Mathis der Maler: the Isenheim Altarpiece

Very little is known about the life of Matthias Grünewald, a painter (German *Maler*) who worked in the early decades of the 16th Century in Germany. He is renowned for the pictures he created between 1512 and 1516 for the altarpiece of the Monastery of Saint Anthony in Isenheim in southern Alsace. The face of Saint Sebastian in one of these paintings (above) is considered to be a self-portrait.

Life of Mathis der Maler

Very few details are available about the life of the painter who came to be known as Matthias Grünewald (Anderson, 2003). His first name has been considered as Matthias, Matthis or Mathis. His surname is disputable: Nithart, Neithardt, Gothart or Gothardt. The name "Grünewald" (green wood) was given to him by his first biographer, Joachim van Sandrart, about a century and a half after his death. The major confusion in his biography is whether Mathis Nithart and Mathis Gothart were one or two people. My intuition is that they were two distinct individuals: one a master painter and the other a water artist (builder of fountains), who also worked as an assistant painter (cf Bruhn, 1998, pp 21-42; Sebald, 1988, 2002).

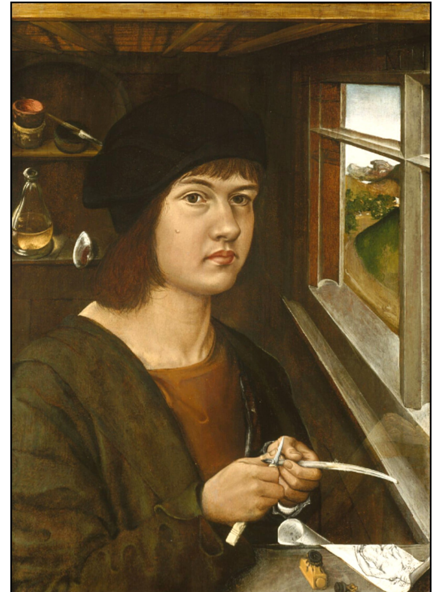
Given this intuition, the main stages of Grünewald's biography are as follows. He was born in about 1480 in Aschaffenburg. After learning the techniques of painting, he worked for the episcopal court of Mainz, painting altarpieces in several churches in Frankfurt. In 1512, he married Anna, a young woman of Jewish descent who had recently converted to Christianity, and bought a house near the cathedral in Frankfurt. In the same year he was commissioned to paint the altarpiece in the Monastery of Saint Anthony in Isenheim. While he worked on the altarpiece, Anna stayed in Frankfurt. Grünewald was assisted

in Isenheim by an older painter, Matthis von Würzburg, and the two men lived together. After finishing the Isenheim altarpiece, they returned to Frankfurt. Grünewald continued to paint under the patronage of Cardinal Albrecht von Brandenburg, who was the Archbishop of Mainz from 1514-1545 and the Archbishop of Magdeburg from 1513-1545. Albrecht, one of the most powerful prelates in the Holy Roman Empire, was a patron of artists such as Albrecht Dürer, Lucas Cranach the Elder, and Matthias Grünewald.

These were times of great social upheaval. Luther published his *Ninety-Five Theses* (*A Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*) in 1517. These were specifically addressed to Albrecht von Brandenburg, who used indulgences to support his life of luxury and patronage. The theses marked the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.

The German Peasants' War (*Deutscher Bauernkrieg*) began in 1524. Though partly related to the Lutheran rebellion against the Catholic Church, the revolt was mainly directed at the feudal aristocracy. Some of the reformist clergy supported the peasants. However, Luther was terrified of the anarchy that might result, and encouraged the nobility to eliminate the rebellious peasants. Pitchforks were no match for artillery. Over 100,000 peasants were massacred and the revolt came to an end in 1525. It is not known whether Grünewald participated in the rebellion, or how he was affected by it. His friend died in 1528 in Halle where he was working as a hydraulic engineer. Grünewald appears to have moved back to Aschaffenburg where he died in 1532.

A portrait in the Chicago Art Institute, initialed MN, has been considered as a possible self-portrait by Grünewald (Mathis Nithart), though its authenticity and dating is unclear. My intuition is that it is the work of the young Grünewald and that it dates to about 1500. The following is the portrait and its description by Sebald in his poem *After Nature* (1988, translated by Hamburger, 2002)



The small maple panel
shows a scarcely twenty-year-old
at the window of a narrow room.
Behind him, on a shelf not quite
in perspective, pots of paint,
a crayon, a seashell and a precious Venetian
glass filled with a translucent essence.
In one hand the painter holds
a finely carved knife of bone
with which to trim the drawing-pen
before continuing work on a female nude
that lies in front of him next to an inkwell.
Through the window on his left a
landscape with mountain and valley
and the curved line of a path is visible.

The Hospital Brothers of Saint Anthony

Saint Anthony the Great (251-356 CE) was a Christian monk from Egypt who lived most of his adult live alone in the desert. At the beginning of his desert life, he was assailed by monstrous demons and tempted by seductive women. Despite a severe asceticism bordering on starvation, he nevertheless lived to

be 105 years old. Although he was buried in the desert, his remains were miraculously discovered about two centuries after his death and transferred to Constantinople. In 980, a French count named Jocelin de Châteauneuf bought the relics from Constantinople to a monastery in what is now known as Isère in the French Alps. The relics were found to alleviate a disease characterized by skin inflammation, gangrene, hallucinations and convulsions that often broke out in devastating epidemics. In 1095 Gaston de Valloire founded the Hospital Brothers of Saint Anthony (also known as the Antonines) in gratitude for his son's miraculous cure. The Abbey of Saint Antoine in Isère became the mother church of the order.

