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HAYDN

String Quartets, "Prussian"

Op. 50 Nos. 4 – 6

Kodály Quartet

Joseph Haydn (1732 – 1809)
String Quartet in F sharp minor, Op. 50, No. 4, Hob.III:47
String Quartet in F major, Op. 50, No. 5, Hob. III:48
String Quartet in D major, Op. 50, No. 6, Hob.III:49

Joseph Haydn was born in the village of Rohrau in 1732, the son of a wheelwright. Trained at the choir-school of St Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna, he subsequently spent some years earning a living as best he could from teaching and playing the violin or keyboard, and was able to profit from association with the old composer Porpora, whose assistant he became. Haydn's first appointment was in 1759 as Kapellmeister to a Bohemian nobleman, Count von Morzin, whose kinsman had once served as patron to Vivaldi. This was followed in 1761 by employment as Vice-Kapellmeister to one of the richest men in the Empire, Prince Paul Anton Esterházy, succeeded after his death in 1762 by Prince Nikolaus. On the death in 1766 of the elderly and somewhat obstructive Kapellmeister Gregor Werner, who had found much to complain about in the professionalism of his young and resented deputy, Haydn succeeded to his position, to remain in the same employment, nominally at least, for the rest of his life.

On the completion of the magnificent palace at Esterháza in the Hungarian plains under Prince Nikolaus, Haydn assumed command of an increased musical establishment. Here he had responsibility for the musical activities of the palace, which included the provision and direction of instrumental music, opera and music for the theatre, as well as music for the church: For his patron he provided a quantity of chamber music of all kinds, particularly for the Prince's own peculiar instrument, the baryton, a bowed string instrument with sympathetic strings that could also be plucked and one that the English scholar Dr Burney thought to have its only proper use on a desert island, where a castaway might accompany himself.

Prince Nikolaus died in 1790 and Haydn found himself able to accept an invitation to visit London. There he provided music for concert seasons organized by the violinist-impresario Salomon. A second successful visit to London in 1794 and 1795 was followed by a return to duty with the Esterházy family, the new head of which had settled principally at the family property in Eisenstadt, where Haydn had started his career with them. Much of the year, however, was to be spent in Vienna, where Haydn passed his final years, dying in 1809, as the French armies of Napoleon approached the city yet again.

Haydn lived during the period of the eighteenth century that saw the development of instrumental music from the age of Bach and Handel to the era of the classical sonata, with its tripartite first-movement form and complementary three or four movements, the basis now of much instrumental composition. The string quartet itself, which came to represent classical music in its purest form, grew from a genre that was relatively insignificant, at least in name, the *Divertimento*, into music of greater weight, complexity and substance, although Haydn, like any great master, knew well how to conceal the technical means by which he achieved his ends. The exact number of string quartets that Haydn wrote is not known, although he himself listed some 83. The earlier of these, often under the title *Divertimento,* proclaim clearly enough their origin and purpose. Haydn's last quartet, Opus 103, started in 1803, remained unfinished and coincided with the appearance of quartets of a new and original kind, from Haydn's recalcitrant and ungrateful pupil, Beethoven. Haydn himself once claimed to have discovered the string quartet by accident. The discovery, if such it was, has continued to have a far-reaching effect on the development of Western music.

Haydn had contemplated a new set of six string quartets as early as 1784, two years after the publication of his so-called Russian quartets, *Opus 33*. The set of six that form *Opus 50*, the so-called Prussian quartets, dedicated to the cello-playing King Frederick William II of Prussia, was written in 1787, to be published by Artaria, whose delay gave the composer an excuse to elicit money from the London publisher Forster for publication there, a step that led to later argument with Artaria's London collaborators Longman and Broderip. The quartets occupy an important position in the development of the genre, reflecting the influence of Mozart's six quartets recently dedicated to Haydn, themselves the product of the latter's study of Haydn's work. With Mozart's move to Vienna in 1781, there had come about more personal contact between the two composers and reciprocal influence and respect that allowed Haydn to develop the string quartet still further, while ceasing to use forms that Mozart had made his own, notably the concerto and opera. Sixteen years later it seems that Beethoven's first excursion into quartet territory led Haydn finally to abandon it.

