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Meaning of Folklore

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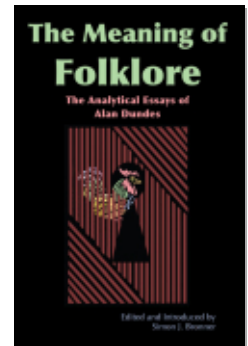
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GROUPING LORE: SCIENTISTS AND MUSICIANS

(A) Science in Folklore? Folklore in Science?

(B) Viola Jokes: A Study of Second String Humor

Introduction

Addressing the question “Who are the folk?” at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) in 1977, Dundes told the group identifying themselves as scientists that he understood the popular perception that “folklore is precisely what science has advanced from” (see Bascom 1977). Dundes declared that the notion that science displaces folklore was false. One reason this fallacy arose, he explained, was the European intellectual construction of several hierarchical dichotomies, in response to nineteenth-century industrialization. He set up the following table to highlight the European equivalence of folk with peasantry, and civilization with the elite, who were associated with so-called rational science.

FOLK or PEASANT	CIVILIZED or ELITE
Illiterate	Literate
Rural	Urban
Lower Stratum	Upper Stratum

Instead of a linear table contrasting upper and lower strata, Dundes’s model was one of folk encircling human existence. Dundes bemoaned the fact that the concept of folk “as an old fashioned segment living on the margins of civilization” persisted into the “modern” era despite ample evidence from field collections of folklore among the literate, urban, upper crust. He proposed to show that these dichotomies were logically, indeed scientifically, false by demonstrating that “one essential part of the science of folklore includes the study of the folklore of science (and scientists).” If such an elite group could be shown to be “folk,” then folklore could arguably be viewed as a fundamental, cultural, identity-forming

process in socializing people as part of groups. It was a strategy Dundes frequently employed in his research, and one he also applied to other “elite” groups, including symphony musicians, mathematicians, physicians (see the essays in the next chapter), computer programmers, and college students.

Dundes proposed a “modern conception of folk” as “*any group of people whatsoever* who share at least one common factor.” He added that “it does not matter what the linking factor is—it could be a common occupation, language, or religion—but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own. In theory a group must consist of at least two persons, but generally most groups consist of many individuals. A member of the group may not know all other members, but he or she will probably know the common core of traditions belonging to the group, traditions which help the group have a sense of group identity.” In this definition, it is possible to have “part-time folk” who engage in traditions temporarily, such as at summer camp or military bases, and it is common in modern life to have many overlapping groups and, therefore, traditions and identities that one possesses. Another implication of this definition is that people can take on identities and customs of their own choosing and creation, in addition to inheriting identities and following traditions. Besides working with the usual identity categories of ethnicity, religion, nationality, region, and occupation, one could observe folklore emerging from the formation of a family, group of friends, or people who share an interest (e.g., motorcyclists, surfers, and music fans), and from an organization (e.g., the Navy, Boy Scouts, or a volunteer association). It should be pointed out that some folklorists building on this definition have proposed a host of dyadic traditions (traditions emerging from a couple), such as between a person and a pet, and even one with oneself (e.g., talking to yourself with ritualized expressions such as “you idiot!”) (see Oring 1984a, 1986; Mechling 1989b, 2006).

In this chapter, Dundes used a rhetorical device that can be read in other writings, differentiating between the folklore of a group and a group’s folklore. The first essay, for example, had texts that demonstrated popular, “exoteric” beliefs *about* lab-coat clad scientists, which were differentiated from the “esoteric,” insider lore of scientists. (Dundes included the classic statement on “The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore” by William Hugh Jansen in his textbook *The Study of Folklore* [1965], in which a definition of folk group figured prominently.) The identification of folk ideas, therefore, was not limited to oral stories, but could also be seen in the mass media. Dundes carried this message—presented as a speech in the first essay—directly to scientists in the magazine *New Scientist*, in an article published the same year as his address to the AAAS. Dundes applied the thesis that professions constitute a folk, and, indeed, “the folklore of a group . . . defines that group,” to mathematicians. Thought of as people dealing with numbers rather than expressive narrative and customs, Dundes (with his mathematician son-in-law Paul Renteln) instead showed that mathematicians as a group shared slang, proverbs, limericks, and jokes (Dundes and Renteln 2005). Nonetheless, scientists, purportedly devoted to impersonal objectivity, still have the image of being acultural, although a few studies following Dundes’s contributions have explored the scientific realm (Gilkey 1990; Jackson 1972; and Shapiro 1987).

Dundes, as a concert musician (he composed for and performed on the clarinet), was also aware of the lore of orchestral musicians, popularly thought of as an elite group. The orchestra provided an apt metaphor for the social dynamics of expressive lore defining overlapping groups. Orchestra members shared an identity as a musical organization, but within the body, humor and speech *about* “sections” of the orchestra expressed hierarchies

within the unit. Instrumental players within the sections had “esoteric” lore that they shared among themselves as well. Dundes, the analyst, teamed up with Meegan Brown, a musician in the San Diego area, to collect the material in the second essay. In keeping with his psychological-outlet theory of humor, he interpreted the material as projecting the anxiety connected with performing in a musical group before a live audience. For other perspectives on folklore in the esoteric and exoteric lore of musicians, see Groce 1996; Rahkonen 2000; and Adler 1982. Beyond musicians and scientists, a host of modern groups have been investigated, with Dundes’s definition of the folk group and process of identity-formation in mind. For instance, among the entries in the *Encyclopedia of American Folklife* (Bronner 2006b) are nurses, soldiers, sports teams, students, taxi drivers, trial lawyers, twelve-step groups, skateboarders, steelworkers, bodybuilders, Boy Scouts, automobile racing fans, martial artists, youth gangs, truck drivers, unions, firefighters, and folklorists. That is in addition to the familiar folk groups of cowboys, loggers, miners, railroaders, and sailors. So what was Dundes’s answer to the question of “who are the folk?” He exclaimed, “among others, *we* are!”

Science in Folklore? Folklore in Science?

