

# MUSIC FOR THE LOVE OF IT

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## THE VERY BEST MUSICAL INSTRUMENT? IT'S THE VIOLA, YOU TIN- EARED LOWBROW *by Susan Riegler*

At first consideration it might seem ludicrous, not to mention dangerous, to try to designate a Best Musical Instrument. So many people have their own favorites — the spritely flute, the shimmering violin, the noble but ear-splitting trumpet. But truth is not for the faint-hearted, so I shall risk ostracism for naming the Very Best Musical Instrument: the Viola.

Unfortunately most members of the public (including many concert-goers) have no idea that this instrument exists, much less that it is The Best. It is inevitably referred to as a "big violin" or "not as rich as the cello." In short, it's known (if at all) in terms of other instruments, rather than on its own. I am reminded of Samuel Johnson's definition of a woman in his famous Dictionary: "Not a man." Thanks, Sam.

Well, it seems time for a bit of Viola Liberation. Novelist Thomas Hardy endeared himself to me forevermore in "Return of the Native" by describing his dark-visaged heroine, Eustacia, as having "a voice like a viola."

Here is an important clue to the nature of the instrument and its musical identity. It has depth and color. It provides the inner voices of chords that are the heart of Western music. And it's a bit mysterious. (Remember, most people don't even recognize one when they see it.)

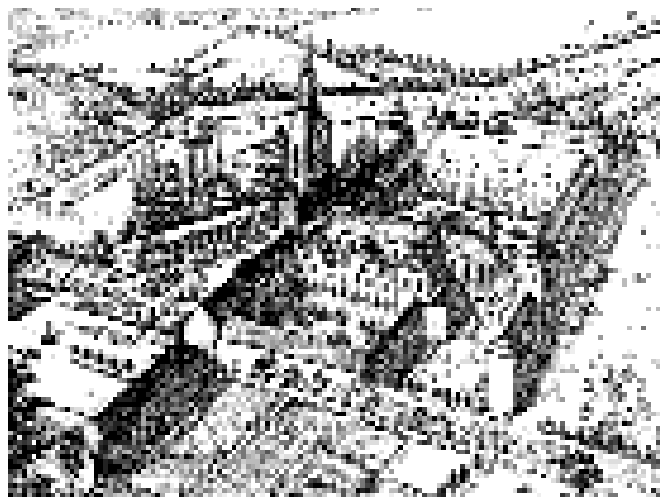
But what would music sound like (real music, not sounds that emanate from "instruments" that plug in) without the viola's rich alto voice linking the squeaky violins and the rumbling cellos? Well, like not much. You would have the musical equivalent of Gertrude Stein's statement about Oakland: "There's no there there".

Violists are well aware of this central, but oft-overlooked role. Violinists always get the tune. And if they don't, the mellifluous cellos or the wind instruments usually do. A few enlightened composers gave the viola the melody from time to time. Mozart, himself a violist, did so.

But the musical calling of the viola is to provide harmony and rhythmic vitality and flavor. Other instruments are the meat, potatoes and salad of a musical meal. Violas are the garlic, fennel and coriander, all in one.

continued on page 6

## SUMMER WORKSHOPS: LETTERS FROM PARTICIPANTS



### ELEGANCE AT THE ORLANDO FESTIVAL

Editor:

The Orlando Festival is held near Maastricht, Holland every year during the last two weeks of July. I had an opportunity to attend last summer and was impressed with its professionalism and excellent facilities. The international staff is composed of musicians like Mila Skampa, former viola player of the Smetana Quartet and founder Stephan Metz, cellist of the Orlando String Quartet, the leading quartet of the Netherlands.

The program is designed to meet the needs of both professional students and advanced amateurs. It centers around daily master classes for professional students (open to all participants), the amateur music program and evening faculty concerts in the Concert Hall of the city of Kerkrade, a pleasant twenty-minute stroll away. English-speaking instructors are always available. Concerts are broadcast by Dutch National Radio.

The facilities are fantastic. All activities except the concerts take place in a 500 year old Roman Catholic monastery of enormous proportions. Participants stay in private or semi private modern rooms with bath and carpeted floors. Everything is spotless. Dinner is served on linen-covered dining room tables with candles. Every amateur chamber group has a dedicated classroom for the entire week, which is situated in the high school wing of the monastery. Every music room has a decent piano; several have grands. Downstairs in the wine cellars is a terrific bar where everybody relaxes after the daily concerts.

continued on page



The Festival is easily accessible, about 2 1/2 hours by train from Amsterdam Airport. The organization runs with papal precision and efficiency. Cost per week for 1994 will probably be around US \$600 per person, which includes full room and board and admission to all concerts.