The *Quartet in F sharp minor, Opus 50, No. 4*, opens with a strongly stated figure that serves, in part, to introduce the A major second subject, and, as it should, the central development. After brief contrapuntal treatment, the principal theme returns, to be capped by its final appearance in the tonic major key of F sharp. In the slow movement the first violin is entrusted with the A major singing theme of the second movement, to be followed by an A minor derivative. The two thematic elements are varied, before the return of a version of the A major theme from the second violin, with comment from the first, which goes on to a rapider ornamented conclusion in a movement that has earned the nickname *Der Traum* (The Dream). The *Minuet* is in F sharp major, with a contrasting trio in the tonic minor. There follows a final fugue, introduced by the cello, followed in turn by the viola, second violin and first violin. The choice of key, again F sharp minor, ensures a continued element of poignancy in a movement that retains motivic connection with what has already passed.

The mood of the *Quartet in F major, Opus 50, No. 5*, is a very different one. It starts with the two violins proposing a simple motif, repeated in sequence, before moving forward to secondary material of greater rapidity. The central development, once the exposition has been duly repeated, allows both elements to be explored, before the recapitulation and its final surprises. The B flat major slow movement derives certain features from what has gone before and is marked by the recurrence of scale passages in contrary motion and of thirds between the two violins. There is a monothematic connection between the F major *Minuet* and its F minor *Trio*. The quartet ends with a *Vivace* in 6/8, the last movement of the set to be completed, seemingly with some relief. In structure it is generally predictable, its sections clearly differentiated and allowing much activity in the central development.

The set ends with *Quartet in D major, Opus 50, No. 6*, known as *The Frog* from the alternating of strings on the same note, the device of *bariolage*, used in the last movement. It has also earned itself the nicknames of *The House on Fire* and *The Row in Vienna*, sobriquets which, however popular at one time or another, now seem increasingly inept. The quartet seems about to start in another key, before the proper D major is established. Basically monothematic, the movement finds an important place for the opening motif of six notes, both in the repeated exposition as in the central development and recapitulation. The slow movement is in D minor, its principal theme soon transformed into a brighter F major. The central section of the movement shifts at first into D flat major, before a further modulation that brings running notes in accompaniment of the D minor theme, soon to return as a second subject, now in D major. Skipping rhythms mark the melody of the *Minuet*, with its *Trio*, bringing a melody with repeated notes perhaps remembered from

the *Adagio*. After the customary repetition of the *Minuet*, the last movement starts with first violin *bariolage*, making use of fingered notes and the open A, E and D strings in that order. This, and other uses of alternating strings in this way, are a principal feature of a movement of considerable originality, the rapider repeated notes suggesting those of the preceding two movements. This *Finale* is monothematic, but falls into the three structural sections now expected, providing elements of surprise and ingenuity within that form.

Kodály Quartet

The members of the Kodály Quartet were trained at the Budapest Ferenc Liszt Academy, and three of them, the second violin Tamás Szabo, viola-player Gábor Fias and cellist János Devich, were formerly in the Sebestyén Quartet, which was awarded the jury's special diploma at the 1966 Geneva International Quartet Competition and won first prize at the 1968 Leo Weiner Quartet Competition in Budapest. Since 1970, with the violinist Attila Falvay, the quartet has been known as the Kodály Quartet, a title adopted with the approval of the Hungarian Ministry of Culture and Education. The Kodály Quartet has given concerts throughout Europe, in the Soviet Union and in Japan, in addition to regular appearances in Hungary both in the concert hall and on television and has made for Naxos highly acclaimed recordings of String Quartets by Ravel, Debussy, Mozart and Haydn.