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Features:

Ritornello Form in
Telemann's Viola Concerto

Ladislav Vycpálek's Suite
for Solo Viola

What's in a Name? Ladislav Vycpálek and His Suite for Solo Viola, op. 21

Jacob Adams

Violists are often on the lookout for new and undiscovered repertoire to promote and program. Many of us are drawn to the shelves of university music libraries, poring over old scores in the viola stacks, in search of that long-forgotten piece just waiting to be resurrected and championed. This article concerns one such piece unearthed through this process that violists should know about—the Suite for Solo Viola, op. 21, written by Czech composer Ladislav Vycpálek in 1929, currently available through Bärenreiter of Prague.¹ Over and over again, in my own performances and presentations of Vycpálek's suite, people have commented on how beautifully the piece shows off the capabilities of the instrument (it is not surprising to discover that Vycpálek was an avid viola player himself). Of course, two questions invariably follow: "How do you pronounce his name again?" and "Why haven't I heard this piece before?"

Both are reasonable questions. The first question is easily answered—the Czech composer's name is pronounced "Vitz-pa-leck." The second question led to the main impetus behind this article, as violists should be aware of this piece in the repertoire. Vycpálek's exotic Czech name and somewhat obscure status may help explain why violists in America are unaware of this piece. But if they look beyond the composer's intimidating name, they will discover a true



Ladislav Vycpálek, circa 1942 (all images courtesy of the National Library of the Czech Republic)

gem of the unaccompanied repertoire that has been overlooked for too long. The suite's four movements showcase the instrument's idiomatic potency for dark expression, dramatic gesture, and virtuosic flair. All of this is in the service of Vycpálek's compelling musical content.

Before examining the suite in more detail, it's worth knowing a bit about the relatively unknown man who composed this piece.

Vycpálek: Biographical Background

Ladislav Vycpálek (1882–1969) is a name known to scholars of twentieth-century Czech music, but not widely recognized beyond that circle. His high standing within Czech musical culture is confirmed by the prominent scholar John Tyrrell, who described Vycpálek as “one of the most distinguished Czech composers of the [twentieth] century.”² Tyrrell mentions that Vycpálek was often “isolated from the main currents of Czech music of the time,” but that his career as a composer was “remarkably direct and assured.”³

Vycpálek began learning violin and piano at age six, and he played in string quartets throughout his life—including thirty years as the regular violist of an amateur quartet led by Josef Pick, from 1909 to 1939. After studying German and Czech at Prague University from 1901 to 1906, Vycpálek obtained a post at the Prague University Library in 1907. In 1908, he began taking composition lessons with Vítězslav Novák, a highly respected composer and pedagogue, who helped forge a path for Czech modernism—in spite of the Romantic predilections in many of his own compositions.⁴

After World War I and the resultant Czechoslovakian independence, Vycpálek founded the music department at the Prague University Library in 1922. He directed the department until his retirement in 1942. Beyond his compositional output, this remains his most lasting legacy. The music department continues to operate today, now under the auspices of the National Library of the Czech Republic. Their present-day website details the content of their extensive holdings, which have been “systematically created from the establishment of the music department . . . thanks to the efforts of the founder of the music department, Ladislav Vycpálek.”⁵ He would go on to hold other important cultural advisory positions up until World War II: as a member of the Czech Academy, a member of the advisory committee of the National Theatre, and as chairman of the music section of the Umělecká Beseda (a Czech civic-arts association).⁶

All of these titles serve to show the preeminent standing that Vycpálek had attained within Czech cultural circles

by the mid-1920s. His actual output of compositions was relatively small—perhaps in part hindered by all of his other commitments, but also inhibited by what Tyrrell calls “his own cautious and fastidious nature.”⁷

Tyrrell goes on to note: “It is surprising . . . that as an accomplished violinist and violist who played regularly in a quartet he did not write more instrumental music.”⁸ Beyond the four string pieces written in the late 1920s (the Suite for Solo Viola, op. 21, is among these, as well as the Duo for Violin and Viola, op. 20, and the Suite for Solo Violin, op. 22), Vycpálek only produced a Violin Sonatina in 1947, two small sets of piano pieces, an early string quartet, and a late orchestral work. Otherwise, he was preoccupied with vocal genres, perhaps due to his extensive literary education.

