



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG  
ACADEMY OF MUSIC AND DRAMA

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AN APPROACH TO PRACTISING BARTÓK'S VIOLA  
CONCERTO

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*PRELIMINARY VERSION*

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Degree Project, Master of Fine Arts in Music,  
Symphonic Orchestra Performance  
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#### ABSTRACT

A master's project on the process of practice that went towards learning the Viola Concerto by Bèla Bartók, with a progressive breakdown of the work and a specific look at the technical difficulties that needed to be overcome in each section, how and why they were tackled in specific ways and what the positive result was that arose. The reflection on the learning process includes references to the tuition by violist Rivka Golani and pianist Michael Hampton, and the documented practice methods of the violist William Primrose.

#### Key Words:

Bèla Bartók. Viola Concerto, practice, shifting, intonation, rhythms, accents, structure, double-stops, open strings, arpeggiated figures, melody, harmony, bowing, string-crossing, triplet, sequencing, chromaticism, articulation, vibrato, Rivka Golani, Michael Hampton.

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## Introduction

Bartok's Viola Concerto was composed at the very end of his life and was completed from sketches by his close friend Tibor Serly in 1949. The piece was a commission by the prominent viola soloist William Primrose who requested a challenging concerto that did not conform to the perceived technical difficulties of the viola at that time. Because Primrose was not able to see the first draft of the solo viola line before the time of Bartok's death, he was unable to discuss with him the difficulties of some of the writing, which has meant that this concerto provides perhaps more obscure technical difficulties than many other viola concertos in the repertoire.

It is for this reason that I have decided to create a comprehensible approach to how I learnt the first movement of the concerto for the possibility of having other violists use it as some form of guide if they decide to tackle it. I was very fortunate to study the work for two years with Rivka Golani, who is widely considered one of the finest performers of this concerto, and this has provided me with a firm ground with which to reflect on my learning process. The lessons with her were hugely beneficial to me and the way the technical difficulties were tackled required perhaps a greater imagination than so many other works I have come across, so I felt that to have this tuition set out in a kind of manual would be useful to many other players and would be a great way of reflecting on how I learned.

After some thought, I have decided that generally the most efficient way to create an approach to this reflection is to essentially take it bar by bar (or certainly some few numbers of bars at a time), rather than to take broad aspects of the concerto such as the shifting difficulties, arpeggiated passages, fast movements and so on. With the bar by bar approach it is easier to build up the structure of the work gradually and see where the difficulties become more extreme or where certain aspects repeat themselves. It is also how I approached the work for the first time and therefore a more faithful example of what my learning process was. I have included at the beginning of each excerpt sections of the viola part in order to show clearly the areas of difficulty that I worked on.

Since I am now having to return to this concerto in order to prepare it for auditions, I am practicing it in a more revised way so I have decided also to include how my learning process has changed now that I am have an obviously much greater familiarity than the first time I took it on.

Bars 1 – 12 (opening quasi-cadenza)

Moderato, ♩ = 104

*mf*

II

poco a poco

accel.

10 III

poco rubato

*f*

Precipitato

1 6 2 1 remain 5

1

Issues:

- Placing the first note
- Intonation
- Practising the accelerando – in rhythm and where marked

1. Placing the first note –

- First finger in 4<sup>th</sup> position on the D string.
- First I tuned it with the open A string until pitch-perfect. Use one long, slow bow and tune the note gradually rather than repeating the note with lots of bows as I found this can distort the sound and make it harder to pitch the note.
- Once the pitch was secured, I removed my hands from the viola and returned them to position, again tuning it with the A string. This disorientates the hands from getting too used to the position, but helps in the long term for pitching the note securely since it gradually becomes instinctive.
- I took this exercise further, by taking away the viola from its position and then returning. This breaks any familiar patterns, which I found very

