



In The Middle (Transcript)

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Max Cardilli (00:00): This podcast was produced in *amiskwaciy-wâskahikan* also known as Edmonton on the traditional lands referred to as Treaty 6 Territory - a place that has been a meeting ground, travelling route and home for many Indigenous Peoples since time immemorial including the Cree, Dene, Nakota Sioux, Saulteaux, Blackfoot, and Métis whose histories, languages, and cultures continue to influence and enrich our vibrant community.

[MUSIC - 00:28]

Max Cardilli (00:33): Welcome to ESO Offstage, I'm your host and ESO Double Bassist Max Cardilli. Stuck in between the virtuosic violins and the charming celli, the viola seldom gets the spotlight. This episode, let's take a closer look at this beautiful and interesting instrument with its own unique place in the orchestra, and its own unique controversies. I sat down at my computer, went into Google and typed "why is the viola" to see the most frequently asked questions about this instrument. Google suggested questions like: why is the viola a joke? Why is the viola made fun of? and most searched: Why is the viola hated?? Now this may sound shocking to you, but if you hang around orchestral musicians or string players long enough, there's a certain type of inside joke you'll inevitably hear. No, I'm not talking about classical music puns - which are honestly too hot to *Handel*. There's a specific niche of joke - so popular that it even has its own Wikipedia page - Viola jokes.

Ethan Filner (02:09): Viola jokes are part of the tradition of stereotyping violists as lesser than and incapable. They range from one-liners to very complicated long stories with a good payoff at the end.

Max Cardilli (02:29): This is the ESO's Assistant Principal Violist, Ethan Filner.

Ethan Filner (02:34): I went to a restaurant and I left my viola in the backseat of my car. When I got back to the car it had been broken into - the back window was shattered and there were two violas in the back seat. [Laughter]

Probably my favorite is this: So the scene is in an orchestra rehearsal, the conductor is doing a run-through of a piece and has to stop suddenly because the last chair violist is sobbing uncontrollably and is not playing - making a real commotion. The conductor's like, "Maurice, what's the problem?" and Maurice responds through his tears "the oboe player has detuned one of my strings." The conductor responds "well, fix it. Let's get on with it" and the viola player through his tears again says, "he won't tell me which one." [Laughter]



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[MUSIC -03:26]

Max Cardilli (03:32): Are these jokes harmful or are they in good fun?

Ethan Filner (03:36): Well, I think they're good fun. When someone tells a viola joke they're not telling a joke about you - they're just telling a viola joke. The viola has long been much maligned for a number of reasons. Primarily because it's usually, as the inner voice, kind of hidden in the music and it's not spotlighted. There aren't a lot of really famous and popular viola *concerti* that help players shine and show off what it can do. But I've come to really love being surrounded by the other voices - sitting in front of the brass or in front of the percussion or in front of the winds that are adding so many layers of music to blend with. I love being in the middle of it, physically and musically.

[MUSIC - 04:33]

Keith Hamm (04:35): Viola jokes, oh man.

Max Cardilli (04:38): Here's ESO Principal Violist Keith Hamm on the topic.

Keith Hamm (04:42): Well, I was never particularly offended by them. I've seen people get their nose out of joint, when they hear a viola joke, but it doesn't really bother me.

[MUSIC- 04:53]

Keith Hamm (04:56): What's the only thing a violinist can actually do better than a violist?

Max Cardilli (05:01): I don't know.

Keith Hamm (05:03): It's play the viola! [Laughter] I like it because you get to laugh a little bit at the violinist too - who's stuck in their room practicing eight hours a day and never actually getting proficient at anything else in life. [Laughter] You know, after our modest amount of practice time we still have a chance to work on the car, and build a deck, and learn to play a sport.

Max Cardilli (05:34): Well, why is the viola the butt of so many jokes?

Keith Hamm (05:38): The idea of a dedicated viola career is relatively new, I think, to be that focused on it as its own instrument. It's a really hard instrument to play and so perhaps there was a time when there were a lot of violinists playing the viola, and that was what you heard. And, maybe, they didn't spend that much time working on it. For me the viola is a lot harder than the violin. I always think it's kind of like the violin is a



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ferrari, and the viola is a pickup truck. I mean, that's just the way it is. It's bigger, the strings are thicker, and it's more to move around. The viola maybe doesn't have power steering or something like that. It's just - it makes it more challenging, I think.

