

BECOMING AN ARTIST: VIOLA REPERTOIRE FOR THE DEVELOPING STUDENT

By James Przygocki 

Historically, finding and selecting repertoire for the developing violist has been challenging. There are many reasons for this, including the fact that violists do not have nearly the amount of music composed for their instrument as violinists and cellists. Until recently, many violists began as violinists and chose to make the switch later in life, so there was less demand for repertoire and technical material that could bring a fledgling violist to artistic levels.

In recent years, however, the situation has improved dramatically. Many more violists start on this instrument, and the expectations for young violists have greatly increased. These days it is indeed possible to find plenty of pieces that are musically appealing and pedagogically focused. We can more easily establish a sequence of repertoire and technical material that will take a student seamlessly and logically from beginning pieces to artist-level repertoire.

In this article, I will discuss the importance of choosing appropriate repertoire for young students as well as some criteria to consider in selecting material. The primary goal, however, is to look at some sources for music and give some specific repertoire suggestions, with a particular emphasis on repertoire that takes a student from the intermediate levels (around Telemann Viola Concerto) to advanced and professional-level repertoire. This includes pieces originally composed for the viola as well as transcriptions that are especially well suited to the instrument. It is worth noting that even the most pedagogically effective pieces work best when combined with a healthy diet of scales, etudes, and other technical material. The suggested repertoire is not intended to be a comprehensive list, but will help to fill the gaps in our more familiar core repertoire to better prepare developing violists for success in playing the great works for our noble instrument.

Criteria for Choosing Repertoire

Difficulty Level and Repertoire Sequencing

A primary goal of repertoire selection is making sure that students are not playing music that is too far beyond their skill level. Playing Stamitz Concerto, Schubert's Arpeggione Sonata, Walton Concerto, or even Telemann Concerto before the student is ready seems to be a common occurrence. While it is important to use repertoire to challenge students to acquire new skills and to motivate them, we must be vigilant about giving music to students before they are capable of bringing it to a high technical and artistic level.

The suggested repertoire is not intended to be a comprehensive list, but will help to fill the gaps in our more familiar core repertoire to better prepare developing violists for success in playing the great works for our noble instrument.

The downsides of playing repertoire at inappropriate level of difficulty are obvious, but worth mentioning. These can include

- developing effortful and tense playing;
- performance anxiety due to unreliable execution;
- executing technical passages incorrectly, thereby teaching poor technique;
- inability to play musically and expressively due to technical limitations;
- a lack of attention to detail; and
- instilling a low standard of what is acceptable.

Teachers have a responsibility to choose music for their students with which they can have a high level of success both technically and musically. Through this, the student develops a solid technical foundation, musical freedom, confidence, and high standards. It also gives the student an opportunity to achieve artistry at every stage of development.

Difficulty level can be a challenging thing to assess. The size of the instrument and its acoustical characteristics create some special considerations for viola teachers. Regarding left hand skills, because the frame of the hand from first to fourth finger is larger, violists are less able to use extensions and may be forced to use more sophisticated shifts and fingerings. They must be sure to balance the left hand and arm correctly, especially for lower strings, and make sure the instrument is well supported. Violinists need to do this as well, but wider

string space, a larger neck, and wider bouts can make the viola less forgiving in this area of technique.

When it comes to the bow, violists live in a world that is between the violin and the cello, making bow distribution a unique challenge along with managing the speed-weight-contact point relationship. Because of the acoustical properties of the instrument and less string tension, getting articulations to speak and bow strokes to respond may also demand special attention.

One of the many issues we need to consider as a student moves through the repertoire is making sure that steps in difficulty level are appropriate. With modest steps judiciously managed, we can modify the sequence of pieces based on the needs of each student. As mentioned, one of the most important things that our students are learning is a performance standard. With each piece, not only should their skill set increase, but the level of technical and artistic achievement should improve as well.

Pedagogical Purpose

We must always know why we are teaching a particular piece, what specific skills are targeted, and how they occur. It is best if there are not too many new challenges, and that old skills are reinforced and polished. This promotes security and confidence in performance. It is also helpful if new techniques occur repeatedly, offering opportunities for reinforcement. These skills could include chords, double-stops, shifts, vibrato, the use of spiccato, or other specific bow strokes. It is better pedagogically if there are a smaller number of new skills in a variety of contexts, rather than many new skills in small doses.

