

Explore Lawrence Wheeler's Nine Caprices for Solo Viola



Double-stops, shifting, and 20th-century influences abound in this overlooked gem

By Leah Swann

STRING PLAYERS SPEND A LOT OF TIME practicing and honing technique. Doing so enables us to develop our abilities and progress to more challenging repertoire. And one of the main tools that we use to help us in this process is playing études—those challenging little pieces that, for many of us, are akin to eating broccoli when we were kids; our parents made us do it because it's good for us, but we never really wanted to.

Unfortunately, many étude books still taste of broccoli today and are more likely to make the player groan than grin. But what if the violists' repertoire had more études that reflected musical goals as well as technical ones? And what if those études were compelling musical works in their own right?

Well, violist Lawrence Wheeler has provided the answers in his *Nine Caprices for solo viola*. These pieces were created to give advanced viola players études that tackle a wide array of challenges—from intricate string crossings to right/left hand coordination, double-stops to mixed meter, and they all address intonation. What's more, the caprices have been inspired by passages from Reger, Hindemith, and Bartók, among others, and relate

specifically to challenges in central works of the viola repertoire.

THE ORIGINS OF THE WORK

Wheeler, who is the former principal violist of the Pittsburgh Symphony, attended Juilliard and remembers his developmental time while studying there. "It was an incredibly exciting time for me. Not only was I developing my knowledge of the viola and its repertoire, but I was also hearing and performing new and great music for the first time."

Some of the influences he discovered during this time can be heard in his music. "My Caprice No. 8, *Elegy*, is a virtual stream of consciousness. Allusions are made to Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 5*, Stravinsky's *Elegy*, Nielsen's *Clarinet Concerto*, Bloch's *Suite for Viola and Orchestra* and *Schelomo*, and the Ysaÿe *Solo Violin Sonatas*.

Measure 33 quotes the 'Dies Irae.' In the final eight bars, the 'Dies Irae' remains unresolved, with an ending similar to Barber's *Adagio for Strings*," he says. Wheeler's *Caprices* do more than explore the tonalities of the 20th century, though—in some ways they emulate compositions like Bach's *Inventions*, Chopin's *Études*, and Paganini's *Caprices*—all meaningful musical works that focus on honing specific aspects of technique.

TACKLING THE TECHNICAL CHALLENGES OF THE CAPRICE

Wheeler's *Caprice No. 8* (see music on pp. 42 and 43) provides a beautiful chance for personal expression while tackling difficult technical challenges like double-stops and shifting. The player should be careful not to allow these difficulties to dictate the musical line. A few particularly tricky spots include mm. 6–9, 10 (the shift), 32, and 39–46. Each of these sections should

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be approached in a similar manner, and the double-stops should first be simplified. Here are some tips to help you navigate and practice the double-stops in mm. 6-10 successfully:

1. Pay attention not only to left-hand position, but also to bow use. Doing this will help address the challenge.

2. It is important to practice in a tempo, even a very slow one, as soon as possible.

3. Practice each line (bottom and top) separately to hear the notes, and use the correct fingerings.

4. Next, isolate the double-stops themselves—play one double-stop per bow and listen carefully for intonation.

5. Use the correct fingerings and bowings for the double-stops while only sounding one line at a time.

6. Finally, the double-stops should be put together, and you should work on shifting between the notes. (Be careful to preserve the correct bowing when practicing these shifts.)

Measures 10-13 present another challenge for intonation: tricky double-stops and shifts while in higher positions. To tackle these spots, try these tips:

1. Initially, play the notes several times in first position to ensure you hear the pitches accurately in your ear—pay particularly close attention to the diminished fourths in measures 12 and 13.

2. Practice scales in fourth and fifth positions, listening carefully for intonation and quality of sound. (Both are readily compromised in high positions.)

3. Bring your bow slightly closer to the bridge and feel the contact of your third finger on the frog.

4. The shifts should be isolated. In m. 10, first practice the shift between the top notes of beats three and four, then the shift between the bottom notes. Next, play a double-stop on beat three and shift to a single note on beat four (try to finger both notes of the fourth beat, but alternate which one sounds). Then reverse this pattern—practice shifting from a single note to a double-stop—and then play as printed.

Wheeler's Caprice No. 8 provides a chance for both musical and technical exploration. A good étude's purpose is to make difficult music come naturally. While some of Wheeler's Caprices are extremely challenging, their musical excellence makes them well worth the work.



Caprice No. 8, Elegy, for solo viola

Composed by
Lawrence Wheeler

Wheeler's Nine Caprices are valuable works in the viola literature, melding musical depth and technical practice and harkening back to those of Bach and Paganini. The Eighth Caprice provides an opportunity to address the demanding technical aspects of double-stops while also challenging the player to keep technique from dictating musical ideas. Leading with the bow arm helps with tricky shifts and double-stops, and one should beware the tendency to use even less bow for difficult left-hand passages. For especially difficult transitions—like those in m. 7—practice the movements of each finger separately. Even without sound, one can practice moving the

fourth finger, in tempo, from the G string to the C string.

Next, use the correct bowing, and play the major sixth between F and D (beat two) and practice moving to the fourth that begins on beat three. Then add the triplet, and play all of beats two, three, and four. Once you have mastered this, add the first beat of the measure. Finally, and most importantly, listen to the music that you are playing!

—L.S.

Lento (♩ = c. 54)
con sordino

solo viola

(2) 3

f *mf*

(n.v.)

6 V

pp *p subito*

11 *mf* *pp*

Il sempre

ten.

16 *p* *ten.*

22 *V* *III sempre* 3 3 2 4 3 1 3 1 (2)

pp espressivo *poco crescendo - - - - -*

26 1 0 1 3 3 4 3 3 1 1 3 2 *b*

f *mp* *cresc. e rit.*

31 (1) 3 2 3 2 3 // *a tempo più mosso*
senza sord. 0 4

f *sfz*

35 *pesante* 0 1 3 0 1 *b* 1 *b* 1 *b* 1 *b* 3

f sempre *poco a poco stringendo al tempo*

39 2 3 1 3 3 *V* 0 0 2 2 0 3 3 3 3

Molto agitato *f sempre*

42 0 3 3 *V* 6 *allargando al tempo* *tr* *Tempo I*
f *p sub.*

48 *molto ritardando* *con sord.* *II sempre* 3 2 1 2 1 3 1 1 3 1

f *pp* *con gran tenerezza*

53 2 4 0 *V* *diminuendo al fin*

mp *p* *pp*