The disease came to be known as "Saint Anthony's Fire." The cause was the consumption of bread made from rye contaminated by the fungus *Claviceps purpurea* (Grzybowski et al, 2021). The fungus produces ergotamine and other compounds: these cause peripheral vasoconstriction and excessive stimulation of the central nervous system. The nature of the disease, however, was not known in the Middle Ages: it was first attributed to blighted rye in 1676 by Denis Dodart, but the fungus itself was not identified until the 19th Century.

Grateful patients gave land and money to the Antonines. This support allowed them to establish other hospitals in various locations in France, and later in other European countries. The Isenheim monastery in southern Alsace was founded around 1300. As the years went by, the Antonine hospitals also treated patients who suffered from leprosy, from the Black Death (an epidemic of bubonic plague) in the 14th Century, and from the syphilis epidemics of the 16th Century. The program of treatment involved prayer and the application of vinous extracts from the saint's relics in Isère (*Saint vinage*). Whatever success occurred, however, was likely the result of the concomitant improvement in hygiene and nutrition.

In 1505, the Antonines at Isenheim commissioned a carved

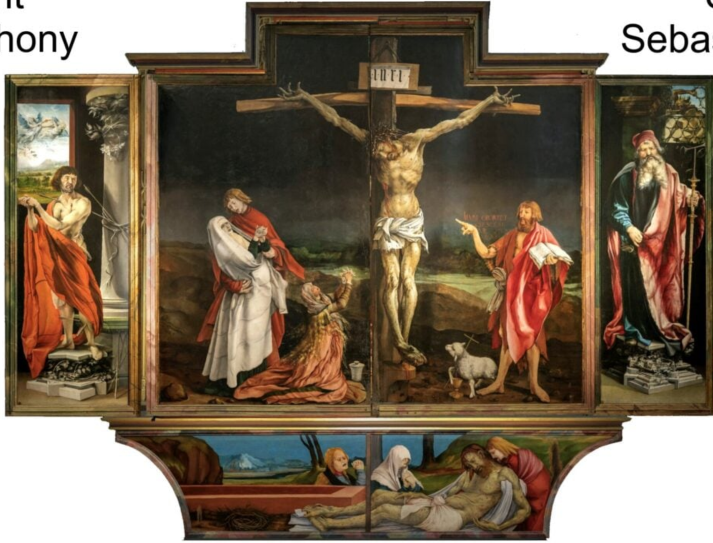
wooden altarpiece from Niklaus Hagenauer (Mayr, 2003). The altarpiece contains a gilded central statue of Saint Anthony, flanked by Saint Augustine of Hippo and Saint Jerome: asceticism aided by doctrine and by scripture. The predella of the altarpiece contains polychrome statues of Christ and the 12 apostles. In 1512 the Antonines asked Grünewald (Mathis der Maler) to adorn the altar with paintings (Hayum, 1989; Scheja, 1969; Réau, 1920; Sieger, 2025). Over the next 4 years he created two fixed wings, two sets of retractable wings painted on both sides, and a cover for the predella The retractable wings could be opened to provide three distinct views of the altar. An animation of the opening is provided below. This has been adapted from that at the SmartHistory website, and provided with a brief excerpt of music from the first movement of Hindemith's symphony *Mathis der Maler*. Following that is a diagrammatic representation of the three views.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/upl
oads/2025/04/isenheim-tp-version.mp4

