Searching for good solo viola repertoire may sometimes feel like looking for a vegetarian at a Texas barbeque. It’s true; the viola is often overlooked by composers when it comes to creating good solo music. As a result, alto-clef players frequently have difficulty tracking down compositions that speak to them—musical jewels that are simultaneously beautiful, engaging, and challenging.

To help uncover these hidden gems, we queried eleven well-known violists and asked them to share their all-time favorite viola work, as well as a beloved unknown or overlooked piece. The resulting collection from these accomplished violists includes some music that you’ll undoubtedly recognize ... but may introduce you to some lesser-known works as well.

“We have such a small and limited repertoire that we are always searching for possible hidden gems,” says Lawrence Dutton, violist for the Emerson String Quartet. Where to look for those gems depends on your personal preferences and how you feel about transcriptions. For Dutton, it means turning toward contemporary composers.

“The main source of music now for solo viola would be in new music,” he says.

But for players like performer, educator, and viola advocate Helen Callus, it means looking to past composers and not discounting transcriptions. “A lot of our repertoire [comes from] transcriptions and we embrace this as part of our existence,” she says.

Whether it be a work written especially for the viola, like Atar Arad’s viola sonata, or a transcribed piece, such as one of Bach’s gamba sonatas, each can provide a learning and emotive experience for the viola player—and his or her audience.

**ATAR ARAD**

Atar Arad was the first prize–winner at the Geneva International Music Competition (by unanimous vote), and later sat as violist of the legendary Cleveland Quartet from 1980 to 1987. Arad has served on the artist-faculty at the Aspen Music Festival and Yale Summer Festival. He’s now on the artist-faculty at the Steans Institute for Young Artists at the Ravinia Festival and is a professor at the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University. Arad also composes works for viola, violin, and string quartet. He premiered his own viola concerto, *Concerto per la Viola*, in 2005—first in Bloomington, Indiana with Uriel Segal conducting, then later the same year in Brussels, Belgium, with Ronald Zollman conducting.

**ALL-TIME FAVORITE – Sinfonia Concertante, K. 364, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**

“This music belongs both up there in the skies and down here with us,” Arad says. “Its eternal perfection and human drama are unseparated, and so are its profound sadness and unbound happiness.”

Arad remembers performing the Sinfonia Concertante—known for its warm expressiveness and engaging dialog between the violin and viola soloists—just one day after his mother passed away. “There was no better way for me to speak to her one last time,” he says.

**MOST OVERLOOKED – Song of Praise”(Viola Concerto No.1), Oedoen Pártos**

In November of 2006 in Tel Aviv, Israel, Arad gave his two first performances of this composition, accompanied by the Buchmann-Mehta School of Music Symphony Orchestra, Zeev Dorman conducting. Arad explains that from the first stages of his work on this piece, he experienced a strong personal bond with the work. “Most fascinating to me in ‘Song of
Praise’ is the composer’s considerable self-indulgence, a possible flaw in any other piece of music,” Arad says. “Himself a virtuoso violist, Pártos knew how to offer a full display of the instrument’s expressive and technical capabilities. His viola laments, laughs, sings, dances, runs, reflects, speaks. Indeed, for 35 minutes the viola is in the center of the universe.”

CLAUDINE BIGELOW

Claudine Bigelow is head of viola studies and chamber music coordinator at the Brigham Young University School of Music. She’s played in the viola section of major orchestras, performed around the world, and continues to be an active recitalist. She’s on the board of the American Viola Society and is president of the organization’s Utah chapter. Bigelow also coordinates the annual Primrose Memorial Concert.

ALL-TIME FAVORITE—The Late String Quartets, Ludwig van Beethoven

“I am deeply touched by [Beethoven’s] music, how the voices interact with each other, and how all voices become inner voices at certain points,” Bigelow says. “[Beethoven’s viola] music can be the most intimate as well as the most extroverted of any I have ever played. With Beethoven’s chamber music we have an opportunity to express ourselves so completely.”