IN AUGUST 1846, ENGLISHMAN WILLIAM Thorns, using the nom de plume Ambrose Merton, wrote a letter to the Athenaeum in which he proposed the term "Folklore" as an appropriate Anglo-Saxon term to refer to "manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, etc. of the olden time." This neologism was well received and it has achieved virtual world-wide currency. In 1878, the English Folklore Society was created, later serving as a model for the American Folklore Society, which began in 1888. As the English Folklore Society approaches its centenary, folklorists from many countries may take pride in the growth of folkloristics from what was originally an amateurish antiquarian hobby of gentlemen and gentlewomen, who collected quaint customs and beliefs from rural parishes to a full fledged academic discipline with its own panoply of theories and methods.

Professional folklorists are concerned with how the folklore of a given group reflects the ideology and worldview of that group. Folklore, i.e., the myths, epics, folktales, legends, riddles, proverbs, curses, charms, songs, dances, games, gestures, costumes, festivals, etc. of a group, provides a unique type of expressive material in which that group's cognitive categories and anxieties are unselfconsciously set forth. Typically, folklore provides a socially sanctioned framework within which members of the folk in question feel free to probe critical issues and problems. One can say in jest or song what one may be ashamed or embarrassed to say without the safety of a folkloric form.

In the beginning of the 19th century, the conception of "folk" was limited to the illiterate in a literate society, that is, people who could not read or write in a society which had a written language. So the Grimm brothers in Germany and their counterparts in other countries collected folklore exclusively from the local illiterates or peasants. Only recently in the 20th century have folklorists realized that the original definition of folk was too narrow. A folk in modern parlance is any group of people who share at least one common linking factor. The common linking factor may be nationality, ethnicity, religion or occupation. Thus one could speak of French folklore (as opposed to German folklore), of the folklore of Jews or Mormons, and of the folklore of coal miners or cowboys. A flexible definition of folk would include an entity as large as a nation or as small as a family. From this definition, it is clear that folklore is not restricted to rural areas. Cities are full of folklore whether it is the folklore of particular city districts or the folklore of such groups as labor unions or militant political organizations. Individuals may belong to a number of different and distinct folk groups, and as they move from family or ethnic groups to professional or occupational groups, they often are expected to "code-switch." Family folklore would be inappropriate at the office, just as office folklore might be equally inappropriate at home.

Scientific tongues

From this discussion, it should come as no surprise to learn that scientists qualify as folk. For that matter, each subgroup of scientists surely has its own folklore. The folklore of biologists is not the same as the folklore of chemists. Some of the folklore of science or scientists is rather esoteric and might be virtually unintelligible to anyone outside the in-group. However, some of the folklore of science is understandable to outsiders. (Indeed some of the folklore about science circulates primarily among non-scientists.) In jokes, one of the most common forms of folklore in the modern world, stereotypes of scientists, may be found.

A physicist, a statistician, and a mathematician were in an aircraft flying over Montana. They looked out and saw below a herd of sheep all of which were white, except one which was black. The physicist began calculating the number of black sheep in the universe, based on the sample. The statistician began calculating the probability of a black sheep occurring in any given herd. The mathematician, on the other hand, knew that there exists at least one sheep that is black, ON TOP!

The role of empiricism is a frequent theme in the folklore of science. In the following example, it is a social scientist who is non-empirical.

A chemist, a physicist and an economist are marooned on a desert island without food. Suddenly they discover a cache of canned goods but there is no opener. The chemist begins looking about for chemicals in their natural state so he can make up a solution which will dissolve the tops of the cans. The physicist picks up a rock and begins calculating what angle, what force, what velocity he will need to strike the can with the rock in order to force it open. The economist merely picks up a can and says, "Let us assume this can is open." (In a variant, "Let us assume we have a can opener.")

Scientific method lampooned

If the need for some form of the experimental method is the hallmark of the natural scientist, that too can be the subject of the folklore of science. In a classic story existing in many variant forms—all folklore manifests multiple existence, typically with variation—we find the experimental method in a *reductio ad absurdum* form.

A researcher is studying a unique six-legged caterpillar (in some versions a flea). Through extraordinary conditioning, the researcher has trained the caterpillar to jump over a little barrier upon command, namely the word "jump." A true scientist, he wonders what it is that is making the caterpillar jump. It must be the front legs. The researcher tears off the front legs and gives the command to jump. The caterpillar jumps over the barrier. The researcher then pulls off the middle two legs. Again he says "Jump," and again the caterpillar jumps over the barrier. Finally, the researcher pulls off the two hind legs and gives the command. This time the caterpillar remains immobile and does not jump the barrier. The researcher therefore draws the conclusion that pulling off the two hind legs has made the caterpillar deaf.

Not only does this text lampoon the "logic" of drawing faulty conclusions from experimental data, it also expresses the stereotype of the cold and cruel scientist for whom scientific truth is more important than ethical questions of cruelty to animals. Caterpillars may not be of the same order as white mice, guinea-pigs, or monkeys, but the apparently callous behavior of the researcher is relevant. The phrase "to be a guinea-pig" has become part of the folklore of Western nations precisely because of the extended use of guinea-pigs as hapless participants (victims) of various scientific laboratory experimentation.

If one were asked to select the single most common piece of the folklore of science, one might well think of Murphy's Law. In theory, scientists are seeking to describe the nature of objective reality with such descriptions embodying such ideal criteria as predictability. The codification of a particular principle frequently bears the name of the scientist who discovered or formulated it. So presumably Murphy's Law was first articulated by a man named Murphy. Carrying scientific worldview to its extreme form, Murphy's Law and analogous "laws" suggest that even failure is acceptable so long as it can be codified and rendered predictable. Here is a representative list of "Basic precepts of science" which includes Murphy's Law:

Murphy's Law: If anything can go wrong, it will.

Patrick's Theorem: If the experiment works, you must be using the wrong equipment.

Skinner's Constant: That quantity which, when multiplied by, divided into, added to, or subtracted from the answer you got, gives the answer you should have obtained.

Horner's Five Thumb Postulate: Experience varies directly with the equipment ruined.

Flagle's Law of the Perversity of Inanimate Objects: Any inanimate object, regardless of its composition or configuration, may be expected to perform at any time in a totally unexpected manner for reasons that are either totally obscure or completely mysterious.

Allen's Axiom: When all else fails, read the instructions.

The Spare Parts Principle: The accessibility, during recovery, of small parts which fall from the work bench, varies directly with the size of the part . . . and inversely with its importance to the completion of the work underway.