The term most frequently applied to Vycpálek's musical style is “contrapuntal.” With polyphony and contrapuntal writing as a foundational aspect of his style, Vycpálek was an avid student of Bach, poring over the scores of his fugues. A case can be made that Bach had a more significant impact on Vycpálek's mature works than did his teacher, Novák. In this sense, Vycpálek continued an early twentieth-century trend of adapting Baroque techniques and forms to modern settings. The unaccompanied string genre was particularly ripe for such Baroque-influenced writing from composers in the early twentieth century—for violists, characteristics in the unaccompanied works of Reger and Hindemith immediately spring to mind. Vycpálek's suite is a similar example of this approach to unaccompanied string writing from the period, though with a decidedly Czech bent.

Suite for Solo Viola, op. 21

In the *New Grove* entry for Vycpálek, John Tyrrell summarizes a number of the notable characteristics of the composer's style. His overview is useful, for many of the features Tyrrell describes are present in the viola suite:

Vycpálek's harmonic texture derives almost entirely from contrapuntal complications. Consecutive dissonant formations are frequent and . . . there are many passages of considerable bitonal tension, or momentary atonality. The lack of clear diatonic polarity in his music meant that the sonata form had little appeal . . . Vycpálek's melody, too, is shaped by contrapuntal necessity. It is frequently modal, lacking



Vycpálek, far right, playing viola in a chamber group with friends in 1930, shortly after completion of the Suite for Solo Viola

tonal drive and clear periodicity. His instrument writing is similarly conditioned by the claims of balanced and blended contrapuntal voices rather than imaginative and vivid colors.⁹

With sonata form having little appeal to Vycpálek as a formal structure, the composer instead suggested that a “tragic dialogue” between a man and a woman was the inspiration for the music of the op. 21 suite.¹⁰ Vycpálek finished composing the suite in late 1929. Its premiere occurred on April 14, 1930, at a concert of the Society for Chamber Music in Prague. Jiří Herold, violist of the Bohemian Quartet, was the performer.

First Movement: Moderato assai

The first movement of Vycpálek’s suite grips the listener with its forceful opening statement: a dissonant, two-chord motto that returns throughout the first movement (ex. 1). With this motto and the way it is utilized in the movement, a parallel with the opening movement of

Hindemith’s op. 25, no. 1 unaccompanied sonata seems appropriate (see ex. 7). As Hindemith does in that work, Vycpálek here utilizes the two-chord motto as a framing device within the movement’s structure. It returns again and again throughout the movement in different roles—acting as an opening declaration, as a dramatic arrival point, and as something resembling a cadential gesture. Indeed, the motto fulfills each of these distinctive roles within the first eleven measures of the piece (ex. 1).

With the motto’s varied functions in this passage, Vycpálek also varies the motto’s content with its restatements: at the downbeat arrival of both m. 5 and m. 10, he alters the motto’s rhythm, while both rhythm and harmony are altered at the downbeat of m. 11. This is an example of what Tyrrell referred to as Vycpálek’s harmonic texture stemming “almost entirely from contrapuntal complications.”¹¹ In m. 11, his sense of chorale-style voice leading produces the first diatonic triad of the piece. The triplet and sixteenth-note passages that link

Example 1. Ladislav Vycpálek, *Suite for Solo Viola*, op. 21, mvmt. I, mm. 1–11.

Moderato assai

stringendo un poco
cresc.
riten.
in tempo
come sopra
cresc. sempre
riten.
in tempo

Example 2. Ladislav Vycpálek, *Duo for Violin and Viola*, op. 20, mvmt. I, mm. 23–25.

ritardando

Example 3. Ladislav Vycpálek, *Duo for Violin and Viola*, op. 20, mvmt. I, mm. 75–76.

the motto statements to one another evoke the *détaché* figuration sequences seen in other Baroque-influenced string writing of the era. These linking passages are also descending sequences, which Vycpálek similarly employed in the first movement of his *Duo for Violin and Viola*, op. 20, written just prior to the *Suite for Solo Viola* (exs. 2 and 3).

In both examples 2 and 3, the descending gesture of major and minor thirds is similar to the motion seen in mm. 7–9 of example 1 from the suite.

Following the dramatic arrival of the G-major triad in m. 11 of the first movement, a contrasting section marked

Example 4. Ladislav Vycpálek, *Suite for Solo Viola, op. 21, mvmt. I, mm. 11–14.*

Example 5. Ladislav Vycpálek, *Suite for Solo Viola, op. 21, mvmt. I, mm. 23–25.*

Example 6. Ladislav Vycpálek, *Suite for Solo Viola, op. 21, mvmt. I, mm. 25–32.*

tranquillo showcases Vycpálek’s skillful contrapuntal writing. Some highly expressive dissonances occur under an eighth-note melody that seems harmonically derived from the motto (ex. 4).

