

8 Etudes for VIOLA

JESSICA MEYER

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Having started on the viola at the age of 9, I am a fierce advocate of this instrument and have always wanted to create a series of etudes where students get to focus on what makes the viola different from the violin.

In short, we just need to use our bodies differently to pull a full-bodied sound out of our instruments. Every viola and every viola player is sized differently - and it takes some practice and decision making to find just the right set up that fits your body, in addition to finding the best hand positions that can leverage the natural weight of your body in order to produce an easy, resonant, and powerful sound.

As for pedagogy, I have found that the best etudes are the ones you make up yourself. I believe that if you can hold an instrument in your hand, you are equipped to make choices about sound. Furthermore, I feel that you can only become good on an instrument if you can truly hear the sounds you are about to play right before you play them - and this is where improvisation comes in.

Eventually, you should then write down your improvised ideas, tweak them, and BAM! - you are composing, just like most musicians did before the 20th century.

I encourage you to say out loud why you play the viola, and celebrate that every day through your sound. These etudes can help you get started, but I hope you will be writing your own as soon as possible.

Enjoy!

Etude #1: Contact Point

Being able to pull your fingers in towards you in order to align the bow closer to the bridge is an important skill as a violist in order to project against a piano, in a chamber ensemble, or to create long phrases.

This etude is best done in front of a mirror and helps build the habit of always being aware of your bow location in relation to the bridge so that you can produce the best sound.

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♩ = 60 Nostalgic

Pull bow towards the bridge by gently bending your fingers and thumb at the knuckle halfway down your fingers. The arrow symbols will be your cue to hug the bridge with your bow while playing, then move back out to where you were.

5

p *mf* *mf*

arrows are reminders to pull the bow towards you & the bridge

9

f *mp* *f* *mp*

let bow float away from bridge

pull it back towards you

13

f *pp*

save the bow while being in the contact point

19

f

21

f

save the bow while being in the contact point

25

f

25

ff *pp*

Etude #2: Shifting and Hand Patterns

Shifting on the viola is indeed different than on the violin. It is important that one shifts with their hand and fingers as one unit, so fingers are ready to be dropped down onto the fingerboard in the new position easily. It is with a relaxed left hand that we can produce the richest sound and be the most in tune.

Your hand should move as a "frame" (but not as a rigid one) and your knuckles should be rounded and soft.

This etude explores both repeating patterns in different positions and repeating the same pitches in different positions.

♩ = 65 **Daydreamy**

1 *p*

5 *mf* *pp*

9 *mf* *p* *f* *pp*

13 *mp* *f* *rit.....*

a tempo
17 *p*

21 *mf* *pp* G or C string

Etude #3: Weight Distribution and Body Balance

Now that you have worked with left hand balance and right hand tracking in your fingers, it is time to think of your larger muscle groups and how they can work for you in order to produce a beautiful viola sound.

During the rests, feel yourself releasing the weight of your right arm and shoulder into the string. When you draw the bow, feel as if you are pulling and pushing the bow across the strings instead of pressing down with your right hand.

Your left hand should not be tense, and allow the resonance of the instrument to flow freely through both hands. Be sure you are standing tall, with your legs hip-distance apart. Knees are bent slightly and not locked - and feel your sound coming up from the soles of your feet.

I highly recommend building in these kind of relaxation check-points into any piece you are practicing.

$\text{♩} = 55$ Lovingly

1

mf *f* *mf*

release your arm weight into the string and adjust your body whenever you get to a fermata for as long as you need, then pull the bow across

5

f *mp*

In these 5 measures, stop if you need to release your weight into the string. The goal of this étude is eventually to play without breaks or fermatas.

9

ff *f*

13

mp

17

f *ff* *mf*

21

mp *p*

Etude #4: Choose Your Own Adventure

Being able to make up your own music in the moment is important for every musician. This etude gives you moments to improvise your own ideas within the structure of the music and the mood. After getting comfortable with these, the next step is to start keeping a notebook of etudes you write for yourself so that you can practice a technique you need to improve in your own way...and have fun while doing it!

same rhythm as measure 3, pick any natural note, but B's are flat

a. Melancholy

1 $\text{♩} = 72$

p

9 same rhythm as measures 9 & 10 same rhythm as measure 13

15 half notes.....

mf

20 make up these 2 measures with your own pitches and rhythms

mp *f* *p*

b. Joyous

1 $\text{♩} = 86 - 96$

f

6 same rhythm as measure 5

10 same rhythm as measure 10

14 same rhythm as measure 13 make up your own pitches and rhythms here same rhythm as measure 17

19 make up your own pitches and rhythms for these 2 measures

Etude #5: Using Open Strings for Tuning

Playing passages with open strings is a regular part of my practice. This makes you focus on pitch as a means of enhancing the resonance of your viola. Furthermore, this increases your awareness of intervals and their harmonic function.
Don't feel you have to take this etude in strict tempo right away: be present and really listen for when an interval is really in tune - you will know when it is by how the instrument is ringing.
All the glissandi should be super-slow so you can hear (and anticipate) how the pitch changes.

♩ = 45 **Meditatively**

1

mf nice, healthy sound throughout...phrase how you want to

5

9

13

17

21

Etude #6: Syncopation

Syncopation is at the root of all music with a groove. Playing "off the beat" is found in all kinds of music, including classical. This etude is written in a Ragtime style to put some swing into your step. In fact - please spend time clapping the beats and saying the rhythms out loud, or stomping the beats and clapping the rhythms. These kinds of rhythms should live in your body before putting them onto an instrument. Have fun with it!

♩ = 96 **Fun** start learning this VERY SLOWLY...get up to tempo eventually.

1

5

9

12

14

17

21

23

f *mp* *f* *mf* *ff* *f* *p* *f* *ff*

Etude #7: Bow Division and Control

For a good number of years as a child, I had a hard time using all of the parts of the bow...especially getting all the way to the frog. This is the etude I wished I had then - where I can practice using all of the different parts of the bow but in a really expressive way. Make it juicy.

♩ = 60 **Conflicted**

1

5

9

13

17

21

25

Etude #8: Staccato & Brush Stroke

becoming agile with your bow takes time, especially with strokes coming up off the string in various ways. Like with most of these etudes, let the character and the mood of the piece help you refine the technique. I wrote this piece when thinking about my cat Ninji, who always likes to get into trouble. Who in your life does this music remind you of? If you have a pet, perhaps you can write a piece about them...what would it sound like?

accidentals apply in that octave for the entire measure unless otherwise noted

♩ = 96 **Mischievous**

1 *p*

5 *mf p f p f*

8 *sub. p f sub. p ff p* pizz. arco

11 *fff pp p* arco

16 *mf mp*

19 *fff p* rit... *a tempo* pizz.

22