

**Featuring violist Sheila Browne  
Rowan University Artist in Residence**

**Saturday, February 1, 2025  
1:30-6:30pm | Wilson Hall, Rowan University**

**Strings players and teachers, join ASTA/NJ  
and Rowan University for Viola Day at Rowan!**

Join us for seminars, a masterclass, and a concert!

- Viola Reading Session
- Viola Masterclass with Sheila Browne
- Writing and Arranging for Viola with Simone Spagnolo
- Concert featuring Sheila Browne and guests, including a U.S. Premiere of *La Luna nel Pozzo for Ten Violas* by Simone Spagnolo



Scan to register, or contact  
ASTA/NJ for more information.  
[njastachapter@gmail.com](mailto:njastachapter@gmail.com)



**Leave Space, Make It Move, Say it Together. On Writing and Arranging for Viola.**  
Viola Day, Rowan University, New Jersey US  
1st February 2025

Dr. Simone Spagnolo, London College of Music, University of West London  
[ seminar-paper ]

Good evening, and thanks for having invited me to give this short seminar. I am really delighted to be part of *Viola Day*, and to have the opportunity to share some ideas and music with you. My seminar, as you know, will focus on writing and arranging for the viola. This is an absolutely extraordinary instrument, of immense possibilities, sounds, colours, applications. It is an enormous topic, and we only have about forty minutes. So, I have filtered a list of points and ideas that I thought could be of interest, and that could possibly address a diverse audience. Some of the things I will mention may be a bit basic, some other perhaps a bit more complex, but, overall, I hope there something for everyone to take away.

As a sort of unsolicited disclaimer, I shall clarify that I do not play the viola myself. I do not play any string instrument, in fact. And this element is important: not because it is a way to say ‘please beware of the accuracy of what I will talk about’, but because it allows me to pose a

reflection, immediately, on the fact that it is absolute necessity, for a composer, to know the mechanics of the instruments he is writing for, regardless of whether he is able to play them or not. Composers and arrangers have to form some sort of mental construct to make sense of how musical instruments work, how they are played, and how they sound, so to manage them effectively, and in line with whatever the context might be. The reason why I am mentioning this, is that such an instrumental, idiomatic knowledge is an integral part of composing and arranging: composing a nice tune is not enough. We also – and perhaps most importantly – need to know if that tune fits well under the player’s fingers and matches the possibilities of the instrument. In this sense composing *is* orchestrating and arranging, and vice versa.

Though let’s focus on the viola. Here is a summary of what I have have planned to address: I will try to illustrate the main characteristics of the instrument, and say something about ‘locating’ it on the score; I will then mention something about generating musical material; and, eventually, I will list some principles of writing and arranging – principles that perhaps are not universal (in that composing and arranging principles tend to be slightly different according to genres and styles), but principles that are nevertheless useful for most applications.

I will also show some practical examples, which I have drawn from two pieces of mine: the first is called *Low Strings Drama*, a musical drama in eleven variations for viola and cello duo. You can easily find the whole album on Spotify, Apple Music, and other music platforms. The score is available through Universal Edition<sup>1</sup>. The second piece, on the contrary, is titled *La Luna nel Pozzo* – translating from the Italian as *The Moon in the Well*. This is a composition for ten violas that I wrote about fifteen years ago, and that has been performed a few times in Europe. It is not currently published, but – as you know – it is receiving its US premier today as part of *Viola Day*, so you should be able to see it live, in action, after my talk.<sup>2</sup>

There is something about the viola that everyone – apart from violists – find annoying, and that is the clef. Viola scores are written in alto clef, as you can see in the top line of Figure 1. When reaching higher notes, they go in treble clef, but they mainly read in alto clef.

Of course, the alto clef perfectly suits the range of the viola, as it allows most of the notes to sit on the stave, avoiding annoying ledger lines. Though the alto clef, for those who are not

---

<sup>1</sup> Spagnolo, S. *Low Strings Drama*, Universal Edition, UES 105 056-000 Partitur (2023)

<sup>2</sup> A recording of *La Luna nel Pozzo* can be found on YouTube:  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vO2qqTXhU4M>>

familiar with it, can be misleading, in the sense that it does not seem to immediately show in which range the viola is playing. Most of the time it is moving around middle C – between the octave below and the octave above middle C – but the eye that is not used to deal with the alto clef does not manage to properly see that movement.

