Album Notes by Kai Christiansen for Naxos Records

1799 quietly witnessed a great turning point in the history of the string quartet. With Mozart gone, both an elderly Haydn and a young Beethoven were simultaneously working on a new set of string quartets: Haydn's last and Beethoven's first. On this noteworthy "passing of the baton", the composers shared a common patron. A young Price Lobkowitz commissioned both composers around the same time. Beethoven's Op. 18 was published at the end of 1801, Haydn's Op. 77 in early 1802. It is no surprise that Haydn's last quartets are often called "Beethovenian" just as Beethoven's first quartets may be called "Haydnesque." Together, they comprise a great high-water mark of the mature Viennese style before Beethoven's middle period expansion. And just as Beethoven's quartets are "early", hewing close to Haydn as a model, Haydn's final quartets represent his own most modern, consolidated and polished efforts in the form with many forward looking aspects.

The most curious (and unanswered) question regarding this historical moment is whether they knew of each other's latest work. There is evidence to suggest that Haydn may have heard a performance of some of Beethoven's Op. 18 quartets as he was in the midst of working on the Op. 77 set. Some have even speculated that Haydn thereby stopped composing quartets, essentially bowing out of the competition with this new young composer from Bonn. Others suggest that Haydn was busy, tired and possibly ill. Either way, it is a mystery why Op. 77 contains only two quartets rather than Haydn's characteristic grouping of three or six to a set. It seems unlikely that Beethoven knew of Haydn's quartets. One might just say they emerged separately, in parallel.

Haydn's Op. 77, no 1 in G major is quite simply a brilliant quartet. The fluid diversity of textures is a hallmark of Haydn and the Viennese style. Dazzling counterpoint is juxtaposed with homophony and even dramatic unisons. Virtuosic *concertante* solos are soon echoed by call and response interactions that formalize into canons and long harmonic sequences for elegant skeins of interchange evoking the late Baroque. The composite effect demonstrates that unique style so famously called conversational.

The opening movement is a robust, definitive sonata form with the two-beat drive of a march and the three-beat perpetual motion of a dance. As in multiple places throughout the quartet, the cello rises in repartee with the first fiddle for some of the most independent part writing to date. This is one of the most elaborate of Haydn's sonatas complete with multiple themes, an adventurous development section, a recapitulation full of fresh innovations and even a small coda. The elaborate polyphony bounding with energy makes for a showcase of both technique and bravado character.

The slow movement is almost the polar opposite. Vocal models prevail from the opening unisons, to four-part chorale, to the accompanied cantilena for first violin to the nearly operatic duet for violin and cello. On the surface, the form appears to be another sonata with all its requisite sections, but, typical of Haydn's endless imagination, the form is relaxed and rhapsodic in the manner of a fantasy. A recurring refrain suggests a rondo but the character equally evokes a da capo aria in a simple song form. Sweet and beautiful as so many of Haydn's lyrical slow movements, it broaches deeper emotions that might best be called a noble melancholy

punctuated by some startling outbursts of anguish, a bit of Sturm und Drang surfacing even here at the end of Haydn's quartet journey. One is tempted to call this Haydn's most "Schubertian" vein, if, in fact, it were not Haydn himself doing it first.

The Scherzo finds Haydn ever toying with his fascination for the transformed minuet here with the verve and pace of a true "Beethovenian" scherzo though it is clear that Haydn got there first. A leaping, syncopated line may have found its inspiration in Hungarian folk music and its soaring energy propels the violin into the stratospheric range of the instrument. A trio intensifies the rhythmic bustle with husky tremolos, abrupt dynamics and a more frantic kind of folk dance in a rather surprising key of E-flat major.

With the finale, Haydn writes his third sonata form of the quartet, this time, a "monothematic" sonata with but one theme as the vehicle for otherwise harmonic changes. The "theme" is barely a scrap of a tune that, in conjunction with all the so-called themes of the quartet, reiterates the Viennese emphasis on the motif rather than melody. The driving rhythms of both the first movement and the scherzo here boil into a true dash of perpetual motion that humorously stalls and disassembles with a playfulness so characteristic of Haydn's finales and so influential on Beethoven. The finale features long stretches of canonic writing in yet another texture: the violins against the viola and cello, the reinforced parts strengthening the canonic play with a unified might.

As James Keller has observed, the first and last movements even hint at Mendelssohn with his nervous splendor. In summary, this "late" work of Haydn's shows absolutely no diminution of craft, creativity or energy. Apparently as a conscious choice, Haydn chose to quit on a high note leaving yet another exemplar of a genre he largely invented and surely perfected.