

# IN THE STUDIO/STUDENT LIFE

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## THE SAN FRANCISCO CONSERVATORY VIOLA PROJECT

by Jodi Levitz

Perhaps the most exciting prospect about relocating back to the United States and assuming the position of Professor of Viola at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music (SFCM) was the possibility of collaboration with other faculty members, both performers and composers. One of my first faculty recitals included an outstanding work called *API* for viola, violin, and percussion written for violin professor Bettina Mussumeli and me by Elinor Armer, an esteemed member of the composition faculty at SFCM. The compositional process Elinor used was both fascinating and personal. She got to know both Bettina and me, heard us play in duo several times, and composed a work that remarkably showcased our playing styles.

This experience brought me to a simple conclusion: why shouldn't my students also have the incredible experience of working with a composer one-on-one in developing a new work for the viola? In addition, Elinor's skill in writing a work for specific performers' styles—and not just an instrument—impressed me so much that I couldn't help but wonder how a skill like this could be developed and nurtured in our young composers.

This is how the first Viola Project was born in 2004. The San Francisco Conservatory of Music is a unique institution, where a new professor with the small germ of an idea receives such support and enthusiasm from her colleagues that a project like this can be initiated literally with a conversation near the faculty mailboxes at the very end of the spring semester.

And so, we were off and running. Dan Becker, outstanding composer and composition professor, was directing the weekly composition seminar (at the time a required class for all SFCM student composers). In this class we offered the students an opportunity to participate in the project, provided they gained the approval of their private teachers. Participation was optional, and although the compositions were to become part of each composer's overall portfolio, no grading was involved for the individual compositions. The composers worked on the compositions with their private teachers, as well as having general discussions in composition seminar regarding writing for the viola.

We established parameters for the new compositions: the compositions were to be no longer than five minutes; they were to be writ-

ten for solo viola, or viola and electronics; and if the student composer had already composed a work for a solo string instrument, the addition of piano or second instrument was given by special permission on a case-by-case basis. We decided on this last point because we wanted the composers to learn how to write for a solo voice and wanted to nurture their understanding of the attributes of our instrument.

Dan quickly got the student composers on board by e-mail over the summer, and he sent me a list of the composers interested in the project. That first year we had thirteen composers volunteer. Dan and I then had a long phone conversation in which he gave me some information about the composers—each one's style, personality, and compositional background, and I shared the same information about the violists. We then matched each viola student with a composer, especially aiming to match the skill level of the instrumentalist with the propensity of the composer to write complicated music with high technical demands.

We also looked for intangibles, often matching composers and violists with like personalities. Conversely, we might pair contrasting personalities in an



attempt to inspire both musicians to explore outside their comfort zones. (If this sounds a bit like matchmaking, it is! I'm very pleased to say after four Viola Projects and one String Project that Dan and I have gotten so good at this we could open up a matchmaking service for instrumentalists and composers.) This system worked well, so we have followed the same format for every subsequent Viola Project. Of course, if a violist and composer requested to work together, that request was always honored.

Once the assignments were made, the violists and composers were encouraged to meet so the violist could play for the composer. I also opened up all my lessons to the composition students so they could listen to their violists, particularly any solo works they were working on at the time.

The project began early in the fall semester of 2004, and a concert date was fixed for early December. An important aspect of the learning experience was the communication process between performer and composer. We deliberately did not insist on a universal deadline for the completed compositions because we wanted the performer and composer to be responsible to each other. I would, of course, ask my students how things were going. If the answer was anything like "we haven't met in a while, and I haven't seen any drafts yet," I'd encourage them to pursue their composer and ask for drafts, even if they were preliminary. The point of this is not so

the violist becomes joint composer of the work, but so the composer can get immediate input on the feasibility of the composition. Also, the performer learns how to deal with the real-life situation of imposing reasonable deadlines on professional colleagues.

There were many levels of contribution by the violists, especially regarding form or style. Once or twice a violist suggested a small motive, but that was quite rare. In general, the discussions were on a more technical level regarding what is possible on the viola and what was truly not. These discussions pushed both violist and composer to test their limits. The composition students, of course, also worked extensively with their teachers on the pieces throughout the semester.

Once a work was completed, my students would bring it to their lessons, often with the individual composers present. This proved to be a wonderful learning experience for all. I made a point to be extremely literal with the student composers, especially regarding ambiguous notation. It's essential to remind them that hopefully their music will be performed for many years, and not all future interpreters will have the benefit of their oral explanation of "what they really meant." The improvement in clarity and skill in subsequent versions proved this was an essential point for the composition students to grasp.

