

Reprintable only with permission from the author.

Haydn Quartet Opus 33 #2

Haydn must have been a great babysitter. You know, the one who picks up three unpromising looking Lego blocks and builds a functioning helicopter, the one who uses the toilet plunger to pick up odds and ends around the house, the one who swaps his white powdered wig for a frizzy brunette one and looks oddly like your aunt, and then appears around corners when you least expect him. In a quartet nicknamed “the Joke” one might expect as much. The nickname of the E-flat major quartet Op. 33 No. 2 refers to the ending of its last movement, but Haydn plays at being a delightful trickster in three of the four movements.

In the opening movement Haydn sets forth a fairly balanced, jovial theme. Even here for the performer there is a slight cognitive dissonance: he gives the performing direction “cantabile,” singing, but much of what makes up this theme is more a good belly laugh than any kind of bel canto. The diva cannot take herself too seriously. And the chuckling pretty much takes over the proceedings. In fact the entire movement is made up of the elements heard in that first statement. It is a fun sleight-of-hand, never even hinting at monotony, a whole meal somehow conjured out of a scrap of bread. When Haydn uses a chain of chuckling motifs to suggest progress it instead leads to a kind of slapstick stuttering. The pitch that leads where we are going arrives on top in the first violin, but it gets stuck there and desperately repeats as the harmonies underneath shift around. In order to regain a sense of dignity, rather in the vein of Sam the Eagle of the Muppets, Haydn takes the rhythm from the chuckling motif and uses it to puff up the quartet. The quartet does its best playing at being an orchestra. Of course it is absurd play, and all is merrily shrugged off when the curtain is lifted on the great and powerful Oz to reveal a humble wizard. Haydn loves to keep us off balance and the movement even ends with the same three notes that introduced the whole piece, the figure that introduces becoming the one that closes, a sort of pun.

Where Haydn would have written a Minuet movement in his earlier quartets he puts a movement marked “Scherzo,” joke, in each of the Op. 33 quartets. Here in Op. 33 No. 2 we get a rather pompously stomping dance that again and again sheepishly looks around filled with doubt, wondering whether any toes have been trampled. This kind of self-referential rhetoric is one of the wonderful hallmarks of Haydn’s style. The music comments on itself, much to the delight of performer as well as listener. In the trio one can almost hear the rust on the strings, the hurdy-gurdy on its last legs. The first violin tries so hard to be elegant and suave, but what can be done when dancing on banana peels? Again there is a moment of attempted dignity and orchestral build-up, again coming up woefully empty-handed. Suggestions of orchestral grandeur appear in each of the movements; in the fast movements they seem to grow more preposterous each time.

In the slow movement Haydn puts aside his clown’s garb to don the enchanted robes of a magician. Starting from the simplest horn call derived melody for the viola and cello he weaves a spell of wonder. As the violins sing their version of the tune the cello murmurs an unassuming oscillating figure, souging water or wind. Throughout the movement this

figuration adorns and illuminates the proceedings gently and tenderly. The moments of orchestral weight here come as foreign declamatory chords, revelations and admissions of darkness. But the slashes in the aural texture do not rent the fabric of the charmed song. Instead they are covered over, healed like a wound that becomes part of one's life story only as anecdote. The movement departs with a series of silvery sighs evaporating into the ether.

The finale is a merry romp of a rondo, quicksilver and pure good spirits. Toward the end, pompous, regal music announces itself. The movement steps outside of itself, taking on the role of narrator, of explicator, and makes a last ditch effort at stately dignity. This is the final, most farcical of the futile orchestral tropes. Laughing it off, what happens next leads to the joke of the piece's nickname.

Surely you didn't expect me to reveal the punch line!

Note by Mark Steinberg