

Programme notes by Chris Darwin: Use freely for non-commercial purposes

Josef Haydn (1732-1809) String Quartet in E flat Op 33 no 2 'The Joke' (1781)

Allegro moderato

Scherzo: Allegro

Largo e sostenuto

Finale: Presto

In the course of the five years from 1768 to 1772, Haydn published three sets of quartets, the Op 9, 17 and 20, in which the older Divertimento form evolved into the true string quartet with free and independent parts. The exercise of manufacturing over a hundred Trios for viola, cello and Prince Esterhazy's baryton during the previous decade had schooled Haydn in writing for individual string parts without an accompanying harpsichord. This technical facility, his extraordinary structural genius, and the continued maturing of his creative powers happily came together to produce in the Op 20 quartets six works of revolutionary genius.

But then Haydn wrote no more quartets for a decade, until the Op 33 set of six in 1781. Probably all his energies were used directing the music for 50 operas (5 his own compositions) and various marionette productions at the Esterhazy palace. In 1779 the Prince engaged a lively young singer, Luigia Polzelli, with whom Haydn developed a passionate relationship. Whether she served as a stimulus or a distraction, or even both is not known, but by 1780, energy flowed back into his symphonies and Haydn started to compose string quartets again. He announced the Op 33 set to potential subscribers as "brand new à quadro ... written in a new and special way, for I have not composed any for ten years". This advert was maybe a bit of a come-on to revive the market, but the new set are altogether more relaxed and confident than the Op 20s. They have jokey scherzi rather than minuets, less "Sturm und Drang", more major than minor and a variety of different finale forms replacing Op 20's intellectual fugues.

Commissioned by the publisher Artaria, the Op 33 "Russian" quartets are dedicated to Paul, Grand Duke of Russia, son and heir to Catherine the Great. He and his musically cultured Prussian wife Maria Feodorovna visited Vienna in 1781 at the start of a 14-month tour of Europe, travelling under the pseudonym of the Count and Countess Severny. Many of these six quartets were premiered in the duchess's apartment in Vienna on Christmas Day 1781.

The Op 33 set appeared in Vienna just as the 26 year-old Mozart arrived there in pursuit of a freelance career. The 49-year-old Haydn's new quartets catalysed Mozart into taking seriously the writing of more quartets of his own, resulting in the famous set of six quartets that he dedicated to Haydn. Fortunately Haydn was not disheartened by Mozart's genius, but generously acknowledged it and in turn was prompted to more quartet invention. They played quartets together, spelling each other on violin and viola. Now *that* is where I would have liked to have been a fly on the wall !

