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Chapter **1**

Introducing the Violin

You don't have to be a professional musician to enjoy playing the violin. Learning to play for your own enjoyment — for the joy of making music — can be really satisfying. If you've always wanted to play but have never had the chance, or if you've taken some lessons or played a bit at school, this book is for you: It starts right from the first time you open your case and takes you step-by-step to playing real music on your violin.

Meeting the String Family

The violin is a member of the *string family*, which also claims the illustrious viola, the magnificent cello, and the imposing double bass as its own, actually totaling 16 strings among them — or even 17, as some basses have five strings! People also often include such instruments as the guitar and the harp in the string family, but these relatives lack an essential piece of equipment: the bow. Violinists almost always use a bow to make sounds. So the violin family has become known by another name too: *bowed strings*. All of the bowed strings' family members bear a distinct resemblance. The overall shape of the instruments is similar, and their sound is instantly recognizable.

The smallest member of the string family, the violin, is an instrument that's familiar to people all over the world. Just because the violin's the smallest in size, however, doesn't mean it's the least important or least powerful — quite the contrary. The violin's special soprano voice can express a whole gamut of emotions, even those beyond the power of words. The violin is capable of creating tone colors and intensities like the greatest of painters, and it has fascinated and moved players and audiences alike for generations.

Making a violin requires great skill, honed through a long apprenticeship, to get more than 70 component parts put together into one beautiful instrument. But many violinists wouldn't know their *scroll* (the beautifully carved whorl of wood at the end of the violin, farthest from the player) from their *saddle* (the small ebony ridge that supports the whole course of the strings). This unawareness isn't surprising; although most people are familiar with cars, they can't name auto parts either.

Plenty of experienced violinists can't name all the component parts of a violin, mainly because many parts are completely hidden inside the violin after it's put together. They *can* name the key ones, though. I discuss the key parts of the violin in Chapter 2 as I take you on a tour of your violin. I also discuss in Chapter 2 some different violin-making processes, and I walk you through the steps for getting your violin safely out of its case when you begin your playing session, and for putting it away when you're done.

Tuning up

After being properly introduced to the violin, you need to tune your instrument's strings before you begin to play. Each string has its own set note that you tune to so that when you put down your fingers, you get the sound you expect.

Tuning the violin can be intimidating: Those four strings need a checkup tuning every time you start your daily playing session, and they occasionally slip out of tune as you play. This frequent tuning seems a bit unfair. After all, pianists don't have to tune for themselves; they just have to call in a professional piano tuner a couple of times a year. And flautists use a fairly simple process to adjust the tuning of their flutes. On the violin, some aspects of tuning can be tricky to master, so I offer tips on how to tune — and how to deal with managing the tricky stuff too (see Chapter 2).

Eventually, the tuning process becomes second nature, and violinists don't mind tuning their instruments, because proper tuning makes them sound good. And think of those pianos with several notes slipping out of tune, and the tuner not due for months — pianists have to grit their teeth and wait! Violinists can fix out-of-tune strings right away.

Holding on

In addition to your violin being undoubtedly the most elegant of instruments, another part of its appeal is how debonair violinists look when they're actually playing. Great violinists often look like their instrument is an extension of themselves — but this seemingly effortless posture actually involves a lot of practice.

Apart from looking great, taking time to get the instrument comfortably lodged and balanced in playing position prevents your music from becoming a literal pain in the neck. Your arm and finger functions also work best when all their muscles are free to move as needed, with no excess tension or creaky joints. Chapter 3 shows you how to hold the violin really well and provides a few tips on finding useful accessories to help you in your quest for balance and comfort.

Bowing Out Some Sounds

The violin may get most of the glory, but its renown wouldn't be possible without its slender companion, the bow. The bow's job is to activate the vibrations of the strings so that your violin can sing out. When you look at the narrow bow stick — only 29 inches long with a ribbon of powdery-white horsehair — realizing how much sound a bow can draw out, and in how many different ways, is quite amazing.

Looking closely at the bow

The bow may have fewer components than its more celebrated case-mate, but it has its own quirks and nuances. How can you not appreciate something with a part named *frog*? I introduce you to the frog and more prosaically named parts of the bow (no toads or princesses) in Chapter 4, which also tells you how to care for your bow so that it stays in tip-top condition.

Although your bow doesn't require tuning, it does need its own type of attention before and after every use. And just like the violin, you need to hold the bow a certain way. Chapter 4 introduces you to holding the bow properly and even shows you how to bow out a few tunes.

Using both your hands

Think of trying to pat your head and rub your tummy at the same time (or is it the other way around?). Playing the violin is a good exercise for your brain and hand coordination because your two hands move very differently to make sounds. If you're an adult taking up the violin for the first time, you can earn extra points for all that new brain activity.

Your left hand has a lot of responsibilities on the violin, making notes both by landing and by lifting fingers on and off the four strings. Fingers also have to move horizontally and laterally to reach various notes on different strings. Eventually, the left hand also moves to different locations farther up the strings to find those impressive high notes. Chapter 5 gets your left hand actions off on the right track, showing you the finger-numbering system for the violin and the way to successfully land your fingers on the strings without getting a pilot's license.

But all that left-hand work can't make an impact if the bow doesn't stroke the strings — and that's your right hand's important job: holding your bow just right. When you assemble all your bowing skills, the bow can make a whole range of sounds, from singing sweetly in lyrical music to hammering out sounds in passionate passages. Chapter 6 sets you on the right path by bringing your hands together to bow and finger the notes simultaneously. You make music by using some simple charts, and you finish up with songs that put all your skills into action.

