

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

March

Waltz

Burlesque

These pieces originated in 1933, while Britten was studying at the RCM, as part of a planned 5-movement suite for string quartet called *Alla quartetto serioso 'Go play, boy, play'* – a series of portraits of his 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.

The Doric comment on the three movements: "The first movement, March, already shows evidence of Britten's preoccupation with transparency of texture. The remarkably idiomatic part writing and use of octave doubling and harmonics create an open, uncomplicated sound-world. However, as the movement progresses more elements are introduced, gradually disrupting the initial impression of order.

"The second movement, Waltz, also revels in its apparent simplicity. In reality though, this is the compositional equivalent of a sleight of hand, as the illusion of simplicity takes remarkable compositional dexterity to create. The lucid textures, irregular overlapping phrases and unity of motive all combine to create a movement of notable fluidity.

"The last movement, Burlesque, is a carefree romp. A more relaxed middle section is unable to stem the flow of energy, and the piece culminates in a high-spirited dash to the end." © *The Doric String Quartet, 2003*

Alban Berg 1885-1935

Lyric Suite

1. *Allegretto giovale*

2. *Andante amoroso*

3. *Allegro misterioso*

4. *Adagio appassionato*

5. *Presto delirando*

6. *Largo desolato*

Berg's Lyric Suite was written between 1925-26 and first performed in Vienna on January 8th 1927 by the Kolisch Quartet (then under the name 'The New Viennese String Quartet').

In 1928 he arranged movements 2-4 for string orchestra, and were the only pieces of his performed by the Vienna Philharmonic in his lifetime.

He at one time planned adding a voice part in the last movement, but later discarded the idea.

Berg became a pupil of Schoenberg's, who took him on as a non-paying student in 1904 due to Berg's poor financial state, and studied with him for six years.

The suite uses methods of composition related to Schoenberg's Twelve-Note technique and Berg's own experiments in the form, but quite freely in places.

It is officially dedicated to the composer Alexander von Zemlinsky, and quotes a theme from his Lyric Symphony which was set to the words 'You are my own, my own.'

But there is a hidden agenda! It has been shown that Berg uses motifs based on the initials of Hanna Fuchs-Robettin, with whom he'd had an extra marital affair, and on his own name.

The piece became a passionate celebration of their secret liaison.

As the titles of each of the six movements show, the music is vivid, intensely emotional and dramatic. Especially striking is the 3rd movement, which is a wonderfully spooky nocturnal ride and takes the form of a scherzo, complete with trio marked *Estatico*!

The 4th movement includes some of the most intense and passionate music in the suite, and the 5th includes moments of real rhythmic drive.

In the 6th movement Berg quotes a theme from Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, though heavily disguised.

The work is largely atonal, though there are tonal references in the 6th movement, so don't expect to be whistling any tunes afterwards!

While listening, allow your imagination to take flight and enjoy the rapidly shifting images, the abrupt changes of mood, the dialogue between the instruments, and the brief moments of calm and great tenderness.

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809-1847): Octet in E flat major, Op. 20 (1825)

Allegro moderato ma con fuoco

Andante

Scherzo: Allegro leggierissimo

Presto

Felix Mendelssohn (Bartholdy was added by his father when Felix was 7) was born into an intellectual and affluent household: his grandfather Moses was the pre-eminent Jewish philosopher of the Enlightenment, and both his father and mother's families were bankers. Felix and his sister Fanny were outstandingly precocious and were driven hard by their parents – their day started at 5 am at the latest. In 1818 the 9-year old Felix publicly performed a Dussek piano concerto from memory, and his first datable composition was performed in Berlin the same year. His copious early compositions outshone even those of Mozart. When Mendelssohn was 12 he played for Goethe who had also heard the young Mozart. Goethe was impressed: "...*what [Mendelssohn] already accomplishes bears the same relation to the Mozart of that time as the cultivated talk of a grown-up person bears to the prattle of a child.*" At the age of 16 he produced his first undoubted masterpiece, his String Octet Op 20, incidentally at the same time as a metrically accurate German

translation of a comedy by Terence which was published by his tutor the following year!

The Octet was intended as a birthday present for Eduard Rietz, Mendelssohn's violin teacher. Like the D minor Violin Concerto, it is dedicated to Rietz and the first violin part written for him; Mendelssohn himself occasionally played the second viola part. The work is orchestral in its scope and writing. Mendelssohn exhorts the players as follows: "Note: *This Octet must be played by all the instruments in a symphonic orchestral style. Pianos and fortes must be strictly observed and more strongly emphasized than is usual in pieces of this genre.*" Without such discipline, important individual parts can be lost against the seven others.

The Octet opens with rising arpeggios on the first violin above a tensely expectant accompaniment. The arpeggios move to the cello and then are transformed into a questioning semi-quaver figure, reassuringly answered by falling crotchets. New material is introduced by the fourth violin and first viola in sixths (*illustrated*), and these ideas form the basis for an exhilarating and masterfully scored sonata form movement.

Allegro moderato ma con fuoco

Violin 1

Violin 4

Viola 1

The lower strings open the second movement with dark foreboding, which gives way to a serene melody from the violins. Tension ebbs and flows with triplet semiquavers, dissolving, in a moment of genius, into an ecstatic *pianissimo* of cascading scales (*illustrated*). The uneasy triplets return, dispelled again by the cascading scales, and the triplets of Mendelssohn's second viola, now calmed, have the last word.

Violin 2

Violin 4

Viola 1

Viola 2

The *Scherzo* presages Mendelssohn's renowned overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which he wrote immediately after the Octet. The movement is *pianissimo* and *staccato* throughout, reinforced again by an admonition from the composer. According to the composer's sister Fanny, it was inspired by lines from Goethe's *Faust*, the Walpurgis Night Dream, 'Clouds and mist pass / it grows bright above. / Air in the bushes and wind in the reeds / - and all is dispersed' Rietz's first violin part emerges briefly in the middle section with a tricky, trill-laden, more *legato* passage, but the *staccato* returns and the movement ends with a rising arpeggio vanishing *pp diminuendo* in a puff of air.

The *Presto* finale is definitely more muscular; the second cello growls out the quavers of the energetic fugal subject which passes quickly all the way up the octet. The quavers continue to carry the movement along almost without interruption in a celebration of teenage energy and exuberant genius.

Programme notes by Chris Darwin (Britten and Mendelssohn) and Berg (Guy Richardson).