

**Zeitschrift:** Basler Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis : eine Veröffentlichung der Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, Lehr- und Forschungsinstitut für Alte Musik an der Musik-Akademie der Stadt Basel

**Herausgeber:** Schola Cantorum Basiliensis

**Band:** 14 (1990)

**Artikel:** Death as a fiddler : the study of convention in European art, literature and music

**Autor:** Steblin, Rita

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-869111>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 18.04.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

DEATH AS A FIDDLER:  
THE STUDY OF A CONVENTION IN EUROPEAN ART,  
LITERATURE AND MUSIC \*

by RITA STEBLIN

„Freund Hein spielt auf“ – Death strikes up to play. What instrument does he play? The violin, of course. When Gustav Mahler inscribed the above caption on the Scherzo movement of his Fourth Symphony (1900) and wrote a special scordatura part for solo violin as a programmatic element, he was influenced by the popular notion that Death comes as a fiddler.<sup>1</sup> This gruesome „friend“ had already appeared, playing the violin for a midnight bone dance, in Camille Saint-Saëns's *Danse Macabre* (1875) and was to be again associated with the violin in Igor Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat* (1918). Why was Death a fiddler? Was he always a fiddler? Is he still a fiddler? These are some of the issues I would like to address here, issues which are of significance not only to music, but to art and literature as well.

A striking example of the conviction among nineteenth-century artists that Death comes with a fiddle in hand is Alfred Rethel's woodcut „Tod als Würger“ [Death as Strangler] (1850). (See Figure 1.) Death is depicted here as a skeleton in monk's garb, playing two bones like a fiddle and bow. He had come in disguise to a masked ball: various dancers in *commedia dell'arte* costume lie dying on the floor around him while the musicians sneak away in terror at the back. Another example is the self-portrait by the Swiss idealist Arnold Böcklin: „Selbstbildnis mit fiedelndem Tod“ [Self-Portrait with Fiddling Death] (1872). (See Figure 2.) The painter tilts his head as though straining to hear something behind him: at his left shoulder is the grinning figure of Death playing the violin.

The same type of imagery appears in Romantic literature: a particularly vivid example is found in Nikolaus Lenau's epic poem *Faust* (1836). In the scene of the village wedding, „Der Tanz,“ Death's agent Mephistopheles grabs a violin and, through the power of his diabolical playing, helps Faust to seduce the girl of his choice. The devil's mastery of difficult technique – double and triple stops according to Lenau's account – indicates that this was his instrument par excellence. The demonic violinist appears again as

\* I wish to dedicate this article to the great Viennese violinist Eduard Melkus, who inspired my interest in this topic.

<sup>1</sup> Donald Mitchell, Gustav Mahler: *The Wunderhorn years*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1975, 303, n. 116: „Freund Hein spielt auf“, according to Paul Bekker, *Gustav Mahlers Sinfonien*, Berlin 1921, 155, was originally inscribed by Mahler on the MS of this movement [the Scherzo]. See also Bruno Walter, *Briefe 1894-1962*, Frankfurt 1969, 52.

„der schwarze Geiger“ or black fiddler in Gottfried Keller's *Romeo und Julia auf dem Dorfe* of 1856. The young lovers fall under the violinist's magical spell, marry in defiance of their fathers' wishes, and deliberately drown themselves while floating on a raft – a Liebestod. At one point in their illegal wedding ceremony, they dance feverishly under the influence of the fiddler's diabolical playing.

The association of Death with dancing, as in several of the preceding examples, suggests that the most logical place to look for the origin of the motive „Death as a fiddler“ is in the medieval Dance of Death convention. This custom, also known as Danse Macabre or Totentanz, arose in the fourteenth century, in the wake of the devastating epidemics of bubonic plague. It usually involved a dramatic, pictorial or literary portrayal of a number of skeleton-like figures leading a procession of living beings to a charnel house (House of the Dead). These skeletons were thought to be the Dead, having come to collect the Living. The message imparted was that no one, pope or beggar, man or woman, old person or child, escaped from the call of Death. The religious authorities encouraged this practice because it helped to reinforce their teachings of leading a moral life, of being prepared for Death at all times.<sup>2</sup>

Since this was a *Dance* of Death, musical instruments play an important part. Let us consider the treatment of instruments in some of the earliest surviving pictorial representations of the Totentanz. Figure 3 is from the Lübecker Totentanz, painted c.1466 (revised in 1588) on the walls of the Marienkirche Chapel of the Dead in Lübeck. Leading the procession is the skeletal figure of Death playing on a flute.<sup>3</sup> Following him are dancing skeletons and persons from all walks of life, twenty-four pairs in all. The highest ranking of these, the pope and the emperor, are the first in line. Figure 4 shows another mid-fifteenth-century Dance of Death – the Klein-Basler fresco at Klingenthal, Switzerland. Here skeletons lead the various estates to a charnel house filled with skulls. The musical instruments heralding this dance are pipes, shawm and drum.<sup>4</sup> Individual scenes from the Dance of Death were also widely disseminated in the form of woodcuts. A famous example is the Heidelberger or Knoblochzer Totentanz of 1485. The text of the title page reads:

<sup>2</sup> The literature on this subject is immense: a recent, comprehensive discussion of the topic, with invaluable iconographic evidence, is Reinhold Hammerstein's *Tanz und Musik des Todes: Die mittelalterlichen Totentänze und ihr Nachleben*, Berne and Munich 1980.

<sup>3</sup> In the original 1466 version, removed to Reval in 1588 upon restoration of the cycle, the leading figure plays the bagpipes. See Hammerstein, *Tanz und Musik des Todes*, fig. 31, and pp. 154-156 for a discussion of the complicated history of this Totentanz.

<sup>4</sup> See the identification of instruments in Kathi Meyer-Baer, *Music of the spheres and the dance of death: Studies in musical iconology*, Princeton 1970, 302, fig. 161

Wol an wol an ir herren und knecht  
Springet her by von allem geslecht  
Wie iunck wie alt wie schone ader kruß  
Ir mußet alle in diß dantz huß

Come ye sires and servers  
Rush here from all estates  
Young and old, pretty or ugly  
All must come to this house of dance <sup>5</sup>

In the scene accompanying this text, skeleton-musicians play for the dance. (See Figure 5.) The instruments are all loud winds: shawms or buisines and a slide trumpet. Another woodcut, designed by Michael Wohlgemuth and printed in Hartmann Schedel's *Weltchronik* of 1493, depicts a rather merry dance beside an open grave, perhaps caricaturing the popular belief in the midnight bone dances. (See Figure 6.) Accompanying the fun is Death as a shawm-player.

An examination of numerous other Totentanz representations from the fifteenth century reveals that wind instruments – often shawms, bagpipes, or a pipe and drum combination – prevail.<sup>6</sup> These were the instruments most often used to accompany medieval processions and dances.<sup>7</sup> Figure 7 shows a fifteenth-century peasant dance from Poitou, accompanied by a musician playing the bagpipes while Figure 8 shows Death playing the same instrument – bagpipes – in a Totentanz depiction in *La Chaise Dieu* (1460). It appears, therefore, that the image of Death as a fiddler had not yet become fixed in the popular imagination, and I can only conclude that the oft-repeated statement by early scholars of the Totentanz, that Death „in the Middle Ages had a distinct preference for the violin“<sup>8</sup> must be false. More often than not he was depicted as a wind player – a piper – and this is confirmed by the well-known legend (dated 1284) of the Pied Piper of Hamelin. The piper who lures the town's children away, never to return again, is usually interpreted as Death.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Original text from Hammerstein, *Tanz und Musik des Todes*, fig. 138. English translation from Meyer-Baer, *Music of the spheres*, 301.

<sup>6</sup> See the illustrations in Stephan Cosacchi, *Makabertanz: Der Totentanz in Kunst, Poesie und Brauchtum des Mittelalters*, Meisenheim am Glan 1965, Hellmut Rosenfeld, *Der mittelalterliche Totentanz: Entstehung, Entwicklung, Bedeutung*, 3rd rev. ed., Cologne 1974, and Hammerstein, *Tanz und Musik des Todes*.

<sup>7</sup> For a thorough discussion of the early history of the pipe-drum combination, in particular its association with the dance (and Totentanz), see Dagmar Hoffmann-Axthelm, „Zu Ikonographie und Bedeutungsgeschichte von Flöte und Trommel in Mittelalter und Renaissance“, *BjBHM* 7 (1983) 84-118.

<sup>8</sup> Léonard P. Kurtz, *The dance of death and the macabre spirit in European literature*, New York 1934; Geneva 1975, 221. See also Maximilian Rudwin, *The Devil in Legend and Literature*, Chicago and London 1931, 256, and Stephan Cossacchi, „Musikinstrumente im mittelalterlichen Totentanz“, *Die Musikforschung* 8 (1955) 11.

<sup>9</sup> In the most recent literature on the Totentanz, in particular in Hammerstein, *Tanz und Musik des Todes*, 41, it is clearly established that the „Fistula“ (the generic word for pipe) is the instrument on which the medieval figure of the Todesspielmann – Death as musician – plays.

The visual image of Death as a piper is reinforced by the verses of text which accompanied the Totentanz pictures. For example, the Würzburger Totentanz, the oldest German Dance of Death poem (c. 1350), begins with a preacher's sermon in which Death is typified as follows:

Mit sîner hellischen pffifen schreien  
bringt er iuch al an einen reien.

With his hellish pipe's sound  
he brings you all to a round.

When Death addresses his first victim, the pope, he taunts:

Her bâbst, merkt ûf der pffifen dôn:  
ir sult darnâch springen schön!

Sir Pope, watch out for the pipe's tune:  
You will be jumping to it soon!

When the choir leader's turn is up, the complaint is:

Ich hân als ein kôrherre frî  
gesungen manic lieplîch melodî.  
Des tôdes pffîf stât dem nit glîch,  
sie hat sô sêre erschreckt mich.

I have as a choir director free  
sung many a lovely melody.  
The pipe of Death compares unlikely,  
it has so very much frightened me.<sup>10</sup>

Later verses, like those accompanying the fifteenth-century Groß-Baseler Totentanz, repeat Death's claim that all „[muß] tantzen nach miner pffifen ton“ (must dance after my pipe).<sup>11</sup> Death is also a piper in several English folksongs inspired by the Dance of Death. The ballad „Can you dance the shaking of the sheets“ (c. 1560) concludes with Death speaking these lines:

Be ready, therefore, – watch and pray,  
That when my minstrel pipe doth play,  
You may to heaven dance the way.<sup>12</sup>

The alternate title of this song was „Dance after my pipe,“ and to dance after Death's pipe „seems to have been a proverbial expression.“<sup>13</sup>

Let us now consider the most famous of all Dance of Death representations: Hans Holbein's series of woodcuts designed in Basel c. 1526 and first published as *Les Simulacres et Historiées Faces de La Mort* in Lyons in 1538. Quite a number of the scenes feature musical instruments. Figure 9, showing Death calling on the Duchess, contains a fiddle-like instrument, and this scene has sometimes been cited as evidence that Death was a fiddler in the Renaissance.<sup>14</sup> But, if we look at more of the musical scenes we find that the

<sup>10</sup> Rosenfeld, *Der mittelalterliche Totentanz*, 309, 310, 314. The English translation is my own. See also the discussion in Hammerstein, *Tanz und Musik des Todes*, 29ff.

<sup>11</sup> Rosenfeld, *Der mittelalterliche Totentanz*, 333.

