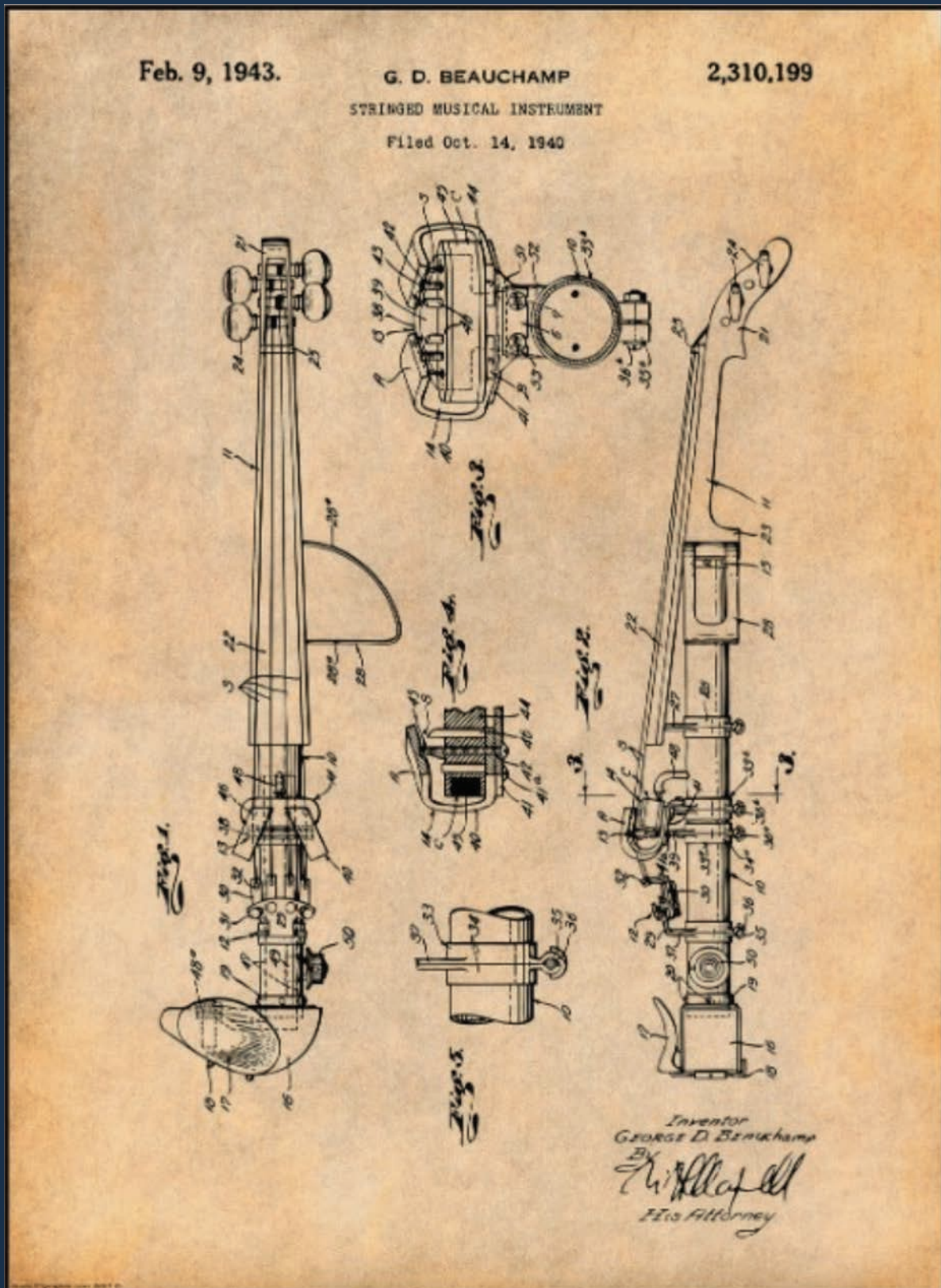


Journal of the American Viola Society

Volume 41 Number 2



Features:

The Viola Behind the Iron Curtain, Pt. II

The Legacy of Pioneering Women Violists

Forging a National Sound: Guillermo Uribe Holguín

A View of fantaSies

by Melia Watras

Since 2016, each American Viola Society Festival has featured a newly composed work for viola ensemble. It was my great honor to receive the 2024 commission, and I am deeply grateful that my piece, *Fantasies in alto clef*, was premiered by the AVS Mass Viola Ensemble under the direction of Anthony Devroye on June 22, 2024, at the Colburn School in Los Angeles.

When Tony and Festival host and coordinator Daphne Gerling approached me about the project, I was thrilled. The opportunity to write for our viola community was incredibly meaningful. As I began sketching ideas, three guiding pillars emerged: first, to reflect the joy and camaraderie of violists gathering together; second, to honor AVS and the Festival itself for the remarkable work they do on behalf of our instrument; and third, to connect past, present, and future generations of violists.

To weave these ideas into the piece, I turned to the letters A, V, and S. They shaped the titles of the three movements—*Alto lines*, *Viola visions*, and *Spin*—and served as musical material through the use of cryptograms. Jules Écorcheville's system spells AVS with A, A, and E; Arthur Honegger's version gives A, C, and G-flat. These became both structural pitch centers and small gestures hidden throughout the score. For me, these cryptograms offered a way to embed AVS into the fabric of the composition itself. As a side note, I found the pitches A and E reminiscent of the opening of the Rebecca Clarke Viola Sonata, as well as *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* (as a violinist would learn it).

