

## **Joseph Haydn, String Quartet in G Major Op. 77/1**

Haydn's reputation as the 'father' of the string quartet reflects not only his extraordinary productivity – he wrote now fewer than 68 quartets, as well as a number of quartet arrangements – but also his pivotal place in music in music history. When Haydn was born, Bach and Vivaldi were still in their prime and by the time he died 77 years later, the Romantic era was being ushered in by Beethoven. Spanning nearly half a century, Haydn's quartets encapsulate his artistic development. The earliest quartets, dating from the mid to late 1750's, are closely related to the popular string sonatas, sinfonias and divertimentos of the time. In these works, the cello was still largely confined to continuo-style harmonic accompaniment, but in Haydn's hands, both the bass line and the two inner voices became increasingly independent. Over the years, he gradually worked out a style in which all four instruments were equal partners, thus laying the foundation for the quartets of Mozart and Beethoven.

Op. 77, comprising two quartets, was Haydn's swan song in the genre. Composed in 1799, they were commissioned by Prince Joseph Lobkowitz, Vienna's leading patron of the arts. These final quartets represent Haydn's most modern, consolidated and polished efforts in the form with many forward-looking aspects.

The opening movement of Op. 77 No. 1 begins with a buoyancy that well reflects Haydn's lifelong pursuits of balance, order and proportion. The symmetry of form and tautness of the musical language reflect years of mastery of the medium of the quartet. Humour, so characteristic of Haydn's individual voice, is never very far from the surface. As in multiple places throughout the quartet, the cello rises in repartee with the first violin for some of the most independent part writing to date. The elaborate polyphony, bounding with energy, makes for a showcase of both technique and bravado character.

The slow movement is an extreme contrast. The form is relaxed and rhapsodic in the manner of a fantasy. Sweet and beautiful as so many of Haydn's lyrical slow movements are, it is at the same time solemn and dignified. An element of melancholy and some startling outbursts of anguish suggest 'Sturm und Drang' being played out here at the end of Haydn's quartet journey. The broad E flat major theme is shared by all four instruments in unison to start with, but Haydn shows a decided partiality for the first violin, whose part becomes increasingly soloistic.

The mood swings back into high gear with the third movement, Menuetto. Marked 'Presto', it explodes with vim and vigour. Such a departure from the traditionally slower minuet-trio was new for the music scene at the time, attesting to the fact that Haydn in his late career was still open to innovation, offering new ideas that would influence composers such as Beethoven and Schubert. A scherzo movement in all but name, this movement is arguably the most vigorous and robust of all classical minuets, rushing along at virtually one beat to the bar. Its music blends virtuoso violin writing with equal interest in the other string parts. A leaping, syncopated line may have found its inspiration in Hungarian folk music as its soaring energy propels the violin into the stratospheric range of the instrument. A central trio section shows no less intensity with its jaunty propulsive rhythms, tremolos and abrupt dynamics in a frantic kind of folk dance.

The last movement is one of Haydn's exuberant gypsy finales. Based on a single theme, derived entirely from the first four bars, it features a canonic texture with long stretches of the violins playing against the viola and cello. It is said to contain echoes of a Croatian round dance that Haydn knew from his youth. The first movement, too, incorporates traces of Eastern European folk music. Its march theme has been linked with an old Hungarian recruiting song. It is worth noting that in this splendid late Haydn quartet, memories of youth combine with his mature mastery of composition.

**Program notes kindly prepared by Elizabeth Dalton.**