[MUSIC - 06:21]

Ethan Filner (06:31): Well, for so long that viola was treated as just a rhythm instrument - or sort of doubling the baseline in the late 1700's. Joseph Haydn is known as the father of the string quartet. He found himself really inspired by the possibilities of conversation between these instruments - and in order to have a conversation you have to basically be equals. His experiments with the form were inspired by progressive reforms of the day, with Franz Joseph, the Emperor of Austria relaxing censorship and encouraging free speech in a different way than people were used to. So the string quartet became a real metaphor for that social change happening. Mozart was inspired by Haydn's treatment of the viola in string quartets. They actually played in a composer's string quartet where they would sort of delight each other with their latest innovations. Haydn's writing inspired Mozart, Beethoven took it to the nth degree and just showed what's possible. There's some writing in the Beethoven string quartets for violists that are more tricky and technically difficult than a lot of solo repertoire - it really challenges the player.

Max Cardilli (07:45): Still, for much of the eighteen and nineteenth centuries the viola was often played by musicians who were not primarily focused on it - with varying results. Wagner once said:

Ethan Filner (07:57): *"The viola is commonly (with rare exceptions) played by infirm violinists, or by decrepit players of wind instruments who happen to have been acquainted with a string instrument once upon a time."*

Max Cardilli (08:17): That's not to say the viola was without it's champions - take Berlioz, who was originally commissioned to compose a piece by Paganini for his recently acquired Stradivarius viola. The result of which led to "Harold in Italy" a piece that revolutionarily put the viola as a protagonistic soloist in front of a large orchestra. Despite the growing presence and demands of the instrument in mid-late nineteenth century chamber and orchestral music, the status quo of who should play the viola remained vastly unchanged. Berlioz lamented this, saying:

Ethan Filner (08:56): *"It is an antique, absurd, and deplorable prejudice that has hitherto handed over the performance of the tenor part to second - or third - rate violinists...It is to be regretted that there is no special class for the viola. This instrument,*



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notwithstanding its relations to the violin, needs individual study and constant practice if it is to be properly played.'

Max Cardilli (09:25): It took until later in the 19th century for the idea of the viola as requiring its own formalized instruction to take hold. For example, the Paris Conservatoire, which opened in 1795 offering violin and cello instruction, did not add viola to the curriculum until 1894- almost a century later! The first professor of viola at the conservatoire was Théophile Laforge, whose studio created several successful alumni and helped in furthering the development of viola musicianship worldwide.

[MUSIC -10:03]

Keith Hamm (10:07): But whatever truth there was in viola jokes throughout history it's not really there anymore. The level is so high in conservatories and in professional orchestras. I mean, you think about the viola section we have here - it's fantastic. Like, maybe we make jokes about violas because they often represent these funny characters in opera and on the symphony stage. I think of the personalities, you know, Sancho Panza and Don Quixote. The big Strauss cello concerto. I think about Mimi and Siegfried, and all those Ring operas. You have to have, for some reason, a member of the band that is the butt of the joke. In rock bands it's the drummer, and I've heard in bluegrass bands it's always the banjo player. I don't know why. Like, you go to bluegrass festivals - there are banjo jokes, and so we need that in classical music. So, okay? What else is it gonna be? Maybe it's also because we have the best sense of humor, so.

Max Cardilli (11:09): Yeah, Totally.

Keith Hamm (11:10): When I go home to Rosebud, where I'm from, people sort of know me. "Oh yeah, Keith, he plays a violin" and "oh yeah, he plays something else too" and "actually, yeah it's sort of like a violin. It's a little bit bigger."

Max Cardilli (11:25): Many mistake the viola for the slightly smaller violin - which is understandable, it is similarly shaped, it has four strings, it's played with a bow and it's held on the shoulder. It's made even more complicated by the names given to these instruments and how they have changed over time.

Ethan Filner (11:43): The word viola, in 16th century Italy actually referred to any bowed string instrument and there were a few different families evolving at that time. There's the *viola da gamba* family- *gamba* meaning leg in Italian - which you play between your legs. These came in all sizes and registers, the largest of which evolved into the modern day double bass. They were typically fretted, flat backed, tuned in



fourths and had six or sometimes more strings. Then there was the *viola da braccio* family - *braccio* meaning arm in Italian, so the bowed string instruments which you play on your arm. These did not have frets, the backs were arched, they were tuned in fifths and they also came in a variety of sizes and registers.