The project had many unforeseen benefits for my students. They

would make extreme efforts and stretch their technique to new heights to perform "their" works. It was a terrific experience to observe a viola student who would complain that an etude was "impossible" tackle a Viola Project composition that was a much harder challenge with enthusiasm and without complaint. Several times in lessons I would ask a composer to simplify a passage, only to be contradicted by my student, who assured me he or she could handle the passage with more practice. An example of this is the third movement of Devin Farney's *Four Exploitations* (ex. 1). The performer, Morgan O'Shaughnessey, insisted on performing the work as written, ably handling the harmonics despite my glaring insistence that they were unfeasible and unworkable. It was thrilling to be proved wrong.

This made me realize the power of "ownership" of a work. This new composition was the student's and the student's alone. This cannot be underestimated as a motivational device for any musician. We are constantly asked to perform works that have been performed countless times before, which creates its own challenges and motivations. But to perform a work written specifically for us is taking on a responsibility and challenge that is unique. The idea that this privilege should be reserved for fully-formed professional instrumentalists is absurd.

The first Viola Project concert was highly successful, and the



### III.

Viola

$\text{♩} = 35$   
*ppoco*

*pp*

6

*mf* *pp*

11

*f* *p* *f*

16

*mf* *fp < ff* *ppp*

21

*pppp*

results encouraged us to continue in subsequent years. We had thirteen works performed that first year, from simple melodic pieces to highly complicated, difficult works. Besides the solo works, there was one work for viola and piano and an electronic work for viola and two dogs (the dogs were pre-recorded, in case anyone was wondering). SFCM records all the Viola Project concerts, as well as binding the finished scores for our library.

The summer after this first Viola Project was completed, several of my students attended a summer festival I was running in Italy. They all chose to perform their

Viola Project works again, to great success. The memory of these young musicians championing "their" new works so convincingly in an ancient venue—a cloister dating from 1000, or the courtyard of a beautiful medieval castle—for an audience of appreciative Italian music lovers is one that will stay with me forever.

In addition, several students have chosen to perform their works again in recitals and juries. At that time, we held violin and viola juries together, and it was very fun to watch my violin faculty colleagues struggle to identify the unknown composer of a work, only to be told the composer was

a current SFCM student! Some of my students also chose to use their Viola Project works for entrance auditions to graduate schools requiring contemporary works. *Air*, by Joshua Sualle, reproduced below, was one such work (see sample score). It was written for SFCM former undergraduate student Matthew Davies, who later performed it for his New England Conservatory graduate audition.

As the years progressed, we had Viola Projects 2, 3, and 4, and on November 22, 2008, we had our first String Project concert. We expanded the idea to include all string instruments, including



duos. The level of the works was outstanding, and I was gratified to see how fully the rest of the string students embraced the project. Over the years we have introduced forty-eight new works for solo viola.

The benefits of the project have been numerous and long-lasting. My students developed their technique in ways I could have only dreamed and with an urgency and sense of purpose that was admirable by any standard. It's one thing to try and get a tricky passage of the Bartók Concerto just so, but it's a totally different motivational experience to stand in front of your peers and a composer and advocate for the value of a composition that has been written especially for you and your instrument. This sense of ownership of a work and pride in being an advocate for the viola as a solo instrument is a tangible driving force that inspires and motivates. My student Morgan O'Shaughnessey put it this way, "The project added a new dimension to my musicianship and my music making. I got to actually work with the composer, eliminate the guesswork of interpretation, and get permission from the composer to give the work a personal imprint."

Guiding the project has been a privilege and a pleasure. The hardest aspect for me personally was to try and motivate without micromanagement. After the initial introductions are made, the onus must be on the performers

and composers for the project not to be turned into a dreary assignment. I would wake up in a cold sweat imagining the concert date would arrive and not a single work would be ready, but so far that hasn't been the case. There have been a few instances where a performer has refused to perform a work because they were given the piece too late to learn it, and a few cases where a composer was unhappy with the final performance, but even these cases have provided valuable learning experiences for instrumentalists and composers.

For anyone considering taking on a project like this, I have several suggestions. First of all, it's terrifically important that the composition faculty is on board and willing to mentor their students with the project. Also, one has to be open minded about the styles and types of compositions, especially electronics. It was an extremely valuable experience for performers to break out of their comfort zones to work with looping devices, improvisation, various percussion instruments, etc. Some of the younger students had never performed a work by a living composer!

Student composer Devin Farney put it best when he told me, "It's a great opportunity for the composers to 'get our hands dirty' with the violists and learn the ins and outs of the instrument." I would encourage every viola instructor at an institution with a willing composition department

to start your own Viola Project. In just a few short years, we could introduce thousands of new works for the viola, and nurture the next generation of violists to become champions of new music for the instrument.

*To download the complete scores to the Saulle and Farney works, as well Ilya Demutsky's Scherzo for Two Violas (also from the SFCM Viola Project), please visit <http://americanviolasociety.org/scores.htm>*

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