

Meet the Violist! Paul Groh

Interview by Greg McGarity



Paul Groh has been a regular contributor to the ANZVS Journal since 2007. A native of Mount Clemens, Michigan, near Detroit, he has had a varied musical career as an orchestral violist, country fiddler, bass guitarist, composer and arranger. He migrated to Australia in 2000 and is currently Principal Viola in both the Central Coast Symphony Orchestra in Gosford and Christ Church Camerata in Newcastle. His solo CD *Extreme Viola* was released in 2006. He has been a featured guest artist at viola conferences in Australia, New Zealand and Thailand as well as the 37th International Viola Congress in Cincinnati USA in 2010.

Was there a specific musical experience that made you wish to pursue music or was it just an inevitable cumulative osmotic effect?

A “cumulative osmotic effect”? You make it sound like mercury poisoning. Well, my mother played the piano, and both my parents sang in the church choir, so music lessons weren’t optional in my family. My brother and sister and I all took piano lessons with my mother from an early age, and then when we were old enough for the instrumental music program at school,

we were given the option of continuing with piano or switching to another instrument. All of us chose other instruments.

Did your brother and sister become musicians as well?

No, they both became engineers. I’m the least successful of the three, but I was the one my parents always boasted about.

How old were you when you started to play violin?

I’ve never played the violin. I wanted to, after hearing an older boy named John Prahll play “O Holy Night” on the violin in church one Christmas Eve. But the day my parents took me to the high school to pick out an instrument, they had violins but no violin study books. But they had a viola study book, and I was keen to get started, so I chose viola instead. Even if I had started on violin, I probably would have been encouraged to switch to viola eventually. I was a big kid.

How old were you then?

Nine. I got my first viola on the 9th of February, 1970, just a few weeks after my birthday.

You can remember the exact date?

Of course. I remember everything about it. It was a Monday, and it was snowing.

What advice would you give young musicians contemplating the switch from violin to viola?

Go do whatever you want. I don't care.

What was your first professional experience in music?

Church and theatre gigs when I was in high school. Then I passed an audition with the Saginaw Symphony Orchestra in central Michigan when I was seventeen. I was going to Wayne State University in Detroit and living at home in Mount Clemens, plus my girlfriend lived in Southfield, so I had to drive over two thousand miles every month for the next three years. Saginaw was a great experience. It didn't pay enough to live on, but they also gave me petrol money and put me up in a hotel whenever there was a rehearsal and concert on consecutive days. The other musicians were a lot more experienced than me, and I enjoyed hanging around with them. I got a kick out of having colleagues in their fifties and sixties and calling them by their first names.

You must have been very mature.

Are you kidding? I'm not even mature now.

You've also played country fiddle and rock and roll bass guitar. What effect did that have on your viola playing?

A very good one, actually. I started playing country fiddle when I was in high school. I played the fiddle tunes on the viola, I mean; as I said, I've never played the violin. My best friend had an uncle who was a fiddle champion in New York State, and I learned all the tunes from his uncle's tapes. It was kind of a novel experience, for a violist, to be the centre of attention in the band and play for people who are smiling and dancing and having fun. That never happens when you play Ernest Bloch. Before that I had been a somewhat diffident player. My teacher used to complain that I sounded like a ninety-year-old man, or like I was walking on cracked ice. But playing fiddle music for appreciative crowds, and sometimes very big ones – there were a couple of times where I performed in hockey stadiums for four thousand people – well, that did wonders for my self-confidence.

As for playing bass, well, you have to remember that there was a period of about six years where I didn't play the viola at all. I was in two different bands during that time, playing with two, three or four other guys, and with no music stands between us. So I learned to connect with the other musicians, especially the drummer, to an extent that I never had done before

in string quartets, for example. Rock and roll is very physical, very visceral. You feel the music with every cell in your body. When I came back to playing in an orchestra, I was a whole different player. Every time you learn a new style of music, you get better at the styles you already know.



Paul Groh (right) with blues singer Frank Lynch in 1991

Why did you come back to the viola?

Basically I was tired of playing long gigs late at night for obnoxious people who've been drinking. When I heard the Kentucky Symphony Orchestra was starting up, I worked up the audition materials and got in. I probably wouldn't have if it hadn't been a new orchestra with six open viola positions.

