Chamber Music

Haydn: If it is "too easy"...why is it so hard?

by Tom Rosenberg

The body of work that Haydn created is nothing short of miraculous. He wrote over a hundred works for orchestra and well over a hundred chamber works. For its time, much of it was startling, unique and downright revolutionary. Yet students and amateurs (and sometimes professionals) are often disappointed when asked to play this truly great music. They somehow have the impression it is either too easy, too boring, or both. Not surprisingly, they also very often have a really hard time bringing it to life. Like Mozart, Haydn's music can fit the category of *"too easy for kids and too difficult for adults."* I firmly believe that students can and need to be able to understand how great this music is and to offer wonderful performances of Haydn's work.

There are lots of reasons that might explain why Haydn is often so difficult for students. Although the first violin parts are generally the most difficult and virtuosic, the part writing is not really all that hard. Despite this, student groups (even advanced ones) often have a much easier time understanding what to do with Shostakovich or Bartok than with Haydn. And yet, I believe the best way for a quartet to learn how to be a quartet is with the music of Haydn. In many ways, it is the essence of quartet playing, and because the part writing is often not as complex as in music by the great composers that followed Haydn, the details that make any quartet sound really good can be exposed and carefully worked on. If the coach emphasizes those details, the students will soon realize the importance of those details and become better players and musicians for it. These include exactly matching with the other players in the group the tempo, rhythmic characteristics of the motifs, bow strokes, attacks, vibratos, crescendos and diminuendos, intonation, voicing, and on and on. These are things that are not able to be worked on between individual players in orchestra rehearsals, or if they are worked on, time permits only superficial individual work. Students who study chamber music and become good at this kind of playing become much better orchestral players, and often move into leadership roles in youth orchestras. (Speaking of youth orchestras, it seems too rare to hear of a Haydn Symphony being programmed. Perhaps this is because the Haydn orchestra usually contains only single winds and a few brass players and youth orchestra concerts often seem to try to use as many players as possible. Nonetheless, the string players would benefit greatly by carefully learning a Haydn symphonic work each season.)

Although it is not true, one could generalize and say that the first violin always has the tune. This can leave inexperienced players to think they have nothing to do. Nothing could be further than the truth. I believe one of the big tricks in getting student quartets to love playing Haydn is to get them all to truly enjoy the role they play at any given time. Once they are good at doing this in Haydn, they will be good at doing it for all composers, so it is really important.

Playing Haydn's chamber music can really help students learn how to listen to the entire piece and not just their own part. An extremely important ensemble skill, and one that is easier learned by playing Haydn is to get each member of the ensemble to play the entire piece in their heads, and to let their hands play their individual part. Much as a conductor or good pianist hears an entire piece, each member of the ensemble needs to do the same. If the piece were a piano sonata, there would be one player, one brain and ten fingers. After careful practicing, all the fingers would work together, playing in exactly the same tempo and with each part voiced so that each voice is heard in an appropriate way. Imagine if some of the fingers on the left hand of the pianist started to complain that they didn't find their voice interesting or if three of the voices buried the melodic material and didn't care!! Because a good pianist hears all the voices and how they work together, there is no chance that individual fingers can get bored with what they have to do and the melodic and motivic material that needs to be heard will be heard. It should be the same in a chamber ensemble, but can not happen unless all players in the group start hearing the entire piece and not just their own part. In a Haydn string quartet, this is much more difficult to do for the individual players in the group than for the one pianist in a keyboard sonata. This is in no small part because of the simple fact there are now four players and therefore four brains and eight hands to coordinate. Not until all four players hear the entire piece in the same way and have practiced their own part can their hands do the bidding of the four brains to achieve great results. When this is happening, the players' hands play their individual part while their brains and hearts hear the entire piece. Although this is required for any good chamber or orchestral music performance, it is easier for the players to hear all of the voices in a Haydn quartet than in music with more complex part writing.

Another thing that can be taught in Haydn more easily than many later composers is a basic understanding of what Sonata Form is and how it is "supposed" to work. Seeing how Haydn manipulates the rules can help students have more fun with this music. Along those same lines, Haydn was one of the first great masters at composing music based on expectations the listener had, and then often doing surprising things to disrupt those expectations. If a student group can be helped to understand what tools a composer has employed to cause these expectations, then the players can enjoy breaking those expectations.

One more thing that is needed to bring Haydn to life is to play every note…*every note*…with character. This seems obvious and necessary to a good performance of any piece. But, because Haydn might give many repeated notes to one or more of the parts by adding rhythm to the harmonies, unless every note has a strong character that contributes to the music, those repeated notes will drag down the performance

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more quickly than with other music. Working with the "supporting" parts teaches students the value of every note, and how important their role is to the whole, even if they are not playing the melody. Learning to bring out harmonic changes by slightly emphasizing certain notes, subtlety altering a bow stroke, and having the repeated notes shadow or mimic the shape of the melody all add interest to the part writing.

The edition that is used in Haydn can also make a huge difference in the final performance and how much students are asked to use their creative energies. The edition of string quartets that has existed for decades is from Edition Peters. The truth is that they are edited with hundreds of bowing changes, changes from the original dynamics and articulations, and even changes in tempo markings. Although many of the changes make sense and work perfectly well, the fact is that they are not by Haydn. I do not recommend this edition of Haydn, except for things like weddings and gigs where no decisions need to be made to unify the group. There are two editions that do attempt to recreate what Haydn actually wrote: Henle and Doblinger. The sparseness of Haydn's dynamics may surprise some familiar with the Peters Edition. There also will be revelations concerning bowings and articulations. So, unless the group takes the time and effort to make decisions about these things, the performance will seem void of expression. Why are his actual markings so sparse? I have two theories. One could be that Haydn wanted his music to sound different each time it was performed. Another explanation could be that he trusted the musicians in his court orchestra to have enough imagination to add shape and articulations. In any case, students and their coaches need to use their own imaginations and experiment with the music to come up with solutions. Although this is not the easy route to take, with the help of an experienced coach, it helps younger musicians to learn how to be creative, to brainstorm, experiment, and to arrive at group decisions.

Although there are many wonderful and inventive movements by Haydn for chamber ensembles, there are several Haydn string quartet movements that specifically come to mind that offer all of the players in the group plenty to do besides playing accompaniment. To name a few of my favorites are the opening movement from the Quartet in G major, Opus 76, #1, the second movement theme and variations from the Quartet in D major, Opus 20, #4, the fugal finales in Opus 20, #'s 2, 5, & 6 and especially the opening movement from the Quartet in D minor, Opus 76, #2, also known as the "Quinten". This movement has it all: drama, contrast, sudden dynamic or harmonic surprises, the use of silence, and brilliant use of the main motive which is the interval of the falling perfect fifth. Haydn distributes this 2-note motif to all four players, using it as melody, accompaniment, bass line, rhythmically altering it to be elongated or compressed, in stretto and in nearly every other way imaginable!

My experience is that once students get a sense that every note they play and the character they give to it is truly important to the success of the performance, once they are challenged to use their imaginations to create great music from seemingly simple sources, once they understand their role in how Haydn manipulates his audience through changes in harmony, dynamics and the architecture of the movement and that this music is really fun to perform, they will no longer find this music boring or easy. Students may need to be challenged to bring Haydn to life…but once they can, they will be much better players and musicians. Whether it is solo, orchestral or chamber music, the music of the great composers who follow Haydn will make more sense and bring them even more artistic and personal pleasure.

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