<sup>12</sup> Henri Stegemeier, *The dance of death in folk-song*, Chicago 1939, 103.

<sup>13</sup> William Chappell, *Popular Music of the Olden Time*, 2 vols., London 1859, I, 84. See also the similar German expressions discussed in Hammerstein, *Tanz und Musik des Todes*, 51-52.

<sup>14</sup> Sharon Latchaw Hirsh, „Arnold Böcklin: Death talks to the painter“, *Arts Magazine* 55 (1981) 86.

instruments depicted are of great variety and seem to be associated with features of the intended victim rather than with the character of Death. For example, Death plays the xylophone in the scene with the Old Woman (Figure 10), perhaps because this instrument sounds like rattling old bones. In the Soldier's scene (Figure 11) an appropriate military instrument – the side drum – is sounded by a skeleton in the background, while in the scene with the Fool (Figure 12), who stupidly swings a bladder, Death blows the lowly bagpipes. In the opening scene to this hierarchical presentation of victims, we see the old charnel house with skeletons making music for the Dance (Figure 13). As in the earlier representations, wind (and percussion) instruments dominate. Thus my conclusion can only be that the notion of Death preferring the fiddle did not originate with Holbein. In the following two centuries the Dance of Death depictions were rather sterile imitations of Holbein and, as in the case of Abraham a Sancta Clara's *Todten-Capelle* of 1710 – the moral warnings of a conservative cleric –, Death was still viewed as a piper, in this case a flutist.<sup>15</sup>

A brief view of the violin's history may help to clarify matters. Bowed fiddle-type instruments, with names like rebec, giga, lira, fidula and vielle, were found in Europe from the eleventh century on. These were often used by the wandering minstrels to accompany their songs and dances, and especially to provide background music for banquets in castles. The tone was thin and nasal – perhaps not loud enough to compete with the shrill pipes and shawms favoured for outdoor processions, and hence not as suitable as the instrument of Death. The fiddle-like instrument in Holbein's scene with the Duchess, for example, was used to accompany a bedroom encounter. There is also a wood relief from 1548 which depicts Death playing the fiddle to a sleeping child, before snatching it from its cradle.<sup>16</sup> The soft tones of the fiddle undoubtedly made this the preferred instrument for a child's lullaby.

The violin as we know it – with four strings tuned in fifths, characteristic outline, bulging back, scroll, f-holes, and overhand bow grip – did not emerge until c. 1550. Once developed by the master craftsmen of northern Italy, the new instrument spread rapidly throughout Europe and by 1600 had virtually replaced all the earlier rebec and fiddle models. The instrument had become so popular that in 1619 Michael Praetorius could write in his famous book on instruments: „Und demnach dieselbige jedermänniglichen bekandt ist davon (ausser diesem, daß wenn sie mit Messings- und Stälernen Saiten bezogen werden, ein stillen und fast lieblichen Resonanz mehr, als die andern, von

<sup>15</sup> See Abraham a Sancta Clara, *Die Totenkapelle: Ein Totentanz in Wort und Bild*, Würzburg 1710; M. Gladbach 1921, titlepage, where an elegantly-dressed couple is dancing to the accompaniment of a skeleton playing the flute. The corresponding German text reads: „Sie sind so sehr vermessen, weil Sie dess Tods vergessen.“ [They are so arrogant because they have forgotten Death.]

<sup>16</sup> Rosenfeld, *Der mittelalterliche Totentanz*, 19.

sich geben) etwas mehr anzudeuten und zu schreiben unnötig“. (*De Organographia, Teil II, Cap. XXII*) (And since everyone knows about the violin family, it is unnecessary to indicate or write anything further about it).<sup>17</sup> The violin's tone was now quite powerful, and its ability to produce strong rhythmic impulses made it eminently suitable for dance music. A valuable early description of the violin, from Jambe de Fer's *Epitome Musical* of 1556, points out this aspect of its social function:

Nous appelons violes c'elles desquelles les gentilsz hommes, marchantz, & autres gens de vertuz passent leur temps....L'autre sorte s'appelle violon & c'est celuy duquel lon use en dancierie communement, & à bonne cause: car il est plus facile d'accorder.... Il est aussi plus facile à porter, qu'est chose fort necessaire, mesme en conduisant quelques noces, mommerie.

We call viols those with which gentleman merchants and other virtuous people pass their time.... The other type is called violin; it is commonly used for dancing, and with good reason, for it is much easier to tune.... It is also easier to carry, a very necessary thing while leading wedding processions or mummeries.<sup>18</sup>

Thus it appears that the violin sound was now powerful enough to lead processions and dances.

The earliest surviving repertoire for the violin is *dance* music, and the instrument became fixed in the popular mind as *the* dance instrument. One of the first paintings in England to show the new violin family – Joris Hoefnagel's „A Fête at Bermondsey“ (c. 1570) – contains two violinist-violist duos, providing the music for a village dance. (See the detail from this painting in Figure 14.) The social history of violin players reveals that they were usually professionals – those forced to make their living by performing – and not gentleman amateurs, as in the case of viols. The general opinion was that a common „Bier Fiedler“ or dance-hall violinist was a low-class scoundrel. Jonathan Swift, in „A Letter to Stella“ (July 25, 1711) writes: „He was a fiddler, and consequently a rogue.“<sup>19</sup>

This attitude was in large measure due to the religious view of dancing. Both Catholic and Protestant moral theologians considered public dancing a dangerous occasion of sin – an activity that might lead to adultery. Hence, the populace was constantly warned, in sermons and tracts, of the evils of dancing. One treatise, by John Northbrooke c. 1577, describes dancing as „vaine, foolish, fleshly, filthie, and divelische.“<sup>20</sup> In fact, dancing was thought

<sup>17</sup> Michael Praetorius, *Syntagma Musicum*, 1619, as quoted in David D. Boyden, *The history of violin playing*, London 1965, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Philibert Jambe de Fer, *Epitome Musical*, Lyons 1556, 62-63, in François Lesure, „L'Epitome Musical de Philibert Jambe de Fer (1556)“, *Annales Musicologiques* 6 (1958-1963) 341-386. See also Boyden, *Violin playing*, 32.

<sup>19</sup> Burton Stevenson, *Stevenson's book of quotations classical and modern*, 9th ed., London 1958, 1370.

<sup>20</sup> John Northbrooke, *A Treatise against dicing, dancing, plays, and interludes, from the earliest edition c. 1577*, London 1843, 146.

to have been devised by the devil.<sup>21</sup> Since epidemics were always a serious threat, dances, with so many people in close contact, no doubt led to the spread of disease and death. The violin, having replaced the pipe as the instrument of the dance, thus became the favoured instrument of Death.

It may be helpful to clarify the distinction between Death and the Devil, since they tend to be synonymous as far as the violin is concerned. According to the Bible, it was through Satan (or the Devil), in the guise of a snake, that sin came into the world, and the wages of sin is Death. Death is a state of being – the end of flesh. The skeletal figure of Death, as in the Totentanz representations, was the artistic attempt to give the idea of physical Death a visual personification. The Devil, on the other hand, was the agent of Death. He came to earth in many forms – often in the nineteenth century, as a sinister man in a dark cape – to barter for men's souls for hell, that is, eternal, spiritual death. The character of Death – in his skeletal form – seems more prevalent in art works, while the Devil is more often featured in literary works. In any case, they both played the violin.<sup>22</sup>

In European folklore, there are many fairy tales or myths about the devil's prowess on the violin, usually in conjunction with dancing. For example, at the witches' sabbath, according to one folk-tale, the devil plays the fiddle – a bone – while all the witches dance around him.<sup>23</sup> Other tales tell of trading one's soul to the devil in order to learn to play the violin or to obtain a magic violin. Such a violin usually causes uncontrollable dancing. One tale goes as follows: Once upon a time at a wedding dance, jokes were told about the Dead. When the musicians stopped playing at midnight, the music continued on, but now with frightful dissonances. Up above, in a fir tree, crouched the Devil, playing on the violin. This awakened the Dead, who rose out of their graves and began a whirling bone dance.<sup>24</sup> Here we have the devil playing for the Dance of the Dead. The same kinds of tales, however, are told about the pipe. For example, there were pipes which could summon the devil or compel the people to dance. Also, there was the tale of a pipe (also of a violin), fashioned from the bone of a murdered victim, which when played revealed the identity of the murderer.<sup>25</sup> Since it is difficult to date these tales – most were collected in the early nineteenth century – it may be that the ones with

<sup>21</sup> See the many quotations with the message „Where dance is, there is also the devil“ in Hammerstein, *Diabolus in Musica*, Berne and Munich 1974, 45-49. See also the discussion in Dagmar Hoffmann-Axthelm, „Instrumentensymbolik und Aufführungspraxis: Zum Verhältnis von Symbolik und Realität in der mittelalterlichen Musikanschauung“, *BjBHM* 4 (1980) 34.

<sup>22</sup> See the discussion of the synonymous aspect of Death and the Devil in Christian theology in Hammerstein, *Tanz und Musik des Todes*, 23.

<sup>23</sup> Hoffmann-Krayer and Hans Bächtold-Stäubli, eds., *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, 10 vols., Berlin and Leipzig 1927-1942, III, 465.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 467.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 469; VI, 1594.

the pipe are the older versions, and that the violin was substituted later as it gradually replaced the pipe. As is to be expected, evidence of the closer association of Death with the violin is well documented in art and literature from about 1550 onwards. An early example of Death in his new role of fiddler is found in Pieter Bruegel's apocalyptic vision „Triumph of Death“ (c. 1562). (See Figure 15.) In the lower right-hand corner of this painting a pair of music-making lovers is interrupted by a grinning skeleton playing a viola da braccio (the immediate forerunner of the violin).<sup>26</sup> A similar scene is depicted in a late sixteenth-century engraving attributed to the Dutch artist Hendrik Goltzius. (See Figure 16.) Notice the hour-glass and the moral message of the text:

Wy syn in vruecht dickmael gheseten  
de doot veel naerder den wy weten.

We are often sitting in joy  
Death is much closer than we know.<sup>27</sup>

Figures 17 and 18 compare Hans Holbein's original version of Death and the Pedlar (c. 1526) with the version „La Mort et le Marchant“ by F. Langlois dit Ciartres (1588-1647), of about a century later. In keeping with the now popular convention of Death as a fiddler, Ciartres, a merchant as well as an artist, has substituted a viola da braccio for Holbein's tromba marina.<sup>28</sup> As far as literature is concerned, no less a figure than William Shakespeare includes the line „Heigh, heigh! the devil rides upon a fiddlestick“ in his play King Henry IV, Part I, dated 1597-1598.<sup>29</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries produced mainly sterile, old-fashioned versions of the Totentanz genre.<sup>30</sup> This is seen in the Ciartres copy of Holbein and in the following Dance of Death text from Ulm, c. 1650, where fiddlers now play for the dance and the bagpipe is associated with vagrants:

Wolauf mit mir auf diesem Plan!  
Ein Tanz will ich euch stellen an,  
Darbei müßt ihr mir All' erscheinen,  
Ihr thut gleich lachen oder weinen.  
Der Vortanz mir allein gebührt,  
Der Tod an euch zum Meister wird,  
Liest euch eine kurze Lection:  
MEMENTO MORI, gedenk oft dran! . . .  
Macht auf, ihr Geiger, einen Tanz!

<sup>26</sup> John Henry van der Meer, *Musikinstrumente: Von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, Munich 1983, fig. 109.

