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XL ARTS

Keeping Austin Viola

Aurelien Petillot starts an ensemble to spotlight his second-fiddle instrument

By [Jeanne Claire van Ryzin](#)

AMERICAN-STATESMAN ARTS WRITER

Thursday, January 22, 2009

Aurélien Pétilot loves chocolate. And the viola.

And so he's happy to gush about both on a recent afternoon at the cafe Dolce Vita.

"The viola is like a dark, rich chocolate," he says in between bites of tiramisù. "The violin — that's like milk chocolate, familiar to everyone. The viola is sensual, full-bodied and darkly sweet."

A little melancholic, perhaps?

"Yeah, sure" he concedes. "But it's also warm, like a hot dark chocolate with a hidden beauty."

And something that good needs its own spotlight, which is why the 30-year-old Frenchman launched Viola By Choice, an ensemble dedicated to spotlighting the often overlooked instrument.

On Friday, Pétilot and a handful of his fellow musicians — not all are violists but among them are Bruce Williams, the principal violist of the Austin Symphony Orchestra — will play music spanning several centuries that's all inspired by color. Included are premieres of new pieces by Austin composers P. Kellach Waddle and James Norman. And the show will also feature live improvised paintings by Austin artist Jan Roset.

The concert epitomizes the kind of eclectic, inclusive lively programming that Pétilot, who received his doctorate from the University of Texas' Butler School of Music, promotes.

Dialogue with other musicians, collaboration with other art forms, supporting the emerging composers of his own generation, digging through archives to find the forgotten gems of the viola repertoire — these are things that ignite Pétilot. "Did you know that there are 120 pieces written for viola and chorus?" he offers excitedly. "And do we ever hear them?"

Pétilot has a point. With the viola so often assigned to play the inner harmonies within a symphony string section or a string quartet, the viola's solo repertoire doesn't make it center stage very often, unlike its higher pitched cousin, the violin.

As a child growing up in Paris, Pétilot started on the violin at the age of 8 but he soon switched to the viola, drawn to its dark chocolatey sound. After studying at the Sorbonne, he took the advice of a teacher to alter his path a bit and headed to New York for graduate study at the Mannes College of Music. Pétilot arrived in Austin in 2000 after UT offered him a scholarship to pursue a doctorate. The city's laissez faire attitude appealed immediately.

"Really, anything goes here, and I like that," he says. Perhaps that's why his sticker-decorated viola case doesn't draw any second looks. Pétilot has covered it with a collage of images of people who inspire him: J.S. Bach, Astor Piazzolla, Billie Holiday, John Coltrane. He also collects autographs on his case: composer John Adams, star violinist Itzhak Perlman, pop star Elvis Costello.

Since starting Viola By Choice about a year and a half ago, Pétilot has presented thematic concerts where almost anything goes. He's organized programs around spooky dark music for Halloween and presented a concert of humorous music that included plenty of viola jokes. Later this year, he'll showcase French music, a little nod to his upcoming 10th anniversary of living in the United States.

Pétilot plans to stay. And plans to keep on promoting the viola.

His motto? "Keep Austin viola."

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'Music Inspired By Colors'

When: 8 p.m. Friday

Where: Bethel Hall, St. David's Episcopal Church, 301 E. Eighth St.


Cost: \$15 (\$12 seniors, \$8 students, \$5 children)

Info: www.violabychoice.org

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