

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:



Viola 'Archinto'
Antonio Stradivari
1696

Viola Pellegrina
David Ravinus
2017

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 from 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 Niccolò 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,

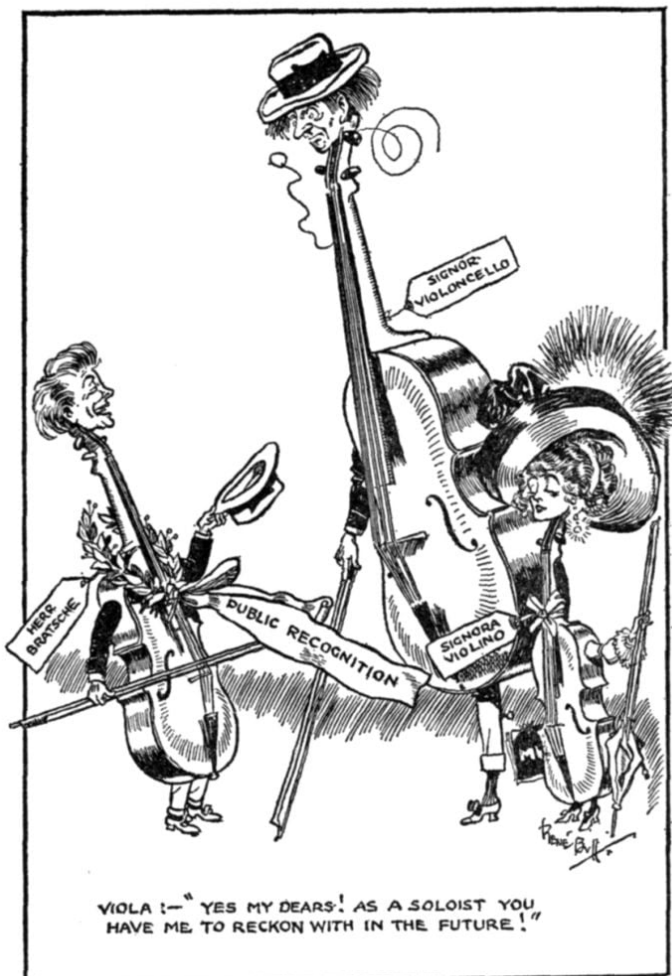
he took up the viola toward the end of his studies. He quickly taught himself techniques to enhance the sound of the viola and decided to become the instrument's champion, setting out to challenge the violin's dominance in string music. Interestingly, Pablo Casals who was to become the champion of the 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 by 1903 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, BWV 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 interesting to compare excerpts from the vocal and viola versions. The raw *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.

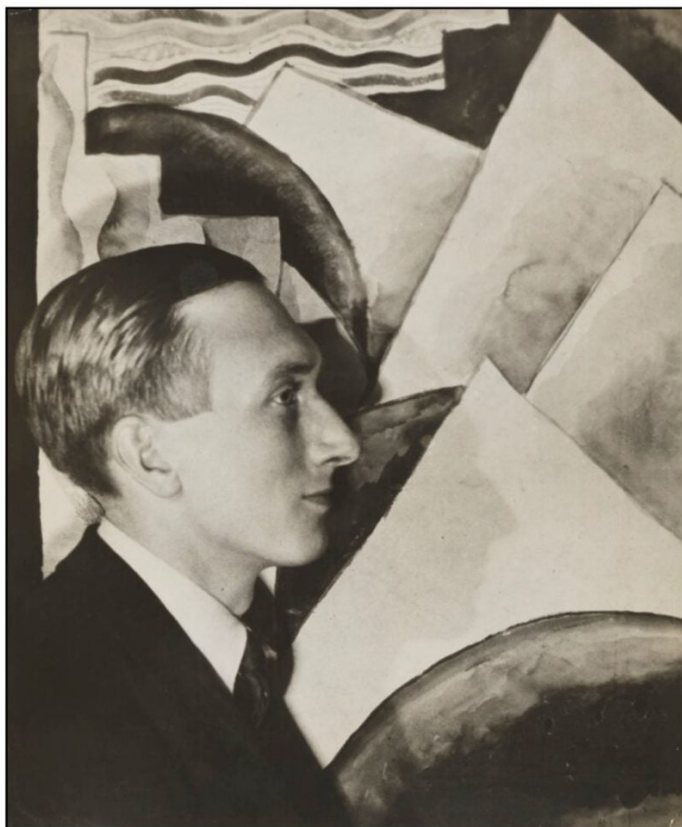
Ralph Vaughan

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 as 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:

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Christmas

“On Earth Peace, Good Will toward Men” – the announcement of the angels to the shepherds – is the main message of Christmas.¹ Its meaning persists even without the attendant theology.