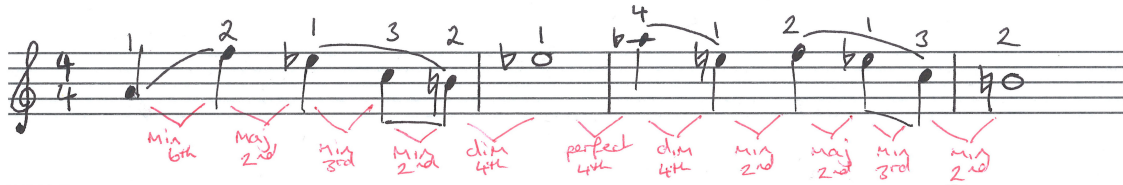
<sup>1</sup> Bartók, Béla 1949, *Viola Concerto, Op. posth.* Ed. Tibor Serly. Boosey & Hawkes. London. Music score. Pg 1.

useful for a performance environment (it avoids any clumsy note searching at the beginning of the piece).

## Visual example

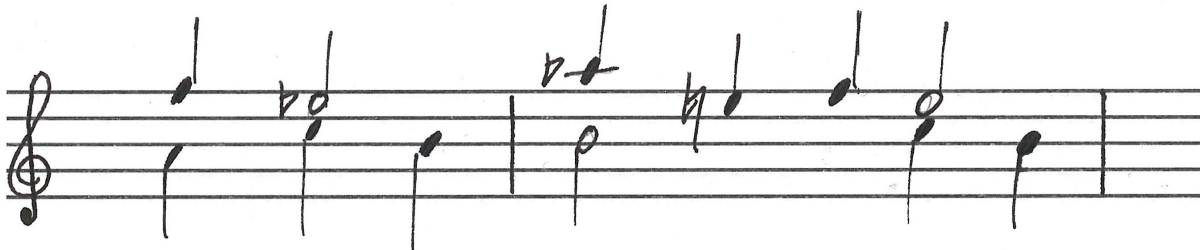
### 2. Intonation -

- I practised each note slowly and separately, ignoring the rhythm and paying particular attention to the harmonic intervals between each note.



Making a note of the intervals in order to pay attention to them slowly.

- Then I worked using double-stops to secure the hand position, being aware of where the 1<sup>st</sup> finger needs to shift.



Practicing with double-stops to secure the position of the right hand.

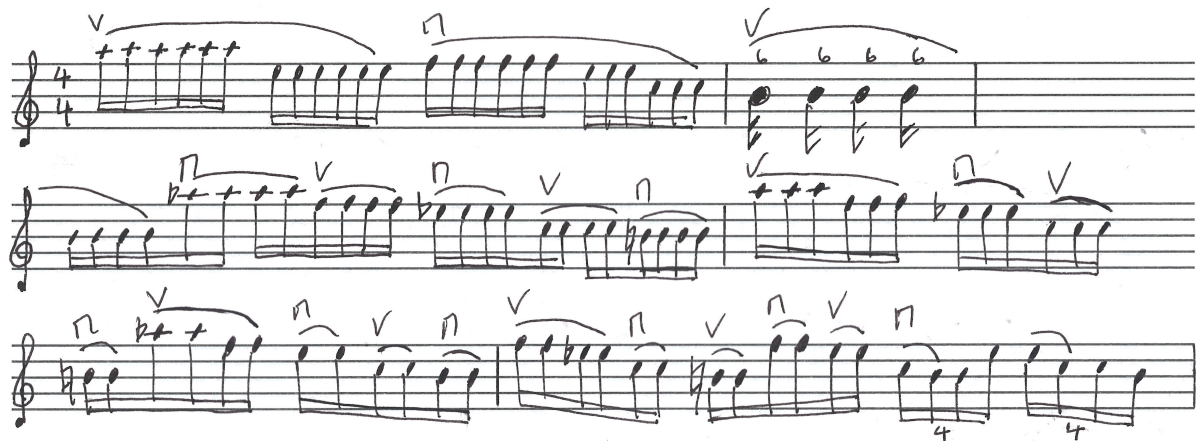
- Bar 12 I practised by recognising the pattern of the fingers on each string. I also played it through on the piano since it is a descending pentatonic scale on the black keys. This made it much easier to pitch on the viola since I now had the scale in my head.



