# Music of the Viola

The viola is much under-rated. The instrument is difficult to play and its sound box is not optimal for its range of notes. Violists are the butt of numerous jokes maligning their tuning and their timing. Nevertheless, in the hands of a master, the viola has a wonderfully rich sound, melancholy in its low register and silvery in the high. Of all the strings it is perhaps most similar to the normal human voice.

**Early History**

The modern viola first appeared in the late 16th century (Riley, 1991). Until then string music had been played on viols of various sizes. These had evolved from guitar-like instruments, but were played with a bow rather than plucked. Most viols were held between the legs (*da gamba*), although the smaller ones were occasionally played on the arm (*da braccio*). Viols typically had 6 strings.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, the luthiers in Cremona, Northern Italy – Andrea Amati and his sons, Antonio Stradivari, Andrea Guarneri, and others – produced a new kind of stringed instrument with 4 strings. They used four sizes to fit the normal vocal ranges: violin (soprano), viola (tenor, alto), cello (baritone)

and bass (bass). Different sized violas were initially made for the tenor and
alto ranges, but as time passed one viola was used for both. Music for the
viola is written in the alto clef.

The viola is
larger than the violin, with a length that varies between 38cm and 43 cm compared to the
violin’s 35.5 cm. The viola bow is a little heavier than that of the violin. The
viola’s sound box is smaller than it should be for its range of notes. This can
be seen by comparing the sizes of violin, viola, cello and bass – the viola is
closer in size to the violin than to the cello rather than intermediate between
the two. This is necessary if the instrument is to be played on the arm:

Violin, viola, cello, bass

Because it was
difficult to play and largely used to complete the middle notes of the harmony
rather than to play the melody, the viola was not popular with string players.
The viola section of the symphony orchestra often came to be

filled with failed
violinists. The following is a comment from 1766:

The viola is
commonly regarded as of little importance in the musical establishment. The
reason may well be that it is often played by persons who are either still
beginners in the ensemble or have no particular gifts with which to distinguish
themselves on the violin, or that the instrument yields all too few advantages
to its players, so that able people are not easily persuaded to take it up.
(Quantz, 1766, quoted by Boyden and Woodward, 2001)

In recent years several luthiers have tried to make the viola more resonant and easier to play. An intriguing modern viola is the Viola Pellegrina of David Ravinus, which accentuates the volume of the sound box by using a novel shape and tilts the board and neck to facilitate the fingering. Rudolf Haken has recorded using a Viola Pellegrina. The following figure compares it to a Stradivari violin named after one of its first owners, the Count of Archinto:

**Early Viola Music**

The viola serves to play the middle notes in the harmony. Most early string music used it simply for this purpose. Themes were introduced and carried by the violins or the cellos. Several pieces of classical chamber music, such as Mozart's viola quintets, benefit immensely form the subtle harmonizing of the viola, but for the most part the viola is not heard separately from the ensemble. Concertos written for the viola, e.g. by Carl Stamitz, Alessandro Rolla and Franz Anton Hoffmeister, were few and are unfortunately now rarely played.

The most important piece of classical music for the viola is Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante for violin and viola in E-flat major K.364/320d*, composed in 1779, The following is an

excerpt from the Andante movement played by Itzhak Perlman and Pinchas Zukerman, with Zubin Mehta conducting the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, Huberman Festival, Tel Aviv, 1982:

**Harold in Italy**

In the early 1830's the great violinist Niccolo Paganini was very impressed by the *Symphonie fantastique* of Hector Berlioz. Having just acquired a Stradivari viola he commissioned Berlioz to write a concerto for the viola. Berlioz was not familiar with the viola but included it in his *Harold en Italie, Symphonie avec un alto principal*, Op. 16, loosely based on Byron's poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage.* Paganini admired the work but found that the sections for the solo viola were not really sufficient to justify his playing it (Kawabata, 2004). He was right. The work is wonderfully tuneful but the solo viola, playing the part of Harold, makes only occasional comments on the orchestral action. The *cor anglais* plays almost as prominent a solo part in the work as the viola. The following excerpt is the ending to the third movement (*Sérénade d'un montagnard des Abruzzes*), with Harold (Gérard Caussé) meditating on the celebrations.