The A-flat–G dissonance on the downbeats of m. 13 and m. 14 evokes the opening chord’s interval, right down to the open string in the bass line. One wonders whether Vycpálek opted for the open G string in the bass over a fingered C, which would have replicated the opening chord precisely at the higher octave, for the sake of the open string’s additional resonance or the easier technical execution of the passage. Whatever the case may be, the triplets of the opening phrase return to build sequentially toward a restatement of this eighth-note melody—now marked *Più mosso, animoso*. The expressive dissonances of the melody are combined with the descending triplet and sixteenth figurations of the opening phrase to arrive at the most ornamented statement of the motto yet, functioning here again as a cadence (ex. 5).

The ornamented version of the motto here serves a similar function to its statement in m. 11. In place of the straight G-major triad of m. 11, however, now the triad is only implied. It is never directly stated, due to the open C pedal and the passing tone A.

The following section is derived from the *tranquillo* material of m. 11. This second version is considerably denser in its polyphonic voicing—illustrating Vycpálek’s penchant for creative and thoughtful harmonies based on contrapuntal principles (ex. 6).

In this dense harmonic world, Tyrrell’s insights about the composer’s tendency toward “passages of considerable bitonal tension, or momentary atonality” ring true.¹² While numerous tonal centers are hinted at in this passage, the anchoring chord is the perfect fifth of the G–D open strings. This fifth occurs on the downbeats of both m. 26 and m. 27. The following two measures are the most chromatic, even atonal, of the movement. While

Example 7. Paul Hindemith, *Sonata for Solo Viola*, op. 25, no. 1, *mvmt. I*, m. 1 and mm. 39–40 (three-chord motto and reduced subsequent statement of motto).

Breit Viertel

Example 8. Ladislav Vycpálek, *Suite for Solo Viola*, op. 21, *mvmt. I*, mm. 64–67.

Meno mosso **Molto meno mosso**

Example 9. Ladislav Vycpálek, *Suite for Solo Viola*, op. 21, *mvmt. II*, mm. 73–78.

the harmony does not center on any particular tonality here, the descending motion of m. 29 does lead back to the G–D anchor. As the G–D chord maneuvers into a restatement of the two-chord motto in its original form, it becomes apparent that the G–D anchor chord in the previous measures was functioning as an equivalent, if abbreviated, substitute for the motto. This is similar to Hindemith’s approach in his op. 25, no. 1 viola sonata from a few years prior, which also used a shortened version of the thematic mottos later in the movement as a substitution (ex. 7).

Vycpálek’s use of this technique is undoubtedly a subtler example than Hindemith’s equivalent uses in op. 25, no. 1, which does seem to reflect the contrasting personalities of the two men. The passage of example 6 also seems to correlate with Tyrrell’s assessment of

Vycpálek’s instrumental music often being “conditioned by the claims of balanced and blended contrapuntal voices rather than imaginative and vivid colors.”¹³ The rhapsodic harmony of this passage never strays far from the overarching structure of the movement.

The movement’s ending once more outlines the G and A-flat–G seventh chord derived from the motto, before some clever idiomatic contrary motion produces an unanticipated final cadence (ex. 8).

While the concluding C-major chord has a triumphant sense of arrival and finality, it also alters the complexion of how the motto has previously been treated throughout the movement. The entire movement has, to this point, had the feel of a prelude built around the G-centered two-chord motto. But in a clever turn, these final

measures recast the motto not as the primary anchoring point itself—as it has been up until this point in the piece—but as a dominant function, a V chord resolving to a C-major tonic. Such a reading of the score gives a more dramatic sense of the movement’s journey. If Vycpálek was truly envisioning a dialogue between a man and a woman in this suite, the first movement’s final cadence conveys an arrival to a previously unattained plane in their story.

If one can only perform a single movement from the suite, the first movement could work quite effectively as a stand-alone entity. It has a self-contained style and virtuosity—somewhat reminiscent of a twentieth-century version of a Bach Cello-Suite Prelude—and it offers a dramatically satisfying opening and conclusion within its four-and-a-half minutes.

