

16. Haydn

String Quartet in E flat, Op.33, No. 2, 'The Joke': movement IV

(For Unit 6: Further Musical Understanding)

Background information

The string quartets of Joseph Haydn (1732-1804) span his creative life and it has been argued that one of his greatest achievements is as the 'Father of the String Quartet'. Given this nickname, it may come as a surprise that Alessandro Scarlatti had the innovative concept of a 'Sonata for four instruments: two violins, viola, and cello without harpsichord' some half a century previously. Haydn's contribution to the development of the string quartet was, however, unparalleled; he transformed the medium from the lightweight 'background' music found in his Opus 1 quartets to the high art form it became in his final works.



With the set of six Op. 33 Quartets, we are almost at the midway point in Haydn's string quartet output. These quartets were not, as is commonly believed, composed for the Esterhazy Court but were a commission for the Viennese publishing firm Artaria, which issued them in 1782. An inventive eighteenth-century marketing ploy to boost sales may account for the boast that the pieces were of 'a new and entirely special kind'. As chamber music, they were intended for private or semi-private performance by four accomplished players.

Opus 33 has attracted its fair share of nicknames. The unusual use of scherzo movements instead of minuets resulted in '*Gli Scherzi*' and a picture of the front cover of the score generated the name '*Jungfernquartette*' ('maiden' quartets) but the dedicatee, Grand Duke Paul of Russia, whose wife heard the first performance in her Viennese apartments on Christmas Day 1781, brought about the most commonly heard title, the 'Russian' quartets.

The movement with which we are concerning ourselves here has caused the second quartet of the set to be labelled, 'The Joke'. The 'joke' here is most obviously played on the audience in this witty movement, with the surprising twists, disconcerting silences and a concluding 'false start', making applause a risky activity for a contemporary audience! Or is the 'joke' also on those amateur 'beat driven' performers who were a source of frustration to the composer and who would find the carefully planned ensemble challenges of the final page quite daunting?

H. C. Robbins Landon came up with the theory that Haydn's commencement of an affair with the young mezzo-soprano Luigia Polzelli is the real reason behind the sheer optimism and cheerfulness of the music. Whether you accept this or any of the other theories, Mozart's comment that Haydn could 'amuse and shock, arouse laughter and deep emotion, as no one else' is a comment no one listening to this wonderful movement could possibly disagree with.

Performance forces and their handling

'The Joke', like all string quartets, is for Violin I, Violin II, Viola and Cello.

The first violinist regularly plays higher than the second (although both players have instruments of the same specification and range).

Only one player is required for each part. No doubling is expected as with string parts in symphonies, not even doubling of cello by double bass an octave lower.

No keyboard continuo instrument is required as in one precursor of the Classical string quartet, the Baroque trio sonata for two (constantly-crossing) violins and cello.

String-playing techniques

- All instruments play with the bow (*arco*) throughout – there is no *pizzicato*, but frequent *staccato* helps create the light playful effect.
- Double stopping (where an instrument plays two notes at once) is used in two passages – notably in the brief *Adagio* near the end for greater weight and mock solemnity.

Dynamics

- The two episodes (bars 36 and 107) are *forte (f)*. *Sforzando (sf)* emphasises some strong beats in the first. Each phrase of the *Adagio* starts imposingly at *f*.
- Many other passages are *p*, with some use of *crescendo* and *diminuendo* but the 'joke' ending is at a very subtle *pp* – as is the last continuous hearing of the first part of the rondo refrain (bars 141-148).

Texture

The texture is:

- Largely four-part
 - Usually each instrument is independent – doubling at unison and octave is not a feature
 - However, violins have some parallel 3rds, 6ths and 10ths (as in the middle of the opening section or 'refrain', from bar 9)
 - There are three parts in the second phrase of the refrain, first heard in bars 3-4)
- Homophonic
 - Very occasional chordal or homorhythmic movement (all parts sharing the same rhythm, as at the two pause chords in bars 139-140)
 - Usually Violin I melody dominates, other parts accompanying with the same rhythm (e.g. at the beginning) – this is melody-dominated homophony.

Textural exceptions and noteworthy points are as follows.

- In bars 112-116 (from the second episode) other parts take up the melody just heard in Violin I. This is not strict imitation, however, because successive entries do not genuinely overlap.
- In the bars of three-part texture Viola functions as the bass instrument in lieu of Cello (e.g., bars 3-4).

- The aforementioned double-stopping automatically creates a denser texture – five parts in bar 151 and six parts in bar 149.
- Pedals are common, either as a sustained note (bars 87-92) or as reiterated notes (bars 128-131).
- Unusually, in bars 128-131 the textural division seems to pair off inner (2nd Violin & Viola) and outer (1st Violin and Cello) parts.
- What then ensues in bars 132-135 is the three upper parts working in partnership whilst Cello is isolated.