Crucifixion

Saint Anthony

Saint Sebastian



Annunciation

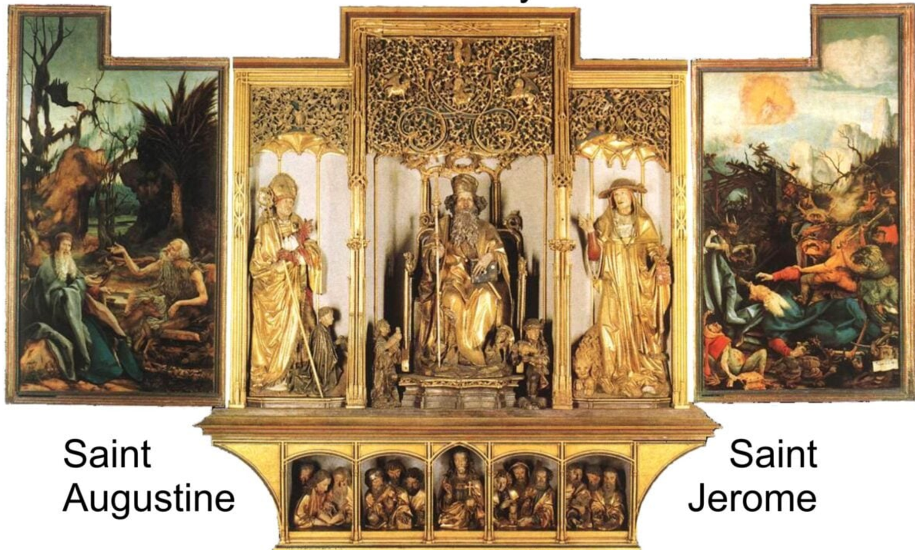
Nativity

Resurrection

Saints Anthony and Paul

Saint Anthony

Temptation of Saint Anthony



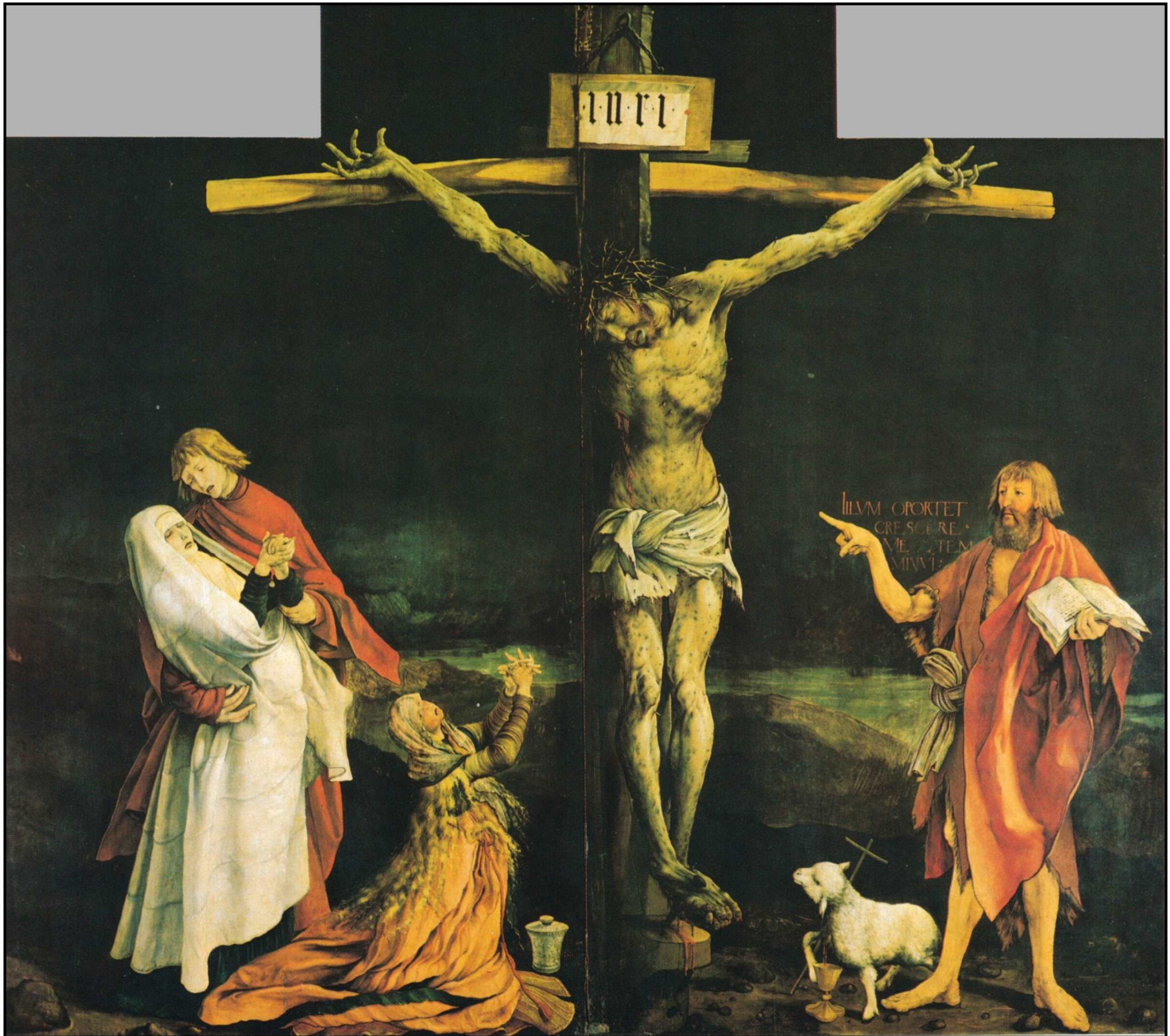
Saint Augustine

Saint Jerome

First View of the Altarpiece

Other than on holy days, the altarpiece was kept closed and the viewer was presented with the terrifying representation of the crucified Christ. The scene is set in the darkness that fell "over all the land" (*Matthew* 27: 45) as Christ died.

> The gigantic body of the dead Christ is rendered with brutal naturalism and seems to leap out at one with redoubled violence, as if to take the viewer in an ambuscade: flesh in the greenish color of death with the scars of the frightful ordeal, an atrocious benumbed pain written across the face, the mouth extinguished in death, the body pulled up high by the tensile arch of the crossbeam and, at the same time, twisted with the torsion of the tree of the Cross, all limbs ripped out of joint, the loincloth in tatters, while a thorn of the crown pins the head fast in an excruciatingly painful position digging low and deep into the chest (Scheja, 1969, p 15).



The cross is contorted as though it shares in the agony. The crossbar is bowed under the weight of the dead body. The vertical post is twisted: it faces to Christ’s right above his head and to his left at his feet. The resin of the wood mixes with the blood of the dead Christ (Bryda, 2018)

The vision of Christ on the Cross as a dead body rather than as a suffering savior perhaps comes from the visions of the 14th Century mystic Saint Bridget:

> The color of death spread through his flesh, and after he breathed his last human breath, his mouth gaped open so that one could see his tongue, his teeth, and the blood in his mouth. Th e dead body sagged. His knees then contracted

> bending to the side. His feet were cramped and twisted about the nails of the cross as if they were on hinges (quoted in Bryda, 2018, p 13)

On Christ’s right side his mother Mary swoons, and is supported by the disciple John. Near them, Mary Magdalene laments the death of her teacher. The figures vary in their size as in their importance to the story.

