

Chapter I Viola Tone - Introduction

What could be more important than the tone of string instruments to the maker, player, composer, and listener? The purpose of music is to transmit human experiences in all the dimensions of emotion to others. The human ear and brain are capable of extremely sensitive discrimination of sound. From the time of infancy to the end of life, most people can discriminate subtle differences in the voices of people, which they can immediately identify. Many who listen to music can identify the artist whose voice is unique and distinct. The use of the word tone can thus have meanings, which are widely conceived and equally complex. Words cannot express what is heard and experienced, especially in the realm of emotional experience. The best teacher is one who can communicate and use examples to demonstrate what needs to be expressed.

It is essential that violinmakers and players learn as much as possible how to evaluate tone, as well as playability. In a sense it is impossible to separate the concepts of tone and playability. In this book the meaning of the word tone encompasses the entire spectrum of what is heard by the player as well as the listener, while playability refers to the experience of the player performing a number of tasks on a particular instrument, more specifically to determine whether a given player likes the instrument and whether it may suit his own individual and professional needs. The viola remains a problem in that tone and playability have not yet been given the attention that violins and cellos have received. There is a wide range of sounds and tones that violas produce, and it remains the task of players and violinmakers to address the problems of viola tone evaluation. The next chapter will briefly review some of the landmark historical developments of the viola, which has had a more varied and unsettled history than violin or cello.

Fortune smiled kindly on the violin as a favored string instrument from the sixteenth century to the present. A happy concurrence of composers, violinmakers and players produced the string trio, concerto grosso and other works in the sixteenth to early eighteenth centuries where the violin was the dominant musical expression. This occurred during the time of makers such as Andrea Amati, and his progeny the Brothers Amati, Nicolo Amati; Nicolo's students Stradivari and Andrea Guarneri; and Andrea's grandson Guarnerius del Gesu. Magnificent solo violin sonatas, in Corelli's Opus 5, which followed the trio sonatas of Corelli, i.e. in Opus 1 and 2, demonstrated the beautiful tonal qualities of the violin. Vivaldi's Opus 2 sonatas were also magnificent works for violin. Vivaldi's Opus 3 and 4 introduced the violin concerto with string orchestra, which became forerunners of the great violin concertos of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. No doubt beautiful music from great performers could be heard in Cremona, with many halls having excellent acoustics, as well as in Venice during the time of Nicolo Amati, Stradivari and del Gesu. The tone of the violin has been more clearly distinguished, whether suited to chamber music or great halls with full orchestra.

The comparisons of Stradivari and del Gesu violins by Rugierro Ricci and recently by the largest collection of these violins by Bein and Fushi and played by Elmar Oliviera are a must for violinmakers as well as players. Thirty Stradivari and del Gesu violins

were thus evaluated, comparing Stradivari and del Gesu violins for each selection of romantic violin works by such composers as Bach, Brahms, Kreisler as well as playing each one using the same piece. While the three disc set of thirty violins on three CD's together with a book may be purchased, a CD *The Miracle Makers* of fifteen of these violins is available at nominal cost. Could this be done one day for violas?

The DVD, *The Art of the Violin*, is also a must for makers and players, enabling some sensitivity to the artistry of the great violinists who set the standards for today's violinists. The differences in the tone produced by these classic violin virtuosos can often be distinguished. One can also learn something about how players can influence the tone of the instruments they play on, by their unique technical and creative abilities. A player can influence any instrument by how the instrument is regarded and played, and this gets into complex realms of human behavior. Yet despite these complexities, most listeners can tell whether or not they like the sound of the violin they hear, and despite limitations of vocabulary describing what is heard, it is possible to arrive at a reasonable consensus of what a violin should sound like.

The cello was standardized early in the eighteenth century by the cellos made by Rogeri, Stradivari, Gofriller, Montagnana and Techler, among others, thus replacing the church bases. The smaller "standard" cellos could be played more readily in solo compositions by late seventeenth and early eighteenth century composers. It was a long time however before the cello achieved its acclaim by players such as Casals, Fournier, Piatigorsky, Rostropovich, Starker, du Pre, and Yo Yo Ma, among others, who have demonstrated the unique voice of the cello and have brought the cello to a comparable status before the public as the violin.

The situation has been quite different for the viola. Players or violinmakers have never yet accepted body size, string length or shape let alone tone approximating a standard for the viola. It remains to be seen whether composers and players along with listeners will come to favor a range of acceptable sounds produced by the viola. Why are there so few concerts featuring the viola as a solo instrument in the United States? As an example from our own little community of Brookings, Oregon, we have had community concerts every year for the past twenty years with only one concert with viola soloist, and it did not receive favorable reviews in our local paper. Yet there have been many appearances by violin soloists.

We have reached a new era for the viola as a solo instrument. New, as well as old violas should be evaluated firstly as solo instruments. Can you imagine a serious violinist trying out a violin as a quartet or orchestral violin? The violist, student or professional, should evaluate a viola as a concert instrument, to be played in concert or recitals as a solo instrument, unaccompanied or with piano or orchestra. The viola must have the essentials of good playability and tone, including clarity, power, colors, contrasts and be able to express a broad range of emotion. When a player is occupied with scales, exercises, or new music to be performed, it is essential that the player have the experience of playing on a superb instrument that affects the player in a very positive way. Most importantly, all violists must be devoted to bringing the viola before the public in recitals and community concerts. The public must be exposed, especially here in the United States, to the beauty of the viola.