

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.