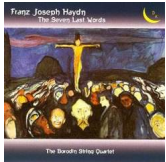


Joseph Haydn – The Seven Last Words (Borodin Quartet) [1984]

Written by bluesever

Thursday, 22 October 2009 20:57 - Last Updated Sunday, 05 January 2014 15:21

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1. *L'Introduzione. Maestoso ed Adagio* 2. *Sonata I. Largo* 3. *Sonata II. Grave e Cantabile*
4. *Sonata III. Grave* 5. *Sonata IV. Largo* 6. *Sonata V. Adagio* 7. *Sonata VI. Lento* 8. *Sonata VII. Largo* 9. *Il Terremoto* Borodin String Quartet: Mikhail Kopelman, Andrei Abramnikov - violin Dmitri Shebalin - viola Valentin Berlinsky – cello Recorded at the Grand Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, December 1984.

Haydn was a devout Catholic and inscribed his scores with prayers, so this musical masterpiece was undoubtedly suffused with the most sincere devotional feeling. It was commissioned by Cathedral of Cadiz, Spain and Hungary being equally provinces of the Habsburg Empire at that time. The seven "words" are actually seven sentences from the gospel texts reportedly spoken by Jesus when he was on the cross, crucifixion being in effect death by thirst and thus taking up to three very unpleasant days. In the notes each "word" is elaborately analysed in terms of the religious significance of the last hours of Jesus' life. It was originally intended that it be recited before each of the adagio movements as appropriate (this and all modern quartet performances I am aware of omit the recitation). As I am not a Christian, and as the performers were at least officially atheists, I can appreciate this performance as brilliant music for four strings written on a dramatic subject. I can imagine an entirely different performance by four severely devout performers, particularly Italian performers, and if you view this music as primarily a religious document, you may prefer to look elsewhere.

The end is a suitably dramatic flourish but the drama builds steadily in intensity, with some surprisingly calm, even pretty, interludes. To our modern ears this sounds like completely abstract music, but to the audience of its day, the music was perceived to follow the text almost word by word. It is my understanding that to a Christian the Crucifixion is an occasion of mixed joy as well as tragedy, for it marks the beginning of victory over evil, and in any event, one would be presumptuous to challenge the depth of Haydn's legendary piety, as Mendelssohn did. Haydn wrote this work originally for string orchestra, but in view of its immediate popularity arranged it for quartet as heard here and also for keyboard. Eventually he arranged it, with

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additional words by Von Swieten, clarinets and trombones, and one additional instrumental largo, as an oratorio for chorus and orchestra.

This is a live recording made in Moscow, apparently during a bronchitis epidemic, and early on somebody slams a door. But the curative powers of the music are here strongly demonstrated because by a third of the way through most of those present are breathing silently. Their applause at the end is both respectful and fervent and shows that this was truly a very large audience.

This is the "new" Borodin quartet, with replacements for the original violinists Rostislav Dubinsky and Yaroslav Alexandrov after they had emigrated to the west in 1976, Dubinsky eventually to form the Borodin Trio. The "old" Borodin quartet was capable of the most stunningly dramatic, "symphonic" performances, and in this recording the "new" quartet shows itself equal to the ability of its predecessor. Although one's attention is throughout focused on the dramatic musicality of this performance, after several hearings one begins to notice and appreciate the astonishing precision and ensemble, as though a single person were playing. ---Paul Shoemaker, musicweb-international.com

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