Paul Klee: Color and Music

The paintings of Paul Klee (1879-1940) gave us a new way to look at the world, allowing us to go beyond our immediate perceptions and see the underlying forms.

> *Kunst gibt nicht das Sichtbare wieder, sondern macht sichtbar.*
> Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible.
> (Klee, *Creative Confession*, 1920/2013, part I).

Color and music were the two great principles underlying his art. The tonal relations between colors and the rhythms of their spatial presentation combine to give us understanding. Many composers have sought to express Klee's paintings in their music, to complement his colors with their notes. This essay presents some of these compositions. On the right is a portrait of Paul Klee by Hugo Erfurth in 1922

Early Life

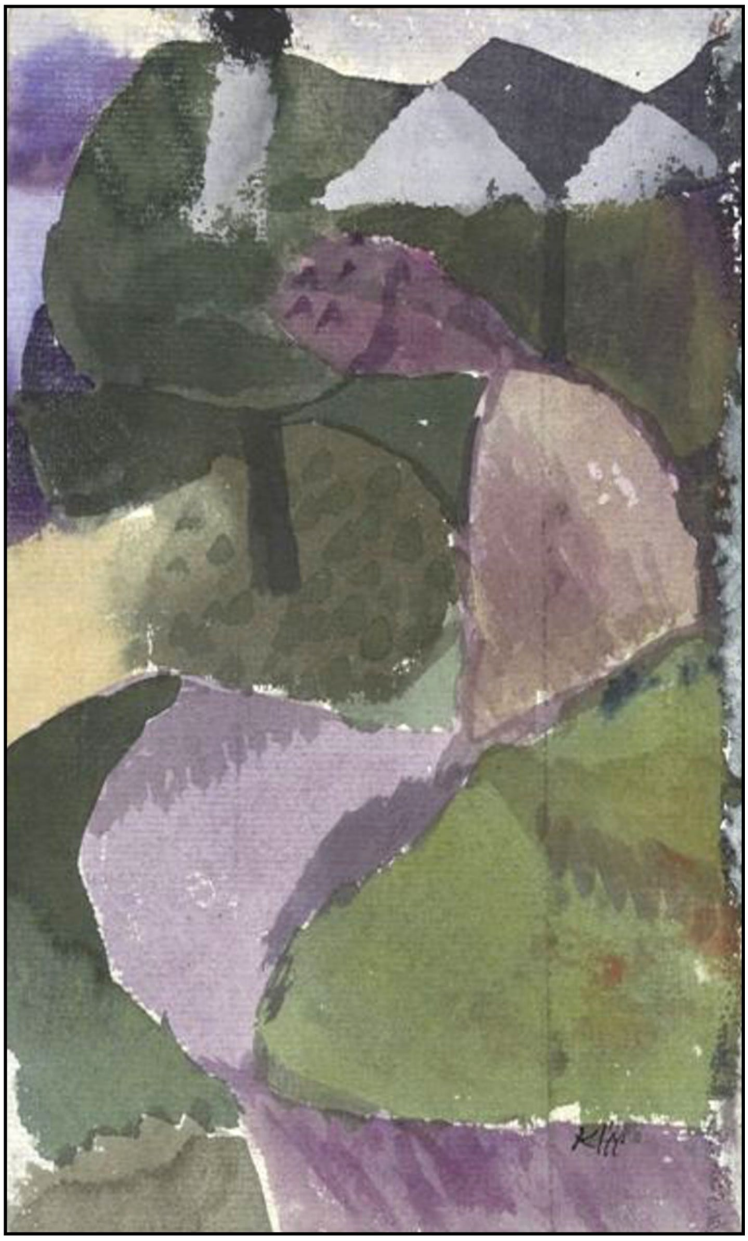
Klee was born in Münchenbuchsee, a small town near Bern in Switzerland, and spent his childhood and adolescence in Bern. His father was a teacher of music and his mother a singer. Klee studied the violin and became good enough to play occasionally in the city orchestra. He revered Bach and Mozart, and cared little for the music of the 19th-Century (Düchting 2012, 7-8).

In 1898 he began to study art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich. He travelled to Italy, but found little inspiration in the works of the masters. His own graphic work – drawings, caricatures and etchings – was strange and uncertain.

Der Blaue Reiter

In 1911, several expressionist painters in Munich, among them, Wassily Kandinsky, Gabriele Münter, and Franz Marc, formed a new group, *The Blue Rider* (Gollek, 1982). They published an almanac, and in 1911 and 1912 held exhibitions of their work and modern paintings from other artists in Germany and France. Klee interacted with them, becoming aware of recent developments in art, such as the Cubism of Pablo Picasso and the Orphism of Robert Delaunay. Klee contributed several of his own works to the second exhibition.

Klee's *Kleine Landschaft in Regenstimmung* (Small Landscape in a Rainy Mood, 1913) shows the influence of Cubism. The picture shows hills in the distance and trees and rocks in the foreground. The violet and green palette is subdued, washed in the rain.



In 1991 Walter Steffens composed a set of 4 pieces for recorder – *Opus 63: Watercolors of Paul Klee*. The following is the haunting third piece – *Kleine Landschaft in Regenstimmung* – played by Benedicta Bonitz on tenor recorder:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/08-4-Watercolors-After-Paul-Klee-Op.m4a

Paris

In 1912 Klee visited Paris. As well as visiting all the

tourist spots, he spent time with Robert Delaunay, who had just written an essay on *Light* (Vriesen & Imdahl, 1969, pp 6-7). True painting depended on light and color. Color allowed different aspects of reality to be simultaneously and harmoniously represented.

> Art in Nature is *rhythmic and abhors constraint*. If art is attached to the Object, it becomes *descriptive, divisive, literary*. It lowers itself to imperfect *means of expression*, it condemns itself of its own accord, it is its own negation, it does not break free of imitative Art. …
>
> For Art to reach the limits of sublimity, it must approach our *harmonic Vision*: *clarity*. Clarity will be *color, proportions*; these proportions are composed of various simultaneous measures within an action. This action must be representative harmony, *the synchromatic movement (simultaneity) of light*, which is the *only reality*. This synchromatic action will then be the Subject which is the representative harmony.

Klee agreed to translated the essay into German and his translation was published in *Der Sturm* in early 1913.

One of Klee's paintings from 1915 – *Lachende Gotik* (Laughing Gothic) – owes much to the ideas and the paintings of Delaunay. Suggesting the tall arches of a gothic church illuminated by the light of stained glass windows, Klee's work owes much to Delaunay's series of paintings of the Église Saint Séverin (1909-10).

