HELP WANTED: Accomplished violist to perform in ensemble. Must demonstrate technical facility, impeccable rhythm, accurate intonation, tonal spectrum from pp to ff, command of wide variety of articulation styles, religious dedication to composer's instructions, sensitivity to differences in musical styles from baroque to avant-garde, and the ability to blend and play together with other musicians.

This hypothetical ad might well solicit applicants for a distinguished string quartet or chamber ensemble, but it is really an attempt to describe the desired qualities in a candidate for a viola vacancy in a major orchestra. One might argue that in reality, an orchestra of 100 musicians performing simultaneously may not always achieve the ideal of chamber music on a large scale, but the attainment of that goal depends chiefly upon the abilities of each individual player. Hence, the need persists for strenuous auditions in an effort to find the player who best satisfies our hypothetical job description. Although the outcome of any audition is subject to human judgment rather than computable proof, much of the mystery surrounding this qualitative analysis can be dismissed by defining the standards expected and identifying common audition pitfalls.

Paths to Accomplishment
The word "experienced" is conspicuously missing from the hypothetical job description in favor of "accomplished." While the former may be the term most frequently used by veteran orchestra players to describe desirable qualities in prospective colleagues, its most positive connotations lie more in the way a candidate presents the music than in the long list of positions in his dossier. Experience may indeed be the best teacher, but specific experiences and the ability to benefit from them vary greatly from person to person.

There are many paths to accomplishment. While inappropriate for listing in a resumé, valuable audition preparation is accumulated from attending live concerts, listening to recordings, studying scores of both large and small ensemble works, and from active mental participation in the ensemble problem solving at hand whenever making music with others. It is not necessary to have previously performed the requested symphonic
passage from a specific Beethoven symphony. It is necessary, however, to know intuitively how to play in the classic style, what sorts of bowing articulations are peculiar to Beethoven, and how this passage relates to the rest of the orchestra. This expertise is best developed in high quality chamber music performance, most specifically of string quartets and trios.

Previous performance of the requested repertoire, while not essential, does provide a head start when tackling an audition list. It is practical to collect a personal library of the most difficult passages you have encountered in the symphonic repertoire, supplemented with complete parts to the most commonly used audition works. These are quickly identified in the American Symphony Orchestra League's compilation entitled Facing the Maestro, by Akos, Burlingame, and Wellbaum, or by consulting the current audition lists of major orchestras. Diagnostic lessons with respected violists in major orchestras may be helpful in gaining the perspective of someone intimately involved with the audition process. But, there are few if any "secrets," and you should not be surprised if such a lesson focuses on the basics of rhythm, intonation, and articulation.

Screening Applicants
The first stage of a professional orchestra audition involves sending a one-page resumé, stating your experience playing in professional orchestras as full time member or substitute, and/or participation in summer festival orchestras. Other important information to include falls into the categories of education, teachers, chamber music experience, and competition prizes. Applicants who do not appear to have significant professional experience are often requested to send a recording of specific solo and orchestral excerpts to be evaluated by the audition committee before a live audition will be granted.

The industry standard format is CD, and it is wise to invest in a good recording system as early in your career as possible. Assuming that the equipment is of good quality for home use, poor recording quality is more likely to result from incorrect placement of the microphone and inappropriate acoustics than from inferior equipment. Making representative recordings improves with practice and experimentation, and if you are accustomed to practicing regularly with a recording device, each new critical assessment brings about dramatic progress. An audition CD presents a performer's abilities in perhaps as little as six minutes of music, and it is of the utmost importance to ensure that it represents the most proficient playing you can produce, without editing, of course. Discernment of tone color subtleties may not be realistic from the recording, but the CD round does enable the committee to eliminate candidates anonymously on the basis of rhythm, intonation, and, to a certain extent, style. Recorded sound can prove particularly unflattering to timbre in string playing, and it is in this area that microphone placement, sound level, and acoustical matters are most crucial. These variables can have a peculiar effect on the clarity of tone, vibrato, and articulation. You should work carefully when recording to avoid an unrealistically vague or brutal impression in extremes of the dynamic spectrum of your playing.
Importance of Tempo
In all phases of the audition process, it is essential to be certain of the appropriate tempo for the orchestral passage and to maintain that tempo for the entire passage, unless a change is indicated in the music. During preparation it is helpful to consult various recordings to get an idea of the possible range of tempi for a given passage, and if a recording by the conductor of the respective orchestra can be found, so much the better. Tempo extremes at an audition indicate a candidate's unfamiliarity with the excerpt in its context, i.e., an “inexperienced” player. Any illogical fluctuation within the chosen tempo is dismissed simply as erratic rhythm, a deadly flaw in a prospective member of any ensemble. A surprisingly common fault is the imprecise measurement of longer notes and rests, revealing an absence of attention to the underlying subdivision of the beat. Meticulous preparation with the metronome and recording device will eliminate these problems.

