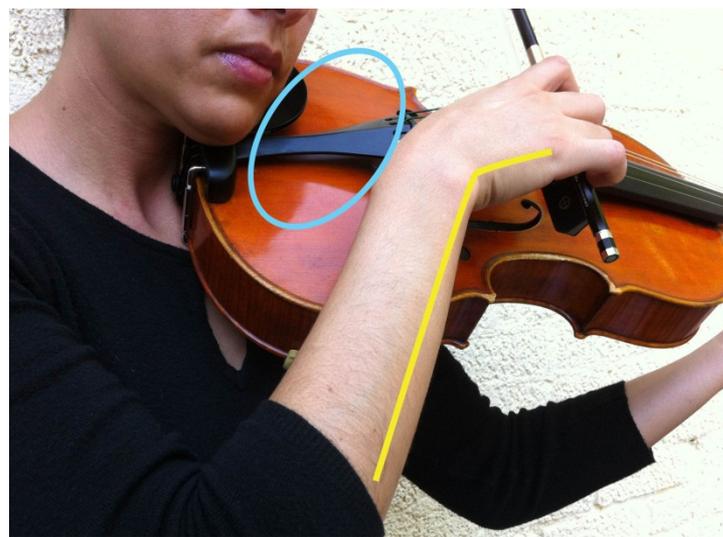
~Henry Barrett
The Viola,
Complete Guide for
Teachers and Students

Sound Production

Violin Bow



Viola Bow

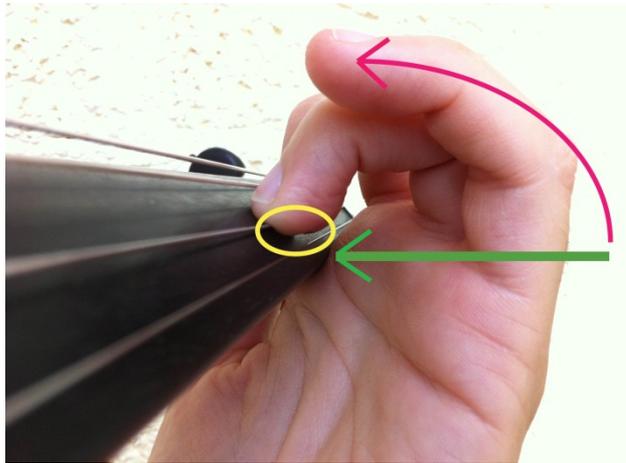


Lack of Response

1. Thicker strings need more time to vibrate
2. Lack of initial contact on the string from the bow
3. Bow slipping in a transverse direction across the string
4. Adding more bow speed and weight to solve the issue of poor sound production

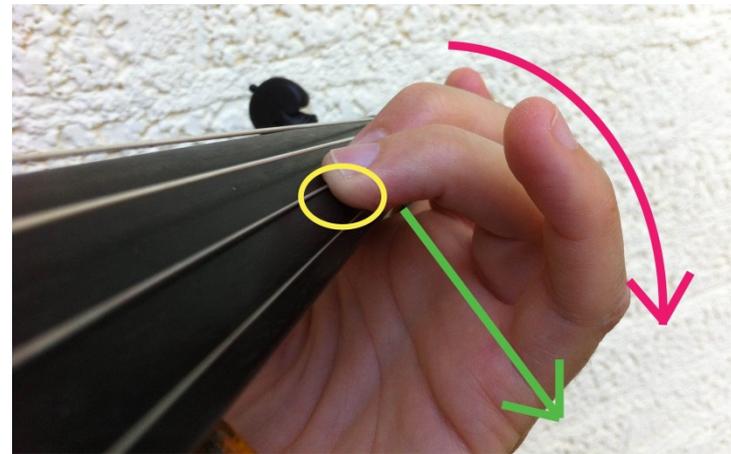
Left Hand

Violin Hand Position on a Viola



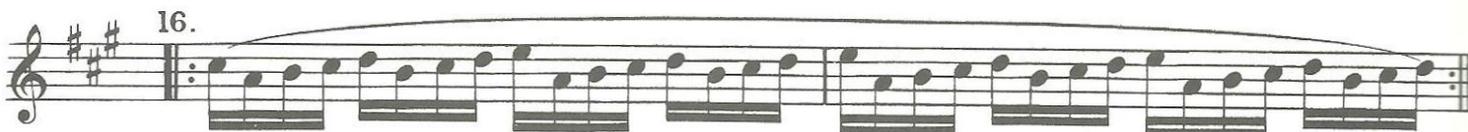
Base knuckles too high for viola.

Proper Left Hand Position on a Viola



Base knuckles in a lower position for viola.

Reading Alto Clef



Don't Cheat!

- Cheat Reading Method #1

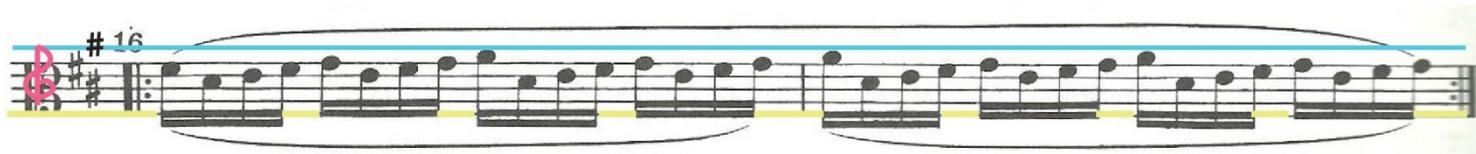
“Take what is written in the alto clef, imagine it written down a line/space, then imagine a treble clef instead of an alto clef, and play it from this point of reference just as you would on the violin (same strings, fingerings).”



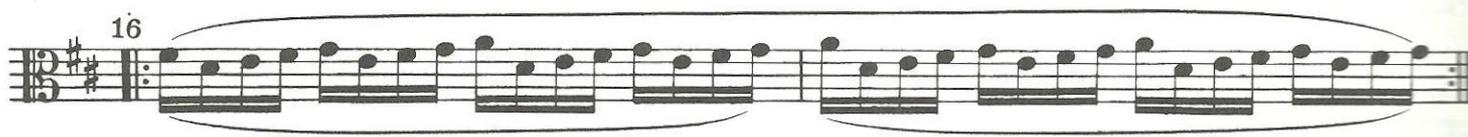
Don't Cheat!

- Cheat Reading Method #2

“Use a ruler and draw an additional line above the clef and mark or white out the lowest line. Then change alto clef to treble clef, and add 1 sharp to the existing key (ie: 3 flats + 1 sharp = 2 flats, 3 sharps + 1 sharp = 4 sharps) At this point I can proceed to play a viola as if it were a violin, you will want to be careful with accidentals especially the courtesy accidentals.”



Alto clef



Part III

Conclusion

“From the violinist’s point of view, the viola possesses specific negative qualities which are overcome only through dedicated effort, a classical example of the triumph of mind over matter.”

~Henry Barrett

The Viola, Complete Guide for Teachers and Students

Conclusion

- Differences between violin and viola are subtle but complex
- Overcoming the power of the mind and body
- A process that takes time, commitment and lots of energy
- Patience is key to success
- The violin and viola are different tools used to communicate a musical message
- Using the proper viola technique will allow the new violist to expose it's unique tonal colors



Questions

Pellegrina Viola
By David Rivinus

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