In 2014, almost a century later, Martin Torp composed *6 Piano Pieces to Pictures by Paul Klee (“Klee-Blätter”)*. The following is *Number 2 Lachende Gotik:*

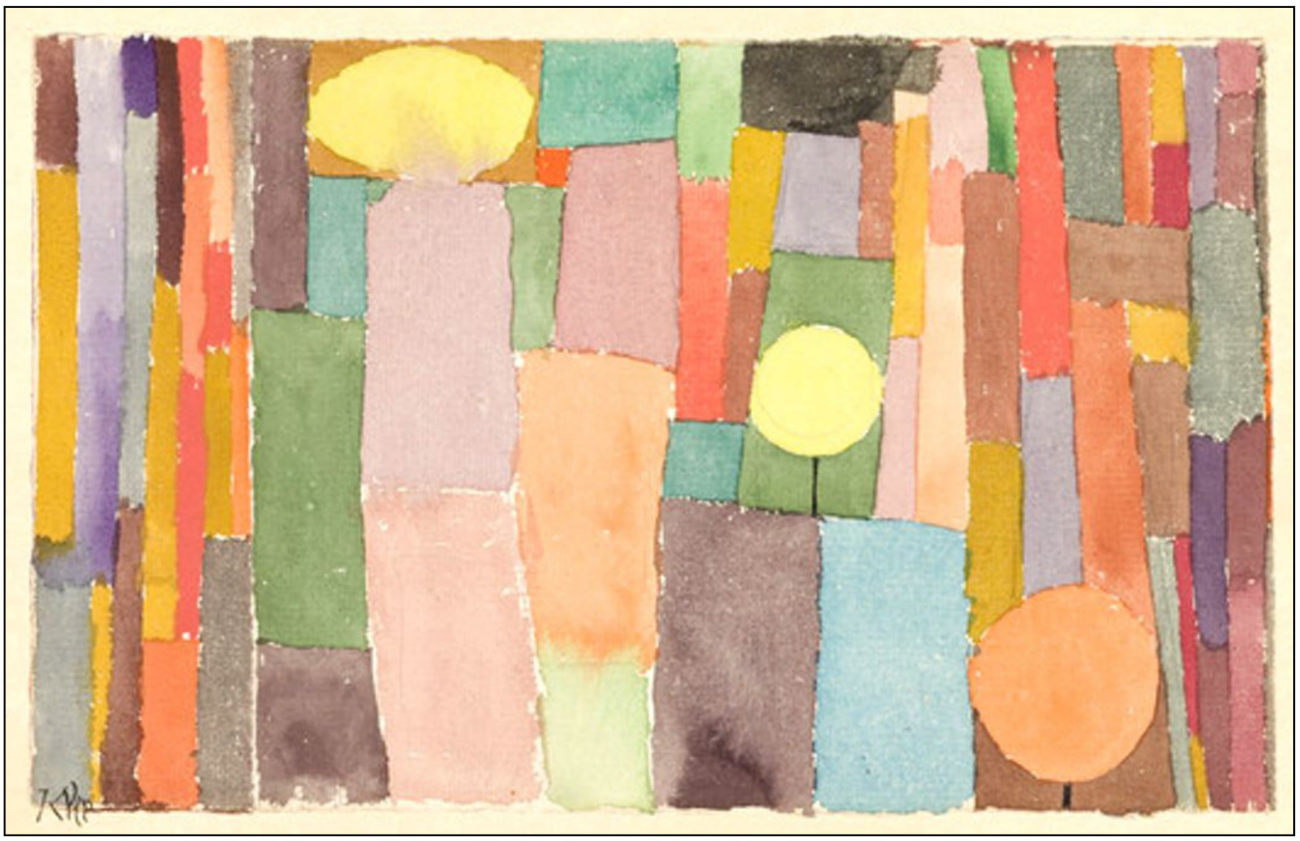
https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/26-6-Piano-Pieces-to-Pictures-by-Pau.m4a

Tunis

In April 1914, Klee travelled to Tunis with August Macke, and Louis Moilliet. The brightness and clarity of the light and the variegated colors of the settlements they visited, Kairouan in particular, provided Klee with an epiphany:

> *Die Farbe hat mich. Ich brauche nicht nach ihr zu haschen. Sie hat mich für immer. Das ist der glücklichen Stunde Sinn: ich und die Farbe sind eins. Ich bin Maler*.
> Color possesses me. I don't have to pursue it. It will possess me always, I know it. That is the meaning of this happy hour: Colour and I are one. I am a painter.
> (Paul Klee diaries, April 24, 1914)

Although most of Klee's paintings from Tunis were representational, one was completely abstract: *Im Stil von Kairouan in Gemässigte übertragen* (In Kairouan Style, Transposed to the Temperate, 1914):



I could find no pieces of music that directly related to Klee's paintings from Tunis. The following is a highly rhythmic jazz piece by Marti Perramon, Joe Gallivan and the Ektal Ensemble entitled *Kairouan a Klee.* Their music suggests the suddenness and brightness of Klee's Tunisian experience:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/04-Kairouan-a-Paul-Klee.m4a