Figure 1: Extract from *Raw Material*, in *Low Strings Drama*, bars 13-17

The image shows a musical score for a Viola and a Grand Staff (piano). The Viola part is written in alto clef (C-clef on the third line) and the Grand Staff (piano) is written in treble and bass clefs. The score is for bars 13-17 of 'Low Strings Drama I. Raw Material'. The Viola part starts with a dynamic marking of *mp*, followed by *mf*, *mp*, *mf*, *mp*, *quasi f*, *p*, *poco cresc.*, and *mf*. The Grand Staff (piano) part is transcribed from the Viola part, showing the same notes and dynamics in a more familiar clef system. The score includes performance instructions such as 'con tutto l'arco' and 'poco cresc.'. The time signature changes from 8/4 to 4/4 and back to 8/4.

The viola line in Figure 1 is transcribed – identically – on a grand staff, just below, where most of us can read it in the more familiar treble and bass clefs. The range and location seem to have changed. The same line is now sitting in the middle of the piano, across the treble and bass areas. This is exactly the alto range, and it is exactly that area that we should approach when writing for the viola. This is an area that we want to visualise in both ways: in alto clef and on a grand staff (the same would apply to all instruments, as for instance the other string instruments shown in Figure 2). Though, the visualisation that I would encourage you to consider, actually, is threefold.

Ideally, as composers/arrangers, we want to locate and memorise the viola's idiomatic range in three ways: the first is how the player sees it on the score, in alto clef; the second is how the arranger sees it on a grand staff, in relation to other instruments and lines; and the third is how the music sits on the piano – bearing in mind that most arrangers operate at the piano, and that the keyboard itself offer and excellent visual reference on which we can locate instruments' ranges.

In other words, I encourage you to think of instrumental writing in a three-dimensional way, simultaneously considering the perspective of individual instruments, the totality of the whole score, and the portions of the keyboard that can offer a visual representation of your instruments' registers.

Figure 2: Violin, viola and violoncello ranges / open strings in their main clefs and on a grand staff.

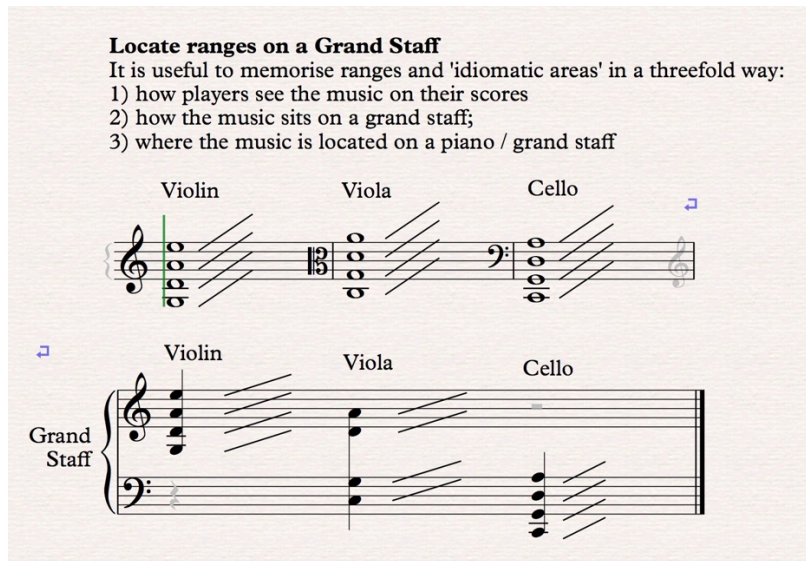
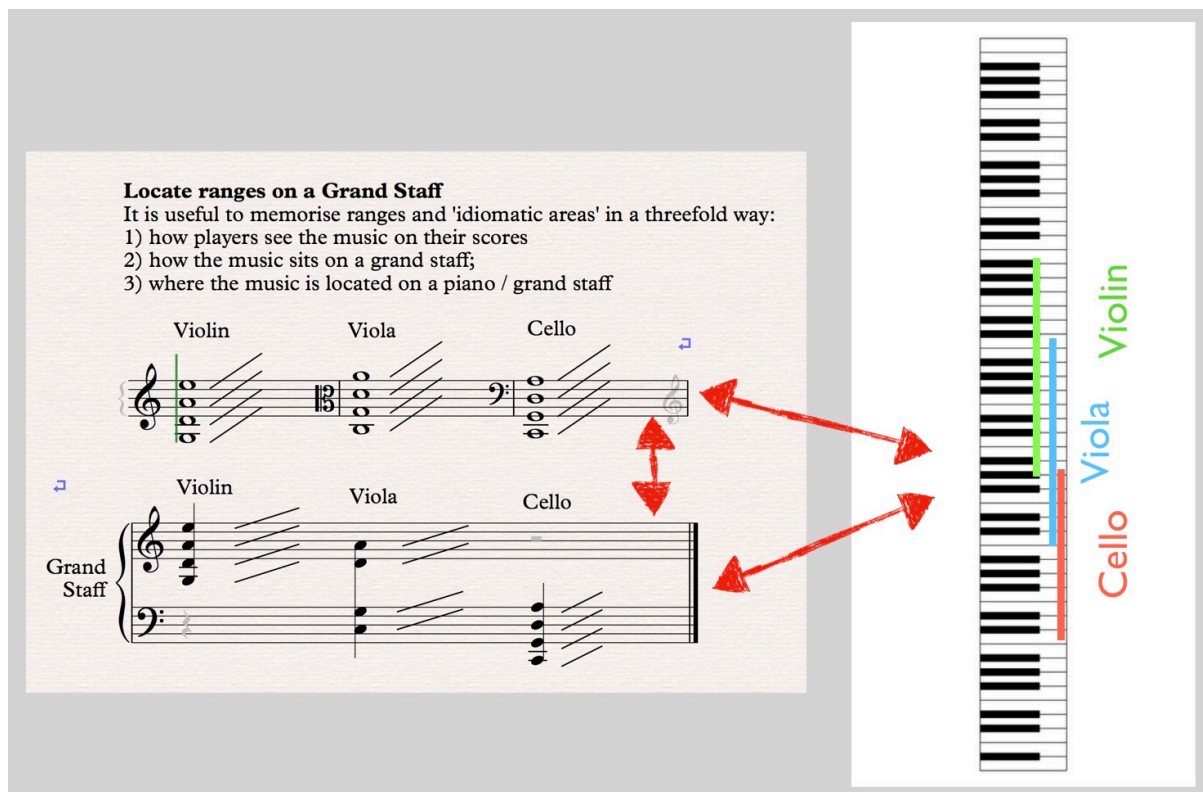


