

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Symphony No. 80 in D minor

Joseph Haydn

In 1761 Joseph Haydn took a step that would define the course of his career — and, by extension, the course of Western musical history. That spring he accepted the post of Vice-Kapellmeister (assistant musical director) for the Esterházy princes, immensely powerful Austrian-Hungarian aristocrats who ruled over vast expanses of Central Europe. Five years later, he was elevated to the post of Kapellmeister. At first, he made the rounds of the Esterházy palaces in Vienna, Eisenstadt (some 30 miles to the southeast), and Kitsee, overlooking the Danube. After 1766 the court largely relocated to the Versailles-like palace Prince Nikolaus Esterházy built in Esterháza, in a remote expanse of Hungary, and that is where Haydn spent most of his time until Nikolaus's death in 1790, when a princely succession spelled an interruption in the court's cultural program.

In his first years at the helm, Haydn was occupied composing new works for his musicians' use and his prince's delectation. As he later recalled of these years, in an interview with his biographer Georg August Griesinger:

My sovereign was satisfied with all my endeavors. I was assured of applause and, as head of an orchestra, was able to experiment, to find out what enhances and detracts from effect, in other words, to improve, add, delete, and try out. As I was shut off from the world, no one in my surroundings would vex and confuse me, and so I was destined for originality.

From his earliest Esterházy years through to his late "London" symphonies of three and

a half decades later, Haydn was constantly evolving as a symphonist. By the time he wrote his Symphony No. 80, Haydn had traversed considerable distance in his experimentation with the genre. Following a flurry of early symphonies that exude the charm of a post-Baroque or proto-Classical sort, he had become captivated with minor-key symphonies with dramatically delineated phrases and abrupt changes of character. By the mid-1770s his fascination with that idiom had run its course (although he had internalized some of its characteristics so they became part of his ongoing style), and he returned to a less confrontational language in his symphonies. Minor modes became rare; from 1784, when he wrote his Symphony No. 80, through to his last symphonies (in 1795), he would enrich the genre by 26 works, only three of which are in minor keys.

IN SHORT

Born: March 31, 1732 — almost certainly, since he was baptized on April 1 — in Rohrau, Lower Austria

Died: May 31, 1809, in Vienna

Work composed: 1784

World premiere: March 13, 1785, at a Lenten concert of the Tonkünstlersozietät (Composers Society) in Vienna

New York Philharmonic premiere: October 21, 1951, Dimitri Mitropoulos, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: February 7, 1954, Dimitri Mitropoulos, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 20 minutes

At the outset, this D-minor Symphony seems as if it may be revisiting Haydn's earlier hyper-expressivity, but after the punchy opening, it adheres to a less extreme style, even arriving at its eventual cadence through a gentle passage in which the flute and first violins seem to be dancing a little *Ländler*. Even if he largely eschews extreme contrasts, Haydn in no way pulls back on his originality. The opening movement unrolls with several "paragraphs" separated by rhythmic gaps (these are actually measured out precisely as rests, but a listener will probably hear them as unmeasured pauses), and sometimes they start up again in unanticipated harmonic regions. The second movement is altogether less discombobulating, adhering to the long-spanning galant style popular in the day; the *Menuetto* recalls the first movement through its initial minor-key

pronouncements and then its more bucolic major-key *Trio* section, where the oboe and horn (and then flute and bassoon) duet above a rustling string figure. Haydn's musical wit has its moments in the sun, too — very strikingly in the off-balance rhythms that begin and then pervade the *Finale*, where they often set off good-humored scurrying by the violins.

This is one of three symphonies Haydn wrote in 1784. That year he was also approached with a commission to write a group of symphonies for a concert series in distant Paris, where he had become more famous than he realized. Those six "Paris" symphonies (Nos. 82–87) would usher the genre into the next brilliant phase of its history.

Instrumentation: flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, and strings.

Haydn + Mozart

The Tonkünstlersozietät (Composers Society) in Vienna produced annual concerts to raise money for pensions that were offered as part of its members' insurance. It could be a thorny organization. Haydn was a member for a while. He resigned when the society started demanding that he contribute works to their events for free, but he continued to accept paying commissions from them.

As the group planned its 1785 installment, its management was considering admitting Mozart, who had moved to Vienna in 1781 and was riding a wave of popularity in his adopted city. Red tape needed to be overcome. The Society's minutes noted:

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart seeks admission to the Society; but can at the moment not present his certificate of Baptism, which he promises to bring later / remains however meanwhile in suspension, partly in the absence of a certificate of Baptism, and furthermore until the settlement of general disputes within the Society.



As part of the admission process, the organization commissioned Mozart to provide a new piece for the concert — his cantata *Davide penitente*, which (the minutes state) would be performed at the upcoming performances on March 13 and 15; the document goes on to say that the concert "is to be opened with a new Symphony in D minor by Mr. Joseph Haydn."

Haydn and Mozart crossed paths in Vienna in the 1780s