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## **Haydn opus 20 no. 1**

Were you an actor in Shakespeare's Globe Theater when his plays were first performed you would have been given "sides" before rehearsal, a copy of your lines, and only yours, perhaps with a few cues to help you figure out when to say them. You would show up to meet your fellow actors, probably with educated guesses as to what would evoke such responses and what responses your lines would elicit, and immerse yourself in the discovery of what the play actually was. No study of the whole beforehand, no profound meditation on the interrelationships of characters and events, just real-time experience: fresh, immediate, and often surprising.

Playing a quartet from Haydn's Op. 20 when the ink was just barely dry would have been a similar experience. The works were published in the 1770s; the first complete score showing all the parts together (considered a completely necessary study text by any serious artist today) appeared only in 1802. The music was published for the entertainment and edification of those playing at home, with friends. You would invite your musically literate friends to join you for an evening of music-making, and each person from his own part would be able to make reasonable, logical guesses as to what the remainder of the quartet might be doing. But Haydn being Haydn, master of clever twists and turns and of the novel combining and recombining of ideas, would subvert those expectations around nearly every turn. And as with good comedy, the thwarting of expectations would provoke delight and fascination.

Besides playing chamber music with friends, were you living at that time you might spend some leisure time at social salons. You would go to enjoy the art of conversation, and would endeavor to embody the qualities of attentiveness, erudition, wit and creativity. You would try to listen well, respond with enthusiasm and personality, and perhaps surprise and titillate with a *bon mot* or two. The interaction in many a movement of a Haydn quartet is quite akin to the conversational atmosphere at a salon, a comparison which would not have been lost on people who were active and eager participants in both. And Haydn was writing these quartets for exactly these people, not so much as pieces to impress an audience. The music is largely about the sense and the feeling of the interaction within the group. A modern day audience is put in the role of eavesdropper, a role not without its considerable pleasures.

So many details of the music might provoke a knowing smile from the educated amateur musician sitting down to read Op. 20 No. 1 for the first time. The piece begins straightforwardly enough, but one member is strangely mute. Hmm. Perhaps all will finally begin in earnest together in the second phrase. The

connecting link between the two phrases is quite a bit fancier than warranted in the cello, a pompous intruder in the salon using eight words where four will do. The second phrase comes along and still one member sits on the sidelines. A brief modulation ensues and finally the second violinist is lured into the action. But the first violinist then steps aside, the cello plays the role of second violin to the second's first and the violist plays at being the supporting bass that is the job of the cello. A battle for prominence between the violins ensues, each snatching the tune from the other. Then the quartet lapses into an imitation of an orchestra, putting an end to this. At other moments a concerto texture is invoked, or the music wanders seemingly aimlessly only to find itself and realize it is not in the expected

place, and so on and so forth, never without a subtle twist to keep us guessing. Precisely the feel of a good, diverting conversation. The clarity of the rhetoric is wonderfully startling to a cultured ear.

Minuets in Haydn quartets represent an opportunity for the composer gleefully to refuse to go along with the conventions of the dance that would have been in everyone's ears. A Haydn minuet is always a confrontation between tradition and innovation. The one in Op. 20 No. 1 is no exception. The tune itself is a non-sequitur of sorts, but one that gets repeated enough to become expected just in time to be abruptly changed just when we are sure we know what we have coming to us. The contrasting trio section finds the violist in the role of spectator, and perhaps the music feels as if it were happening within his memory, in a sort of subjunctive mood, in the past or in a dream-state. Unbeknownst to us at this moment, it is a foreshadowing of the extraordinary slow movement with which it shares both a key and a motivic link. (The first four notes in the second violin and cello are identical with the inner voices that begin the following movement.) When the viola finally joins it is as if in semi-awakening, in a bit of a haze trying to ascertain where we are. The minuet tune is attempted, but it turns out we're not in Kansas anymore. It doesn't take hold. But while Haydn could easily have written the briefest transition to bring us back to the right key, he instead allows a silence to startle us enough to be ready for the shrug and slap in the face that jolts us back to where we should have been all along.

The slow movement displays a mesmeric homogeneity of texture and rhythm, choral in sound and with kaleidoscopically shifting colors and shadows. The surface is pared down and with it our attention to the sky-shifts is honed and intensified. All shenanigans left behind, the movement enchants with its hushed confidences. Haydn writes phrases that flout circularity and regularity, often in groups of five pulses, all float and drift. We leave the salon to confide one on one, quiet and intimate. Mozart was clearly touched deeply by this

movement and paid extraordinary tribute to it in the slow movement of his own E-flat major quartet, K428.

As a young man Haydn made money collaborating with a comic actor named Kurz on burlesque performances and comic operas (at least one of which was banned by the queen for impropriety!). Kurz was fond of physical comedy. His theater housed an apparatus the Jesuits constructed to have angels descend from the heavens; he used it instead to feature flying donkeys. The burlesque is rarely far from the surface in a comic finale by Haydn, and here we have hiccupping, sudden fits and starts, the sense of a creature chasing its own tail, and many other ridiculous and charming exploits. One of my favorite anecdotes about Haydn finds him in the back of the concert hall during a performance of one of his symphonies erupting in giggles at every surprise. I would like very much to think of him so during the finale of Op. 20 No. 1.

Note by Mark Steinberg