

Viola d'amore, Magical Improv Vehicle

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I first saw a viola d'amore when I was about 12 years old. Going to an event at UCLA's Schoenberg Hall, I noticed a group of exotic looking old instruments in large glass cases in the lobby: d'amores, gambas, a harp-guitar, and so forth. Among them was this wonderfully bulbous instrument with love handles, looking like something from a fantasy world, by Bohemian maker Thomas Hulinski (Prague, 1781). I continued to enjoy the sight of these instruments year after year.

In the mid-1970s, I jumped out of the world of classical music into the world of free improv on violin, viola and electric violin. I said goodbye to music notation and never looked back. Aside from a few jazz violinists, I did not at the time know of anyone who was improvising on violin family instruments, though of course there were lots of us, all over the world, and many of us now know each other. But back then I had to discover everything for myself. One day, near the beginning of these adventures, I walked into Tower Records in Berkeley, and my eye was caught by a recording called *Voice of a Hundred*

Colors by the sarangi master, Ram Narayan. The sound of this instrument with three playing strings and 38 sympathetic strings blew me away. I thought of the Indian technology of sympathetic strings was a way of doing electronic music – a certain magical intensity and all-around engulfment in timbre – long before there were electronics. I found a sarangi and enjoyed it tremendously. Parallel to these experiments I began playing electric violin with the pedals and electronic filters that are standard in the armamentarium of the electric guitar. Then I remembered the viola d'amore – resonant qualities like sarangi or sitar with the (for me) easy-to-operate and hugely adaptable interface of the violin or viola. But decades later, the d'amore remained no more than a recurrent idea in the back of my mind. I got to examine and try instruments from time to time, but conditions were never aligned. Then recently,

within a year of each other, I was lucky enough to acquire two of these wonderful instruments, quite different from each other. One, with 4 playing strings and 5 sympathetics, was the very same Hulinski that had caught my fancy at UCLA all those years ago. The other has 7 and 7, by Abbondio Marchetti. I was also lucky enough to have a conversation with Ravi Shankar, who is familiar with the d'amore and thought it would be a fascinating project to use the d'amore in the melding together of crossover musics, East-West and past-future. I have become fascinated with the improvisational possibilities of viola d'amore, particularly for solo improvisation, with its penchant for layering a rich variety tone color with resonance and silence.

I am really a beginner in this exploration, and compared with people who have played and studied the d'amore for a lifetime I am a complete ignoramus. It feels like a good place to start.



IMPROVISING

Over the decades I have developed simple ways to “teach” improv. Everyone can do it and no one is left behind. A group of musicians without any previous background in improv (or dancers or actors or others) can begin from the simplest sounds and gestures to have the experience of making totally improvised pieces that are coherent and satisfying. I say “teach” in quotation marks here, because in a sense I am not teaching anything, but rather providing a context or safe space in which people can express what they already know how to do but for which they may never have given themselves credit.

People find it exhilarating to perform for the first time with no barrier in the form of a music stand (physical or virtual) between them and the audience. And if they are classical musicians who then return to playing notated scores, they come back from the improv experience seeing and hearing those scores freshly, from the point of view of a composer.

One of the most compelling arguments for improvisation is the issue of repertoire for unusual instruments. Every musician is largely motivated by how the *interface* of our instrument fits our personality: how it sounds, looks, and feels to us, how our nerve-muscle-bone-mind-heart-breath system interacts with a particular piece of technology-craftsmanship. If the instrument we love has a large repertoire, like piano or violin, sax or guitar, we have a lot to explore. For people who love an unusual instrument like the viola d'amore, there is a variety of written music, old and new, but the supply is relatively small. In improvised music, the repertoire is infinite.

The great thing about violas d'amore is that they are so fanciful and singular. Makers felt and still feel free to play with fantastic and magical shapes. There is no such thing as “the” viola d'amore. Because of the differences among d'amores – the style of build (and how that build connects with the style of your body and movement), how many strings, how many

sympathetics and how you choose to tune them, string spacing, and so forth – the improviser inevitably creates music that is best expressed by his or her particular instrument.

Whenever we improvise, we play the individual instrument. Playing scored music, we try to tame our instrument to the nature of the music at hand. Improvising, we allow the instrument to shape the music. Personality of the player's bodymind plus personality of instrument plus context yields the music of the moment.

In any form of music, not-playing is just as important as playing. In collective improv, not-playing usually means stepping back so my partners can step forward, in the way of chamber music or jazz. People fill in each other's silences. In solo improv, it's elegant to allow silence to stand out there naked. D'amore shines as a solo improv instrument. Its silence is filled in by the ghostly 3-dimensional touch of the sympathetics. One can then return to collective improv with the expanded feeling for space that the d'amore teaches. Later this year I'll be playing a duo project with shakuhachi – another instrument which thrives on silence.

