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Haydn wrote his opus 50 Quartets in 1787. Like Mozart with his final three quartets, he dedicated them to King Friedrich Wilhelm of Prussia, who was a music lover and an enthusiastic amateur cellist. Perhaps for this reason the cello part, throughout the six quartets, has little moments in the sun, snatches of brilliance or brief alluring melodies -- a more subtle featuring than in Mozart's quartets, as if Haydn was attempting to judge very carefully how much of a burden of exposure to place on his royal (and hopefully generous) dedicatee.

The first of these quartets, opus 50 no. 1 in B-flat, opens with patchwork. Haydn seems to be sifting through his musical remnants, setting himself the challenge of fashioning an entire movement out of brief motifs and incomplete notions. The cello starts alone, trudging along on a single repeated pitch. When the other instruments enter, it is only to play a little "ender" gesture, just when one would expect a proper melody of decent length to be initiated. There is obviously humor in this approach, but at the same time we are being treated to a display of composer's virtuosity, as we behold the delicate architecture of an extended form gradually taking shape, despite resting on such a seemingly trivial, flimsy foundation. The non-melodic, repeated pitch of the cello opening is destined to become the ubiquitous vehicle of the movement, gently carrying and shepherding all of these inchoate, fragmentary bits of music into wholeness.

The second movement is a set of variations on a courtly, elegant theme. Simplicity seems to be the focus here; however, Haydn being Haydn, he bases his theme not on periods of four bars (the usual, regular length), but rather six bars, so that we detect a gleam of something richer, more oblique, underlying this simple world. The variations are not ambitious -- one with a first-violin descant, one minor and operatic, and one embellished from below by cello filigree -- rather, this music is content to bask in its world of rhythmic grace and simple, glowing harmony.

The Minuet is jocular, full of Haydnesque energy, featuring a straightforward melody that is put through its paces, appearing in all possible registers, harmonized now from below, now from overhead, and finally on all sides. The contrasting Trio section is, like much of the first movement, an exercise in minimalization: a cute, sparkling descending line in the first violin announces that, for a while, we will be dealing in only quarter-note rhythms, both in the melody and the accompaniment. Only at the very end of the Trio is the music permitted to branch out into goofy, hiccuping eighth-beats, before the more robust main section of the Minuet returns.

The final movement has a clearly more active nature than its predecessors. In this busy, high-energy context, the composer indulges happily in contrapuntal exchange between the voices - question and answer, rude interruption, amusing pauses and brilliant outbursts, all in an atmosphere of joyful congeniality. Only occasionally does the music verge towards minor, a mock-tragic sighing that is quickly laughed off. At one point the first violin part is sidetracked into a daydreaming cadenza, where it lingers for a few seconds before being teased back into the dance. After a couple of fakeouts -- the listener is being tested to make sure he is paying attention -- the movement closes triumphantly.

Note by Misha Amory