<sup>27</sup> Georg Kinsky, *A history of music in pictures*, London 1930, 93, fig. 4. The translation is my own.

<sup>28</sup> A. P. de Mirimonde, *L'Iconographie musicale sous les rois bourbons: La musique dans les arts plastiques (XVII - XVIII siècles)*, Paris 1975, 113, fig. 85.

<sup>29</sup> Act 2, sc. 4, l. 534.

<sup>30</sup> See Gert Buchheit, *Der Totentanz: Seine Entstehung und Entwicklung*, Berlin 1926, 205, and Aldred Scott Warthin, *The Physician of the Dance of Death*, New York, 1931, 57ff.

Dem Kaiser bind ich da ein' Kranz.  
 Ewr Majestät wöll einher prangen,  
 Man wird ein Galliard anfangen. . . .  
 Jetzt bin ich worden ein Sackpfeifer  
 Und ruf zusammen all Landläufer,  
 Bot, Kramer, Schüler, Sternsinger;  
 Ein neues Jahr ich ihn' wollt abg'winnen.<sup>31</sup>

The progressive feature of this text is the mention of „Memento Mori,“ for this reflects the theme of the innumerable *Vanitas* paintings of the Baroque era – the new genre which replaced the old Totentanz representations.<sup>32</sup> The Goltzius engraving seen in Figure 16 is an early example of this genre, the purpose of which was to remind the viewer of the fleeting nature of life and the futility of earthly pursuits. The early Vanities, which included human figures, subsequently developed into still-lives with well-defined stock images: a skull, hour-glass, mirror, burnt-out candles, and dead flowers to symbolize the passage of time; books, dice, playing cards, and musical instruments to show meaningless (and sensual) pastimes. More often than not, the instrument depicted was a violin, which, combined as it usually was with the skull, could only help to reinforce the popular association of Death with the fiddle. The Vanity shown in Figure 19, a mid-seventeenth-century painting by Simon Renard de Saint-André, is typical of the genre in that it „brings together all the classical attributes: the extinguished candle, the hour-glass, the watch, the roses in full bloom (an evocation to love) – the crown of laurel placed on a skull – symbols still obvious today.“<sup>33</sup> It must also be symbolic that the musical instrument featured here – the type of violin known as a „kit“ – was that used by dancing-masters.

The notion that Death (or the devil) now played the violin is most evident in the kinds of anecdotes told about great violinists. One of the earliest of these concerns the German violinist Thomas Baltzar (c. 1630-1663) who came to England about 1655, served as Charles II's private violinist, and was buried in Westminster Abbey. In a diary entry by Anthony Wood, dated July 24th, 1658, we read: „[Baltzar] came to one of the weekly meetings at

<sup>31</sup> Ludwig Erk, *Deutscher Liederhort*, 3 vols., Leipzig 1893, II, 795-799. The English translation, taken from the preface of the work for organ by Gerhard Krapf entitled „Totentanz“, Nashville and New York 1972, reads: „Come with me to a dance that I shall arrange for you, and which you all must join – be it with merriment or with weeping. Mine is the lead-dance, even as Death is master of all; it begins with a brief lesson: *Memento Mori*, forget this not. You fiddlers, strike up a tune, while I fashion the emperor's laurel: May it please Your Majesty to strut about, presently a galliard will be intoned. Now I have become a bagpiper collecting all vagrants and taking them in my ranks; come with me, then, to the *danse macabre*.“

<sup>32</sup> See A. P. de Mirimonde, „Les Vanités à personnages et à instruments de musique“, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 92 (1978) 115-130; 94 (1979) 61-68. See also Pieter Fischer, *Music in paintings of the low countries in the 16th and 17th centuries*, Amsterdam 1975, 45-72.

<sup>33</sup> François Lesure, *Music and art in society*, London 1968, pl. 77.

Mr. Ellis's house, and he played to the wonder of all the auditory; and exercising his fingers and instrument several wayes to the utmost of his power, Wilson thereupon the public Professor (the greatest judge of musick there ever was) did after his humoursome way, stoop downe to Baltzar's feet to see whether he had a huff (hoof) on, that is to say, to see whether he was a devil or not, because he acted beyond the parts of Man.<sup>34</sup>

Probably the most famous anecdote concerns the legend of Giuseppe Tartini's dream. This dream took place in 1713, according to the account given by the astronomer J.J. de Lalande, and runs as follows:

One night I dreamt that I had made a bargain with the devil for my soul. Everything went at my command; my novel servant anticipated every one of my wishes. Then the idea suggested itself to hand him my violin to see what he would do with it. Great was my astonishment when I heard him play, with consummate skill, a sonata of such exquisite beauty as surpassed the boldest flights of my imagination. I felt enraptured, transported, enchanted; my breath failed me, and – I awoke. Seizing my violin I tried to reproduce the sounds I had heard. But in vain. The piece I then composed, „The Devil's Sonata“, although the best I ever wrote, how far was it below the one I had heard in my dream!<sup>35</sup>

The work thus created circulated in manuscript during the eighteenth century and was later published as „Le Trille du Diable“ (Devil's Trill Sonata) in J.B. Cartier's *L'Art du Violon* of 1798. The Tartini legend was very popular in the Romantic era and inspired numerous artistic works including a ballet by Cesare Pugni for the Paris Opera of 1849 and even an opera.<sup>36</sup> Figure 20 shows a dramatic painting of Tartini's „Dream“ by James Marshall (1838-1902), an artist who worked primarily in Dresden and Leipzig. Here a winged devil plays the violin while Tartini lies entranced on a bed in his priest's cell. The Devil's Trill Sonata has remained as a masterpiece of virtuosity in the violin repertoire. The difficult double trill which Tartini supposedly heard the devil play at the foot of his bed appears in Example 1.



<sup>34</sup> Jeffrey Pulver, *A biographical dictionary of old English music*, London 1927, 22.

<sup>35</sup> *Grove's dictionary of music and musicians*, 5th ed., London 1954, VIII, 313.

In the nineteenth century it was the phenomenon of Niccolò Paganini which more than anything else reinforced the popular notion that Death or his alter-ego, the devil, played the violin. The enormous success of Paganini's violin concerts across Europe in the 1830's can only be compared with the mass hysteria of present-day rock concerts. Paganini fever seized all classes of society and rumours abounded: the most popular was that he had sold his soul to the devil in order to become the best violinist ever.

Figure 21 shows a little-known sketch, a caricature after a Paganini concert in Vienna, by the deaf artist-musician J.P. Lyser (1803-1870).<sup>37</sup> Paganini dances as he plays within a circle laden with satanic emblems, including the Double Triangle or Sign of Solomon, magic sword, snake, (and various imaginary symbols). On the right is a round-dance of skeletons led by a violinist and on the left, in the midst of various nightmarish creatures, is a scene depicting „Death and the Maiden.“ The great poet Heinrich Heine, in speaking of another portrait – a Paganini profile – by Lyser, writes as follows:

Ich glaube es ist nur einem einzigen Menschen gelungen, die wahre Physiognomie Paganinis aufs Papier zu bringen; es ist ein tauber Maler, namens Lyser, der, in seiner geistreichen Tollheit, mit wenigen Kreidestrichen den Kopf Paganinis so gut getroffen hat, daß man ob der Wahrheit der Zeichnung zugleich lacht und erschrickt. „Der Teufel hat mir die Hand geführt“, sagte mir der taube Maler, geheimnisvoll kichernd ...

I believe that only one man has succeeded in putting Paganini's true physiognomy on to paper—a deaf painter, Lyser by name, who, in a frenzy full of genius, has, with a few strokes of chalk, so well hit Paganini's head that one is at the same time amused and terrified at the truth of the drawing. „The Devil guided my hand,“ the deaf painter said to me, chuckling mysteriously . . .<sup>38</sup>

(Was Lyser thinking of the sketch in Figure 21?)

Heine was profoundly moved by Paganini's appearance in Hamburg in 1833 and he recorded his vivid impressions in the *Florentinische Nächte* – a series of tales told to a dying woman – of 1836. His description of Paganini is „among the finest things Heine ever wrote ... an essay in mind-reading translated into visual imagery which would be the height of virtuosity were it not for the depth of creative emotion which inspired it.“<sup>39</sup> A few excerpts from Heine's account reveal how much of his inspiration was derived from the idea of Paganini as an agent of the devil. First, a glimpse of a death-like Paganini caught on the streets of Hamburg:

<sup>36</sup> The opera „Il trillo del diavolo“ by Stanislao Falchi was presented in Rome, January 29, 1899. For other works inspired by the „Devil's Trill“ see Marc Pincherle, *Tartiniana*, Padua 1972, 17-18.

<sup>37</sup> Lyser is best known for his sketches of Beethoven walking on the streets of Vienna (first published in 1833).

<sup>38</sup> Heinrich Heine, *Reisebilder. Erzählende Prosa. Aufsätze*, Werke Bd. 2, hg. von W. Preisendanz, Frankfurt/M. 1968, 574, *Prose and Poetry*, ed. Ernest Rhys, London and New York 1934, 271.

<sup>39</sup> E. M. Butler, *Heinrich Heine: A Biography*, London 1956; Westport 1970, 137.

In der Tat, es war Paganini selber, den ich alsbald zu Gesicht bekam. Er trug einen dunkelgrauen Oberrock, der ihm bis zu den Füßen reichte, wodurch seine Gestalt sehr hoch zu sein schien. Das lange schwarze Haar fiel in verzerren Locken auf seine Schultern herab und bildete wie einen dunklen Rahmen um das blasse, leichenartige Gesicht, worauf Kummer, Genie und Hölle ihre unverwüstlichen Zeichen eingegraben hatten.

It was indeed Paganini himself, whom I then saw for the first time. He wore a dark grey overcoat, which reached to his feet, and made his figure seem very tall. His long black hair fell in neglected curls on his shoulders, and formed a dark frame round the pale, cadaverous face, on which sorrow, genius, and hell had engraved their indestructible lines.

Then an account of Paganini taking bows at the start of the concert, with the mixed images of sick death and the wily cunning of the devil:

Ist dieser bittende Blick der eines Todkranken, oder lauert dahinter der Spott eines schlaun Geizhalses? Ist das ein Lebender der im Verscheiden begriffen ist und der das Publikum in der Kunstarena, wie ein sterbender Fechter, mit seinen Zuckungen ergötzen soll? Oder ist es ein Toter, der aus dem Grabe gestiegen, ein Vampir mit der Violine, der uns, wo nicht das Blut aus dem Herzen, doch auf jeden Fall das Geld aus der Tasche saugt?

Is that the entreating gaze of one sick unto death, or is there lurking behind it the mockery of a crafty miser? Is that a man brought into the arena at the moment of death, like a dying gladiator, to delight the public with his convulsions? Or is it one risen from the dead, a vampire with a violin, who, if not the blood out of our hearts, at any rate sucks the gold out of our pockets?

Later, during the performance, Heine is entranced by supernatural visions, influenced no doubt by tales of the magic qualities of the devil's violin:

Jenen [Paganini] konnte ich kaum wiedererkennen in der braunen Mönchstracht, die ihn mehr versteckte als bekleidete. Das verwilderte Antlitz halb verhüllt von der Kapuze, einen Strick um die Hüfte, barfüßig, eine einsam trotzige Gestalt, stand Paganini auf einem felsigen Vorsprung am Meere und spielte Violine. ... Manchmal, wenn er den nackten Arm aus dem langen Mönchsärmel lang mager hervorstreckend, mit dem Fiedelbogen in den Lüften fegte: dann erschien er erst recht wie ein Hexenmeister, der mit dem Zauberstab den Elementen gebietet, und es heulte dann wie wahnsinnig in der Meerestiefe und die entsetzten Blutwellen sprangen dann so gewaltig in die Höhe, daß sie fast die bleiche Himmelsdecke und die schwarzen Sterne dort mit ihrem roten Schaume bespritzten.

