

Opus 20 No. 6 in A Major

Quartet No. 6 in the current numbering, ending with a fugue with three subjects, was listed second in Haydn's catalog. The opening measure of the first movement is actually a variation on the opening of the preceding F minor quartet. This underlines both the many similarities and the differences between the two works. Where the earlier quartet maintained a calm and serious demeanor, the present work is bursting with energy. The first movement of the F minor quartet was in a moderate common time; that of the present quartet is in a lively 6/8. The slow movement, in the dominant key of E major, is placed second instead of third; this was the first time that Haydn used this sequence in a string quartet, although this didn't become the standard order until Op. 50.

First Movement: Allegro di molto e Scherzando. The opening measure ties this quartet to the F minor quartet; but where the first movement of the earlier quartet was monothematic, the present quartet has no fewer than five themes and new material is introduced in the development, which is otherwise based mainly on the opening theme. Such a wealth of ideas is more commonly associated with Mozart than with Haydn. The second group starts unexpectedly in E minor, the dominant minor key, before turning to major. In the recapitulation, the restatement of the opening theme as well as the second group is given in A minor. Unlike the F minor quartet, where the recapitulation was expanded by continuing the development of the main theme, the recapitulation of the opening theme is here reduced from twenty-one to just eleven bars by reducing the restatement of the opening theme.

Second Movement: Adagio. The slow movement, now in second place, ambles along in a binary form. The first refrain is repeated with variations while the second refrain is only played once. The first refrain has a second theme which is recapitulated in the tonic in the second refrain, making a type of sonata form.

Carl Philip Emanuel Bach had published a set of six keyboard sonatas with varied repeats in 1760. Haydn may have been inspired by this to write this slow movement in sonata form with varied repeats, but where Bach had provided varied repeat of both halves of his sonata movements, Haydn only repeats the first half.

Third Movement: Menuet. In the minuet, Haydn plays a trick on the listener by using the opening phrase (which is a variation on the opening of the first movement) as the last phrase of the second refrain as if it was in rounded binary form, but this is followed by the end of the minuet and not the next phrase as an attentive listener (and Prince Nicolas Esterházy was certainly an attentive listener!) might expect. He used a more elaborate form of the same idea in the last movement of Op. 33 No. 3, the familiar "Joke" quartet, as part of the setup for confusing the listener about when the movement actually ends.

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The trio section, in A major like the minuet, is a real trio, scored for the first violin, viola, and cello. The first three measures (not even the first phrase!) of the trio return in the second refrain, but they are followed by new material rather than the rest of the first refrain; so, like the minuet, the trio isn't quite in rounded binary form either.

Fourth Movement: Fuga con 3 Soggetti. The final fugue continues the lighter and more energetic character of the rest of the quartet. In the exposition, the first violin begins with the first subject followed by the third subject (little more than a slow trill) and second (a descending scale). The second violin and viola follow with the second subject followed by the first and third subjects. In the cello, the first subject is followed by the second and third subjects. The exposition ends with a return of the first subject in the first violin.

The fugue continues with a "development" section which modulates before returning to end firmly in the A major tonic. The first subject is broken up into a number of sections that are presented in counterpoint with each other as well as with the other subjects, often given in stretto entries. At one point, a passage in the first violin and viola with the first subject in inversion and in stretto, is repeated by the second violin and cello, both passages being marked "al rovescio". The fugue concludes with a unison statement based on the first subject.

"Laus Deo et Beatissimae Virgini Mariae"
"Praise God and the Blessed Virgin Mary"