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

Background

Haydn's string quartets 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, who issued them in 1782. An inventive 18th 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? What about H. C.

Robbins Landon's 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 any of these 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.

If for your own interest and information you wish to look more deeply into Haydn's string quartets, consult C. Rosen, *The Classical Style* (Faber & Faber, rev. ed., 1976), pages 111–142. For broader background, plus bibliography, see *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London, Macmillan, 2nd edition, 2001) – available online, e.g. at some major libraries.

Performance Forces and their Handling

The 'Joke', like all string quartets, is for

- Violin I, Violin II, Viola, 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's 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)
    - three parts in the second phrase of the refrain, first heard in bars 3–4).
- *Homophonic*:

o Very occasional *chordal* or *homorhythmic* movement (all parts sharing the same rhythm, as at the two pause chords in bars 139–140)
o Usually Violin I melody dominates, other parts accompanying with the same rhythm (e.g. at the beginning) – this is *melody-dominated homophony*.

In bars 112–116 (from the second episode) other parts take up the melody just heard in Violin I. This is not really *imitation*, however, because successive entries do not genuinely overlap

Structure

When considering structure, it is worth remembering that Haydn was a composer of incredible 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 wouldn't be Haydn if there were not some anomalies thrown in for good measure. Particularly problematic is the final A^1 section which includes an incongruous **Adagio** and much unsettling **fragmentation** of the main theme.

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.

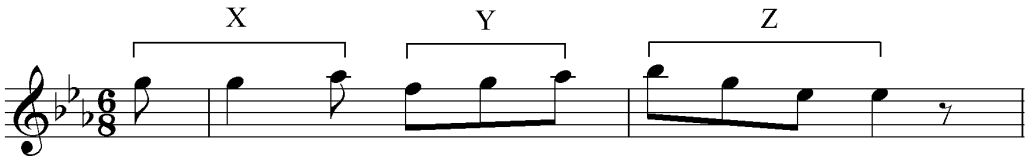
Melody

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 that the opening 8 bars to find a perfect (2 + 2 + 4) Classical phrase structure
- Much use of **scale** and **arpeggio** patterns – Bars 17- 21 is 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	Bars 26-27	**Chromatic rising sequence**
Y	Bars 59-62	Persistent repetition with comprising short term **descending sequences** contained within a longer term **rising sequence**
Z	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.

Tonality

Haydn's **functional tonality** is reinforced by the aforementioned **perfect cadences** and **pedals** (both **dominant** and **tonic** version can be found). Each Rondo section is firmly centred on the **tonic key** of **Eb major** and elsewhere Haydn restricts himself to **modulations to related keys**; here are some examples:-

Bars 37-47	**Ab Major**	**subdominant**
Bars 48-53	**F minor**	**supertonic minor**
Bars 64-68	**Bb Major**	**dominant**

Interestingly, throughout the movement he 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; thereby cleverly ensuring that intelligent use of functional tonality underpins the joyful mood.

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 22-3.

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, a mention has to be given to the astonishing use of **silence** in the concluding Presto – certainly this is where Haydn plays his most daring and mischievous pranks! It's 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 one's musical instincts tell one that the movement has finally run its course. Our familiarity with the music means that perhaps there's one last joke we miss – at that premiere performance on Christmas Day 1781 the longest "General Pause" of all could well have been the one that happened **after** the final note!