I could scarcely recognize him in the monk's brown dress, which concealed rather than clothed him. With savage countenance half hid by the cowl, waist girt with a cord, and bare feet, Paganini stood, a solitary defiant figure, on a rocky prominence by the sea, and played his violin.... Often, when he stretched his long thin arm from the broad monk's sleeve, and swept the air with his bow, he seemed like some sorcerer who commands the elements with his magic wand; and then there was a wild wailing from the depth of the sea, and the horrible waves of blood sprang up....<sup>40</sup>

Heine's neighbour at the concert brought him to with the remark:

„Das ist das berühmte Spiel auf der G-Saite“.  
(That is the famous performance on the G string).

<sup>40</sup> Heine, *Werke*, Bd. 2, 575-576, 577, 580-581. *Prose and Poetry*, 272, 274, 276-277.

This was Paganini's specialty – a trick to astound his listeners. The upper strings would snap one after another and the audience was then treated with the performance of an entire piece on the remaining string – the G string. Paganini wrote several compositions for this purpose, including the Napoleon Sonata, the Sonata Marie Luisa, the *Moses Variations*, and the Military Sonata. Such a display of virtuosity seemed to be supernatural – aided by the devil – and in fact people claimed to have seen the devil at Paganini's elbow during his performances.<sup>41</sup>

Paganini's influence on the Romantic psyche should not be underestimated: for example, his legendary virtuosity on the G string probably influenced Böcklin's „Self Portrait with Fiddling Death.“ (See Figure 2.) Why else would Death be playing on only one string – the G string? The significance of this reference to Paganini was lost to the art historian Max Schneider, who had difficulty accounting for what he thought was an E string.<sup>42</sup>

The Paganini legend may have influenced Rethel too. (This German artist, considered the greatest successor to Dürer and Holbein, ended his days in a mental asylum.) Rethel's „Death as Strangler“ (1850) was inspired by Heinrich Heine's 1832 account of a sudden, tragic attack of cholera during the recent Paris Carnival. (See Figure 1.) The dark-faced female figure sitting rigidly with a scourge in her hand is a personification of Cholera. The cowed figure of Death resembles Heine's vision of Paganini in monk's attire: „with savage countenance half hid by the cowl, waist girt with a cord ... he stretched his long thin arm from the broad monk's sleeve.“

Surely it is no coincidence that Rethel's Fiddling Death was playing at a ball. The old association between dancing and Death, hence the violin and Death, had become a convention by the nineteenth century. The Romantic era in general witnessed an increased artistic preoccupation with death. This was caused by a new awareness of the horrors of war (French Revolution, Revolution of 1848) and by rampant diseases (cholera, syphilis, tuberculosis) which attacked those in the prime of life. All this led to a rebirth of the old Dance of Death genre. Figure 22 shows a woodcut illustrating the theme „Tanzen“ (Dancing) in Carl Merkel's *Todtentanz* series from 1850. The accompanying text reads:

Der Busen kocht	Breasts beat
und die Locken fliegen,	and locks are at leisure,
Sie tanzen in's Grab	They dance to death
und nennen's Vergnügen.	and call it pleasure. <sup>43</sup>

The young couples dance to Death's tune – played on the violin.

<sup>41</sup> John Sugden, *Niccolo Paganini: Supreme Violinist or Devil's Fiddler?*, Tunbridge Wells 1980, 41.

<sup>42</sup> Max Schneider, *Arnold Böcklin: Ein Maler aus dem Geiste der Musik*, Basle 1943, 34-36.

<sup>43</sup> Carl Merkel, *Bilder des Todes oder Todtentanz für alle Stände*, Leipzig 1850, „Tanzen“. The translation is my own.

Another Dance of Death series, eight poems published in 1857 under the title *Todtentänze* by the Munich draughtsman, poet and musician Franz Graf von Pocci, begins with the lines:

Hei! lustig Fideln, scharfer Hall,  
Wie tönst du durch die Welt!  
Fürwahr es ist ein arger Schall,  
Der keinem wohl gefällt;  
Denn Alt und Jung wie Arm und Reich,  
Noch keinem ward's geschenkt,  
Und Alle fallen seinem Streich,  
Wenn er die Fidel schwenkt.

Hey! merry fiddles, piercing clang,  
How does your tone resound!  
In truth it is a wicked bang,  
No pleasure to be found;  
For old and young as poor and rich,  
Indeed not a one stays,  
And all will fall under his twitch,  
When he the fiddle plays.<sup>44</sup>

Figure 23 shows Death fiddling for a dance as the illustration for the letter „H“ heading the third poem in this series. This particular poem relates the folk tale about how Death with his fiddle interrupted a peasant dance and forced the couples to dance themselves to death.

Pocci's friend Ludwig Richter drew an interesting illustration for the letter „E“ at the beginning of a fairy tale in Johann Musäus's *Volksmärchen der Deutschen* (German Fairy Tales) of 1842. (See Figure 24.) The picture illustrates the beginning of the story – a rich merchant dying at the dinner table. Below is a little figure of Death, dancing and playing the fiddle in the „Spielmann“ – travelling musician – tradition, with the caption „Heute roth; morgen todt“: „Today red; tomorrow dead.“

Fairy tales and their illustrations were very popular in the Romantic era, and they helped to reinforce the image of Death as a fiddler, especially on children. Richard Wagner writes in his autobiography:

Schon als kleinstes Kind fiel der Klang dieser Quinten [auf der Violine] mit dem Gespensterhaften, welches mich von jeher aufregte, genau zusammen.... Da ich nun auch das bekannte Bild sah, auf welchem ein Totengerippe einem sterbenden Greise auf der Violine vorspielte, so prägte sich das Geisterhafte gerade dieser Klänge der Phantasie des Kindes mit besonderer Stärke ein.

When I was still almost a baby [the striking of fifths on the violin] was closely associated in my mind with ghosts and spirits.... And when I saw the well-known picture in which a skeleton plays on his violin to an old man on his deathbed, the ghostly character of those very notes impressed itself with particular force upon my childish imagination.<sup>45</sup>

Gustav Mahler too was influenced by childhood memories of fairy tales and their illustrations, and it is not surprising that the fiddling Death concept appears as „Freund Hein“ in his Fourth Symphony. („Freund Hein“ was the popular cozy term for Death.) The scordatura tuning of the strings a whole

<sup>44</sup> Franz Pocci, *Todtentänze*, Stuttgart and Munich 1857, 7. The translation is my own.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Wagner, *Mein Leben*, ed. Martin Gregor-Dellin, Munich 1976, 36-37. I have not been able to locate the illustration referred to here. See also Richard Wagner, *My life*, 2 vols., New York 1911, I, 35.

tone higher and the direction to sound „like a fiddle [*Fiedel*]“ suggests a Dance of Death as imagined by medieval German woodcutters.<sup>46</sup> This is a view of history coloured by the Romantic imagination, since Death in the medieval era was a piper.

The fantastical tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann often feature crazy fiddlers and mysterious violins with supernatural properties, as in the story *Rat Krespel*. Here, the ancient violin takes on the tone qualities of Antonia's voice when she is forbidden to sing, and upon her death the sound-post splits into pieces. Jacques Offenbach's opera *Hoffmanns Erzählungen* (1881), which combines aspects of several Hoffmann stories, makes use of a diabolical fiddler. In Act IV of the opera, the sinister Dr. Miracle, in luring Antonia to sing, seizes a violin, plays a frenzied accompaniment, and causes her to sing herself to death. As she falls to the ground, the evil Miracle – the devil in disguise – vanishes into the earth with a wild laugh.

The theme of „Death and the Maiden,“ seen here in the opera and already mentioned in connection with Lyser's Paganini caricature, recurs frequently throughout the nineteenth century. It is probably best known from Franz Schubert's song setting „Der Tod und das Mädchen,“ which he wrote in the key of D minor. This was known as the demonic key<sup>47</sup> – associated with supernatural elements as in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Beethoven's *Geistertrio* [Ghost Trio] – and it is significant that Schubert featured a set of variations on this song melody in a string quartet (known as „Death and the Maiden“), likewise in the key of D minor. The last movement of this work has been described as a frenzied dance. The image of a ghostly fiddler enticing a young maiden to dance herself to an early death is succinctly captured in the following poem from Heinrich Heine's „Heimkehr“ series of 1823-1824:

Die Jungfrau schläft in der Kammer,  
Der Mond schaut zitternd hinein;  
Da draußen singt es und klingt es,  
Wie Walzermelodein.  
„Ich will mal schaun aus dem Fenster,  
Wer drunten stört meine Ruh.“  
Da steht ein Totengerippe,  
Und fiedelt und singt dazu:  
„Hast einst mir den Tanz versprochen,  
Und hast gebrochen dein Wort,  
Und heut ist Ball auf dem Kirchhof,  
Komm mit, wir tanzen dort.“  
Die Jungfrau ergreift es gewaltig,

The maiden sleeps in her chamber,  
The moonlight trembles there;  
Outside, singing and ringing,  
A waltz tune floats on the air.  
„I'll take a look through the window:  
Who breaks my rest with this stir?“  
A skeleton stands in the moonlight  
And fiddles and sings to her:  
„A dance you promised to give me,  
You broke your word instead;  
Tonight there's a ball in the churchyard,  
Come with me and dance with the dead!“  
Enchantment draws the maiden

<sup>46</sup> H. S. Redlich, *Bruckner and Mahler*, rev. ed., London 1963, 194.

<sup>47</sup> For a discussion of the „ghost“ character of D minor see David P. Schroeder, „Berg's Wozzeck and Strindberg's musical models“, *The Opera Journal* 21 (1988) 5. See also my book, *A History of key characteristics in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries*, Ann Arbor 1983, 243.

Es lockt sie hervor aus dem Haus;  
 Sie folgt dem Gerippe, das singend  
 Und fiedelnd schreitet voraus.  
 Es fiedelt und tänzelt und hüpfet,  
 Und klappert mit seinem Gebein,  
 Und nickt und nickt mit dem Schädel  
 Unheimlich im Mondenschein.

Spellbound past the door;  
 She follows, the skeleton paces  
 Singing and fiddling before.  
 It fiddles and skips and dances  
 And rattles its bones in tune;  
 Its skull is weaving and bobbing  
 In the baleful light of the moon.<sup>48</sup>

The idea of a fiddling death or devil also gripped the imagination of British and French poets. For example, Robert Burns's poem „The De'il's awa wi' th' Exciseman“ (1792) begins with the lines: The deil cam fiddlin thro' the town, And danc'd awa wi' th' Exciseman.<sup>49</sup> And Robert Browning, in the long poem of 1873, „Red Cotton Night-Cap Country,“ includes the lines:

The Devil, that old stager, at his trick  
 Of general utility, who leads  
 Downward, perhaps, but fiddles all the way!<sup>50</sup>

Charles Baudelaire was influenced by tales of the devil's prowess on the violin, and describes Satan as follows in his prose poem „Les Tentations“ of 1863:

Dans sa main droite il tenait une autre fiole dont le contenu était d'un rouge lumineux, et qui portait pour étiquette ces mots bizarres: „Buvez, ceci est mon sang, un parfait cordial“; dans la gauche, un violon qui lui servait sans doute à chanter ses plaisirs et ses douleurs, et à répandre la contagion de sa folie dans les nuits de sabbat.