What are some of your favourite composers; works; styles; genres; ensembles?

I've always enjoyed playing contemporary music, or twentieth-century music, which was contemporary when I was young. I love Hindemith. I have more CDs of Hindemith than any other composer, over 80 at last count. Beethoven is a distant second. I love Baroque music, but like most people of my generation I have no training in period practice. I don't think I have the finesse to excel at Classical music, but lately I've enjoyed playing the Mozart Duos with the concertmaster of my orchestra. She's Ukrainian, so it's sort of like Natasha Fatale playing duets with Bullwinkle Moose.

How do you go about studying a difficult work you haven't played before?

The first thing is to work out the basic mechanics of the piece, the bowings and fingerings, just a little bit at a time, far under tempo. Of course you can change them later, but you need to remove as much guesswork as possible before you can begin practicing in earnest. This can take a long time. It took me a couple of hours to do the bowings and fingerings for Stephen Rudko's *Totentanz*, which is only a five-minute piece, and I had the composer right there to help me. When we did the Bartók Divertimento in Newcastle last year, it took me two weekends to work up the solo viola part. After that, it's just a matter of working up individual gestures, then phrases, then passages, and ultimately putting it all together. It's important to include all the dynamics and articulations right from the start. If you practice without dynamics with the intent of putting them in later, you're creating a bad habit, and you'll have to work that much harder to unlearn it. For the same reason I avoid listening to recordings of pieces that I'm learning. I'd rather develop my own interpretation than place myself at the mercy of someone else's. Most of the new pieces I do have never been recorded anyway.

How do you go about composing a new work for the viola?

Well, with any new piece I always work the whole thing out on the viola and then perform it before I write anything down. That's the only way to be sure that the experience of playing the piece is worthwhile. Otherwise you might wind up composing passages that are too difficult, too awkward or just not satisfying.

What hobbies or activities do you enjoy for relaxation or interest?

I've always been interested in nature study. I'm a lifelong birdwatcher, and since coming to Australia I've become a very keen scuba diver, having logged hundreds of dives around Australia and the Indo-Pacific. I'm also a huge animation fan. I have over a thousand DVDs at home, and nearly all of them are animated. My main interest is the early animation of the twenties and thirties, but I'm also nostalgic for the Saturday morning cartoons of the sixties, and I like a lot of current stuff as well.

What viola do you play? Can you describe what you like about it?

I play an early twentieth-century viola made by Charles Enel of Paris in 1906. It has an unusual shape, so it must have been either custom-made or an experimental model. It has a 17-inch body, but the ribs are only 1 ¼ inches wide, and it has huge f-holes like a cello. It's

very lightweight for such a large-bodied instrument. As for what I like about it, it's probably added years to my life. When it became available, I was out of debt for the first time in a long time, and I had just moved into a bigger apartment in a nice neighbourhood. I didn't want to go into debt again, but I knew that if I didn't buy this viola I'd always regret it. So, to make the payments on the loan, I gave up cable TV, snacks, alcohol, meat and cigarettes. The cigarettes were the last to go. I lost 35 pounds and paid off the loan a year early.

What are your goals from here?

Goals? That sounds like the sort of question you should ask a younger person. I'm not really very goal-oriented, as far as that goes. I've always been the kind of person who takes life as it comes. My father used to complain about me "drifting through life", but then I wound up drifting all the way to Australia, which is a bit of good fortune I never planned for.

How did you happen to come to Australia?

I married an Australian. We've been separated for years.

Is your wife a musician?

No. These mixed marriages rarely work out.

Are there any memorable stories or concert events that would make good reading?

Oh God, yes. Hundreds of them. You can't be a musician for as long as I have without having all kinds of crazy things happen all around you. The only stories I can think of offhand are all pretty embarrassing. I may be the only violist who ever fell asleep on stage during an orchestra concert. That was one time while the brass were playing an arrangement of the slow movement from the Rodrigo *Concierto de Aranjuez*. It was very restful, and I couldn't keep my eyes open. The next thing I knew, the audience was applauding, and I needed to brush my teeth. Nobody noticed, not even my stand partner. I have a lot of fond memories from all my years as a musician, and a lot of other memories that aren't so fond, but good or bad, I wouldn't trade the experience for anything.