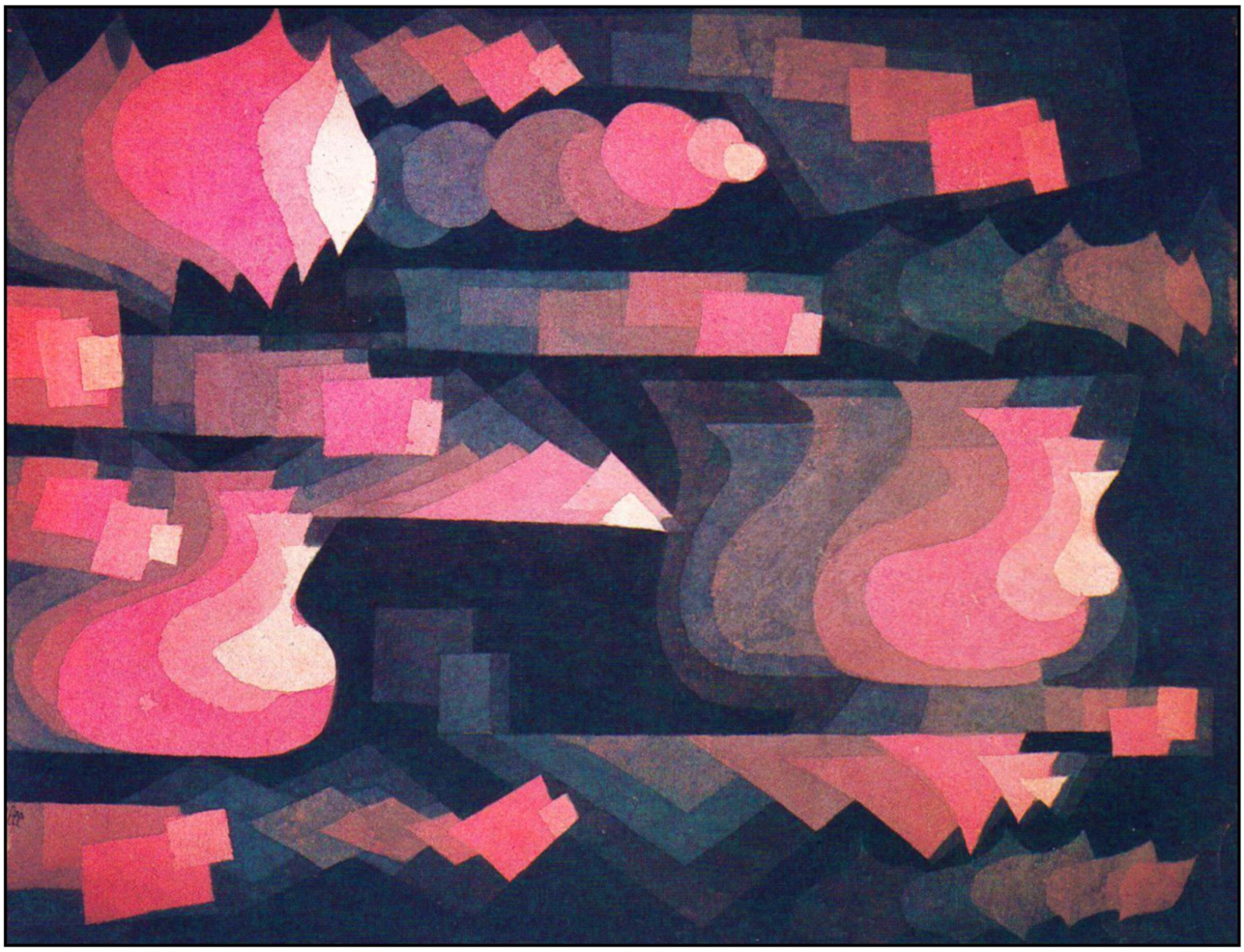
World War I

Klee's friends, August Macke and Franz Marc joined up at the onset of the war. Macke died in September 1914, and Marc in March 1916 (in the Battle of Verdun). Klee, whose Swiss nationality gave him some respite, was finally called up in March 1916 since his father was German. As chance would have it, Klee was not assigned to the front lines: he spent the war doing clerical work in the payroll office. This gave him time

to think through his philosophy of painting. He extended Delaunay's ideas of simultaneity by joining it to the musical concept of "polyphony." The following is from his diary in July 1916:

> Thoughts at the open window of the payroll department. That everything is transitory is merely a simile. Everything we see is a proposal, a possibility, an expedient. The real truth, to begin with, remains invisible beneath the surface. …
>
> Simple motion strikes us as banal. The time element must be eliminated. Yesterday and tomorrow as simultaneous. In music, polyphony helped to some extent to satisfy this need. …
>
> Polyphonic painting is superior to music in that, here, the time element becomes a spatial element. The notion of simultaneity stands out even more richly. … Delaunay strove to shift the accent in art onto the time element, after the fashion of a fugue, by choosing formats that could not be encompassed in one glance.

The following illustration shows Klee's *Fuge in Rot* (Fugue in Red, 1921).



The painting uses various shapes – leaf, vase circle, triangle and square – to depict the basic subjects of a fugue. Each of these shapes goes through an overlapping sequence from left to right becoming lighter as the sequence progresses. Sometimes the sequence might repeat and sometimes the subject might recur in inverted form. (see Liu, 2022, and Düchting, 2012, for further analysis).

In 2009, Jason Wright Wingate composed his Symphony Number 2 Kleetüden. The symphony consists of 27 parts, each keyed to one of Klee's paintings. The following is the 14th section: *Fuge in Rot, moderato rossastro* (at a moderate reddish pace) played by *L'orchestre de l'Invisible*:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/14-Kleetuden-14.-Fuge-In-Rot-Fugu.m4a

Bauhaus

Walter Gropius, a successful architect, took over the Grand-Ducal Saxon Academy of Fine Art in Weimar in 1919, renaming it *Das Bauhaus* (building house). The first members of the faculty were Johannes Itten, a Swiss painter and color-theorist, and Lyonel Feininger, a German Expressionist painter. Klee joined the faculty in 1921, and Kandinsky followed in 1922. The Bauhaus moved to Dessau in 1925. Klee continued to work and teach at the Bauhaus until 1931, when he became a Professor at the Düsseldorf Academy of Fine Art. The Bauhaus was closed when the Nazis assumed control of the Dessau city council in 1932.

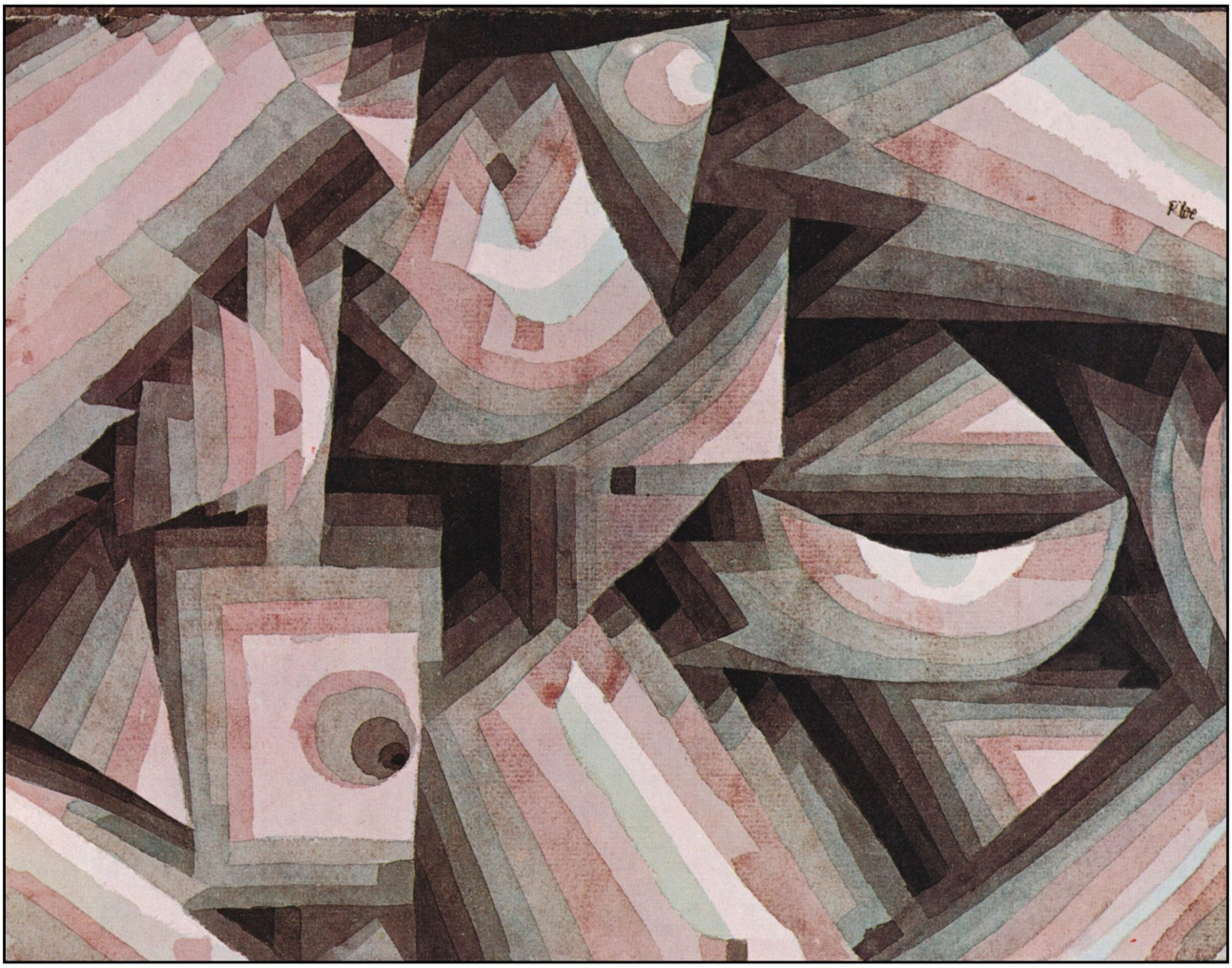
Gropius envisioned artists working together to create beautiful surroundings for people to live in:

> The ultimate aim of all visual arts is the complete building! To embellish buildings was once the noblest function of the fine arts; they were the indispensable components of great architecture. Today the arts exist in isolation, from which they can be rescued only through the conscious, cooperative effort of all craftsmen. Architects, painters, and sculptors must recognize anew and learn to grasp the composite character of a building both as an entity and in its separate parts. Only then will their work be imbued with the architectonic spirit which it has lost as "salon art." …
>
> Let us then create a new guild of craftsmen without the class distinctions that raise an arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist! Together let us desire, conceive, and create the new structure of the future, which will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting in one unity and which will one day rise toward heaven from the hands of a million workers like the crystal symbol of a new faith.