There are a number of very interesting local diversions. The cities of Aachen (Germany) and Maastricht are each about 10 miles away and are both great fun to visit. History oozes out at every corner and Maastricht in particular enjoys a French *joie de vivre*. The local surroundings are beautiful and there are great opportunities for bicycle riding trips and hiking in the Ardennes (Belgium).

Because of its high professional standards and excellent facilities, this Festival is perfect for American and Canadian participants.

Constantijn A. Bonebakker  
Kleinburg, Ontario, Canada

*For further information write Isabelle Bensa, General Manager, Orlando Festival, Kiezersgracht 261, 1016 EC Amsterdam, call 31.(0)20.6226979 or fax 31.(0)20.6229081.*

## MUSICAL REVELATIONS AND GOOD FELLOWSHIP AT SUMMERTRIOS

Editor:

Tonight's the Night! First, 8 to 10, Concert Time. We listen to the finest musicians, not yet household names, but should be. They play the great piano quartets, quintets, and trios. (This is a workshop on the piano in chamber music). We enjoy the concert even more because we already are acquainted with these accomplished musicians who are our coaches during the day. We actually played together, and learned something besides.

After the concert, enter the Beer Barrel, and the pretzels, wines, etc. We stand around, steeped in good conversation and good refreshment.

Then comes Pick Up Time: someone asks, "What's your instrument? . . . Good, come along with us." So starts an impromptu string quartet, or quintet, or whatever. We play along with fellow campers, and the staff mavins who just performed for us, and the playing goes on until 2:00 a.m., even later. This is every night. A bacchanal of Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, etc.

Memorable occasions are many. Mr. Phillip Coonce, a remarkably talented coach, once sat with us as first violinist. We spent an hour and a half on the first page of Beethoven's "Harp" quartet where he revealed a wealth of new insights to us. A great classic such as this holds depths we can probe forever.

Besides the music making, meals are opportunities for meeting people who love music, too. I look forward to

returning to Summertrios for a third time, to meet once again the many people who have become good friends.

Kudos to Lily Friedman and Betty Mock, for their fine services. Besides hand picking this incredible staff of teachers and counselors, they saw to it that all program and events went well. Many thanks.

Sam Savar  
Philadelphia, PA

*Summertrios, a workshop focussing on the piano in chamber music, will be held in Bethlehem, PA, July 3-10, 1994. For further information please contact Lily Friedman, P.O. Box 1062, New York N.Y. 10025, 212/222-1289.*

## VARIETY AND INTENSITY AT SAN DIEGO

Editor:

The brochure from Ron Goldman's San Diego Chamber Music Workshop (for experienced strings, woodwind and piano) promised "an opportunity to play chamber music utilizing varied teaching formats", and spoke of "a national reputation for intensive coaching and innovative teaching ideas."

I had previously attended some dozen chamber music workshops which I enjoyed immensely, and was curious to see how much more "intense" and "varied" San Diego might prove to be.

Arriving on a Sunday afternoon, I was handed a "week-at-a-glance" calendar. The workshop began that evening with a thrilling concert by the workshop's resident Miami Quartet and then a get-acquainted party (as opposed to the more common good-bye party) with everything catered. This was followed by freelance playing in the dorm — the only time in that location but it proved to be lovely, and I drifted off to sleep to the sound of a good quartet outside my door.

More "variations" from my previous workshop experience quickly followed: after a long Monday afternoon of pre-assigned music for all groups — most of Dvorak's chamber works — there was a chamber orchestra gathering, open to all participants. The next four mornings began with an 8 a.m. ensemble reading "to awaken you to new, unusual and revealing works" capably and pleasantly led by coach Ron Erickson which proved to be an extremely enjoyable hour.

Starting on Tuesday, new groups and new pieces were assigned daily, but the performances took the form of "mini-master-classes" with three or four groups and several coaches forming each class. The coaches gave suggestions and commentary after each performance.

The lecture-demonstration programs were many, original and varied. A violin-maker spoke on how to evaluate an instrument for purchase. One of the coaches



## VIOLA

continued from page 1

What probably sets the viola apart, however, is that, unlike other instruments, it has inspired an entire genre of modern music.

Much excitement was generated in Louisville when the Kentucky Opera commissioned and performed an opera by very-trendy-indeed composer Philip Glass. Works by Glass are often referred to as "minimalist." To give an idea (if you didn't hear the work), for more than two hours the audience was treated to music that sounded rather like this:

"Bup, bup, bup, bup, bup, bup, bup. Bup, bup, bup. Bap, bap, bap. Bup, bup, bup.