On the left side of the crucified Christ is a representation of John the Baptist. This is in no way realistic: John was from another time – he was beheaded before Christ was crucified. Yet he was the last of the prophets to announce the significance of Jesus as the son of God. His words are written in red:

> *Illum oportet crescere me autem minui*
> [He must increase, but I must decrease]. (*John* 3:30)

At the feet of the Baptist is a lamb from whose chest blood drops into a communion chalice. When John had baptised Jesus, he had proclaimed “Behold the Lamb of God!” (*John* 1:36) The Baptist’s right arm points dramatically to the crucified Christ. The eye may move to the attendant figures but Grünewald insists that it return to the dead Christ.

In *The Emigrants,* W. G. Sebald describes the experience of Max Ferber on viewing the Isenheim crucifixion

> The monstrosity of that suffering, which, emanating from the figures depicted, spread to cover the whole of Nature, only to flood back from the lifeless landscape to the humans marked by death, rose and ebbed within me like a tide. Looking at those gashed bodies, and at the witnesses of the execution, doubled up by grief like snapped reeds, I gradually understood that, beyond a certain point, pain blots out the one thing that is essential to its being experienced – consciousness – and so perhaps extinguishes itself; we know very little about this. What is certain,

> though, is that mental suffering is effectively without end. One may think one has reached the very limit, but there are always more torments to come. One plunges from one abyss into the next. (Sebald, 1993/1996)

Perhaps the sight of the dead Christ served to numb the pain and suffering of the patients who came to Isenheim for treatment.

The fixed wings of the altarpiece provide a stark contrast to its horrifying centerpiece. On the left Saint Sebastion tranquilly suffers through his wounds. On the right Saint Anthony remains unperturbed by the demon threatening him through the window at his shoulder. Both Saints are invoked for protection against disease. Saint Sebastian actually survived the onslaught of arrows that pierced his body. Saint Anthony endured his temptations and lived to die of old age.

Radiographic examination of the Saint Sebastian has revealed that the head was painted over an earlier version. In *After Nature*, Sebald interprets this in terms of the existence of two painters: Grünewald and Mathis Nithart:

> And indeed the person of Mathis Nithart
> in documents of the time so flows into
> the person of Grünewald that one
> seems to have been the life,
> then the death, too, of the other.
> An X-ray photograph of the Sebastian
> panel reveals beneath the elegiac
> portrait of the saint
> that same face again, the half-
> profile only turned a tiny bit further
> in the definitive overpainting.
> Here two painters in one body
> whose hurt flesh belonged to both
> to the end pursued the study
> of their own nature. At first
> Nithart fashioned his self-portrait
> from a mirror image, and Grünewald
> with great love, precision and patience
> and an interest in the skin
> and hair of his companion extending
> to the blue shadow of the beard
> then overpainted it.
> The martyrdom depicted is
> the representation, to be sensed
> even in the rims of the wounds,
> of a male friendship wavering
> between horror and loyalty.

Second View of the Altarpiece

On holy days the altarpiece was opened to show a sequence of

paintings depicting episodes from the life of Christ. On the left is the Annunciation. The center, where once was presented the horror of the death of Jesus now shows the wonder of his birth. Heavenly angels provide a marvelous music while the baby Jesus plays with a golden rosary on the lap of his mother Mary.

In 1938, Paul Hindemith completed an opera about *Mathis de Maler*. The prelude to the opera is a musical version of the concert of the angels in the Isenheim altarpiece. This was also used as the first movement of his 1935 *Symphony Mathis der Maler*. Hindemith introduces three themes: a setting of an old German hymn *Es sungen drei Engeln* (There sang three angels) mainly in the brass, a lively melody on the strings and a more peaceful tune on the flute. He then plays these themes against each other. The following is an illustration of the painting together with the initial introduction of the themes in the Symphony Matthis der Maler with the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra led by Marin Alsop:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Symphony_Md-M_-I-beginning.mp3

The beautiful angel in the foreground of Grünwald’s *Concert of*

the Angels is playing a viola da gamba, the forerunner of the modern violoncello. Grünewald was clearly familiar with the instrument, which has been closely studied and reproduced. However, the direction of the bowing is strangely reversed from normal. It is difficult to understand what his means (Rasmussen 2001). Perhaps the angel is producing heavenly rather than earthly music. Even more disconcerting is the angel directly behind and above the foreground cellist. This angel is covered in iridescent green feathers and looks upset rather than entranced by the birth of Jesus. Mellinkoff (1988) proposed that this is the angel Lucifer who rebelled against God, brought about the fall of man, and is now aghast that man will be redeemed by the birth of Christ.

Between the concert of the angels and the representation of Mary and the infant Jesus is a vision of a woman, with a crown of flames, surrounded by a bright yellow and red aureole (see below). No one is sure who she represents. Malinkoff (1988) suggests that she is *Ecclesia* (Church), who with the birth of Christ takes over from *Synagoga* as the intermediary between man and God. Others (e.g., Réau, 1920, p 187-94; Scheja, 1969, p 48) consider her to be the Eternal Mary, Queen of Heaven, the woman “clothed with the sun” of *Revelation 12*. She is there to witness herself in her temporal form together with her infant son.

