

Programme Note by Chris Darwin: please use freely for non-commercial purposes

Josef Haydn (1732-1809) String Quartet in B \flat Op 76 no 4 (1797)

Allegro con spirito

Adagio

Menuetto: Allegro

Finale: Allegro, ma non troppo

In 1795 Haydn returned from his spectacularly successful visits to England to the relatively light duties prescribed by the new Esterházy Prince Nikolaus II. Nikolaus had abandoned his father's palace at Esterházy, sacking its extensive musical establishment, and divided his time between Eisenstadt and Vienna. Haydn was kept on, but his main duty was just to write a Mass for the Princess's name day. He was free to accept other commissions.

One such came from Count Joseph Erdödy, the Hungarian Court Chancellor. Although Erdödy's father had employed an orchestra to play in their family's three palaces, the son, on inheriting the title in 1789 responded both to contemporary taste and financial stringency by replacing it with a string quartet. In 1796 he placed a generous commission with Haydn for six quartets. The resulting 'Erdödy' quartets are a triumph, perhaps the pinnacle of Haydn's long quartet-writing career.

The fourth of the set, nicknamed '*The Sunrise*', dawns gently in a simple B \flat chord from the three lower strings. The first violin's theme cautiously rises, with no suggestion of the movement's *Allegro con spirito* marking. After 20-odd bars light floods in, somewhat reminiscent of the opening of '*The Creation*' on which Haydn was working at the time, and the spirit is freed in dancing semiquavers. The opening chord returns in F but now with the theme in the cello curving down, rather than rising. The movement develops the contrast between these ideas.

The *Adagio* is one of Haydn's most profound. Its pausing, hesitantly rising opening recalls, in slow-motion, the start of the first movement. The first



violin's rapt meditation is intensified by closely overlapping entries of this opening phrase.

The *Menuetto* is rustic rather than courtly, and its lines again recall the gentle rise of the opening sunrise. The *Trio* is linked through from the *Menuetto* by a held chord on the cello and viola, again recalling the work's opening.

The last movement's structure starts like that of this evening's first quartet, with alternating major-minor episodes, but after the reprise of the major section Haydn puts his foot on the accelerator, *Più allegro*, *Più presto*, an exhilarating race to the finish.