



essay

The Inner Voice by Kenneth Freed

People who know me know that I kid around a lot. It could be dictated by my genes. Or maybe it's my way of coping with the innumerable jokes by professional musicians whose target is always, *always* the violists, of which I am one. But I speak the truth when I say that gifts of empathy and compassion lie at the heart of the violist's art.

We do not get to play the famous melodies people whistle as they leave the concert hall: we provide a symphony's less flashy "inner voices." We confront the challenges of coordinating the melody with the harmony. Should we drive the rhythm forward, or let the melody arc and soar—but lose momentum? Our pitch is often relative, as we calibrate intervallic relationships between the bass line and the melody, mindful of how sharp or flat others may be playing on any given evening.

Personally, I think that the constant coordination of pitch and rhythm makes violists, of necessity, philosophers and students of human behavior. We get high marks on social-emotional tests. We play well with others. Our role is to empathize and assist those around us. If a symphony concert were a soccer game, we violists would be making the passes, not the goals.

As a former violinist, I had a hard time adjusting to this background role when I switched instruments rather late in my career. But with time, I've gotten over myself a bit. I've come to value the importance of the support function—and not just in music. Often, the most vital work in our community gets done quietly, in what you might call a "violist" spirit.

Most of us in the Minnesota Orchestra play a supporting role with young people. Almost all of us teach lessons. Many of us coach with the local youth orchestras. Some teach at the college level, or with community music schools. I am often moved to see my colleagues help with all kinds of youth music organizations and projects. All of us grew up benefiting

from classical music's extraordinary tradition of mentorship. We all want very much to perpetuate it.

There is a tremendous unmet need, even here in Minnesota. Far too few schools are able to offer hands-on, sequential instrumental music instruction. The costs of taking private lessons and buying instruments are significant, and the time required to nurture the musical development of a child is more than many working parents can muster.

I am very proud to be part of an orchestra that does its utmost, reaching some 80,000 young people each year. I know that music study is vital to cognitive, social and emotional development. I know that harmony and listening between musicians is a template for life as it could be lived in our troubled world. I believe every child deserves the opportunity not just to hear, but to *make* music of his or her very own.

I am fortunate to play the "inner voice" in a great symphony orchestra. It's a daily reminder of what we must all be to one another. I like the double meaning of that phrase. Just as the viola part is subtle but crucial, so, too, is the quiet voice within each of us, softly but persistently reminding us of our obligation to be a positive presence in the world.

A violist with the Minnesota Orchestra since 1998, Kenneth Freed is also an assistant conductor with this Orchestra, music director of the Kenwood Symphony Orchestra and, starting next season, music director of the Mankato Symphony Orchestra. His activities as an educator include leading a consulting group, Learning Through Music, and working with students at the Ramsey Fine Arts Magnet School in Minneapolis. He holds a graduate degree in music and bachelor's degree in literature, both from Yale. He and his wife Gwen Freed, a member of the Orchestra's development staff, have three children who, like his colleagues onstage, remain cheerful and well-balanced, having learned to ignore his offbeat humor almost completely.