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## **Haydn Quartet opus 20 #2**

Haydn's *Quartet in C Major, Op. 20 No. 2* seems much like a palimpsest. In an often florid and elegant work in many respects typical of the classical period, the faded hand of the baroque still shows through. And the composer engages in a kind of game with this faded, or fading, past, showing his respect and love through gentle teasing.

As if to announce immediately that a set of four homogeneous instruments need be no impediment to imaginative textures, Haydn opens the piece with a trio sonata texture, typically baroque, but one where no one plays his proper role. The instrument who should anchor the proceedings with a bass line plays the top melodic part, and the viola, who should fill in the middle of the texture, takes over that role. The second violin plays its usual role, but in a duet with the wrong person, as the first violinist sits and listens. It is as if the instruments are children playing dress-up. The tune, itself, is charming, and features a moment of getting stuck, oscillating in a flutter. This will come again in the piece, and, most importantly, the triple hit on the top note, which he does twice in succession, will show up in varying guises in each movement, an ingenious and unusual binding agent. When the first violin does enter, in imitation of the opening 'cello melody, the interval that announces the tune is unnecessarily altered. This is the province of a most important baroque form, the fugue, termed a "tonal" rather than a "real" answer. In the normal course of events in the classical period this wouldn't happen in a situation of pure imitation, but here it is curiously and charmingly out of place, and, not coincidentally, a harbinger of things to come later in the work. Many times in the movement the idea of fugal imitation seems to be essayed, but it is never followed through in any serious way. Any threat of debate dissolves into good-natured agreement.

Virtuosity abounds not only in the kaleidoscopic rearrangements of the voices of the group but also in individual textures. The start of the second part of the movement sees the 'cello and first violin engaged in dialogue, each obeying the rules of etiquette and waiting until his companion has reached his final word before finishing the thought or posing a question. But meanwhile the second

violin seems overexcited and expertly juggles notes in many registers in a figuration worthy of a Vivaldi or a Corelli in its fiddly panache. When this ushers in a seemingly more serious consideration of the opening idea the music instead begins to babble, weakening until finally it grinds to a halt, having landed exactly nowhere. A further attempt to bring this to a conclusion also fails, until the movement seems to stumble back upon the home key. With a shrug, the 'cello reinstigates the opening tune, nonchalant and unfazed, The endings of both halves of the first movement are, in fact, a collection of ending gestures, one after the other, the buffoon who keeps having one more thing to say when all present are ready to move on, certain he has wrapped it up.

The *Capriccio* slow movement is a fantasia, formally exploratory rather than neatly balanced, obeying the dictates of stream-of-consciousness more than architectural premeditation. Austere in a unison proclamation, the jagged opening, garishly ornamented as if to suggest gargoyles on a cathedral, seems a kind of oracular prophecy. Immediately a dichotomy is set up between that outer announcement and its internalization by the 'cello, cloaked in a espressivo pulsation by the other instruments. The first part of the movement consists of alternations of this ilk, the imposing cathedral and the vulnerable doubter within, tremulous and contemplative. The first is grounded, rooted, imposing; the second floating: the world of thoughts of the cowering mortal. When this musical alternation is brought to a close it is with an open half-cadence, one that should return us to the world of the prophecy, vindicated, perhaps fulfilled. (Incognito, this is a version of the thrice-repeated top notes from the first movement's main tune.) But instead the possibility of the supernal beyond reveals itself in a moment of transcendence, and the sense that a new movement is beginning. This music is discovered afresh, unrelated to what precedes it. Akin to some of the music from Haydn's *Seven Last Words of Christ* in its luminous beauty, it seems to speak of divine love. Perhaps, as well, it addresses human love in the brief duet between the two violins that is Mozartean in its

touching eloquence, and, to music lovers hearing it from a later vantage point, seems even to look forward to the *Cavatina* of Beethoven's Quartet Op. 130. When a brief violin cadenza (drawn from the world of memory, from the first movement's opening's fluttering figurations) interrupts this reverie it breaks the mood and the prophetic voice from earlier in the movement reappears. The strands of the movement are interwoven now and eventually wend their way

back to the same open half-cadence that prefaced the heavenly interpolation. Now, however, it punningly becomes a portal offering an escape from the cathedral of concerns entirely, into the out of doors.

