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Haydn's Opus 33 Number 4: A Neglected Masterpiece?

In: Internationales musikwissenschaftliches Symposium „Haydn & Das Streichquartett“. Im Rahmen des „Haydn Streichquartett Weekend“ Eisenstadt, 1.–5. Mai 2002. Referate und Diskussionen. Hrsg. von Georg Feder und Walter Reicher. Eisenstädter Haydn-Berichte. Veröffentlichungen der Internationalen Joseph Haydn Privatstiftung Eisenstadt, Band 2. Tutzing, Hans Schneider 2003, S. 123 – 138.

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INTRODUCTION

Although Haydn's Opus 33 is one of the most famous sets of string quartets in the repertoire, perhaps only numbers two ('The Joke') and three ('The Bird') are especially well known to performers or music lovers generally. The rest of the set are heard relatively infrequently in concert. Indeed, it probably takes a festival such as the present one for all six quartets to receive live performances. Similar neglect is apparent in the literature, which, since the time of Adolf Sandberger in 1899, has concerned itself more with debate about the significance of Haydn's famous description of his Opus 33, in letters to various potential clients, as composed 'in a new and special way', than about the merits of the individual quartets which make up the opus.¹ About the string quartet Op. 33 no. 4 in B flat major in particular, the present writer knows of only Donald Francis Tovey, H. C. Robbins Landon, Charles Rosen, and Reginald Barrett-Ayres amongst the authors of major studies of the classical era who have a kind, if very brief, word to say.² Other studies either ignore no. 4 altogether or, in the case of Hans Keller, apply the 'coup de grace' by declaring the work unworthy of a place in a serious study of Haydn's great quartets.³

* Grateful thanks are due to Roger Bigley, of the Royal Northern College of Music, and David Wyn Jones, of Cardiff University, for reading a draft of this paper and making helpful suggestions.

¹ A description of the origins of the debate and its continuation in the literature up to 1976 is provided by H. C. Robbins Landon, *Haydn: Chronicle and Works*, vol. 2: *Haydn at Eszterháza 1766–1790*, London 1978, p. 578. See also John Irving, *Reading Haydn's Quartets*, in: *Haydn the Innovator: A New Approach to the String Quartets*, ed. by David Young, Todmorden, Lancs., 2000, pp. 11–31.

² Donald Francis Tovey, *Haydn*, in: *Cobbett's Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music*, vol. 1, London 1980; Landon, *op. cit.*, p. 581; Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style*, London 1971; Reginald Barrett Ayres, *Joseph Haydn and the String Quartet*, London 1974. See also Ludwig Finscher, *Studien zur Geschichte des Streichquartetts*, vol. 1: *Die Entstehung des klassischen Streichquartetts. Von den Vorformen zur Grundlegung durch Joseph Haydn*, Kassel 1974, pp. 252 ff.

³ Hans Keller, *The Great Haydn Quartets: Their Interpretation*, London and Melbourne 1986, p. 7.

THE FIRST MOVEMENT

If there is a problem with number 4, and clearly there was in the judgement of Keller, it lies especially with the first movement, which is quite unlike any other movement by Haydn in its highly eccentric features. The most curious of these may be listed as follows:

1. The movement, in 4/4 metre, opens on the half bar. No other Haydn quartet begins in such a way. (See appendix to this essay, example.)
2. The opening passage features seemingly inappropriate harmonic and cadential rhythms, in that quick-fire, cadential, dominant-tonic chords appear the wrong way round, in strong-weak rhythmic progressions instead of the more orthodox weak-strong (bars 1-2, 3-4 etc). Moreover, the opening harmony of dominant seventh chord in third inversion gives the impression of a piece beginning after it has begun.
3. The primary material seemingly ends unconvincingly and inconclusively (bars 7-13), as if Haydn is still searching for that elusive, firmly articulated perfect cadence.
4. Stylistic inconsistencies may be perceived in the way in which, in contradistinction to the opening period, the transitional and secondary sections proceed with orthodox harmonic and cadential rhythms—notice, for the first time, the firmly articulated cadence between bars 16 and 17 and the strong perfect cadence between bars 25 and 26.
5. However, at the start of the development section there is a return to the type of seemingly inappropriate harmonic and cadential rhythms witnessed in the opening period (bars 31-33).
6. Again in contradistinction to what has gone before, the rest of the development section is taken up with regular modulatory sequences in which harmonic, surface, and cadential rhythms behave in orthodox manner (bars 34-48).
7. The recapitulation enters in apparently awkward fashion, after a false start in E flat, and in mid phrase (bars 48-53 ff.).
8. As a consequence of the apparently awkward phrase structures which have been a characteristic of much of the movement so far, the recapitulated secondary material changes its

position so that instead of beginning on the half bar it begins at the beginning of the bar (bars 64 ff.).