He held in his right hand a flagon containing a luminous red fluid, and inscribed with a legend in these singular words: „DRINK OF THIS MY BLOOD: A PERFECT RESTORATIVE“; and in his left hand held a violin that without doubt served to sing his pleasures and pains, and to spread abroad the contagion of his folly upon the nights of the Sabbath.<sup>51</sup>

Henry Cazalis (pseudonym Jean Lahor) was inspired by folk tales of midnight bone dances, led by Death playing on the fiddle, to write the following verses:

Zig et Zig et Zig, la Mort en cadence  
 Frappant une tombe avec son talon,  
 La Mort à minuit joue un air de danse  
 Zig et Zig et Zig, sur son violon.  
 Le vent d'hiver souffle, et la nuit est sombre;  
 Des gémissements sortent des tilleuls;  
 Les squelettes blancs vont à travers l'ombre,

<sup>48</sup> Heinrich Heine, *Sämtliche Werke*, Munich 1969, I, 140. English translation in *The complete poems of Heinrich Heine*, trans. Hal Draper, Boston 1982, 85-86.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Burns, *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols., Oxford 1968, II, 655.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Browning, *The poems*, vol. 2, ed. John Pettigrew, New York 1981, 109.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes: Petits poems en prose*, Paris 1926, I, 66. See also Charles Baudelaire, *Baudelaire: His prose and poetry*, ed. T.R. Smith, New York 1925, 131-132.

Courant et sautant sous leurs grands linceuls.  
Zig et Zig et Zig, chacun se trémousse,  
On entend claquer les os des danseurs.  
Mais psit! tout a coup on quitte la ronde,  
On se pousse, on fuit, le coq a chanté

Zip, zip, zip, Death in cadence  
Knocking on a tomb with his heel,  
Death at midnight plays a dance tune  
Zip, zip, zip, on his violin.  
The winter wind blows and the night is dark,  
Moans come out from among the linden trees,  
The white skeletons go past through the gloom,  
Running and jumping in their large shrouds.  
Zip, zip, zip, each one is shaking,  
The bones of the dancers are cracking.  
But hist! All of a sudden they stop the round,  
They push each other, they flee – the cock has crowed.<sup>52</sup>

This poem led Saint-Saëns to create one of his most popular works, the *Danse Macabre* of 1875, which in turn inspired Franz Liszt to produce one of his masterpieces of piano transcription, the *Danse Macabre* of 1876. In Saint-Saëns's tone poem, the solo violin has its top string tuned down a semitone to create the tritone A - Eb, or *diabolus in musica*, – thus a different kind of scordatura tuning to that used by Mahler but with a similar programmatic effect.

The dark feelings of resignation and decline – even deadly foreboding – at the end of the nineteenth century meant that artists continued to be inspired by the theme of death. That the image of a fiddling Death was firmly fixed as an artistic convention is evident in many of the paintings of the enigmatic Belgian artist James Ensor. For example, in his painting „Skeletons Trying to Warm Themselves at a Stove“ (1889), a violin is prominently displayed next to the chief skeleton, who wears a black top hat (and represents Death).<sup>53</sup> Figure 25 shows Ensor's „Masks Confronting Death“ (1897), which also includes a violin: the scroll only is visible in the lower left-hand corner. The masks symbolized for Ensor the grotesque, fantastic, absurd world of carnival balls, and he must have associated the dancing of these balls with the violin and with Death.

Another end-of-the-era work was Hugo von Hofmannsthal's first play, *Der Thor und der Tod* (The Fool and Death) of 1900. Here, the spoiled and selfish nobleman Claudio, the fool, has treated people badly and filled his life with empty things. Suddenly he hears mysterious music – and there, at the door, stands Death, a fiddle-bow in his hand and a violin hanging from his belt. Claudio protests that he is not ready to die, that he has not yet experienced

<sup>52</sup> Arthur Hervey, *Saint-Saëns*, New York 1922; Westport 1970, 89-90. The translation is my own.

real life. But, to the violin call of Death there appear one after another his mother, his wife and his friends—those who had offered him life, a life which he had rejected. At the end, Claudio is resigned to accept his fate of death.<sup>54</sup>

In the twentieth century, the massive devastation and loss of life during World War I impelled an upsurge of artistic interest in the old Dance of Death theme. This medieval art form was thus flexible enough to meet the current need. Figure 26 shows an illustration which appeared in the Hungarian publication *Borszem Janko* in 1915. Entitled „Der Krieg als Tanz in den Tod“ [The War as a Dance of Death], it depicts soldiers from different countries, dancing to Death's fiddling. The accompanying text reads: „Tanzt, Kinder, tanzt, tanzt bis zum Umfallen, ich werde nicht müde!“ (Dance, children, dance; dance till you fall dead; I shall not get tired!)<sup>55</sup> A drawing from the same year, 1915, by the Dutch artist Albert Hahn, is entitled „Het nieuwe Offensief – Doodendans“ [The New Offensive – Dance of Death]. It features a large violinist-Death fiddling away in the foreground, while in the distance soldiers drop dead amid exploding bombs and hovering ravens. Another Dutch drawing, Leo Jordan's „Doodendans“ [Dance of Death], also from 1915, contains a large fiddling Death, dressed in formal tails like a dance-band leader, astride a burning globe of Earth. Under his feet are worm-like hordes of soldiers wriggling to Death's tune.<sup>56</sup> Figure 27 shows Franz Masereel's striking woodcut „Mobilmachung“ [Mobilization] from 1919. This Flemish artist and noted pacifist depicts fiddling Death leading a crowd of enthusiastic victims for one last dance. Another wartime image, of Death fiddling beside a howitzer, appears as the title picture in a series of silhouettes from 1923, „Gestalten des Todes: Ein Totentanz des Weltkrieges“ [Figures of Death: A Dance of Death from the World War] by the German artist Melchior Grosseck (Figure 28). Grosseck dedicated this series to his two brothers who were killed in the war. A second image in the same series was inspired by the old Pied Piper of Hamelin legend: Death wears a medieval hat and plays a pipe (Figure 29).

It should be noted here that, as in the last figure, Death is still at times depicted as a piper. However, the artist usually makes it clear that this is the medieval image of Death. Figure 30, „Liebespaar-Selbstmordes“ from „Ein Totentanz“ (1922) by Walter Draesner shows a pair of lovers in a joint suicide. As they hang together from a tree-branch, Death sits in the tree, piping a tune. The form of his cap and shoes identify him as a medieval piper. It is

<sup>53</sup> See Theodor Kiefer, *J. Ensor*, Recklinghausen 1976, fig. 32.

<sup>54</sup> See the discussion of Hofmannsthal's play in Kurtz, *The Dance of Death*, 271-272.

<sup>55</sup> Istvan Kozáky, *Geschichte der Totentänze*, 3 vols. (Budapest 1936-1944), III, 264-265. The work by Kozáky (Cosacchi) is the most extensive (from its origins to the twentieth century) to date on the Dance of Death theme.

<sup>56</sup> See the illustrations in *Totentanz: Kontinuität und Wandel eines Bildthemas vom Mittelalter bis heute*, Mannheim 1987, 169, figs. 204 and 203.

significant that the Death in modern dress in Renate Geisberg's „Das böse Lied“ [The Evil Song] from her „Totentanz“ of 1927 plays the violin. (See Figure 31.) Death, of course, appears with many non-musical attributes as well: the spear, bow and arrow, scythe (as in the Grim Reaper image), hour-glass (since he represents time running out) and, as in Figure 29, ravens.

The rise of Fascism and the horrors of World War II provided the impetus for further artistic representations of fiddling Death. For example, Lyonel Feininger's cubist painting „The Red Fiddler“ (1934) features a Hoffmannesque devil playing the violin.<sup>57</sup> This work has been interpreted as Feininger's reaction to Hitler: a demon seducing the masses with beautiful music; thus, a foreshadowing of „Germany's inevitable Danse Macabre.“<sup>58</sup> Kurt Schumacher's cubist wood relief „Totentanz“ (1929, c. 1940) also depicts this modern Dance of Death, with a skeleton and his violin leading the people, represented by various stations of life as in the old medieval illustrations, to their gruesome end.<sup>59</sup> Figure 32 shows Felix Nussbaum's last work, „Die Gerippe spielen zum Tanz“ [The Skeletons Play for the Dance], painted while in hiding, in 1944. Here a dance-band of skeletons, led by a violinist, plays on the destroyed remains of civilization. Both Schumacher and Nussbaum were killed by the Nazis.<sup>60</sup>

Other twentieth-century artists continued to be inspired by the fertile image of fiddling Death—when not driven by the immediate condition of war, then certainly by the inevitability of human death. Karl Hofer's „Der Geiger“ [The Violinist] of about 1948 illustrates in a modern artistic vision the archetypical skeleton Death with his violin.<sup>61</sup> (See Figure 33.) Alfred Kubin, the Austrian master of the macabre, was greatly affected by the untimely death of his young mother, which may have been the impetus for his ink lithograph on the „Tod und das Mädchen“ theme. (See Figure 34.) In Walter Ritzenhofen's „Clown und Tod: gemeinsame Melodie“ (1978), Death draws the bow across a fiddle-type instrument fingered by the clown, thus making a joint melody as in the title. (See Figure 35.) The theme here may be similar to Hugo von Hoffmannsthal's in that we are all fools, forced to follow Death's tune.

In twentieth-century music there are several works which are based on the old convention of demonic fiddlers. Igor Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat* (1918) is built on the story of a soldier who sells his violin, symbolizing his soul, to the devil in exchange for worldly wealth. This tale, though taken from a collection of Russian folklore, was so international in its theme that

<sup>57</sup> See Walter Wiora, *The Four Ages of Music*, trans. M.D. Herter Norton, New York 1965, fig. 2c.

<sup>58</sup> Ernst Scheyer, *Lyonel Feininger: Caricature & Fantasy*, Detroit 1964, 149.

<sup>59</sup> See *Totentanz: Kontinuität*, 238, fig. 11.

<sup>60</sup> See the discussion of Nussbaum and Schumacher in *Totentanz: Kontinuität*, 238, 240.

<sup>61</sup> This work was displayed in West Berlin in 1981 in the special exhibit at the Galerie Pels-Leusden entitled „Der Künstler und der Tod.“

it was ideally suited to Stravinsky's project of a travelling theatre in Switzerland. Of more recent vintage is the 1970 composition for electric string quartet – *Black Angels: Thirteen Images from the Dark Land* – by Georg Crumb. Crumb explains that this work „was conceived as a kind of parable in our troubled contemporary world.<sup>62</sup> Black angel symbolizes fallen angel, that is the Devil, Death. Among the images portrayed are „Devil-music,“ featuring solo violin, and „Danse Macabre,“ with quotations from the Saint-Saëns work of the same name, including the violin's tuning to a tritone. An example can even be found from the American pop music scene: Charlie Daniels's hit country and western single „The Devil Went Down to Georgia“ (1979). It includes the lines:

The devil went down to Georgia,  
He was lookin' for a soul to steal. . . .  
When he came across this young man,  
Sawin' on a fiddle and playin' it hot,  
And the devil jumped up on a hickory stump,  
And said, „Boy, let me tell you what.  
I guess you didn't know it, but I'm a fiddle player, too.“<sup>63</sup>

The devil's fiddle playing in this work uses virtuoso violinistic technique – a sort of twentieth-century pop version of Tartini's Devil's Trill. Old traditions die hard, and it appears that the devil is still fiddling away in the present century.