**Cinderella no More**

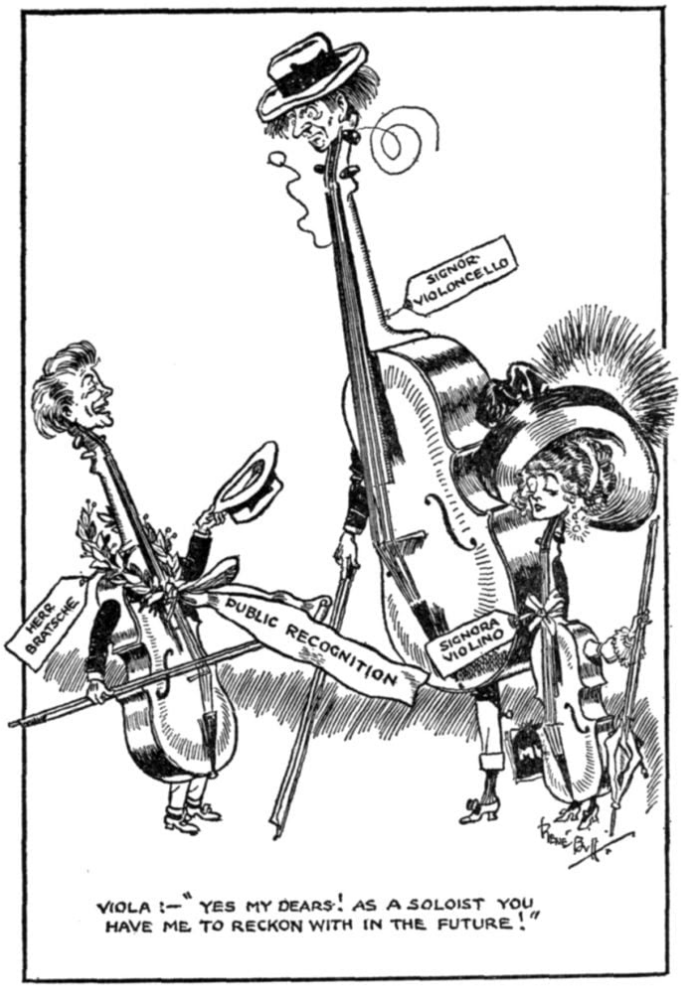
Lionel Tertis (1876-1975) was the first modern viola virtuoso (Tertis, 1953, 1974; White, 2006). Initially trained in the violin at the Royal Academy of Music in London,

he took up the viola toward the end of his studies. He quickly taught himself techniques to enhance the sound of the viola and decided to become the instrument's champion, setting out to challenge the violin's dominance in string music. Interestingly, Pablo Casals who was to become the champion of the cello was born in the same year as Tertis.

Lionel Tertis

At the end of the 19th century, Tertis was widely heard in chamber music concerts, and by1903 he was the first viola in the Queen's Hall Orchestra. He was popular, and provided his fans with souvenir postcards signed "Yours very sincerely, Lionel Tertis" (see illustration on the right). At the Royal Academy, he taught many new viola students, among them Rebecca Clarke. At the Royal Academy he also interacted with York Bowen, Benjamin Dale and Arnold Bax, all of whom composed

works for the viola. Full of enthusiasm and talent, Tertis quickly brought the viola out of obscurity and made it recognized as a solo instrument. This striking change gave him the title of his first autobiography: *Cinderella no more* (1953).




