

Friday, Nov 1, Professor Harry Powell,  
"European Music Genres," Class #3: **The Classical Era.**

During the second half of the XVIII century music changed remarkably. From the high pinnacle of Baroque music which was rooted in polyphony and reached its apex in the work of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), music looked for new directions and found them, just as new audiences were also emerging in the era of the Enlightenment. Three great composers, all known to each other to some degree, became the driving force of the Classical period (1750-1800) Their new direction centered on dismissing the need for melody that had to be fully 'spelled' out; they would use shorter musical fragments 'motifs', building them up in new ways, in what later became known as 'Sonata form'. This new means of approaching music required composers to become very conscious of their artistic standards, while at the same time needing to please the public. In fact Haydn sometimes censored his own music, saying that this piece in question was not going to work for the 'long eared ones' meaning musical donkeys in the audience. Mozart wrestled with the same problem telling his father that he wrote at two levels. He liked to please the audience but he also liked to work out very complex musical problems that only a really musical mind could appreciate. And he liked to boast to his Dad when he brought off such a miracle. Beethoven didn't seem to care what the audience thought. And if musicians complained about difficulty, he told them he didn't care. Further reading could include Charles Rosen's influential 1971 book, 'The Classical Style'. Also Harold Schonberg's excellent 'Lives of the Composers'.

Joseph Haydn was born in 1732 and lived until 1809. He was the senior figure of the Classical era, also an amazing innovator of new musical forms. The string quartet, the classical symphony and the piano sonata, were all worked out by Haydn, using 'Sonata form'. Soon other composers adapted his forms to their needs, notably the highly creative Mozart and Beethoven who left their mark on these new musical forms. Haydn was born very poor and was lucky enough to get a musical scholarship, essentially bed and board. Hired as a singer he learned to play instruments and when his voice broke and he faced life on the streets, he got his first job. Such jobs in those days meant being hired for a nobleman's orchestra or choir. Haydn worked his way up, through hard personal effort and his skill at managing other musicians. His eventual patron, Prince Esterhazy was a man of taste and Haydn had enough influence over the prince to be able to work for the interests of his fellow musicians. The 'Farewell Symphony' is a story of this influence. During the summer months the orchestra was used to being released towards the end of the season to go home to their wives and families. But the Prince was hanging on to his employees and there was grumbling, to the point that they appealed to Haydn to 'do something'. So he composed Symphony No 45, 'The Farewell'. As the piece continues individual players reach the end of their part and are instructed to blow out the candle on their music stand and to take their leave as quietly as possible. At the end, only Haydn the concertmaster was left along with the second violinist Tomassini, another composer and official at the court. The prince got the message, the orchestra was released and Haydn's name was blessed both for his lovely music and diplomatic skills. All three of our composers had each a lively sense of humor, but Haydn's was the most charming and in its way musical.

Among the musical forms in which Haydn excelled, the trio, the string quartet, the symphony and religious works (masses) as well as secular oratorios. In all of these forms he excelled and set a standard for excellence. There are many examples of his lovely sense of humor. Sadly, his marriage was unhappy, he loved another woman and she in turn was waiting both for her husband and for Haydn's nagging wife to depart to their just reward. Haydn is famous for his symphonies, 104 of them; as one critic said, at least eighty are 'out and out masterpieces'. Famously prolific, he was doing exactly what he was hired to do, provide new music on a daily or weekly basis for his employer. Sometimes he struggled for inspiration, he would go down on his knees to ask divine help. And sometimes he used ideas from his immediate environment. For example in his symphony known as 'La Poule' the hen, he uses a little motif played on the oboe which reminds one of a clucking chicken, then he works this musical idea through the first movement in an amusing and engaging way that is 'totally Haydn'. Again in his writing of trios and string quartets, his sense of humor is never far from the action, some of his jokes are only caught by the musicians, others, such as the big crash of drums and full orchestra in the Surprise symphony, are meant as Haydn said, 'for the ladies'. Haydn lived longer than his two great contemporaries, but the final years were sad in that he lost his ability to compose, perhaps to dementia. He had neurological problems and was no longer able to play.