Second Movement: *Con moto*

While each of the remaining three movements of the suite contains its own distinct appeal, none of them encapsulates the characteristics of Vycpálek’s style quite as fully as the first movement. The second movement is a *moto perpetuo*, fulfilling the role of a scherzo within the suite. Its harmonic journey is in some ways similar to the first movement—with this movement centered on the pitch D; the final chord consists of three Gs in octaves. This suggests the same dominant V function for D throughout this movement as seen with the two-chord

motto throughout the first movement, with the pitch center of the entire movement serving as a V leading to the concluding tonic cadence (see ex. 8).

The second movement features a lot of passagework in the detached bariolage style, similar to that employed to great effect by Bach and Hindemith in their solo string works.¹⁴ String crossings are essential to this technique being effective, as is a deft use by the composer of utilizing open strings as pedal tones. On both counts, Vycpálek demonstrates a knack for virtuosic sensibility and an idiomatic understanding of the viola’s capabilities. Take, for example, the exciting sequence that concludes the second movement (ex. 9).

Vycpálek utilized similar bariolage techniques in the third movement of his duo, op. 20. In the duo, the viola’s bariolage acts as accompaniment, occasionally venturing into double-stop territory, covering sometimes three or all four strings (exs. 10a and 10b).

It is interesting to note that the bariolage utilized in the suite is less involved and complex for the performer to execute effectively than that seen in example 10 in the duo. When functioning as the accompaniment to a melody, Vycpálek is more ambitious in his bariolage writing. But as the single voice directing the musical line, as in the suite, the bariolage is harnessed more carefully to convey the sweeping contour of the gesture.

Example 10a. Ladislav Vycpálek, *Duo for Violin and Viola*, op. 20, mvmt. III, mm. 1–6.

Allegro moderato (♩ = c. 100)
vigoroso, quasi Poco meno sul G e D

Violin

Viola

mf

mf > *mp* *cresc.*

cresc.

al molto f

ri - te - nu - to

Example 10b. Ladislav Vycpálek, *Duo for Violin and Viola*, op. 20, mvmt. III, mm. 87–96.

The musical score is presented in two systems, each with a Violin (V) and Viola (V) part. The first system (measures 87-90) features a Violin part with trills and a Viola part with a melodic line. The second system (measures 91-94) includes a Violin part with triplets and a Viola part with a steady accompaniment. The third system (measures 95-96) shows a Violin part with a fermata and a Viola part with a final cadence. Performance instructions include 'col talone' at the beginning, 'f sempre' for sustained fortissimo, 'cresc.' for crescendo, 'allargando poco a poco' for a gradual tempo change, 'molto f' for very loud, 'più allargando' for further tempo change, 'ff sostenuto assai' for fortissimo with a long note, and 'secco' for a dry, accented ending.

Third Movement: Lento

The slow movement of the suite strikes an elegiac tone, with chant-like melodic lines growing in expressivity and range to a highly impassioned middle section, before withdrawing again to an intimate resignation. Throughout, the fluid melodic lines are interspersed with a two-chord fermata gesture, which might be termed the motto theme of this movement. This motto

is always marked *pianissimo*, characterized by fifths in the instrument's upper register under a fermata. As with many of the first movement's motto statements, no two statements are identical—though they are unmistakably interconnected (ex. 11).

With its contrast of mournful lyricism and ethereal chorale motion, the third movement could function

Example 11. Ladislav Vycpálek, *Suite for Solo Viola*, op. 21, mvmt. III, motto statements.

Example 12. Ladislav Vycpálek, *Suite for Solo Viola*, op. 21, mvmt. IV, mm. 1–6.

Allegro ma non tanto, poco rubato ♩ = c. 144

Example 13. Ladislav Vycpálek, *Suite for Solo Violin*, op. 22, mvmt. III, mm. 1–6.

Allegro non tanto (♩ = c. 144 [vigor] - 160 [d'ord.])

quite effectively as a stand-alone piece—in the Offertory for a religious service, for instance. It is a very affecting movement, full of the sort of dark-timbred writing on the G and D strings that characterize the best lyrical, elegiac works for the instrument.

