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Haydn Quartet opus 33 #4

As a young man, Joseph Haydn took a job improvising for a comic actor, a sort of vaudeville performer, and was called upon to illustrate musically the character's antics and physical comedy, apparently with great success. He was a man of the theater. At the time that the quartets of Op. 33 were published it had been nine years since Haydn's previous set of quartets, and he, famously, announced that the publication of the six quartets of Op. 33 heralded a "new and special style." ("New and improved," might have been the marketing lingo today.) The intervening years had seen Haydn preoccupied largely with comic opera, and the new set of quartets arrived replete with clever amusements galore, awash in the misdirections and other assorted shenanigans of *opera buffa*.

In addition, Haydn's writing is much indebted to the patterns of rhetoric and the charms of punning, delighting in deliberate confusion and manufactured ambiguities of meaning and function. An example of both of these qualities, theatricality and grammatical whimsy, is found in the very first gesture of the Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 33 No. 4. The piece enters on tiptoe, precarious and in the spirit of rhetorical provocation, figuration evoking an ending more than beginning, only to erupt — *peekaboo!* — with a start. That eruptive chord is held as if a deer in headlights, before being tossed away in a sea of giggles, a miniature aviary of trills. Doubleness abounds: the piece fashions beginnings out of traditional closing figures; the accompanimental repeated notes that tiptoe in become a central concern of the movement and often occupy the foreground; the movement crafts its progress through reiterations of material that should draw the motion to a close; each confident ending immediately has its bluster deflated with a doubtful rejoinder. Perhaps Haydn would have smiled to read Gertrude Stein: "There is no beginning to an end / But there is a beginning and an end / to beginning." There are structural rhetoric feints, as well. Where the movement should find itself back home in the opening idea, it instead appears in the wrong key, confident in its arrival until the realization kicks in that we've taken a wrong turn. A quick reorientation solves the problem, and the music continues innocently until getting caught in a long preparation for an ending that stutters along in repetitions of the material that, near the opening, builds continuity out of final gestures. When the passage finally manages to resolve and cadence in the home key, fulfilling its long-promised role, that resolution, which should herald the closing material of the movement, loops back around to the opening idea before relenting, then once again gets stuck in the opening gambit before banishing it with a series of final exclamation points infiltrated

with winking asides. The movement has a flirtatiously entangled narrative trajectory that would make Calvino or Borges proud. (Or, for that matter, and closer to his time, Laurence Sterne.)

There is, as well, a charmingly ridiculous passage in the middle of the movement that is full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. A virtuosic passage in the first violin, buoyed by the ebullient repeated note figure that starts the movement, travels through a too-long sequence of harmonies, an ouroboros, a dog chasing its tail, an Escher staircase. The 11th (!) iteration is the same as the first; it is as in *Alice in Wonderland*: “My dear, here we must run as fast as we can, just to stay in place.” Again and again, Haydn chuckles along, conflating motion and stasis, beginning and ending, progress and the impediments that frustrate that progress.

The Op. 33 set is also known for Haydn’s decision to replace each Minuet movement with a *Scherzo*, literally a “joke.” In this particular quartet it almost seems a joke to entitle it so, as the movement has all the hallmarks of a well-behaved Minuet. After the complexities of the first movement, the second charms through its simplicity and straightforward *joie de vivre*. The Scherzo proper is all hop, the minor key trio section in the middle, all glide and interrupted, stealthy slither. Together they seem light and dark incarnate.

The glowing, E-flat Major slow movement beguiles, hesitantly hopeful and singing. The first figure, which reappears throughout, lifts gently upward and seems an echo of the similar figure that follows the initial eruption of the first movement. That figure then becomes linked to itself to form a longer unit that travels. Only once in the movement does this set of fused figures sigh downward rather than reach upward, and the moment offers a tender consolation. Such a small change, with such a touching result. The upward reach of hope is answered by the downward drift of acceptance, Leibniz’s best of all possible worlds. The final moments offer an after-echo of this descending idea, further distilled, just a memory.

The last movement plays on the repeated note idea from the first, all laughter and hijinks. This ebullient and mischievous finale might well be summoned as an example to illustrate the adjective “Haydnesque,” with its sparkling wit and good humor. Returns of the opening idea are varied with warbling or with unpredictable, hiccupping leaping notes, all athletic prancing of a tipsy acrobat. Contrasting sections offer, first, a gently playful riff on the initial three notes of the movement, while a later section erupts in gypsy-inflected faux-fury, crackling with energy. Each return seems gleefully unaffected, happy to bounce along as before. The movement ends with an adorably insouciant surprise, another signature move.

In the 1760s German critics castigated Haydn for “debasing the art with comic fooling.” Decades later we find him, as evidenced by much in this work, still at it, and thank goodness for that!

Note by Mark Steinberg