

From Violin to Viola

by Susan Fowle

I learned viola first, in a mixed string class, so I learned where the notes are on violin almost simultaneously, but played violin in groups almost not at all until well past college. I now strive for proficiency on both instruments. I've taught 2 violinists to play viola within a day, and would like to share with you how we did it.

It's best if the violinist (hereafter referred to as "student") can enlist a viola player (hereafter referred to as "teacher") who is

1. very comfortable with naming the notes in alto clef
2. can look at the student's fingers on viola and interpret whether the student is playing the correct note.

Start with a beginner's book which has a printed scale in C covering at least 2 octaves, in alto clef, beginning from the open C string. The teacher should point out to the student each open string, what the note looks like in alto clef, and have the student say the name of the string out loud and then play it.

Now the student should start from the open C string, play note by note up the scale very slowly, stopping before each note to look at it on the page, name the note out loud, and then play it. Go clear up to at least E on the A string (1st position, 4th finger).

Next the teacher should point to notes at random, ask the student to name the note and then to play it.

When the student is sufficiently comfortable with seeing the alto clef note and naming and playing it on the instrument, he should play a simple piece printed in the alto clef. Then the teacher should present an easy piece in treble clef to be sure the student can readily play it, stopping to say the name of the note as before if there is any confusion. As one only has to move the mental image of the violin one string to the right to play treble clef on the viola, this should not present a major problem.

All this should be possible in one session. It probably works best if the student has not previously tried to use mental crutches to omit really learning alto clef. I deplore the approach of handing the student a viola and saying "find the notes

any way you can, we need you now on viola." Play in a group as soon as you feel at all ready, but stop and rest whenever your brain becomes fatigued, at least for the first few occasions.

Check your intonation by playing double stops, using adjacent open strings. Your 3rd and 4th fingers are especially likely to be flat.

I'm aware of at least one book on learning to play viola which advocates the mental crutch approach. I encourage anyone who owns this type of book to return it to the publisher with a note that the approach is harmful.

I cannot stress strongly enough that the student must learn to read alto clef and know where the notes occur on the viola so that he can say instantly the name of the note he is seeing or playing. Mental tricks will only result in continual confusion.

The best of luck to anyone who tries this method. I'd enjoy hearing about your experiences.

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