Joseph Haydn
Born March 31, 1732, Rohrau, Lower Austria.
Died May 31, 1809, Vienna, Austria.

Symphony No. 103 in E-flat Major (*Drumroll*)

Haydn composed this symphony in the winter of 1794–95 and led the first performance on March 2, 1795, in London. The score calls for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns, and trumpets, with timpani and strings. Performance time is approximately thirty minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first subscription concert performance of Haydn’s *Drumroll* Symphony was given at the Auditorium Theatre on December 14, 1901, with Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on January 15, 16, 17, and 20, 1987, with Sir Georg Solti conducting. The Orchestra has performed this symphony at the Ravinia Festival only once, on August 6, 1950, with Pierre Monteux conducting.

Between the two high-profile London residencies that marked the peak of Haydn’s long career, he took on a brash new composition student from Bonn named Beethoven. The young man arrived in Vienna in November 1792, shortly after Haydn returned home from his first trip, and began lessons with him almost at once. Within weeks they both realized the futility of the experience—a clash of personalities and a battle of wills, undermined, even in its best moments, by the unspoken fact that Haydn was really Beethoven’s second choice, since Mozart had died the previous December.

When Haydn returned to London in January 1794, Beethoven switched teachers without hesitation or regret, and Haydn defended his position as the greatest living composer by offering the British public six symphonies that still stand among the finest pieces in the form. Like many important works of art, they’re not only summations of a grand tradition, they offer glimpses into the future as well. (Despite their personal friction, it is with these scores that Haydn, in effect, passes the baton to Beethoven, who would begin his own first symphony in just five years.)

Haydn’s last three symphonies—the ones we know as nos. 102-104—composed for the 1795 spring concert season in London, are perhaps the most serious and impressive of his entire career, distilling everything he had learned in almost forty years of working in the form, yet still alive with the irreverence and originality of a young adventurer. No. 103 commands attention from its very first measure.

Haydn begins, as he does in all but one of his twelve London symphonies, with a slow introduction. These introductions are subtle dramatic devices that have a very fluid relationship with the movement that follows. They are about process, not exposition, and they allow us to hear material taking shape, as if we were looking over Haydn’s shoulder: “The Introduction excited the deepest attention,” *The Morning Chronicle* reported after the premiere of this E-flat major symphony, not surprisingly because it’s one of Haydn’s stunners, opening with nothing but the long drumroll that gives the symphony its name. From this unexpected effect—like the solo piano beginning of Beethoven’s Fourth Piano Concerto, it could only have been written for an audience that could be trusted to be attentive—the music slowly takes wing, first in the low strings and bassoon and then gradually embracing the entire orchestra. Oddly, Haydn fails to give a dynamic marking to the kettledrum effect, leaving it to later editors and conductors to decide whether to capture their audience’s attention with mystery or by force.
The transition from slow introduction to allegro is unusually subtle, and the fast music that follows is as brisk and efficient as the opening was broad and mysterious. (That doesn’t mean the Allegro isn’t without adventure or surprise—it even includes a speeded-up reference to the slow introduction.) The development section is even longer than the exposition it develops—a shift of focus that Beethoven would eventually exploit—and, as if to compensate, the recapitulation is highly compressed. But Haydn still takes time for one last glimpse of the slow opening, now complete with drumroll.

The London audience liked the Andante so much that the orchestra played it again. This is a set of variations on two alternating folk tunes from the countryside around Esterházy, where Haydn had worked for three decades in what must have seemed to him like obscurity now that he was the toast of London. Haydn writes two variations on each theme—the tunes are so closely related themselves that one sounds like a variant of the other—and even manages to work in a generous solo for his concertmaster.

The minuet begins as boilerplate dance music and quickly turns into a richly nuanced symphonic movement. The innocent trio, too, grows in stature and complexity. Both minuet and trio turn out to be music of unexpected depth and consequence.

The finale is one of Haydn’s greatest. It begins with simple horn calls, stated once and then immediately repeated as the accompaniment to a sprightly violin melody. And with that—a few seconds of music, the merest kernels of thematic ideas—Haydn has introduced all the material he will need to build an entire movement full of drama, suspense, and fire. A master of economy, and a born storyteller who never runs out of interesting things to say—and who is incapable of writing a commonplace phrase—Haydn is working here at the top of his game. Ever the perfectionist, he tightened the final pages, already a marvel of brevity, when he got back to Vienna.

On March 2, 1795, the night Haydn introduced this dazzling symphony, he fully justified his position as the finest composer alive. Yet that same night in not-so-far-away Vienna, the twenty-four-year-old Beethoven made his debut at a concert given by Prince Lobkowitz and “made everyone sit up and listen.”

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