JOSEPH HAYDN
Born March 31, 1732, Rohrau, Austria. Died May 31, 1809, Vienna, Austria.

Symphony No. 92, G major (Oxford)
   Adagio – Allegro spiritoso
   Adagio cantabile
   Menuetto: Allegretto
   Presto

Duration: 28'

Instrumentation: 1 flute, 2 oboes, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, and strings.

(Franz) Joseph Haydn was probably the only great composer to make the successful transition from Feudalism to cut-throat Capitalism—and be a winner in both systems. In Haydn’s early years, he was a choirboy in Vienna—not exactly an Oliver Twist existence though not far from it. Haydn’s fortunes took a real hit at age 17 when he was summarily dismissed with only the clothes on his back, close to being literally kicked out on the street. He had hastened his departure by mischievously cutting off another choirboy’s pig tails. While this incessant joking wasn’t appreciated at the august St. Stephen’s Cathedral (factoid: the late comic/musician Dudley Moore also started as a choirboy at age 6), it carried over into his music to the great joy of listeners.

Post choirboy, Haydn lived a life of extreme poverty in a Viennese garret practicing the harpsichord and giving lessons. More important, through a miraculous coincidence, an accomplished composer/teacher, Niccolò Porpora, lodged in his building. In return for accompanying Porpora’s vocal students at the harpsichord and essentially performing valet duties, Haydn received lessons in composition. Haydn gave an account of his lessons with Porpora thus: “There was no lack of ‘Asino, Coglione, Birbante’ [ass, jerk, villain], and pokes in the ribs, but I put up with it all, for I profited greatly from Porpora in singing, in composition, and in the Italian language” further claiming that with Porpora he gained “the true fundamentals of composition.”

He achieved some early compositional success, but really hit the jackpot when he was hired in 1762 by Prince Nicolaus (“The Magnificent”) Esterházy (actually by his brother who died shortly after hiring Haydn but Nicolaus more than honored the contract) to be his Kapellmeister at his “fairy tale castle”—unsurprisingly called Észterháza—in Hungary not too remote from Vienna. Haydn was essentially a servant but given
considerable respect (for a servant) and resources—Eszterháza was sometimes called “le petit Versailles de l’Hongrié.” These resources included having his own orchestra and singers with which to experiment and compose symphonies, operas, and chamber pieces for the Prince’s pleasure. This “feudal” arrangement lasted over 25 years until Prince Nicolaus’s death in 1790.

Originally, Haydn’s contract limited his compositional performing rights to Eszterháza. But his reputation, through the word of mouth of the people that attended the Prince’s events (including the Empress Maria Theresia, herself) raised his standing with the Prince to the point that the contract was revised in 1779 allowing his music to circulate and for him to accept outside commissions. He soon acquired world fame through the dissemination of his many compositions. Both Paris and London had a rich public concert life (unlike Vienna), and Haydn was commissioned to produce six symphonies for Paris in 1784. These were the conventionally numbered 82-87, now known as the “Paris” Symphonies, which were grand works for full orchestra (larger than the court orchestra at Eszterháza) and highly successful.

Haydn was not one to let the grass grow under his feet. When it became apparent that Prince Anton, who succeeded Nicolaus, did not have the desire to maintain the castle orchestra, Haydn left for Vienna so quickly that his belongings were still in Hungary. There a stranger called on him and, in one of the most astonishing sentences in music history, bluntly stated, “I’m Salomon from London and have come to fetch you. Tomorrow we will make an accord.” And fortunately for music history, they did strike a bargain. Haydn was to provide new symphonies and various other works that the impresario and violinist, Salomon, could promote for his concert series in London. Haydn made it across the English Channel on New Years Day, 1791, not speaking a word of English.

