

Emerson String Quartet

September 28, 2008

Haydn, String Quartet in F Major, Op. 74, no. 2

Soon after Haydn returned from his first journey to England in 1792, he began making preparations for a second English tour. Besides a new set of symphonies, the composer began to prepare music for piano and chamber music. The usual offering was a set of six works, and so he produced six string quartets. Owing to the whims of later publishers these first appeared in print divided into two groups of three works under the opus numbers 71 and 74. However, it had been Haydn's intention to keep these together. The six quartets were dedicated to Count Anton Apponyi, who had exclusive use of them for a time and who would later become a patron of Haydn's *Creation*.

In London, presenting chamber music publicly was common, in the manner of symphony concerts. Thus, intended for the concert hall, Haydn's Op. 71/74 quartets maintain a certain extroversion rarely found in his earlier chamber music. In the F Major Quartet, this quasi-symphonic style is clear in the first measures, which form a brief introductory flourish and introduce the movement's only principal theme. The movement itself is a masterful example of monothematic sonata form, where the single theme keeps recurring, including as a substitute for a second theme. Remarkably, Haydn puts this simple little theme through its paces in the development section, sometimes utilizing its ideas in brief contrapuntal passages. Amazingly, the recapitulation section of the little theme is fresh sounding.

In Classical-period tradition, *Andantes* are more lightweight than *Adagios*, and this *Andante grazioso* is no exception. "Ingratifying" might be the word to describe it. Engaging and always easy to follow, the movement must have been written to make a favorable impression on first hearing — a talent for which Haydn (and few others) could call up at will.

The Menuetto is not striking for its melodic ideas, but it is strongly rhythmically, reminding us that, after all, the minuet was a dance. The central Trio section side-slips into another key, and its texture contrasts with the main section by being smooth, serious, and sustained. The return of the main minuet section may sound folk-like by comparison.

Part of Haydn's genius was that he could find seemingly endless good ideas, using only the first five notes of a major scale. Such minimalism is the basis for the dominating theme of the *Presto* finale. In contrast, the composer later flirts briefly with darker musical ideas. The playful main theme triumphs, however, in a frothy, applause-getting ending.

Program Notes by Dr. Michael Fink
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Prokofiev, String Quartet No. 1, Op. 50

We are most used to hearing such music by Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) as *Romeo and Juliet*, the *Lt. Kije Suite*, *The Fifth Symphony*, or the later piano sonatas. Those works were products of the repatriated Prokofiev who sought to reach a wide audience and satisfy Soviet authorities. However, there was an earlier Prokofiev, the expatriate with a home base in Paris. This was the Prokofiev of *The Fiery Angel*, the *Second to Fourth Symphonies*, and works that show the “primitive” fallout from the earlier *Scythian Suite*, *Sarcasms*, etc. The composer resided outside the USSR nearly 20 years, during which time his music was often a little rebellious, a little tinged with French neo-Classicism, and a bit influenced by his fellow expatriate, Igor Stravinsky.

The impetus for composing the *First Quartet* came during a tour of the United States in 1930. Here, the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation of the Library of Congress commissioned him to write, specifically, a string quartet. As a composer, Prokofiev was not attracted naturally to chamber music, his output being a mere handful of works. However, he accepted with good grace and produced his *First Quartet* with diligence. In April 1931, the Brosa Quartet gave the premiere at the Library of Congress.

In preparation, he even made a study of Beethoven’s quartets. “That is the source of the rather ‘classical’ language of the quartet’s first section,” Prokofiev later said. Actually, that section — with its squarish-sardonic theme and propulsive accompaniment — is more typically Prokofiev than what follows. The torso of this loose sonata-form is reminiscent of late Beethoven quartets: heavily contrapuntal, broadly developmental of a few short themes, and deadly serious. Here is the intellectual side of Prokofiev we rarely hear.

At the opening of the second movement, Prokofiev tricks us into thinking it will all be slow. However, after a few moments it turns out to be the quartet’s “scherzo,” a big, A-B-A structure, somewhat polyphonic like the first movement. The “A” section’s scurrying quality is a foil for its catchy violin theme. Imperceptibly, the rhythm turns to triplet motion for the B (Trio) section. Here, the music is more ingratiating and traditional. The breathless A section returns to bring closure.

The *Andante* promised in the foregoing movement is delivered fully in the finale. Here is the most emotionally intense portion of the quartet, where Prokofiev is at last completely at home in his contrapuntal language. This comes across most clearly in the frequent dialogues between high and low instruments. A movingly rich harmonic palette also pervades the movement. Soviet critics later deemed the *Andante* to be “a peculiarly Russian Romantic

introspection,” interpreted as the composer’s longing to return to his homeland. Quite possibly that was the case, for in a few short years, Prokofiev did repatriate to Russia.

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FRANZ SCHUBERT, Quartet in D Minor, D. 810 “Death and the Maiden”

Schubert’s “Death and the Maiden” opens with a terse descending triplet figure, hammered into the listener’s consciousness by two fortissimo statements followed by a shuddering, groping pianissimo in the first violin. The triplet figure is so prevalent throughout the first movement, so obsessively reiterated with such stark contrasts of dynamics and mood that it takes on the weight and portent of a fate motive.

Schubert the long-lined melodist, evident in the lyrical second theme, is subordinated here to a Beethovenian determination to extract every ounce of expressive potential from the ubiquitous triplet motive. The second movement is a set of variations on a somber chorale, taken from a song written several years earlier about a shilling confrontation between a young girl and an allegorical death figure. The G minor chorale and all the variations but one end in G major, signifying the rest, the relief from life’s woes and travails that Death offers the Maiden. The quiet but powerful pull toward G major, the seductive, paradoxical allure of Death as antidote to turbulence and terror is expanded, amplified at the end of the movement; even the opening measure of the chorale, not just the cadence, are heard in the major mode. The angular, tightly coiled Scherzo catapults us back to D minor and the world of conflict; the tense atmosphere is only momentarily relieved by a sweet, tranquil Trio section in D major, whose long melodic lines have a lilting, waltz-like underpinning. The finale is a tarantella, a dance of death in which the first movement’s triplet motive reappears first as part of the second theme, then throughout a transitional passage and finally as the essential building-block of a diabolical sassy third theme played by the first violin over the tarantella as accompanist. The headlong rush of this movement towards the final prestissimo builds an electrifying conclusion to the whole work, whose visceral impact is heightened by motivic coherence and compelling structural unity.

Program notes by Eugene Drucker / Emerson String Quartet