Figure 3: Threefold visualisation.

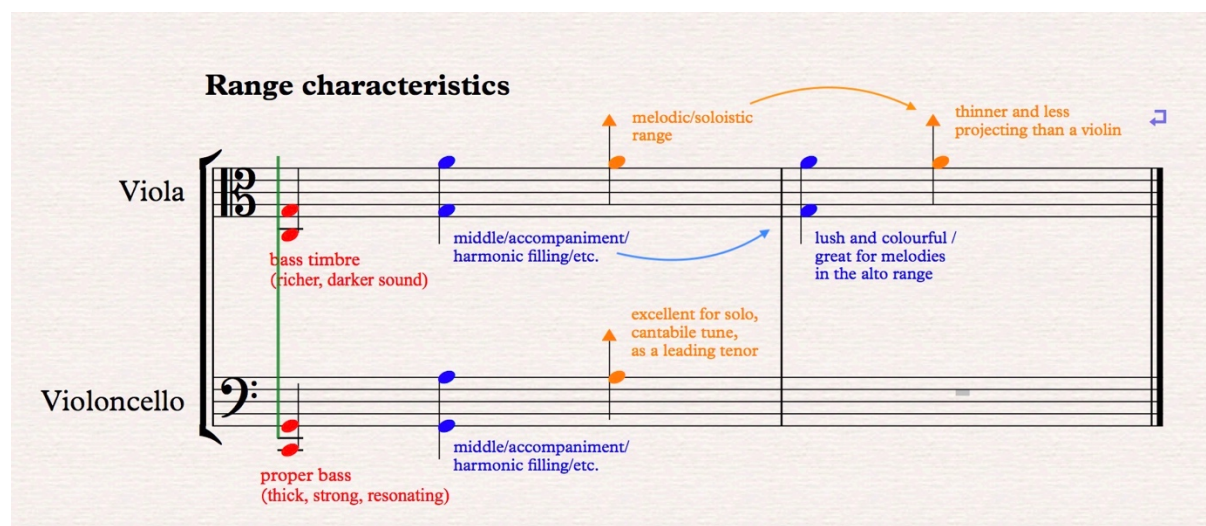


Sounds, colours and timbral inflections change in all instruments, according to their internal registers, and I have tried to capture, in Figure 4, the main timbral characteristic of the viola (I have also included the cello, but let us mainly focus on the viola,

In Figure 4, I have identified three areas: at the bottom, in red, the instrument offers a very rich, dark sound. This corresponds to the bottom C string, which is the thickest string, and it allows a warm, opulent sound. The blue area, which corresponds to more or less the two middle

strings, G and D, offers a more lush, mellow, median sound; a sound that is absolutely great for melodies sitting in the alto range. This is probably that range in which the viola expresses its peculiarities at its best. However, this central blue area, when the viola is part of an ensemble, is also very often used to deliver accompaniments and general harmonic filling. The same applies to the cello: both instruments, in their central area, offer an optimal accompaniment, filling support to violin melodies taking place above. Finally, the orange area, which predominantly runs along the top A string, is the more melodic, soloistic range. It has to be noted, however, that this top range of the viola – which we can imagine as the soprano register of the instrument – is somehow thinner, less brilliant, less projecting, than that of a violin. Therefore, prominent melodies in this area are traditionally assigned to the violins. A proper, substantial tune, on the viola, tends to go in the blue area, in the alto register.

