

# Joseph Haydn and the German Nation

**A subject and servant of Europe's most cosmopolitan empire, the composer Joseph Haydn played an important role in the emergence of German cultural nationalism during the 18th and 19th centuries, writes Tim Blanning.**

Joseph Haydn was born on March 31st, 1732 in the village of Rohrau in Lower Austria, a province of the Habsburg empire. This was arguably the most multinational, multicultural, multilingual and generally diverse great power that Europe had ever seen. Its then ruler, Charles VI, held sway over a great conglomeration of territories stretching from Ostend to Belgrade and from Prague to Palermo. It included all or part of the following present-day countries: Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Hungary, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia and Italy. As Sir Harold Temperley observed, the Habsburg monarchy was not so much a country as a continent all by itself. The most succinct illustration of this was provided by the trilingual signature of the monarchy's greatest military commander, Prince Eugene: Eugenio von Savoie. Everyone who visited the capital Vienna was struck by the wonderful variety of languages, clothing and customs on display.

From the age of 29 until the day he died almost half a century later, Haydn was in the service of the Esterházy, the greatest aristocratic dynasty in the monarchy. In the course of the previous century they had risen with amazing speed by helping to defeat their Habsburg overlords' two great enemies: the Protestants and the Turks. Although the Esterházy family was Hungarian by origin, theirs was a world without national identity in which Italian, French or even Latin was as much used as German. Evidence of its cosmopolitanism can be seen in the visual vocabularies of their three main palaces – in Vienna, at Eisenstadt and at Esterháza. It was at the last of these, built by Prince Nicholas 'The Magnificent' in the 1760s, that Haydn was to spend most of his time.

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At all three palaces Haydn had access to an enormous collection of musical scores. They came from all over Europe but especially from Italy, the centre of the 18th-century musical world. Although Haydn was unusual among contemporary musicians in never actually travelling to Italy, the Vienna in which he received his early musical training was suffused with Italian music. In an autobiographical sketch written in 1776 he recalled that he had 'the good fortune to learn the true fundamentals of composition from the famous Porpora', the Neapolitan composer. But Vienna was also a city to which musicians from the Habsburg-ruled kingdom of Bohemia flocked, bringing with them their own distinctive sound. The incorporation of Slavonic melodies and rhythms was one of the many features of Haydn's music to win the later approval of Richard Wagner. Less often acknowledged but also powerful was the influence of the Protestant north. Haydn himself told one of his two contemporary biographers that he owed 'a great deal' to Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, *Kapellmeister* at Hamburg.

Of course what Haydn then did with this richly international mix was entirely individual. Tucked away in rural isolation at remote Esterháza, with an excellent orchestra always on hand and writing for a musically sophisticated patron, Haydn could allow his powerful imagination full rein. As he himself put it: My Prince was content with all my works, I received approval, I could, as head of an orchestra, make experiments, observe what enhanced an effect, and what weakened it, thus improving, adding to, cutting away, and running risks. I was set apart from the world, there was nobody in my vicinity to confuse and annoy me in my course, and so I had to be original.

It turned out that what pleased Prince Nicholas also pleased the rest of Europe. Haydn's original contract stated that everything he wrote was the exclusive property of his patron. But it was not long before news of his talent began to spread, as manuscript copies of his keyboard sonatas and string quartets began to circulate. Always more honoured in the breach than in the observance, the restrictive clause was dropped in a revised contract of 1779, by which time his music was freely available everywhere that music was performed. Haydn was fortunate that his career coincided with a massive expansion of music printing and publishing. He turned out to be a shrewd businessman, driving a hard bargain with the publishers who clamoured for his work.

Over the next two decades an ever-increasing stream of his compositions found their way on to the international market, sometimes in manuscript but increasingly in printed editions. Especially successful was the set of six keyboard sonatas published in 1774 and dedicated to Prince Esterházy, which was soon reprinted in Paris, London and Amsterdam. By the 1780s Haydn was composing music for patrons all over Europe, including the six symphonies composed for a masonic lodge

at Paris. The most eloquent visual illustration of his international fame was Goya's magnificent portrait of the Spanish Duke of Alba holding a book of Haydn's *Four Songs with Pianoforte Accompaniment*, now in the Prado.

