

Opus 20, the "Sun" Quartets

"The next set of quartets was known to contemporaries by two titles: *die Grossen-Quartette* and *die Sonnen-Quartette*. Great they are and, even after op. 17, a sunrise over the domain of sonata style as well as of quartets in particular. Every page of the six quartets of op. 20 is of historic and aesthetic importance; and though the total results still leave Haydn with a long road to travel, there is perhaps no single or sextuple opus in the history of instrumental music which has achieved so much or achieved it so quietly." - Sir Donald Francis Tovey

Opus 20 was written at the end of a three- or four-year period during which Haydn also composed his quartets Opp. 9 and 17. The reason for their composition is unknown, but there is one interesting suggestion. In 1771, the year before Op. 20 appeared, a North German critic had lumped Haydn together with half a dozen other composers and complained of the "emptiness, the strange mixture of comic and serious, of the trifling and the moving" in their works and he went on to deplore their "great ignorance of counterpoint". This criticism must have stung Haydn deeply. In an autobiographic sketch written in 1776, Haydn said that his works were enjoyed everywhere except in Berlin, where "they are incapable of performing some of my works, and are too conceited to take the trouble to understand them properly". Op. 20 could have been a response to such criticism. A number of points support this. Three of the quartets end with fugues and counterpoint plays an important roll in all of them. There is certainly nothing in them that could be called empty. On the other hand, the mixture of comic and serious elements is quite blatant, particularly in No. 4; this was an important part of his style, so on that point there could be no compromise.

This interpretation could also explain certain curious details. Haydn marked certain passages in the fugues where the theme appears in inverted form with the inscription "al rovescio" (Italian, "reversed"), while a passage in canon is marked "in canone". In the third movement of No. 5, he put Baroque figured bass numbers under the cello part and wrote "per figuram retardationis" over the first violin part to indicate that notes required by the indicated harmonies are delayed by the figuration in the violin part. This would not mean much to the players, but it could have served to tweak the noses of his critics.

There are many interesting features of the set as a whole. It was normal for Haydn to write one quartet in each set of six in a minor key, but Op. 20 has two: No. 3 in G minor and No. 5 in F minor. It was usual for the slow movement of a sonata-type work to be in a contrasting key to the rest of the movements, usually the dominant if the key was major; but in each group of six, Haydn usually wrote one or two quartets with all the movements having the same tonic and with the slow movement in the opposite mode (e.g. a C minor slow movement in a C major quartet or a G major slow movement in a G minor quartet). Here, four of the

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quartets have the same tonic for each movement. Three of the quartets follow the practice of Opp. 9 and 17 in putting the minuet in second place, but the other three place it third.

The standard sequence comes from the complete edition published by Pleyel and is based on the first Amsterdam and London editions. Haydn's personal catalog of his works lists them in the order 5, 6, 2, 3, 4, 1 relative to the standard order. This puts the three quartets with fugues in ascending order of the number of subjects at the beginning and the two minor-key quartets at the start of the first and second halves of the collection. Studies of the paper of the autograph manuscripts confirm that the first three were written on the same type of paper. This is the order that will be followed in the discussions of the individual quartets that follows. When Arteria published a two-part edition of Op. 20 in 1800 and 1801, supposedly with the composer's input, the sequence was 1, 6, 5, and 4, 2, 3, moving the minor key works to the ends of the two halves. The autograph manuscripts, which were collected by Johannes Brahms, are separate and unnumbered and so provide no clues to the intended sequence other than those derived from the paper on which they are written.

Early editions of Op. 20 were published in Paris (1774), Amsterdam (1779), and London (1778-1780). The nickname "Sun" quartets comes from the image of a sunburst-framed face, presumably meant to represent the god Apollo, on the title page of the Amsterdam edition.

The edition published by Arteria in 1800 and 1801 bore a dedication to Baron Nikolaus Zmeskall von Domanovecz, best known as a life-long close friend of Beethoven's and the dedicatee of his Op 95, *Quartetto Serioso*, and other works.

Whatever the reason for their composition, Haydn obviously took considerable care in writing these six quartets. He must have seen them as a musical calling card or resumé that would demonstrate his compositional skills and his imagination. His joy and sense of achievement at completing each of them can be gauged by the inscriptions he added at the end of each quartet. He normally ended his works with a simple *Laus Deo*, "Praise God", and this is the inscription at the end of No. 5. As he went on, the inscriptions became more elaborate. They are given below after the discussion of each quartet.

"With op. 20 the historical development of Haydn's quartets reaches its goal; further progress is not progress in any historical sense, but simply the difference between one masterpiece and the next. Not all the later quartets are equally valuable; inequalities of value are relatively more than less noticeable, and no later set of six quartets, not even op. 76 is, on its own plane, so uniformly weighty and so varied in substance as op 20." - Sir Donald Francis Tovey