(Bauhaus Manifesto, 1919)

The Bauhaus combined craft with art to produce beautifully designed furniture, buildings and paintings. Form and function were joined together. Art was wedded to technology.

Klee's appointment at the Bauhaus gave him the time and the freedom to create. One of Klees' early works in Weimar is *Kristall-Stufung* (Crystal Gradation, 1921). One is tempted to related this to Gropius' "crystal symbol of a new faith." The different gradations in the picture are created by multiple overlays of transparent water-colors, a technique known as "glazing."



In 2007 Paul Osterfield wrote some chamber music for guitar, flute and clarinet entitled *Klee Abstractions*. The following

is the second movement based on *Crystal Gradations*:

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Another early painting from his Bauhaus years is *Der Bote des Herbste* (Autumn Messenger, 1922). This is the description of Carola Giedion-Welcker (quoted in Klee, 1959, p 21)

> A picture organized architectonically and musically, well-knit, gently toned, and sonorous. The parallel linework is articulated in long rectangles, stripes of gray and blue that darken into violet and become more compressed. There are delicate color gradations, which in the end are definitively brought together and tied into impressive rhythmic contrasts of light and shadow. Within the angular austerity of the whole, there swell the curves, solitary and impressive, of the organic oval—the sign of the tree, of the golden yellow messenger of autumn, which dominates the picture by virtue of its formal and color values. The white sickle on the lateral plane is like a fragmentary formal echo of the main theme.

The following is a musical interpretation of the painting by Takeshi Kako (1988) on piano:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/01-Bote-Des-Herbstes.m4a

Giedeon-Welcker also noted that the picture is reminiscent of Paul Verlaine's poem *Chanson d'Automne* (Song of Autumn, 1866)

Les sanglots longs
Des violons
De l'automne
Blessent mon cœur
D'une langueur
Monotone.

Tout suffocant
Et blême, quand
Sonne l'heure,
Je me souviens
Des jours anciens
Et je pleure;

Et je m'en vais
Au vent mauvais
Qui m'emporte
Deçà, delà,
Pareil à la
Feuille morte.

[The long sobbing of the autumn violins wounds my heart with

> a monotonous languor. Breathless and pale, when the hour sounds, I remember the old days and weep; soon I am going away in the ill wind that carries me here and there, like a dead leaf.]

Klee's *Vor dem Schnee* (Before the Snow, 1929), a painting from the late autumn when the trees are on fire and the leaves are falling, brings to mind the transience of life:

The following is Takashi Kato's pianistic interpretation:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/07-Vor-Dem-Schnee.m4a

Klee and the poet Rainer Maria Rilke had been friends and neighbors in an apartment building in Munich in 1919. Rilke

died in 1926. This painting recalls the poet's acute sense of time, as seen in his poem *Herbst* (Autumn, from *Das Buch der Bilder*, The Book of Pictures, 1902). The poem describes the falling leaves and realizes that we are always falling through time. The following is the poem's ending with Robert Bly's translation (1981):

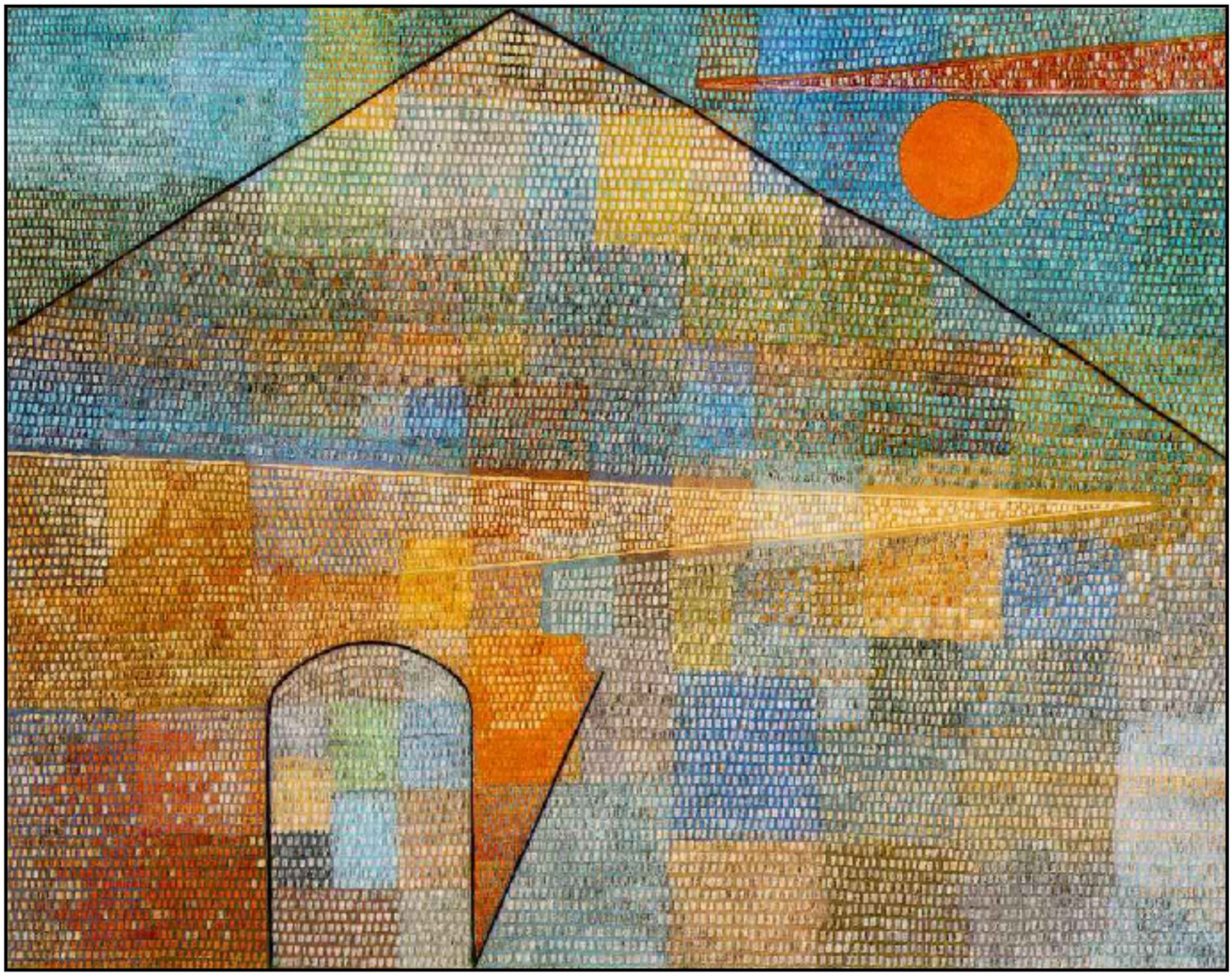
> *Wir alle fallen. Diese Händ da fällt.*
> *Und sieh dir andre an: es ist in allen*
> *Und doc hist Einer, Welcher dieses Fallen*
> *unendlich sanft in seinen Händen hält*
>
> We're all falling. This hand here is falling.
> And look at the other one. … It's in them all
> And yet there is Someone, whose hands
> infinitely calm, hold up all this falling.