The Compensation Corollary: The experiment may be considered a success if no more than 50 per cent of the observed measurements must be discarded to obtain a correspondence with theory.

Gumperson's Law: The probability of a given event occurring is inversely proportional to its desirability.

The Ordering Principle: Those supplies necessary for yesterday's experiment must be ordered no later than tomorrow noon.

The Ultimate Principle: By definition, when you are investigating the unknown, you do not know what you will find.

The Futility Factor: No experiment is ever a complete failure . . . it can always serve as a bad example.

One of the characteristics of folklore is that authors are rarely if ever known. We do not know who was the first to tell the story of the six-legged caterpillar or who invented the list of "Basic precepts of science." This puts folklore, which is transmitted from person to person, in contrast with mass or popular culture, in which the authors of comic strips, television series, or movies are known. Popular culture, like folklore, is frequently deemed to be unworthy of serious study by the literary Brahmins of the academy, but this is a mistake. For popular culture also affects the public's perception of science and scientists. Certainly

the stereotype of the mad scientist as depicted in so many horror films is a reflection of the image of the scientist not unlike the one delineated in the caterpillar story.

I want to consider briefly one television series and one motion picture to illustrate how and what science fiction as found in popular culture communicates. Typically in *Star Trek*, a space ship makes an *uninvited* visit to some alien culture which somehow threatens the existence or safety of the ship. Often the progress of the ship is imperiled or stopped temporarily. The USS initials supposedly stand for United Star Ship and not United States Ship, but a clue as to the identity of the ship is suggested by its name *Enterprise*. The captain of the ship is named Kirk, an English word meaning church. The rest of the leadership bears similar names, e.g., Spock, Scotty, McCoy, but when commands are issued, they are carried out by an assorted set of ethnic underlings (Asian, African American, etc). If the alien culture does not respond to suggestions of reform (along the lines of democracy and Christianity), the crew has no choice but to destroy it. The reform or destruction of the alien culture usually frees the ship which thus becomes once again a “free *Enterprise*,” a fantasy-form justification of free-floating American influence and intervention all over the world. Science fiction, like science itself, may not be as free of political implications as “pure” scientists might think or wish. In the motion picture *Star Wars*, we find an interesting combination of folklore and science fiction. The plot is basic fairytale with a hero falling in love with an image of a princess whom he attempts to rescue. His parents dead, Luke Skywalker is raised by foster parents as is required by the heroic formula. From a wise old man, who functions as the traditional donor figure of fairy tales, the hero obtains the inevitable magic sword (the life force) which belonged to his father. The hero is accompanied on his quest by an assortment of helpers with unique abilities. However, superimposed upon the underlying fairy tale plot is a fairly standard Second World War film scenario. The enemy consists of “stormtroopers,” who dress and act like Germans as depicted in World War films. The little creature who in the memorable bar scene tries to collect an outstanding debt owed by the mercenary pilot Han Solo speaks a foreign tongue which is accompanied by English subtitles. The language is not identified but if it were to be Japanese, it would support the Second World War pattern in which the Japanese and Germans were part of an axis. In this context, the somewhat effete robot C-3PO, who has great polyglot linguistic expertise and who speaks with an English accent, might well represent the British ally of the American hero attacking the German stronghold. If fairy tale and Second World War adventure film were not enough, there is a phallic component in which a boy learns to handle his life force well enough to fly through a long slot and drop a bomb down a virtually inaccessible and closely guarded tube leading to the one weak spot or Achilles’ heel of the enemy. It may or may not be relevant that the archvillain’s name is Darth Vader which strongly suggests death and father. As a concession to modern taste, the hero is taught to close his eyes and trust his (life force) feelings while the heroine, something of a liberated woman, refuses to play the conventional passive female part found in fairy tales. Her irreverent attitude seems to delight not one but two heroes: Luke Skywalker and Han Solo, who compete for her attentions.

Science fiction is not science any more than the folklore of science is science. What is important is that one measure of the impact science has had on the modern world lies in the artistic efforts it has inspired. Scientists themselves are influenced by folklore. Why, for example, was the lunar mission labelled Apollo? With presumably an infinity of names to choose from, why was the name Apollo selected? Selecting the name Apollo consciously or unconsciously invoked mythology. In Greek mythology, Apollo the Sun is the brother of Artemis or Diana the Moon. After achieving enough “thrust” to lift off and overcome the

gravitational pull of the (mother) Earth, Apollo the Sun/son rises and is able to land on the Moon, his sister, where astronaut Armstrong (whose name means powerful body extremity) was the very first to step on the virgin soil of the Moon and to erect a flag. The astronauts brought back pieces of Moon to show off to peers back home. Who remembers the names of the second set of astronauts to land on the Moon? Very few. The point might be that the Moon could be “violated” only once. This is, of course, not an analysis of heavenly bodies but of earthly ones. But that is precisely the issue. Scientists are folk too and as such they are bound by folklore. That is why it is imperative that the science of folklore include the study of the folklore of science.

Viola Jokes: A Study of Second String Humor

THERE IS A SUBSTANTIAL SCHOLARLY literature devoted to the study of musical humor. Most of it tends to deal with individual composers and specific compositions, for example, Haydn's musical jokes.¹ Much less studied are the numerous jokes told by and about musicians. Anyone who performs regularly in bands or orchestras is likely to be familiar with these traditional jibes. Whether the jokes stem from the anxiety connected with performing on one's instrument (in front of peers or an audience) or the competitive aspect of seeking to move from third chair up to second or first chair, there can be no question of the jokes' continued popularity.

As with ethnic humor, there is usually a scapegoat to serve as the butt of the jokes. So the English tell jokes about the Irish, the French about the Belgians, the Germans about the East Frisians, and so on.² Almost every cultural group has some other group or subgroup to beat up on, so to speak. No doubt one of the psychological benefits of telling such jokes is to bolster feelings of inadequacy. If A says B is inferior, then that automatically makes A feel superior.

In musical joking traditions, different instruments or instrumentalists fill the role of scapegoat. There are jokes about conductors or prima donnas, mostly about their highflying egos. One of the chestnuts about conductors is: *What's the difference between a bull and a symphony orchestra? The bull has the horns in front and the asshole in back.*³ Another series involves drummers and the fact that their musicianship is said to be minimal or lacking altogether. *What do you call someone who hangs out with musicians? A drummer.* But surely the leading figures in music joke cycles are banjo players and violists.

