



Franz Joseph Haydn

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(The following article [Franz Joseph Haydn] is one of a number written by Mencken to encourage interest in the newly created Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. It was the first instance in this country that an orchestra was entirely subsidized by the city government. Dr. Gustav Strube, assistant conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, was brought to Baltimore to be its conductor.)

NEVER HAVING HEARD the Haydn symphony which Dr. Strube and his tone artists are to perform on Friday night, I am unable to tell you precisely what is in it, but all the same I offer my ears in wager that good stuff is there, and that no one will hear it without joy. Old Haydn wrote so many symphonies that no one in the world has heard them all, but he never wrote one that lacked beauty, and he never wrote one that was not marked all over by his extraordinarily cheerful and ingratiating personality. Exploring them is an almost endless business and full of charming surprises. Some time ago, idling away a half hour at Schirmer's I happened upon one so crowded with loveliness that

its relative obscurity remains astounding. A composition of such unusual beauties written today, would make a composer's reputation. But Haydn wrote dozens, nay scores, like it: and many of them are now moldering on the shelf and forgotten by all save compilers of thematic catalogues. Beethoven stopped with nine symphonies; Mozart with forty;¹ Schumann and Brahms with four each; Schubert with eight; Tschaikowsky with six; Mendelssohn with five; Mahler with eight or nine. But Haydn wrote fully a hundred, not counting symphonic overtures, and among them all it is difficult to find a dull one, or one which does not show superb musicianship on every page.

The very clarity and simplicity of these great works has mitigated against a true understanding of their merit. Too often they are dismissed as hollow, as trivial, almost as infantile. In the shadow of the vast compositions of Beethoven they shrink to almost nothing. But a diligent study of them is all that is needed to rehabilitate them. Under the smooth and glistening surface there is seen a structure of the utmost complexity and ingenuity. They are magnificently articulated and thought out. They stand as unsurpassable examples of that exact and inevitable form which is the soul of all great music. There are ideas in them; the flow of beautiful sound never ceases for an instant; they have a beginning, a middle and an end; they hang together almost perfectly. One turns to them, from harmonic and emotional bombastics of modern orchestral music. . . .

But Haydn was more than a great composer of music;

¹ Actually, Mozart wrote 41 symphonies, Haydn 104.

he was, beyond everything else, a great musical revolutionary. The orchestra as we know it today is his creation, or, at any rate, more his than any other man's. He put form and logic into the symphony, the most formal and logical of musical forms. He improved and gave direction to the solo sonata. Above all, he left the marks of his genius upon the string quartet. His principal quartets, even after all these years, remain fresh and vigorous; they still dispute for places on programs with the quartets of Beethoven and the vastly more complex quartets of a later day. In them, and for the first time, one finds that varied and resourceful four-part writing which is the secret of all the charm of the form, and that adroit use of polyphony which alone makes it possible. And in them, too, despite many a naïf touch, one finds a sound understanding of the capabilities and limitations of the four instruments, and an amazing skill at developing their beauties. The famous Kaiser quartet, as it stands, is so nearly perfect that the search for flaws in it can only lead to absurdity. Beethoven, true enough, wrote greater quartets, but he surely never wrote a greater one within those limits.

As for the symphonies, they are little heard today, not so much because they are empty of the wild emotion that music-lovers have been taught to look for, as because they are infernally difficult of execution. Their very simplicity, in fact, is what makes them hard to play properly; the slightest error in tone or dynamics sticks out like a sore thumb. Modern music, by its bewildering complexity, gives tone artists hedges to hide behind. Once in Munich, hearing