Figure 4: Range characteristics.



These are generic descriptions, of course: sounds and instrumental colours can have very different shades and nuances depending on different contexts.

And it on this note that I would like to invite you to not necessarily think about sounds and instrumental colours when writing a tune. Instead, I would encourage you to think about roles and functions: rather than thinking about warm, thin, rich or mellow sounds, try to keep an eye on what function your line is meant to have.

Instrumental areas and timbral qualities, in fact, also correspond to musical roles: if your viola, for example, is meant to play the bass line of a certain passage, you want to ideally place it across the red and bottom-blue area. This is where the darker sound of the instrument will make your line sounds as a bass line. Or, if your viola has to play a prominent, trenchant, intense melody, which has the function of delivering a strong main line, and you place it in a high spot

of the orange area, it is likely to lose energy and projection. Instead, it would be much more effective to place it in the top part of the blue range – across the blue and bottom-orange range. In other words, there is strong correlation between registers, sounds and roles, and I invite you to consider this triangular relationship, as it can make you design more effective music.

One more point before we listen to some examples, and this is about generating material. I am of the opinion that strong musical designs are those in which the musical material is inspired by, and emerges from the natural, idiomatic possibilities of the instrument(s). Take the example in Figure 5: this is the beginning of the sixth movement of *Low String Drama*. The piece starts with a cello arpeggio moving across a quadruple stop. There are two chords being played, one per bar. Though, if we look at the notes that compose the two chords, it is difficult to give them a name. I have tried to label them myself, in red: the first is a G minor second inversion, with D at the bass; the second a sort of E flat major, with the major 7th and augmented 11<sup>th</sup>, but without the 5th. Particularly this latter, it is a group of notes, really, more than a nameable chord.

Figure 5: Extract from *Sinister Memory*, in *Low Strings Drama*, bars 1-2

## VI. Sinister Memory

Simone Spagnolo

**Malinconico, un po' sinistro** ♩ = 72 (♩ = 36)

Viola

Violoncello

**G min / D**  
poco sul pont.

**Eb 7maj 11#**

*mp resonating*

My point is that these two chords did not come from a purely musical or harmonic idea, or from me improvising at the piano (which is another, but very different way of generating material). They instead came from an idiomatic movement silently suggested by the instrument; from the shape of the instrument itself.

The idea was to allow the two middle strings to resonate as open strings (see the blue boxes in Figure 5), while the bottom and top notes would instead move (see the purple arrows). I therefore tried to design a chord progression in which the two central notes (G and D) would

be held, while the bass line and top melodies would move, in counterpoint, through fingered notes.

In this way I gained a triple benefit: the instrument would resonate greatly, the actual playing for the musician is easy and idiomatic, and the musical material – by which I mean, in this case, the harmonic content – is rich, unusual, and interesting to the ear.

This is something I often tell my students: you are more likely to come up with interesting, and not banal musical material if you allow it to emerge from what the instrument can offer.

It is another threefold relationship, if you like: musical material, physiognomy of the instrument, and physicality of the playing: all three converge towards one entity.

Let me play you two examples: the first is the fourth movements from *Low Strings Drama*, titled *Inevitable Chase*, and the second is *Sinister Memory*, which is the movement featuring the two unusual chords I just talked about.

In Figure 6 you can see the first four bars of *Inevitable Chase*. There is a total of three lines. Look at them as both musical roles and instrumental colours. Starting from the bottom: the lowest note of the cello plays the bass line, which is a sort of pedal note on G; this is located in that bottom red area I mentioned earlier. Above this, still played by the cello, there is an accompaniment, a sort of repeating riff, which also has the function of being a harmonic filling; this is placed in the central blue area of the cello. Finally, on top, the main melody is assigned to the viola, explicitly positioned in its alto-tenor area; in that lush, intense blue area we discussed earlier. Here is a recording of the piece.<sup>3</sup>

Moving to the second example, *Sinister Memory*, you have already seen the first two bars. In Figure 7 you can find bars 5 to 8, when the viola outlines the beginning of the main melody after the initial cello arpeggios. We have already talked about the harmonic-idiomatic nature of the cello chords, but let us see them as musical roles now. The bass line slowly moving between bottom D and Eb is positioned in the low red area, and the rest of the arpeggio, which has the function of accompaniment and harmonic filling, is comfortably spread across the central blue area. Finally, the main melody, on top, played by the viola, is located in that optimal register of the instrument where the viola can operate soloistically, lyrically, in an agile first position. This format is kept from more or less the whole piece, which sounds like this.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Spagnolo, S. *Inevitable Chase*, in *Low Stringa Drama*, Intervox Music Production, 2023. Available on Spotify <<https://open.spotify.com/track/25Df5YKz6Ri8Hib9a1ezFe?si=e7c2724f39e74658>>