The promise of full cadence at first suggests the sealing of the prophecy, the natural outcome of what Fate decrees. But in fact we discover this to be the gateway to the third movement of the quartet. It resolves into the major mode and into a *musette*, a dance taking its name from an instrument of the bagpipe family; the drone-infused texture is readily apparent. When this drone appears the music is earth-tethered, the moment of dance paradoxically suspended in time. And in fact Haydn even tantalizingly arrests the motion soon after it starts, so that we are for a moment uncertain of whether the movement will actually take off. Once bitten twice shy, perhaps — that half cadence has fooled us before! The second section begins with a chromatic bagpipe line that creates a different kind of stasis within motion: it goes nowhere at all, a bit of sound and fury signifying nothing. (This musical moment will prove important in the next movement as well.) As the final, whispered version of this drone allows the minuet proper to drift away it also prepares for a change of register, in the literary sense of changing social strata. Whilst the minuet suggests the open air and a fancy-free hopping dance, the trio returns to the circumscribed world of, and the actual music of, the prophecy from the second movement, oddly out of place and unsettling. (And again, brings in the idea, on another level, of being stuck in place rather than moving forward.) A stern, stentorian unison, recalling the start of the second movement, reminds without returning. It slips away, again with a version of the open half-cadence, and thus of the opening tune's flutterings, that helped us to discover not only the vision of the beyond in the previous movement but also the *musette*-minuet itself, more self-referential mirror-work.

Remember the moment at the opening of the second strain of the minuet with the chromatically slipping lines that turn out to be pure ornament, not advancing the argument in the least. Chromatic lines often feature in very serious fugue subjects in the baroque. Filling in the "in between pitches" is like having a collection of notes that act as a prism for harmony; they most often are replete with innuendo and complication and the piece unfolds accordingly, exploring the implications of each pitch of the main idea. But here we have a light, Puckish fugue where the chromatic descending line is nothing but ornament and could easily be replaced with a gentler, less busy diatonic

descent with no effect on the rhetoric of the subject. It almost teases the idea of a particularly erudite fugue, instead offering a rather more nimble and playful one, its subject slipping before it rights itself. And the first three notes of the subject are, as one might almost guess at this point, the three repeated pitches from the top of first movement tune, the three-time repetition in the half-cadences of the second and third movements, and the top notes of the “stuck” strain in the minuet that births as well the chromatic idea. This most learned of baroque forms, one akin to a scholarly debate, is kept *sotto voce* throughout, whispered almost as if it were a form of gossip. Haydn late in the movement introduces the subject upside down, “al roverscio,” a Bachian trick, but does it not as the start of an equal section but more as a tease, a playful display of mettle. Not long after this is introduced the entire fugal apparatus is dropped, the veil removed as the voices jump out at full throttle and chase each other more simply, a game of tag, joyful and unleashed. A last laugh about the “al roverscio” ushers in a flamboyantly grandiloquent summing up. Over this final flurrying passage Haydn writes “Laus omnip: Deo / Sic fugit amicus amicum’ (‘Praise to Almighty God / Thus one friend flees another’). Haydn chases the baroque idea of counterpoint with more decorative and simpler ideas, and all in good fun.

A recent poem by Joyce Carol Oates (*The First Room*) reads:

In every dream of a room  
the first room intrudes.  
No matter the years, the tears dried and forgotten, it is the skeleton  
of the first that protrudes.

This idea seems to exist on two levels in this quartet. First, the palimpsest idea whereby we can see the traces of baroque figurations, forms and concepts that leave their legible traces on this classical work. But also in the piece’s development itself. Each movement refers back to the movement preceding it, borrowing from it some salient detail, a fertile seed that will shape and color the new movement in some crucial way. Every new journey is rooted in the steps of the past, and creative transformation is new life.

Note by Mark Steinberg