It was brand new music, but it sounded vaguely familiar to me. A few days later I was practicing the second viola part to Mozart's Viola Quintet in G minor. Remember that harmonic and rhythmic vitality?

My part went something like this:

"Bup, bup, bup, bup, bup, bup, bup. Bup, bup, bup. Bap, bap, bap. Bup, bup, bup.

Aha! The minimalists' secret is out. The composer simply writes the viola part for the entire orchestra.

To be fair, there was a second prevalent theme in the Glass score, something like: "Daw-dee, Daw-dee, Daw-dee, Daw-dee, Daw-dee." Hum this to a violist, and you will be told you are quoting the viola part from practically any Haydn string quartet. I really think it's time for composers like Glass to be honest with their listeners and refer to their work as Violistic.

Finally, a word about viola players, for as a group we seem to have special personality traits.

Of course, we can be mysterious and exotic, as befits the clandestine role of our instrument. We can be eccentric in dress and behavior. Perhaps this is an expression of individuality not often allowed musically.

I know a violist whose hair has been streaked with most of the rainbow's hues over the last few years. Another

individual has a fascination with the Mexican Day of the Dead. (Little plastic skeletons, in a variety of many poses, adorn his apartment.)

I myself am pretty normal, though some people think it unusual that my teddy bears, Gervase and Winston contribute money to the orchestra each year — and consequently, their names appear in the concert program.

Generally, however, the violist's outstanding personality trait is a cooperative spirit, since, after all, we are responsible for the harmony. If you meet an aggressive violist, that person probably used to play another instrument — the violin or trumpet, perhaps — but was compelled to switch to viola in a high school or college orchestra to swell the ranks of the select viola section.

I recently joined a baroque chamber ensemble whose five string players are all primarily violists. Our ensemble is a cooperative in both business and musical aspects. Can you imagine five violinists or five trumpet players forming a cooperative? It would be like getting five CEOs to work at union scale.

Of course, we can and do play other instruments. One of us can also play the cello. We draw straws to see who has to play the violin. Otherwise you'd have four violas and a harpsichord playing music that sounded like — you guessed it — a Philip Glass composition.

*This column originally appeared in the Louisville Courier Journal, and is used with permission.*

## NEW MUSIC CLEARINGHOUSE

This department will reappear from time to time as composers inform us of additional pieces they would like to have played by our readers. Listings should identify the title, instrumentation and level of difficulty of each piece.



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# MUSIC FOR THE LOVE OF IT: ADULT BEGINNERS AND THEIR TEACHERS

by Janis Weller

*"Don't be afraid to use what talents you possess. The woods would be silent indeed if no birds sang except those who sang the best."*  
—Anon.

## Profile of the Adult Beginner

Adult beginning musicians are a fascinating lot (see box, page 6). Generally well-educated by schooling or life, they range in age from barely out of their teens, to well into retirement. Usually open minded, highly self motivated, frequently overextended, demanding, honest, and enthusiastic, they are experts in a variety of fields and skills, but often nervous and insecure about their musical abilities. They are risk takers who are willing to be neophytes starting from scratch to learn a foreign and complex array of skills. Most of all, they share a passionate commitment to playing music.

## The Teacher/Student Relationship

The teacher/adult-student relationship is an intimate one — of mentor, friend, cheerleader, sometimes therapist, and also music teacher. As teachers of adult students, we must guide, nudge, calm, challenge, and try to inspire our students. We learn from them, both directly and indirectly, as they push us toward creative solutions for their individual musical problems and share their expertise and points of view with us. And it is incredibly gratifying for us to share their successes, large and small.

Guilt, mostly about not practicing enough, seems to plague many adult music students. A holdover from school reflexes well-honed in childhood, adult students often start lessons with a stream of apologies and excuses, and sometimes have a hard time realizing that as the teacher, I'm not there to judge (or, heaven forbid, give them a grade). Being "good students", they instinctively want to please the teacher, but the adult student's lesson must begin just where he or she is that day. There are no preconceived expectations of practice time invested or results obtained. We simply start from right now and take it from there. As a student, you can address this situation directly: "I won't have much practice time this week, can I just review?"

Student motivations vary. Some come to lessons well prepared, with questions or problems to solve, ready to get down to business with a minimum of chit-chat. Others take a more casual approach, seeming to gain as much from the one-on-one socialization as from the music making and instruction. Here again, I work to take the student's cues: "I want my assignments ordered—you tell me what to do." "I don't want pressure, or it stops being fun for me."

