

Haydn

String Quartet, Opus 50, Number 4

A compositional gap of seven years (except for Opus 42) marked the distance between Haydn's quartets of Opus 33 and Opus 50. The new quartets are differentiated by a maturity of form, tighter construction (not an extraneous note to be found), and increase in overall scale.

In 1787 this set of six string quartets, was dedicated to Friedrich Wilhelm II, King of Prussia, who was a fine musician (flautist and cellist) and composer. For years, he had been a great fan of Haydn, and once had sent the composer a diamond ring as a thank you for Haydn's gift of scores of his Paris Symphonies. Legend has it that Haydn enjoyed the ring, and wore it "when composing important compositions." Maybe he wore it while writing Opus 50?

Sometimes Opus 50 has been considered his "most difficult quartets" but they are nonetheless rich with invention, beautiful themes, and audience appeal. One of the most interesting components is that number four contains his last fugue for strings.

Opus 50, No. 4 begins with a snappy Allegro spiritoso in 3/4 meter. Haydn immediately reiterates three

staccato eighth notes before outlining an F-sharp minor triad, marked forte. Immediately thereafter he moves to a delicate repeat of the eighth note/quarter gesture in the first violin, a repetitive feature which will preside over the first movement. After the presentation, the string quartet moves into a spree of repetitions of this idea before Haydn accelerates the pace, especially in the inner parts, while still allowing the first violin to be the main speaker. A related second idea is announced with small syncopations, in A major, before the exposition closes. The development enters fortissimo: opening exactly like the beginning, but now the texture is thickened with constant sixteenth note passage work, shared by all except the cello, and lots of imitation. Haydn moves into F sharp major for a traditional recapitulation, with the secondary idea having a quiet last word.

The second movement, Andante, opens with a gentle, lyrical idea, marked “dolce... p” in A major. This theme is repeated three times, interspersed with florid writings, and an especially beautiful imitative section in A minor, before his to final re-statement of the opening theme, now played fortissimo. The Andante is solidly anchored by a final A major chord.

A small, stately Minuetto marked poco allegretto moves into third place. Like the first movement, Haydn herein selects a single rhythmic feature to provide continuity and logic. The music opens with a jolly forte, displaying this seminal building block: four sixteenths

followed by quarter notes, a pattern which will grow into a fortissimo section with all players moving together in tandem. A recall of the opening prefaces the trio.

The delicate trio shifts to soft dynamics. It provides a variant of the preceding rhythmic germ: quite simply, the opening set of sixteenth notes is followed by greater spacing in the subsequent quarter notes. In the corpus of the trio, all instruments take turns proclaiming the novelty in close imitation. Listen for the staccato articulations which provide lightness, occasional syncopations marked by wider intervals (hops between notes) which add a sprightly nature. Per tradition, the first section is repeated.

The last movement presents a four-voiced fugue, introduced by the cello in 6/8 meter. Its subject enters in ascending order of the instruments. The tail of the subject provides material for the first episode, with each instrument having several turns with it. Then, reiteration of the entire fugal subject comes in exactly as the opening. Haydn now allows the fugue to gain in dynamic heat before a sudden depression on the final page with a drop to piano (soft) dynamics. At the end, Haydn provides a surprise. Three piano (soft) bars introduce three consecutive sets of rolling sixteenths, moving placidly, it seems, toward a peaceful destination. Not so!!! The last sixteenth set suddenly jumps into fortissimo iteration with an abrupt, snappy, pizzicato ending.

