Emerson String Quartet, January 16, 2003

Notes on the Program

FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN
Born March 31, 1732, Rohrau
Died May 31, 1809, Vienna

String Quartet in G Minor, Opus 20, No. 3

In 1772 Haydn composed the six quartets that he would publish as his Opus 20, but listeners should not for an instant be fooled by that low opus number-these quartets are the work of an experienced composer. When he wrote them, Haydn was 40 years old, he had been kapellmeister to the Esterhazy for over a decade, and he had composed nearly fifty symphonies. The string quartet had begun as an entertainment form, usually as a multi-movement work of light character intended as background music at social occasions. The original title of this form-*divertimento*-made clear that this music was intended as a diversion. Haydn in fact published the six quartets of his Opus 20 under the title *Divertimenti*, but he had already transformed the string quartet. No longer was it entertainment music content to remain in the background-Haydn made it a concise form, capable of an unusual range of expression. He reduced the number of movements to four, liberated all four voices (particularly the cello), and built the music around taut motivic development. The evolution of the form, though, was not simply a matter of newly-refined technique-it was also a matter of new depth of expression. Haydn brought to his Opus 20 all his recent growth as a composer (some have heard the influence of his symphonic thinking in this music), and these quartets demonstrate a level of dramatic tension far removed the form's original entertainment function. The *String Quartet in G Minor* is a very serious piece of music: its minor tonality is one indication of this, as is the fact that three of its four movements are in sonata form. Throughout this music runs an unusual level of tension, an atmosphere heightened by the fact that all four movements end quietly.

Haydn marks the opening movement *Allegro con spirito*, and spirited it certainly is, with the animated line leaping between the four voices at the opening-this interplay of four voices will mark the entire quartet. The development is terse-Haydn compresses his ideas into motivic fragments and their development feels lean rather than melodic; after all this energy, the quiet ending is particularly effective. The minuet stays in G minor, and a level of tension informs this dance. The trio-in E-flat major-feels like a ray of sunshine cutting through the chill mists of the minuet, and Haydn makes a characteristic decision here-the melodic interest is in the three lower voices, while the first violin weaves an amiable texture of steady eighth-notes above them. The *Poco Adagio* is the one movement not in G minor (it is in G major), and it is an unusually long movement-even if the repeat is not taken, it is still the longest movement in the quartet. Textures are somewhat fuller here, and while the music turns dark in the course of the development, this remains a melodic and attractive movement. There are many nice little touches along the way, including an extended brilliant passage for cello (its liberation from the old accompaniment role is clear) and some nice attention to sound when Haydn contrasts the quite different sonorities of open and closed D's in the second violin part. The finale, marked *Allegro molto*, returns to the mood and manner (and key) of the opening movement, with taut contrapuntal textures and spirited interplay between the four voices. After all this virtuosity, the ending is terrific: the dynamic grows quiet, and it is the (fully-liberated) cello that draws this quartet to its close on murmured bits of the movement's opening theme.

String Quartet in D Major, Opus 76, No. 5

Haydn composed the six string quartets of his Opus 76 in 1796?7, shortly after returning from the second of his wildly successful visits to London. At age 65, he was nearing an important turning point in his life: soon he would turn away from instrumental music entirely and devote the rest of his life to vocal music. Behind him now were all 104 of his symphonies, and he was close to the end of the cycle of his string quartets-the present quartet is the 79th of his 83 quartets. Even as he wrote these last quartets he was beginning work on his oratorio *The Creation.*

The Opus 76 quartets-sometimes nicknamed the "Erdödy Quartets" after the man who commissioned them, Count Joseph Erdödy-include some of Haydn's most famous, among them those nicknamed "Emperor," "Sunrise," and "Fifths." While the fifth of the cycle, in D major, lacks a nickname, it shows some unusual technical features. As might be expected, it also shows the consummate mastery of a composer who had spent a lifetime transforming the string quartet into one of the greatest of all musical forms. Particularly striking is the structure of the first movement. Haydn had for many years experimented with building sonata-form movements on just one theme, but here he goes even further, dividing the movement into two parts-each at a different tempo-yet using the same theme. The quartet opens with a lengthy *Allegretto*, based on the violin's graceful opening melody. Hardly has this had a chance to unfold when the music slips suddenly into D minor, and the cello now has the theme beneath the first violin's complicated embellishments. The music grows turbulent, then just as unexpectedly moves back into the D?major sunshine of the beginning. Only at this point does Haydn launch the *Allegro*, itself based on the opening melody, but this section (the first movement proper) is extremely short, almost abrupt.

The unusual length of the slow movement gives it central importance. It also has a distinctive marking-Haydn stresses that he wants it to sound "Singing and sad"-but even more remarkable is the key signature, for Haydn sets the movement in the unusual key of F-sharp major. This is another monothematic movement, based on the violin's dotted opening melody. The minuet is more conventional, though the expansive D-major minuet gives way to the tense mutterings of a trio in D minor. Some have heard the rustic music of village bands in the finale, marked *Presto*, but Haydn transforms this material into a sonata-form movement of unusual polish. Particularly impressive here are the range of the writing (the first violin part is extremely high for a string quartet) and Haydn's deft use of silences to contrast with the cheerful thrust of this lively music.

The Seven Last Words of Christ

Haydn may have claimed that his thirty years as kapellmeister to the Esterhazy princes forced him to work in isolation, but from that quiet isolation his fame spread steadily across Europe. One of the clearest signs of this came in 1784 when Haydn received a handsome commission from Paris for six symphonies, and he worked on these *"Paris" Symphonies* (Nos. 82-87) during the years 1785-86. At exactly this same moment came an even more remarkable commission. A Spanish cleric wrote to Haydn to ask for music to accompany the reading-on Good Friday, 1787-of the seven final statements of Christ on the cross.

Haydn rarely commented on his music, but in 1801 he recalled the circumstances of this work's creation, and it is worth quoting him at length:

"About fifteen years ago I was requested by a canon of Cadíz to compose instrumental music on the Seven Words of Jesus on the Cross. It was the custom of the Cathedral of Cadíz to produce an oratorio every year during Lent, the effect of the performance being not a little enhanced by the following circumstances. The walls, windows, and pillars of the church were hung with black cloth, and only a large lamp, hanging from the center of the roof, broke the solemn obscurity. At midday, the doors were closed and the ceremony began. After an appropriate prelude, the bishop ascended the pulpit, pronounced one of the Seven Words and delivered a discourse thereon. This ended, he left the pulpit and knelt prostrate before the altar. This pause was filled with music. The bishop then in like manner pronounced the second word, then the third, and so on, the orchestra falling in at the conclusion of the discourse."

It should further be noted that the Good Friday observances in Cadiz took place not in the cathedral but in the Chapel of Santa Cueva, a cave carved in a hillside beneath the cathedral, so this music was first performed in a profound darkness.

Haydn wrote this set of musical meditations for large orchestra (one that included four horns and timpani), and it was performed in Cadíz on April 6, 1787. But it a telling indication of the fame of the 55-year-old composer that it was performed almost simultaneously in both Vienna and Bonn; in fact, those two performances took place at the end of March and so preceded the Cadíz ceremony (and it is likely that one of the performers in the Bonn orchestra was

a 16-year-old violist named Beethoven). Alert to the commercial possibilities of this music, Haydn quickly arranged it for string quartet-the version heard on this program-and oversaw its transcription for solo piano; some years later-in 1796 as he was beginning work on his oratorios-he made a further arrangement for soloists, chorus, and expanded orchestra. He regarded *The Seven Last Words of Christ* as one of the greatest successes he ever had as a composer, and he conducted it at his last public performance, in 1803.

There is no question about Haydn's devout Catholic faith: he inscribed the words *Laus Deo* ("Praise God") at the end of the manuscripts of all of his symphonies. But while he welcomed this commission, he found it a challenge, noting that "it was not an easy matter to compose seven Adagios to last ten minutes each, and follow one after the other without fatiguing the listener . . ." Uncertain how to proceed, he consulted his friend, the Abbé Maximilian Stadler, who suggested building the main theme of each movement on the rhythm of its Latin text, and this proved a useful procedure.

Haydn said of *The Seven Last Words*: "Each [movement], or rather each setting of the text, is expressed only by instrumental music, but in such a way that it creates the most profound impression on even the most inexperienced listener." The challenge for him as a composer was to capture the spirit of these solemn words and to create music suitable for meditation on each of them, yet still to engage a listener's interest across the span of seven slow movements. He addressed the last of these in several ways: by making sharp contrasts between the character of the movements (some are lyric and lamenting, others dramatic), by varying keys effectively, and by contrasting sonorities-muting the strings for one movement, using pizzicato at other points. Haydn frames these seven slow movements with contrasted outer movements. He establishes a suitably solemn atmosphere with an *Introduction* in D minor that he marks *Maestoso ed Adagio*, and he concludes with a musical depiction of the earthquake that rocked Calvary after the crucifixion. At last we have a fast movement-it is marked *Presto e con tutta la forza*-and it brings *The Seven Last Words* to a conclusion that is satisfying both emotionally and musically.

Haydn's arrangement of this orchestral music for string quartet is particularly successful, and the music is most often heard today in this version. At the time he made this transcription, he had already written 43 of his 83 string quartets, and the music is beautifully conceived for the four instruments in this version. The seven meditative movements do not really require detailed description. Each is in sonata form, which allows Haydn the scope to develop the implications of his opening theme, much as a meditation expands on its fundamental idea. These movements do not offer scene-painting, but instead are emotional correlatives to the words of the dying Christ, and listeners might best approach them as did the listeners at the first performance in Cadíz: by reading the text of each movement and being aware of it as they listen to Haydn's musical response.

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