Klee's painting *Hauptweg und Nebenwege* (Highway and Byways, 1929) seemed to portray the infinite artistic possibilities provided by the Bauhaus. The painting is an example of Klee's polyphony, as it leads us into the future on parallel and contrapuntal paths:

The following is Takashi Kako’s pianistic journey (1988) through the colors of the painting:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/11-Hauptweg-Und-Nebenwege.m4a

Klee visited Ravenna, Italy, in 1926 and was entranced by the mosaics. Some of his later paintings were made in a pointillist style that brings to mind the mosaics. One of these, *Ad Parnassum* (1932), shows the mountain of the muses in the distance and the ruins of a temple in the foreground. The red triangle above the sun likely represents the morning from dawn to noon and the light-yellow triangle the afternoon from noon to sunset. The painting suggests a journey beginning at the temple and ascending toward the rocky peak:



The following is the 5th movement from Peter Maxwell Davies' *Five Klee Pictures*: *Ad Parnassum*. Maxwell Davies initially composed this piece for a high school orchestra in 1959, and then revised it in 1976 for the Philharmonia Orchestra:

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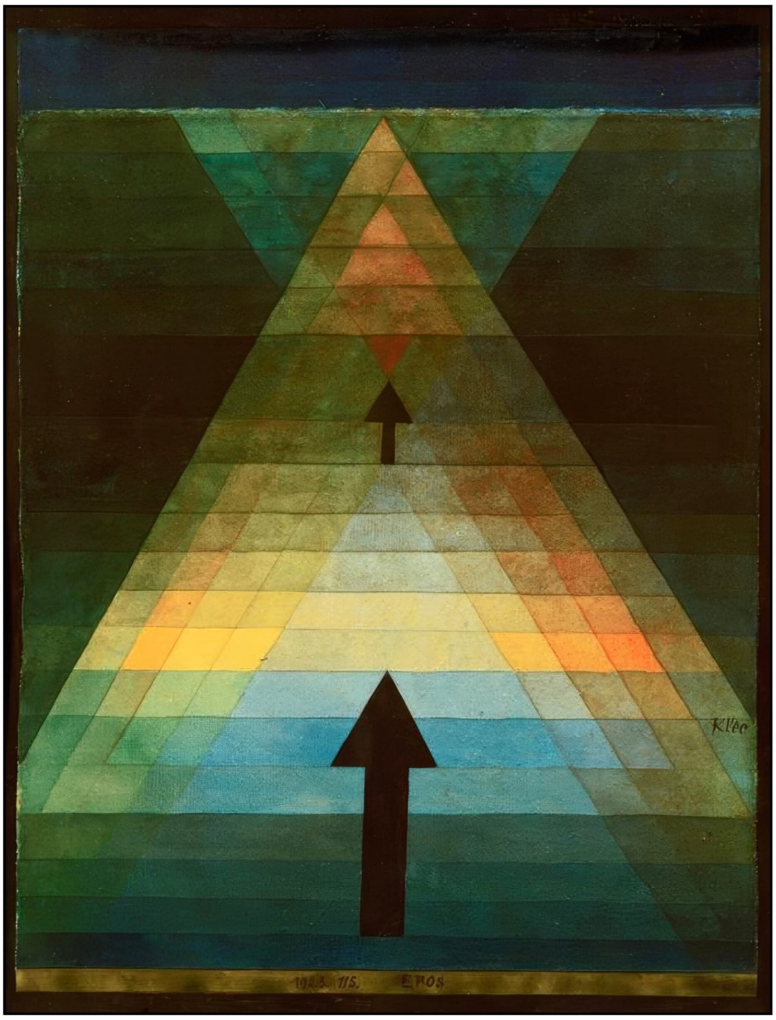
The painting *Eros* (1923) is dominated by a rising arrow.



The painting is concerned with the erotic aspects of desire.

The following is the 4th section of Wingate's Symphony Number 2: *Eros* (*grave libidinoso*):

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For Klee, the arrow symbolized "desire" in both its sexual and intellectual forms. In his *Pedagogic Sketchbooks* (1925, p 54), he wrote about the intellectual aspects of desire:

> The father of the arrow is the thought: how do I expand my reach? Over this river? This lake? That mountain?
> The contrast between man's ideological capacity to move at random through material and metaphysical spaces and his physical limitations is the origin of all human tragedy. It

is this contrast between power and prostration that implies the duality of human existence. Half-winged – half-imprisoned, this is man.

Another painting that deals with desire is *Katze und Vogel* (Cat and Bird, 1928). The image of the bird is fixed in the brain of the cat as it quietly waits to pounce:

The following is the 24th section of Wingate's *Symphony Number 2: Cat and Bird, andantino desideroso:*

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/24-Kleetuden-24.-Katze-Und-Vogel-.m4a

The National Socialists

All was not perfect as the decade of the 1920s progressed. Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party began their slow but

inexorable rise to power. Klee's paintings are open to many levels of interpretation. Some of these express foreboding about the times to come.

Klee's *Schwartzer Fürst* (Black Prince, 1927) provides a frightening vision of power:

The following is the1st movement, *Black Prince*, of George Crumb's *Metamorphoses* (2017), a series of pieces for piano based on paintings (Buja, 2022). The pianist, Marcantonio

Barone, plays both through the piano keys and by manually activating the piano strings:

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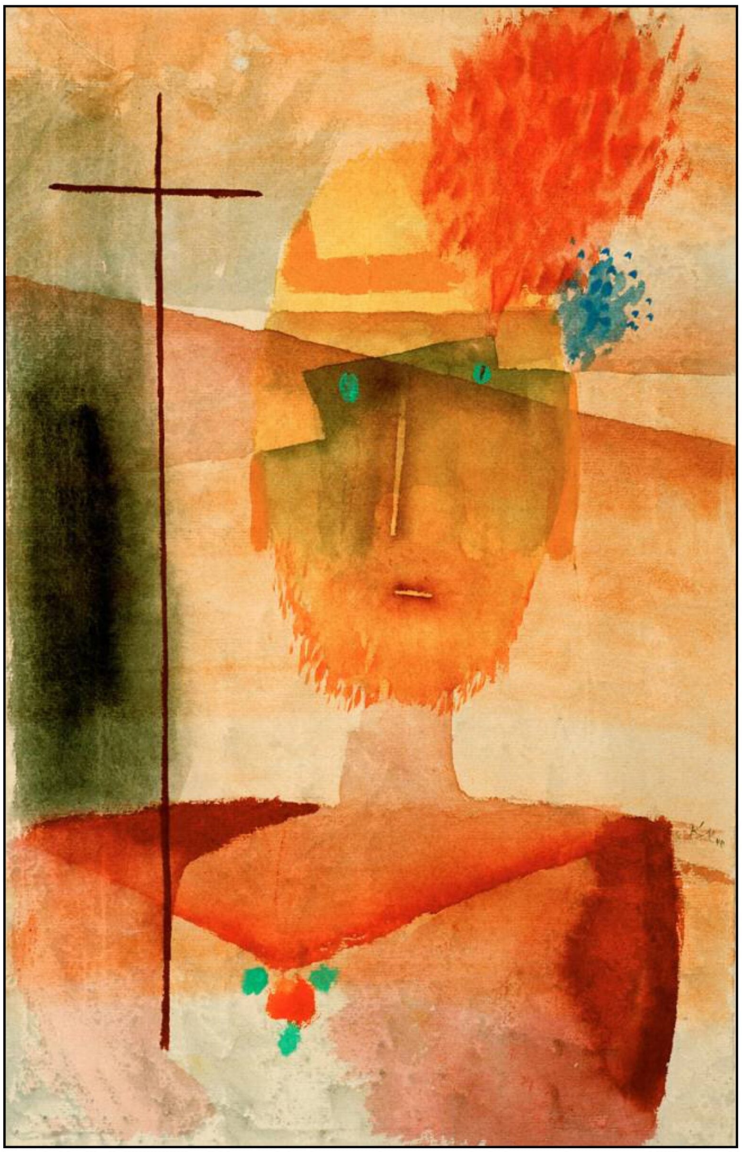
At one level we can see in Klee's picture *Ein Kreuzzugler* (Crusader, 1929) an innocent medieval peasant off to liberate the holy land. The landscape is becoming visible through the crusader as he fades away. The green eyes burn. At another level we can see someone foolishly believing in something as vacuous as the Nazi ideas of racial superiority.



The following is the 1st movement from Peter Maxwell Davies' *Five Klee Pictures*: *Crusader*. The first movement is an unnerving march. Maxwell Davies conducts the Philharmonic Orchestra.

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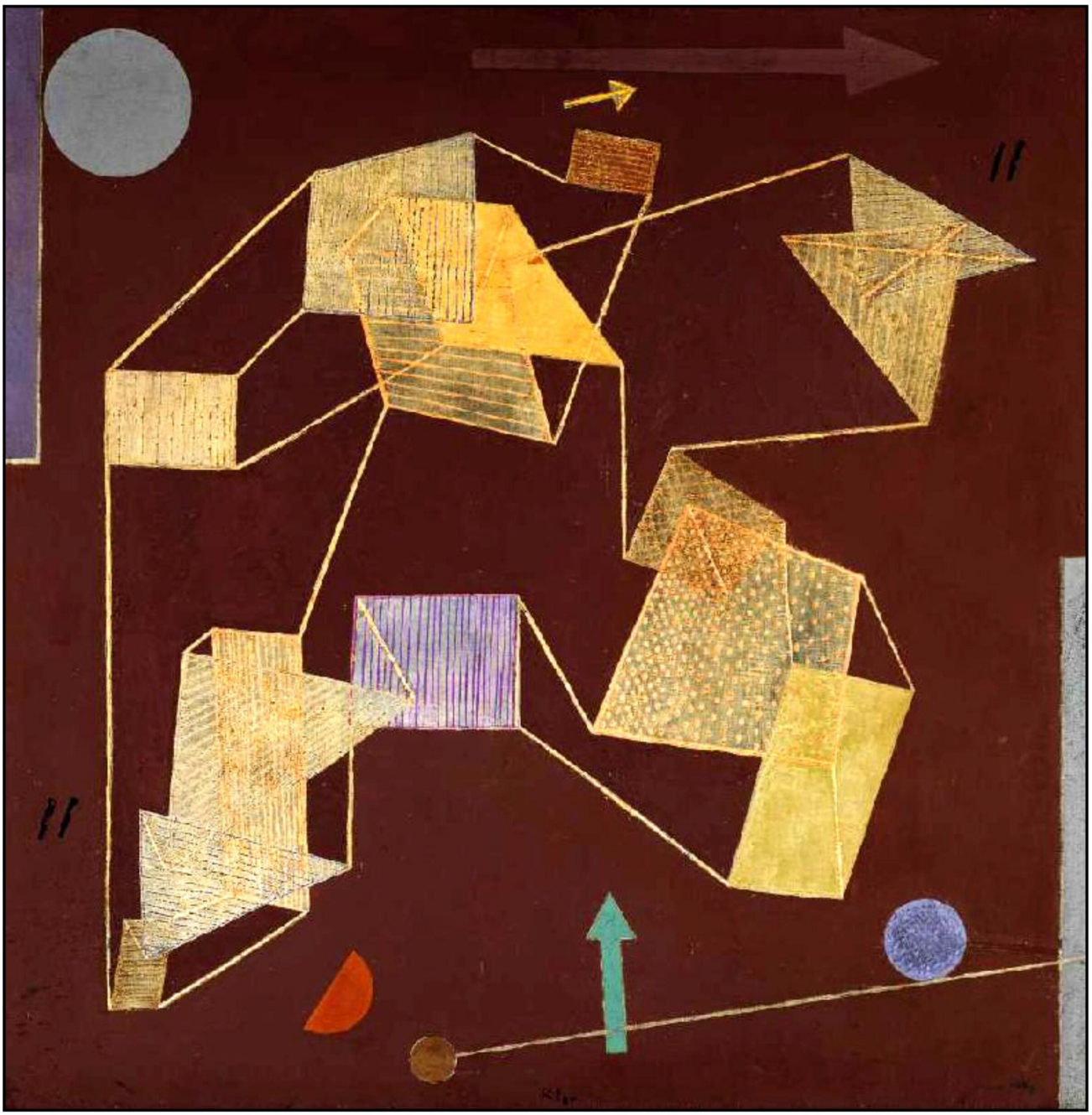
Klee's painting of *Kleiner Blautuefel* (Little Blue Devil, 1933) is ambivalent. Is the subject an agent of mischief or of chaos?

This ambivalence is nicely captured in the 3rd movement of Gunther Schuller's *7 Studies on Themes of Paul Klee* (1959) which combines jazz and classical music (Buja, 2021). The piece is performed by the Boston Symphony Orchestra under

Erich Leinsdorf:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/06-Concerto-per-Klee_-Polyphonie-I.m4a

Although he abhorred the Nazis. Klee attempted to stay clear of overt politics. His painting *Auftrieb und Weg – Segelflug* (Up and Away – Gliding, 1932) captured his desire to get away from the coming evil:



