

Twisting for Solos, the Violist Is a Quartet's Odd Player Out

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There's not much to look at when a string quartet is playing. Other than the movements that draw sound from the instruments, the scene is relatively static.

But train your eyes on the violist, and sooner or later you may well witness what seems like a secret struggle. The player's body language becomes a spiral of contradictions, like someone keeping up dinner-table conversation while scanning the room for the waiter. Chances are that in this awkward yet riveting moment, you witnessed a viola solo, a phenomenon that is rare in chamber music, often fleeting and even physically taxing.

"It's a funny and weird thing," the violist Nadia Sirota said in an interview. "Right at the moment when you are most stressed, you also have to torque your body in the most uncomfortable position in order to be heard."

The viola is an inherently quixotic instrument. Its construction is a compromise between an acoustic ideal and human limits: For its sound to bloom as effortlessly as that of a violin or cello, its neck would need to be impossibly long. For most of the instrument's history, composers have conspired to keep it out of the limelight, assigning it a supporting role. And chamber music conventions dictate that on the rare occasion that a viola *does* get the melody, it's facing the wrong way.

That's because the most common quartet seating arrangement has the violist placed opposite the first violinist and, from the audience's perspective, on the far right. That means that the viola's F holes — the openings through which most of the sound escapes — are angled away from the audience.

Much of the time, that can be an advantage. “It’s literally gluing the group together as its sound goes into the ensemble,” Ms. Sirota said. T

he contortions begin when the music gives the viola star billing. To project the sound out to the listener, violists have learned to lean and twist outward, or sharply whip their left arm sideways. But at the same time, the player’s attention needs to stay within the group. And unless the passage can be memorized, his or her eyes have to stay on the score.

Negotiating these tensions while building a cohesive ensemble sound takes practice, experimentation and debate. A common strategy is to preemptively angle the violist’s seat so that it takes only a slight turn to face out toward the audience, as the Juilliard String Quartet does here.

But taken too far, this can be visually jarring, with one participant in the musical conversation seeming — actorlike — to be declaiming to the auditorium. The struggle is less noticeable in ensembles that perform on their feet, as the Emerson Quartet used to do until health issues forced them to sit. As the group’s violist, Lawrence Dutton, said in an interview, “When the Emerson was standing it was really easy to, in effect, just walk around.”

John Pickford Richards, of the JACK Quartet, recalled his surprise when an enterprising stagehand in Belfast, Northern Ireland, presented him with a swivel stool. “We played pieces I was really comfortable with,” Mr. Richards said, “so whenever I wanted to contribute a bit more I could just lift my feet up and swivel.”

The most elegant solution, from a violist’s point of view, is also the most obvious: switching seats. The cello usually needs to stay at the back, to anchor the ensemble’s sound. That means that the second violin, usually second from left from the audience’s perspective, could, as Mr. Richards put it, “take one for the team.” The position is so acoustically ungrateful that Ms. Sirota’s mixed sextet yMusic places its sole brass player, a trumpeter, there “so that it is literally harder to hear him,” she said.

The Parker Quartet recently made the switch so that its violist, Jessica Bodner, sits to the inside of the first violinist. She said she enjoyed the feeling of forming a bass section with the cellist at the back of the group, and experiencing what she called the “concertante back-and-forth” between the two violins who face each other.

And, during solos, she no longer has to twist to make herself heard. “When I want to make sure something is really clear, I think of sitting especially straight,” she said.

That sense of taking responsibility for her sound with her full body may be a remnant of her time in the violist's traditional acoustical blind spot on the outside. When she was there, Ms. Bodner came to think of the extra physical investment she had to make in solos as not awkward, but an asset. After all, we listen with our eyes, too.

“Balance is not always so much about the actual sound you are making, but about what you're drawing the audience to,” she said. “If there is a moment of even a slight turnout, it gives that person the conviction of saying, ‘Here I am.’”

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