Nowhere was Haydn's music more appreciated than in London. Kept within the bounds of the Esterházy residences by his contract, he could not exploit this popularity at first hand until the benevolent but demanding Prince Nicholas died in the autumn of 1790. Pensioned off by his less musical and more thrifty successor, Prince Anton, Haydn was now free to enter the public sphere. Accompanied by the impresario Johann Peter Salomon, Haydn arrived in London on New Year's Day 1791 to direct a series of concerts of new symphonies. To his great surprise but gratification he found that he was a celebrity. He wrote home to one of his lady friends:

*My arrival caused a great sensation throughout the whole city, and I went the round of all the newspapers for three successive days. Everyone wants to know me. I had to dine out six times up to now, and if I wanted, I could dine out every day. By the time he got back to Vienna 18 months later, Haydn had made a considerable amount of money. Before he embarked on his English expedition his life's savings amounted to a paltry 2,000 gulden, just two years' worth of his pension. Yet within six months of arriving in London he was able to send home nearly 6,000 gulden. A second visit in 1794-95 was also profitable, the two spells yielding a total of around 15,000 gulden in clear profit.*

Yet it proved to be the darkness before the dawn. Within 50 years of Leibniz's death in 1716 the German language was flourishing as never before. In part this was a natural consequence of economic and social recovery after the dark days of the previous century. Among other things it brought a growing population, better communications and improving literacy rates. From the 1730s a number of 'German societies' were founded to promote the status of the language. In 1761, the year in which Haydn entered the service of the Esterházy, a branch was even founded in Vienna, arguably the least German city in the Holy Roman Empire. It was badly needed: Count Kaunitz, the senior minister in the Habsburg monarchy, spoke the Romance languages perfectly but deliberately chose to butcher his German to demonstrate his distance from the common herd.

By this time, German speakers were beginning to grow in confidence as the improvement in their material conditions was accompanied by cultural achievement. Philosophy was one field in which they could claim at least parity with the rest of Europe, but it was in music that they were beginning to establish pre-eminence. The point is well made by a simple list of 18th-century German composers born before Haydn: Johann Pachelbel (1653-1706), Georg Philipp Telemann (1681-1767), Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), Georg Friedrich Händel (1685-1759), Johann Joachim Quantz (1697-1773), Johann Adolf Hasse (1699-1783), Carl Heinrich Graun (1703-59), Franz Benda (1709-86), Frederick the Great of Prussia (1712-86), Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714-88), Johann Wenzel Anton Stamitz (1717-57), Johann Friedrich Agricola (1720-74) and Georg Anton Benda (1722-95). No wonder that in 1741 a periodical published in Brunswick, entitled *Der musikalische Patriot* ('The Musical Patriot'), offered the following triumphant proclamation of the supremacy of German music:

*Must not the Italians, who previously were the tutors of the Germans, now envy Germany its estimable composers, and secretly seek to learn from them? Indeed, must not the high and mighty Parisians, who used to deride German talent as something provincial, now take lessons from Telemann of Hamburg? Indeed, I believe that we Germans can go on instructing foreigners in how music can be developed still further, in much the same way that our fellow countrymen, notably Leibniz and Wolff, have demonstrated how the philosophical and mathematical sciences can be raised to a still greater pitch of perfection.*

As this jibe at the 'high and mighty Parisians' suggests, it was the French against whom the Germans measured themselves. So great had been the power exercised by Louis XIV and so triumphalist was the culture he created at Versailles that a reaction was inevitable sooner or later. It was intensified by the knowledge that the French held the Germans in very low esteem. Voltaire's *Candide* (1759), one of the great bestsellers of the century, opened with a contemptuous satire on the clod-hopping Germans:

*The most noble Baron of Thunder ten Tronckh was one of the most powerful lords in Westphalia; for his castle had not only a gate, but even windows ... He was called 'My Lord' by all his people, and he never told a story but everyone laughed at it. My Lady Baroness weighed 350 lbs, consequently was a person of no small consideration.*

As the German cultural revival gathered pace, so did resentment at French condescension. Perhaps the most distinguished representative of the Austrian Enlightenment was Joseph von Sonnenfels, born in the same year as Haydn and a friend and patron of both Mozart and Beethoven. He complained bitterly that: It is well-known how the French are accustomed to speaking and writing with unseemly contempt about German traditions, intellect, society, taste and everything else that blossoms under the German sun. Their adjectives tudesque, germanique and allemand are for them synonyms for 'coarse', 'ponderous' and 'uncultivated'.