Intonation
Defining good or bad intonation is not a matter of tabulating mishaps; it is an impression of the candidate's general sense of pitch, indicated as much by the kinds of intonation flaws as the quantity. If certain intervals are consistently out of tune, or if the fourth finger is always flat in first position, no amount of facility will mask the general impression of faulty intonation. Unfocused vibrato can also obscure pitch, and here again recorded practice is helpful in pinpointing the problem. Vibrato in all of its variations should be used as an essential expressive technique, with attention to relating its intensity and continuity to the musical context.

Articulation
The ability to vary articulation is probably the most obvious component in evaluating a player's sense of musical style. This expertise is best cultivated by the violist in string chamber ensemble settings in which the group is small enough to be able to hear clearly the effect of a particular bowing, attack, or release. The viola solo repertoire offers few lengthy examples of the ponderous articulation required in ensemble works of Brahms or many opportunities to practice meeting the \textit{fp} and \textit{subito p} demands of Beethoven. The most critical articulation problem for violists appears to be spiccato in all its permutations, and if one has not encountered any of the classical solo sonatas or played a great deal of chamber music by Mozart, Schubert, Mendelssohn or Beethoven, the mere mention of this bowing may cause panic. Passages involving spiccato are guaranteed to appear on audition lists, and daily practice of this bowing in its many variations can produce a valuable asset. There are instances in which the interpretation by different orchestras varies as to whether a particular passage is played on or off the string. This is one area in which a diagnostic lesson with a violist of a professional orchestra can be helpful.

Musical Context
The audition repertoire is chosen with an ear toward all of those qualities in the hypothetical job description. The concerto, sonata and solo works give a general impression of the candidate's mastery of his instrument as well as his musicianship in a
repertoire for which the viola is the predominant voice. This repertoire is thoroughly familiar to most applicants, and it is fair to say that many do not bring the same quality of presentation to the orchestral excerpts. This is hardly surprising, because we all know that these passages were never meant to be performed by themselves away from the rest of the orchestra, and many of the best viola audition passages are not even melodic lines! This may well be the most crucial challenge to overcome in audition preparation—presenting the passage in musical context by conveying to the listener not only the appropriate tempo, precise rhythm, and accurate notes, but the shape of the phrase, tonal color within the stated dynamic level, awareness of rhythm and harmonic tension, attention to articulation details of attack and release of notes, and so forth. All of these concerns would naturally enter into the preparation of chamber and solo repertoire, but are often overlooked when the rest of the orchestra is absent.

Auditions are just as likely to be lost for neglect of these matters as for messy passagework or, said in a more positive light, a player is more likely to perform with distinction the difficult passagework if he is conscious of its musical context. The idea is to present the orchestral passage with the same attention to detail and musical involvement as if it were a solo sonata, at the same time being aware of the need for it to fit into the whole. It can be as simple as feeling a silent upbeat in the character of the music which follows, thereby ensuring a definite and rhythmic start to any number of passages in Don Juan, for example, or an extremely hushed but articulate opening of the Eroica Scherzo. And, the underlying harmonic tension of Brahms demands continuous crescendo and sustaining of line in lyric passages, such as found in the last movement of the Fourth Symphony. Examples abound, and once one adds focusing on musical context to the basic problems at hand, not only does practicing orchestral excerpts become more interesting, but performing them at an audition seems less intimidating and unnatural.

The standards and techniques brought to the highest quality solo, chamber, and orchestral performance are by no means mutually exclusive. Today's most successful violists are actively involved in playing and teaching vast amounts of repertoire from all these areas. We cannot possibly learn every note of all repertoire while in school, but by devoting ourselves to developing a mastery of the instrument and a general intuitive understanding of music, we can better prepare for a multifaceted career assuming any of the viola's roles.