<sup>4</sup> Spagnolo, S. *Sinister Memory*, in *Low Stringa Drama*, Intervox Music Production, 2023. Available on Spotify <<https://open.spotify.com/track/5NVvhzqQ4iCNseNduZeUaq?si=cb22cf3c540941bf>>

Figure 6: Extract from *Inevitable Chase*, in *Low Strings Drama*, bars 1-4

### IV. Inevitable Chase

Simone Spagnolo

**Well syncopated, like a thriller chase** ♩ = 72

intenso, con tutto l'arco

The score for Figure 6 consists of four staves: Viola, Violoncello, Vla., and Vc. The time signature is 3/4. The Viola part has a few notes in the second measure, with an annotation 'melody in the tenor/alto range' pointing to them. The Violoncello part has a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes, with an annotation 'accompaniment saltato, quasi marcato, mostly al tallone, scratching the strings in a ringing, noisy way' pointing to it. The Vc. part has a similar rhythmic accompaniment, with an annotation 'bass line' pointing to it. The Vla. part has a few notes in the second measure, with an annotation 'mf giusto' pointing to it. The overall dynamics are 'quasi f' and 'mf giusto'. The tempo is marked '♩ = 72' and the performance instruction is 'intenso, con tutto l'arco'.

Figure 7: Extract from *Sinister Memory*, in *Low Strings Drama*, bars 5-8

The score for Figure 7 consists of two systems, each with Vla. and Vc. staves. The time signature is 3/4. The first system starts at bar 5. The Vla. part has a melodic line with an annotation 'molto sul pont.' and 'viola's optimal melodic area' pointing to it. The Vc. part has a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes with triplets, with an annotation 'accompaniment/harmonic filling' pointing to it. The second system starts at bar 7. The Vla. part has a melodic line with an annotation 'stranamente lirico' pointing to it. The Vc. part has a similar rhythmic accompaniment with triplets, with an annotation 'poco' pointing to it. The overall dynamics are 'mp' and 'mf'. The performance instruction is 'molto sul pont.'.

These two examples show some principles, formats and ideas that are very safe and scholastic, in the sense that, if you follow these rules and combinations you can put together a composition, or arrangement, that is effective, sound and linear.

But I do not wish to only advocate for safe and traditional options. On the contrary, I also encourage you to be creative and adventurous with your sounds and colours.



In fact, those principles I have mentioned – particularly a consideration for roles and functions, and the idea of letting the instruments suggest their own musical material – are principles that I invite you to combine with creative ideas, unusual textures, adventurous interlockings.

In Figure 8 you can see an extract from another movement of *Low Strings Drama*, titled *Last Waltz*. Here the cello is providing both bass line and main melody: the bass line is played with low pizzicato notes, and the main melody with long, arco, crescendo isolated notes placed at the higher register. The viola, on the contrary, plays the accompaniment, with pizzicato arpeggios, like a guitar, and this unusual accompaniment also functions as a harmonic filling. I hope you can see, in this example, the junction between those scholastic principles I mentioned earlier and a search for more adventurous sounds. The important point, here, is that those scholastic principles give solidity and structure, while the more adventurous sounds provide aesthetic form; and music always is a balance between these two elements.

Here is a recording of this movement – *Last Waltz*. I will only play the beginning of the piece.<sup>5</sup>

Figure 8: Extract from *Last Waltz*, in *Low Strings Drama*, bars 1-8

## IX. Last Waltz

Simone Spagnolo

**Un po' enigmatico, e un po' esotico** ♩ = 112 circa

Viola

Violoncello

Vla.

Vc.

pizz., come una chitarra un po' metallico

arpegg. pizz. like a guitar

sim. arpegg. sempre

*mf* ben articolato

pizz.

arco

isolated, apparently fragmented melody

pizz.

arco

Bass line pizz.

*mp*

*n* < *mf*

*mp*

*n* < *mf*

5

arco

(sim.) pizz.

arco sim.

(sim.)

*n* < *mf*

*mp*

*n* < *mf*

<sup>5</sup> Spagnolo, S. *Last Waltz*, in *Low Stringa Drama*, Intervox Music Production, 2023. Available on Spotify <<https://open.spotify.com/track/5thysuiMSgX3ujTWuuLA9Z?si=b14a9c55435841e8>>

I will now move on to some more ‘arranging matters’ that are not about individual instruments anymore, but about ensemble combinations. I have selected five principles in particular, which I find useful to list through the following catchphrases: ‘leave space’, ‘make it move’, ‘say it together’, ‘juxtapose colours’, and ‘think of instruments in the space’.