Those words were written in 1793, four years after the fall of the Bastille. Initially many, if not most, Germans welcomed the French Revolution as the triumph of reason and liberty over superstition and despotism. Very few, however, wished to see anything similar occurring east of the Rhine. As one conservative sneered: 'Those who are most favourably disposed

towards the French Revolution are also those who are most opposed to it in their own country.' The majority view, even among those of a liberal disposition, was that the enlightened reforms introduced by rulers such as the Emperor Joseph II, the Holy Roman Emperor from 1765 to his death in 1790, made violent upheaval unnecessary. Opposition to the Revolution was strengthened by the outbreak of the French Wars in 1792, the devastation inflicted by the invading armies and by the Terror of 1793-94.

Musicians were as open to cultural influences as any other social group. For all his unique genius, Mozart (1756-91) was a typical intellectual of his time: a man of the Enlightenment and a Freemason but also a devout Christian. He was also proud of his German identity although this is rarely mentioned by his biographers. He wrote home from Paris in the spring of 1778 that the taste of the French had improved a little since his last visit, because at least they could now bring themselves to listen to good music as well as bad, but:

***... to expect them to realise that their own music is bad or at least to notice the difference – Heaven preserve us! And their singing! Good Lord! Let me never hear a Frenchwoman singing Italian arias. I can forgive her if she screeches out her French trash, but not if she ruins good music! It's simply unbearable.***

Rather more chilling was the vow he made when the prospect of a commission from 'these stupid Frenchmen' for an opera appeared:

***I tremble from head to foot with eagerness to teach the French more thoroughly to know, appreciate and fear the Germans.***

In another letter to his father, Mozart expressed his ambition 'to do honour to myself and to the whole German nation'. Haydn never expressed himself in these terms. He was of an older generation and of a more equable temperament than Mozart. Nor did he ever go to Paris. But during his first visit to London he was greatly impressed by the enthusiasm with which theatre audiences sang 'God Save the King'. On his return from his second visit he reported this to his friends in high places. Either Count Saurau or Baron van Swieten (the evidence is not clear) then commissioned an Austrian version, the text to be written by Lorenz Haschka to music by Haydn. The result was 'God Save Emperor Francis!', first performed in all the theatres in Vienna and in many other places throughout the Habsburg monarchy on February 12th, 1797, the Emperor's birthday. Translated, the first verse runs as follows:

***God save Emperor Francis Our good Emperor Francis! Long live Emperor Francis In the brightest splendour of good fortune! May the leaves of laurel bloom for him As a garland of honour, wherever he goes. God save Emperor Francis!***

The other four verses are no more exciting, but when sung to Haydn's melody the combined effect was, by all accounts, electrifying (This will seem less surprising when it is appreciated that in 1841 the melody was borrowed by Hoffmann von Fallersleben for his German national anthem 'Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles').

If the reliability of official reports may be doubted, there is no gainsaying the testimony of the canny entrepreneur Emanuel Schikaneder who immediately advertised on his handbills that 'God Save Emperor Francis!' would be sung at all performances in his theatre. As the doyen of Haydn studies H.C. Robbins Landon has observed, it 'was the greatest piece of propaganda ever devised to hold together a people made nervous and uncertain by the French Revolution.' Above all, it bound together the head of the Habsburg dynasty with nation and people, being variously described as a 'national anthem' (*Nationallied*) and a 'song of the people' (*Volkslied*). The nation in question was 'German', not in a political sense – for very few even dreamed of a unified German nation state – but in the cultural sense employed by Mozart. In London, at one of their meetings, George III told Haydn that he admired him for being 'a good honest German gentleman', to which Haydn replied: 'To keep that reputation is my greatest pride.'