The red brackets indicate which string the hand is on - starting with the A string and going to the C string

### 3. Practising the accelerando -

- There is a very clear written accelerando which I effectively practiced using subdivisions.
- An effective way to secure the rhythm and manage good bow distribution was to subdivide the beat into semiquaver sextuplets whilst following the written bowing patterns. This fits into all the note groupings until the straight semiquavers begin in beat 3 of bar 7.



*Subdividing into sextuplets*

- I used staccato first, to secure a stable rhythm, then used portato for a more melodic and legato approach.
  - Where the 'poco a poco accel' is marked, I practised with a metronome at the opening speed ( $\text{♩}=104$ ) then kept repeating the passage at an increasingly quicker tempo until deciding where the accelerando should go. This is perhaps a little artificial musically, but it is nonetheless effective in gaining some direction and fitting it with the accompaniment. I can credit this method to the pianist Michael Hampton, with whom I rehearsed and performed this concerto.
4. Further issues – shifting (bar 10)–
- I practised going back and forth between each note with a light but audible glissando. Then I practised using the '4 – second rule' which means counting approximately four seconds between each note. This really had me listening to the relationship between the notes and secured my hand greatly for the shift. This was a method I got from a fellow viola student whom I played for in order to get some critical feedback and it proved to be another very successful method of working.
  - I would start the shift on the finger of the first note and land on the second with the desired fingering, then repeat but shifting with the finger of the second note. This covers all bases in the smooth motion of the shift and avoids jumping from note to note, which is too insecure.

Bars 14 - 23

a tempo, ♩ = 100

The musical score consists of four systems. The first system shows the treble clef with a main melody starting on A4, marked *mf*. The second system shows the bass clef with an arpeggiated accompaniment, marked *p*. The third system continues the bass clef accompaniment, marked *mf*, with a box around measure 20. The fourth system shows the end of the piece with a final note on A4.

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Issues:

- Introduction of main melody.
- Arpeggiated figures

1. Practising the main melody -

- Between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> note I shifted for musical reasons from the first finger to the fourth finger in 3<sup>rd</sup> position so I practised this shift in ascending scales.
- From A (first finger, 1<sup>st</sup> position) to F (fourth finger, 3<sup>rd</sup> position), A to F<sup>♯</sup>, A to G, A to G<sup>♯</sup>, all the way up the string as far as possible; the extremity in the shifting eventually means that the original shift becomes very simple since it is relatively small.

The handwritten notation shows a sequence of notes on a staff. Each note has a '4' written above it, indicating a four-second shift. The notes are: A (1st finger), F (4th finger), A (1st finger), F# (4th finger), A (1st finger), G (4th finger), A (1st finger), G# (4th finger). The sequence ends with 'CONT...' and a final note on A (1st finger).

Practising the shift in ascending scales. Each shift taking approximately 4 seconds.

- After this I practised the passage using my own 'standard method' This method includes a systematic practice of staccato, portato, rhythm and accent variations and exercises. For example, with melodic passages I would employ staccato and portato exercises in order to gain control over bow distribution and sound quality, and in faster technical passages I

<sup>2</sup> Bartók, Béla 1949, *Viola Concerto*, Op. posth. Ed. Tibor Serly. Boosey & Hawkes. London. Music score. Pg 2.



would add rhythmic patterns and accent patterns on top of the staccato and portamento for the left-hand dexterity. So when I mention the 'standard method' in later passages, it is to this kind of work that I am referring to.

## 2. Arpeggiated figures –

- I practised each note separately to hear the bare note patterns.
- Then I followed this with double stops to secure the intonation and, more importantly, to secure the hand position so the hand automatically fell into the correct position in a performance situation, saving any intonation anxiety that might have occurred.



*The red brackets indicate the string each note is on. The passage should also be practised with double-stops.*

- I then did the double-stopping with the prescribed bowing that Bartok writes in order to build it into the performance requirements. This encouraged the correct bow position as well as strengthening my left hand.
- I finally practised the music as it was written but stopping before each change of string and consciously moving the left hand and right hand into position for the next string (like changing gears).
- I included the standard method into the practice and also built in the dynamics, which are a big feature in this passage, so it became automatically apart of the music.
- Often using a tiny amount bow in my practice helped me to secure the control of the right hand because it requires the activation of the finger tips, rather than large arm movements, which is something Rivka always encouraged.

