



Franz Joseph Haydn
(1732-1809)

String Quartet in G Minor, Op. 74, No. 3, “The Rider” (1793)

Surely among Haydn’s most virtuosic string writing, the Opus 74 quartets were composed in 1793, between Haydn’s two London sojourns, probably with the London impresario and violinist Salomon in mind. With less of his usual playful surprise and more of surprising gravity, the “Rider” quartet, as the third of the opus is known, begins starkly in the key of G minor. One is struck by the fact that this is the very key signature employed by the recently deceased Mozart for his most anguished works, and one can’t help but wonder if Haydn deliberately chose this key, and used it for so much of the quartet, to commemorate his esteemed and deeply mourned colleague. While lacking Mozart’s limpid lyricism, Haydn’s quartet contains passages expressive of profound sorrow and, at the same time, presents us with innovations of form and harmony that foreshadow Beethoven, already his student, and Schubert, not yet born.

In a structural oddity, the opening theme of the first movement, *Allegro*, doubles as both an introduction and as a contribution to the thematic content of the movement, but is not included in the recapitulation as a true first theme would be. You may also notice that the movement starts out in G minor but ends in G major. This modal ambiguity will characterize the entire quartet.

Haydn achieves a certain warmth of sound in the *Largo assai* that follows, by dropping the pitch a major third for a richly harmonized hymn. Key ambiguity continues when the mode slips from major to minor in the middle section of this three-part movement instead of the more usual change to a contrasting harmonic realm. The third movement, *Menuetto: Allegretto*, stays in the key of G now in its minor mode. One would have expected instead the related key of E minor. This holds a mirror to Mozart’s great Symphony No. 40 in G minor, and his String Quintet in G minor, K. 516; the shifting back and forth between major and minor would become an expressive hallmark of Schubert’s style a generation later.

The *Finale* starts in a darkly agitated mood still in G minor, but it soon brightens with dance music from the countryside in the related key of B major. Then for most of the remainder, sunshine prevails with only a brief reminder of the angst that opened both the first and last movements. The work ends with the key change to G major actually written into the key signature of the score, once more emphasizing the composer’s new exploration of ambiguity.