The examples I will show are all drawn from my composition for ten-violas, *La Luna nel Pozzo*.

Let us go in order: ‘leave space’. It’s always important to leave some space in between your musical lines, musical roles, between musical objects in general. If you have several lines in counterpoint, or several musical roles in counterpoint – for instance a melody and an accompaniment, or an ostinato against a bass line – you want to avoid them happening in the same register, and on top of each other. Musical objects are strong and meaningful when they have a clear identity. If a musical object clashes with another, it weakens its identity. Musical lines that are superimposed tend to suffocate each other and confuse each other’s identity. It is like two persons speaking at the same time: you cannot understand what they are saying. It is always good practice to leave a bit of space.

Figure 9: Extract from *La Luna nel Pozzo*, bars 33-24

The image shows a musical score for ten violas, labeled Vla. I through Vla. X. The score is divided into three measures. A green box highlights the first measure of each staff, with the text 'Leave space' written above it. The first measure of each staff contains a single note with a dynamic marking of *pppp* and the instruction 'sul pont.'. The second measure is mostly empty, with some notes in Vla. IV and Vla. VII. The third measure contains notes for all ten violas, with dynamic markings of *mp*. The score includes various musical notations such as clefs, notes, rests, and fingerings (6).

Figure 10: Transcription on grand staff of *La Luna nel Pozzo*, bars 33-24

**Leave space: think of musical objects in counterpoint**  
*La Luna nel Pozzo: Bar 33*

The image shows a grand staff with three staves. The top staff is labeled 'harmonics' and contains a series of notes. The middle staff is labeled 'middle arpeggio' and contains a series of notes with a '6' above each, indicating a sextuplet. The bottom staff is labeled 'bottom strings' and contains a series of notes. The notation is in a key with one flat and a common time signature.

In Figure 9 the ten violas are all playing at the same time, but there are only three main musical objects going on, which I have transcribed on Figure 10's grand staff: four violas play the bottom chord written on the bass clef staff; another four violas – playing harmonics – outline the other thick chord three octaves up, like an echo of overtones; and two violas in the middle articulate those sextuplet arpeggios. There are three distinct musical objects, distributed in three different registers. Each operates in its own space. Very simple, but hopefully straightforward example.

The overall range of the ensemble is huge, I know, but this is because I have ten violas to manage. Usually, in a composition, or arrangement, we have three or four lines in counterpoint, not ten.

The second principle I would like to mention regards horizontal organization. It is not about the vertical distribution instruments, but about the horizontal arrangement of a musical line. I have called it 'make it move', and it is a pretty straightforward idea: try to design your melody so that it can be shared between players. Do not allocate your main melodies to just one instrument, or just one voice. Try to make them move between several players.

In Figure 11 you can see another passage of *La Luna nel Pozzo*, in which the main melody is designed as a sharable object that travels between five players. The orange boxes highlight the moments in which the main tune moves between different violas.

In Figure 12 you can see the overall melody reduced on one staff: the different colours show the segmentation of the overall tune, and above them you can see which viola plays which segment. It is a melody that moves very fluidly across a rather wide range, but it also is a melody that is originally designed to be segmented in regular patterns.

There are three main benefits that arise from this practice: firstly, your melody sounds constantly fresh; secondly, all players feel encouraged to contribute to a main line, as protagonists; and thirdly, your subject becomes part of a musical discourse. You see: it is not just a musical statement, but a conversation.

However, there is a risk to be avoided: it is important to design your melody so that it can be shared in the first place, otherwise it may just feel fragmented; and fragmented tunes are not strong tunes. In this sense, it really is about ‘making it move’, rather than ‘breaking it up’ – a subtle but crucial difference.

Figure 11: Extract from *La Luna nel Pozzo*, bars 18-23

The image displays a musical score for ten violins (Vla. I to Vla. X) from the piece *La Luna nel Pozzo*, covering bars 18 to 23. The score is written in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The time signature is 3/8. The notation includes various dynamics such as *pp* (pianissimo), *p* (piano), *mp* (mezzo-piano), and *mf* (mezzo-forte). Articulation marks like *pizz.* (pizzicato) and *arco* (arco) are present. Phrasing slurs and accents are used throughout. Orange boxes highlight specific melodic lines in Vla. II, Vla. IV, Vla. V, Vla. VI, and Vla. X, with arrows indicating their movement across the staves. The score is divided into two systems, with the first system ending at bar 20 and the second system starting at bar 21.