Bars 25 – 40

The musical score consists of seven staves of music. The first two staves are in bass clef, and the remaining five are in treble clef. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4. Performance instructions include *mf*, *poco f*, and *f sempre*. There are also markings for shifting (II, III, I) and bowing (Harm.). The score is divided into two systems, with bar numbers 30 and 40 clearly marked.

3

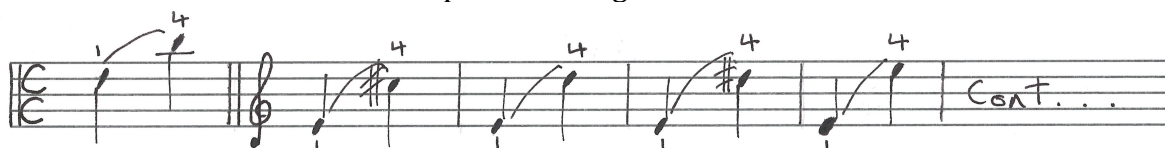
Issues:

- Shifting
- Bowing + string-crossing

1. Shifting –

<sup>3</sup> Bartók, Béla 1949, *Viola Concerto, Op. posth.* Ed. Tibor Serly. Boosey & Hawkes. London. Music score. Pg 3

- Now the main melody returns a fifth higher and is much further developed which creates more issues.
- As with before, the first shift between the first two notes I practised in a scale-like manner up the D string.



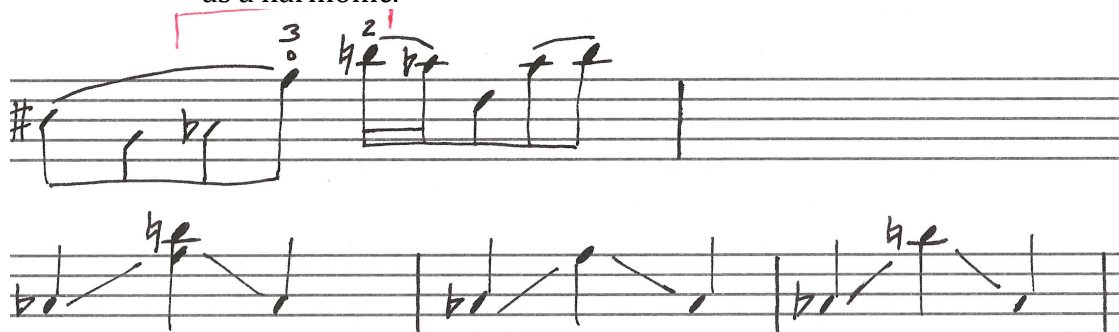
*Again, shifting with ascending scales over approximately 4 seconds.*

- In the next two bars I shifted between the A and B $\flat$ , and the G to F $\sharp$  using the 'four-second rule', to secure the movement of the left-hand between the notes.



*The red brackets indicate where the shifts occur.*

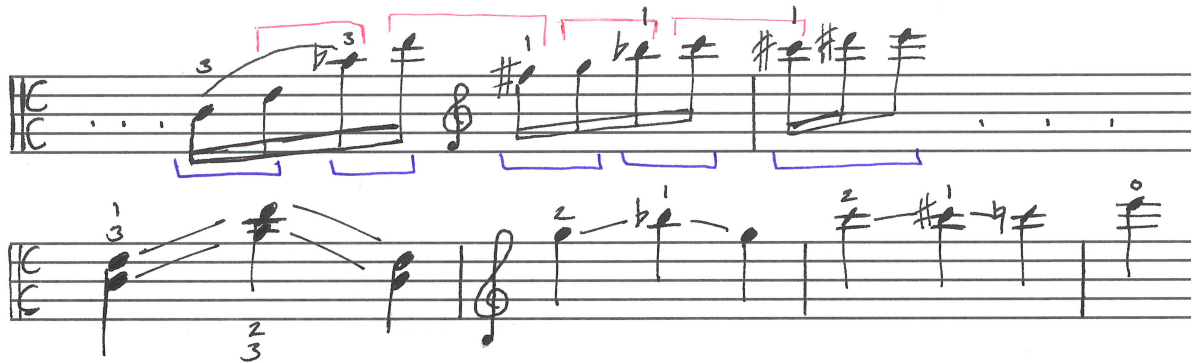
- In bar 28 I followed Rivka's fingerings and shifted up the G string from the B $\flat$  to G (harmonic), but this time I included the C $\sharp$  (on the D string) as a way to secure the position of the hand in 5<sup>th</sup> position. It was also an effective way of securing the perfect fourth, which is often a very difficult interval to tune.
- In the shift I focused my attention on the C and adjusted the G to it since C I always found it the more difficult note to tune and the G sounds naturally as a harmonic.