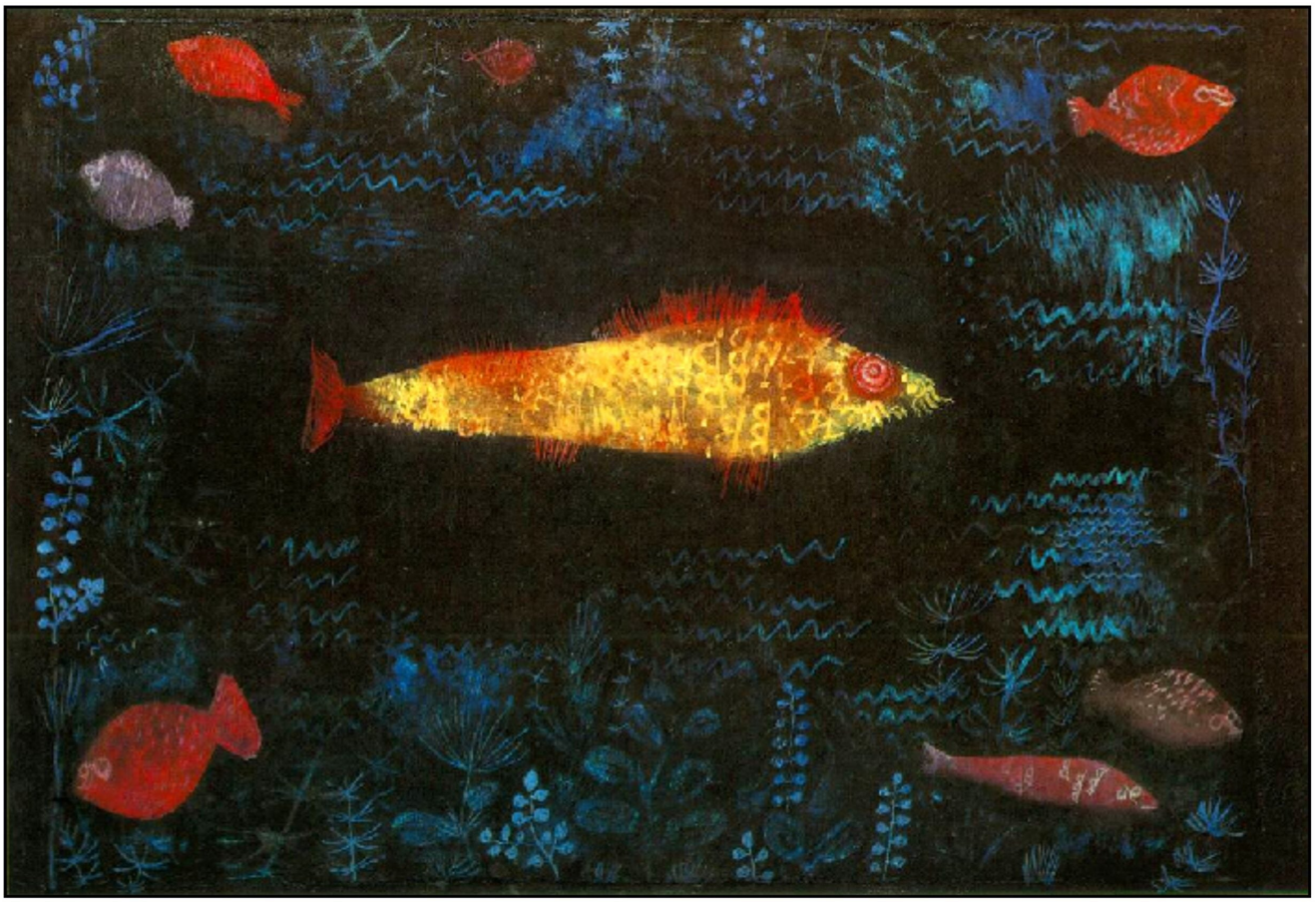
Fabien Müller wrote a *Concerto per Klee* for cello and chamber

orchestra in 2007. The following is the 1st movement: *Auftrieb und Weg (lento, poco rubato – presto)*. The cellist is Pi-Chin Chien and the orchestra is the Georgisches Kammerorchester Ingolstadt conducted by Ruben Gazarian.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/06-Concerto-per-Klee_-Polyphonie-I.m4a

In January 1933, Hitler became Reich Chancellor. In March, Klee's home was searched and his papers were confiscated. In April, he was summarily dismissed from his position at the Düsseldorf Academy of Fine Art. In December Klee moved to Bern. Although he was born in Switzerland, he was considered an immigrant, and not granted Swiss citizenship. He stayed in exile in Switzerland until his death in 1940.

In 1937 the Nazis organize an Exhibition of Degenerate Art (*Entartete Kunst*) in Munich (Barron, 1991). The exhibition claimed that much of what passed for art in the preceding years had been an insult to the purity and integrity of true German culture. Thirty-five works by Paul Klee were removed from German art galleries and included in the exhibition. Among them was *Der goldene Fisch* (Golden Fish, 1925) which had been acquired by the National Gallery in Berlin. The painting shows a magnificent golden fish shimmering in the dark blue waters as other smaller fishes make way for his passage:



The second of George Crumb's *Metamorphoses* (2017) provides a sensitive interpretation of this ancient and magical being. We may not understand its life but we can marvel at its beauty. The music (played by Marcantonio Barone) shimmers:

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Exile

Klee's time in Bern was lonely and painful. In 1935, he was diagnosed with scleroderma, an auto-immune disease that causes the skin to tighten progressively, and also affects other organs. This caused him pain, and difficulties with swallowing and breathing. Ultimately, the disease led to his death in 1940 (Suter, 2010, 2014).

Nevertheless, he continued to be very productive. One of his Bern paintings, entitled *Zeichen in Gelb* (Signs in Yellow,

1937), was similar to his early work exploring the significance of colors and the colors of signs.

The painting was the inspiration for the 1st movement of *Hommage à Paul Klee*, a concerto for 2 pianos and string orchestra by Sandor Veress (1951). The following is a performance by Andras Schiff and Denes Varjon on pianos, with Heinz Holliger conducting the Budapest Festival Orchestra.

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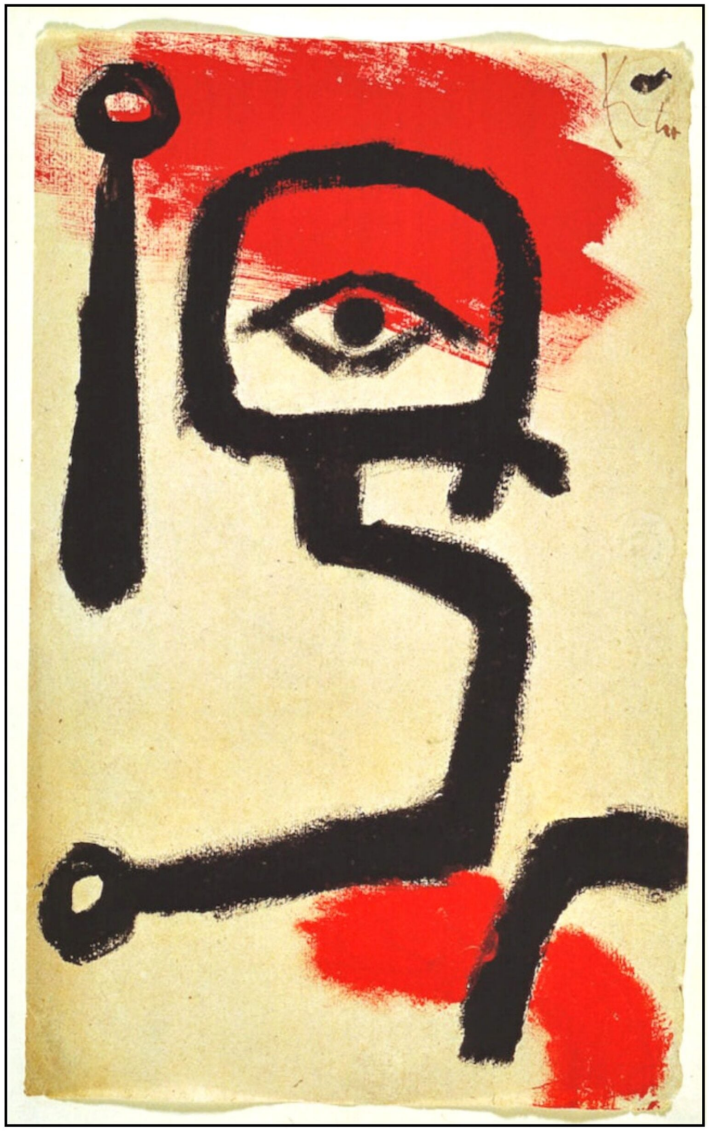
mmage-a-Paul-Klee_-I.-Zeichen-i.m4a

The painting *Paukenspieler* (Kettledrummer, 1940) can bear multiple interpretations. On the one hand, it can simply represent a tympanist in the midst of a drum solo, caught with one drumstick raised and the other hitting the drum. On the other hand, the stark black and red colors and the angular shapes bring to mind the Nazi swastika and the drumbeat of war.