Mozart, who was very conscious of Haydn's great reputation, wrote symphonies, concertos, string quartets, masses and the operas, the latter perhaps, his greatest work. Mozart was well served by a great librettist, Lorenzo da Ponte, for several of his most famous operas and unlike Haydn who for most of his life, wrote for one exalted person. Mozart had to keep public taste in mind. So it delighted him when his opera the Marriage of Figaro went over very well and he wrote: 'Everyone in Prague is whistling the melodies from Figaro'. Haydn's operatic collaborators were not as good and his operas are less often performed.

But Mozart was less fortunate in his employment, unlike Haydn who was greatly respected by the Esterhazy family for his gifts, Mozart was considered too big for his britches by Archbishop Colloredo and there was a mutual lack of respect. In one of his letters Mozart referred to Colloredo as the 'Archboob', a risky thing to write because in those days all mail was intercepted and opened in the main post office. Mozart's father was horrified at the risks that his son took in offending his employer, he was also very disappointed that his son lacked business sense. But he recognized that his son and daughter were utterly brilliant and was deeply committed to their education as musicians as well as their cultivation of fame. He interfered or tried to, in their personal lives, the son broke free but the daughter could not even marry the man she loved, her story is a sad one. After Mozart got to Vienna he surprised his father by being so popular and successful. But he had inherited his father's paranoia and barbed tongue, so pretty soon he made enemies and over time it cost him dearly.

Mozart was very generous with his money, sometimes lending what he needed for himself and his wife, just to help out a friend. Beethoven was far tighter with his cash. Mozart adored his wife, trusted her judgement and sought her opinion, especially as he grew more mature. Beethoven was drawn to many women but could never sustain a relationship. His involvement in his music was so absolute. He composed in his room, on long walks in the country, always carrying a notebook even though he claimed to remember every idea. At the age of twenty-seven, when he realized that he was hearing impaired and that the condition was getting worse, he despaired. But he agonized his way through the problem after writing what appeared to be a suicide note. He committed himself totally to his art and lived until the age of fifty seven. Along the way alcoholism, family disputes, arguments with others, all threatened his peace of mind, yet the compositions steadily grew in depth and brilliance.

Mozart and Haydn knew each other well, they often played together in string quartets and other chamber ensembles. When Haydn met Mozart's father Leopold, he paid the son one of the most generous tributes ever paid by a musician to a fellow composer. Haydn told Leopold that his son Wolfgang was the greatest composer known to him, he praised Mozart's taste and his skill in composition, such generous praise that the ever suspicious Leopold must have been won over. And the younger Mozart responded by dedicating six of his string quartets to 'Papa' Haydn. Haydn and Mozart bid farewell to each other when the older composer went off to London to concertize. Mozart feared the stress of the trip might be too much for his friend, sadly it was the younger man who died first and Haydn lived almost two decades longer.

Beethoven hoped to meet Mozart and receive lessons from him. Beethoven did indeed reach Vienna while Mozart was still alive but it is not certain that they met. Beethoven was called back home to Bonn upon news of his mother's illness. There is a popular story that Mozart heard Beethoven playing and predicted that this young man would make a great impression on the world. Beethoven certainly met Haydn and received lessons from him. He was very eager to have Haydn's good opinion. At one point he showed Haydn three trios for piano, violin and cello that he subsequently identified as opus 1 in his catalogue of compositions. Haydn loved the first two but balked at the third which was written in the 'dark' key of c minor. Beethoven took offense and stormed off. He continued to use the key of c minor, for example the Pathétique sonata, the very famous fifth symphony and several other works. The key worked for Beethoven, but in Haydn's world it was a problematic choice.

After these three composers music would never be the same. They created and developed new forms of musical writing. They knew how to please an audience but also how to move music forward. They knew and respected each other and each others talents. They revised the relationship between aristocrats and musicians in such a way that aristocrats now began to respect musicians for their original gifts, not just talented servants that could be hired and fired. They too their music to the public and helped build up a real public demand for great music, one that has never truly died. They were unwilling to dumb down music to fit popular taste, but they liked to get paid as each of them knew a lot about being poor.