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Haydn Quartet, opus 64 #4

By 1790, when the Op. 64 set of six string quartets was published, Haydn was writing to satisfy a great demand for his music throughout Europe. These were to be among the final works he wrote as a servant. He was on tour in London at the time of their publication, having just been released, upon the Prince's death, from thirty years' service at the royal court at Esterhazy (with a generous pension). These quartets are exuberant in their mastery and are dedicated to Johann Tost, the violinist who was principal second violin in Haydn's orchestra at Esterhazy.

As in much of Haydn's music, his debt to the conventions and possibilities of comic opera is immediately evident. Although the first movement begins in a straightforwardly jovial manner, the opening phrase is followed by a wink-like aside to the audience, turning away from the main action. Following the next phrase the aside is further developed, motivating the continuing progress of the movement; the audience is made complicit in the wit of the proceedings, cognizant of the fact that not all is as it appears. When a cadence suggesting a second, contrasting theme in a new key is reached, Haydn instead gives us slippery, tonally unstable music; it is as if a doorbell rings in a comic opera, but when the door is flung open there is no one there and everyone looks about perplexedly. This music settles into a mildly virtuosic flurry of notes within which is embedded the motif of the original "aside." Eventually, at the last possible moment, the expected theme pops up, teasingly appearing from around the back of the house and tapping us on the shoulder, trailing off in winks reminiscent of those at the opening. It is this late-arrived theme that ushers in the development section, with the new guest entertaining all with heavily embroidered tales of adventure. While there is not much developing in this development section, once the recapitulation of the opening arrives both the opening theme and the more lost, slippery second music have brief bouts of development, but this time the music for the late arrival is not to be found at all. The evening's host tries to take the floor one more time, but is interrupted in mid-sentence, and after some more determined and good-natured searching we are yet again surprised by the sly intrusion of the jaunty theme, closing out the movement.

It is often convention that allows fancy to have meaning. In Haydn's time, the minuet was a well-known, almost formulaic dance; in London in 1770 Pierre Hoegi published *A Tabular System Whereby the Art of Composing Minuets Is Made So Easy That Any Person, without the Least Knowledge of Musick, May Compose Ten Thousand, All Different, and in the Most Pleasing and Correct*

Manner. For such an imaginative composer as Haydn, these expectations provided a perfect frame within which to frolic. In this particular minuet there is much play between rustic and elegant music, between the court's minuet and the popular Laendler. The movement starts out closer in feel to a Laendler, a dance that was described in Haydn's day as one where "couples hop and turn themselves continually." It seems as if the couples dance in this fashion when we have our backs turned; as soon as one turns to look they settle more modestly into a well-behaved minuet proper. Ironically, the trio section, filled with typical Laendler figuration, almost yodel-like and repetitious (although in a cheeky way, in groups of five bars), is rather gentle, accompanied by strummed pizzicato chords in the lower three voices.

The third, slow movement is an extended aria for the first violin, surely a nod to Haydn's friend and dedicatee Tost. It is a beautiful, spun-out song. Yet here is an unusual ideal of beauty, one that celebrates asymmetry, with offbeat notes often stressed, pulling the center of gravity of various phrases off to one side. A contrasting section in minor becomes more interior and exploratory, but when the original version of the aria returns it is still open and lyrical, unmarked by the experience.

The finale is joyful and full of invention. In a favorite game of Haydn's, phrases are set up with the expectation of regularity and then thwarted, celebrating the careful art of disproportion. The music occasionally seems to get a bit stuck, but of course usually manages an elegant dismount despite any unconventional maneuvers along the way. The piece ends with two Puckish winks, hearkening back to the comic rhetoric of the first movement.

Note by Mark Steinberg