The most striking painting in the second view of the altarpiece is the Resurrection on the right side. Christ arises from the tomb in glory, scattering and tumbling the guards:

Joris-Karl Huysmans, the first modern critics to consider the importance of Matthias Grünewald in *Trois Primitifs* (1905, reprinted in part in Huysmans & Ruhmer, 1958), described *The Resurrection*:

> As the sepulchre opens, some drunks in helmet and armour are knocked head over heels to lie sprawling in the foreground, sword in hand; one of them turns a somersault further off, behind the tomb, and lands on his head, while Christ surges upwards, stretching out his arms and displaying the bloody commas on his hands.
>
> This is a strong and handsome Christ, fair-haired and brown-eyed, with nothing in common with the Goliath whom we watched decomposing a moment ago, fastened by nails to the still green wood of a gibbet. All round this soaring body are rays emanating from it which have begun to blur its outline; already the contours of the face are fluctuating, the features hazing over, the hair dissolving into a halo of melting gold. The light spreads out in immense curves ranging from bright yellow to purple, and finally shading off little by little into a pale blue which in turn merges with the dark blue of the night.
>
> We witness here the revival of a Godhead ablaze with life: the formation of a glorified body gradually escaping from the carnal shell, which is disappearing in an apotheosis of flames of which it is itself the source and seat.
>
> … Having dared to attempt this tour de force, Grünewald has carried it out with wonderful skill. In clothing the Saviour he has tried to render the changing colours of the fabrics as they are volatilized with Christ. Thus the scarlet robe turns a bright yellow, the closer it gets to the light-source of the head and neck, while the material grows lighter, becoming almost diaphanous in this river of gold. As for the white shroud which Jesus is carrying off with him, it reminds one of those Japanese fabrics which by subtle gradations change from one colour to another, for as it rises it takes on a lilac tint first of all, then becomes

pure violet, and finally, like the last blue circle of the nimbus, merges into the indigo-black of the night.

This is no ordinary representation of the Resurrection. Christ has not just risen from the tomb: he has also been transfigured into a vision of the Godhead. Scheja, 1988, p 40) notes how Grünewald has accurately depicted Dante’s vision of the Trinitarian Godhead at the end of *The Divine Comedy* published two centuries before his painting (*Paradiso* XXXIII 115-120):

> *Nella profonda e chiara sussistenza*
> *de l’alto lume parvermi tre giri*
> *di tre colori e d’una contenenza;*
>
> *e l’un dall’altro come iri da iri*
> *parea reflesso, e il terzo parea foco*
> *che quinci e quindi igualmente si spiri.*
>
> [There appeared to me in the profound and bright
> reality of that exalted light
> three circles of three colors and one size.
>
> As rainbow by rainbow, one seemed reflected
> by the second, and the third seemed a fire
> that breathed as much from one as from the other.]
> (translation by Louis Biancolli)

Third View of the Altarpiece

As well as the statues created by Niklaus Hagenauer the third view has two lateral paintings that are the obverse of the *Madonna and Child* and the *Concert of Angels*. These represent *The Tribulations of Saint Anthony* and *The Meeting between Saint Anthony and Saint Paul*.

Although often called the “temptations” of Saint Anthony, the subject of Grünewald’s painting on the right is more accurately considered his “tribulations.” Scheja (1969, p 28) tells the story from original biography of Saint Anthony written by Athanasius a few years after his death. When Anthony first went to the desert he was attacked by demons. Despite the pain, he refused to give up his devotion to Christ. Finally, the heavens opened, light streamed down from Christ in majesty, and the demons vanished. Anthony had passed his test and was worthy of his God. Anthony cried out the words written at the lower left of the painting (Hayum, 1989, p 79):

Ubi eras ihesu boni, ubi eras? Quare not affuisti ut sanares

vulnera mea?
[Where were you good Jesus, where were you? Why were you not there to heal my wounds?]

The poor wretch at the lower left of the painting represents a patient suffering from ergotism. The distal parts of his fingers have been lost to gangrene and his skin is covered with sores (Grzybowski et al, 2021). The image serves as an intermediary between the patients in the hospital and Saint Anthony. Even the fingers of Saint Anthony's left hand are turning grey with incipient gangrene (Kluger& Brandozzi, 2023). The patients can see in the painting that their disease is the same as that of Saint Anthony. They can therefore hope that God may relieve their pain, just like he drove away the demons that tormented Saint Anthony. The following is Hindemith's musical version of Saint Anthony and the Demons: from the beginning of the 3rd movement of his Mathis der Maler symphony:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Symphony_M-d-M_III-beginning.mp3

The painting on the left is as tranquil as that on the right is turbulent. After his tribulations, Saint Anthony sought out Saint Paul, an older ascetic who had retired to the desert. Paul convinced him that the monastic life was worth pursuing. Although the meeting was reported to have taken place in a cave, Grünewald locates it in a peaceful wooded landscape with a gently doe acting as an intermediary between the two saints. In the background a stag waits patiently. On a high branch, a raven, accustomed to providing Paul with his daily slice of bread, gets ready to deliver two slices. The head of Saint Paul is another self-portrait of Grünewald (Scheja, 1969, pp 30-33; von Mücke, 2011)

Afterlife of the Altarpiece

The altarpiece remained in the abbey church at Isenheim until the French Revolution (1789-1799) led to the suppression of the monasteries. In 1852, the altarpiece was moved to the new Unterlinden Museum located in Colmar, about 25 km north of Isenheim. The museum is housed in what was once a convent for the Dominican sisters, originally built in 13th Century.

