

Saint Lawrence Quartet notes

Quartet No. 62 in D major, Opus 76, No. 5 (1797)

Joseph Haydn (b. Austria, 1732; d. Vienna, 1809)

Haydn is well known as the “Papa” of the symphony, but he also fathered 68 string quartets, and can lay claim to the first perfection of that genre. The six “Erdődy” Quartets take their nickname from a dedication to Count József Erdődy (1754–1824), Knight of the Golden Fleece. Haydn composed them in 1797, when he was at the height of his fame and working away at *The Creation*, his response to the sublime music of Handel he had heard in England. The contemporary historian [Charles Burney](#) wrote of the Quartets: “They are full of invention, fire, good taste, and new effects, and seem the production, not of a sublime genius who has written so much and so well already, but of one of highly-cultivated talents, who had expended none of his fire before.”

The Quartet in D is a glowing example of Haydn’s promethean powers. Form to this composer is not a vessel into which matter is poured, but the very clay on the wheel, spinning free to take the form of his fancy. And this is one sly artisan. The pot is sure to be whimsical, as well as decorative and functional.

The opening Allegretto combines elements of ternary, variation and sonata forms. But it’s deceptively simple, beginning with a lilting song ideal for variation treatment. Haydn indeed varies the theme each time it recurs, but the variations are “graces,” tasteful ornaments a performer of the day might have introduced to keep things fresh. Where a second idea would usually appear, Haydn slips into minor mode and treats the theme contrapuntally. In his book, *The Classical Style*, Charles Rosen observes that the composer “liked to give the middle section of his free ternary forms the character of a development section with a climax and a retransition. Often this does not suffice. . . and a long coda provides an astonishing second development.”

After such a kaleidoscopic opener, weight falls on the Largo (as it will in so many Bruckner symphonies to come). The Largo leaps a third above tonic to an extraordinary key: F-sharp major. For pianists, F-sharp is a blizzard of black keys; on string instruments it produces a covered but malleable tone with no open strings. If keys were actors, F-sharp would be cast in a supporting role, never a lead. Haydn only visited F-sharp major a few times, notably in the Minuet of the [Farewell Symphony](#), and he never made it the principal key of a work. Here, it steals the show.

There are other subtleties in this Largo. The first chord calls for a big *crescendo*, a great swelling of the heart. The movement sings, but sadly, even tragically. In this sonata form, the second subject is introduced as an afterthought, but it becomes an important countersubject to the principal theme. Three times, Haydn approaches a cadence, only to pull back. Beethoven remembered these deceptive cadences when he wrote the Andante con moto of his Fifth Symphony.

The opening arpeggiation of the Menuetto affirms the Largo theme in a new key. Violin, then cello, compress the three-beat meter into two. A wheedling “*ti-do, ti-do*” in the Trio will be taken up in the Finale, where it crowns a very final-sounding cadence. Have the players cut to the double bar? Are they heading to the pub? A scratchy drone and fluty tune suggest urban buskers. Thus Haydn, the sly artisan, blends high and low, pop and classical in tragical mirth.

Quartet in G minor (1893)

Claude Debussy (b. Germain-en-Laye, 1862; d. Paris, 1918)

Looking back on the early 1890s, Debussy recalled: “the period when I wrote my String Quartet was not exactly one of extravagant luxury but, even so, it was the best time of all.” The young composer had passed through many phases. His Conservatoire training had introduced him to the harmony of Massenet. A Prix de Rome rewarded an academicism he soon found distasteful. He made two trips to Bayreuth to absorb Wagner’s *Parsifal*, *Meistersinger* and *Tristan*. “When I met Debussy he was full of Mussorgsky,” remembered Eric Satie, “and was very deliberately seeking a way that wasn’t very easy to find.” Paris’s [Universal Exposition of 1889](#)—the fair for which the Eiffel Tower was erected—provided a direction. It was there that the composer first heard the Javanese gamelan, a ringing percussion orchestra.

Debussy had promised to dedicate his Quartet to his friend Ernest Chausson, but in the end that honor went to the Ysaÿe Quartet. The great Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe led his ensemble in the 1893 premiere at a concert of the Société nationale de musique. The other works on the program, Franck’s Sonata and D’Indy’s Quartet No. 1,

were also dedicated to Ysaÿe. Parisian critics were nonplussed. But two months later the work was encored in a more sympathetic context at *La Libre Esthétique*, a Brussels salon promoting "the free aesthetic" which showcased many prominent French artists like Gauguin and Toulouse-Lautrec. Durand published it as *Premier quatuor*, Opus 10, but the composer would never finish Quartet No. 2, nor would he use opus numbers again.

The Quartet is often called cyclic. Moreover, it's the story of a single theme, which is broken in pieces, stretched apart and viewed from many perspectives. The **opening** motto-theme, marked "animated and very determined," is full of possibilities. It mimics the five tones of *sléndro*, one of two Javanese tunings. The first two chords are tough and harmonically ambiguous. While the work is nominally "in G minor," the second chord borrows from Phrygian mode, the mode that begins with a half step, one known for its unsettled quality. Composer Paul Dukas described the motto-theme as "striding across the [harmony] as across a sumptuous and finely decorated carpet," with a little flourish at the top of the line, and the bass marching down by half-steps. Two lyrical ideas introduced later occupy much of the working-out.

With the "Lively and well paced" **scherzo**, Debussy strikes out into unfamiliar territory. Never before had the string quartet sounded so percussive. The viola lays down an ostinato (a repeated pattern) based on the motto-theme, and soon there are four different things going at once. This carbonated but static texture imitates superimposed gamelan rhythms. "Remember the music of Java which contained every nuance, even the ones we no longer have names for," wrote a wistful Debussy to critic Pierre Louÿs.

Much of the **Andantino** is played with mutes, and after the wooden tones of the scherzo, it glows. It glows for the same reason Haydn's Largo glowed: D-flat major is like F-sharp a distant and covered key. The form is simple ternary form, the music sustained, heartfelt and "gently expressive." Oddly, the moments of greatest control, the several points where one instrument imitates another, are the ones that feel the most improvisatory.

Composer **Guy Ropartz** detected the "predominant influence of young Russia," referring perhaps to the deliberately crude harmony that propels the **final movement** from "moderate," to "hectic and passionate." In any case, it's a thrilling progress, crowned by the most frankly-virtuosic roulade in the quartet literature. Is it a parting concession to Ysaÿe's virtuosity? Or an ascent to the top of the Tower?

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Links

Charles Burney: https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_O1EUAAAQAAJ/page/n13/mode/2up

Farewell Symphony: <https://youtu.be/iS4IDgGLGmA>

Universal Exposition of 1889: <https://www.tou Eiffel.paris/en/the-monument/universal-exhibition>

La Libre Esthétique: <https://archive.org/details/cataloguedelae1894libr/page/n7/mode/2up>

Guy Ropartz: https://youtu.be/ATK_B2sHYzQ