MOST OVERLOOKED—Viola Concerto in A minor, Gyula David; Viola Sonata in G, Arnold Bax; Romantic Fantasy for Violin, Viola, and Orchestra, Arthur Benjamin; Pulse Aria/Achoo Lullaby for Viola, Live Electronics, and Tape, Stephen Andrew Taylor

Bigelow suggests the David Concerto as an excellent piece for advanced students to learn while preparing for the Bartók Concerto, and says that the Bax Sonata has been overlooked as one of the staples of the viola repertoire, though “it should really be one of them.”

Bigelow would like to hear more people play the Benjamin. “Violists complain that we don’t have enough Romantic-period music for us,” she says. “This piece has the lyricism and sweep to be placed in that category.”

Pulse Aria/Achoo Lullaby is written for solo viola and CD (a percussion track using sounds from a newborn baby, such as a heartbeat, sneezes, and so on). “The music explores the inner life of a child and mother, their special relationship, and the rhythms of their lives together in a way I have never heard in music before,” Bigelow says.

HELEN CALLUS

International recording artist Helen Callus serves as associate professor of viola at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and is the president of the American Viola Society (the first woman elected to that title). She is also the viola forum editor for the American String Teachers Association Journal. Recently, Callus accepted the position of artistic director of the Centrum Chamber Music Festival. She has long championed the viola works of violist and composer Rebecca Clarke and such other 20th-century British composers such as Sir William Walton and York Bowen.

ALL-TIME FAVORITE—Romeo and Juliet, Sergei Prokofiev

“[This] is my absolutely favorite piece,” Callus says. “It’s such amazing music.” Callus suggests the arrangement by legendary Russian violist Vadim Borisovsky. She recently recorded the work for the ASV label in Frankfurt, Germany (the CD is scheduled to be released in fall 2008).

MOST OVERLOOKED—Romeo and Juliet, Sergei Prokofiev

Callus’ all-time favorite viola work doubles as a piece that she feels is often overlooked by violists. “It is well arranged for the viola by someone who knows how to write [and] arrange for the viola,” she says. “It is virtuosic of the highest order and incredibly beautiful—we really need something like this in the repertoire.”

VICTORIA CHIANG

Victoria Chiang is a founding member of the Aspen Ensemble Quintet, and is on the artist faculty at the Peabody Conservatory of Music
and the Aspen Music Festival. Chiang has served on the faculty at the Juilliard School and Hartt School of Music, and she was a board member of the American Viola Society.

ALL-TIME FAVORITE — Concertpiece for Viola and Piano, George Enescu

“This is one of my all-time favorite pieces,” Chiang says. “It is a work that demands virtuosity, lyricism, and elegance. It also is one of the few pieces for viola in the Romantic French style.”

MOST OVERLOOKED — Sinfonia Concertante for Violin and Viola, Ignaz Pleyel

This is Chiang’s current favorite. “It is a beautiful piece in the classical style of Haydn and Mozart, with lovely melodic lines passed back and forth between violin and viola,” she says. “Violists need concertos! This is an effective work, and a wonderful complement to Mozart’s Sinfonia Concertante.”

CAROL COOK

As a native of Scotland, Carol Cook won her first Scottish fiddle competition at age eight and went on to make her concerto debut at 16. She was recently a member of Mark O’Connor’s Grammy Award–winning Appalachia Waltz Trio (along with cellist Natalie Haas). Cook has performed with the New York Philharmonic, the London and Chicago Symphony Orchestras. She’s a member of the Lyric Opera Orchestra and the Metamorphosen Chamber Orchestra.

ALL-TIME FAVORITE — Sinfonia Concertante, K. 364, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

“I have to say that, forced into a decision on my favorite viola piece, it would have to be this Mozart work,” Cook says. “[The second movement theme] has to be one of the most beautiful viola lines ever written.”

