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**The Storyteller:
Sally Beamish's Viola Concertos**

ALTERNATIVE STYLES

GOING ELECTRIC, PART ONE: ELECTRIC CAREERS

by David Wallace

Since the *JAVS* Alternative Styles column began in 2003, it has broadened our horizons by increasing our knowledge of repertoire, styles, pedagogy, and violists who have broken new ground. In this spirit, I hereby declare 2009 The Year of the Electric Viola and invite you to venture into a powerful realm that is exciting for teachers, students, and performers alike.

Once again, I have a confession to make. I never had any plans to be anything other than an acoustic performer. For that matter, as a student, I didn't know that the possibility of electronic bowed instruments existed. Sure, I had heard a few of the plugged-in classical/pop crossover projects that were making the rounds in the late 80s and early 90s, but I could not correlate them with my dreams, ambitions, or sonic identity as a classical violist.

The four violists you are about to meet opened my mind, broadened my perspectives, and made me a true believer in the incredible potential electric performance offers all string players and teachers. Moreover, each has made a primary impact on the musical world as a performer, pedagogue, or com-

poser. As they share their stories in their own words, I encourage you to think about how you might incorporate a little more electricity in your careers.

I first met **Martha Mooke** in the mid 1990s when we shared a ride to a regional orchestra gig in New Jersey. Neither one of us said much, but she caught my attention because she definitely had the

coolest hair and clothes in the entire orchestra. My stand partner told me that in addition to being a top-level New York freelancer, Martha was a composer, a fearless new music champion, and an electric violist. Soon afterwards, I spied her *Enharmonic Vision* CD at a record store, bought it, and went home to bask in some of the most haunting and ethereal timbres I had ever heard. Martha's original



Martha Mooke

mercial version of *The Devil Went Down to Georgia*” featuring rapper Nas and violinist Miri Ben-Ari. My role? *The Devil, of course!*

Recently, Mark has gained widespread attention for his Electrify Your Strings residencies, which enable string educators and orchestra directors to provide electric pedagogy and performance opportunities for their students.

Around the same time I began playing one of Mark Wood’s electric violas, violist **Asha Mevlana** was also beginning to explore the world of amplified viola. Asha has always been willing to share her insights, as well as thought-provoking questions that have led me to new discoveries in pedagogy and performance. Although Asha is the newest person of our four to plug in, her reason was the same as Stuff Smith, the first known violinist to amplify: she was fighting to be heard above a loud band.

After years of classical training, I began to explore alternative styles. When I graduated from college, I moved to New York City and joined a rock band that played several times a week at smoky clubs around the city. I was worried about putting my expensive viola in danger from spills or theft. Besides that, the sound of my acoustic viola was not cutting through the hard-hitting drums and electric guitar, so I bought my first electric: a five-string Zeta. I loved being able to be heard over the rest of my band and “compete” with the electric guitar.

Like Wood, Asha turned to guitarists as role models for her new musical approach:

I’ve always loved classic rock. When I went electric, I began listening to a lot of the guitar greats’ solos—B.B. King, Chuck Berry, Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page—and began to translate that type of music and soloing to my instrument.



Asha Mevlana

Asha also studied many of the classic string solos from the rock repertoire, like the violin jam at the end of the Who’s “Baba O’Riley,” which she has performed with Roger Daltrey.

Asha’s time studying the rock and pop repertoire was well spent as she has gone on to perform with several of her own bands, as well as Gnarl Barkley, the Black Eyed Peas, Alanis Morissette, Mary J. Blige, Cheap Trick, and for Dee Snider’s *Van Helsing’s Curse*, a rock

opera with an electric string section. She is probably also the only violist to perform a solo rendition of “The Star-Spangled Banner” for a Boston Red Sox game at Fenway Park.

Although Asha is best known for her performances on her seven-string Wood Violins Viper, she still teaches and performs extensively on her acoustic viola and believes

that her unplugged playing has benefited from going electric:

After a strict classical upbringing, playing electric has allowed me to explore the different sounds and effects that I didn’t know were possible on a violin or viola. When I go back to playing my acoustic viola, I have a lot more freedom in my playing and am much more experimental—trying to figure out how to imitate some of the electric sounds, using slides, different bow pressures to obtain different sounds, etc.