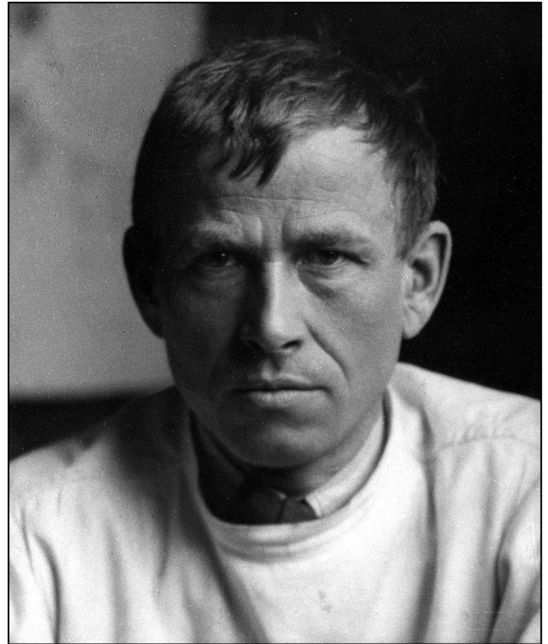
After the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), Alsace became part of Germany. The unification of Germany bought with it a desire for a distinct national culture. Philosophers conceived a Northern or Gothic tradition in art, as distinguished from Mediterranean Classical art (Rosenblum, 1975; Stieglitz, 1989). Its characteristics were a sense of the sublime, an emotional intensity, a mystical predisposition, and a deep subjectivity (or inwardness, *Innerlichkeit*). Grünewald's paintings fitted easily into these ideas.

During World War I, for safety's sake, the altarpiece was taken away from Colmar to Munich, where it was exhibited to great acclaim. The peace arrangements after the war included a requirement that the altarpiece to be returned to Colmar. Since 1919, the altarpiece has lived there in the Unterlinden Museum. The following illustration shows how it is exhibited.

The visitor can go behind first section to see the paintings on the obverse side of *The Crucifixion – The Annunciation* and *The Resurrection*. And then behind the *The Nativity* (*Angel Concert* and *Madonna with the Infant Jesus*) to see *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* and *The Meeting between Saint Paul and Saint Anthony*.

Otto Dix

Otto Dix (1891-1969) studied art at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts. When war was declared in 1914, he volunteered for the army and served for the duration of the war. He took part in the Battle of the Somme in 1916, was transferred for a while to the Eastern Front, and then back to Flanders for the end of the war. He was profoundly affected by the horrors he experienced. After the war he painted images representing both his ghastly memories of trench warfare and his anger at the hypocrisy and depravity of post-war German society. He was one of the painters of *Der neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) Exhibition of 1925.



Dix became a professor at the Dresden Academy in 1927. A 1929 photograph by Hugo Erfurth is shown on the right. Between 1929 and 1932 he worked on a large triptych entitled *Der Krieg* (The War) based on old German triptychs especially that of Grünewald’s Isenheim altarpiece (Bayer, 1920).

The left wing of the triptych, entitled *Aufmarsch* (Deployment), depicts the soldiers leaving for the frontline early in the morning before the mists have cleared.

The right wing, entitled *Nachtlicher Ruckzug* (Nightly Retreat) shows a soldier (a self-portrait of the artist) trying to bring a wounded colleague back to safety behind the frontlines.

The central section, *Der Krieg*, takes the place of the Crucifixion in a medieval altar. Instead of Christ on the cross

> a rotting corpse has been hurled onto iron girders in similar fashion. His eye sockets have already become black holes, the teeth are bared, with what remains of his uniform hanging in tatters. (Bayer 1920)

The corpse points to another dead body on the right. This is clearly an illusion to Grünewald’s Isenheim altarpiece wherein John the Baptist points dramatically to the crucified Christ. The body to which the finger points is upside down and riddled with bullet holes in much the same way as Grünewald’s Christ was covered in sores. The background to these horrors is a landscape completely destroyed by artillery.

The predella of Dix’s triptych shows several soldiers lying down under what might be a camouflage screen. It is unclear whether they are dead or sleeping. If the latter there is a

clockwise circular logic to the triptych: the exhausted soldiers will wake up, advance to the front again, engage in the murderous work of war, and then retreat, wounded and exhausted to sleep another night.

Dix’s description of the war was loathed by the Nazi government, who wished to portray war as an occasion for heroism rather than a field of horror. In 1933 Dix was dismissed from his position at the Dresden Academy. Many of his paintings were removed from galleries and destroyed. Some were included in the Exhibition of Degenerate Art in 1937. Dix saved the triptych, took it apart, and stored it in a friend’s farmhouse until after the war. The *Galerie der Neue Meister* (Gallery of Modern Masters) in Dresden purchased the painting in 1968.

Paul Hindemith

Paul Hindemith (1895-1963) studied music at Dr. Hoch’s Konservatorium in Frankfurt and joined the Frankfurt Symphony

Orchestra after graduation. He served in the German army on the frontlines in Alsace during the last year of the war.

After the war, he founded the Amar Quartet, playing the viola, and began to compose. During the 1930s he worked on his Opera *Mathis der Maler*, based on the life of Matthias Grünewald. As he was writing this music, he used some of the orchestral interludes in the opera to make his *Symphony Mathis der Maler* which was published in 1935. The opera was not completed until 1938. Because the Nazis considered his music degenerate, Hindemith was unable to get the opera performed in Germany. He emigrated to Switzerland in 1938 and then to the United States in 1940.

As well as the modernity of the music, the subject matter of the opera was anathema to the Nazi powers (Bruhm, 1998, 2002; Paret, 2008; Watkins, 2002; Fuller, 1997). It revealed the horrors of war: the summary executions, the raping and pillaging. One of the scenes concerned the burning of Lutheran books as ordered by the Catholic Church. This made obvious reference to the Nazi book burnings which had begun in the early 1930s.

The opera has been performed only rarely. A 1977 production starred Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau as Mathis. A striking recent production in Vienna that was captured on DVD by Naxos in 2012.