MOST OVERLOOKED — Elegy for Solo Viola, String Quartet, and Orchestra, Herbert Howells

“It is very lyrical and full of soulful, plaintive melodies as well as heartbreaking emotion,” Cook says. “It is very well written for the viola and I feel that you can just let the instrument sing as the registers he writes help create the colors needed.

“It is so well suited to viola and it is one of very few pieces that a violist can perform with a chamber orchestra.” Helen Callus has recorded the work (with the Walton Concerto).

“It is absolutely beautiful.”

DAVID DALTON

After David Dalton completed his doctorate under famed violist William Primrose at Indiana University, he helped the legendary violist prepare his memoir, Walk on the North Side. The twosome also collaborated on Playing the Viola: Conversations with William Primrose. Dalton was instrumental in establishing the Primrose International Viola Archive on the campus of Brigham Young University.

ALL-TIME FAVORITE — “I don’t have an all-time-favorite viola work,” Dalton says.

But he adds that several pieces have resonated deeply with him. “[When] I first heard the opening theme of the Walton Viola Concerto, it affected me as a siren song. The Bax Sonata
for Viola and Piano has remained one of my favorites—it’s also neglected, in my opinion.”

MOST OVERLOOKED—“Rhapsody on Folk Songs Harmonized, by Béla Bartók” Tibor Serly; Concerto for Viola and Orchestra, Gyula David

“Both works have a Hungarian flavor, of course,” Dalton says. He adds that they are colorfully orchestrated and accessible to the advanced student. Though not rigorously difficult, technically speaking, there are passages and pages that will challenge the player. “Audiences respond generously to these viola works that are colorful, tuneful, and often brilliant,” he says.

ROBERTO DÍAZ

Roberto Díaz is the new president of the Curtis Institute of Music. He is a professor of viola at the school and was previously principal violist of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Díaz was also principal violist of the National Symphony (under the direction of Mstislav Rostropovich), a member of the Boston Symphony (under Seiji Ozawa), and a member of the Minnesota Orchestra (with Sir Neville Marriner). He has received numerous awards, including prizes at the Naumburg and Munich international viola competitions.

MOST OVERLOOKED—Fantastic Variations on a Theme from Tristan and Isolde, for viola and piano, William Bergsma

Commissioned for Primrose by the Harvard Musical Association in 1961, this work is “really good music,” Díaz says of the piece he’s performed in recital and at the International Viola Congress. “It is always very well received.” He adds that it is almost 15 minutes in length and is wonderful for viola and piano. Díaz points out that although the piece is very difficult technically, it is really worth it.

KIM KASHKASHIAN

An educator at the New England Conservatory of Music and one of the leading advocates for contemporary music, especially the Eastern European compositions of Tigran Mansurian, Kim Kashkashian has recorded extensively for ECM Records. Her most recent recording, Asturiana, showcases the works of Spanish and Argentine composers Manuel de Falla, Alberto Ginastera, Enrique Granados, Carlos Gustavino, and Xavier Montsalvatge. She has recorded all the concerti listed here except the Larcher and the Olivero, which are scheduled to be recorded in 2008. All the concerti except for the Berio were written for her, and she hopes that other violists will perform these works. Kashkashian will perform the US premiere of the Betty Olivero piece on February 7 at Kaufman Concert Hall in New York City.

ALL-TIME FAVORITE—“It’s the one I’m playing!” as Slava [Mstislav Rostropovich] used to say,” Díaz quips.

FAVORITE/MOST OVERLOOKED—“My favorite concerti are also pieces that I consider to be overlooked:
Peter Eötvös: ‘Replica’ (1998); Luciano Berio, ‘Voci’ (1984); Tigran Mansurian, ‘… and then I was in Time Again’ (1995); Thomas Larcher, ‘Still’ (2002); and Betty Olivero, ‘Neharoth Neharoth’ (2006)” Kashkashian says.

“The most challenging and exciting music for me to play in recital these days is György Kurtág’s ‘Signs, Games and Messages’ and György Ligeti’s ‘Solo Sonata.’

