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Haydn opus 50 #4

Joseph Haydn composed his opus 50 string quartets in 1787. Hoping for royal acknowledgement, and perhaps emolument, he dedicated the set to King Frederick of Prussia. Although the monarch's response may have been disappointingly parsimonious -- a gold ring and a thank-you -- Haydn fared quite well in the end, selling the quartets to two different publishers without either of them knowing, and pocketing his fee twice.

The F-sharp minor Quartet, opus 50 no. 4, is the only minor-key quartet of the six. F-sharp minor is altogether an unusual key, as it is difficult for string players and does not take much advantage of the natural resonance of the instruments; but Haydn used it for his "Farewell" Symphony and for one of his late piano trios as well, so he clearly responded to its severe, somewhat astringent tonal flavor. The first movement of this quartet, designated unusually "Spiritoso", features a bold, sometimes symphonic palette with a quite wide range of register. It opens with a bold, rhythmic unison statement from the whole quartet, to which the first violin responds with a lonely, tentative figure. However, it is the strength of the opening gesture, rather than the pathos of the reply, which stamps the movement as a whole, a depiction of restless, celebratory Jovian energy. Only at the end of each major section does the music find a quieter place where it can repose briefly.

The second movement showcases a particular genius of Haydn's, the expression of great beauty through simple means. Here we have a patient Andante setting wherein a melody walks up and down the scale, harmonized glowingly, measured out in the plainest of musical periods. In the course of the movement, major-key sections alternate strophically with minor-key ones, returning in a different variation each time, a favorite slow-movement form for the composer. The major-key music is radiant, unassuming, reflective; the minor-key darker, more troubled, more sophisticated. The final return of the major-key section sets the cello part in its high, *bel canto* register (a star turn for the cello-playing King Frederick?), where it plays a close duet with the second violin before concluding the movement with emphatic chords.

The third movement is on the one hand a typical, genial Haydn minuet; on the other, it is a subtly unifying force for the other movements of the quartet. Like the first movement, it features some "large" writing -- grand arpeggios, unison writing to provide emphasis, a wide register. From the second movement, it inherits a preoccupation with the tension between major and minor; although the movement as a whole is in a major key, the main section of the minuet has

minor-key "coloring", and the entire Trio is in minor, a grave, contrapuntal examination. It is this Trio section which prefigures the Finale, in its rather learned interplay of voices, its evocation of elevated discourse.

The final movement is a fugue, a form where the voices enter one at a time, each in its turn stating the "subject" -- the topic that is to be discussed, so to speak. Haydn, in his opus 20 quartets, had undergone a period of fascination with fugal finales. This one, with its severe intervallic outline and light rhythmic character, recalls the finale of opus 20 #6, which itself can perhaps claim a lineage back to Bach's *Musical Offering*. With the present fugue, however, there is no claim to a great polyphonic edifice such as that one; here we have a movement less than three minutes long, wherein all is lightness, grace and wit. Many an erudite fugal trick is employed, but the listener is equally likely to be struck by the movement's dramatic gestures: sudden silences, sustained suspenseful pedal points, unexpected harmonic shifts, massive unisons, and not least, the abrupt strength of the emphatic closing cadence.