

Haydn Quartet opus 33 #3 (“Bird”)

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When Haydn published his Op. 33 quartets and claimed he had written them in a “new and special style” it was neither an empty boast nor necessarily particularly newsworthy; every new work the master wrote seems to reveal further, unforeseen facets of his fertile imagination. Haydn, often lauded for his considerable wit, is a prestidigitator extraordinaire, fully conversant in misdirection, taking delight in, and exploiting fully, ambiguities of form and function. He lives in the Newtonian world of expected relationships, but as soon as one peers more closely quantum weirdnesses start to crop up.

He wastes no time in toying with his audience and players in the opening of the Quartet in C Major, Op. 33 No. 3 (“the Bird”). A primary task at the start of any tonal work is to establish the key of the piece, to provide context, to set the stage upon which the action of the play will transpire. It takes at least three notes to make a chord, the lowest of which, in the normal positioning, is called the root, and lends the key its name: here, C Major. This quartet starts with only two notes, which could plausibly be part of two different simple harmonies, one major, one minor. In fact, the root is there, but in the higher position, uprooted, as it were. Haydn buries the lede. It is only with the entrance of the third note, which appears above, drawn from the air, that resolution and recognition of the scene becomes possible. The entrance of the first violin is akin to the appearance of Ariel in *The Tempest*: Ariel is beholden to the laws insisted upon by Prospero, yet he is able to enchant and conjure, affecting the presentation of the world in which he is captive and in which these laws pertain. The sense of expectation is further heightened, theatrically, by the exquisitely delicate pulsations in the opening measure, the texture of time and anticipation itself, unadulterated possibility. The repetitions of a pitch here also propel the first violin melody, albeit more patiently, now adorned with grace notes that evoke the chirping of birds, one of several details in the piece that may be responsible for its nickname. By the time the ‘cello also joins, and provides, at long last, the root in its proper position, the phrase is already hurtling toward its own vanishing: a wink, a flutter, a series of acrobatic leaps ending with a fancy dismount into the sea. No sooner does the music situate itself than it disappears, and immediately, with the second phrase, calls into question the plausibility of the first statement; perhaps we are in the presence of an unreliable narrator. The first moment in the piece where the quartet properly delivers a completely unambiguous C Major chord, which would logically suggest a solid foundation and an unchallenged sense of place, the chord heralds, paradoxically, a bridging, transitional idea. Haydn starts on his way toward the so-called second theme, usually providing contrast and, thus, dramatic tension, in a sonata form movement such as this one. The dismount motive, used at first to end a thought, is punningly remolded

into a propulsive idea, eventually intermingling with the chirping, birdlike initial first violin idea just before the arrival of the second theme, a shuffling of the deck. But, lo and behold, after the shuffling we find the card drawn at the beginning of the movement materializes again, resurfacing at the top of the deck. The second theme starts almost identically to the first theme, albeit twice as fast and with a small alteration in the interval of the grace notes. Birds of a feather, I suppose. Further transmutations await. In the development section, where the composer reexamines and refashions earlier ideas, using them as vessels on which to sail and explore, the “chirping” figure turns dark and moody, haunted, self-entangled, with a melancholic cast: the shadows, now, of ravens and crows. Clouds dissipate, and we find our way back to the opening idea, but as we arrive at the anticipatory pulsations we know from the opening we may be startled to realize they are not where we should expect harmonically. On the return home, the plane descends through layers of clouds and suddenly the landscape we expect to recognize seems terra incognita. Of course it is a feint, a fleeting mirage, and a quicksilver bit of harmonic manipulation situates us correctly, at home. Don’t get comfy, though. The second phrase again starts in disguise before revealing its true, original identity. Doubtless abounds. The movement ends in high spirits, at long last providing closure to the phrase that started it all.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the Op. 33 quartets is Haydn’s decision to replace the expected Minuet movement with movements entitled “scherzo,” literally “joke” in Italian. The minuet was already a potent template within which Haydn could jest, as it was a rather quotidian dance with clear presuppositions that could be cleverly thwarted to comic effect. In the case of Op. 33 No. 3, the title, itself, seems a form of misdirection, as the dusky, undulatory murmurings and susurrations of all the instruments under the breath and in their lowest registers seems more akin to prayer and introversion than pleasantries and wisecracks. In fact, the scherzo proper serves as a foil for the bright and strutting, if perhaps vainglorious, trio section, in which the violins perform a pompous dance, a feathery frolic, all twitter and hop. The lower instruments silently observe, binoculars at the ready!

The silken slow movement is a tender aria, charming and charmed. replete with sighs and florid arabesques. Gentle singing, suffused with warmth and comfort, cedes way now and then to music rather more playful and enchanted, dancing around the singer. The song spins itself out more or less placidly, despite occasional nods toward exotic harmonies that haunt the periphery. The movement circles around itself, reexamining the same landscape with fresh eyes each time.

The finale of the quartet might have been titled by Bartók, a century and a half later, a “teasing song.” Here is the trademark call of the cuckoo, named from the sound of its

cheep. Of course the cuckoo is also beloved of clockmakers, and just as the quivering opening of the piece seems to make audible the texture of time, giggling repeated notes here return to the idea of measuring the progression of moments. The four “g’s” that the first violin intone at the start of the work are here doubled, hitting that pitch eight times in the tune. All is good-natured ribbing and tickling. Twice the childlike provocations are cut off by Turkish inflected Janissary music, begging for drums and cymbals. But the more naive and lighthearted music wins out, and the piece in its final moments evaporates with an insouciant wink, the first violin floating away while accompanying with the same repeated note on which it first appeared. We could easily loop back around to the opening of the piece, but instead the balloon is let go into the sky, lighter than air, to be amongst the birds.

Note by Mark Steinberg