

When I was younger and found myself on a beach holiday, I would really enjoy the act of collecting shells. Naturally, I preferred those that had kept their bright colours or had an interesting shape, to the common, grey-white, motley ones which are the bane of any reputable shell-collector. However, I would sometimes examine one of these rejects on impulse, and find that the underside was a swirl of colour, like the refractions of oil on water.

The viola is a bit like this. For all intents and purposes, it too is treated as a reject, most often being allocated a tedious, middle part, and providing a focus for a constant stream of derogatory jokes. It does not appear to have a clear personality, being not overly flashy like the violin or piano, nor exotic like the sakauhachi or sitar. Yet under scrutiny, the viola's worth is made readily apparent. The healthy volume of its large body, the dark, rich quality of its C string, and the strained but beautiful colour of the upper reaches of the A string are perhaps the most luminous characteristics in this regard.

This piece traces the viola's struggle for a dignified and honourable position alongside the other string instruments, in the wake of entrenched ideas and the resultant resistance to change. Never fear: by the end, the war is won, and the beauty of the "underside" revealed!