

FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN

Born March 31, 1732 in Rohrau, Lower Austria; died May 31, 1809 in Vienna

Symphony No. 68 in B-flat major (1778)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Esterházy Palace, Hungary, 1778

Franz Joseph Haydn, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 21 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: two oboes, two bassoons, two horns and strings

Since Haydn's name is so closely associated with the genres of instrumental music, it is perhaps surprising to learn that in the year he apparently wrote this Symphony — 1778 — he was one of the busiest opera producers in Europe. As part of his duties at the Esterházy Palace, he was not only responsible for the regular Tuesday and Saturday orchestral concerts (for which this work was written), but he was also in charge of the opera and marionette theaters. He composed music for each of these functions, organized the repertory and performers, oversaw the music library and instrument collections, and conducted the performances. To say that he was busy is to seriously understate his situation. On March 10, 1778, the Pauli Company, a group of itinerant players, took up residence at the palace to present plays for the noble audience (for which Haydn also provided incidental music). From the date of the troupe's arrival until three days before Christmas, there was a German play, an Italian opera or a German marionette opera at the Palace every night except Easter or when the Prince was not in residence. In 1786, Haydn conducted 125 performances of seventeen operas, eight of them premieres. So great was the Prince's love of opera that, when fire gutted the opera house on November 18, 1779, he had the ground cleared and a new corner stone laid within a month. While construction went forward on the new building — grander, of course, than the original — the entire company was moved into the closer confines of the marionette theater, whose stage was specially renovated to accommodate the full-size singers.

All of this operatic activity meant that Haydn had less time to devote to the symphonic form than in previous years. The symphonies of the decade following 1774 show little of the incipient Romantic spirit of the works of the preceding "*Sturm und Drang*" ("*Storm and Stress*") period, with their minor keys and compressed emotionalism. Many of the post-1774 symphonies were written in a deliberately unaffected, popular style. Those were the years of Haydn's growing European notoriety, and such a work as this Symphony No. 68 seems to have been written with a more general audience in mind than the group of devoted connoisseurs at Esterházy Palace. The late Haydn authority H.C. Robbins Landon had some disparaging things to say about the "great master sacrificing his art for the sake of public acclaim," but the true measure of this Symphony is not that it fails to scale the peaks of the Paris or London sets, but that it shows such craftsmanship, style and wit at a time when Haydn was busier than at any other in his life.

The opening movement is a compact, almost nonchalant, sonata-allegro. The main theme is trotted out by violins in thirds before the double reeds have their chance with it. The second theme, full of little graces, appears over pizzicato basses and a ticking accompaniment in second violins and violas. A brief and uneventful development utilizes both themes. The recapitulation recalls the first theme (with oboes doubling the violins), after which the remainder of the movement proceeds apace, ending without deliberation.

For reasons of structural balance, the minuet is placed second rather than third in this Symphony. It is a straightforward demonstration of this hardy dance species, with its main point of interest being some surprising but rather contrived dynamics sprinkled upon the central trio. The following *Adagio* is a sprawling sonata form whose incessant accompanimental rhythms look forward to the great Symphony No. 101 ("The Clock") of 1794. The finale is one of Haydn's rollicking hybrids: part rondo, part variations. The rondo theme, a chunky, little, no-nonsense ditty, is tossed off without introduction by the full orchestra. This same theme then serves as the basis for some resourceful elaborations. First the bassoons have a go at it. After another traversal of the rondo theme, the oboes get their turn. Further displays of the rondo theme and more of its variations lead to a disintegrating phrase which is followed by a curious section marked "Echo Solo" in the score. In these measures, various of the orchestral instruments quietly bandy about a thematic fragment before the entire ensemble joins in for the final sprint to the finish.