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Haydn Quartet Opus 64 #3

In 1790, Joseph Haydn was 58, and had been in the employ of the court at Esterhaza for almost thirty years. During that time the composer had been very productive, enjoying an assured income and the time and demand necessary to work constantly. It was in this period that he matured the genres of symphony and the string quartet, and established them enduringly as artforms, even if (some would say) his greatest contributions to those genres were yet to come.

This year was to witness a major shift in Haydn's life and career, as his patron, Count Nicholas, died and his successor released the composer from his contract. Simultaneously the great impresario Salomon made his appearance, and brought Haydn to London, where he was to have an impact that would make him the most famous composer in Europe. His style was to lose none of its inventiveness or depth, but a clear shift is palpable as Haydn aims his music at a larger, more public concert hall instead of the intimate court audiences he had known.

The six opus 64 quartets straddle this moment of change. Haydn wrote the last two of these quartets (including the celebrated "Lark" quartet) with the London public in view, while the first four are still the creation of Haydn the court composer. The Quartet in B-flat, opus 64 number 3, displays characteristics worthy of both milieus: its extroverted brilliance would play well to a large hall, but it retains the characteristics of the genius of the Esterhaza laboratory: curiosity, experiment, innovation.

The first movement, a swift, sparkling Vivace assai, abounds with one of Haydn's favorite tricks: musical phrases which are irregular and often interrupted. During the entire first section, the only "regular" 8-bar phrase, near the opening, is a four-square tune accompanied by galloping rhythms; this comes off as intentionally oafish, the butt of humor, surrounded as it is by witty and unpredictable structures. The second movement is a simple and lovely Adagio that features the two violin lines in a closely entwined duet. Consisting essentially of two outer major sections and an inner minor one, the movement closes with an extraordinary coda which appears from nowhere – darkly chromatic and hushed, it seems to elevate the movement to another sphere.

The genial Minuet, as with so many of Haydn's minuets, is all about rhythmic play. We are kept guessing where the downbeat is as the composer employs hemiola after hemiola in the minuet section (with unexpected pauses), then a

funny, hiccuping figure in the trio section. Then follows a typically ebullient Haydn finale, in a quick-paced 2-4 meter. All sorts of humor is on show here; the music loves to get stuck, or lose its way, before snapping out of it unexpectedly and forging on. Sudden dynamic shifts and unexpected modulations are the order of the day. After a teasing moment of suspense, the movement closes brilliantly and triumphantly.

Note by Misha Amory