



**Robert Commanday, Senior Editor**

## **The Perils of Perfection**

**by Michelle Dulak**

I was still musing over the Emerson Quartet's brilliant-but-very-odd Haydn concert at Herbst last Thursday when I read a piece in the Sunday *New York Times* by Bernard Holland titled "If Practice Makes Perfect, Practice Less?" Holland is ruminating over Murray Perahia's new recording of the Chopin Etudes, which he thinks astonishing, but unnervingly clean and struggle-free, and wonders whether the struggle is *part* of music so difficult. And then he mentions the Emerson Quartet:

"Tradition also associates the word 'cold' with the word 'perfection.' It is an irony to those who are not cold but who have worked hard to be perfect. The Emerson String Quartet is an intensely musical ensemble, yet the uncanny clarity of its playing takes getting used to. The gut roughness of Beethoven's middle quartets or of the six quartets of Bartók sounds at first to have been airbrushed to a Playboy-centerfold idealization. Actually, it is not, but it takes a while to realize that the Emerson is just telling the truth more clearly than most of its colleagues do."

The Beethoven and the Bartók concerts Holland mentions were two of three projects the quartet undertook in celebration of its 25th anniversary. The third was the "Haydn Project" of which Thursday's performance at Herbst Theater was a byproduct.

**At ease in Haydn**

Holland is of course right, twice: The Emersons are not "cold," and they are damn near perfect. The violinists, Eugene Drucker and Philip Setzer (who trade off between first and second violin) are both brilliant, and also different enough from one another to make their interaction always interesting. David Finckel, the cellist, is a massively accomplished player. As for the violist, Lawrence Dutton, I came out of that concert firmly convinced that he is the greatest quartet violist alive. But there are dangers in such ease. Sometimes the Emersons didn't tell the truth so much as overshoot it.

Give the Emersons credit for great taste in Haydn: they picked two extraordinary and not exactly over-exposed quartets, Op. 20 No. 3 and Op. 76 No. 5 (still known, though mainly in England, as "The One with the Famous Largo"). And they played both with a degree of technical finesse that I doubt either piece often gets anywhere. But what a strange mixture the results were!

A few seconds into Op. 20 No. 3 I was already wondering why the Emersons had picked *it*, of all things. Haydn went a few even wilder places later on in his quartet-writing career, but this G-minor Quartet is one strange beast, and nowhere more than in that first movement. The piece starts with two seven-bar phrases; it's full of odd sudden turns and murmured asides and collisions of motives as bald as any before Bartók. A good performance has you shaking your head to stop it from spinning and exclaiming in disbelief, "That's from 1772?"

### **Making light of weirdness**

But for the Emersons it was all too easy, in more senses than one. They sailed smartly through the technical difficulties, more damagingly through the interpretive ones. Sometimes, in fact, they were the same thing. In that first movement there are a couple of strange passages where the first violin repeats an agitated little gesture with occasional, irregularly-placed chords in comment from the other players. Towards the end of this passage both times it comes, the first violinist is directed to play the figure on a single string, which means shifting quickly under a slur. That generally means an audible little slide between the notes, which was presumably Haydn's point. Not, though, for Philip Setzer, who followed the instruction to the letter but shifted so cleanly that from the listener's point of view he might as well have been crossing strings.

In that whole alarming movement, the Emersons never seemed alarmed; through most of the sorrow-laden minuet that followed, they seemed oblivious of the sorrow; the heartbreaking slow movement was magnificently played (really!), but its pathos had turned to prettiness. Everything was in order — sleek, perfectly tuned, beautifully balanced, utterly wrong. It was a performance far too easy for its own good.

The odd thing is that there are a great many Haydn quartets that would survive such treatment, even thrive under it. There are even several in the same opus. I should like very much to hear the Emersons in Op. 20 No. 1 or 2 or 5, where their virtues and the music's needs would line up much better. But where Haydn is being blatantly radical, if you don't notice the radicalism you miss half the music, and that's what happened Thursday night.

### **Beautiful complacency**

Op. 76 No. 5 went better — somewhat to my surprise, as it's another famously difficult piece to bring off. The really tough thing is the first movement, which is repetitious and is in a *siciliano* meter that can bog down with the slightest provocation. That the Emersons handled very well indeed. Eugene Drucker inflected the first violin line delightfully, tossing off the slight variants as though they were his own inventions — which is just how they *should* sound, but almost never do. And the coda, which is at a faster tempo, was urgent and exhilarating. So was the finale of the same piece (especially the maniacal second violin solo at the recap, where Setzer nearly showed more spunk in a few seconds than he had in all of Op. 20 No. 3).

But there was no sense of play in the Minuet's cross-rhythms (why play Haydn at all if you're not the type to seek out rhythmic fun and exuberantly exaggerate it whenever you come upon it?). And the "Famous Largo" was a disappointment, plush and over-vibrated, complacently beautiful. I was reminded uneasily of a young quartet (since "grown up" and well-known) I'd heard play the same work many years ago, who had written their own program notes and rather glibly commented that they didn't understand the tempo indication for this piece ("Largo cantabile e mesto" — roughly, "slow, singing, and sad") because there was nothing sad about the music. There is; and if you can't hear it, you should run along and play something else.

After intermission came the *Seven Last Words of Christ*, which these days is a string quartet classic, despite having been written for orchestra and only hastily arranged for quartet (among other things), like innumerable other orchestral pieces of its time. But here Holland's line about "telling the truth" was literally correct. I know the quartet version of the *Seven Last Words* pretty well, and not far into the Emersons' performance I thought my memory had gone haywire. A little further on, and I was convinced that the quartet was using some new edition. It turns out that they were — their own.

### **A model lecture-demo**

After the performance was over, the players and local musicologist Bob Greenberg convened onstage for a lecture-demonstration that was a model of its kind. While rehearsing the *Seven Last Words*, the Emersons had done what any inquisitive musicians doing the piece would do — looked at the original, orchestral version — and had seen what any string players would immediately see — that the "quartet arrangement" published as Haydn's own is basically the orchestral string parts of the original, with a few trivial alterations.

The winds in the original mostly double the strings and fill out chords, so the string parts alone make a workable quartet, but there are a few places where the winds have important material that didn't make it into the "arrangement." The Emersons restored these, and also put the cello an octave down in many places to add the lower octave that the orchestral version (with basses, reading the same line as the cellos but sounding an octave lower) would have had. Everything they did was effective and a decided improvement on the familiar version (we got "before-and-after" versions of all the most dramatically altered places). There are no plans to publish this version, alas. There ought to be.

In the *Seven Last Words* the Emerson violinists took opposite stands and traded off movements, Drucker taking the first part in some, Setzer in others. And it was marvelous playing — Setzer's sweet sound set

against Drucker's sharper one, Dutton's inimitable viola revealing things you never would've noticed in any other performance, Finckel's cello anchoring the whole thing to earth. To me it seemed sometimes rather too beautiful for its subject, which (remember?) is a man slowly dying by torture. And I thought back to an oldish recording by the Lindsay Quartet, pretty crude in a technical sense, not nearly so beautiful, not nearly so artful. But somehow more appropriate.

What, you say the Lindsays don't play like that because they can't? No, they can't, and Bernard Holland's point (and mine) is that sometimes that's a *good* thing.

(Michelle Dulak, editor of San Francisco Classical Voice, is a violinist and violist who has written about music for *Strings*, *Stagebill*, *Early Music America*, and the *New York Times*.)

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