Viola jokes have been noticed. A brief article by Martin Boyd on the subject appeared in *The Strad* in 1995. The following year, Nancy Groce's "Knowing the Score: The Transmission of Musician Jokes among Professional and Semi-Professional Musicians" was published in *New York Folklore* as well as her more complete compilation *The Musician's Joke Book*. In 1997, Dave Marsh and Kathi Kamen Goldmark completed *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Joke Book*. In 2001, we find a newspaper essay by Olin Chism entitled "Violins Get the Glory, While Viola Is Butt of Jokes" in the *Dallas Morning News*. But by far the most comprehensive consideration of the viola jokes is violist and ethnomusicologist Carl Rahkonen's "No Laughing Matter: The Viola Joke Cycle as Musicians' Folklore" in *Western Folklore* in 2000.⁴

Groce speculates as to why violists have been singled out for jocular disparagement. According to Groce, "Violists are widely believed to be intellectually dull, musically timid, and to have boring personalities."⁵ She also remarks that violists have a much more limited solo repertoire than do violins and that generally speaking, viola parts tend to be less technically exacting than those of other instruments, often playing harmony rather than melody. Violist Rahkonen says much the same: "Orchestral viola parts are easier than violin

parts and they tend to be the less important, non-melodic parts. If viola players do get difficult parts, as they do from time to time, violists in amateur orchestras tend to struggle while trying to play them.⁶ Groce even goes so far as to suggest that the majority of violists are failed violinists who may have been encouraged early on by their teachers to switch to the less demanding viola. Whether or not this is nothing more than a standard stereotype of violists, the fact remains that there is an impressive spate of viola jokes. The stereotype of a violist as a violinist *manqué* is clearly indicated in the following definition of a string quartet: *A good violinist, a bad violinist, a would-be violinist, and someone who hates violins getting together to complain about composers.* Here is another version of the same joke. *What makes up a string quartet? A person who can play violin, a person who can't play violin, a person who used to play violin, and a person who hates violins.*

For the benefit of readers who may not be familiar with this joke cycle, we shall present a generous sampling of representative texts.⁷ One should keep in mind that viola jokes, like all traditional jokes, in fact like all folklore, demonstrate multiple existence and variation. That means that an individual joke will usually exist in more than one time and place. Moreover, the transmission process is such that no two versions will be verbatim identical. In some instances, the same basic joke may be told about various instruments. Such parallels to some, though by no means all, of the viola jokes will be noted.

The first examples have to do with the alleged poor musicianship of violists.

What's the difference between the first stand and the last stand in the viola section?

About two bars. In other versions, the answer is *A semi-tone* or *Half a measure* or *About a measure and a half.*⁸

How do you get a violist to play a passage pianissimo tremolano? Mark it solo. The implication is that violists are so unused to playing solos that their nervousness makes them shake their bow uncontrollably resulting in a pianissimo tremolando.

*How do you get a viola section to play spiccato? Write a whole note with "solo" above it.*⁹

Another version of this joke involves vibrato: *How can you make a violist play with vibrato? Write a fermata over a whole note and mark it solo.*¹⁰

Vibrato also figures in other viola jokes: *What's the difference between a viola and scraping your nails on a blackboard? Vibrato.*¹¹

The sound made by violas is a common leitmotif in the joke cycle: *What's the difference between a violist and a dog? The dog knows when to stop scratching.*¹²

What's the most common viola tuning system for Western music? Bad-tempered.

Why can't you hear a viola on a digital recording? Because technology has reached such an advanced level of development that all extraneous noise is eliminated.

What kind of microphone works best for viola in a live band? A cordless mini condenser with a dead battery.

Who makes the best viola mutes? Smith & Wesson.

How do you make a violin sound like a viola? Sit in the back and don't play or Play in the low register with a lot of wrong notes.

*How do you get a beautiful sound out of a viola? Sell it and buy a violin.*¹³

The majority of viola jokes, however, are variations on the theme of sloppy technique on the part of violists: *What's the difference between a viola player and a dressmaker? The dressmaker gets paid to tuck up the frills; A viola player . . . never mind.*

Why are violists' fingers like lightning? They never strike the same place twice.

Why do violists get antsy when they see the words "Kama Sutra"? All those positions!

What's the difference between a violist and a prostitute? 1. A prostitute knows more than two positions. 2. Prostitutes have a better sense of rhythm.

A German text involving positions suggests that the viola jokes are also to be found in Germany: *Was sind die drei Lagen auf der Bratsche? Erste Lage, Notlage, und Niederlage.* (What are the three positions of the viola? First position, emergency, and defeat.) An American variant: *How many positions does a violist use? First, third, and emergency.*¹⁴

Why are viola parts written in Alto Clef? Harder to prove that wrong notes weren't copying errors.

Where did Alto Clef originate? Bach took a bribe from a wealthy viola player.

How is a violist like a terrorist? They both mess up bowings [Boeings].

*How can you tell if a violist is making mistakes? His bow is moving.*¹⁵ The same answer is found with a different question: *How can you tell if a viola is out of tune? The bow is moving.*

*What's the difference between a viola and a lawnmower? You can tune a lawnmower. There is also Why isn't a viola like a lawn mower? Nobody minds if you borrow their viola.*¹⁶

*How do you get two viola players to play in tune (or in unison)? Shoot one of them.*¹⁷

What's the definition of a minor 2nd? Two violas playing in unison.

*What's the definition of atonal music? A violist playing Bach.*¹⁸

What's the definition of a cluster chord? A viola section playing on the C string.

How was the canon invented? Two violists were trying to play the same passage together.