Musical Style, Character, and Quality

Exposure to a variety of musical styles and periods is important in developing young violists. We want to seek this out for our students at every stage of their development, and current repertoire options now make this much easier. These should include baroque music, romantic repertoire, showpieces, classical concertos and pieces, as well as modern music, which is so prevalent in the viola repertoire.

Because of the nature of our instrument, there is a great deal of sad music for the viola, including a plethora of laments, funeral music, elegies, and the like. While I do love serious music, an overrepresentation of this is not necessarily the best way to bring out the latent extrovert in our students. A strong musical personality that speaks to the student is important in choosing music, including a healthy dose of showpieces. Not every piece has to be a masterpiece, but repertoire does need to have something to say if we want our students to play with expression, personality, and flair.

Specific Repertoire Suggestions

The following pieces are ones that are especially enjoyable for students and which meet the criteria described above. Their pedagogical purpose is clear with a finite number of

skills addressed. They all have a strong musical character, offer the developing performer lots of expressive possibilities, and represent a range of styles. The list steers clear of the best-known pieces and instead discusses pieces that teachers may be less familiar with or may have dropped off their radar.

Recommended Collections

Suzuki Books. These are already familiar to most teachers and don't require a lot of discussion, but their value makes them important to mention. Books 1 through 4, supplemented with other material, offer an effective way to get a student from the beginning stages to intermediate repertoire quickly. Books 5 through 8 provide a wealth of material, much of it standard viola repertoire, such as the Casadesu versions of the Handel and J.C. Bach concertos and the Hummel Fantasia. This is a rich resource for violists, as it is for other string players.

Solos for Young Violists by Barbara Barber. These five volumes provide more excellent choices and offer a wide variety of styles. While all contain useful material, I particularly recommend the intermediate-level pieces in Books 3 and 4. In Volume 3, both the *Romanian Peasant Dance* by Dimitrescu and the *Mazurka* by Hans Sitt combine a strong eastern European character with technical challenges that make them rewarding. They use half through fourth positions and include lots of double-stops. From Volume 4, I often teach Hermann Ritter's *Pastorale and Gavotte*, Opus 31, and Vaughan Williams' *Six Studies in English Folk Songs*. The Ritter is in a Romantic style and includes frequent uses of harmonics, chords, and double-stops as well as high positions, but in an accessible manner. The Vaughan Williams songs initially appear simple, but are full of challenges in managing bow speed, weight, and contact point, and are useful for exploring tone color and developing vibrato.

The Royal Conservatory Viola Repertory. American string teachers are generally unfamiliar with this excellent eight volume series. Some of it is standard repertoire, but a lot will be unfamiliar. Much of it was written by living composers, making these books a rich source of modern music that is often well thought out pedagogically. In looking for intermediate to advanced level repertoire, I especially recommend Volumes 5 through 7.

Some specific suggestions from Volume 5 include the *Air Varié* by Oskar Rieding, which gives young violists a chance to play a showpiece similar to ones violinists play regularly. The Brevard Concertino No. 5 introduces classical style, and an aleatoric piece by Canadian composer David Duke (b. 1950) is fun for students and audiences. Some of my students have especially enjoyed *Three Miniatures*, by another Canadian composer named Michael Miller (b. 1932). These pieces are at a technical level comparable to Suzuki Book 4.

In Book 6, of particular interest is another Air Varié, this time by Charles Dancla, the Berceuse by Frank Bridge, and an entertaining piece called Catch Me if You Can! by Christine Donkin (b. 1976). Volume 7 contains more contemporary pieces along with more familiar pieces by Vivaldi, Marais, Flackton, et al. These pieces are at the level of Suzuki Books 5 and 6.

One World Strings Publications. Bonnie Greene publishes some excellent material for young students through One World Strings. Included among these are pieces for beginners on all stringed instruments, along with transcriptions of pieces for developing violists. The beginning books include appealing folk songs, fiddle tunes, and duets. I use these as a supplement to the Suzuki books for the purposes of working on note reading skills and to motivate young students. One World Strings viola publications include showpieces such as The Boy Paganini and Infant Paganini by Mollenhauer, Introduction and Polonaise by Bohm, and Polish Dance by Severn, as well as a collection of twelve more advanced duets by Gliere.