Max Cardilli (12:34): There were some lesser known instruments in this family like the *viola d'amore*, *viola da spalla* and the *arpeggione* (which shares characteristics from both families), but the most common included the soprano instrument named the violino (or small viola) that we now call the violin, the tenor viola which fell out of popularity somewhere in the mid 18th century. The bass instrument of the group, the violoncello, meaning little big viola in Italian, actually evolved into the modern day cello, and finally the alto viola which has evolved into what we now call the viola, and it continues to evolve to this day as both players and makers try to find a solution to a fundamental challenge.

Ethan Filner (13:22): If you think of a violin, the size and shape was standardized hundreds of years ago. At some point they figured out what all the dimensions need to be to maximize the vibrations and projection of that sound that it creates. Every viola is different from the next. There is no standard size. The shape has been experimented with a lot, especially in recent years, because it's fundamentally the wrong size for the notes it plays.

Max Cardilli (13:58): What do you mean by that?

Ethan Filner (14:00): So, the register of a viola is one octave above the cello, and thanks to physics we should expect a viola to be half the size of a cello in order to play the one octave higher. But if you think about half the size of a cello, like, it's too small to play sitting down but it's too big to play holding it under your chin. So, violin/viola makers have had to experiment with getting the viola as small as possible to play, but also as big as possible to get the right volume of air vibrating to maximize the projection - so that you've got as powerful a sound as a violin, or the cello - so that it can compete and work in balance.

17-inch or longer violas are really heavy. They're stretching your arm out too long - like you can play it, but not for too long. So, there's this cost benefit analysis that you do when you're looking at an instrument. Does it sound good? Can I hold it? Can I hold it long enough to practice so that I can sound good?

Max Cardilli (15:26): The fact that the viola isn't standardized provides an exciting opportunity for luthiers today and throughout history to be creative and innovative in trying to solve the puzzle of resonance vs playability imposed by the register - like the



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ergonomic viola design by luthier David Rivinus which looks like it's straight out of a Salvador Dali painting.

Ethan Filner (15:50): The end result of all this experimentation is every viola sounds totally different - very much like we all sound different as we talk or sing. I think violinists, violists and cellists all try to lay claim to their instrument being the most like the human voice. I think the viola is most like the quirkiness and the individuality of human voices, you know. Every time a violist meets another violist it's like "oh, what's your instrument?" It's really interesting because they're gonna sound different, they're gonna look different - so it's really magical when you can find a viola that is big enough to sound big, and light enough. Or it feels right under your chin, on your shoulder, and it speaks really clearly - and if you're lucky has a special color quality that you might sort of fall in love with and it becomes your voice.

[MUSIC -16:53]

Max Cardilli (17:11): So we've heard about this stereotype - that violists are really "violinists who didn't make it". It's true that many people come to viola by way of violin - including both Ethan and Keith - but there are far more practical and nuanced reasons for this.

[MUSIC - 17:29]

Ethan Filner (17:36): Going back to this imperfect proportions of a viola - if you're a little kid trying to start playing you might love the sound of a viola that you hear on a stage somewhere, but if you get yourself a half-sized viola or if you get a violin string it up like a viola it's just not going to work. Smaller size violins are much more likely to feel satisfying while you're learning how to play. It's just so much easier to learn the basic techniques and to get further with it faster and then transfer those techniques to the larger viola.

Max Cardilli (18:12): We know the viola sits in an odd register for its size, and on the topic of register - different instruments use different clefs depending on their register. A clef is like a legend on a map. They are marked at the beginning of every line of notated music, and they indicate what notes the lines and spaces refer to. If you're familiar with piano music, you'll know that the right hand is often written in the treble clef and the left hand is often in the bass clef. But there are other clefs too. The middle line of the alto clef, for example, is middle "c" which falls exactly in between the treble and bass clefs and the viola is the only instrument in the orchestra that uses the alto clef.



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Keith Hamm (18:58): It's the main stumbling block for violinists, actually, picking up the viola. If you play the violin - if you're a young person and you play the violin, picking up a viola and learning to read the alto clef and taking on that role in your string quartet or in your youth orchestra - it can only be a good thing. It's like the challenges associated with the size of it - all of those things - will, I think, help your violin playing. That's what I've certainly seen.

The viola, I think, is more of an ensemble instrument than the violin. I think it's more dependent on a shared ensemble experience, and so I think when you're starting out it'd be great to play chamber music and orchestra immediately - but unfortunately that's not usually the case. Mostly it's kids scratching away by themselves with their parents and a teacher and so the violin, I think, lends itself a little more to that. You wouldn't sign your kid up for soccer lessons and make sure that they're practicing 40 minutes a day of soccer by themselves. That wouldn't make any sense, and I think that's actually kind of what we do. We are playing a team sport as orchestra players, and as string players especially.