Considering that Death originally became associated with the violin in connection with the dance, it is a sign of the strength of this convention that, even though various changes on the dance scene might suggest that the violin be replaced by a saxophone, electric guitar, or even a synthesizer, the image of a fiddling Death continues to thrive in the twentieth century. The final two illustrations show how this image is impressed upon the popular imagination through the form of the print media. Klaus Böhle's „Libanesischer Totentanz“ [Lebanese Dance of Death], which appeared in *Die Welt* in 1985, features a grinning Khomeini disguised as Death playing his violin, gloating over the warring factions in Lebanon. (See Figure 36.) Figure 37 shows how the German magazine *Der Spiegel* used Alfred Rethel's 1850 image of fiddling Death to illustrate its 1985 cover story on AIDS. Since there appears to be no end to war and disease, there will continue to be a need for a graphic visualization of Death. With no sign of a demise, the image of Death as a fiddler lives on, firmly fixed in the popular imagination.

<sup>62</sup> George Crumb, *Black angels (Images 1) for electric string quartet (Thirteen images from the dark land)*, New York 1970, preface.

<sup>63</sup> Hat Band Music (BMI) jacket notes for Charlie Daniels Band, *Million Mile Reflections* (Epic 35751).



Fig. 1: Alfred Rethel (1816-1859), „Tod als Würger“ (c. 1850). (After Wolfgang Stämmler, *Der Totentanz: Entstehung und Deutung*, Munich 1948, p. 41)

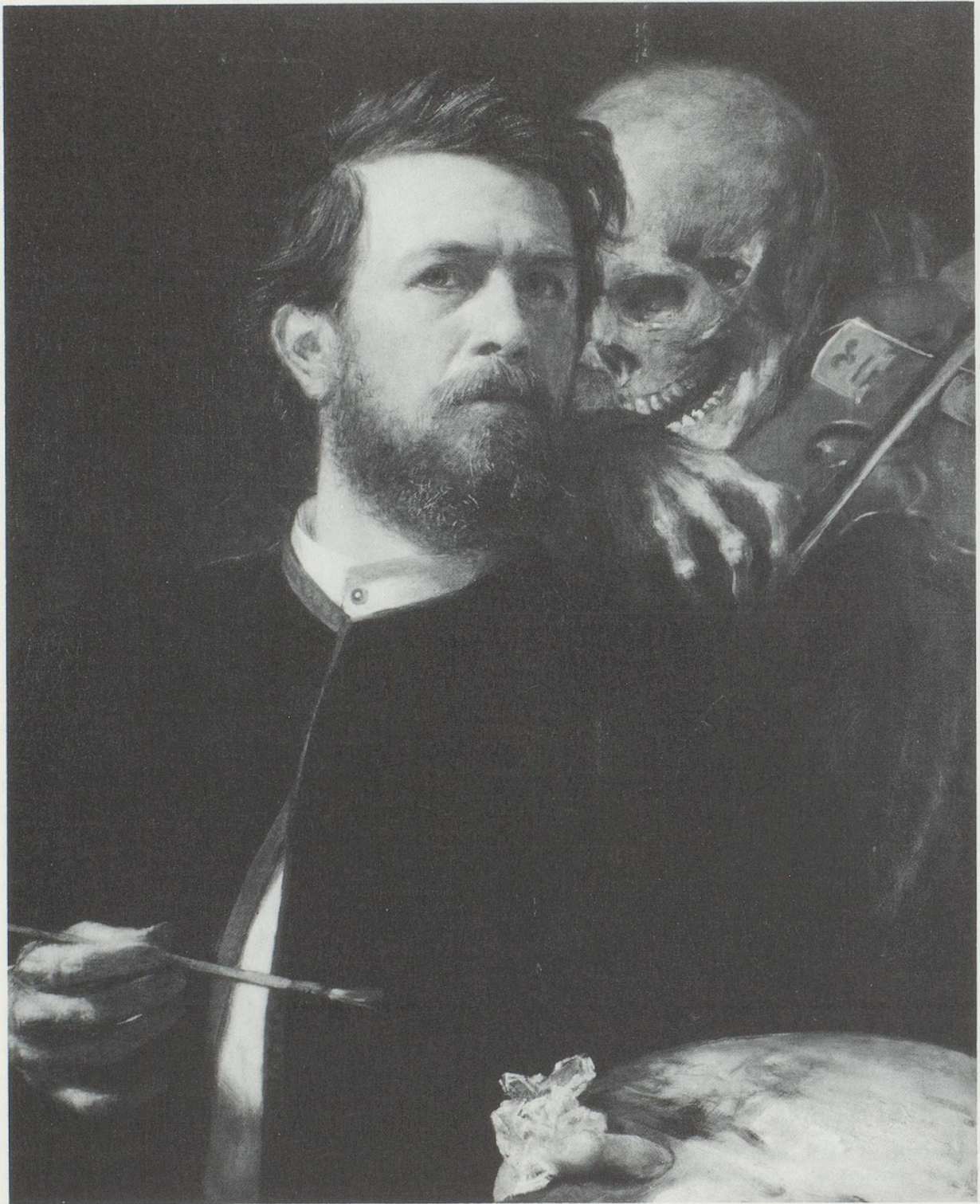


Fig. 2: Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901), „Selbstbildnis mit fiedelndem Tod“ (1872). West Berlin, Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Nationalgalerie. (Photo: Jörg P. Anders)



Fig. 3: Lübecker Totentanz, St. Marien (1466, revised 1588). (After Gert Buchheit, *Der Totentanz: Seine Entstehung und Entwicklung*, Berlin 1926, p. 19)



Fig. 4: Klein-Basler Totentanz (mid-15th century). (After Kathi Meyer-Baer, *Music of the spheres and the dance of Death: Studies in musical iconology*, Princeton 1970, p. 302, fig. 161)



Fig. 5: Heidelberger (Knoblochzer) Totentanz (1485). (After Meyer-Baer, *Music of the spheres*, p. 301, fig. 158)



Fig. 6: Hartmann Schedel, *Weltchronik*, Nuremberg 1493, „Imago mortis“. (After Meyer-Baer, *Music of the spheres*, p.4, fig. 2)



Fig. 7: Ländlicher Tanz aus Poitou (15th century). (After Hellmut Rosenfeld, *Der mittelalterliche Totentanz: Entstehung, Entwicklung, Bedeutung*, 3rd rev. ed., Cologne 1974, fig. 19)



Fig. 8: Totentanz in La Chaise Dieu (1460). (After Rosenfeld, *Der mittelalterliche Totentanz*, fig. 20)



Fig. 9: Hans Holbein (1497-1543), *Les simulacres et historiées faces de la mort*, Lyons 1538, „The Duchess“ (designed c. 1526). (After Francis Douce, *Holbein's dance of death*, London 1890, fig. 36)



Fig. 10: Hans Holbein, „The Old Woman“. (After Douce, fig. 25)



Fig. 11: Hans Holbein, „The Soldier“. (After Douce, fig. 40)



Fig. 12: Hans Holbein, „The Idiot Fool“. (After Douce, fig. 43)

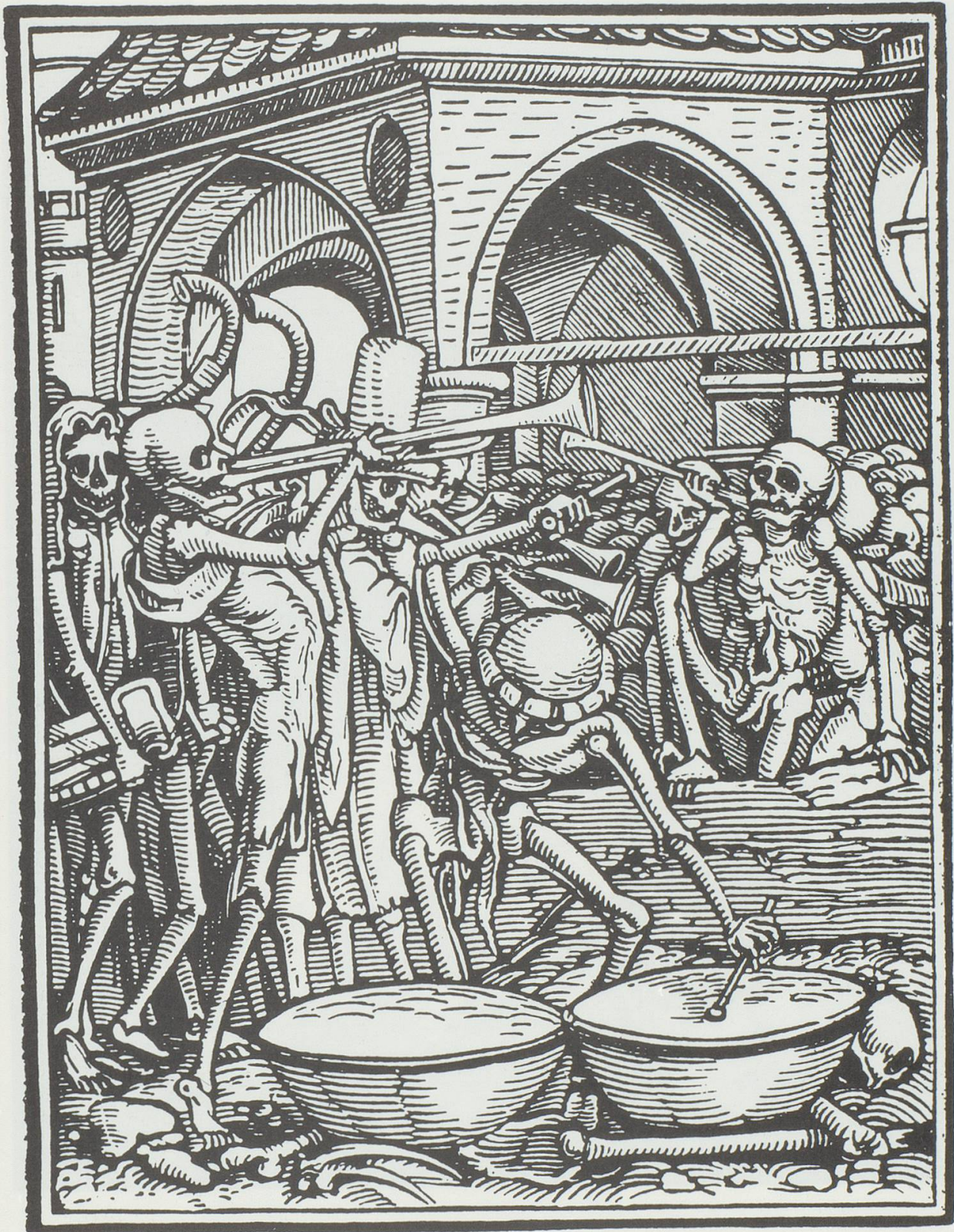


Fig. 13: Hans Holbein, „A Cemetery“. (After Douce, fig. 5)



Fig. 14: Joris Hoefnagel (1542-1600), Detail of musicians in „A Fête at Bermondsey“ (c. 1570). Hatfield House (The Marquess of Salisbury). (After Mary Remnant, *English bowed instruments from Anglo-Saxon to Tudor times*, Oxford 1986, fig. 153)



Fig. 15: Pieter Bruegel (1528-1569), Detail of music-making lovers in „The Triumph of Death“ (c. 1562). Madrid, Prado. (After John Henry van der Meer, *Musikinstrumente: Von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, Munich 1983, fig. 109)



Fig. 16: Attributed to Hendrik Goltzius (1558-1617), „Couple playing, with Death behind“  
(After Georg Kinsky, *A history of music in pictures*, London 1930, p. 93, fig. 4)



Fig. 17: Hans Holbein, „The Pedlar“. (After Douce, fig. 37)



LA MORT

LE MARCHANT

Sus, cesse ton mistiq, car il jout à cest heure  
 Que tu sente l'effort de mon dard asseré.  
 Tu as assez vesçu, il est temps que tu meure,  
 Mon coup inevitable est pour toy preparé.