Fourth Movement: *Allegro ma non tanto*, and the *Suite for Solo Violin*, op. 22

The suite's finale provides an ample showcase for the composer's contrapuntal skill and a performer's virtuosity. Cast in a large-scale ABA form, the movement's jaunty and boisterous momentum seems inspired by folk fiddling. There are elements here similar to those seen in the final movement of Hindemith's *Der Schwanendreher* (which takes its inspiration from a folk tune of the same name), written several years later. Both Vycpálek's and Hindemith's movements share a common key center (G) and an earthy exuberance, to say nothing of the virtuosic

challenges present in both works. There is also a notable connection between the suite's finale and the work that Vycpálek wrote immediately after—his *Suite for Solo Violin*, op. 22.

The *Suite for Solo Violin* does not share many common features with the *Suite for Solo Viola* in general. But when comparing the finale movements of each work, some parallels emerge. In op. 21 (the viola suite), Vycpálek creates an appealing triple-metered energy in the A sections of the finale (ex. 12).

The opening of the final movement of op. 22 establishes a similar character (ex. 13).

It is worth noting that the violin suite includes descriptive titles for its three movements, with the finale movement titled "The Village." Such a descriptor evokes the rural

Example 14. Ladislav Vycpálek, *Suite for Solo Violin*, op. 22, mvmt. III, mm. 117–22.

Example 15. Ladislav Vycpálek, *Suite for Solo Viola*, op. 21, mvmt. IV, mm. 120–26.

dances and simple peasant life that had served as a marker for Czech national identity going back as far as Smetana.¹⁵ And the similarities between the writing in the violin suite and viola suite in the finale movements suggest a common source of inspiration in this style. Note the similarities in style and content in the parallel passages seen in exs. 14–17.

In both works, the jaunty and virtuosic folk-inspired character of the music acts as the driving force of momentum toward each suite's ultimate conclusion.

Conclusion

Upon reflection, it is clear that the *Suite for Solo Viola* is not music written with a timid player in mind. While Vycpálek had a good idiomatic knowledge of the instrument through his own experience as a player, he may have also had the strong, robust tones of contemporary central-European players like Paul Hindemith or Ladislav Černý (the legendary Czech violist for whom Hindemith's op. 25, no. 1 sonata is dedicated) in mind. Indeed, Vycpálek's writing for solo viola shares some

Example 16. Ladislav Vycpálek, *Suite for Solo Violin*, op. 22, mvmt. III, mm. 129–32.

Example 17. Ladislav Vycpálek, *Suite for Solo Viola*, op. 21, mvmt. IV, mm. 150–53.

common characteristics with Hindemith's unaccompanied sonatas from the same era—as suggested in this article with the comparisons to the op. 25, no. 1 sonata in particular. But, as seen in the context of the composer's Duo for Violin and Viola, op. 20 and his Suite for Solo Violin, op. 22, the Suite for Solo Viola, op. 21 also showcases Vycpálek's own distinct style of string writing.

My enjoyment in discovering and performing Vycpálek's Suite for Solo Viola has been greater than I expected. This is the pleasure and satisfaction one can gain from digging deep into our repertoire's history to find forgotten or little-known gems. In programming and discussing the piece, I continue to discover new aspects to consider, uncovering more layers and insights into this score and its enigmatic composer. These are the qualities that one dreams of when searching for those undiscovered diamonds-in-the-rough in the repertoire. While it can be a tiring and sometimes fruitless process, I strongly encourage all violists—especially those trying to establish an individual performing voice—to explore repertoire beyond what is most standard or familiar. Certainly this means championing new music and living composers, but it can also mean resurrecting long-forgotten works that deserve to be reconsidered with fresh eyes and ears.

Vycpálek's viola suite is a true showcase of virtuosity and musicality for the mature and advanced player, particularly one looking for something different to learn. Each of its individual movements is convincing as a stand-alone work—but put together as the composer intended, they are especially effective. The suite could work beautifully if programmed as a companion piece to any of Hindemith's solo sonatas or as a foray into the rich legacy of twentieth-century music for the viola by Czech composers. It is a unique and splendid work, written by a composer with a unique musical voice—and a very unique name!

Dr. Jacob Adams is Assistant Professor of Viola at the University of Alabama. His recording of Vycpálek's Suite for Solo Viola is available on iTunes and will soon be released on Centaur Records along with works of fellow Czech composers Leoš Janáček and Otakar Zich.