There's not a lot of concerto repertoire unfortunately. I don't think the viola is maybe quite as well suited to the concerto stage as the violin or even the cello.

Max Cardilli (20:37): How Come?

Keith Hamm (20:38): Well, you know this is a double bass player - we share this in common. We have this kind of funny instrument, that's slightly too small and I think that gives our instruments a really special character. It puts them at a disadvantage as far as concerto playing and projection, but it has a really special voice - and the best composers are composers that really know how to make use of that as a color, whether it's in a string quartet, or an opera pit, or a symphony.

[MUSIC - 21:17]

Max Cardilli (21:19): Part of what has fueled the viola jokes is what gives the instrument it's incredible character. Many famous composers played the viola including Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Dvorak, Mendelssohn, Britten, Hindemith and the list goes on! They also knew how to utilize its voice which is often described as being rich, melancholic, and even chocolatey.

Ethan Filner (21:50): There's a modern renaissance happening where people are exploring what the instrument can do. It's built on the legacy of violists like Lionel Tertis and William Primrose who helped expand the repertoire - commissioning great pieces



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from great composers of the day and increasing the esteem of the viola as a solo instrument. If you look around today - we've got quite a number of internationally recognized viola soloists like Kim Kashkashian, and Tabea Zimmermann, and modern composers demonstrating creativity and ingenuity like Penderecki, Widmann, some composer-friends of mine like Jennifer Higdon and Elena Ruehr - and even performer-composers like Atar Arad and so many others.

Max Cardilli (22:40): There are still so many possibilities for this instrument that for a long time was either ignored or the butt of the joke. But I think it's safe to say that there's never been a better time to be a violist.

[MUSIC - 22:54]

Max Cardilli (23:16): Ethan and Keith have compiled some Spotify playlists to showcase some great examples of music written for the viola. You can find those as well as other resources in the Show Notes or find it on our website!

This episode you heard Keith Hamm and Julie Herish performing Beethoven's Eyeglass duo for viola and cello.

Thank you to our wonderful guests Ethan Filner and Keith Hamm who shared their time and voices for this episode. With this being the last episode of Season One of our podcast - we will be taking a break over the summer and returning next fall. Thanks to all of you who have been listening in this year and a special thanks to all those who help make this happen behind the scenes - I truly appreciate it.

And if you and your kids are looking for some fun activities this summer, you might consider The Winspear Centre's Sensational Strings Summer Day Camps, which offer kids ages 6 to 12 the chance to learn to play a musical instrument. Beginners are welcome, instruments are provided and children will receive both group instruction and individual attention from our qualified teachers. For more details, dates, and how to register, follow the link in the description or visit our website!

And if you are a musician yourself, looking to tune up your skills: July 7th to 11th , the Rusty Musicians Summer Camp at the Winspear Centre pairs ESO musicians and other pros with adult campers for five days of classes, rehearsals, and sectional instruction, all leading up to a performance on the Winspear Stage. You can follow the link in the show notes or Visit winspearcentre.com/rustymusicians to sign up. Don't wait – because some instrument categories have already filled up!

The Youth Orchestra of Northern Alberta will be Holding their 8th annual Road to Joy Fundraising concert. It will be livestreamed on the ESO Youtube page on June 8th at 7



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PM, so make sure you save the date. Everyone is welcome to join in the musical celebration and you can find more information about how you can support the program at winspearcentre.com.

This episode was produced by me, ESO double bassist Max Cardilli. If you want to connect with me about the podcast you can write to eso.offstage@winspearcentre.com. If you like our show, please consider leaving us a rating and review on Apple Podcasts.

[MUSIC - 25:36]

Ethan Filner (25:54): So, the Personnel Manager for an orchestra comes up to the podium at the beginning of the dress rehearsal for a concert and announces that the Conductor is sick and the Assistant conductor is not available. They are in dire straits, and they're looking for volunteers. Does anybody have any experience conducting? They're in a real pinch, they'll take whatever. The second chair violist meekly raises his hand, and the Personnel Manager sees him and waves him offstage, and ushers him off. He goes and he sort of studies the score, and he comes back out and does the dress rehearsal and it's kind of okay. Then the concert happens that night and it's a huge success, and there are a series of concerts following that. The Conductor is still sick and so the violist is still conducting - and this goes on for a week or two. Finally the conductor is back and the violist sits back down in his second chair spot and the Principal looks over at him and says, "where have you been all week?" [Laughter]

Max Cardilli (26:59): that's my favorite one [Laughter]

[MUSIC - 27:02]