

INNER VOICES

MANY OF THE SYMPHONY'S BEST PLAYERS STAR IN SUPPORTING ROLES.

BY EDDIE SILVA



Jennifer Nitchman and Mark Sparks

Jennifer Nitchman often plays the second or third part in the flute section. She's not a principal player, as are section mates Mark Sparks and Andrea Kaplan. She rarely plays the melody or the stratospheric high notes that the section leaders display. As she puts it, "My job is to make Mark and Andrea sound as good as they can."

Nitchman plays in a supporting role. The supporting role has its own set of skills in an orchestra, and these skills are not readily noticeable. If they were, it would mean something went wrong. As an example, Nitchman explains the logistical concerns of one note.

"When Mark and Andrea stop to take a breath," she says, "I may play

louder for that one note, as loud as if they were both playing that note."

In the audience, you would never notice the principals' breath-taking, because Nitchman has filled in with a sound in perfect synch with the sound Sparks and Kaplan play in unison—for one note. "Then," Nitchman continues, "I immediately go back to blending with them on the next note." Don't try this at home.

If an orchestra was made up of musicians who only played the first part to a score, it would make for a tedious, if not an absurd, concert. As Lorraine Glass-Harris, a longtime member of the second violins puts it, "There are so many parts to an orchestra. The second players—in strings and woodwinds and brass—without them the music isn't whole, the bottom falls out. You lack the infrastructure that holds it all together.

"The inner voices complete the whole."

The second players blend, they cover, they support, they add emphasis to a line, they articulate a rhythm, they make harmony, they enhance the melody. They must be fierce listeners. They must anticipate what their colleagues might do. They must be flexible, and able to play sounds distant from the main themes. The awkward notes—they play those.

They may even transform their musical identity for the sake of the whole. "The clarinet can sound like a lot of other instruments," Diana Haskell, Associate Principal, says. "I match with the sound of the oboe or the viola—to enhance rather than dominate."

When Haskell plays the high-pitched E-flat clarinet, she is often paired with the piccolo or violin, often playing in unison with them.

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*“When violas have the melody, everyone looks over in amazement.”
Chris Tantillo and Shannon Farrell Williams*

“E-flat clarinet is actually the loudest voice,” says Haskell, almost sheepishly, “but there are also a lot of points where you are playing a harmonic line—where you need to blend or color so you don’t stand out.”

Not standing out has been the historic role of the viola. “When violas have the melody, Associate Principal Kathleen Mattis remarks, “everyone looks over in amazement.”

Violas are typically the character actors, the star’s disheveled sidekick. In Richard Strauss’s *Don Quixote*, the cello plays the title role; the viola is tag-along Sancho.

But thanks to the inner voices of the violas, explains Mattis, “body is given to sound. We play beneath the first violins to add color. You have to accompany with color.” Without them, the first violins may sound airy, thin, lacking shape and gravity.

Mattis describes her viola section as “a colony of strings with good radar.

“A GENEROSITY OF HEART IS WHAT IT TAKES TO PLAY THESE ROLES.”

—LORRAINE GLASS-HARRIS, SECOND VIOLINS

You have to anticipate what others do, and be flexible. Our idea is to jump, anticipate. If we’re reactive, we’re too slow.”

In February, Mattis looks forward to upcoming concerts of Stravinsky, Tchaikovsky, and Dvořák—composers for whom the viola takes a more independent role. “*Firebird* was a favorite childhood piece, and it still is,” she says.

“I love to master colors, and you hear that in Stravinsky and Tchaikovsky. Viola gets a greater role in the late-Romantic and early-Modern eras. In contemporary works the viola part is sometimes longer than the first violins.”

Although viola may be gaining some cachet in a lead role—kind of like when Walter Matthau moved from supporting parts to top-billing—the second violins shall always be second. But when Glass-Harris speaks of her role in the orchestra, you hear the passion and intelligence that makes that position second to none. “A generosity of heart is what it takes to play these roles,” she says.

“When looking at the music,” Glass-Harris explains, “what you see on the page is the bare minimum of what you need to do. It’s not what you play, but the way you play it. For example, the many ways you may say ‘I love you’ changes the meaning each time.”

When Glass-Harris speaks of her profession, it’s not surprising that the word “love” comes to her so easily. Music-making is so much about the intimate relationships between the players at the given moment of the performance. “It’s amazing to live through the score and respond to colleagues,” Glass-Harris says. “Sometimes people don’t even like each other but they’re involved in very intimate interactions.”

Glass-Harris admits that playing the second part is “not the big drama,” but suggests there are subtle glories in that role. “It’s a chance to respond to

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DILLIP VISHWANAT

A narrow aisle separates the first and second violins, but they must blend consistently.

tremendous solo playing, to respond with our inspiration. When playing the supportive role, what's in the mind and heart is to find ways to make it sound even better. You see a beautiful princess, you want to give her satin sheets."

For flutist Nitchman, she not only adorns her princess and prince, she puts on their costumes at times. Cinderella's transformations—from char girl to princess and back again—Nitchman may repeat many times in a single concert. "I need to be Mark Sparks-lite sometimes," she says with a laugh.

It's good she has a sense of humor, or at least irony. She mentions that in *Scheherazade*, "the first flute is actually playing second and I'm playing first. It's the ultimate when people think I was Mark, or that in our duet it was all him."

Nitchman must not only play well with others, but play as well as the others with whom she plays. "It's not just playing along or just playing in tune with each other," Nitchman explains. "I need to have the same color, the same levels of brightness and darkness as Mark, the same speed and depth of vibrato, but a notch softer, or a notch less focused."

"I'm attuned to the plight of the inner voices," Nitchman adds. When she fills in as principal player on occasion, she often receives compliments such as "So nice to hear you." Again she laughs, "But they hear me all the time and don't know it."

For Nitchman, it's what they don't know that makes the orchestra sound so magical. "I feel lucky to be playing in an orchestra where there is a tradition of listening to inner voices. Those rich, full sounds the orchestra makes, in part, are a celebration of the inner voices."

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