The opera is concerned with the life of Matthias Grünewald after he completes the Isenheim altarpiece. Hindemith imagines that Mathis leaves the service of Albrecht von Brandenburg and joins the rebellion of the peasants. Throughout these terrible times, images from the altarpiece (and Hindemith’s musical versions thereof) return to comfort or to haunt the painter. During the rebellion, he takes care of Regina, a young woman whose father, one of the leaders of the rebellion, was cruelly executed before her eyes. The beginning of the 6th scene of the opera finds them fleeing from the mercenaries through the

forest of the Odenwald southeast of Frankfurt, Mathis tries to comfort the grieving Regina with the story of the *Concert of Angels* who played music at the nativity of Jesus. The following is part of the aria, as sung by Wolfgang Koch as Mathis and Katherina Tretyakova as Regina:

Alte Märchen woben
Uns fromme Bilder, die ein Widerscheinen
Des Höheren sind. Ihr Sinn ist dir
Fern, du kannst ihn nur erahnen.
Und frommer noch reden
Zu uns die Töne, wenn Musik, in Einfalt hier
Geboren, die Spur himmlischer Herkunft trägt.
Sieh, wie eine Schar von Engeln ewige Bahnen
In irdischen Wegen abwandelt. Wie spürt man jeden
Versenkt in sein mildes Amt. Der eine geigt
Mit wundersam gesperrtem Arm, den Bogen wägt
Er zart, damit nicht eines wenigen Schattens Rauheit
Den linden Lauf trübe. Ein andrer streicht
Gehobnen Blicks aus Saiten seine Freude.
Verhaftet scheint der dritte dem fernen Geläute
Seiner Seele und achtet leicht des Spiels.

Wie bereit
Er ist, zugleich zu hören und zu dienen.

REGINA
Es sungen drei Engel ein süssen Gesang,
Der weit in den hohen Himmel erklang.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Mathis-der-Maler-Scene-6-Alte-Marchen.mp3

The following is a translation

Old fairy tales wove
Pious images for us that are a reflection
Of something higher. Their meaning is so
Far from you, that you can only guess.

And music speaks even more piously
When, born here in simplicity,
It brings a breath of heaven.
See how a host of angels eternally follow
Our earthly paths. How one feels each one
Is immersed in their gentle office. One plays the violin
With a wondrously bared arm, lightly bowing
Lest any roughness darken
Cloud the gentle melody. Another,
With an uplifted gaze, strokes joy from the strings.
The third seems captivated by the distant chiming
of his soul and hardly attends to the music.

How ready
he is to listen and serve at the same time.

REGINA
Three angels sang a sweet song
That resounded far into the heavens.

The Comfort of Images

Hindemith’s Mathis comforts the grieving Regina by describing to her his painting of the *Concert of Angels*. The world is difficult to understand. The suffering that occurs is often unjustified. So we tell ourselves stories – we weave together fairy tales – to make sense of the world. We can represent these stories in paintings and in music.

The story that Grünewald unfolds in the Isenheim altarpiece is the myth of a Son of God who suffered and died so that we may be redeemed and live forever. And the life of Saint Anthony who lived in holiness so that our illness can be cured.

And even if these are only stories, the comfort they provide is real.

References

Andersson, C. (2003). Grünewald, Matthias [Gothart Nithart, Mathis; Gothardt-Neithardt, Matthis]. Grove Art Online.

Bayer, M. (2020). Der Krieg: Otto Dix's War Triptych, memory, and the perception of the First World War. In Hutchison, M., & Trout, S. (Eds.). *Portraits of Remembrance*. (pp 250-269) University of Alabama.

Bruhn, S. (1998). *The temptation of Paul Hindemith: Mathis der Maler as a spiritual testimony*. Pendragon. (difficult to find; preview in Google Books)

Bruhn, S, (2002). Wordless songs of love, glory, and resurrection: musical emblems of the holy in Hindemith's saints. In *Voicing the ineffable: musical representations of religious experience*. (pp 157-188). Pendragon.

Bryda, G. C. (2018). The exuding wood of the cross at Isenheim. *Art Bulletin, 100*(2), 6–36.

Fuller, M. (1997). Hindemith's Mathis der Maler: A parable for our times. *New Blackfriars*, *78*(916), 260–267.

Grzybowski, A., Pawlikowska-Łagód, K., & Polak, A. (2021). Ergotism and Saint Anthony's fire. *Clinics in Dermatology*, *39*(6), 1088–1094.

Harrisville, R. A. (2004). Encounter with Grunewald. *Currents in Theology and Mission*, *31*(1), 5-14.

Hayum, A. (1989). *The Isenheim altarpiece: God's medicine and the painter's vision*. Princeton University Press.

Huysmans, J.-K. & Ruhmer, E. (1958). *Grünewald: the paintings*. Phaidon Press.

Kluger, N., & Brandozzi, G. (2023). Digital necrosis in the

Isenheim altarpiece (1512–1516). *Journal of the European Academy of Dermatology and Venereology*, *37*(7), 1265–1267.

Mayr, V. (2003). Hagenauer [von Hagnow; Hagnower], Nikolaus [Niclas]. Grove Art Online.

Mellinkoff, R. (1988). *The devil at Isenheim: reflections of popular belief in Grünewald's altarpiece*. University of California Press.

Paret, P. (2008). Beyond Music: Hindemith's Opera Mathis der Maler as political document. *Historically Speaking*, *9*(5), 6–9.

Rasmussen, M. (2001). Viols, violists and Venus in Grunewald's Isenheim Altar. *Early Music*, *29*(1), 60–74.

Réau, L. (1920). *Mathias Grünewald et le retable de Colmar.* Berger-Levrault. (Available at archive.org)

Rosenblum, R. (1975). *Modern painting and the northern romantic tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*. Harper & Row.

