

Britten, Three Divertimenti

Toward the end of his student life, Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) composed a set of pieces for string quartet, which the composer intended to form a suite to be titled *Alla quartetto serio*: “Go play, boy, play.” These were intended to be musical sketches of school friends. The original plan of five movements was unrealized, but three years later, Britten gathered and polished three of them to form the *Three Divertimenti*. In February 1936, the Stratton Quartet (later renamed the Aeolian Quartet) premiered the work. Britten never published the *Three Divertimenti*, and they were finally brought out in 1983, about seven years after his death.

“March” pictured an athletic friend from Gresham’s boarding school. The angular, “athletic” introduction leads to a witty essay in march style (a recurring feature in several later works). The music has a truly outdoor feeling as well as conveying youthful bravado. Its ending is humorously droopy.

“Waltz” was associated with a boy from public school. The music’s quietly reserved opening belies its original title, “At the Party,” but later antics and surreal moments illustrate it. The fade-out ending may leave us with a feeling that the waltz will continue long after we have left the party.

“Burlesque” originally portrayed a boy from South Lodge, an earlier private school. The music’s pesky insistence in near *moto perpetuo* is understood better by its original title, “Ragging.” In the musical style and wry humor of this movement, we hear a

bit of Britten's debt to Stravinsky, yet the finishing moments are theatrical Britten, giving us a clear glimpse of his boyhood years — the pranks, the questioning, and the joy.

Finzi, *By Footpath and Stile*, Op. 2 for Baritone and String Quartet

The 20th century saw the rebirth of vocal chamber music, very little employed since the Baroque period. The first 20th-century works to come to mind might be radical experiments such as Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912), which used the voice as a semi-recitation. However, in England, a more conservative, classic approach was dawning. Ralph Vaughan Williams composed *On Wenlock Edge* (Housman) during 1908-1909, conventional songs for voice and string quartet, and George Butterworth wrote *Love Blows as the Wind Blows* (Henley) in 1911-1912 for the same forces. Thus, something of an English tradition was set into motion, which would culminate in the much later music of Peter Maxwell Davies.

Several less well known works helped to build that tradition, one of the most important of which is *By Footpath and Stile* by Gerald Finzi (1901-1956). A lifelong devotee of English literature, Finzi is best known to audiences through his art songs. Finzi chose six poems by Thomas Hardy for his vocal-chamber cycle, all of which had been published in or after 1914, when Hardy was in his 70s. Composed during 1921-1922, *By Footpath and Stile* was the music of a man in his early 20s. Influenced by the sad period of World War I yet hopeful and courageous in nature, the six poems deal (respectively) with death, loss, doubt, the past, withdrawal, and separation. Finzi's song

cycle was a way of expressing his feelings as a sole survivor, having lost many friends and family members in the war.

“Paying Calls” begins with a substantial string introduction to the entire cycle. The song itself, though it deals with a visit to a cemetery where the poet seeks and speaks to friends (who, he notes, do not reply), contains a spirit of consolation.

Finzi was deeply influenced by Vaughan Williams, and this is heard in the second song, “Where the Picnic Was,” especially in its modal harmonies. Undulating chords are another feature, here supporting the seaside memory of a pleasant occasion that will never return.

The third song, “The Oxen,” paints a Nativity scene with “ancient” Renaissance harmonies. Then the style changes radically, as the poet speaks of *these* years (WW I), and the song concludes in a quiet pensive mood as the poet reflects on following Christ.

“The Master and the Leaves” is the closest thing to a scherzo in *By Footpath and Stile*. Its poetry uses the leaves’ changing colors as a metaphor in a dialogue between them and the “Master” Gardner, who cannot reveal the secret of where things go when they die.

The varied personages in “Voices from Things Growing in a Churchyard” may remind us of a medieval “Dance of Death” procession, where each image has a unique story. Yet here, the dead characters speak through the “masks” of flora growing over them. The mood is pleasant, a suitable setting for Hardy’s pantheism.

In “Exeunt omnes,” elements from all the preceding poems come together in a final summing up. Themes from songs return, and toward the end, the melody of the first song appears, beautifully illustrating the final lines of the poem:

Whence they entered hither.

Soon do I follow thither!

Elgar, Piano Quintet in A Minor, Op. 84

Few (if any) classical music composers have specialized in “spooky” or ghostly music, but some have delved briefly into moods and subjects related to mystery, ghosts, etc. We certainly associate Sir Edward Elgar (1857-1934) more with *Pomp and Circumstance* and echoes of the Grand Siècle than with any probing of the supernatural. Yet, he did compose one work in which the opening movement was apparently influenced by ghost stories and local folklore — oddly enough a chamber work, his Piano Quintet in A Minor.

Edward and Alice Elgar would spend the summer and early fall at their country cottage far from “town,” where the composer could rejuvenate his creative impulses close to nature. During 1917-1921, it was Brinkwells, an isolated cottage in the woods of Sussex. High above the house was a gathering of dead “sinister” trees, around which a local legend had grown, possibly embellished by one of the Elgars’ friends:

Upon the plateau, it is said, was once a settlement of Spanish monks, who, carrying out some impious rites, were struck dead; and the trees are their dead forms.

In the summer of 1918, Elgar first heard this tale, and the first week of September he ordered the novels of spooky mystery writer Bulwer Lytton (“It was a dark and stormy night . . .”).

All this is to introduce the opening minutes of the Piano Quintet, which Elgar composed at that time. The mood of the slow introduction is surely connected to the tale, yet this is broken by the main theme-complex, which is nothing but Brahmsian in style.

However, the second theme is purposely “Spanish,” and the third theme is a grand sweeping dance, that could conceivably also be called Spanish. From there we can follow the words of Elgar’s friend and biographer W.H. Reed:

With alternations and elaborations of these moods, this remarkable movement proceeds through the development and recapitulation sections until it ends in rather a gloomy manner, leaving the listener with an uncanny feeling of awe.

The nobility of sentiment we associate with Elgar comes to the fore in the *Adagio*. Here we have a seamless melody, at first in a unified presentation by the whole ensemble, but later focusing on individual instruments, which then builds to an emotional climax. Subsiding, the opening melody returns but with a more elaborate piano accompaniment. Toward the end, a ghostly reminiscence of the first movement passes through briefly before the rich, softly consoling conclusion.

Somewhat in balance with the first movement, the last opens slowly. Now, however, the mood is resolute, and the composer carries this into the main body of the movement. In a sense, this movement, composed in early 1919, reflects Elgar’s revived spirits influenced by the recent end of World War I as well as by his country cottage. As biographer Jerrold Northrop Moore writes:

No such affirmation had closed any work of his since the First Symphony. For then, as now, a war of the spirit had been won. Then, the enemy had been the quasi-military ghosts of ambition. Now, they were the disintegrating self-doubts which had been faced through the wood magic of countryside peace. Thus, the end of the Quintet, though finished at Severn House [London], was inscribed as the other chamber music with the name of Brinkwells.