Structure

When considering structure, it is worth remembering that Haydn was a composer of astounding imaginative genius and not a music analyst. That is why this rondo form movement is open to more than one interpretation. The most commonly agreed and persuasive analysis can be found in the table below.

Bars 0-36	A	Refrain(with repeats)
Bars 36-70	B	Episode
Bars 71-107	A	Refrain
Bars 107-140	C	Episode
Bars 140-172	A ¹	Refrain (substantially altered)

Also worthy of note is the internal structure of the A section as rounded binary form, clearly delineated by the repeat marks on its first appearance at bars 0-36.

It would not be Haydn if there were not some anomalies thrown in for good measure. Particularly problematic is the final A¹ section which includes an incongruous adagio and much unsettling fragmentation of the main theme.

Analytical consideration should also be given to the following points.

- Although the two episodes are labelled B and C they do begin with almost identical melodic phrases in 1st Violin (2nd Violin is identical).
- Each episode seems to have a rather transitory feel; in the case of B it is because of harmonic instability (a lack of resolution during the pedal note passages) and C remains in E flat major with little feeling of novelty.
- The end of the C section (bars 139-140) bears too close a resemblance to bars 27-28 in the centre of A for it to be anything other than a direct reference.
- Each Episode ends with an inconclusive Dominant 7th Chord creating both a lack of finality and emphasising the musical identity and completeness of the Refrains – all part of a subtle plan which eventually adds to the dramatic impact of the bizarre, fragmented final Refrain.

The movement also shows evidence of Haydn's monothematicism. As we shall see when considering melody, most of the thematic material can be derived from a few small motivic units with the result that structural contrasts are significantly diluted.

Melody

Haydn's melodic style in this piece is as typical of the Classical style as one could ever hope to find. Features worthy of comment are:

- periodic phrasing – look no further than the opening 8 bars to find a perfect (2 + 2 + 4) Classical phrase structure
- much use of scale and arpeggio patterns – bars 17-21 are a good example of alternation between them
- some chromaticism within a mainly diatonic melody – the phrase at bars 9-12 exemplifies this
- melodic dissonance – for example, what would have been a rather bland arpeggio in bars 18 and 20 is transformed by the inspired inclusion of a surprising strong beat A natural
- passing notes – these vary from diatonic, unaccented (e.g. the D in bar 3) to chromatic, accented (e.g., the B natural in bar 13)
- auxiliary notes – the A natural in bar 4 is a chromatic lower auxiliary note
- *échappée* – the G in bar 3 qualifies as one of these unusual notes
- ornamentation – quite limited in this movement although acciaccaturas do make a number of appearances, the first one being in bar 7
- articulation – the crisp and buoyant nature of Haydn's melody is brought alive by short slurs and much use of staccato.

As mentioned above, Haydn is particularly renowned for adopting a monothematic approach. The opening phrase can be analysed as comprising three thematic units: X, Y & Z.



It does not take too much imagination to relate every other melodic unit in the piece to one of these initial motives. Here are clear examples of how Haydn utilises and transforms each motive.

X	Bar 2²-3¹	One tone lower and rising a tone instead of a semitone
	Bar 10²-11¹	Inversion
	Bars 25-26	Chromatic rising sequence
Y	Bar 3²	Inversion
	Bar 6	Six notes rise instead of just three

	Bars 59-62	Persistent repetition comprising short-term descending sequences contained within a longer-term rising sequence
Z	Bar 18¹	Arpeggio rises instead of falling
	Bars 63-65	Repetitions in the second half of each bar as a diminished triad instead of a major triad

Harmony

As one would expect, much of the harmonic language Haydn utilises adheres to contemporary stylistic norms, for example:

- functional harmony
- tonic and dominant chords used very frequently – e.g. the opening phrase consists of a straightforward I-V-I
- frequent perfect cadences
- pedals
- some limited use of chromatic harmony – e.g. a diminished triad in bar 69
- harmonic sequences – e.g. bars 59-61
- suspensions – quite rare in this movement, but one can be found in bar 14 (the Bb).

In addition, there are some features which are both unusual and clearly designed with a humorous effect in mind:

- a dominant 7th chord left ‘hanging in mid air’ in bar 28 before the return of the main theme
- extended dominant pedals on p. 203, with chords Ic and V regularly placed above, yet a desired key-affirming cadence is never reached. The *sf* markings only exaggerate the sense of exasperation. Seemingly embarrassed by this lengthy indecision, Haydn then, at bar 59, speeds up the harmonic rhythm from one chord per bar to two as if desperate to escape these unresolved pedals as quickly as possible
- a mock-dramatic dominant 9th chord at the start of the Adagio.