A CONTEXTUAL INTERPRETATION

Humour has long been recognized as an important ingredient of Haydn's instrumental music. That contemporary audiences appreciated this feature is well documented.⁴ Also widely accepted is the view that comedy, wit, and humour were elements which Haydn may well have had in mind when describing Op. 33 as 'composed in a new a special way.' In many instances, Haydn must have been aiming his witticisms at players and listeners well acquainted with the normal conventions of the contemporary style, for the humour lies in playing against these expectations. As examples we may cite no. 1, which begins in D major before proceeding with ambiguous hesitations to B minor, the real key of the piece—whereas the normal convention was, of course, to define the true key at the outset. (The ambiguous tonal opening was an idea Haydn was to return to in Op. 64 no. 2.) Quartet no. 2 begins with a four-bar phrase and continuous line, which is immediately perceived as the norm, before breaking the norm with fragments of the phrase interrupted by tiny interjections from the inner 'voices', in a manner reminiscent of the techniques of opera buffa. Number 3 begins before it has begun—that is, with a bar of accompaniment with nothing to accompany. Other examples are less subtle than these. The famous ending of no. 2, with its long pauses between apparently concluding fragments, resorts to humour of the most obvious sort.

Needless to say, these examples of humour are by no means the first or last by Haydn in the quartet or any other instrumental genre, especially symphony, piano trio, and sonata. Even in the

⁴ Cf., for example, the definition of humour in Haydn's music provided by his contemporary C. F. Michaelis, Ueber das Humoristische oder Launige in der musikalischen Komposition, in: *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* (1806–7), cols. 725–29, cited in: Steven E. Paul, *Comedy, Wit, and Humor in Haydn's Instrumental Music*, in: Jens Peter Larsen, Howard Serwer, and James Webster (eds.), *Haydn Studies: Proceedings of the International Haydn Conference* Washington, D. C., 1975, New York and London 1981, pp. 450–56. See also Charles Rosen's perceptive discussion of humour in classical music in op. cit., pp. 94 ff.

landmark string quartets Op. 20, which we tend to associate with rather serious, contrapuntal devices, there are examples of a lighter side, as in the finale of no. 1, or even in the fugal finale of no. 6. It can be argued, however, that no earlier set of quartets has had such a rich and varied fund of comic devices and that this feature may well have been one of the elements which Haydn had in mind when describing Op. 33 as being composed in a new and special way.

AN INTERPRETATION OF THE FIRST MOVEMENT

With these brief, contextual thoughts in mind we can revisit and reinterpret the movement's curious features, but now perhaps not so much from the point of view of a series of possibly unsatisfactory gestures but more as a series of witty plays upon expectations of what constitutes the norm in musical style. Thus the opening passage already quoted immediately goes against expectations by beginning as if in mid phrase and consequently on the 'wrong' part of the bar and by reversing normal harmonic and cadential rhythms. (This manner of beginning as if after it has begun perhaps acts as the counterpart to Op. 33 no. 3, which, as described above, appears to begin *b e f o r e* it has begun. Perhaps Daniel Weber had these examples in mind when referring, in 1800, to the 'artful imitation of musical incompetence'.⁵ The so-called unconvincing and inconclusive cadences at the end of the primary material repeatedly frustrate expectations in humorous manner but also set a crucial structural procedure, in that the low, apparently isolated D in bar 13 serves as the fundamental of the dominant seventh harmony leading to G minor and subsequently to the dominant key F major for the secondary material. Moreover, this little figure (hereafter referred to as 'the motive') assumes increasing structural significance as the movement progresses. (A version of this motive is destined to appear twelve years later in Op. 71 no. 3, first movement.) It is passed continuously between the two lower strings and the second violin for much of the development section, and, in the recapitulation, it acts, in both original and inverted form,