*Why do violists stand for long periods outside people's houses? They can't find the key and they don't know when to come in.*¹⁹

Sometimes it is the viola rather than the violist that is subjected to ridicule: *What's the useless woody material around the F holes? A viola.*²⁰

What is the range of a viola? As far as you can kick it. In another version, the answer is: *About 35 yards if you have a strong arm.*²¹

What is the definition of "perfect pitch"? Throwing a viola into a dumpster without hitting the rim. In several variants, perfect pitch is defined as throwing a viola or banjo into a toilet without hitting the rim²²; in another, perfect pitch consists of lobbing an oboist into a garbage can without hitting the rim.²³

*What's the difference between a viola and an onion? People cry when they chop an onion to pieces*²⁴ or *Nobody cries when they chop up a viola.*

What's the difference between a viola and a trampoline? You should take your shoes off before you jump on a trampoline.

What's the difference between a viola and a TV dinner? The viola doesn't fit in a microwave oven (unless you break the neck off).

What's the difference between a viola and cello? You can fit more violas into a trash compactor.²⁵

What's the difference between a violin and a viola? The viola burns longer.²⁶

This joke has inspired a follow-up text: *Now we all know that a viola is better than a violin because it burns longer. But why does it burn longer? It's usually still in the case.²⁷* The implication here is that one reason violists play so poorly is that they never practice. Hence their violas remain in their cases at all times. The violist's supposed reluctance to practice is also reflected in the following texts: *After his retirement, the violist arrived home carrying his viola case. His wife saw the case and asked, "What's that?"* In Germany, for example, it is a standing joke that some players leave their instruments in their lockers, removing them only for rehearsals and performances. In other words, they don't bring their instruments home to practice.

Why is a viola the perfect murder weapon? It is a classic blunt weapon and it never has any fingerprints on it.²⁸

How is a violist similar to a lawyer? Everyone is happiest when the case is closed. In a variant: How is a viola like a jury trial? Everyone breathes a sign of relief when the case is closed.²⁹

How do you keep your violin from getting stolen? Put it in a viola case.³⁰

Why do viola players keep their cases on their car dashboards? So they can park in handicapped spaces.

Why does the violin player keep a spare viola in his trunk? So that he can park in the handicapped zone. In a variant: Why did the musician hang a small viola from his rear view mirror? So he could park in "handicapped" zones.³¹

The implication is that violists by definition are considered to be physically less gifted than other musicians. Accordingly, the viola or a representation thereof is a telltale sign of such a limitation. It may or may not be relevant that several of the most famous violists were noticeably short in stature (for example, Lionel Tertis³² and Lillian Fuchs), for they may possibly have felt lesser in some sense, a feeling that might have unconsciously led them to choose to play the viola, a "second string" instrument, so to speak. The jokes, however, indicate that although the violist may be handicapped, he has turned his handicap into an advantage. It enables him to find a parking space, that is, a place in the orchestra that others cannot occupy.

Why are violas bigger than violins? They're really not. It just looks that way because violists' heads are smaller. Here is another version of that joke: Why are violas so large? It's an optical illusion. It's not that violas are large, just that the viola players' heads are so small. In yet another version, the joke is at the expense of violinists rather than violists: Why are violins smaller than violas? They're actually the same size—it's the violinists' heads which are larger.³³

Here the allusion is to the perceived conceit of violinists.

One notable joke about the purported lack of intelligence of violists is the following: *What's the most challenging requirement for finalists in the International Viola Competition? A finalist must be able to hold his viola from memory.*³⁴

Some jokes concern the lack of employment opportunities for violists: *What's the difference between a viola player driving into town and a plumber driving into town? The plumber is going to a gig.*

What's the difference between a dead viola player lying in the road and a dead Country Singer lying in the road? The Country Singer was going to a record date.

Why do violin players double on viola? So they can get less work.

Definition of an optimist: A viola player with a beeper.

A few jokes hint at the relative lack of importance of the viola in the overall orchestral setting:

*What's unique about viola concertos? They're the only concertos in which the soloist plays the harmony.*³⁵

Why don't violists play hide and seek? Because no one will look for them.

Why shouldn't violists take up mountaineering? Because if they get lost, it takes ages before anyone notices that they're missing.

If you're lost in the desert, what do you aim for? A good viola player, a bad viola player, or an oasis? The bad viola player. The other two are only figments of your imagination.

A number of viola jokes portray the violist as dead:

*What do you do with a dead violist? Move him back one stand.*³⁶

What's the difference between a viola and a coffin? The coffin has the stiff on the inside.

*Why is the viola section like the Beatles? 25% of them are dead, and the other 75% haven't played together for years.*³⁷

*If you see a violist and a conductor in the road, which do you hit first? The violist—business before pleasure.*³⁸

The basic message of viola jokes is that the viola (its solos and sounds) and the violist should be avoided if at all possible:

Why do most people take an instant dislike to violists? Saves time.

Why is a viola solo like premature ejaculation? Because even when you know it's coming, there's nothing you can do about it.

Why do people tremble with fear when someone comes into a bank carrying a violin case? They think he's carrying a machine gun and might be about to use it.

Why do people tremble with fear when someone comes into a bank carrying a viola case? They think he's carrying a viola and might be about to use it.

What is the most popular recording of the "William Walton Viola Concerto?"

Music Minus One. In this joke, which refers to recordings made with the accompaniment only so that would-be instrumentalists can practice with a full orchestra or other members of an ensemble, the implication is that the Walton concerto, featuring the viola as soloist, would sound better without the viola solo part.

*Why is playing a viola solo like wetting your pants? Both give you a nice warm feeling while everybody moves away from you.*³⁹

*What's the definition of a perfect gentleman? Someone who can play the viola but chooses not to.*⁴⁰

*Why did the chicken cross the road? To get away from a viola recital.*⁴¹

The recognition of the viola joke cycle is attested by the fact that there is even a text referring to such jokes: *What is the longest viola joke? "Harold in Italy."*⁴² This is a reference to the composition composed by Hector Berlioz expressly for the viola and orchestra.

What is one to make of this spate of viola jokes? And to what extent, if any, does it reflect actual attitudes towards violists or, for that matter, violists' attitudes towards themselves and their chosen instrument? An examination of several prominent violists' autobiographies clearly reveals that the traditional disdain held by so many towards the viola is keenly felt by violists. Consider the following statement made by famed violist Lionel Tertis (1876–1975) writing about his experience at the beginning of the twentieth century: "When I first began to play the viola as a solo instrument, prejudice and storms of abuse were my lot. The consensus of opinion then was that the viola had no right to be heard in solos, indeed the consideration of its place in the string family was of the scantiest. It was not only a despised instrument, but its cause was far from helped by the down-and-out violinists who usually played it. The executants in those days were violinists too inferior to gain a position in orchestras as such. A wretchedly low standard of viola-playing was in fact accepted simply and solely because there was no alternative."

