**Joseph Haydn — Symphony No. 94 in G Major (Surprise)**

Joseph Haydn

*Born March 31, 1732, Rohrau, Austria.*

* Died May 31, 1809, Vienna, Austria.

**Symphony No. 94 in G Major (Surprise)**

Of all Haydn’s symphonies with nicknames—and nearly a quarter of his 108 have them—none is better known than the *Surprise*. It has been unusually popular and beloved since its premiere during Haydn’s acclaimed first season in London—before it was even given its famous subtitle. The name itself is the work of Andrew Ashe, a flutist in the London orchestra that first played the piece, who later boasted that “my valued friend Haydn thank’d me for giving it such an appropriate name,” although to most listeners since, there is little else one could reasonably call it. The surprise—spoiler alert—was apparently an afterthought: in the original manuscript, the first eight measures of the second movement are repeated literally, note for note, without the unexpected big bang that Haydn eventually inserted, giving his flutist a shot at immortality. No one knows why Haydn added the surprise, although he supposedly said, with delight, that it would make the ladies jump. (According to another source, Haydn had it in for an old man he had noticed in the same seat at each of his London concerts who regularly fell sound asleep.) One newspaper critic said the effect reminded him of a “beautiful shepherdess who, lulled to slumber by the murmur of a distant waterfall, starts alarmed by the unexpected firing of a fowling-piece.”

Over the years, Haydn had regularly turned down offers to appear in England, where his music had long been popular. (Haydn’s name was introduced to London audiences as early as 1765, inadvertently mangled as “Haydri,” when six of his string quartets were performed.) In 1790, when the impresario Johann Peter Salomon heard the news that Haydn’s longtime patron Nikolaus Esterházy had died, he promptly went to 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. When Mozart, Haydn’s only equal 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.” (Mozart died within the year; the two composers had said goodbye before Haydn left Vienna for London, not knowing it was the last time they would see each other.)

Haydn had agreed to compose six new symphonies for his London visit—two for the 1791 season and four more for the
following year. The chronology of Haydn's symphonies is messy, and the ones we now know as nos. 95 and 96 were the first ones he unveiled, shortly after he arrived on New Year's Day of 1791. Three more followed early in 1792, beginning, in February, with no. 93, and continuing with nos. 98 and 94 in March.

The opening movement of Symphony no. 94, with its attention-grabbing slow introduction, a commonplace feature of Haydn's late symphonies, is itself full of surprises, including the fact that the main Allegro section starts off in the “wrong” key. The entire second movement, its notorious sixteenth measure aside, is filled with riches, though often of deceptive simplicity. The format is a set of variations, with plain ones alternating with more elaborate ones and building to a fine marchlike climax. The third movement minuet is out-of-doors music, impossible to imagine, particularly at its breathtaking tempo, in the confines of the ballroom. The finale is brilliant and demanding, obviously written with the knowledge that his London orchestra could outdo any ensemble he had ever known.

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