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CD Review: Recent Haydn recordings featuring violinist Aisslinn Nosky.

by Michael Weiss

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Joseph Haydn. *String Quartets Op. 33*. Eybler Quartet. Recorded January 2012,
 Analekta AN 2 9842-3, 2 compact discs.



Joseph Haydn. *Haydn: Vol. 1. Symphony No. 6, Symphony No. 82, Violin Concerto in G major*. Harry Christophers, Aisslinn Nosky, Handel and Haydn Society Orchestra. Recorded live 22 & 24 February 2013, CORO COR16113, compact disc.



Analekta's 2012 release of Haydn's Op. 33 played by the Eybler Quartet is the third in a string of interesting recordings that are bound to appeal to enthusiasts of eighteenth-century music, and will hopefully win a few more listeners over to the delights of that century's string quartet repertoire. The liner notes tell us that the players are "united by their unquenchable passion for exploring works of the first century and a half of the string quartet repertoire," which is not much of a declaration, as that would cover the bulk of the standard concert repertoire. In reality the Toronto-based group has concentrated on the earlier part of that bracket, and their "unquenchable passion" for the music of this period is definitely borne out in their recordings.

Given that their debut recording was of three quartets by their namesake, Joseph Leopold Edler von Eybler, they have made it clear that their notion of eighteenth-century chamber music goes beyond just Mozart and Haydn. But while they profess to pay "a healthy attention to lesser-known composers," they are by no means renegades trying to shunt these "greats" off the stage: in their second album (with clarinettist and basset horn player Jane Booth) Mozart is allowed to share the spotlight with Johann Georg Heinrich Backofen, and the disc under review here is entirely of Haydn. The concert calendar on the group's website: <http://www.eyblerquartet.com>. shows that they have big names like Beethoven, Schumann, Brahms and Mendelssohn rubbing shoulders with, and actually being outnumbered by, composers such as Vanhal, Boccherini, Dittersdorf, Reicha, Wikmanson, Titz, Asplmayer, M. Haydn, Arriaga and Kraus. This is "healthy attention" indeed. It is all too easy and all too common for professional string quartets to pay nothing more than lip service to the eighteenth century, shoving at most a bit of Mozart or Haydn onto a concert programme as a support act for a Romantic warhorse. Lesser-known eighteenth-century composers are a rarity on the concert circuit, so it is such a pleasure to see the variety and extensiveness in the Eybler Quartet's repertoire of choice, both for their concerts and, so far, on disc. As any reader of this journal will know only too well, music in the eighteenth century is on the whole lamentably misrepresented today, so an approach to programming that attempts to do justice to this historical period and to give more exposure to its many rare gems can only be encouraged.

The Eybler Quartet's aim of historical verisimilitude extends to their playing as well. They perform on instruments said to be "appropriate to the period of the music," which make a beautiful, mellow, velvety sound and respond well to the predominantly non-vibrato approach. This last point is made only because it will resonate with modern readers; otherwise, characterizing the playing by its lack of continuous vibrato is an anachronism that offers only a limited description based on nothing other than the absence of a twentieth-century stylistic trait. It would be more correct to state that the Eybler Quartet cultivates a full palette of timbres—at times warm and refined, at others edgy and punchy—all through a versatile and controlled use of the bow.

Also reflecting the Eybler Quartet's historically sensitive *mentalité* is their free addition of ornamental and embellishment effects. All the players take great freedom with inserting the occasional mordent or turn. These are tastefully done, serving to bring out a particular line or idea and never clouding the texture. Vibrato is also used (plenty, in fact) to ornament or intensify notes or to enrich the resonance of certain carefully selected chords. We therefore get to hear how effective vibrato can be as a tool of tone coloration, something that doesn't happen when groups apply it universally, as some highly respected ensembles do for this repertoire. There are also numerous cadenzas at fermata points, principally from the first violin, but occasionally from the others. Whether or not they were worked out in advance, they sound extemporized and thereby give the playing an air of spontaneity. One cadenza that really takes the listener by surprise is on the repeat of the second half in the da capo (they do all repeats throughout) in the scherzo of the G major quartet. This is indicative of the fun the group has with the music throughout the set. Fun is perhaps not quite the right word, for that suggests little more than jocularity and levity. I mean that they treat *all* of the pieces, not just the ordained spots like the trio in the scherzo of the "Joke" quartet, with the same level of interpretive freedom. In point of fact, the portamenti that Haydn calls for in that trio can sound goofy in performances where the other movements are played as stiff realizations of ossified scores. But the Eybler Quartet brings portamenti into other spots as well, including a couple of beautifully poignant instances in the first *minore* episode of the finale of Op. 33 no. 6. As a result they prove the versatility of that technique, and the trio of the "Joke" comes across as amusing without being outlandish.