⁵ Ueber komische Charakteristik und Karrikatur in praktischen Musikwerken, in: *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* (1800–01), cols. 137–43. See also Leonard G. Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form, Style*, New York 1980, p. 387.

in place of the transition as the sole link between primary and secondary material (bar 63). It also adds an element to the second subject in the recapitulation (bars 64 and 65). The 'correct' harmonic and phrase rhythms of the transitional and secondary sections 'explain' the joke of the opening as well as reversing the more usual classical procedure of regularity followed by irregularity. The joke is driven home in the development section, where 'awkward', irregular procedures (bars 31–34) are followed by a long passage of regular, modulatory sequences, beginning in E flat, and passing through G minor, C minor, (F major), D minor, and back to E flat. At which point, having come full circle, Haydn introduces a false reprise in E flat. The wit takes on a satirical element here as Haydn, playing the incompetent, corrects his 'mistake' and continues the phrase with the true recapitulation, and in so doing shows the trickster's slight of hand. (This satirical feature of a 'mistake' corrected perhaps anticipates the first movement of Beethoven's eighth symphony, where, in the exposition, several 'wrong turns' are 'corrected'.) By this stage of the quartet players and listeners should be ready for anything, and so the change of position in the bar at the recapitulation of the secondary material (bars 64 ff.) should, once again, take on the mantle of comedy. One of the most delightful comic touches is yet to come. This is where a long dominant pedal is alternated between cello and viola whilst the violins, playing a decorated version of the motive, try to escape, in a manner reminiscent once again of opera buffa (bars 72–76). To turn an essential structural device such as a dominant pedal into a comic turn (literally!) in this manner may be seen as further evidence of a skilful comedian at work. The high spirits continue to the end of the movement where the most emphatic perfect cadences so far in the lower strings fail to bring the first violin to order. Only the coda brings final resolution.

Perhaps the humorous elements, the tricks and surprises in Op. 33 generally and no. 4 in particular are indications of a composer full of confidence, and Haydn had plenty of justification for such confidence, for he had mastered all aspects of his craft completely over a long period of time, and had established a formidable reputation through, in particular, his symphonies, keyboard trios and sonatas, and, of course, string quartets opp. 1, 2, 9, 17, and 20. (Moreover, as inferred above, Haydn's experience with comic opera—e. g. "Lo speciale" of 1768, "L'infedeltà delusa" of 1773, or "Il mondo della luna" of 1777—may well have

had some influence on the quartets' jokes, both in their nature and timing.)

SECOND, THIRD, AND FOURTH MOVEMENTS

The rest of the quartet probably requires less interpretation. The graceful Scherzo is notable in two respects: firstly, for the way in which both it and its adjoining (unnamed) Trio are constructed almost entirely from the rhythm of the opening two bars in each case; and secondly from the key of the Trio section—B flat minor, one flat in excess of the normal classical limit of four flats, and thus acting as the flat-side counterpart to the Trio of Op. 33 no. 1, in B major, one sharp in excess of the normal classical limit of four sharps.

The slow movement, in Haydn's slowest tempo of Largo, shares with the slow movements of nos. 2 and 3 qualities which are rather different from the conventional aria, or arioso, style which we find in so many of the earlier quartets (and also, to a degree, in nos. 1 and 6); here we have expressive melody with a full, rich, integral texture; we also find that motivic development is just as important in the lower parts as in the top line. Although similar examples can be found in earlier quartets (Op. 9 no. 5 or Op. 20 no. 3, for example) this type of slow movement is destined to become especially characteristic of Haydn's subsequent quartets (as in Op. 64 no. 5 or Op. 74 no. 3, to cite just two more examples), and to have such a powerful effect on later composers, especially Beethoven.