Notes

1. Ladislav Vycpálek, *Suite für Viola Solo, Op. 21*, Editio Bärenreiter Praha H3729. The piece was first brought to my attention by musicologist Derek Katz—UCSB Professor, Czech music scholar, and avid violist. I would like to thank Dr. Katz, Helen Callus, and David Bynog for their support and feedback in the research and writing that went into this article.
2. John Tyrrell, *Janacek: Years of a Life*, vol. 2, *Tsar of the Forests: (1914–1928)* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 146.
3. John Tyrrell, "Ladislav Vycpálek," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Macmillan, 2001), 26:915.
4. The relationship between Vycpálek and Novák deteriorated in 1917 due to Vycpálek's negative opinion of his teacher's opera *The Lantern*.
5. National Library of the Czech Republic; "About the Holdings of the Music Department," accessed February 3, 2015, <http://www.en.nkp.cz/about-us/professional-activities/music/oh-holdings>.
6. Tyrrell, "Ladislav Vycpálek," 914.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 915.
10. Jonathan Woolf, review of *Monologue*, Jitka Hosprová (viola), Supraphon SU 4049-2, compact disc, *Fanfare* 35, no. 2 (November/December 2011): 643.
11. Tyrrell, "Ladislav Vycpálek," 915.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. The preludes to Bach's E-Major Violin Partita and G-Major Cello Suite come immediately to mind as classic examples of bariolage usage. Closer in date



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to Vycpálek, Hindemith utilizes this technique masterfully in both the last movement of his op. 11, no. 5 sonata from 1919 and in the opening movement of his op. 31, no. 4 sonata, written in 1923. Bariolage is employed similarly, and to great effect, in Krzysztof Penderecki's much later *Cadenza for Viola Solo* (1984), which, in spite of its far later composition date, seems to share a kinship with unaccompanied string works of this era due to its structure, use of expressive dissonance, and use of Baroque forms.

15. There was and is nothing uniquely "Czech" about rural villages or peasant dances—but these were accepted tropes within the broader cultural understanding related to notions of nationalism, specifically Czech nationalism. See, for example, the discussion of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) and the *Volksgeist* in Lonnie R. Johnson, *Central Europe: Enemies, Neighbors, Friends* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 130–43. Vladimír Macura describes the milieu of Czech culture in the nineteenth century for educated Europeans as being “a kind of naïve Arcadia of pristine values, associated with childhood, Nature, or folk-lore.” See Macura, “Problems and Paradoxes of the National Revival,” in *Bohemia in History*, ed. Mikuláš Teich (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 184.

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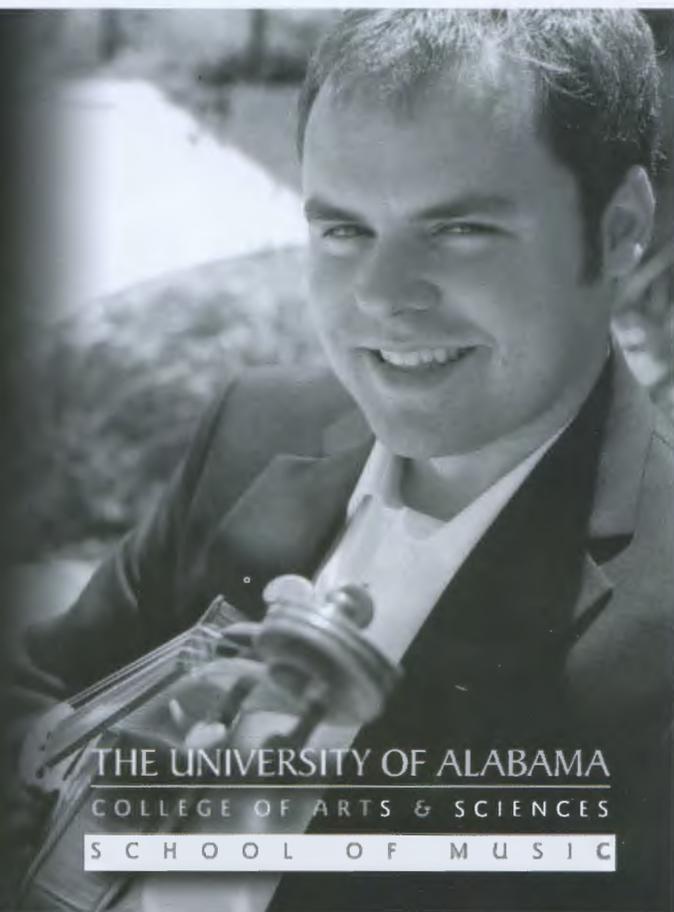
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