Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)
"Concertante" in B-flat for violin, cello, oboe, and bassoon, Hob. I:105

Though the first printed editions by André in Offenbach and Artaria in Vienna call this work respectively “Sinfonie Concertante” and “Grand Symphonie concertante,” Haydn’s manuscript gives simply “Concertante.” The composer presided over the first performance, on March 9, 1792, in London, the soloists being Johann Peter Salomon, violin, Mr. Menel (or Menal, Menall, Memel, etc.), cello, Mr. Harrington, oboe, and Mr. Holmes (or Holms, Homes, etc.), bassoon.

The likely inspiration for this concertante was a similar work—though with six solo parts for flute, oboe, bassoon, violin, viola, and cello—by Haydn’s pupil, Ignaz Pleyel (who, after a successful career as a pianist and composer, eventually became rich in grand style with a piano factory he founded in 1807 in Paris). That is to say, what probably happened is that Johann Peter Salomon, the violinist and impresario responsible for bringing Haydn to London in 1791 and again three years later, encouraged him to try his hand at the genre with which Pleyel had scored such a success. It seems unlikely that Haydn would have written a work of this type without specific encouragement, since, unlike Mozart, he was neither a man of the theater nor a virtuoso performer, and was not much drawn to the composition of concertos. The manuscript looks like something written in a tremendous hurry, and it is not impossible that the Concertante was composed between February 27, 1792, when Pleyel’s work appeared on Salomon’s program, and March 9, the date of the premiere. At any rate, it pleased, eliciting not quite the rapture of his most famous London symphonies, but still, most distinctly, enough to be repeated the following week and again on May 3, as well as being one of the first works up for revival when Haydn returned to England in 1794. It was one of the Haydn pieces that went underground in the 19th century. A recording Charles Munch made in the 1930s in Paris first brought the Concertante to general attention; the assumption of the work into the standard repertory was a development of the post-war years.

As 18th-century composers use the term, a “sinfonia concertante” (or however you would like to spell it) might be a concerto with more than one solo instrument, for example, Mozart’s well-known Sinfonia concertante in E-flat, K.364, for violin and viola, or something closer to what the name actually suggests, a symphony that behaves in the manner of a concerto. Haydn’s Concertante tends toward the latter idea. The solo parts are demanding and grateful, but not as unambiguously soloistic as the cello and trumpet parts in Haydn’s most famous concertos, nor even as much as the violin and viola lines of Mozart’s K.364. In addition to the solo parts, the score calls for an orchestra of one flute, an additional oboe, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings.

The Concertante begins with an understated beginning that is almost in medias res. The solo quartet emerges unexpectedly early, to recede quickly into the orchestral texture once more. The development, going through a considerable chain of minor keys, is a serious matter indeed. The cadenza is Haydn’s own and is fixed in the autograph. In the Andante, Haydn gives us something close to chamber music, the accompanying orchestra having next to no independent action and being reduced to flute, oboe, the two horns, and strings. Haydn had confidence in Mr. Holmes’s top register, for in the third measure he sends the bassoon to high B-flat. The finale, too, begins as though one had suddenly switched it on. Just as suddenly, it interrupts itself to make way for the violinist in the guise of an operatic diva under full recitativo sail. (Haydn’s Symphony No. 7,
Le Midi, has a similar excursion into operatic gesture.) The recitative makes its presence known once more before the spirited Allegro sweeps all before it.

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