

Reprintable only with permission from the author.

Haydn opus 20 #3

Joseph Haydn wrote his six opus 20 quartets in 1772, when he was forty years old. At that time he had been the court composer to Count Esterhazy for twelve years, and was to fill that position for a total of thirty. "I was completely secluded from the world," he said of those years, so that "nobody was nearby who could distract me or confuse me about myself; in this way I became original." Coming fast on the heels of two earlier sets (opus 9 and opus 17), the opus 20 quartets are arguably Haydn's first quartet masterpieces. They make the fullest use of four completely independent voices (in his earlier quartets Haydn would often fuse the viola and cello parts together to be one line), employ a much expanded range of texture and dynamics, and show for the first time the composer's flexibility in phrase length and structure, with all its attendant capacity for wit and surprise. The set's nickname, the "Sun Quartets", is due merely to the sun that was displayed on the cover of the first edition; the name even seems somewhat misleading, since two of the quartets are in darker, minor keys (it was more the custom to have only one minor-key work in a set at this time), and since the many bright moments in these works are well balanced by passages that are more learned, convoluted, and experimental.

The key of G minor had tragic connotations for Haydn's great contemporary, Mozart, as one can hear clearly in his 40th Symphony or his G minor Viola Quintet. Haydn does not seem to have shared Mozart's feelings about this key. In the opus 20 #3 Quartet, as in its later counterpart, the "Rider" Quartet, Haydn couples the key of G minor with a spirited, feisty attitude, sometimes even turbulent and stormy; there is never that sense of fatefulness, of deep sorrow, that the younger composer was to bring. The first movement opens with a figure that is distinguished by a number of jagged leaps up and down, which immediately set a kind of combative tone. By the eleventh bar the composer has already steered the work into a sunnier major key, a sure sign that the movement will be pithy and succinct. The most extraordinary aspect of this movement, however, is its penchant for stopping short in its tracks. Even by Haydn's standards -- he was a master of sudden silences -- this movement, especially in its development, is dotted with these quick stops. Into each silence falls a hushed declaration by the whole quartet in unison, evoking a Greek chorus commenting on the actions of the play's indecisive hero. The dialectic between the forceful main mood and the quiet "commenter" is really what forms the drama of this first movement.

The minuet is perhaps a shade more serious. It is distinguished by phrases of irregular length -- a favorite habit of Haydn's which gives the music an unconstrained, rhetorical air -- and by a rather beautiful trio section in which lyrical counterpoint in the lower three instruments unfolds against a tracery of first-violin eighth-notes. The movement ends in a fading, mournful major key, marked "perdendosi", or "dying away".

The slow, third movement opens like a hymn, with a stately, rising figure in the first violin accompanied by simple chords. The main contrasting idea appears soon after: a tender, twisting line of sixteenth-notes in the cello, the accompaniment now celestial in the high upper strings. These two themes alternate persistently throughout the movement, seeming to suggest an elevated sermon from the individual, the grave response from the multitude.

The finale is a fiery Allegro with strong Gypsy undertones. Despite the minor key, an atmosphere of dark-hued merrymaking prevails. As in the first movement, there are copious sudden stops, sometimes dramatic, sometimes humorous, which keep the listener constantly guessing. A twittering, almost irritable motif, which is first heard right away in the first violin part, becomes a kind of ubiquitous comic leitmotif, refusing to go away; and in fact it has the last word, mumbled in the cello's lowest register as the quartet comes to a close.

Note by Misha Amory