Just as viola d'amore is a multicultural hybrid, so improvised music can be hybridized among many kinds of structure. My preference is to play with no forethought whatsoever, with the structure and coherence of the piece arising from total listening in the moment. But there are many stations in the improv universe, and many intermediate ways of doing music which is semi-planned and semi-free. You can take the sounds that you love from 18th century music and adapt them into all kinds of mixtures. The Beatles, thanks to George Harrison, adapted sarangi and sitar to do things that were sort of Indian and sort of rock'n'roll, and did them supremely well. As in music, so in other arts like cooking: are you the kind of person who likes to follow recipes, are you the kind of person who likes to throw things together, are you the kind of person who likes to read the recipe to get an idea and then close the book and not follow the recipe but do something inspired by it? Even the player of strictly scored classical music is appreciated for the way that she makes it her own, finding something new in a work that everyone knows. How you fit on the spectrum of preferring pre-programmed or free forms is entirely up to your own personality.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Viola d'amore arose from a historical 17th - 18th century past in which European, Indian and Middle Eastern musical technologies cross-fertilized (what today is called fusion music). But it almost feels as though it arose from a very far distant past, in some fantasy place. I have friends who never heard of the d'amore – when they see such an instrument they remark that it looks like some elvish craft from Tolkien's world.

Among my musician friends, I have known quite a few who are fascinated by both the very old and the very new: baroque and renaissance music, and today's chamber music involving electronics, fusion and hip hop, without much interest in the in-between time of the 19th century which is still the dominant item in the concert hall. I have one friend who plays electric gamba. This activity of fusion is right in tune with the bohemian spirit of the original d'amore makers – crisscrossing cultures, doing new music with old tools, or freely combining

the old technologies of viols and sympathetic strings with electronics and other tools. I'm reminded of steam punk, a science fiction esthetic blending the archaic and the futuristic.

As we know, viola d'amore, baroque violin and other older instruments were left by the wayside in the 19th century because that they did not have the projection to fill a large concert hall. Fortunately, we have brought these fascinating instruments into a century when we can amplify them. Today we have a wide variety of microphones, contact mics, pickups, etc. with which we can experiment. Garth Knox has advanced the art of the d'amore in just this way, combining the old with the futuristic. He has performed some fascinating experiments, fitting his d'amore with a humbucker to amplify the sympathetic strings and an air-mic for the main strings. Garth points out that this instrument is called viola d'amore because the only person who can hear it is the lover sitting next to you. While many d'amores do carry well, the strongest aura of the sympathetic strings is a short-range phenomenon. At a distance the sympathetics impart a vaguely "silvery" tone, but up close, you feel that you are inside a powerfully resonant sacred space. Close-miking the instrument, or mixing a mic with a pickup, works marvelously well (unlike the violin, which needs to be recorded from 4-10 feet away so its sound can "develop" into the room). Even if you are playing ancient music, there is no reason not to amplify when playing in a big hall. Why not let the audience in on the secret of the d'amore's resonance?

TIMBRAL MODULATION

One of the most important dimensions of improv is timbral modulation. Of the four elements of instrumental sound – pitch, rhythm, timbre, and silence – timbre is at least as important as the others but almost impossible to notate. Bartok might mark a part *sul ponticello*, but how that actually sounds is learned by aural transmission, example, and kinesthetics. Freed from notation, musicians are free to play with timbral modulations in the most direct and imaginative ways – without having to label or classify them.

As I began improvising on violin, viola and electric violin, I became fascinated by what could be learned about bowing from listening to shakuhachi, or sax. Without being a jazz player, I still wanted to learn to growl and yowl like Sonny Rollins. Timbral imitation across media can be a powerful generator of new music.

Timbral modulation is often linked to extended techniques. "Extended" implies that we first learn the standard techniques and then find some new ones. But think of language acquisition. As babies, we babble a gigantic variety of sounds and words, then through cultural training whittle and pare them down to a limited subset which is our conventional language. Extended technique in music is the rediscovery of the enormous expressive range we had as babies and small children. We can play with our instrument as a toy, we can rub it, thrum it, twiddle it in a thousand ways to get interesting sounds. An adult improviser is capable of modulating muscle force so as to explore the possibilities of an expensive and delicate instrument without damaging it.

Here we can barely even touch on the varied universe of the bows, the most analog of tools, calligraphy brushes for painting with time. Violin family bows and instruments, whose tone

production is entirely analog, provide infinite variety of blended emotions. Often we hear string pedagogues say “you must play with a singing tone.” This sounds fine until we realize that by *singing* they are referring to opera or art-song tone – a narrow band of the vast spectrum of human singing. What about the voices of Bob Dylan or Tom Waits, the raga singing of Pandit Pran Nath, Tuvan throat singing or the polyphony of Bibyak Pygmies?