Winter is a time for rest. Midwinter celebrations such as Christmas are marked by both conviviality and quietness. In the cold it is better to gather together than to fight each other. And nothing takes the mind away from the present more than starry night over snowy ground.

This post presents some visual and musical versions of the Christmas message. Christmas music usually makes reference to the birth of a savior and wishes everyone be merry. The following music is from the Christmas Concerto (1712) by Arcangelo Corelli, played by the McGill University Sinfonietta under Marcel Saint-Cyr. The allegro celebrates the joyfulness of Christmas and the final adagio portrays its peacefulness.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Corelli-Christmas-Concerto-5.mp3>

Near the town of Ipswich, where I lived as a child, is the smaller town of Bury St Edmunds, named after Edmund, King of the Angles, who died in 869 defending the land from Viking invaders. He was buried at the abbey of Beodercicsworth, founded in the seventh century. As the shrine attracted pilgrims, the town and abbey flourished and renamed themselves after the martyred king. The following photograph shows the ruins of the abbey that was rebuilt in the eleventh century, and the steeple of the cathedral built in the fifteenth century.



In the middle of the nineteenth century, Thomas Carlyle visited Bury St Edmunds and was impressed by its history. His world was following goals quite different from those that had

governed the abbey. Man was exploiting others for gain, rather than working together for the common good. The world had forgotten its compassion:

But yet it is pity we had lost tidings of our souls: actually we shall have to go in quest of them again, or worse in all ways will befall! A certain degree of soul, as Ben Jonson reminds us, is indispensable to keep the very body from destruction of the frightfullest sort; to 'save us,' says he, 'the expense of salt.' Ben has known men who had soul enough to keep their body and five senses from becoming carrion, and save salt: men, and also Nations. You may look in Manchester Hunger-mobs and Cornlaw Commons Houses, and various other quarters, and say whether either soul or else salt is not somewhat wanted at present! ²

Soul has lost its primacy for understanding ourselves. Yet the concept remains helpful even when freed from its religious underpinnings: that which in us looks to matters beyond the present and that which leads us to help rather than hate our fellows. Carlyle and his world are long gone, but we are still in need of soul.

The following music is *England's Carol* – God rest ye, merry gentlemen – as performed by the Modern Jazz Quartet accompanied by a symphony orchestra (1960). ³ Tidings of comfort and joy in soulful variations:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/03-Englands-Carol-German-Symphony.mp3>

The following photograph shows the ruins of the abbey in Bury St Edmunds in a more abstract manner:



Once we had a soul. We may not now need its theological trappings. But we must regain its compassion and desire for peace.

The posting ends with Percy Grainger's setting of the *Sussex Mummers' Carol* for viola (Paul Coletti) and piano (Leslie Howard). The viola is the most harmonious of the strings, bringing together the brightness of the violins and the intensity of the cello. Grainger's music comes in many different versions. The message is the same:

God bless your house, your children too,
Your cattle and your store;
The Lord increase you day by day,
And give you more and more.
And give you more and more ⁴

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/grainger-sussex-mummers-carol-coletti-and-howard.mp3>

Happy Christmas! I wish everyone peace on earth and good will toward men. You need not believe in the angels to accept their tidings of our souls.

Notes

¹ The angels' words are quoted from Luke 2:14 in the King James Version. More recent translations have followed early manuscripts, which have *eudokia* (goodwill, benevolence, pleasure) in the genitive form (*eudokias*). The message then makes the peace contingent on human goodwill "Peace on earth to men of goodwill"

² Carlyle, T. (1843, reprinted 1897). *Past and present*. London: Ward, Lock & Bowden. (Book II, Chapter 2, *St. Edmundsbury*). Shelston (*Thomas Carlyle Selected Writings*, Penguin, 1971) notes that the reference is to Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass* I:6:88-90 when Wittipol refers to Mistress Fitzdottrel as

the wife

To so much blasted flesh as scarce has soul
Instead of salt to keep it sweet.

A long tradition has claimed that saints were so full of soul that their bodies did not decompose after death. The unsaintly had to resort to salt to preserve their corpses.

³ John Lewis, piano; Milt Jackson, vibraphone; Percy Heath, bass; Connie Kay, drums. The orchestra is conducted by Gunther Schuller

⁴ Full lyrics