The group recognises many of the opportunities that Haydn has given the players for creating gestural variety, discursive utterances, contrasts in character and even moments of theatricality. They could have achieved some greater fluctuations in the timing afforded by the flexibility of chamber configurations, but overall their tempi are well chosen and they deliver their interpretations convincingly. The recording captures well the balance between the parts and therefore does due diligence to the counterpoint that gave Op. 33 some of the “new and special manner” Haydn bragged about to his customers. This is not so much about making all parts equal—an oft-told part of the heartwarming but not quite accurate narrative of democratization in the evolution of the string quartet—as giving each a separate identity and an indispensable role in the texture. All four players acquit themselves admirably, with the lower three parts never betraying any of that sense of panic even seasoned players can show when it’s their turn to have a little solo.

Particular mention must be given to Aisslinn Nosky, the first violinist, who is in superb command of her material and makes a strong leader. She is also, besides the music of Haydn, the common thread between the two recordings in this review, being concertmaster of the Handel and Haydn Society (H & H) Orchestra and soloist in Haydn’s Violin Concerto in G major. The concerto is preceded on the disc by Haydn’s Symphony No. 6 (*Le Matin*) and followed by his Symphony No. 82 (*L’Ours*), all conducted by Harry Christophers and released in 2013 on the CORO label.

Christophers, who is best known as founder and conductor of the vocal ensemble *The Sixteen*, was appointed artistic director of the H & H Orchestra in 2008. Acclaimed for his recordings of Renaissance and Baroque vocal music, it is a pleasant surprise to find he is adept at performing Haydn too, producing renditions that are stylish and thoughtful. This is touted as the first in a series of live recordings from the H & H in Boston’s Symphony Hall, so opening with *Le Matin* was an obvious choice as he has a group of very capable players at his disposition. The soloists play the concertante parts in this piece with great aplomb, enabling Christophers to show them off to his audience just as Haydn was able to impress his new employer with the players at the Esterházy palace in Eisenstadt.

There is never any sloppy playing here. The ensemble is on its toes at all times, crafting a precise and subtle performance through careful attention to dynamics and phrasing. Without ever resorting to extremes, Christophers is able to give the more up-tempo sections energy and forward drive while giving sections of a more relaxed character a vitality that keeps them elegant and interesting. He always has the bigger picture in mind in his careful control of contrast and continuity, never letting individual moments disrupt the flow of the whole.

These are excellent performances, though I find it a bit overstated when Christophers promises in the accompanying booklet to "perform the music of the past but strip away the cobwebs and reveal it anew." We could just take these words with a grain of salt and write them off as marketing speak. But given that there are dozens of recordings of Haydn symphonies by such renowned champions of the "period" style of performance as Harnoncourt, Minkowski, Weil, Kuijken and Norrington, Christophers' statement seems somewhat disingenuous. There may be other (unavoidable) accretions to this repertoire brought on by the so-called early music revival as it has extended its reach to the later eighteenth century, but cobwebs there are none, at least in terms of available recordings. On the other hand, what I do find particularly interesting and appealing in Christophers' interpretation is that although he is conducting a period-instrument orchestra, he does not try to stun audiences with extremes the way some other period conductors do. Contrasts between forte and piano are made more through changing character than actual volume, there are no overly dramatic interpretations of tempo such as near-pulseless adagios or hectic accelerandos, and it is energetic without being aggressive. (Although the way the timpani and open-fifths brass nearly drown out the violins and upper winds at the end of *L'Ours* is very bold – but also great fun!) Christophers cultivates a sound that is generally warm and well-rounded rather than harsh, and he prefers slightly more sustained tones over the very rapid decay favoured by some period conductors. In short, these performances are not modish and they never try to slap the listener in the face.

The best example of this is the violin concerto—not just the performance of it, but also the mere fact of its inclusion on the disc. Although it is numbered fourth in the Hoboken catalogue, it is probably the earliest of the extant concertos in composition

order, possibly written while Haydn was in the employ of Count Morzin. Consequently it occasions less of a display of the violinist's technical abilities than those composed for Tomasini and the Esterházy band. Barring some Baroque-style passage-work, there is little room for dazzling fireworks (though the listener is left with no doubt of Nosky's skill) and the style of writing is generally so moderate of character that the whizz-bang approach of many period-style ensembles would fall flat here. Instead, the players preach patience, not afraid to make as much of the *moderato* as the *allegro* in the first movement's *allegro moderato* marking.

Nosky's performance is self-assured and her experience as a player of eighteenth-century music shines through in her relaxed manner as well as in her effortless improvising of ornamentation, including even a brief moment of portamento in last movement (which sounds a little out of place, but it is still encouraging that she does not hesitate to use it). Nosky is set to record the other Haydn violin concertos with the H & H Orchestra, and these, plus whatever other symphonic offerings they intend to make, will be well worth keeping an eye and an ear open for.