Cartoon by Rene Bull included in a program for a concert by Lionel Tertis at the Wigmore Hall in 1911

Tertis concertized widely in Britain. Europe and America. In Berlin in 1907, together with York Bowen he played *Brahms Sonata for Viola in E-flat major Opus 120, No 2, Dale's Suite for Viola*, and *York Bowen's Viola Sonata Opus 18* to great applause(White, 2006, p 18). Brahms' viola sonatas were initially written for clarinet but were adapted by Brahms himself for the viola. To give some sense of the Berlin program the following is an excerpts from the beginning of the third movement of the Brahms sonata (*Andante con moto*) as

played by William Primrose with Gerald Moore on piano (a 1937 recording). Primrose was Tertis's successor as the world's leading violist:

The beginning of
the Bowen Sonata (*Allegro moderato*) as
played by Matthew Jones (viola) and Michael Hampton follows:

In Paris in 1920 Tertis
found a viola made in 1717 by Domenico Montagnana a master luthier based in
Venice. With a body that was 17 1/8 inches (43.5 cm) long, the viola was larger
than most other violas. The instrument was in pieces and without a case. Tertis
had it repaired and played it from 1920 to 1937. It is currently played by
Roger Chase.

Tertis recorded extensively for Vocalion (1919-1923), and for Columbia (1924-1933). Many of the recorded pieces were adapted by Tertis from music originally written for other instruments or for voice. Among the transcriptions was Bach's sacred song *Komm, süßer Tod*, BMW 478. The words are from an unknown poet. The first verse follows; the whole poem is online.

*Komm, süßer Tod, komm sel'ge Ruh!*
*Komm führe mich in Friede,*
*weil ich der Welt bin müde,*
*ach komm! ich wart auf dich,*
*komm bald und führe mich,*
*drück mir die Augen zu.*
*Komm, sel'ge Ruh!*

Come, sweet death, come, blessed rest!
Come lead me to peace
because I am weary of the world,

O come! I wait for you,
come soon and lead me,
close my eyes.
Come, blessed rest!

This Bach song was
also transcribed for orchestra in 1946 by Leopold Stokowski. The full
orchestral version is powerful. Tertis' 1925 recording is heart-breaking. We
have grown to love sad songs and the viola sings them well.

**Bach Cello Suites**

Bach's *Suites for Solo Cello* have been transcribed many times for viola (Tatton, 2011). These transcriptions began in 1916. The music sounds quite different on the viola, but it is still as fascinating and as beautiful as on the cello. The following are some excerpts for comparison. First the beginning of the *Sarabande* from the 4th Suite as played by Pierre Fournier on cello and then by Maxim Rysanov on viola:

And then the first *Bourrée* from the same suite:

Rysanov uses the 1998 transcription of Simon Rowland-Jones. Although I originally thought that the suites were inextricably bound to the cello, I have grown very fond of the viola arrangements.

**The Berkshire Festival**

In 1918 Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, a rich American heiress, founded the Berkshire Music Festival in the hills of western Massachusetts. Although it later evolved into the Berkshire Symphonic Festival at Tanglewood, it was initially devoted to chamber music. Part of the festival involved a competition for composers of new chamber music. In the second year of the

festival the chosen instrumentation for the competition was viola and piano. Out of 73 entrants, two tied for first place: Ernest Bloch's *Suite for Viola* and Rebecca Clarke's *Sonata for Viola*. Elizabeth Coolidge herself cast the deciding vote for the Bloch suite.

Ernest Bloch

Ernest Bloch (1880-1959) was born in Switzerland and came to the USA in 1916. The photo on the right is from 1917. After the competition he went on to a very successful career in composition and teaching. His music uses both ancient and modern harmonies, but is immediately appealing. Many of his compositions are related to Jewish traditions, such as the *Suite Hebraïque for viola and piano* of 1951.

Rebecca Clarke

Rebecca Clarke (1889-1979) studied viola at the Royal Academy of Music with Lionel Tertis. She came to the United States in 1916 and supported herself by performing both in chamber ensembles and as a soloist. The photo at the right is from 1919. She also composed music, especially for the viola, and performed her compositions as part of her performances.

