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Haydn Quartet opus 64 #2

The opus 64 Quartets occupy a special place in Joseph Haydn's composerly development. The year was 1790; at 58, he had already written many masterpieces for the string quartet, establishing it as an important genre and inspiring his young acquaintance Mozart to do the same. However, the years of London, and international stardom, were yet to come. This was Haydn's final year serving at the court of Esterhazy, the place where, for thirty years, he had come into his own as a creative artist, inventing and experimenting to his heart's content. Accordingly, in these quartets, we still sense the intimacy of the small court, and the exploratory curiosity of the writing, so different from the more public brilliance of the later quartets; at the same time, the ease and authority of the writing is unmistakable, a mature Haydn strolling in the garden that he created.

Opus 64 no. 2 is one of Haydn's dozen or so quartets in a minor key. Like his other, earlier quartet in b minor (opus 33 no. 1), he opens by playing a trick on the listener: the first violin's melody, unsupported by any harmonic structure, seems to be in D major, and only after a few bars is the true minor key revealed. From here he unfolds a movement that is quite reliable and regular in its form, but constantly surprising as to its content. The music moves from one fixation to another, first a slithering set of chromatic descents, then a fascination with trills, followed by an unexpected and stormy visit to operatic d minor; this in turn dissolves into a rootless unison which goes back up the chromatic ladder to a final resting place, where Haydn closes the section by merrily punctuating his tunes with plucked open strings. After a very busy developmental section, which focuses especially on the chromatic obsessions (both downwards and upwards) from the earlier music, the opening ambivalent melody returns. One astonishing moment late in the movement comes when the music very nearly gives up: the cello meanders to a standstill, then the first violin barely has the energy to continue, making a couple of abortive attempts before finding his way forward.

The slow movement moves to the parallel major key, a radiant tonality which each of the remaining movements will visit substantially. After the brilliant and argumentative first movement, this music is an oasis for quiet reflection. It consists of a main melody in two repeated sections, upon which the composer then builds three variations. Here there is no dramatic trajectory, no surprise lying in wait; instead we contemplate a celestial object, turning it over in our hands, each facet revealing a more ornate and lovely aspect than the last.

In the Minuet, we are treated to a masterclass in Haydn's love for the irregular phrase length, one of his favorite tools for teasing the listener. Instead of "normal" phrases of four bars or eight bars, reassuring in their balance and predictability, he treats us to phrases of five, nine, six and six bars, always stopping early or going on for too long. By the time he relents and closes the section with two eight-bar phrases, we are so befuddled that even they don't sound like regular periods. On top of that, the music itself is funny, feisty, and full of clucking, repeated 8th-note commentary. The middle Trio section, by contrast, is in the major key, and is all sweetness and light, as if to soothe us and apologize for all the antics of the main section.

The Finale is brilliant and pugnacious, again strongly recalling the last movement to Haydn's earlier quartet in the same key. With its Gypsy flavor, it features brilliant fiddling, insistent rhythm and a fiery temperament. At one point the first violin is asked to play an entire phrase on his lowest string, which evokes an earthy virtuosity. Also in abundant evidence is the composer's fondness for stopping the music dead in its tracks, and resuming after a silence as it tries to figure out where to go next. Late in the movement, in a moment of euphoria, the music shifts to B major, and it seems as if we will end with a big party; but, ever devious, Haydn lets the violins dance away, ever softer up the stairs, finally closing the bedroom door *pianissimo*.

Note by Misha Amory