

FRANZ JOSEF HAYDN

(1732 – 1809)

Concerto for Oboe & Orchestra in C Major, Hob. VIIg:c 1

Franz Joseph Haydn was born in the small Austrian village of Rohrau and was selected, at the age of eight, for the choir of St. Stephen's in Vienna, where his academic and music education continued. Although he received no formal lessons in composition, his exposure to the finest music was an education in itself. When Haydn's voice changed at the age of seventeen, he was forced to leave St. Stephen's but stayed on in Vienna, playing violin on the streets, giving lessons, and honing his compositional skills. After a couple of minor court appointments, he was appointed Kapellmeister at the sumptuous Esterházy castle where he remained from 1761 until 1790.

Although he was a servant at Esterházy, Haydn held a rank that afforded him a substantial salary as well as the services of a footman and maid. His duties included composing, rehearsing, and conducting music for frequent orchestra, chamber music, and opera performances by the 25 instrumentalists, 5 vocal soloists, and chorus on Prince Esterházy's staff. In addition, he wrote music for the Prince, who was an avid amateur performer. After the death of Prince Esterházy in 1790, Haydn made his permanent home in Vienna but visited London and Paris several times.

While Haydn's very early music tended to be light, charming, and elegant, he later added folk and rustic elements. In his maturity, he developed and wove these two threads into skillfully organized works that helped set the standard for musical style and taste. But even as he imbued his compositions with such hallmarks of the Classical style as proportion, symmetry, balance, restraint, and clarity, his inventiveness and originality allowed him to satisfy his own need for self-expression.

Deteriorating health forced him to give up conducting and composing in 1803, so he settled into retirement and began drawing up a catalog of the works that "he could approximately recall having composed". On May 31, 1809, while Napoleon's troops bombarded Vienna, Haydn died at his small home.

The Concerto for Oboe and Orchestra in C Major is but one example of a substantial body of disputed Haydn works either lost or otherwise discounted. However, based on its melodic distinction and high degree of craftsmanship alone, this is a work that has long challenged Haydn scholars and which seems set to retain its status in the concerto literature for oboe, irrespective of its authorship. The work has one obvious feature above all that signals that it most likely is not a work of Haydn's: the orchestration. It is highly unlikely that Haydn would have used trumpets and timpani in an orchestral accompaniment for a concerto of this type, especially one involving the oboe. It seems likely that Haydn's name was added by an unknown hand on the title page of the only surviving copy, perhaps to lend prestige to the work.

Nevertheless, the concerto is an exemplary example of the Classical wind concerto. Melodic lines are finely contoured and the full range of technical possibilities available are richly exploited in the work. The oboe's songful capabilities and bravura potential come powerfully to the fore.