

Josef Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in C, Op 33 No 3 (The Bird)

Allegro moderato

Scherzo: Allegretto

Adagio non troppo

Finale: Rondo Presto

Haydn was the father of the string quartet. In the course of the five years from 1768 to 1772, his 40th year, he published three sets of quartets the Op 9, 17 and 20, in which the older Divertimento form evolves into the true string quartet with free and independent parts. The exercise of manufacturing no less than 126 Trios for viola, cello and Prince Esterhazy's baryton during the previous decade had schooled Haydn in writing for individual string parts independent of an accompanying harpsichord. This technical facility, his extraordinary structural genius, and a continuing maturing of his creative powers happily came together to produce in the Op 20 quartets six works of revolutionary genius. But then, he wrote no more quartets for a decade, until the Op 33 set was published in 1782. Probably all his energies were used directing the music for 50 operas (5 his own compositions) and various marionette productions at the Esterhazy palace. Haydn 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". 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 with jokey scherzi rather than minuets, less "Sturm und Drang", more major than minor, witty rondo finales replacing intense fugues.

Tonight's Op 33 quartet, "The Bird" has all these hallmarks of the new Haydn way with quartets. Expect the unexpected. The first movement shows yet another characteristic of these "new" quartets: Haydn's ability to take a small motif and expand it throughout first the movement, and then the whole quartet. The first violin introduces the motif in the second bar - a repeated G decorated with two single grace notes and then a turn. Listen how these initially simple decorations become elaborated – at one point the first violin stutters five turns before landing on the target. The whole movement is littered with grace notes designed to trip the players' fingers. But all with the charm of goldfinches!

Although the second movement is marked Scherzo, the joke is that it is initially so unjokey; all the instruments are on their lower strings so that, as Rosemary Hughes remarks, "nowhere else, perhaps, in all music does C major sound so dark". But then we see that this gloom is in fact a foil for the birdy chirpings of the first fiddle in the Trio lightly accompanied by the other violin. Just 50 bars of genius!

The Adagio has one of Haydn's most gloriously extensive melodies whose 30-odd bars are simply played three times in variations that also bring in those chirpy grace notes from the first movement.

The Rondo is a boisterous romp, full of energy and unexpected swerves. Here the turn from the first movement is king – transformed into a four-note semiquaver figure which is tossed around all the players before finally disappearing pianissimo into the viola.

Publication of the Op 33 set coincided with Mozart's arrival in Vienna, and catalysed

him into returning to writing string quartets himself, leading to the wonderful set of six quartets that he dedicated to Haydn. These quartets in turn stimulated Haydn to continue to develop the quartet form.