It turns out that Tertis's own professional trajectory lends credence to some portions of the stereotype. He started out as a violinist and took up the viola on a whim. Henry Wood of the Henry Wood's Queen's Hall orchestra learned of Tertis's interest in the viola and asked to hear him play. At the time, Tertis was "the last player at the last desk of the second violins." After the audition, Terns "jumped from last violinist to principal viola in the orchestra."⁴⁴ Curiously enough, there is a joke which reverses this *cursus honorum* from lowly violinist to high-ranking violist. Moreover, the joke departs from the joking question format of most of the viola jokes. Instead, it employs a folktale framework and is in fact a variant of a well-known tale of three wishes.⁴⁵

The last chair violist of the Minot North Dakota Symphony found a magic lamp, and after rubbing it, a genie appeared and granted him three wishes. His first wish was to be an 80% better player than he was now. The genie granted his wish and—poof—he became the principal violist of the Minot North Dakota Symphony. Soon he wasn't satisfied with this so he made his second wish—again to become an 80% better player than he was and—poof—he became the principal violist of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Well, he still had one wish to go and—you guessed it—he asked once more to become an 80% better player than he had been. So—poof—he became the last chair second violin of the Minot North Dakota Symphony Orchestra.⁴⁶

Violist Lillian Fuchs (1902–1995) had an instrument-changing experience somewhat parallel to that of Tertis. She began on the piano, but influenced by the example of her successful older brother Joseph, a talented violinist, she too took up the violin. However, at one point, her violin teacher urged her to switch from violin to viola. Her father was adamantly opposed to this and she herself thought her decision might be “the catastrophe of her life.”⁴⁷ In 1992, when she received a Medallion Award for Distinguished Artistry from the New York Viola Society, she was asked how she came to play the viola instead of the violin. Her answer given in the third person: “Lillian didn’t intend to play the viola. She was talked into learning it by her teacher, Franz Kneisel.”⁴⁸

Violist William Primrose (1904–1982) also reports starting out on the violin and that eventually his teacher Eugène Ysaÿe suggested that he switch to viola.⁴⁹ Like Fuchs’ father, Primrose’s father firmly opposed the shift, becoming “deeply despondent” at his son’s decision.⁵⁰ Primrose’s father, despite being a violin teacher who himself “doubled” on the viola, felt that “anyone who was confined to play out his musical life on what he regarded as the secondary instrument did but confess his failure as a violinist.”⁵¹ At the time, a highly respected orchestra player told Primrose, “you’re making the biggest mistake of your life. You will regret this as you’ve regretted no other thing.” Late in life at the outset of a lengthy interview, Primrose claimed that he would rather accept as a pupil someone who had come to the viola via the violin rather than someone who started from the beginning on the viola.⁵³ Rahkonen claims that “one of the first assumptions in junior high school orchestras is that the director will switch the poor violinists over to viola, where they will do less harm. and perhaps even contribute.”⁵⁴

Primrose was certainly well aware of the violist stereotype. In describing the make-up of a string quartet, he said that “the violist was usually, as we know to our sorrow, a disappointed violinist” and this was one reason why he so admired Lionel Tertis for his many years of advocacy of the lightly regarded member of the string family. As Primrose phrased it, “after he championed the cause of the instrument. those who followed no longer felt ashamed to be playing the viola.”⁵⁶

In his autobiography, Tertis repeatedly referred to the viola in such demeaning folk verbiage as a “Cinderella” or “Ugly Duckling.” He spoke of the viola’s reputation “as a nasty, growling, and grunting instrument.”⁵⁸ What this suggests is that violists have internalized the stereotype so that it functioned as a self-stereotype. Regardless of whether violists are truly inferior musicians or whether the viola is truly an inferior string instrument, the fact is that violists are well aware of the stereotype and feel obliged to do their best to overcome the stigma attached to their choice of musical vocation.

We should stress that not all the jokes pick on the viola. There are other instruments that come in for ribbing. The French Horn, for example, is featured in such texts as: *How do you make a trombone sound like a French Horn? Put your hand in the bell and miss a lot of notes*⁵⁹ or *How can you tell you are kissing a French Horn player? Because he has his hands up your ass.* Bagpipes may also be victimized: *Why do bagpipers walk when they play? To get away from the noise.* Other musicians are also featured in traditional jokes. Besides conductors, singers are famous for their prima donna personalities. *What’s the definition of a male quartet? Three men and a tenor*⁶⁰ and *What’s the difference between a soprano and a terrorist? You can reason (negotiate) with a terrorist.*⁶¹ Still, it is the viola, among orchestral instruments, that takes the most jocular punishment.

Unanswered remains the question of why these jokes should exist at all. We know that states of anxiety are often relieved by humor, but is it sufficient to say that the anxiety or

nervousness resulting from a form of stage fright, exacerbated when one has to perform a solo in front of one's peers or in front of an audience, explains the existence of viola and other musical jokes? We believe an examination of the content of the jokes, the themes and variations so to speak, provide an illuminating clue as to the function and meaning of viola jokes. One must keep in mind that viola jokes are told by many musicians, not just string players or violists. So whatever the significance of the joke cycle might be, it is likely that it is relevant to the act of musical performance.

It is our contention that musical groups, whether large (orchestras or bands) or small (string quartets or other small ensembles), are microcosms of the larger European (and American) societies that produced them. The social organization of orchestras and bands is extremely hierarchical. Not all musical groups in other cultures have a dictatorial conductor to "govern" and control the group. In fact a Martian might find it strange that the conductor holds only a small stick (baton) and does not actually play one of the orchestral or band instruments. The social organization includes a second in command, the concertmaster, typically the first violinist. The various instrumental sections are ranked such that one can be first chair, second chair, third chair, etc. Even at an early age, young musicians are encouraged to compete in order to move up the ladder, say from second clarinet to first clarinet in a high school band. The emphasis upon regimentation and order in bands is usually marked by a form of folk costume. Military bands obviously have members in uniforms, but even high school and college marching bands typically wear some kind of uniform dress. Members of orchestras do not wear such uniforms, but on the other hand, formal dress, for example, tuxedos or coat and tails for piano soloists, surely can be construed as a sort of uniform, again underlining the formality of such performance events.