Making Music with or without Notation

The first songs you meet in this book don't require the ability to read music, because they're written out in handy charts. The charts allow you to play simple songs right away as you begin to play your violin. However, when you find out how to read actual musical notation, you can play more advanced music and enjoy a wealth of songs and pieces.

Printed musical notation is a shorthand system that communicates a whole world of playing instructions to musicians. These instructions include information about which notes to play, and at what speed and rhythm; how loud or soft the music needs to be; and a rich resource of other visual information that helps you to make the sounds right. As an added advantage, the ability to read music allows you to understand music that's been written for any instrument or singer, not just for the violin.

Knowing the notes

Reading music is a bit like reading a language written with a different alphabet than the one you're used to. Printed music has similarities to what you already know; you just need to get to know the new system. The notes belong on those famous five lines, which function much like a ladder: The higher the notes climb the ladder, the higher the sound you get. Notes have slightly different appearances according to their time values. Various symbols tell musicians about the volume, how to “attack” the notes (just with a bow, no arrow necessary), and so on.

To crack the secret code, see Chapter “007” (or Chapter 7, if you're not the espionage type), which takes you through the symbols and signs and shows you how to make them into musical sounds.

Getting rhythm

All the melodies in the world would be a lot less listenable without rhythm. Dancers would trip over one another, soldiers would fall over like dominoes, and toe-tappers would be toe-tally frustrated. Rhythm gives life and energy to music and lets you dance along to many different drummers (or violinists).

Chapter 8 introduces you to the most important elements of rhythm and shows you how to count your way through the different values. In Chapter 9, you put those rhythms together into different measures so you know when to waltz and when to polka.

Digging Deeper into Music

Reading notes on the page and knowing the time values of the notes is just the start of playing music. After you know those basics, doors open to the big leagues.

Scales and key signatures

I know that scales often inspire dread because they used to be drilled and repeated endlessly in the bad ol' days. But scales are really the building blocks to music, enabling musicians to find their way around just about any piece. Knowing your scales well gives you fluency and confidence — nothing wrong with that! Chapter 10 covers some of the most essential scales for a violinist.

After you know some scales, you have the picks to unlock *key signatures*. These little signs, containing up to seven sharps or flats, occur at the very start of each piece of music and are repeated as reminders at the start of every line throughout the piece. A key signature is a way of telling musicians exactly which notes to play in a particular piece. Chapter 11 shows you how to read and recognize the different key signatures.

Harmony

Although violins usually play the melody one note at a time, one of the advantages of this string instrument is that its four strings enable players to play up to four notes at once, when needed. But just as pickles and ice cream don't usually mix, not all notes work well together. Chapter 12 combines some of these notes into sweet harmonies, so you don't marry dill and vanilla.

Playing with Style

The violin is well loved for its versatility and for the panoply of sounds it can make, from the gentle singing of a slow, peaceful lullaby to the dazzling cascade of brilliance in a virtuoso showpiece. You're probably already itching to tackle some cool moves and to coax all kinds of exotic sounds out of your violin. The good news is that you can begin to do some really neat things as you look into the chapters about fancier techniques and styles.

Dazzling technique

After you master some different ways of playing with the bow, you can add new dash and panache to your sounds. Even the names of the different bowings sound fancy. When you bump into your friends, you can casually let drop that you're playing *spiccato*, and then after a suitable pause for effect, you can let them know that this is a bow stroke where the bow bounces off the violin strings.

Seeing the words *brush stroke* may make you wonder what a violinist is doing with a brush, but you don't have to transform into Chagall to play your violin — you just add an artistic brushing movement to your bow strokes, bringing a whole new palette of sounds to your fingertips. Chapter 13 introduces you to a choice menu of bowings, some in the meat-and-potato department, and some in the sinful dessert category!

In Chapter 14, you go through a similar journey of discovery with your left hand, getting your fingers to dance across the strings (almost doing a violin version of the Highland fling) and do other neat moves. Not only do your fingertips lift and land on one string, but they also slide and hop to different spots on that same string, ready to leap across to another string at any time. Sometimes two different fingers play on two different strings at once. Just when you have those fingers in line, you find out how to move your left hand to high positions (and back again) so that you can play high notes or make slinky-sounding slides.

Multicultural music

The violin is like a chameleon — it's at home just about anywhere. In addition to the more classical styles of playing, cultures all over the world have their own unique styles featuring the violin and its relatives — from the Chinese two-string *erhu*, which has a ravishing and magical vocal sound, to the Indian *sarangi*, an expressive and exotic instrument with three gut strings to play on and a whole array of metal strings that vibrate sympathetically.

But you don't need to get hold of an *erhu* or a *sarangi* to play in different styles. Chapter 15 takes you on a visit to some different musical styles that you can play with your very own violin. You can fit right in, whether you're at a joyful *ceilidh*, at a smoky jazz club, or in a sultry gypsy caravan.

Having Your Own Violin

As you embark on your important and exciting violin project, you may be so in love with the instrument that you want to buy one right away. However, you may feel cautious about jumping in, so you may choose to rent an instrument for a while. Either option is a good way to get started.

Finding the right instrument with the right price tag for you, whether it's through buying or renting a violin, is a personal decision that affects your enjoyment and progress. You want to feel satisfied with the instrument you play, so your violin needs to sound good enough. Chapter 16 discusses some of the issues to consider before you make a decision about what's best.

After you're equipped with all the gear, you can find out how to take good care of it and do the necessary maintenance. Keeping your violin and bow in tip-top condition takes only a few simple steps. Chapter 17 covers these in detail (even talking about what to do if an accident occurs to your violin), discussing daily care, changing strings, and traveling safely with your violin in hand (or should I say, in case?).