Figure 12: Assignment of main line of *La Luna nel Pozzo*, bars 18-23


**Make it move:**  
**allow your melodies to be shared between instruments: it makes music move in the space,**  
**it keeps everyone busy with melodic material, and it creates musical discourse.**  
*La Luna nel Pozzo*: Bars 17-23

The ‘say it together’ principle is one of my favourites: it is a very effective way to put some musical material forward and give it substance. The idea is simple, and it is contained in the passage framed within the blue box in Figure 13. Though it might be easier to visualise it through the reduction in Figure 14.

Figure 13: Extract from *La Luna nel Pozzo*, bars 12-13

Figure 14: Reduction of *La Luna nel Pozzo*, bars 12-13

**Say it together:  
when you have something important to say,  
don't say it loud. Say it together, in harmony.**  
*La Luna nel Pozzo*: Bars 12-13



Here, in Figure 14, you can see I have isolated the main melody of this passage. It is the one in the first two bars, on the left. This is an important melody for my piece: it has both melodic and structural importance, and it also is a pretty, lyrical, somehow charismatic short line. I guess it is the typical musical gesture that an arranger would want to emphasise in a score.

My advice, here, is not to make it louder or have several instruments doubling it in unison. Instead, I suggest you harmonise it, vertically, enabling a group of instruments to ‘say the same thing in slightly different ways’. My suggestion is to make several instruments contribute *chorally* towards the decoration of one musical gesture: this will be a decoration that allows the main musical phrase to emerge stronger, richer, above other lines. In the two bars on the right-hand side you can see the ‘choral’ arrangement I am referring to: this is how the six violas ‘say together’ the same thing.

The main benefit of this practice is that the line in question has acquired harmonic substance: each note has a harmonic weight, and it is this weight that makes the overall phrase more important. Yet, there is also something about method: if you emphasise a melody through volume or unisons – for example, having six violas playing the same phrase fortissimo – that would equate to a sort of loud shout; if, instead, your six violas outline your melody in harmony, articulating each note as a moving chord progression, then the effect is that of a chorale, of a community that expresses a common thought. The latter is a much more elegant application, I think. But I will leave it with you, because these aesthetic observations depend on contexts, and you may need your instruments to actually shout in your music (even if, perhaps, they could shout as a choir).

Moving on, my next point is about ‘juxtaposing colours’. It may seem a bit obvious, but I do not see arrangers and composition students practicing it enough. And the viola, in particular, has a very rich palette of colours to offer.

The example you can see in Figure 15 is drawn from the end of my ten-violas piece. It is a short moment of transition before the finale, and it is a rather good example showing several colours happening simultaneously: some violas play long, sustained harmonics; some others play off-beat pizzicatos; others play pizzicato arpeggios, like a guitar; the two violas in the middle play sextuplet arpeggios with ‘normal arco’. They are all violas, but it is as if they articulate an overall orchestral texture.

Figure 15: Extract from of *La Luna nel Pozzo*, bars 12-13

**Juxtapose colours**

The image shows a musical score for ten violas, divided into two systems of five staves each. The score is annotated with purple arrows and text labels pointing to specific musical features. The first system (bars 12-13) includes:   
- Top two staves: Sustained harmonics, labeled 'harmonics'.   
- Third staff: Pizzicato notes, labeled 'pizz.' and 'mp delicato'.   
- Fourth and fifth staves: Sextuplet arpeggios, labeled 'norm.' and 'mp'.   
- Sixth staff: Pizzicato notes, labeled 'pizz.' and 'mp'.   
The second system (bars 14-15) includes:   
- Top two staves: Sustained harmonics, labeled 'harmonics'.   
- Third staff: Pizzicato notes, labeled 'pizz.' and 'mp delicato'.   
- Fourth and fifth staves: Sextuplet arpeggios, labeled 'norm. pizz.'.   
- Sixth staff: Pizzicato notes, labeled 'pizz.' and 'mp delicato'.   
- Seventh staff: Pizzicato arpeggios, labeled 'pizz. arpeggio'.   
- Eighth staff: Pizzicato notes, labeled 'pizz.' and 'mp delicato'.   
- Ninth and tenth staves: Sustained harmonics, labeled 'harmonics'.   
The score is enclosed in a purple rectangular border.

My composing / arranging point, here, is not so much about advocating a continuous change of colours. Asking a violist to quickly change colours and techniques every now and then does not necessarily do your piece any good; in fact, it could make it fragmented or discontinuous. On the contrary, my point is to exploit different colours and techniques to support your counterpoint: if you assign different sounds to the different lines and musical roles that compose your piece, you can both give a stronger identity to your musical lines and generate a richer, more colourful texture for the ensemble. (There is a piece in particular that always comes to my mind when thinking about combining string colours to strengthen and enrich counterpoints and textures: this is *Verklärte Nacht – Transfigured Night* – by Schoenberg. It’s one of those works that, if you explore it from this angle, will remain with you forever.)