The rigorous nature of performance constraints is by no means limited to the social organization of the orchestra or band or even string quartet. The very nature of musical performance is such that strict demands are made in terms of time and place. Members of musical groups are required to play together. One must know one's place and one must stay in it. An individual cannot simply play whenever he or she feels like it. There is a score. One must begin at a particular time and even more important, one must end at a particular time. Nothing is more embarrassing for an instrumentalist to be heard playing after all his fellow group members have stopped. Similarly, one of the greatest fears for a musician is that he or she has lost his or her place during a performance. (It is worth noting that several of the viola jokes specifically refer to being lost, for example, "lost" in the desert or "lost" as a result of mountaineering.) Upon realization that he or she is lost, the befuddled musician may cease playing, hoping that he or she will be able to recognize an opportune (and correct) moment to start playing again in the right place. There is even a joke, usually told of a trombonist, that expresses this fear: *The town's brass band had just finished a loud but not very coordinated selection. The musicians had just sunk down to their seats after bowing to the applause when the trombonist asked: "What are we playing next?" The band director replied, "The Stars and Stripes Forever." "Oh my gosh!" exploded the trombonist. "I just got through playing that!"*⁶²

If we consider the themes of the viola jokes, we can easily see that they concern playing in unison or in tune or the lack thereof. Another theme concerns time rather than tone. The difference between the first and last section of violas is said to involve two bars or a measure and a half. Such jokes are all about not playing together properly, that is, being either ahead or behind one's fellow musicians. What these jokes seem to do is to provide a socially sanctioned vehicle for the expression of rebellion against the various forms of

restraint and order inherent in group musical performances. So it is not only violists who are afraid of not playing in unison or finishing a half measure ahead or behind their comrades. In this connection, it is of interest that in Mozart's *Ein musikalischer Spass* KV 522 [A Musical Joke] composed in 1787, part of the humorous scoring by Mozart included having an instrument enter one beat too late in both the third and fourth movements.⁶³ What is perhaps even more striking in the present context is the fact that the instrument in question was a viola! This may suggest that Mozart as well was aware of the tradition of making the viola the butt of the string section of the orchestra.

It is not just instrumentalists playing harmony who are concerned with losing their place. Soloists also worry about playing in concert with their accompanists or the orchestra. Group musical performance by its very nature demands conformity of the highest order. Moreover, one mistake, one missed entrance, one false note, can ruin an entire performance for an audience and for the orchestra or band. No matter how seasoned a musician may be, no matter how many times he or she may have performed a given composition, there is always the possibility of making a mistake. It is one matter to make a mistake in the privacy of one's practice room at home; it is quite another to make it in front of a live audience and one's peers. We believe it is this constant pressure to perform at the highest level, the worry about meeting the expectations of a sophisticated audience or one's fellow musicians that has generated the viola jokes which in effect list all the things that could possibly go wrong—playing out of tune, missing one's cue, and the like. What this means is that viola jokes fulfill a valuable function in articulating the traditional anxieties of musicians. Telling a viola joke to a fellow musician is a tacit admission that one knows full well what pitfalls lie in performing a piece of music. The listener laughs because he or she recognizes the point of the joke, albeit unconsciously. Non-musicians would probably not find most of the jokes very amusing and for that matter might not even understand some of the more technical musical terminology. In that sense, some of the viola jokes tend to be somewhat esoteric, intelligible only to true *cognoscenti*. That special knowledge is required only makes such jokes more enjoyable as it is clear that only real musicians can fully appreciate their nuances. In that sense, the telling and re-telling of viola jokes helps create a bond among musicians. They not only share the jokes; they share the anxieties that produced the jokes in the first place.

As to why the viola joke cycle flourished in the 1990s, it is difficult to say. Rahkonen, who claims that the cycle began in 1991, admits that he "could find nothing specific to point to a cause for the beginning of the cycle."⁶⁴ Presumably, the tensions articulated in the jokes have existed for centuries. It is always difficult to pinpoint the actual moment of the onset of a joke cycle and just as hard to explain why the cycle started at that particular time. In this instance, we might speculate that the popularity of the viola joke cycle seems to have coincided with the emergence of a censorious perspective known as "political correctness." According to the guidelines of PC, it was no longer permissible to poke fun at minority cultures. Racist and sexist jokes were, in theory, no longer acceptable.⁶⁵ Dumb "Pollack" or dumb "blonde" jokes were considered offensive and definitely not PC. In that context, it became necessary to find some other group that could be depicted as "dumb" or otherwise undesirable or inferior.⁶⁶ As violists already had a stereotyped reputation as second class citizens, it was a simple enough matter to abuse them verbally as a group that few would feel obliged to defend. Of course, assuming there is any causal connection between "political correctness" and the emergence of viola jokes in the early 1990s, the question of why political correctness should have emerged at that particular time remains.

In any event, the empirical reality of the viola jokes is irrefutable. As we have suggested, much of the content of the jokes expresses fundamental sources of abiding concern among musicians. There will probably always be anxiety connected with performing in a musical group before a live audience. The nervousness and the excessive flow of adrenalin may even be considered positive factors in helping to make a musician perform at his or her very best. But the inescapable presence of anxiety also means that musicians will need an escape valve to relieve the pressure. And that is why we believe that viola jokes or their successors in the future will continue to circulate among both professional and amateur musicians.

Notes

The jokes reported in this article were collected by Meegan M. Brown in 1996 from several fellow musicians in the San Diego area, from members of the Ying Quartet, and mostly from nationwide alumni of the Interlochen Arts Camp in Michigan. We are indebted to famed opera staging director Jonathan Miller who was kind enough to send us several pages of musicians' jokes.

