

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Joseph Haydn - Sinfonia concertante in B-flat Major, Hob. I:105

Born March 31, 1732, Rohrau, Austria.

Died May 31, 1809, Vienna, Austria.

Sinfonia concertante in B-flat Major, Hob. I:105

In 1790, when he heard the news that Joseph Haydn's long-time patron, Nikolaus Esterházy, had died, the impresario Johann Peter Salomon promptly left for Vienna to make the best business deal of his career. He showed up, unannounced, at Haydn's door and said, "I am Salomon from London and have come to fetch you. Tomorrow we shall make an *accord*"—that final pun (in French *accord* means both "agreement" and "chord") no doubt winning him critical points with the composer before negotiations had even begun. Haydn had turned down offers to appear in England before, but now that he was free (and unemployed) he was more easily persuaded to visit this foreign country where his music had long been popular. When Mozart, his only peer among composers, asked him how he would get along in a place where he didn't even speak the language, Haydn replied, "Ah, my language is understood all over the world."

Haydn enjoyed great success his first season in London—he was in demand at all the society events and proved to be an unbeatable box office draw at Salomon's concerts, where he unveiled brilliant new symphonies written for the occasion. The next season, a rival organization, the Professional Concerts, hired Haydn's former student, Ignace Pleyel, as a counterattraction. "So," Haydn wrote to a friend in Vienna in January 1792, "a bloody harmonious war will commence between master and pupil." It was apparently Salomon's idea that Haydn would now tackle one of the few forms he had never tried before—the *sinfonia concertante*, in which Pleyel excelled. And that's how Haydn, who had written more than ninety symphonies and some four dozen string quartets, came to compose the only *sinfonia concertante* of his long career.

Haydn's manuscript appears to have been written so hurriedly that he may well have composed it between February 27, when Pleyel's "rival" work was performed, and March 9, the date of Haydn's premiere. Regardless of the circumstances of its creation and the haste of composition, Haydn's *Sinfonia concertante* was a hit; it was repeated the next week and again on May 3. "It was profound, airy, affecting, and original," wrote the *Morning Herald* critic.

A sinfonia concertante is a concerto with more than one soloist. The finest examples, like this one by Haydn, as well as those by Mozart, are really, as the name implies, symphonies that act like concertos—a hybrid that enjoys the best qualities of each form. (Beethoven's *Triple Concerto* and Brahms's *Double Concerto* are among the few later examples.) Haydn had written very few solo concertos in his life, partly because most concertos in the eighteenth century were designed to be performed by the composer, and Haydn wasn't a particularly accomplished pianist or violinist. But cameo solos regularly popped up in his symphonies, and in London he had already written short solos for Salomon on violin, as well as for his cello, oboe, and bassoon players—the four instruments featured in this sinfonia concertante. At the premiere, Salomon apparently outdid himself in his role, although all the solos, as the *Morning Herald* noted, “were ably sustained by the respective performers.”

All four solo roles are filled with challenging virtuoso music, but they rarely hog the spotlight like the trumpet or cello in Haydn's most famous concertos. Even the violin part Haydn wrote for Salomon is more conversational than flashy, and it only occasionally takes the lead over the other three players, although Salomon was in fact the group's leader. (He does get the unexpected operatic “recitative” at the beginning of the finale all to himself.) Throughout the fast outer movements, the solo quartet regularly emerges and then recedes into the orchestral music; there's a real sense of give and take, and of soloists playing among their colleagues. Just by listening to this music, we would know that Haydn was writing for four members of the orchestra rather than for guest artists. The slow movement is more clearly tailored to show off the solo quartet, but even here the reigning idea is chamber music and the spirit is one of sharing.

A final note. Pitting Haydn against Pleyel may have been good for the box office, but it failed to disturb relations between the two men, who remained friendly throughout their London “rivalry,” met regularly for dinner, and even attended each other's concerts.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

© by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. All rights reserved. Program notes may not be reproduced; brief excerpts may be quoted if due acknowledgment is given to the author and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

These notes appear in galley files and may contain typographical or other errors. Programs and artists subject to change without notice.