And conversely, what can players of other kinds of music learn from listening to the unique tone production of viola d’amore?

RESONANCE

It’s fun to play violin in a cathedral or cave because of what the environment does to the sound. The viola d’amore, however, is its own church, its own environment. The most dramatic feature in the sound-world of d’amore is the resonance of the sympathetic strings. (Though there were some early instruments without symps, this does seem to be the point of the whole thing, in addition to the extended pitch range of 6 or 7-string instruments which also creates a feeling of being inside a large space). In improv we play what the instrument wants. Because of its enriched resonance, the viola d’amore is an instrument that wants to play music which, whether fast or slow, has a lot of rests and silences in which the reverberation can sing out and die away in its own sweet time.

We make a gesture, fast or slow, and that gesture fills the surrounding silence. We experience a sense of light and shadow, being inside the sound as it lingers and shimmers.

For many years on my visits to New York, my dear friend, the violin dealer Jacques Francais, opened up his man-sized safe filled with about 30 top-of-the-line Italian violins, and turned me loose to explore, study and play for hours at a time. He was a generous teacher and guide. I often got to play a Strad or some other delectable instrument, facing into the interior of the safe, with all the other instruments tuned up and sympathetically vibrating with the one I was playing. The side-by-side doors of the safe were lined with copper, a funnel of reverberance, which made for rich and powerful sympathetic sound reflections. It was an amazing setting in which to play, and the resonance, which you could only hear if you were standing right there, was to die for.

The reverb of sympathetic strings evokes a kind of intensification that shines and wiggles around the sound one is making, a feeling of heightened reality. Sympathetic resonance is the auditory equivalent of the visual experience of glow. Playing the d’amore unexpectedly brought me back to being young and reading Aldous Huxley’s *The Doors of Perception* and *Heaven and Hell*, in which he writes of the mystical evocativeness of glowing things in art and nature, of reflective things. This is why artists often visualized haloes around sacred people or objects.

I’m experimenting using the d’amore with some of the computer effects that are so juicy on electric violin – the echoes, phase shifters, envelope filters and so on. While they work wonders on conventional strings, they want to be used very differently and sparingly on viola d’amore because it really is its own effects box. Not only do the sympathetic strings provide reverb, but they have their own way of amplifying unusual bowing techniques, or bowing with substances

other than a bow. The instrument provides a range of timbral modulation, of growling, whining, pleading, praying, lovemaking, and so forth.

PAINT AS YOU LIKE AND DIE HAPPY

In 1997, I was astonished to read an article in *The Strad* magazine about a viola d'amore made in 1715 by Stradivari, which was cut up and rebuilt (artfully) by Vuillaume in the 1850s into an ordinary viola. We can call it Stradivari's viola ~~d'amore~~. Vuillaume sliced off the head and grafted on a scroll by the Brothers Amati, made a new back, and cut the viol-body down to be a recognizable "Stradivari" instrument. Vuillaume, for business reasons, felt entitled to edit Stradivari's creativity. The reason for my astonishment was that the author of the article did not seem to find this at all strange. Artists are used to being told that it's very nice that you want to create unusual things but first you need to prove yourself by following the conventions. There is an assumption that after you get tenure, or win some competitions, or pay your dues, *then* you can do your own work in your own way. But we all know that we can work for a lifetime and never feel free. Here was Stradivari, the most respected instrument maker of all time, yet to supply the market (a market created from his very fame) his nonstandard instruments had to be adapted to the so-called Stradivari ideal. No matter how eminent a creative artist is, he or she is under pressure to conform, even posthumously.

Yehudi Menuhin was profoundly supportive of improvisation, even though he never crossed over to do it himself. One night he was talking about the wonderful things one can do with a baroque violin bow. I asked why, since he played the Bach Sonatas and Partitas so often, he didn't perform them with a baroque bow. He said that he had to fill up large concert halls with sound, for which he needed a modern bow. I said, "You can use a microphone." He said the concert hall crowd would never sit still for that. I said, "But you're Yehudi Menuhin, you can do whatever you want!" He looked at me as though to say how much I had to learn about the real world.

The lesson of these tales is that no one will ever give us permission to be ourselves and create our own work. We simply have to do it. Improvising, therefore, becomes a powerful act of assertion for us as human beings, whether or not it is our main art form. Improvising is a *practice*, in both the Eastern and Western senses of the word, practice at being who we want to be, saying what we need to say, and communicating with others directly.

Each of us who has taken up the viola d'amore has, as it were, consciously signed up to participate in a world that is a bit to the side of the mainstream. We do what we do for the pure fascination and love of it. No one is going to spank us for doing unconventional things, and if they try, what effect would it have? We are free. We are free to pursue our field of play wherever it takes us, whether it be ancient music or new improv, straight classics from the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe or India. As Henry Miller said, "Paint as you like and die happy."

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