The Berkshire Festival competition was the closest that Rebecca Clarke came to appropriate recognition for her compositions. Years later she called it her "one little whiff of success." No one was sure who Rebecca Clarke was. The general opinion was that a woman could not produce such fine music. Some even suggested that the name was a pseudonym for Ernest Bloch! In 1923, Elizabeth Coolidge commissioned a *Trio for Piano, Violin and Cello*. Thereafter she continued her career as a violist and occasionally composed music. Most of Clarke's compositions, however, were performed by her in concerts and not published until after her death. There is an

excellent website about her life and work.

The following excerpts provide a taste of the 1919 Berkshire competition. The first is the *Allegro ironico* movement of Bloch's suite played by Paul Neuberger, accompanied by Margo Garrett:

And the second is the comparable *Vivace* movement from Clarke's sonata, played by Paul Coletti and Leslie Howard.

It has become fashionable to suggest that Clarke probably would have won the competition if she had not been a woman. Myself, I prefer the Clarke. However, I am not sure how much of this is related to the performers rather than to the actual compositions.

**The Viola and the Voice**

The viola has a particular affinity for the human voice. In 1884 Brahms published *Two Songs for Alto, Piano and Viola*, Opus 91 (Miyake, 2018). The lyrics of the first song (*Gestillte Sehnsucht* – Longing soothed) are from a poem by Thomas Rückert, the first verse of which is given below (and the whole poem is available online).

In gold'nen Abendschein getauchet,
Wie feierlich die Wälder stehn!
In leise Stimmen der Vöglein hauchet
Des Abendwindes leises Weh'n.
Was lispeln die Winde, die Vögelein?
Sie lispeln die Welt in Schlummer ein.

Bathed in golden evening light,
How solemnly the forests stand!

The soft voices of the birds breathe
The wafting of the evening winds
What do the winds and birds whisper?
They whisper the world to sleep.

The following is the
beginning of *Gestillte Sehnsucht* sung
by Janet Baker with Cecil Aronowitz on viola and André Previn on piano.

The viola beautifully portrays human singing in transcriptions of folk-songs and carols. The *Sussex Mummers' Carol* was originally collected in 1880 by Mrs. Lucy Broadwood and published in 1908. Percy Grainger composed a piano version of the carol in 1915, and also arranged the piece for viola and piano. The first two verses are:

When righteous Joseph
wedded was
Unto a virtuous maid
A glorious angel from Heaven came
Unto that virtuous maid.

O mortal man, remember
well
When Christ our Lord was born;
He was crucified betwixt two thieves,
And crownèd with the thorn.

The text of the complete carol is available online. The following excerpt is the beginning of Grainger's viola arrangement as played by Paul Coletti and Leslie Howard:

This can be
compared to the how the carol sounds in the voices of the

Choir of St Paul’s
Cathedral (directed by John Scott) singing wordlessly:

In 1944 Rebecca Clarke wrote a viola transcription of an old Scottish ballad *I’ll bid my heart be still.* The tune is centuries old (Graham, 1849, Volume III, p. 84). The Scottish poet Thomas Pringle (1789-1834) wrote the modern words (Pringle, 1839, p 168). The song laments the death of a lover in battle. The first two verses are:

I’ll bid my heart be still,
And check each struggling sigh;
And there’s none e’er shall know
My soul’s cherish’d woe,
When the first tears of sorrow are dry.

They bid me cease to weep
For glory gilds his name;
But the deeper I mourn,
Since he ne’er can return
To enjoy the bright noon of his fame!

Again, it is
interestingto compare excerpts from
the vocal and viola versions. The raw *a capella* voice is that of Sylvia Tyson from the 1965 Ian and Sylvia album *Early Morning Rain*, and the viola and
piano performance is by Philip Dukes and Sophia Rahman.

Ralph Vaughan
Williams (1872-1958) used British folk music extensively in his compositions.
The following is the beginning of the *Ballade*
movement from his 1934 *Suite for Viola and Orchestra* performed in the composer’s own reduction for viola and piano

by Tina Cayouette and Mariane Patenaude. The piece portrays the idea of singing
rather than a specific song.

