

Hey Presto for viola is a collection of three volumes (with volume 4 planned for 2024) intended to comprehensively guide the player from beginner through to around grade 7 (by volume 4). Rather than specify grade levels the volumes are Bronze, Silver and Gold (Platinum to follow). Already available for violin, many of the pieces can be played together with violinists.. Perhaps a good way to introduce the joy of ensemble playing?

There is a dedicated website where you can access accompaniments for all the exercises.. You just need the password! Happily, this is printed inside the books, so that's one less password to remember. CDs are available with the accompaniments too.. Perhaps for when the Internet collapses?!

So, rather unsurprisingly, the first thing I encountered when reviewing these volumes were the covers... And very appealing they are too. Colourful, with subtle music themes embedded and cartoon characters who will recur throughout the books... Clearly these volumes are aimed at the younger student, but I image in a rather appealing way (I can only imagine as I'm no longer a 'younger' student).

I was very pleased to see that volume one begins with a couple of pages which, as usual, introduce the various parts of the instrument but also tell you how to look after it... And that's BEFORE you start playing.

A lot of information is on each page, with the cartoon characters guiding the student. The eternal debate; how soon to use the bow, is resolved pretty quickly.. It is first used on page 8. Regular quizzes keep the student on their toes, and helps to check what's been absorbed.

Something I rather liked was the subtle use of colour coding for each string... However I wasn't convinced by 'Mrs Crochet' & 'Mr Minim'. I was also surprised when 3/4 time appeared with no comments or explanation (unless I missed something)... I've often found THAT to be a tricky transition (a silent fourth beat often added unintentionally by the student) but perhaps the reasoning here is that by not making a fuss it happens easily?

By the end of volume one, the student will be using their first and second fingers, familiar with the basic rhythms and bowings. Each volume finishes with a bigger quiz, a very helpful list of important terms and the all important certificate of completion.. Hey, who doesn't love a certificate?!

Volume 2 introduces fingers 3 & 4 and the low second finger... And we meet the 'quaver twins'... I'm not sure whether I love this idea or whether it will cause problems later.. My initial response is it's a good idea. Slurs are also introduced in this volume.

By the end of volume 2 the student should have all the required techniques for the early grades. Volume 3 introduces 3rd position and more complicated rhythms...semiquavers don't appear to have a name, unlike the quaver twins; perhaps the student has outgrown this idea? The pieces are considerably longer and more involved, taking the student to around grade 5 by the end...I was puzzled to see one isolated exercise in second position.

Now, all tutorial books are subjective, they will appeal to some, provide too much information per 'square foot' or not enough information. For me, possibly a bit too much per page early on. However, where these volumes really excel is with the backing tracks. Mostly, they come with two versions; with the solo part and just accompaniment. I haven't listened to them all, but they are fun, imaginative and make the early stages of learning much less 'lonely' for the student. In themselves, they are what makes these books particularly useful. The website also provides a link to a PDF with scales and arpeggios, using the string colour codes, which I think is particularly helpful in this context.. I rather like that the colour coding ISN'T used throughout the pieces, so the student learns to read music as it occurs naturally 'in the wild'!

Overall, I think this series is a useful addition to be seriously considered for the young student.

I was also sent 4 volumes of 'Top Ten' for viola.. Exercises taking the student from grade 2 to grade 8. Still with friendly drawings, not in colour, these exercises work well for the more committed student. I feel volumes 3 & 4 especially would help a serious player (and teacher!) really develop sound techniques. These are exercises worth coming back to over the years.

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