

## Two Quartets from Haydn's Opus 55

### FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN

Born: 1732

Died: 1809

SEATTLE  
CHAMBER  
MUSIC  
SOCIETY

Haydn had written forty string quartets by the time of his fiftieth birthday in 1782, but at that point he set the form aside for several years. Over the next few years he wrote twenty symphonies, including the splendid "*Paris*" *Symphonies*, but only one quartet. Then in 1788 he returned to the string quartet with renewed energy: over the next two years he composed twelve quartets. Haydn wrote the three string quartets of his Opus 55 during the summer of 1788, at exactly the same moment when—a few miles away in Vienna—his good friend Mozart was composing his final three symphonies.

Haydn dedicated the Opus 55 quartets to Johann Tost, who served as the principal second violinist in the Esterhazy orchestra between 1783 and 1788. Tost left the orchestra, married a wealthy widow, and set himself up as a successful cloth merchant in Vienna. Haydn's dedication of this set "To the Wholesaler Tost" is a wry comment on his friend's change of fortunes (and perhaps reflects a touch of envy on the composer's behalf). At this point Tost was about to leave on a trip to Paris, and Haydn entrusted the manuscript of six of his new string quartets (his Opus 54 and 55) to Tost, asking him to find a publisher for them in Paris. This Tost did, and Seiber published these quartets in Paris in June 1789, just weeks before the storming of the Bastille and the beginning of the French Revolution.

#### **String Quartet in A Major, Op. 55, No. 1, Hob. III:60**

The *Allegro* of the *String Quartet in A Major* gets off to a bold beginning with a firm, rising statement from the first violin, and this contrasts nicely with the more flowing second subject. The development is quite active, with much of the writing in brilliant triplets that leap between the instruments.

Haydn specifies that the beginning of the *Adagio cantabile* should be played *dolce*, and he makes an interesting choice by having the first violin sit out opening eight measures and allowing the second violin to offer the first statement of the movement's primary theme. The movement is in rondo form, with that melody making several welcome returns. Some of the episodes along the way have a sharp chromatic tension, and as those tensions mount, Haydn writes out a cadenza for the four players in octaves, a cadenza that disappears on an expectant trill.

The third movement is a spirited *Menuetto*; the second violin leads the way into the trio section as the first violin decorates the melodic line with some very high staccato writing. The finale is in rondo form, and it bursts with exhilarating energy—Haydn specifies that it should be played *Vivace*, and the entire movement whips past in just over two minutes. At its center, the sparkling rondo tune gives way to a taut fugato before that pleasing tune returns to lead the quartet to its sunny conclusion.

### **String Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 55, No. 3, Hob. III:62**

One of the things that distinguishes the *Quartet in B-flat Major* is how chromatic Haydn's writing is. The title may say "B-flat Major," and the key signature may have the two flats of that key, but Haydn throws in so many "wrong" notes for that key that this music often feels harmonically unstable. Even as he presents the opening theme, it includes an E-natural, an A-flat, a B-natural and even an F-sharp, all "wrong" for B-flat major, and the surprising sting of those "wrong" notes gives this music much of its pleasing piquancy. Haydn builds the movement almost exclusively on this opening theme, and it is a mark of the concentration of his writing that rather than bringing that theme back literally in the recapitulation, he continues to develop it right into the movement's final bars.

The *Adagio ma non troppo* is in theme-and-variation form, based on its ornate opening melody. As in the just-performed *Quartet in A Major*, the second violin is often given a leading role here, which the first violin decorates. One more measure of the concentration of this quartet: the final variation is presented in canon just before the coda.

Haydn rounds things off with two spirited movements. The *Menuetto* features a trio section built on flowing triplets, and the *Presto* finale goes like a rocket. It is built on an almost non-stop rush of sixteenth-notes, but this breathless rush of sixteenths is briefly interrupted by a second theme that dances agilely along the 6/8 meter. This music is shot full of a happy energy that continues through the firm concluding measures.

## String Quartet in A Major, Opus 41, No. 3

### ROBERT SCHUMANN

Born: 1810

Died: 1856

Schumann's marriage to the young Clara Wieck in 1840 set off a great burst of creativity, and curiously he seemed to change genres by year: 1840 produced an outpouring of song, 1841 symphonic works, and 1842 chamber music. During the winter of 1842, Schumann had begun to think about composing string quartets. Clara was gone on a month-long concert tour to Copenhagen in April, and though he suffered an anxiety attack in her absence Schumann used that time to study the quartets of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. His wife's return to Leipzig restored the composer's spirits, and he quickly composed the three string quartets of his Opus 41 in June and July of that year; later that summer he wrote his *Piano Quartet* and *Piano Quintet*. Writing string quartets presented special problems for the pianist-composer. The string quartets are his only chamber works without piano, and—cut off from the familiar resources of his own instrument—he struggled to write just for strings. Though he returned to writing chamber music later in his career, Schumann never again wrote a string quartet.

The *Quartet in A Major*, composed quickly between July 8 and 22, is regarded as the finest of the set and shows many of those original touches that mark Schumann's best music. The first movement opens with a very brief (seven-measure) slow introduction marked *Andante espressivo*. The first violin's falling fifth at the very beginning will become the thematic "seed" for much of the movement: that same falling fifth opens the main theme at the *Allegro molto moderato* and also appears as part of the second subject, introduced by the cello over syncopated accompaniment. Schumann's markings for these two themes suggest the character of the movement: *sempre teneramente* ("always tenderly") and *espressivo*. Schumann's procedures in this movement are a little unusual: the development treats only the first theme, and the second does not reappear until the recapitulation. The movement fades into silence on the cello's *pianissimo* falling fifth.

The second movement brings more originality. Marked *Assai agitato* ("Very agitated"), it is a theme-and-variation movement, but with a difference: it begins cryptically—with an off-the-beat main idea in 3/8 meter—and only after three variations does Schumann present the actual theme, now marked *Un poco Adagio*. A further variation and flowing coda bring the movement to a quiet close. The *Adagio molto* opens peacefully with the soaring main idea in the first violin. More insistent secondary material arrives over dotted

rhythms, and the music grows harmonically complex before pulsing dotted rhythms draw the movement to a close.

Out of the quiet, the rondo-finale bursts to life with a main idea so vigorous that it borders on the aggressive. This is an unusually long movement. Contrasting interludes (including a lovely, Bach-like gavotte) provide relief along the way, but the insistent dotted rhythms of the rondo tune always return to pound their way into a listener's consciousness and finally to propel the quartet to its exuberant close.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger