

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING SECOND VIOLIN PARTS

by David Winkler

For church orchestras which have string players, a typical violin section might include one or two excellent players, a handful of average-level players, and several weaker players. The weaker players may be allowed to play with the group because of the desperate need for more strings, or perhaps because they are younger players who need to gain experience. With this in mind, it's important for orchestrators of church music to create parts for the violins which can help them play with some measure of confidence and thus contribute something positive to the overall sound of the group.

As an editor who has been involved in preparing literally hundreds of orchestrations for publication, I've had a chance to think about this a lot. The following are some suggestions I would offer to help in this matter. On a second page, I have provided examples to illustrate the concepts. Most of the examples come straight out of pieces I have edited, where an arranger's original idea was modified slightly to better meet the needs of the church musician.

1. RANGE - It's always safe to keep the range of the second violins within "first position," which would limit the top notes to B (or C natural) above the staff. However, if the music is written in a string-friendly key such as C, G, or D major, the range limit could be extended to E above the staff (the octave point of the first string on the instrument). Please see Examples 1 and 2. If the line in question moves in and out of first position range notes, however, usually it makes more sense to double it throughout, as in Example 3. This is particularly important in a faster moving passage, such as is illustrated in Example 4.

2. KEY - A general rule is: the more accidentals there are in a key signature, the simpler the music should be (especially if there are a lot of flats). Remember also that the higher the notes go, the harder they are to play in tune.

3. RUNS - Those famous running scales that sound great on recordings - first off, don't expect your music to sound quite like that live unless you have a lot of professional players present and a good sound man to mic them and add lots of reverb. That said - if a "run" is really an important part of the music, your second violins may be able to get through it if (1) the range doesn't go too high, (2) the key isn't too tricky, and (3) it's just a simple scale and doesn't have a lot of awkward gaps or down and up motion.

If those conditions are not present, there are some other options which can help make life easier for our lowly second fiddles. Here's one option (see Ex. 5): Let the second violins hold on to a note while the firsts do the "run;" then have them land on the note an octave below where the firsts end their run. Typically the note held by the seconds will be the first note of the run, though a different note may be needed if the first note is a non-harmonic tone. Another option, particularly if the run is very long, is to have the seconds hold a note for part of the run, and then join in on it an octave lower (see Ex. 6).

Leonard Bernstein once said that the most difficult instrument in the orchestra to play is second violin. (Of course, what he meant is that it's harder on one's ego to serve in a secondary capacity). Let's make their job a little more pleasant by providing music which, as my friend Doug Smith often says, will help them "sound good and feel good" about what they are playing.

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1 ORIGINAL SUGGESTED

NOTE: OK to go this high (but no higher than E above the staff) if it's step-wise motion and not too fast.

2 ORIGINAL SUGGESTED

NOTE: Because of the key signature, Vln. 2 down an octave is preferred

3 ORIGINAL SUGGESTED

NOTE: Here we have Vln. 2 notes added to keep them in range, but it creates some awkward leaps. Also, the overall sound is weakened by alternating unisons and octaves.

4 ORIGINAL SUGGESTED

NOTE: awkward leap for Vln. 2 in a quick passage.

5 ORIGINAL SUGGESTED

NOTE: quick run for Vln. 2 in a difficult key. Let the firsts do the sweep and the seconds support with a single note.

6 ORIGINAL SUGGESTED

NOTE: longer run not going straight up the scale. Let Vln. 2 hold a note which supports the harmony and then join in the scale later.