Scheja, G. (1969). *The Isenheim Altarpiece*. H.N. Abrams.

Schloss, M. F. (1963) Grünewald and the Chicago portrait. *Art Journal*, 23(1), 10-16.

Sebald, W. G. (1988). *Nach der Natur*. Franz Greno, Nordlingen,

Sebald, W. G. (1988, translated by Hamburger, M. 2002). *After nature*. Hamish Hamilton.

Sebald, W. G. (1993, translated by Hulse, M., 1996). *The emigrants*. Harvill.

Sieger, J. (accessed 2025). Der Isenheimer Altarund seine Botschaft [The Isenheimer Altarpiece and its Message] (Google provides a reasonable translation)

Stieglitz, A. (1989). The reproduction of agony: toward a reception-history of Grünewald's Isenheim Altar after the

First World War. *Oxford Art Journal*, *12*(2), 87–103.

Snyder, J. (1985). *Northern Renaissance art: painting, sculpture, the graphic arts from 1350 to 1575*. Prentice-Hall.

von Mücke, D. (2011). History and the work of art in Sebald’s *After Nature. Nonsite.*

Watkins, G. (2002). Prophecies and Alarms. In *Proof through the Night* (pp. 403-416). University of California Press.

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.

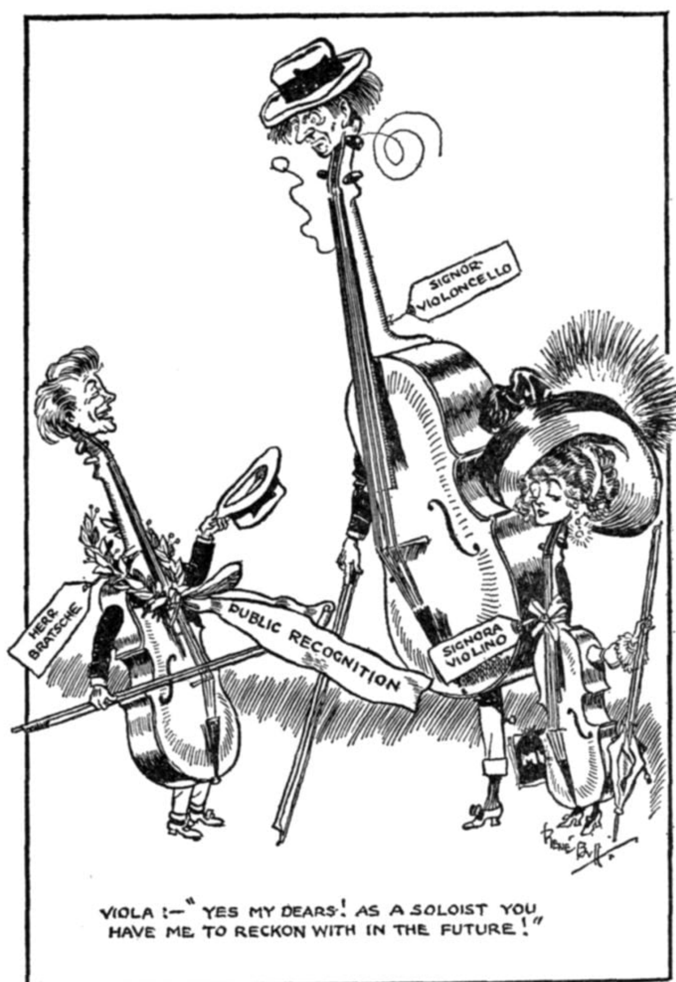
Cinderella no More

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.

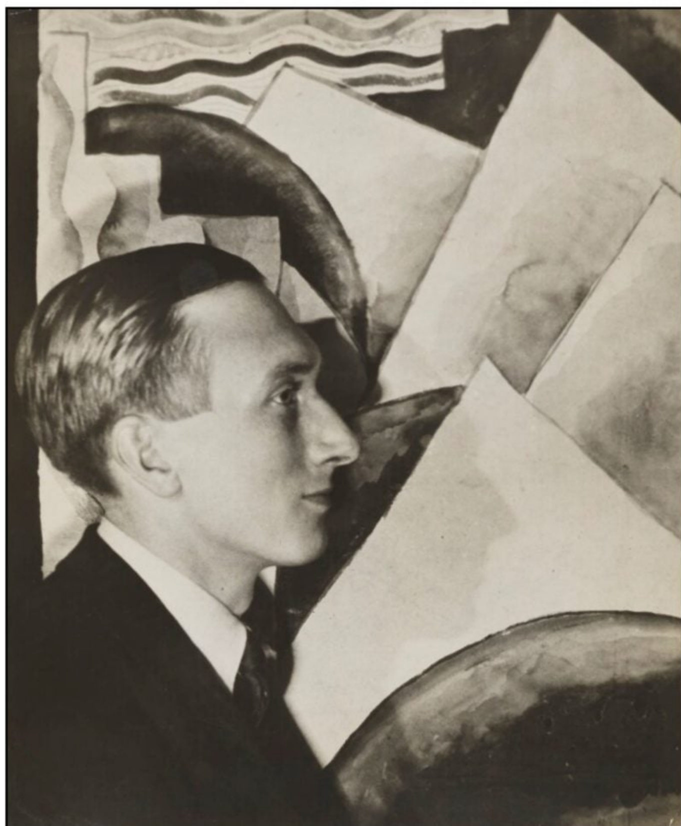
They bid me cease to weep
For glory gilds his name;
But the deeper I mourn,
Since he ne’er can return
To enjoy the bright noon of his fame!

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.