Et de grace parlon, arreste tu Cheler  
 Je suis pauvre Marchant appaise ta rigueur,  
 Fermes qu'encore un temps ie vive en ceste terre  
 Et puis tu recevras l'offrande de mon Cœur

Fig. 18: F. Langlois dit Ciartres (1588-1647), „La Mort et le Marchant“. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale Estampes. (After A. P. de Mirimonde, *L'iconographie musicale sous les rois bourbons*, Paris 1975, fig. 85)

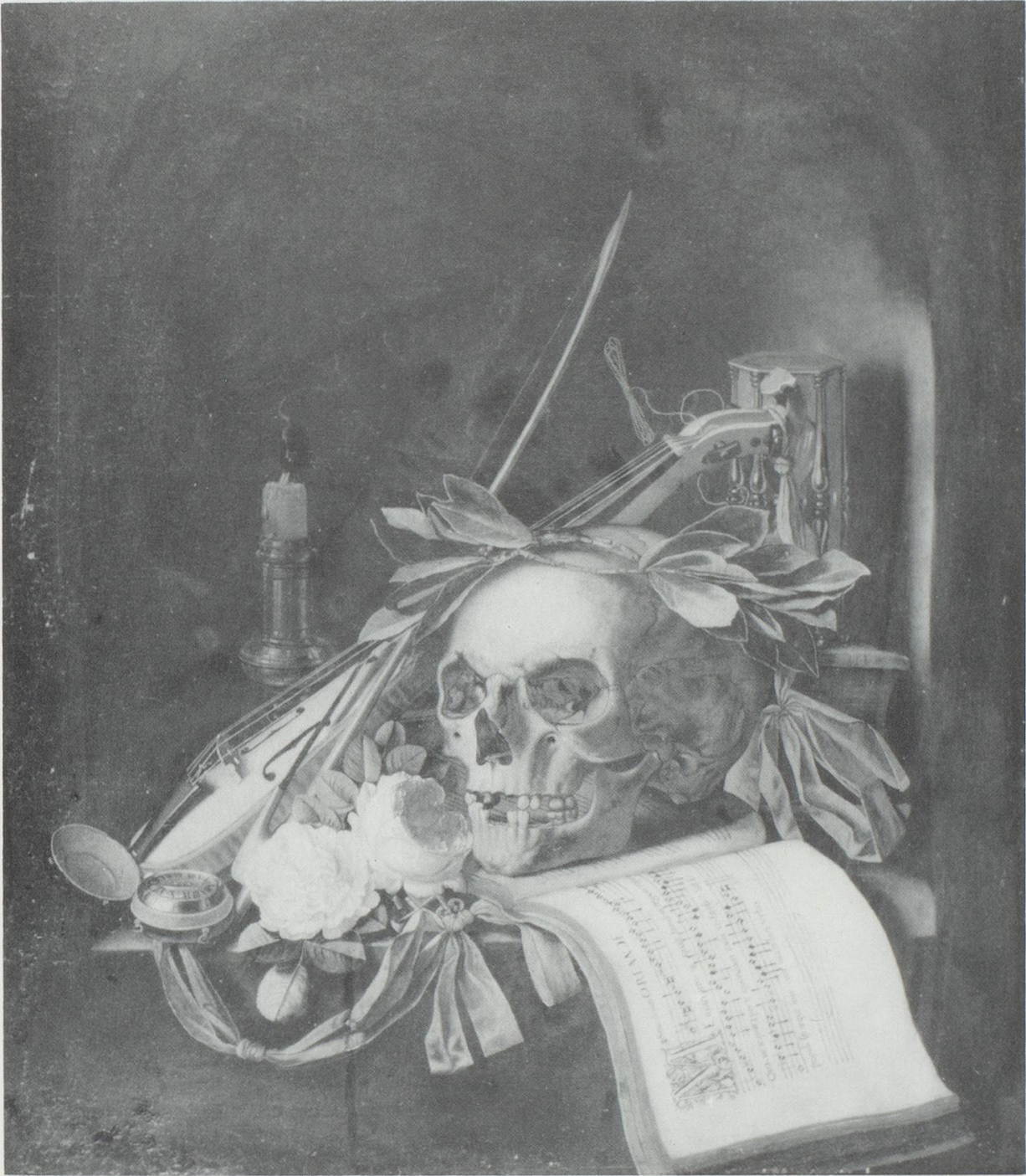


Fig. 19: Simon Renard de Saint-André (c. 1613-1677), „Vanité“. Strasbourg, Musée des Beaux Arts. (Photo: Musées de la Ville de Strasbourg)



Fig. 20: James Marshall (1838-1902), „Tartinis Traum oder Die Teufelstrillersonate“.Munich, Schack-Galerie. (After Eduard Melkus, *Hohe Schule der Violine*, Archiv recording 2533 086)



Fig. 21: Johann Peter Lyser (1803-1870), „Karikatur auf die Wiener Konzerte“ (1828?). (After Julius Kapp, *Paganini: Eine Biographie mit 60 Bildern*, Berlin 1922, p. 9)



Fig. 22: Carl Gottlieb Merkel (1817-1897), *Bilder des Todes oder Todtentanz für alle Stände*, Leipzig 1850, „Tanzen“.



Fig. 23: Franz Graf von Pocci (1807-1876), *Todtentänze*, Stuttgart 1857, Initial „H“ illustration for „Heisa, lustig Musikanten“, p. 17

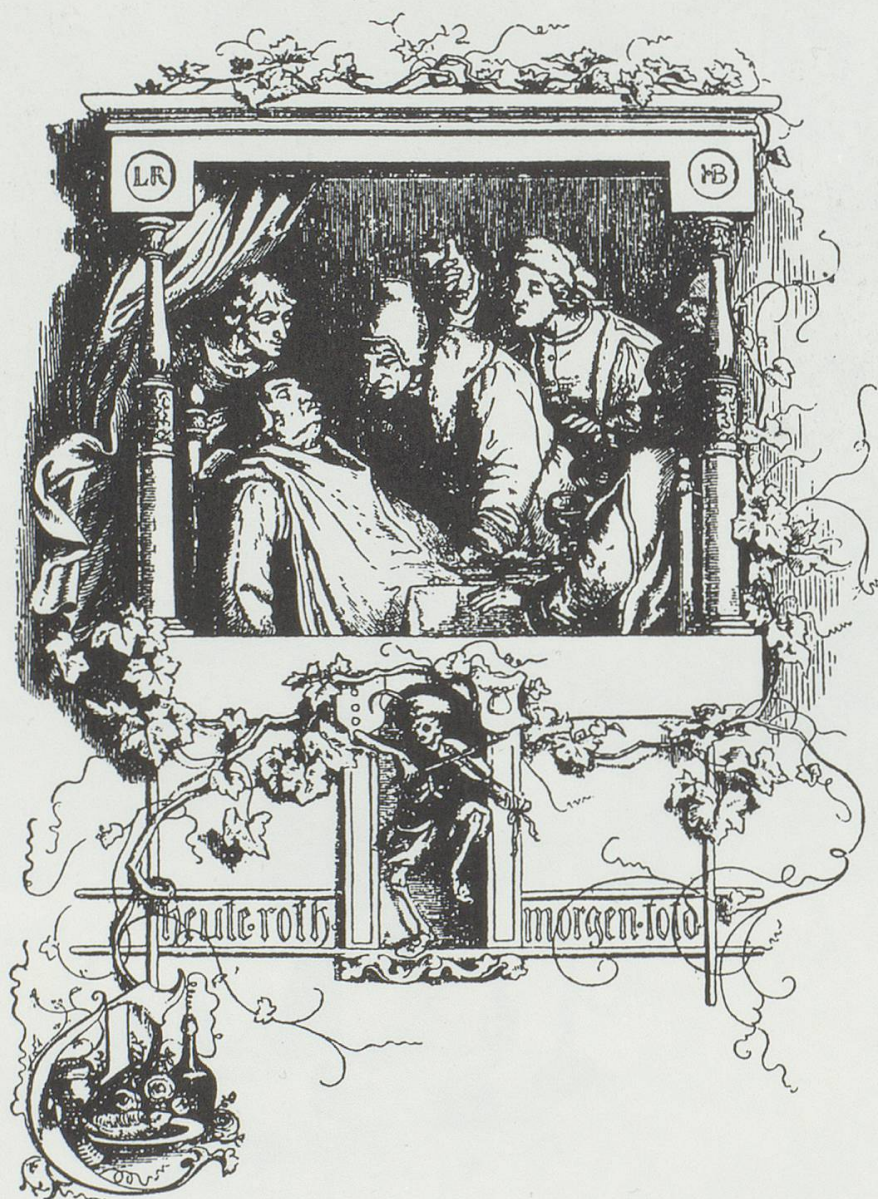


Fig. 24: Ludwig Richter (1803-1884), Initial „E“ illustration for „Stumme Liebe“ (1842). (After Johann Musäus, *Volksmärchen der Deutschen*, Jena 1912, vol. 1, p. 161)



Fig. 25: James Ensor (1860-1949), „Masks Confronting Death“ (1897). Liège, Musée des Beaux-Arts. (After Jacques Janssens, *James Ensor*, New York, 1978, p. 84)



Fig. 26: Hungarian Caricature in *Borszem Janko*, 1915. (After Eduard Fuchs, *Der Weltkrieg in der Karikatur*, Munich 1916, p. 81)



Fig. 27: Franz Masereel (1889-1972), „Mobilmachung“ (1919). (After Stammer, *Der Totentanz*, p. 38)