To understate the matter considerably, in London Haydn was a great popular and critical success as well as being continually feted by the nobility. As the late Charles Rosen put it, “… [there have been no composers] who so completely won at the same time the unquestioned and generous respect of the musical community and the ungrudging acclaim of the public.” Over two trips to England (1791-92 and 1794), Haydn composed 12 symphonies (Nos. 93-104) which are known as the “London” Symphonies (or sometimes by us chatterers as the “Salomon” Symphonies). The astute reader is probably wondering where the actual symphony on our program tonight, the Symphony No. 92 “Oxford,” fits in. Well, it’s not really called a London or a Paris symphony though both regions have a right to claim it.
Because of the achievements of his Paris symphonies, Haydn was quickly commissioned to write five more for Paris of which Nos. 91 and 92 (composed in 1788-89) were dedicated to Comte d’Ogny. It is generally accepted that the first symphony that Haydn performed in London in March of 1791, prior to being able to compose any new works there, was No. 92 whose score he brought with him. It gained the moniker, “Oxford” when it was again performed at the ceremony where Haydn received an honorary doctorate at Oxford University in July 1791.

It was no accident that Haydn chose this Symphony No. 92 in G to be his calling card both in London and at Oxford for it represented a major step forward in his symphonic mastery. Written for large orchestra, some have considered this work Haydn’s first symphonic masterpiece—his “Eroica” in allusion to the great breakthrough symphony in Beethoven’s career. (There are not many symphonic masterworks in G major, but the IPO has recently played two of them, the Dvorak Symphony No. 8 and the Mahler Symphony No. 4—which, along with the Haydn Nos. 88, 92, 94 “Surprise,” and 100 “Military,” form a select group.)

As with many of Haydn’s mature symphonies, the “Oxford” begins with a slow (“adagio”) introduction. Haydn’s mastery of the art of the introduction is something that perhaps Debussy could appreciate—all seamless oratory with one rhetorical gesture flowing from another without tunes, development, or defined structure. The Oxford ends its introduction with a dramatic pause on one of those Neapolitan 6ths that, as we mentioned in our Walter Piston notes from this season’s opener and that all studious Pistonites know, goes to the dominant—not the tonic or “home” key. So the “allegro spiritoso” (fast with spirit) opening proper begins with a bit of misdirection—it’s still going somewhere when it already should have gotten there. Maestro Danzmayr, in his pre-concert remarks last concert, seemed to offer a challenge to see if anyone could hum the themes from Britten’s Four Sea Interludes and similarly, here Haydn really doesn’t provide anything to hum. The four bars in the dominant lead to the home key but when this is arrived at, there is no melody waiting there but immediately some transitional figures played by the loud orchestral tutti (all instruments) which “transition” right back to the four measures. It’s like the hurrying Red Queen in “Thorough the Looking Glass”—always running just to stay in one place.

And Haydn doesn’t even provide relief in a second theme either. It is really just an upward flowing counter melody played by the oboes balancing the downward motion of the allegro—new, yet not fully new. With a cute closing theme, Haydn finally gives us something hummable which, after the repeat, leads into a development section full of violent off-beat accents. These accents were presaged in the earlier “real” transition.
(And even the falling motion of the opening theme was hinted at by phrases in the introduction.) These are the little aspects that delight the knowing but also make the novice listener instinctively feel that a mature Haydn work really “holds together.” Haydn follows his recap with a full coda—inventing even more episodes for his close-knit family of themes for a satisfying close.

The theme to the “Adagio” (slow) second movement is definitely hummable. The idyll, however, is broken by an unusual minor-key clamoring of trumpets and timpani which are usually given the direction “tacet” (silent) in the slow movement of a Classical-Era piece. Proceeded by some very dramatic pauses there are some lovely wind-section passages in the conclusion.

The Menuet (French term—remember who commissioned this—for Minuet) “allegretto” (moderately fast) has only one bar of conventional dance rhythm before it starts its second phrase on the “wrong” beat. Soon there are more blatant syncopated accents and —what else?—dramatic pauses! Haydn, more than any other Classical composer, was a master of the use of silence. The “Trio” (middle) section begins with the horns and bassoons lurching with their own special off-beat phrases and soon the whole orchestra is dancing on the wrong foot until finally getting it right just in time for a return to the beginning of the minuet.

The last movement’s (“presto”—very fast) scurrying theme is not just singable, it’s compulsively, damnably singable. (It starts with a formula that Mozart also uses in the finale of his famous Symphony No. 40 in G-minor.) This seems the perfect theme for a rondo movement where a catchy, attractive theme is simply repeated alternating with contrasting passages. But no. This is a sonata form, and Haydn transforms his theme through some learned counterpoint in a development section which begins with… (You know the drill) Dramatic Pauses! A great ending to a great work.

-Program Note by Charles Amenta