## ***"Haydn was given the credit for 'establishing the supremacy of German music in the concert life of Europe' "***

Haydn himself was greatly attached to his anthem 'God save Emperor Francis!' This was confirmed by his early biographers, Georg August Griesinger and Albert Christoph Dies, both of whom visited him frequently during his last ten years and recorded their conversations. He told both men that, whenever he was upset by bad news from the French wars (and there was plenty of it), he calmed himself down by going to his piano and playing and singing it. When Dies observed that he was not surprised because the song was a masterpiece, Haydn replied: 'I almost think so myself, though I shouldn't say it.' Posterity has been less enthusiastic, the words no longer having any resonance. There appears to be only one current recording of just the first verse available (by Emmy Ameling). However, the melody alone has enjoyed much wider currency as Haydn used it for the slow movement of his String Quartet in C major, opus 76 (*The Emperor*).

Also frequently performed and recorded has been another of Haydn's musical contributions to the war effort – his Mass in D Minor of 1798. The title Haydn originally gave it in his catalogue was *Missa in Angustiis* ('A Mass in Times of Trouble'). As it turned out, just as Haydn was putting notes on the staff, 1,500 miles away the troubled times were being alleviated by

Nelson's destruction of the French fleet at the Battle of the Nile during the night of August 1st. This was one of the most decisive naval battles of all time – 'victory is not a name strong enough for such a scene' was Nelson's own verdict when day dawned. It may have been the coincidence of the arrival of the good news of the British victory with its first performance that led to the Mass being given the name *Nelson Mass*.

It may also have been retitled in honour of Nelson's visit to the Esterházy palace at Eisenstadt in 1800. This was the occasion for one of the more intriguing concerts in musical history, as Nelson's mistress, Lady Emma Hamilton, sang an ode in English to Nelson's victory set to music by Haydn, who accompanied her at the piano:

***Britannia's leader gives the dread command; Obedient to his summons flames arise: The fierce explosion rends the skies. And high in the air the pond'rous mass is thrown The dire concussion shakes the land. Earth, air and sea united groan. The solid Pyramids confess the shock, And their firm bases to the centre rock.***

This was to be Haydn's last original vocal work for solo voice. He was now 68 and was beginning to find composition hard work. There were two more Masses and *The Seasons* to come but in 1802, after a serious illness, he stopped creative work. His patriotic attachment to his national anthem, however, was undimmed. In the spring of 1809, as his life neared its end and the fortunes of war turned against the Austrians yet again, he was still using it to lift his spirits. According to Griesinger, he sang and played the song three times in a row on May 26th, just five days before his death.

It was sad indeed that Haydn should have died as Austria was suffering yet another defeat at the hands of Napoleon, for it proved to be the last. Only five years later it was the German powers who would be celebrating a victory parade in Paris to mark Napoleon's defeat. However, Haydn did leave one further and posthumous gift to the German nation. This was well put by Griesinger at the beginning of his memoir of the great composer, published in 1810:

***Joseph Haydn has ended his glorious career. By his death Germany again suffers a national loss; for Haydn was the founder of an epoch in musical culture, and the sound of his harmonies, universally understood, did more than all written matter together to promote the honour of German artistic talent in the remotest lands.***

This was a claim made again and again in the 19th century. In 1870, looking back on the past century, the great Viennese music critic Eduard Hanslick (mercilessly and unfairly lampooned by Wagner in the person of Beckmesser in *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*) gave Haydn the credit for 'establishing the supremacy of German music in the concert-life of Europe'. It was pride in their cultural achievements that had given the Germans the self-confidence to shake off foreign models and to speak with their own voice. In that process, music in general and Haydn in particular played a crucial role.

### **Further Reading**

Tim Blanning, *The Triumph of Music: Composers, Musicians and their Audiences 1700 to the Present* (Penguin, 2008); Richard Wigmore, *The Faber Pocket Guide to Haydn* (Faber, 2009); David Wyn Jones (ed.), *Oxford Composer Companions: Haydn* (Oxford University Press, 2002); H. C. Robbins Landon and David Wyn Jones, *Haydn: His Life and Music* (Thames and Hudson, 1998); Daniel Hertz, *Mozart, Haydn and Early Beethoven 1781-1802* (W. W. Norton, 2008).

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