Finally, my last composing / arranging point is about ‘thinking your instruments in the space’. I am not necessarily referring to *spacial* composition, or theatrical ideas of instruments and musicians moving in the space – even if that would be a very interesting conversation. I am instead thinking of a much simpler idea, which is about distributing musical material according to where instruments and musicians are physically placed within the ensemble.

Conventionally, in a string ensemble, violins are placed to the left, violas in the middle-right, cellos on the right-hand side, and the double basses to the far right. There is an optimal equilibrium in this *spacial* organisation, and music sounds really strange if you try to invert this format; particularly in recordings, when you accidentally invert the panning of right and left channels.

Though, in the case of my piece for ten violas, I do not have this problem, as I have violas on all sides. I actually have the opposite problem: that of having to figure out who plays the higher notes and who does the bass lines. It would be silly to just give the top lines to the first two/three/four violas on the left, and the bottom lines to the violas sitting on the right-hand side. It would be a ‘non-violistic’ use of the ensemble.

I have therefore reconsidered the distribution of the musical roles within the ensemble according to where the instruments are placed in the space, and I have adopted several formats. The one you see in Figure 16 is one of them: the two extremities of the ensemble – Viola 1 and Viola 10 – have a melodic role and play the top lines; while the bass lines are directed towards the centre of the ensemble – towards Viola 5 and 6 in particular.



Figures 17 and 18 show other examples, in which I have inverted the scenario, giving the higher lines to the instruments in the middle, or making the bass lines converge towards the extremities.

Figure 16: Diagram of *La Luna nel Pozzo*'s spacial arrangement

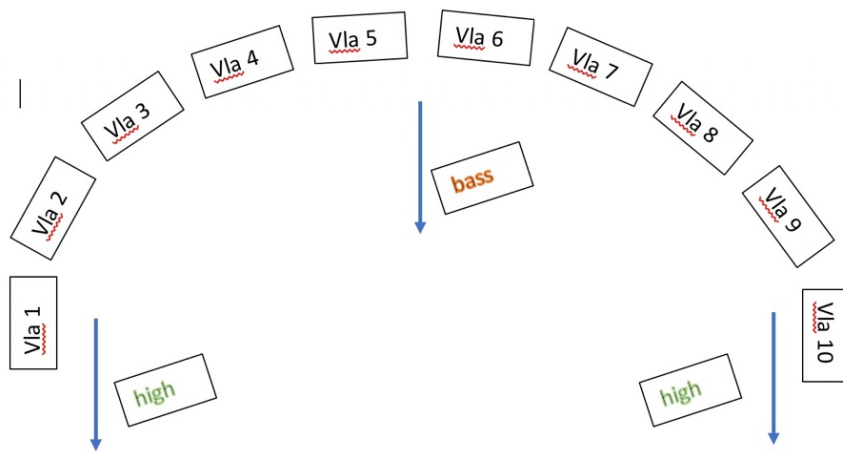


Figure 17: Diagram of *La Luna nel Pozzo*'s spacial arrangement

**Symmetric / Spacial Arrangement**

Figure 18: Diagram of *La Luna nel Pozzo*'s spacial arrangement

Symmetric / Spacial Arrangement

Figure 19: *Looking Inward*, in *La Luna nel Pozzo*

II. Looking Inward

Simone Spagnolo

Sober, yet lyrical  $\downarrow = 72$  circa

central range for accompaniment / harmonic filling

Copyright © Simone Spagnolo - London - February 2023

At first sight it may seem an extravaganza, but the musical movement and the sonic rendering is spectacularly interesting.

These *spacial* movements have repercussions on how the music is organised on the score, of course, and you might find moments in which the top and bottom staves play a melody at the same time; or you may see bottom notes assigned to the first viola.

These are unusual formats, but they can open the composer's imagination in many interesting ways. Most importantly, they can make you conceive the overall composition as *a moving sonic architecture*, rather than a given framework of parts in the space.

To conclude, I will play a final example: this is the second movement of *Low Strings Drama*, it is titled *Looking Inward*. It is not about 'music in the space', but it is a pretty good example of all the other points I have been talking about: instruments' colours and their relationship with registers and roles, musical material emerging from instrumental possibilities, making lines move, saying melodies together, leaving space, juxtaposing colours, and so on. I have tried to indicate some of these elements in Figures 19, within the score. This is how *Looking Inward* sounds.<sup>6</sup>

Thanks for your attention.

Simone Spagnolo

---

<sup>6</sup> Spagnolo, S. *Looking Inward*, in *Low Stringa Drama*, Intervox Music Production, 2023. Available on Spotify < <https://open.spotify.com/track/7uhGgxdW0KrPT6NoLnCcW1?si=43f475ca292e43a0>>