*Practising the shift to include the C as a double-stop.*

- In bar 36 – 37, the shifting becomes more extreme as the notes go into the high regions of the viola and immediately back down again. By recognising that the shifting came every other note, I could create a system of grouping two notes together and building the scale up gradually.
- For example, C+E, B $\flat$ +E, F $\sharp$ +G, B $\flat$ +C, C $\sharp$ +D $\sharp$ , E.

- So using the 'four-second rule' once again I could gradually build up the scale. Note: the C+E and B $\flat$ +E can be double-stopped, so I practised the shift with these notes together to secure the hand position.



The red brackets indicate the shift, the blue brackets indicate which position the left hand is in (1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>)

- The next extreme shift is from B $\sharp$  to an octave C $\sharp$  on the A string. It was important to make sure that the C $\sharp$  was a semitone up from the octave leap.

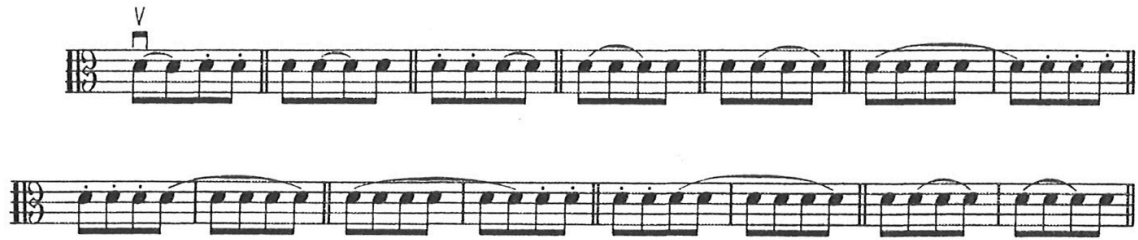


Practising the shift whilst making a note of the octave.

- Playing the interval on the piano was the best way to hear the distance of the interval objectively. Also finding the C first and then the C $\sharp$  relative to it on the string was a good way to secure the pitch. After engaging the 'four-second rule' I also practised the shift very quickly to become comfortable with it in its final tempo. This was a shift I frequently returned to due to its difficulty.

## 2. Bowing and String Crossing –

- This is a major issue in bars 34 – 35 and 38.
- In bars 35 – 36 I applied some bowing patterns by William Primrose to secure the left-hand and exercising the bowing technique alongside my standard method.



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*William Primrose's bowing method, each pattern practised 6 times at the frog, tip and middle of the bow, starting on a down bow, then on an up bow, equalling a total of 60 repetitions.*

- Also practising the passage very slowly and having a minute double-stop whenever I had to change string as a way of keeping the line very legato in a faster tempo – no jumping between strings!



*The red marking recognises the fingers that can be left down as a double-stop and tuning reference for the other fingers.*

- In bar 38, the string crossings are over every string, which makes the passage particularly difficult to play fluidly. At the suggestion of Rivka I practised this passage pianissimo in order to force myself to use a tiny amount of bow with absolute control in my finger tips. As a result the fortissimo playing was much easier.

<sup>4</sup> Dalton David. 1988, *Playing the Viola. Conversations with William Primrose*. OUP: New York. Pg. 29.