The humour of the finale is self-evident. In its rapid pace, rondo form, and reliance on surface jokes, it is perhaps a companion to the finales of nos. 2 and 3. In the present finale we find a full complement of tricks: octave stretching of leaps, unexpected silences, fragmentation of motives. And of course, the feature for which the quartet is best known: the soft pizzicato ending, the master comedian's most perfect final touch.⁶

However, for all the present writer's advocacy of Op. 33 no. 4, a lingering doubt remains, in that, if one stands back and con-

⁶ On the finale see especially Georg Feder, *Haydn's Streichquartette: Ein musikalischer Werkführer*, Munich 1998, pp. 62–63.

siders the work as a whole, a relative lack of variety in the textures becomes apparent. In short, the first violin is the leading voice for most of the time without much change of function, and there is perhaps less emphasis on shared thematic development between the four instruments as a whole than one finds in the other quartets of Op. 33.⁷

CONCLUSION

Even if Op. 33 no. 4 does not stand comparison with the rest of the set in terms of variety of texture or richness of 'dialogue', the work perhaps deserves recognition as a significant component in Haydn's development as a quartet composer. Although later quartets can boast combinations of humour and pathos, perhaps few can lay claim to a more potent, and varied, mix of comic devices. In short, it is the present writer's proposal that the comedy, wit and satire of the first movement, the grace and beauty of the Scherzo, the depth of expression of the Largo, and the boisterous humour of the finale commend the quartet as a singular achievement.

⁷ For a discussion of textural variety in Op. 33 see Denis McCaldin, *The First Movements*, in: Young (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.43-46. The present writer is especially grateful to David Wyn Jones for helping him to temper his enthusiasm for the work with a more balanced critical view than he might otherwise have adopted.

Ex.

Allegro moderato

The musical score is arranged in four systems, each with four staves. The instruments are Violino I, Violino II, Viola, and Violoncello. The key signature is one flat (F major), and the time signature is 3/4. The tempo is marked 'Allegro moderato'. The score includes various dynamic markings: *p* (piano), *f* (forte), and *sfz* (sforzando). Trills (*tr*) are indicated above certain notes in the Violino I and II parts. Accents (*^*) are placed above notes in the Violino I, II, and Viola parts. The first system covers measures 1-4, the second system covers measures 5-8, the third system covers measures 9-12, and the fourth system covers measures 13-16. The Violoncello part has a *[f]* marking at the end of the first system.

Joseph Haydn, Op. 33 no. 4, first movement, bars 1–16.

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17

20

24

28

31

Joseph Haydn, Op. 33 no. 4, first movement, bars 17-35.

36

39

42

45

48

Joseph Haydn, Op. 33 no. 4, first movement, bars 36–51.

52

56

61

65

68

Joseph Haydn, Op. 33 no. 4, first movement, bars 52–70.

71

75

79

82

(85)

Joseph Haydn, Op. 33 no. 4, first movement, bars 71–89.

Diskussion (Leitung: Georg Feder)

Georg Feder

Recht vielen Dank, Herr Young, für diese schöne Analyse besonders des ersten Satzes mit seinen Techniken der Überraschung, der Verfremdung, der Entfernung von der Konvention.

Wenn ich mir eine Frage erlauben darf bezüglich des Einflusses der komischen Oper auf die komischen Züge in Haydns Quartetten: Ich habe mich oft gefragt, ob dieser Einfluss bewiesen werden kann oder nicht? Ich habe Haydns komische Opern studiert, „Marchese“, „Canterina“, „Speziale“ usw. und mich oft gefragt, warum sie so wenig von der Technik des instrumentalen Komischen enthalten. So würde ich gern einer Abhandlung entgegensehen, welche einmal die komischen Züge in Haydns Streichquartetten oder Sinfonien mit den Techniken der Opera buffa in seinem Schaffen vergleicht.

David Young

I would also welcome such a study. I have to confess that my feeling for some kind of relationship with opera buffa is more instinctive than carefully analytical. It just reminds me of some of the techniques of comic timing in opera buffa, particularly, for example, in ensemble.

James Webster

My opinion is that the relations to comic opera are more evident in symphonies of the middle, late seventies and the early eighties than in the string quartets. Haydn was not composing string quartets between 1772 and 1781. In the symphonies there are uses of overtures and other actual, tangible relations and many of these symphonies are humorous in a way that reminds me of Haydn's comic stage action. My feeling about these quartets is that of course humour is central to them and that the humour operates in the quartets much faster, on a more motivic level, on a level that I don't find it in the opera scores and also don't find so much in the symphonies of the same period. And so it

seems to me that the humour in the quartet is qualitatively different. But I too would be interested in the study in question.