Top 10 Recommended Pieces

Sonatas by Benedetto Marcello. Several of the sonatas by the Italian baroque composer, Benedetto Marcello, are published for the viola, and one in D major appears in the fifth Suzuki book. They rarely go above third position and mostly use the basic martelé, détaché, and legato bow strokes that are prevalent in Telemann concerto and other baroque pieces. They are a musically rewarding vehicle for developing tone color, vibrato, and expression. These sonatas are also useful for remediating basic skills in students who need technical rehabilitation or to improve basic bow strokes and sound. Using a variety of fingerings that address shifting skills or encouraging the students to choose their fingers can be worthwhile exercises. The E minor sonata is especially useful, but I teach many of them regularly.

Concerto in C Major by Johann Vanhal. Johann Baptist Vanhal (1739–1830)—sometimes spelled “Wanhal”—was a Czech composer. The virtuosic character and modest technical demands of his Concerto in C Major can make it an excellent choice for a first classical concerto. Technically and stylistically comparable to the Haydn G major violin concerto, it mostly uses first through third positions with only a couple of forays into fifth. It is helpful for developing more sophisticated bow strokes such as spiccato and various off-the-string bowing patterns, along with bow distribution skills that arise in music of this period. The International edition has challenging cadenzas which can be modified, depending on the needs of the student.

Divertimento by F. J. Haydn, Transcribed by Piatigorsky. This work, in three movements, is a transcription of a cello piece that works beautifully for viola. It mostly uses first through third positions and the classical style presents challenges similar to the Vanhal concerto. The first movement is an expressive and engaging adagio, the second a charming minuet, and the third a virtuosic finale. Each movement has something unique to offer, and the piece as a whole is short and accessible enough to play all three movements together.

Air and Dance by Gordon Jacob. Twentieth-century music by British composers is at the core of viola repertoire. Rebecca Clarke, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Benjamin Britten, Arnold Bax, York Bowen, and Frank Bridge are some of the composers who wrote extensively for the instrument. This short piece by Gordon Jacob introduces students to this music at an approachable level of difficulty. The moody, slow, and very beautiful Air is tonal but uses 20th harmonic language. It is followed by a perky and playful Dance that includes chords, double-stops, ricochet bow strokes, and left hand pizzicato. Neither movement goes above fifth position. This piece is also included in Volume 5 of Barbara Barber’s collections.

Fritz Kreisler Pieces, Especially Sicilienne and Rigaudon and Preludium and Allegro. There is a paucity of more advanced showpieces for viola, but some do exist, including pieces by Enesco, Vieuxtemps, and Paganini. However, it can be useful to borrow from the violin or cello repertoire. Many of Fritz Kreisler’s pieces work well on the viola, including *Preludium and Allegro* and *Sicilienne and Rigaudon*, which are published by Viola World Publications. Because of the size of the instrument and acoustical properties discussed above, these pieces can be more challenging on the viola: double-stops are a bit more awkward, string crossings are a little further, and getting the string to respond in fast passages requires a unique approach. Violists will benefit greatly from confronting these issues, and the virtuosic style of the music encourages playing with style and personality.

Twelve Fantasias for Solo Viola by G.P. Telemann. Bach suites should be reserved until the student can play them at a high level, with style and sophistication. These unaccompanied Fantasias by Telemann can be an effective way to prepare them for this while exploring music that is played far less frequently than the Bach suites. The Fantasias are shorter than the Bach suites and rarely go above third or fourth positions. In these pieces, students will become familiar with baroque bow strokes, string crossing patterns, finger patterns, chords, voicing, and phrasing that can be applied later in the Bach suites. Number 2 in C Major and Number 9 in E Minor are particularly useful in addressing these skills, but teachers can choose from other challenging options based on the needs of their student.

Recommended Collections and Repertoire

Suzuki Viola School, Revised Edition: Summy-Birchard, Inc., copyright 1999, 1983.
Solos for Young Violists: Compiled and edited by Barbara Barber, Summy-Birchard Music, 2004.
Royal Conservatory Music Development Program Viola Repertory: Viola Level 5, 6, and 7, The Frederick Harris Music Co., 2013.
Blue Book of Viola Tunes: Compiled and arranged by Bonnie Greene, One World Strings, 2007.
Applause: Compiled and arranged by Bonnie Greene, One World Strings, 2005.
E. Severn: Polish Dance, Transcribed and edited by J. Przygocki, One World Strings, 2000.
B. Marcello, Sonata in E Minor, International Music Co., 1966.
F.J. Haydn: Divertimento, Transcribed by G. Piatigorsky, Elkan-Vogel, Inc.
J.B. Wanhal: Concerto in C Major, International Music Co., 1973.
Gordon Jacob: Air and Dance for Viola and Piano, Oxford University Press, 1957.
R. Gliere: Twelve Duets for Viola, Transcribed and edited by R. Noren, One World Strings, 2005.
G.P. Telemann: Fantasias for Viola Unaccompanied, Arr. Louise Rood, McGinnis and Marx, 1960.
Fritz Kreisler: Preludium and Allegro, Transcribed and edited by Alan Arnold Viola World Publications, 1986.
Fritz Kreisler: Sicilienne and Rigaudon, Transcribed and edited by Alan Arnold, Viola World Publications, 1986.
J.S. Bach: 3 Sonatas for Viola da Gamba and Cembalo, Arranged for viola by Watson Forbes, Edition Peters, 1951.
Tibor Serly: Rhapsody, Southern Music Publishing, 1950.
Gyula David: Concerto for Viola and Orchestra, Editio Musica Budapest, 1952.
Alan Shulman: Theme and Variations for Viola and Orchestra, pub. by Alan Shulman, 1953.

