



the movement is played sufficiently “*con moto*”, the suspension becomes understandable (technically it echoes the Eb / A juxtaposition of the work's opening bar), but is still outrageously ear-catching even of our modern ears; I bet Mozart loved playing that bar in his quartet with Haydn !



The third movement, a Minuet, again contrasts leaps and close intervals. Here the opening leaps are a couple of loud brays on the first violin, contrasted with quiet, closely-knit descending quavers,



which are chromatised into sliding semitones in the trio. The final Rondo movement is less obviously chromatic, though even here, there are episodes of descending chromatic scales, just to remind us which quartet we are in!

### Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) Three Divertimenti for string quartet (1936)

*March*

*Waltz*

*Burlesque*

These pieces originated in 1933 as part of a planned 5-movement suite for string quartet called *Alla quartetto serioso 'Go play, boy, play'* – a series of portraits of Britten's school friends from South Lodge and Gresham's. The three movements that were actually composed were substantially revised over the next three years. The *March* was entirely replaced, with the original being considered for another quartet suite inspired by the film of Erich Kästner's children's book *Emil and the Detectives*. It finally appeared in the song-cycle *Les Illuminations*. The revised *Three Divertimenti* were first performed by the Stratton quartet (which later metamorphosed into the Aeolian) in the Wigmore Hall in February 1936. Britten became depressed by their reception: 'sniggers and cold silence' he wrote. He withdrew them, and they only reappeared after his death.

## Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) String Quartet No 3 in Eb minor Op 30 (1876)

*Andante sostenuto - Allegro moderato*

*Allegretto vivo e scherzando*

*Andante funebre e doloroso, ma con moto*

*Finale: Allegro non troppo e risoluto*

Tchaikovsky's third quartet is dedicated to the memory of Ferdinand Laub (1832-1875), a virtuoso Czech violinist who for almost 10 years was professor of violin studies at Nikolai Rubinstein's Moscow Conservatory. Tchaikovsky, who was also a professor at the Conservatory, regarded Laub as "the best violinist of our time". Laub led the Russian Music Society quartet that played the premieres of Tchaikovsky's first two string quartets. Laub's health deteriorated rapidly in 1874 and he died the following year, aged 43, on the way to a spa near Bolzano in Italy.

The quartet opens with an extended *Andante* prologue: after a few bars the music dies away to a sombre *pizzicato* pulse that introduces a *cantabile* theme on the violin (illustrated) joined by the cello. The following



*Allegro* again has a short introduction leading to a theme (illustrated) with a triplet motif which will be developed later.



The music at last allows itself to cheer up

with a charming waltz (illustrated) that exploits the previous theme's triplets. But the cheer does not last long - the music gets more and more anguished as the triplets are tossed between the players. This wealth of material is developed at length, with violent mood swings; finally the sombre quiet of the opening *Andante* returns.



The second, *Scherzo*, movement is an altogether lighter affair in Bb major, with a rather comic descending arpeggio across the four instruments, and in the trio section an opportunity for the viola to sing; Laub had played the viola solo in Berlioz's *Harold in Italy*, when the composer conducted it in Moscow.

The *Adagio* is said to have drawn tears at its first performance, and it is a fine memorial to Laub. The opening dirge in Eb minor captures the leaden footsteps of a cortège with its on-beat semiquaver (as in Tennyson's: "Bury the Great Duke").



The violin and cello then sing *piangendo* (weeping) a slowly



descending lament. After an impassioned climax, the cortège returns. Tchaikovsky originally put the *Scherzo* movement after this *Adagio*, but almost immediately revised the order. The impact of this movement is heightened by the lightness of the *Scherzo* separating it from the exhausting first movement. Many of the great slow movements in the quartet literature come after rather than before a lighter *Scherzo* / *Minuet*.

The last movement is joyfully celebratory – a lively *Rondo* in the major. Its cheerful dance is only once interrupted by the *pizzicato* bars from the work's introduction, reminding us of Laub's absence.