The first movement, *Alto lines*, opens with the resonance of the viola's open strings. It gradually contracts from full ensemble to a solo voice, intertwining lush, lyrical textures with passages marked *come una voce antico*—for which I had in mind a sound not quite of this world. My friend and colleague at the University of Washington, Catherine Connors, Professor of Classics, once told me

that to the Ancient Greeks and Romans, whose Muses were the daughters of Mnemosyne (Memory), music has always existed, and its creation is an act of remembrance. This deep insight has stayed with me.

The second movement, *Viola visions*, reverses the process of *Alto lines*: it begins with a single violist and expands to the full ensemble. In measures 2 and 42, the four parts collectively play pitches from both cryptograms: A, C, G-flat and E. This chord slides down, up and down again—giving a melting, Dalí-ish, surreal feeling. In a subtle honorific nod to our instrument, I made the notation resemble the shape of the f-holes of a viola (lying on their sides, horizontally). In measures 31-36, the voices enter and recede in a pattern that echo the viola's f-holes.



Example 1. Melia Watras, *Fantasies in alto clef*, mvmt. 2, mm. 2-4

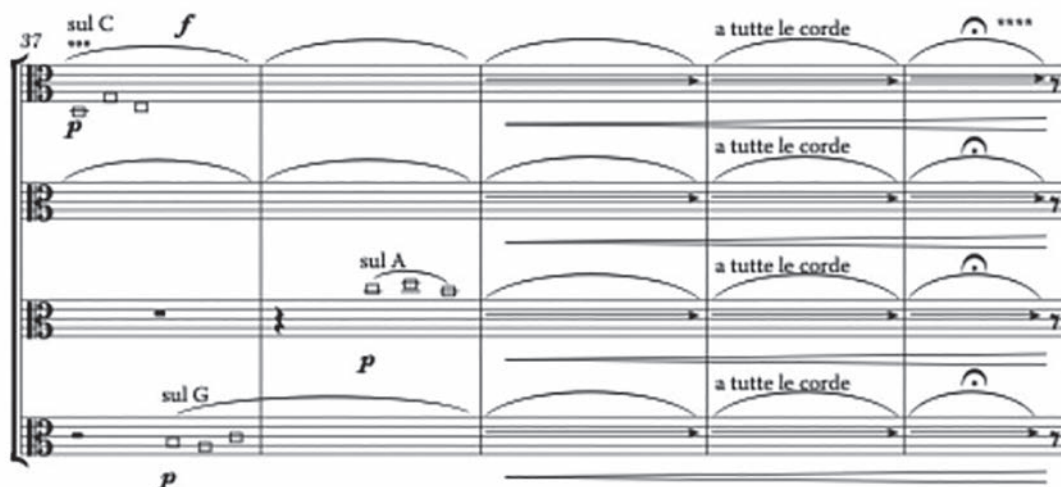


Example 2. Melia Watras, *Fantasies in alto clef, mvmt. 2, mm. 31-36*



Example 3. Melia Watras, *F-holes/viola entrances sketch*

Viola visions explores sound imagery through its use of extended techniques and notation. In measure 1, boxes containing musical material are to be played and then repeated (as fragments or complete boxes) by individual members of the section as they wish. This gives the moment freedom, complexity and a sense of improvisation, without having to over-notate. Beginning in measure 26, the performers are asked to use half-pressure in the left hand: somewhere between a solid note



Example 4. Melia Watras, *Fantasies in alto clef, mvmt. 2, mm. 37-41*

and a harmonic, to assist in generating a swarming effect. Finally, *Spin* is a celebration: energetic, raucous, and joyfully communal. It invites every violist on stage to let their (bow) hair down and revel in the sonority of so many instruments spinning sound together.

One of the privileges of this commission was imagining the magic of an ensemble comprised of violists of every background, age, and corner of the country. Composing

for this intergenerational community was as inspiring as hearing it brought to life at Colburn. I am especially grateful to Tony Devroye, whose vision, preparation, and leadership ensured the piece resonated. His observation captures the spirit of the project: “No matter who you are as a player and what your background is, there is a role for you in this piece and a role for you as a violist as part of this community.”



Photo of the Mass Viola Ensemble performing Melia Watras' fantaSies at the 2024 American Viola Society Festival at Colburn School in Los Angeles. Photo courtesy of Dwight Pounds.

Looking ahead, *Fantasies in alto clef* will be recorded in Seattle this fall with Tony, Kayleigh Miller, Erin Wight, and Michael Jinsoo Lim, to be released on Planet M Records. As I think back on the 2024 Festival, I'm filled with gratitude and excitement for the next viola ensemble commission in 2026, and for all the artistry, scholarship, and community that AVS continues to inspire.

Remembering the wonderful experiences of the 2024 AVS Festival has me looking forward to what lies ahead in 2026. I'm excited for the next viola ensemble piece that will be premiered, and all of the breathtaking performances, presentations and people that make the AVS Festival such a truly special event.