

Haydn and Spirituality

From “Exploring Haydn: A Listener’s Guide” by Daniel Hurwitz

Joseph Haydn had to be the first composer in history whose slow movements were as famous as – and if anything, even bigger attractions than – his quick ones. A good number of Haydn symphonies with nicknames take them from their slow movements, and there’s another, equally interesting fact related to the symphonies. Approximately forty of them have slow movements designated “adagio” or something similarly measured (*lento*, *largo*, *grave*); whereas out of fifty-one or so Mozart symphonies, only a single work (the “Linz” Symphony, No.36) contains an adagio, and it’s a “poco adagio” at that (*poco* means “a little bit” or “slightly”). Haydn’s cultivation of the symphonic adagio, therefore, is an important stylistic fingerprint, and it stems directly from his willingness to use musical materials of a non-vocal character or, as you also hear, his ability to use singable ideas in unusual ways.

The reason that you seldom find an adagio in a Mozart symphony stems from the fact that any instrumental piece in slow tempo based on song-type tunes needs to move at a “human” pace (basically *andante*, or walking, tempos) in order to preserve its vocal identity. The phrases have to breathe the way a singer would, particularly if the players are wind instruments, which operate on the same principle as the human voice and so need to pause regularly for breath. On the other hand, although Haydn wrote plenty of such “singing” *andantes* (the other 60-odd percent of his symphonies, in fact), his very slow movements – whether in sonata, variation, rondo, or some other form entirely – often feature a combination of hymn-like melodies of a religious nature, strange or evocative harmonies, and arresting sonorities found nowhere else among his works. In short, Haydn has a special “adagio style,” and through it he introduced instrumental music to an entirely new emotional world – that of the spiritual, or transcendental, becoming the first composer to reach beyond the standard happy/sad antithesis typical of most compositions without voices.

Haydn’s spirituality has been one of the least discussed and acknowledged aspects of both his character and his art. Everyone concedes that he was deeply religious but then usually goes on to say that he was “cheerful” and that his faith did not compromise his natural exuberance or high spirits. And why should it? Where is it written that all those with strong spiritual leanings have to be miserable, or austere, or inhibited? Aside from this obvious point, both scholars and commentators are not only uncomfortable discussing religion in general, often for purely personal reasons, they also have problems studying spiritual components in music within the commonly accepted vocabulary of theory and analysis. It’s all very subjective, they will tell you, and therefore beyond the sphere of legitimate subjects for consideration. Humor in music, for example, can be reduced to matters of timing, rhythm, dynamic contrasts, and harmonic surprise. There’s no guarantee a listener will get the joke, but at least it’s explicable. Transcendental qualities, on the other hand, would seem to offer nearly insuperable difficulties to the prospective analyst, despite the fact that most people today are probably far more open to the notion that music without words can express these feelings than they are to the possibility of its being truly funny.

And yet, Haydn himself stressed the “moral” character of his instrumental music. He began all his major works with the words “In Nomine Domini” (In the name of the

Lord) and concluded them with “*Laus Deo*” (Praise God), written directly into the score. He was the foremost composer of liturgical music of his age (although he would have accorded that honor to his brother Michael, who wound up with what would have been Mozart’s job in Salzburg). Of course, it’s one thing to describe religious music that purports to support a specific text and that belongs to a longstanding tradition, such as that of the Catholic church, and it’s quite another matter to attempt to quantify the vaguer, more generalized spiritual or sublime element in an abstract chamber or orchestral composition. Still, there’s no question that many of Haydn’s works in these genres express exactly this quality.

One example illustrates this very special type of instrumental writing, which not only enriched Haydn’s and Beethoven’s art but also had an inestimable impact on much later music, from Wagner (who was a big admirer of Haydn) to Bruckner, Mahler, the so-called Second Viennese School (Schoenberg, Berg, Webern), and beyond. This extract does not come from a symphony at all but from Haydn’s oratorio *The Creation*, the opening of which is a tone poem (probably the first legitimate example of that genre as well), *the Representation of Chaos*, which illustrates the biblical text: “and the earth was without form, and void.” In this prelude, Haydn achieves the paradox of creating music that portrays formlessness in a manner that is atmospheric, evocative, specific, and (believe it or not) formally satisfying. Here’s how he does it:

THE CREATION (1798)

Largo: The Representation of Chaos

The first thing to keep in mind is that *chaos* does not mean “noise and hysteria” but “disorder.” However, even before Haydn gets to that part, he needs his empty void, something music of all the arts is particularly well-suited to express. The piece opens with a loud octave C in all the instruments, whose range from low to high suggest both depth and distance, while the total lack of harmonic filler admirably qualifies this sound as a void. The initial attack and decrescendo, combined with the very large and weighty orchestration, also conveys a sense of brooding power. At a stroke, Haydn has provided listeners with the musical equivalent of a big, vacant space, and everything that comes afterward clearly appears to move within and around it.

Common sense dictates that in order to maintain the impression of disorder, Haydn will not write any symmetrical tunes. Instead, he offers a series of short motives that drift about unpredictably but nevertheless have very specific emotional qualities. The soft sound of muted strings that arises out of the void is intensely lonely and sad. This inchoate musical matter longs for order, for harmony, and suffers in its absence. But it is an other-worldly, suprahuman sorrow. (Similarly, the moment when God brings forth light represents, as depicted by the massed voices of the chorus and the full orchestra, a greater-than-human joy.) Some of the objects adrift in Haydn’s vacant musical cosmos include:

- a seven-note rising figure in triples, first on bassoon, then on viola;
- a heavy rhythm in the strings with sorrowful cries in oboes and flutes;
- a series of abrupt chords in the strings;

- a three-note dotted rhythm (dum, dadum) in oboes and horns over rippling clarinets, full of stabbing dissonance punctuated by heavy orchestral thuds.

After these motives pass from view an upward run on solo clarinet leads to the most remarkable passage yet, a genuine piece of “space music” featuring softly pulsating high violins and winds above low cells and basses, with nothing at all in the middle. Haydn, incidentally, when in England visited the famous astronomer (an oboist, and composer) William Herschel, discoverer of the planet Uranus. The two men discussed music as well as astronomy. It was while Haydn was gazing out into space, according to legend, that the first ideas for *The Creation* came to him, and he was evidently familiar with the Nebular Hypothesis (first proposed in 1775), which held that the planets gradually condensed out of clouds of dust and gas. It’s hard not to hear something similar to this idea in *Chaos*.

The space music gradually drifts toward a return to the movement’s opening gesture, but instead of a single blast of emptiness, Haydn hammers out seven rapid cannon shots in the triplet rhythm of the initial rising bassoon figure. The void, in other words, is no longer empty. The concluding moments clearly recapitulate the opening pages as all the initial motive return in varied form, suggesting not just aimless wandering but an imperceptible evolution and coalescence. At last desolate strings and solo flute bring the music to a mournful close in utter darkness, but in an unambiguous minor-key harmony that’s all the more powerful for being so soft and so stable. However hesitant and uncertain, the process of creation has begun, and all stand in readiness for the Divine Will to make itself manifest.

This astonishing piece of music, although admirably illustrative of its subject, in fact relies on quite a few stylistic fingerprints with which you are already familiar: the lack of literal repetition, the shortened recapitulation, unexpected harmonies and rhythms, asymmetrical phrases, soloistic scoring for wind instruments, and above all, an avoidance of anything like a sing-able tune. The very slow tempo sets all these traits into high relief, and this, combined with the fact that there are no obvious external references at all (to nature, for example) creates the music’s “spacey” feel.