Haydn’s delightful harmonic ingenuity does appear on various levels. To appreciate the full subtlety of this movement we must delve into the detail. The following is one example.

- Whilst the opening three two-bar phrases are identical in rhythm, their harmonic treatment varies considerably, particularly with regard to the harmonisation of the first bar of each unit. Bars 1 and 3 both contain the aforementioned *échappée* note but the resolution note on beat two of each bar is quite different – in bar 1 Violin 1 lands on an F, the consonant fifth note of Chord V, whereas in bar 3 Violin 1 lands on an E flat, the far more dissonant seventh of the prevailing harmony. This increase in harmonic tension is taken much further in bar 5 when a B natural, melodically treated as a chromatic retardation, creates tremendous dissonance, resolves upwards for the briefest moment on a C natural, and then lands on an A flat, doubling the seventh of a V7d chord.

Thereafter, harmonic tension dissipates and we are gently led back to a comfortable, diatonic, E flat major by way of a concluding and simple II-V-I progression in bars 7-8. Of course, at the movement's rapid pace all of these harmonic nuances are over in a flash but their effect is both carefully calculated and brilliant; they give the eight-bar statement a compelling sense of gradually increasing tension followed by playful and carefree release in the concluding bars.

Tonality

Haydn's functional tonality is reinforced by the aforementioned perfect cadences and pedals (both dominant and tonic versions can be found). Each rondo section is firmly centred on the tonic key of E flat major and elsewhere Haydn restricts himself to modulations to related keys. The following are some examples.

Bars 37-47	A flat major	subdominant
Bars 48-53	F minor	supertonic minor
Bars 64-68	B flat major	dominant

Interestingly, throughout the movement Haydn avoids the 'obvious' move to C minor, the sombre relative minor, and focuses most attention on numerous references to the bright dominant key, Bb major. In this way his tonal scheme underpins the joyful mood.

Worthy of comment is the pedal which occurs in bars 16-28. At its conclusion it is unequivocally a Dominant pedal preparing for the return of the main theme. Its commencement is more ambiguous; from bars 17-20 the harmony above consists of alternations of a Diminished Seventh chord outline (with a root of A natural) and a B flat major arpeggio (with an added A natural). We could therefore easily argue that these bars are centred on B flat, permitting it to be described as a tonic pedal at that point; the contrary argument is that the whole passage can be thought of as being in the key of E flat major, with some secondary dominant influences causing chromaticism.

Metre and rhythm

It is very unusual for a rondo movement to incorporate any changes of metre but Haydn does so here. The prevailing compound duple metre is interrupted at the Adagio in bar 148 and a slow simple duple emerges for four bars before resumption of the previous metre.

Rhythm is generally simple in style and dominated by crotchets (often dotted) and quavers, with a tendency for longer notes to appear in the lower parts. The 1st violin has a number of passages consisting of endless and rather "breathless" streams of quavers, e.g. bars 54-67.

Some rhythmic diminution is apparent. Motive X, quaver-crotchet-quaver, becomes three quavers when it recurs at bars 22-23.

Even rhythmically and metrically, Haydn is not averse to throwing in some little surprises. The first episode, or B section, begins rather innocuously at bar 37 with a two-bar phrase which Haydn then repeats almost identically. However, the last few notes suddenly lead us

unexpectedly into the beginning of the series of Dominant Pedals previously discussed. As listeners we should feel some sense of metrical disorientation here. We want bar 40 to sound like the end of a two-bar unit and it nearly does, but it also becomes clear that it is equally the start of a new phrase and section. The correct academic term for this type of overlap is 'elision'. Deliberately and additionally unhelpful to our aural stability is the subsequent *sf* marking in bar 41 and beyond which succeeds in accenting what seems like the 'wrong' bars in the next series of phrases. By playing with our rhythmic and metric sensibilities Haydn is, yet again, having one of his little 'jokes'.

The Adagio begins with an anacrusis, something which it has in common with most of the movement. Bar 149 then follows with on beat demisemiquavers creating a bold Lombardic ('Scotch Snap') rhythm.

Finally, mention has to be made of the astonishing use of silence in the concluding Presto – certainly this is where Haydn plays his most daring and mischievous pranks. It is hard to imagine what the first audience must have made of the bizarre general pauses which fragment the tune, particularly the extended four-bar silence just after the point at bar 166 when our musical instinct suggests that the movement has finally run its course.

Further reading

If for your own interest and information you wish to look more deeply into Haydn's string quartets, consult C. Rosen, *The Classical Style* (London, rev. ed., 1976), pp. 111–142.

For broader background, plus bibliography, see *Stanley Sadie (ed): The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (Oxford, 2001).