The following is the 16th section of Wingate's *Symphony Number 2 Kleetüden: Paukenspieler (grave morboso).*

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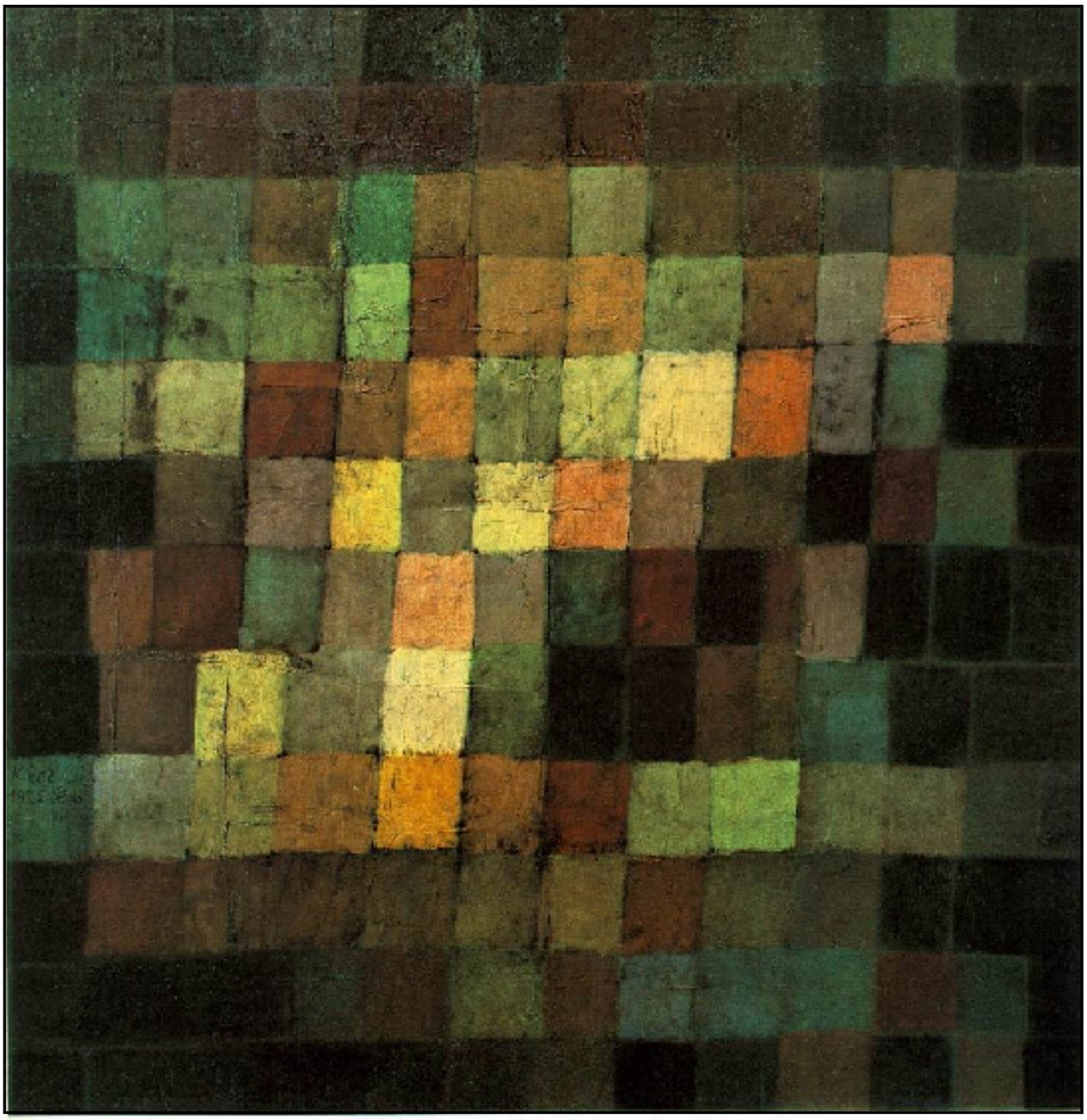
One of Klee’s last paintings was *Tod und Feuer* (Death and Fire, 1940). The white shape in the center brings to mind a skull, the features of which are portrayed by the letters T, O and D of the German word for “death.” Outside the skull the letters recur going up from the left and down on the right. The orange and yellow colors of the background suggest flames. Klee joined his own tragedy with that of the world at war.

The following is 7th movement (Tod und Feuer) of Jim NcNeely's *Paul Klee Suite for Jazz Orchestra* (2006), as played by the Swiss jazz Orchestra with the composer conducting.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/07-Tod-Und-Feuer-Death-and-Fire.m4a

Envoi

One of Klee's most famous paintings, entitled *Alter Klang* (Old Sound/Ancient Harmony, 1925), encapsulates his desire to bring to painting the polyphony of music. The viewer can spend forever finding the patterns of the colors and their echoes across time.



Below are two musical interpretations: by Takashi Kako (1988) on solo piano, and by Sandor Veress (1951) in the 3rd movement of his *Hommage à Paul Klee*, a concerto for 2 pianos and string orchestra, with Andras Schiff and Denes Varjon on pianos, and

Heinz Holliger conducting the Budapest Festival Orchestra:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/12-Alter-Klang.m4a

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/03-Hommage-a-Paul-Klee_-III.-Alter-K.m4a

We can conclude with a quotation from Klee's *Creative Confession* (1920/2012, part V)

> Formerly we used to represent things visible on earth, things we either liked to look at or would have liked to see. Today we reveal the reality that is behind visible things, thus expressing the belief that the visible world is merely an isolated case in relation to the universe and that there are many more other, latent realities. Things appear to assume a broader and more diversified meaning, often seemingly contradicting the rational experience of yesterday. There is a striving to emphasize the essential character of the accidental.

The essence of things had much in common with music. There is a rhythm at the heart of things. Multiple strands of meaning can interact like the themes in a fugue or the colors in a polyphonic painting.

Notes:

Klee produced many thousands of paintings over his lifetime. This essay only looks at twenty. A searchable listing of Paul Klee's works is available. Many of his paintings have been

interpreted musically (Wikipedia provides an extensive but incomplete listing). Recently, Jonathan Posthuma has composed some 50 chamber pieces related to Klee's paintings: Paul Klee: Painted Songs.

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