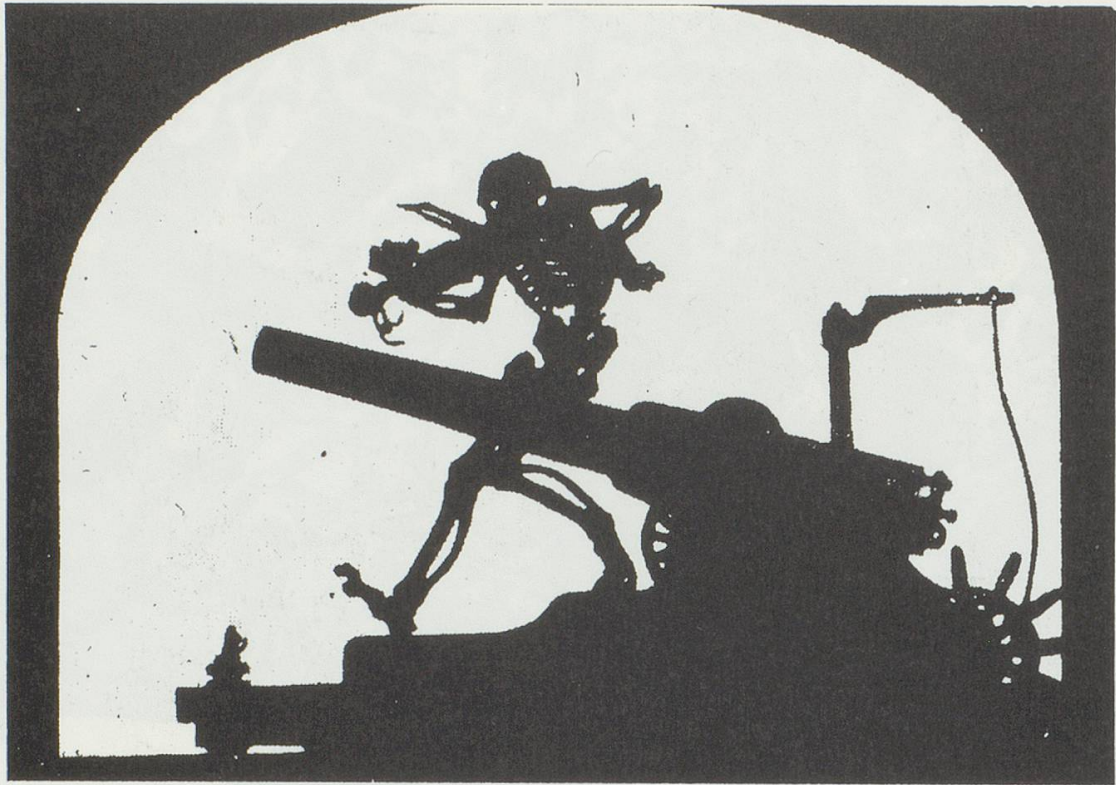


Fig. 28: Melchior Grosseck (1889-1967), Gestalten des Todes: Ein Totentanz des Weltkriegs, 1923, „Das Bild des Todes“. (After Istvan Kozáky, *Geschichte der Totentänze: Der Totentanz von heute*, Budapest 1941, pl. 79, no. 1)



Fig. 29: Melchior Grosseck, Gestalten des Todes, „Der Ausmarsch“. (After Kozáky, *Der Totentanz von heute*, pl. 79, no. 2)



Fig. 30: Walter Draesner (born 1891), Ein Totentanz, 1922, No. 3, „Im Tode vereint“. Darmstadt, Private collection. (After *Totentanz: Kontinuität und Wandel eines Bildthemas vom Mittelalter bis heute*, Mannheim 1987, p. 129, fig. 132)



Fig. 31: Renate Geisberg-Wichmann (born 1898), *Totentanz*, 1927, No. 6, „Das böse Lied“. Universität Düsseldorf, *Totentanzsammlung „Mensch und Tod“*. (After *Totentanz: Kontinuität*, p. 129, fig. 133)



Fig. 32: Felix Nussbaum (1904-1944), „Die Gerippe spielen zum Tanz“ (1944). (After *Totentanz: Kontinuität*, p. 240, fig. 19)



Fig. 33: Karl Hofer (1878-1955), „Der Geiger“ (c. 1948). (After *Der Künstler und der Tod*, Berlin 1981, fig. 43)



Fig. 34: Alfred Kubin (1877-1959), „Tod und das Mädchen“ (1920's?). Author's private collection

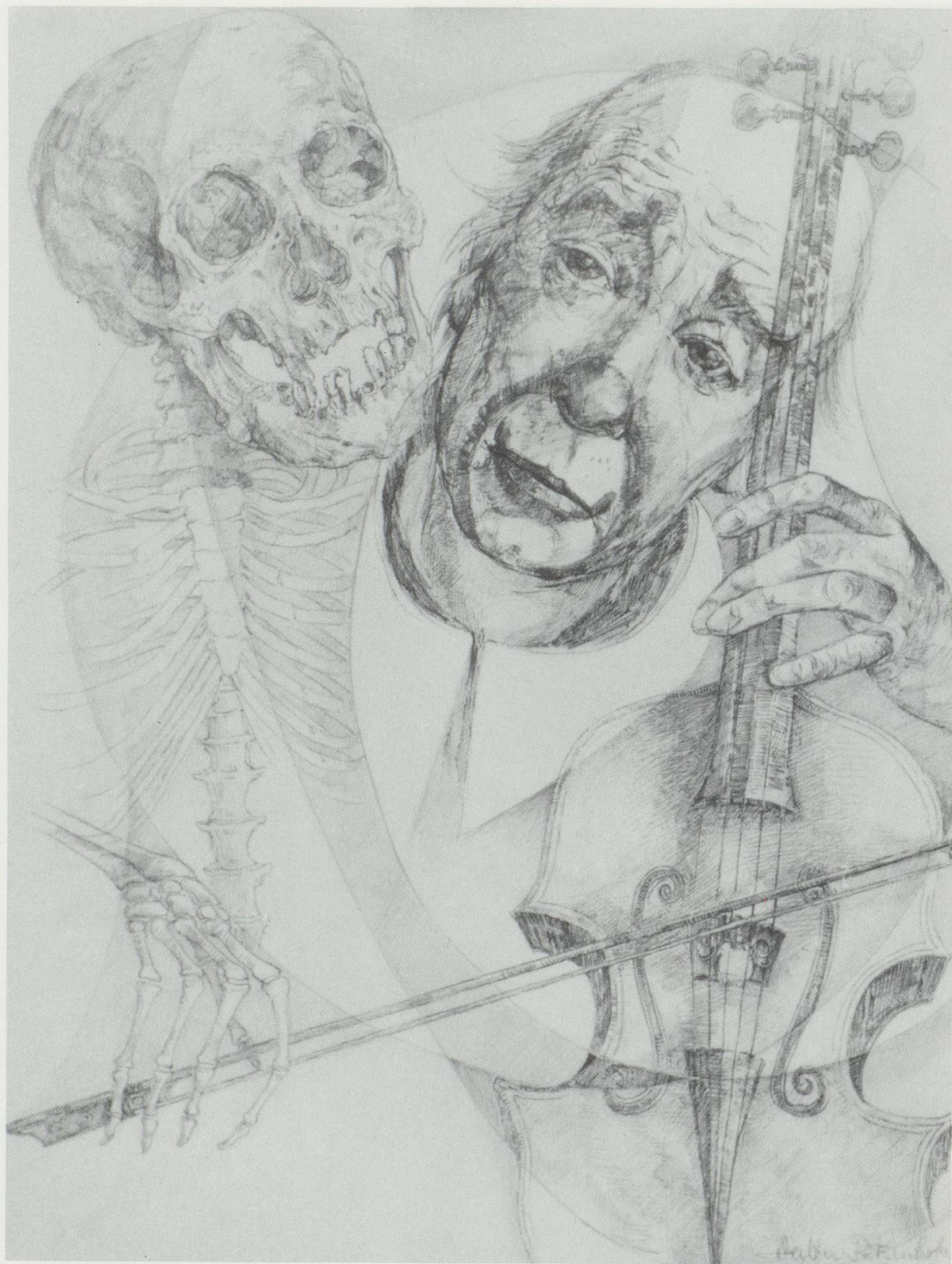


Fig. 35: Walter Ritzenhofen (b. 1920), „Clown und Tod: gemeinsame Melodie“ (1978). (Photo: artist)

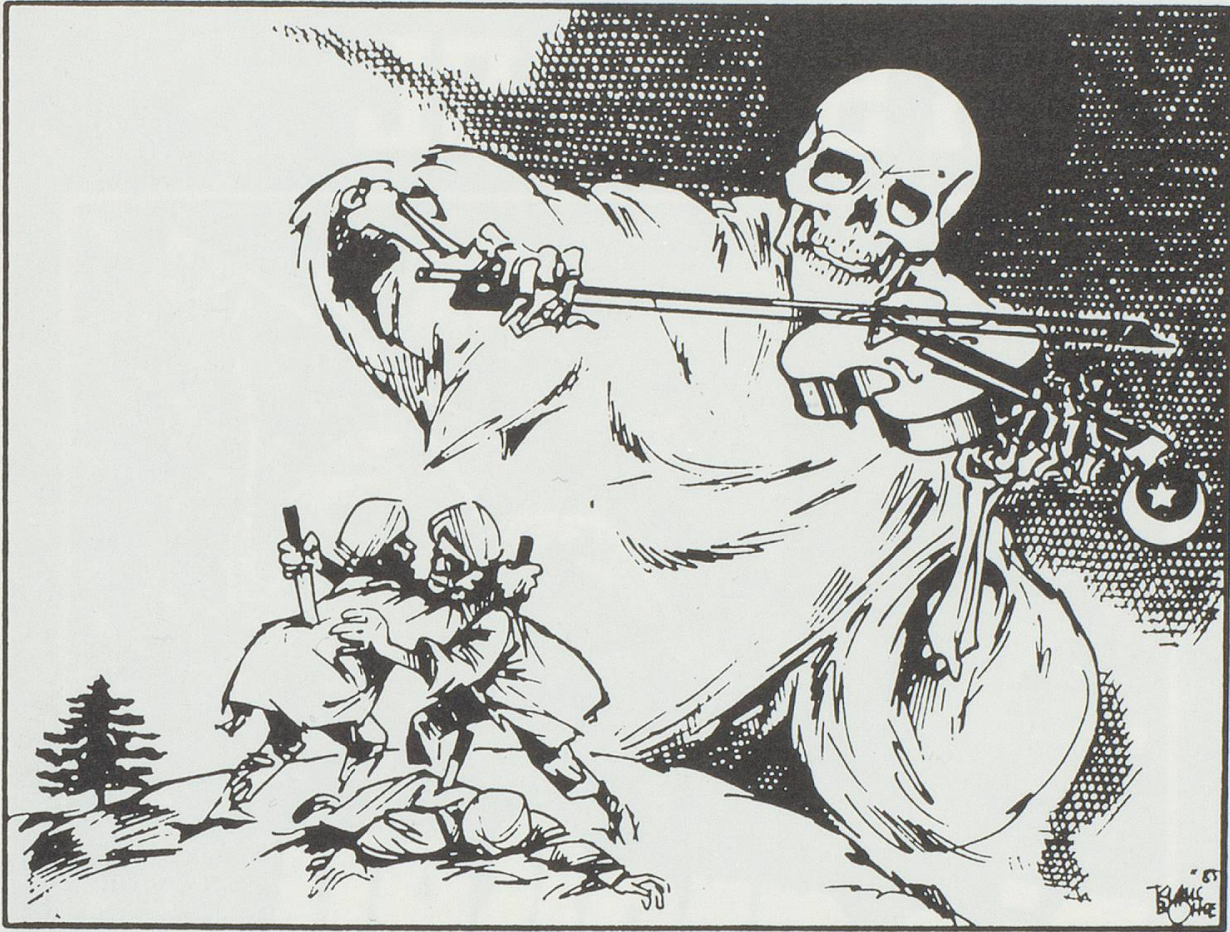


Fig. 36: Klaus Böhle, „Libanesischer Totentanz“, *Die Welt*, 11.6.1985. (After *Totentanz: Kontinuität*, p. 263, fig. 23)

# DER SPIEGEL



Fig. 37: „Die großen Seuchen“, *Der Spiegel*, No. 39, 23.9.1985. (After *Totentanz: Kontinuität*, p. 264, fig. 27)