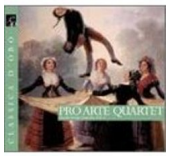
Joseph Haydn – String Quartet No. 62 in C major ('Emperor') [1996]



1. Allegro
2. Poco Adagio Cantabile (Variations)
3. Menuetto
4. Finale – Presto

Pro Arte String Quartet

This is both the most popular and most notorious of Haydn's string quartets, all because of the second movement, a beautiful hymn that was later misappropriated by the twentieth century's most evil regime. Back in the late eighteenth century, Napoleon was posing a serious threat to the Hapsburg empire; after his armies raided Styria in 1796 Haydn was driven to a burst of nationalism. He set patriotic words by L.L. Haschka as a so-called Kaiserlied, and had an immediate hit on his hands. He determined to write all the "popularized" arrangements himself, including one for string quartet. This became the slow movement of the third quartet of his opus 76 set. The moving, noble melody has been too good to pass up. Later composers, including Czerny and Smetana, incorporated it into works of their own. And a few decades after the Austrian empire finally collapsed, Germany's Nazis commandeered the melody for the song "Deutschland über alles." This limited the quartet's popularity among the Allies during and immediately after World War II, but the taint soon washed away.

The whole quartet seems to be a patriotic effort once you realize that the first bar of the opening Allegro is a musical anagram. Its notes correspond to the first letters of the words "Gott erhalte Franz den Kaiser" (with "Caesar" apparently filling in for "Kaiser"); this is the opening line of the Kaiserlied on which the second movement is based. This is hardly obvious unless you examine the score, for all you hear is a bright, bouncy C-major tune that the first violin soon appropriates with an obsessive dotted rhythm. In the late eighteenth century, by the way, that rhythm was

symbolically associated with royal occasions. All the movement's principal thematic matter is derived from this small bit of music. The development section includes a characteristically Haydnesque surprise: an E-major Hungarian scene with a gypsy-like accompaniment of strong accents on weak beats. This was Haydn's nod to the Hungarian aristocrats who employed Haydn and commissioned these quartets; they were footing a big part of the bill for the emperor's war against Napoleon.

The second movement, Poco adagio-cantabile, begins with an especially sweet statement of the Emperor Hymn, then puts it through four variations. The first is a quiet but ornate elaboration for the first violin, while the second fiddle plays the theme in its original form. The next variation shifts the theme down to the cello, with the viola and second violin providing harmony and the first violin offering counterpoint. The viola finally gets its own statement of the theme in the third variation while the top and bottom instruments wind around it. Finally comes a richly harmonized version of the theme with more elaborate inner voices than in the beginning, but nothing as complex as what has come in between.

The Minuet is a good-humored drawing-room dance, marked especially by a slightly mocking downward-drifting figure in the first violin. The trio is a cautious- sounding variation of the Minuet's main theme.

The Presto finale thrusts us into what one analyst has described as a C-minor battle scene: Franz vs. Napoleon. The movement does begin with three loud, jagged chords and eventually has the first violin fire off a barrage of eighth notes, but there's little explicitly militaristic about the music. After this material is intensely developed, the main themes return in a C major version that certainly sounds optimistic, though not necessarily triumphant. ---James Reel, Rovi

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