Sonatas for Viola da Gamba and Continuo by J.S.

Bach. Bach wrote three sonatas for viola da gamba. Like the sonatas for violin and continuo, they are masterpieces that are played less frequently than they deserve. There are a few editions of these sonatas available for viola, with differing register choices in the transcription. The Watson Forbes version, which tends to use higher registers for the viola part, is recommended, though all work well. These sonatas are musically sophisticated without being extremely demanding technically and are comparable to the more advanced Handel violin sonatas such as the A major and D major. They do not go above fourth or fifth position, depending on fingering choices. Since they are sonatas, it is important to have access to a capable pianist.

Rhapsody on Folk Songs by Tibor Serly, Harmonized by Bartok. As every string player knows, Hungary has a rich musical heritage and a long and proud tradition of string playing and teaching. The next two works are examples of this.

The Hungarian violist Tibor Serly (1901–1978), a compatriot and friend of Bela Bartok, is best known in the

viola world for reconstructing and editing Bartok's viola concerto. Around the time he was engaged in this task, Serly wrote this Rhapsody for viola and orchestra. This piece has a strong musical character and, like the music of Bartok, combines folk elements with a modern musical language. It is a virtuosic piece that uses high positions, chords, double-stops, and off-the-string bow strokes. Many of the technical skills used in the Rhapsody also appear in Hindemith and Bartok concertos in more complex forms.

Viola Concerto by Gyula David. Gyula David (1913–1977) may be unfamiliar to American musicians, but he is well known in his native Hungary where he studied with Kodaly at the Liszt Academy. This music, like that of Kodaly, is strongly influenced by Hungarian folk music and is more late-romantic than modern in its musical language and expression. The concerto is a big work in three movements and uses the entire range of the viola, including the highest positions. There are a lot of octaves and fast passages in the outer movements, and the middle movement, marked adagio, is full of free, expressive, recitative-like writing.

Theme and Variations by Alan Shulman. Alan Shulman (1915–2002) was an important twentieth-century composer, teacher, orchestral player, and chamber musician. An accomplished cellist, Shulman knew stringed instruments well and wrote idiomatically for the viola. Though this piece is artist-level repertoire, it is shorter and less difficult technically than our three major concertos. Although Shulman uses a twentieth-century musical language in his compositions, the *Theme and Variations* is tonal and musically accessible for listeners. As with the *Serly* and *David* works, it is for viola and orchestra and can be an excellent choice for competitions.

The List Goes On!

This is by necessity a very short list and only includes a small portion of the music now available to develop young violists. I would encourage viola teachers—and especially violinists who find themselves presented with the opportunity to teach viola students—not to simply go to the best-known viola repertoire, but to use this as a starting point for exploration of less familiar repertoire that is gratifying to play and to teach. Artistic playing can happen at every level and at every stage

of a student's development, and the use of rewarding and appropriate repertoire will facilitate this. There is plenty of great music to help young violists to play at a high level with polish, confidence, and personality.

ORCID iD

James Przygocki  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4600-3605>



James Przygocki (przygocki@uwyo.edu) is professor of viola at the University of Wyoming (UW) where he teaches viola, violin, and music education courses and conducts the UW Chamber Orchestra. In addition to his work with university students, he teaches pre-college viola and violin students for the String Academy of Wyoming and is the director of the UW String Project. He also serves on the faculty of the Indiana University Summer String Academy and the Indiana University Teachers Retreat for Professional Violinists and Violists. An active as a performer, conductor, and clinician, he has performed and taught in Europe, China, Brazil, and around the United States.