1. For representative studies of Haydn's humor, see Gretchen A. Wheelock, *Haydn's Ingenious Jesting with Art: Contexts of Musical Wit and Humor* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1992) and Andreas Ballstaedt, "'Humor' and 'Witz' in Joseph Haydn's Musik," *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 55 (1998): 195–219. For musical humor in general, see Laurie-Jeanne Lister, *Humor as a Concept in Music* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1994) and James E. Myers, ed., *A Treasury of Musical Humor* (Springfield: Lincoln-Herndon Press, 1998).
2. For an excellent introduction to ethnic humor, see Christie Davies, *Ethnic Humor Around the World: A Comparative Analysis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).
3. For other versions of this joke, see Nancy Groce, "Knowing the Score: The Transmission of Musician Jokes among Professional and Semi-Professional Musicians." *New York Folklore* 22 (1996): 44; Myers, 199; and Carl Rahkonen, "No Laughing Matter: The Viola Joke Cycle as Musicians' Folklore," *Western Folklore* 59 (2000): 58.
4. Martin Boyd, "Alter Ego: A Brief History of the Viola," *The Strad* 106 (1995): 818–819; Nancy Groce, "Knowing the Score: The Transmission of Musician Jokes among Professional and Semi-Professional Musicians," *New York Folklore* 22 (1996): 37–47; Groce, *The Musician's Joke Book* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996); Dave Marsh and Kathi Kamen Goldmark, *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Joke Book* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997); Olin Chism, "Violins Get the Glory, While Viola Is Butt of Jokes," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Thursday, January 4, 2001, p. D7; Carl Rahkonen, "No Laughing Matter: The Viola Joke Cycle as Musicians' Folklore," *Western Folklore* 59 (2000): 59–63. The fact that viola jokes have begun to be included in general anthologies of modern humor suggests that the jokes are by no means confined to musical circles. See, for example, Geoff Tibballs, ed., *The Mammoth Book of Humor* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2000), 218–221.
5. Groce, "Knowing the Score," 41.
6. Rahkonen, 55.
7. Many of the jokes included in this essay or variants thereof were reported by Rahkonen who collected them during the period 1991–1995 from a cellist and violist in the Pittsburgh Symphony.
8. Groce, *The Musician's Joke Book*, 24.
9. For a variant, *How do you get a viola player to play flying staccato? Write a semibreve with the word "solo" beside it*, see Boyd, "Alter ego," 818.
10. Groce, "Knowing the Score," 41.
11. For a text in which adding vibrato is supposedly the way to make a bass saxophone sound like a chainsaw, see Myers, *A Treasury*, 220.
12. Groce, *The Musician's Jokebook*, 20; for a version with an oboe player in place of a violist, see Myers, 213.

13. Groce, "Knowing the Score," 42.
14. Groce, *The Musician's Jokebook*, 24.
15. Groce, "Knowing the Score," 41.
16. Groce, *The Musician's Jokebook*, 19; for texts substituting a kettledrum or a tenor sax for the viola, see Myers, 161, 215.
17. This joke is often told about piccolos. For a version recommending the shooting of three of four oboe players to accomplish the same end, see Myers, 216.
18. Groce, *The Musician's Jokebook*, 26.
19. The version reported by Rahkonen makes no mention of the key: *How do you know it is a violist who knocked at your door? He won't come in*. See Rahkonen, 52. For a version about a lead singer that does include a reference to a key, see Groce, *The Musician's Jokebook*, 41.
20. Groce, *The Musician's Jokebook*, 26.
21. Chism, D7; for an unlikely version involving a tuba rather than a viola, see Groce, *The Musician's Jokebook*, 36.
22. Groce, "Knowing the Score," 41; Marsh and Goldmark, 23.
23. Myers, 224. This is one of the very few viola jokes not contained in Rahkonen's comprehensive collection.
24. Chism, D7.
25. Groce, *The Musician's Jokebook*, 21.
26. For a version about a bass instead of a viola, see Marsh and Goldmark.
27. Rahkonen, 50.
28. Groce, "Knowing the Score," 42; for a version with a pianist instead of a violist, see Myers, 53.
29. Groce, *The Musician's Jokebook*, 20.
30. *Ibid.*, Myers, 2.
31. Rahkonen, 51.
32. David Dalton, *Playing the Viola: Conversations with William Primrose* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 10.
33. Rahkonen, 53.
34. Groce, *The Musician's Jokebook*, 21.
35. *Ibid.*
36. Groce, "Knowing the Score," 42.
37. *Ibid.*
38. For a version with a trombone player and a conductor, see Groce, *A Musician's Jokebook*, 34; for a version turning on the question of whether to push a bass player or a conductor off a pier first, see Myers, 179.
39. For a version referring to playing a tuba, see Myers, 242.
40. Boyd, 819. For versions involving a banjo or a bassoon, see Myers 22, 215; for a version with bagpipes, see Tibballs, 218.
41. For versions involving a violin solo or an oboe recital, see Myers, 22, 214; for a cello recital, see Tibballs, 219.
42. Cf. Groce, *The Musician's Jokebook*, 21.
43. Lionel Terti, *My Viola and I* (Boston, Crescendo Publishing Company, 1974), 16.
44. Terti, 19.
45. See tale type 750A, The Wishes, in Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale*, FF Communications No. 184 (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1961), 254–255.
46. Rahkonen, 54.
47. Amedee Daryl Williams, *Lillian Fuchs, First Lady of the Viola* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1994), 16.
48. Williams, 129.
49. William Primrose, *Walk on the North Side: Memoirs of a Violist* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1978), 59.
50. *Ibid.*, 45.

51. Ibid., 19.
52. Ibid., 46.
53. Dalton, 5.
54. Rahkonen, 56.
55. Primrose, 69; Dalton 226.
56. Primrose, 165.
57. Tertis, 86–87, 138, 162.
58. Dalton, 197.
59. Cf. Groce, *The Musician's Jokebook*, 37.
60. Ibid., 44.
61. Ibid., 41.
62. Myers, 241, 213.
63. Lister, 126.
64. Rahkonen, 59.
65. For an interesting extended roundtable discussion of the impact of political correctness on traditional humor, see Paul Lewis, ed. "Humor and Political Correctness," *Humor* 10 (1997): 453–513.
66. There are a few viola jokes that portray the violist as truly dimwitted. For example, *During a concert, a fight broke out between the oboe player and the viola player. At the interval, the orchestra went to investigate. "He broke my reed," said the oboe player. "He undid two of my strings," countered the viola player, "but he won't tell me which ones!"* See Tibballs, 220.