The teacher is there to serve the student's needs, giving shape, direction and support to the means of achieving his or her musical goals. It helps the teacher do this if the student describes what he or she enjoys most and what he or she expects from music lessons. (Some topics adult students might reasonably discuss with a new teacher are suggested in the box on page 5.) At the same time, it is important for the student, too, to listen and be flexible. Be open to your teacher's suggestions, even (or maybe especially) if they seem to take you in new directions.

## Enjoying the Process

*"Success is a journey, not a destination."* —Ben Sweetland

Look at a small child's drawings and they may look like nothing more than scribbles. But watch that child in the process of creating a drawing and you will witness the utter delight of the moment—the feel of the crayon gliding first in carefully measured strokes, then in exuberant swirls, her arm swooshing across the paper. But as demands imposed by others begin to increase in our lives ("There will be a test on Friday." . . . "Get me that report by Wednesday"), we become less and less process oriented and more and more results oriented.

## SUCCESS STORIES

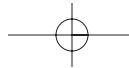
Marion began the cello at age 65, after retiring from a long career as a church organist. Working through the stiffness of arthritic hands, she has become a fanatically dedicated cellist in the ten years since she started. She plays with three community orchestras, a trio and a quartet, and spends her summers crisscrossing the country from one music camp to another.

John started cello from scratch, with no background in music, not an especially good sense of pulse, and with no music reading skills. He agreed, but with great trepidation, to perform in studio recitals, working with his teacher on anxiety-relieving activities. After he successfully negotiated his way through elementary pieces in these concerts, he reported that his newly-found performing skills made presentations at work substantially easier.

Stephen grew up in the heart of Harlem, kept straight, he says, by the Brothers at the Catholic school he attended. Following the army and college, he became a social worker in Minneapolis. Today he supervises an agency of social workers, lobbies the legislature for social service and day care issues, and prods city government and large foundations for project funds. His colleagues thoroughly enjoy his attachment to the flute. "Finally there's something to keep you humble, Stephen", they chuckle.

One twenty-something single student reported that "When a new acquaintance finds out I play the flute as a hobby, I become instantly fascinating."





# BACK TO THE ROOTS OF CHAMBER MUSIC *by Alice Benedict and Paul Dickert*

In April of 1975, an invitation was sent to 40 or 50 music lovers for an afternoon concert in Gail Penniman's living room. The conveners were the newly formed Société Soirée Musicale, an association dedicated to showing that, in California's Santa Clara Valley, musical enterprise can coexist amicably with computer chips and remnant orchards. Eighteen years later, in February 1993, more than 300 people gathered in the Carriage House of Saratoga's Villa Montalvo to celebrate the Soirée Musicale's 100th concert, a tribute to the affection and enthusiasm this series of concerts has generated among its supporters.

In Mrs. Penniman's living room, a charming tradition was introduced for chamber music enthusiasts in the Santa Clara Valley. This intimate music would be enjoyed not just in concert halls, but also in the homes of friends, as its composers first intended. In time, the Soirée came to host two concerts a year in larger venues open to the general public without charge. There are now six concerts a year on a bimonthly schedule. Thus the Soirée Musicale perpetuates chamber music's earliest tradition of including ensemble music as a regular part of social life at home, with the hosts and guests often participating in the music-making.

Soirée Musicale concert programs range from duets to small-scale symphonies; from Claude Bolling's "Toot Suite for Trumpet and Piano" to a Bach cantata. Each program has a unique musical theme: recent concerts have explored twentieth-century song, Russian romanticism and the influences of ragtime. Often the programs center on a particular type of ensemble: some focus on vocal music — for example, an evening of

renaissance song; others have featured music for woodwinds, or piano and string ensemble, or string ensemble with other instruments. The 100th concert in February featured a fortepiano built in 1985 by longtime Soirée attendee John Germer, modeled on pianos made in Vienna some 200 years ago, and included works by such composers as J. C. Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven that were first played on similar instruments.

Some concerts include an open reading session following the main program, so that members of the audience, many of whom are musicians themselves, have a chance to join in the fun. Soirée events are very accessible: to attend, one needs only to request to be added to the mailing list, and to pay a small fee to cover postage and the cost of printing programs. Setup for the concerts and for the post-concert social gathering are coordinated by the host and by society volunteers.

*For further information, please contact Paul Dickert, 117 Husted, San Jose, CA 95125, 408/448-1960.*

## CHRISTMAS ROUND *by David Goldstein*



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