**Walton’s Concerto**

William Walton

Cecil Beaton’s 1926 photograph of William Walton (1902-1983) portrays him against a cubist background that Beaton had painted himself. The
intent was to present Walton as Britain’s modernist composer. And indeed, many
of his compositions broke with traditions putting forth new rhythms and
harmonics. Yet, at heart he was still a romantic. His music was emotional
rather than dry, lush rather than austere – “the reaction of a mind
fundamentally romantic to the events in a most unromantic world” (Avery, 1947).

Walton's *Concerto for Viola and Orchestra in A minor* (1929) is considered by many as his most important composition. The concerto was written for Tertis, but he initially found it too modern and Paul Hindemith played the premiere.

Breaking with tradition, its first movement, is an *Andante comodo*. Walton greatly admired Prokofiev's first violin concerto (1923), which had begun in this way and there are notable similarities between the works. The following is the beginning of the first movement as played by Helen Callus with Marc Taddei conducting the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra. Against the growling of the orchestra the viola claims its rights and interweaves its song with the flute.

At the end of the concerto's third and final movement the themes of the first are recalled:

Walton had written the concerto for Lionel Tertis, but he thought the music too modern. The soloist at the premiere was Paul Hindemith. Over the years various violists, such as William Primrose and Frederick Riddle worked with Walton to improve the solo viola part, and Walton reduced the size of the orchestra before the concerto came to its final form in 1962 (Dunham, 2006).

**Epilogue**

After Tertis the viola came into its own as a solo instrument. Composers such a Cecil Forsyth (1903), York Bowen (1908), Paul Hindemith, (1925), Darius Milhaud (1929, 1955), Bela Bartok

(1945), and Arthur Schnittke (1985) have written important viola concertos. The sonata for viola and piano has provided composers with a form especially suited to inner feelings. One of the most powerful of these sonatas was Dimitri Shostakovich's last composition: the *Sonata for Viola and Piano, Op. 147* (1975). Music for solo viola has also become important. This posting ends with the *Langsam mit viel Ausdruck* (slowly with much expression) movement of Paul Hindemith's 1922 *Sonata for Solo Viola Opus 25, No. 1* played by Kim Kashkashian:

**References**


Avery, K. (1947). William Walton. Music & Letters, 28, 1-11.

Boyden, D. D., & Woodward A. M. (2001). Viola (Fr. alto; Ger. Bratsche). In *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd Ed., Online

Broadwood, L. E. (1908) *English traditional songs and carols*. London: Boosey & Co, 1908.

Dunham, J. F. (2006). The Walton viola concerto: a synthesis. *Journal of the American Viola Society, 22* (1), 13-21.

Graham, G. F. (1849) The songs of Scotland adapted to their appropriate melodies. Volume III. Edinburgh: Wood & Co.

Kawabata, M. (2004). The concerto that wasn't: Paganini, Urhan and *Harold in Italy*. *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*, 1, 67-114.

Miyake, J. (2018). Implications of phrase rhythm in Brahms's "Gestillte Sehnsucht," Op. 91, No. 1. In Murphy, S. (Ed.). *Brahms and the shaping of time*. Pp. 83-109. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press.

Pringle, T. (edited by Leitch, E., 1839). *The poetical works of Thomas Pringle*. London, E. Moxon

Riley, M. W. (1991). *The history of the viola*. *Volumes I and II*. Ypsilanti, MI: M.W. Riley.

Tatton, T. (2011). Bach violoncello suites arranged for viola: Available editions annotated.*Journal of the American Viola Society, 27*, 5-27.

Tertis, L. (1953). *Cinderella no more*. London: P. Nevill.

Tertis, L. (1974). *My viola and I: A complete autobiography, with Beauty of tone in string playing, and other essays*. London: Elek.

White, J. (2006). *Lionel Tertis: The first great virtuoso of the viola*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press.