PAUL NEUBAUER

Paul Neubauer has performed as a soloist with more than 100 orchestras in the United States and Europe. He serves as orchestra and chamber-music director of the OK Mozart Festival. Neubauer was principal violist of New York Philharmonic for six years (joining at age 21 as the youngest principal string player in the philharmonic’s history) and received the Avery Fisher Career Grant in 1989. Neubauer is also an artist-member of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and has been featured on CBS’s Sunday Morning and Garrison Keillor’s hit National Public Radio series A Prairie Home Companion.

ALL-TIME FAVORITE—“I hate to be cliché,” Neubauer says, “but I try to make whatever I am playing at the moment my favorite piece.”

MOST OVERLOOKED—Romance from the Suite for Viola and Piano, Benjamin Dale (1906)

“It’s a beautiful English romantic work that has a lot of pizzazz!” Neubauer says of this selection by the late British composer. “This work was a great favorite of its dedicatee, Lionel Tertis, as well as William Primrose.” According to Neubauer, this romance was featured in numerous performances and recordings by both of these great artists. “I contacted the publisher of the romance in search of the orchestral parts,” Neubauer says, “and I was informed that a Mr. William Primrose took out the parts in 1942 and never returned them!”

GERALDINE WALThER

Since 2005, Geraldine Walther has served as the violist of the Takács String Quartet. Before then, she had been principal violist of the San Francisco Symphony for 29 years. She had also been assistant principal of the Pittsburgh Symphony, the Miami Philharmonic, and the Baltimore Symphony, and she served as principal violist with the Mainly Mozart Festival in San Diego. In 1995, Walther was selected by Sir Georg Solti as a member of his Musicians of the World.

ALL-TIME FAVORITE—Walther doesn’t favor one viola work over all the rest.

“It’s really hard to choose one piece from all the beautiful, evocative, and endlessly different pieces written for the viola,” she says.

MOST OVERLOOKED —The Three Gamba Sonatas, Johann Sebastian Bach

Walther would like to hear more violists include these three beautiful gamba sonatas in their programs. “They are technically challenging because of the nonstop nature of the writing,” she says.

Walther feels that these three pieces can teach a lot to violists. “It’s just such beautiful music! They sound like they were written for the instrument, especially when you play them with harpsichord so that you aren’t having to produce a big sound all the time and you can lighten up.”

MELIA Watras

Melia Watras has performed worldwide and has appeared as a soloist. She performs extensively throughout the United States and Europe with the award-winning Corigliano Quartet. A native of Hawaii, Watras began studying piano at age five, and soon took up the viola, making her debut as a 16-year-old soloist with the Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra. Watras later won the National Wendell Irish Award. Today Watras is assistant professor of viola at the University of Washington, where she teaches viola and chamber music.
ALL-TIME FAVORITE — Sonata for Viola, Atar Arad

“I spent many years at IU as Atar’s student and teaching assistant, so I got to know him and his music making well,” Watras says. “Many people know Atar as a fabulous viola soloist and chamber musician. He’s also a terrific composer.”

Watras believes this piece is a significant contribution to the viola literature. “I was lucky enough to study the piece with [Arad], and record it for my first CD, so it’s a very special piece for me.”

MOST OVERLOOKED—Sonata for Viola and Piano in Bb major, Op. 36, Henri Vieuxtemps

“I find it to be a very charming piece that probably doesn’t get the respect that it deserves,” Watras says. “The music of many of the historic violin virtuosi-composers is often passed off as physical exercise, rather than beautiful music. Vieuxtemps writes with passion, charm, grace, and beautiful bel canto lines.”

Watras especially loves the barcarolle movement, which reminds her of the Offenbach opera Tales of Hoffman. “It lays well on the viola,” she says, adding that the work is virtuosic and satisfying to perform. “It’s not heard that often in concert, so it’s fresh, while still being familiar to an audience’s ears.”