Georg Feder

Ich würde dem zustimmen, besonders was die Bemerkung über das Tempo anbelangt. Ich glaube, dass in der Musik die Schnelligkeit des Denkens etwas ganz Wichtiges ist und dass das Denkt tempo in Haydns Opere buffe langsamer als in seinen Streichquartetten ist.

Rupert Scott

First of all, I like to share Dr. Young's admiration for this magnificent quartet. I remember one of Hans Keller's series when I was a student at the Royal Academy of Music. Keller came to talk to us and he was very keen on the foreground and the background of expectancy and the composer confounding expectancy. And it seems to me while talking about humour there are really two different things: the irony of confounding expectations—the phrase structure and the harmony at the beginning—and the genuine comic elements, what one might call opera buffa techniques such as the three notes when the cello is left behind. It makes one laugh. It is rather a different type, maybe a more obvious type of humour.

Gerald Hessenberger

Können Sie Beispiele geben für ähnliche Anfänge im sinfonischen Schaffen, also z. B. dafür, dass die harmonische Spannung anders herum als erwartet ist? Gibt es solche Anfänge in den Sinfonien?

James Webster

There are, but they tend to be beginnings of first movements following slow introductions. For example the so called "Surprise Symphony" ("Mit dem Paukenschlag") begins off the tonic after the slow introduction. Also a number of symphonic finales: no. 86, no. 62, no. 81. There are quite a few. Now, one might object that's not the the initial beginning of a fast first

movement and so perhaps it is not entirely clear that that is really an analogy.

David Young

I cannot think of a symphonic first movement which is as comparable as the examples from finales which have been already given. I'd like to point to the finale of symphony no. 70 which begins with the very high repeated D in the violins as if coming from nowhere followed by rich harmony and another very high D. And the question is: What is high D doing here? How did it get here? Where did it come from? Where is it going? And that is in my view high humour. Where is he going? At least to a fantastic triple fugue.

N. N.

Although the high D returns at the end of that movement in fact that movement has always struck me as an example of comic opera-like traits in a symphonic movement.

William Drabkin

I'd like to continue my role as devil's advocate here. First of all, to thank you for rescuing this work from the status of non-greatness, but also to say something in defence of the great Hans Keller who's not here to explain why he didn't include Op. 33 no. 4. I think it was provocative of him to exclude it, if also somewhat irresponsible of him not to explain at a greater length why he didn't include it. I would say it would be very unlikely for Keller to have rejected this work on the basis of what goes on in the first movement. I suspect what he would have objected to would be things that come later in the quartet. And I would just say that there is a difference between a piece of music being great and not great, or given that status, and a piece of music about which a writer may have something to say in words or not have something to say. It may just be that Keller didn't know what to say about the piece or perhaps not know what to say about it after the first movement.

David Young

My object was not to criticise Hans Keller. It was just to share my perception. Very briefly how I came to this work. (I shared this with you before.) When I was planning a course on Haydn's string quartets for the "HaydnFest '99" which was held in Manchester I wanted to represent the example of Op. 33 and I was particularly struck by no. 4. Having delivered the lecture on the quartet, I then turned to Hans Keller's book which I hadn't really looked at before and to my shock and amazement—he dismissed it as unworthy. So I thought to myself either I have a peculiar talent for backing a loser, which is quite possible, or there are things in the work which deserve to be discussed. Nowhere in my paper have I described Op. 33 no. 4 as a great work; when I put the question I decided to leave it open. But I certainly think it is a significant work and well worthy of serious consideration and performance.

James Webster

I would guess that Hans Keller might have disliked the development section in the first movement for it's rigidly sequential in character.

William Drabkin

I like to go back and defend myself. That happens in Op. 20 no. 2 and I don't think you'd complain about that piece. He doesn't dismiss the work. He says that Op. 33 no. 4 almost makes it but it doesn't maintain the high quality of Haydn throughout. I think that's his words.

Friedhelm Krummacher

Für die Abschlussdiskussion würde ich vorschlagen, dass wir Op. 33 Nr. 4 als Diskussionsbeispiel nehmen.

Georg Feder

Ich danke den Referenten für Ihre sehr anregenden Referate. Ich danke den Damen und Herren, die sich an dieser Sitzung beteiligt und die sich zu Wort gemeldet haben, und ich wünsche Ihnen jetzt ein angenehmes Konzert.