When, in 1784, Franz Joseph Haydn was approached with a commission to write a group of symphonies for a concert series in Paris, he was astonished. He seems not to have noticed that, while working diligently for a quarter of a century as a secluded court musical director in Austria-Hungary, he had gradually grown famous in the world outside.

Since 1761 Haydn had been serving on the court staff of the wealthy Esterházy Princes, where for two decades he was perpetually occupied composing new works for his musicians’ use and his prince’s delectation. As he later recalled, “My sovereign was satisfied with all my endeavors. I was assured of applause and, as head of an orchestra, was able to experiment, to find out what enhances and detracts from effect, in other words, to improve, add, delete, and try out. ... As I was shut off from the world, ... I was destined for originality.” He seemed to be unaware that his music was attracting an enthusiastic following throughout Europe.

The Parisian commission — from the newly formed Concerts de la Loge Olympique and instigated by Claude-François-Marie Rigoley, Count d’Ogny, one of the group’s principal backers — was breathtaking. Haydn was offered 25 louis d’or (in today’s currency, roughly $60,000) for each of 6 symphonies, plus another 5 for the right to publish them. And then there was the prospect of writing for a large cosmopolitan orchestra. At the Esterházy court he could count on an orchestra of about 24 instrumentalists, a good-sized orchestra at that time but a far cry from the string section with 40 violins, ten double basses, and two players for each of the usual wind instruments now at his disposal. The composer could only imagine these expanded sounds as he composed his six Paris symphonies (Nos. 82–87) in 1785–86. The Count d’Ogny was so enthusiastic about Haydn’s music that he then privately commissioned three further pieces with his own purse — the Symphonies Nos. 90–92.

Haydn’s longtime patron, Prince Nikolaus Esterházy, died in September 1790. His son and heir did not care for music and accordingly fired the entire court orchestra and opera company, granting Europe’s most admired composer a pension of a thousand florins a year and making it clear that no particular duties — or even attendance — would be required. Haydn was free to explore.

The German-born violinist Johann Peter Salomon, then working as a concert impresario in England, prevailed among competitors for Haydn’s services, securing the promise of a tour to England. The first concert was scheduled for March 11, 1791, at the Hanover-Square Concert Rooms, which seated 800. Great excitement attended the event. The program included Haydn’s Symphony

---

**In Short**

**Born:** almost certainly on March 31, 1732, since he was baptized on April 1, in Rohrau, Lower Austria

**Died:** May 31, 1809, in Vienna

**Work composed:** 1788 or 1789, on commission from Claude-François-Marie Rigoley, Count d’Ogny

**World premiere:** March 11, 1791, at the Hanover-Square Concert Rooms in London, with the composer conducting from the keyboard

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** March 15, 1873, conducted by Carl Bergmann

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** July 24, 2021, Jaap van Zweden, conductor, at the Bravo! Vail Music Festival in Colorado

**Estimated duration:** ca. 27 minutes
No. 92, which scored a huge success. The historian Charles Burney related “a pleasure superior to any that had ever been caused by instrumental music in England,” and nominated Haydn for an honorary Doctor of Music degree from Oxford University. Haydn became only the fourth person to receive such a degree since the honorary program had been established in 1400.

Oxford set aside several days in early July 1791 for a festival that would include three concerts as well as Haydn’s investiture. The composer had planned to unveil a brand-new symphony on July 7, but he didn’t arrive in time for rehearsal, so an earlier work — his Symphony No. 92, already well known to music lovers — was performed instead. It is to that last-minute substitution that the piece owes its enduring nickname, “Oxford.”

The musicologist Herman Kretzschmar called this symphony Haydn’s *Eroica*, by which he meant that it marked a breakthrough to a new plateau of musical style. Indeed, the *Oxford* does point ahead to the visionary language of Haydn’s *London Symphonies* (Nos. 93–104, composed from 1791 to 1795). The *Oxford* is filled with brave explorations of thematic transformation, brilliantly effective counterpoint, and touches of wit that cannot help but delight the attentive listener. Erudite

---

**The Work at a Glance**

A brief but lovely *Adagio* launches Haydn’s Symphony No. 92, first with strings, then with winds added. We move from the harmonic stability of G major to denser, more ominous sounds before plunging into the fast movement proper (*Allegro spiritoso*). This is a tightly constructed movement with a fleeting development section and a recapitulation that keeps on exploring the movement’s basic material in fascinating ways, even when a listener might expect mere repetition of material that had come before. Though Haydn uses his trumpets and timpani sparingly, they add considerable luster to the orchestral sound.

The trumpets and timpani stay in the game for the ensuing slow movement, adding staccato point to a rather stormy (and imaginatively scored) central section. That eruption contrasts starkly with the gentility that surrounds it and with the elegant coda, in which the flute and first violins spin out roulades and the upper winds offer a sort of written-out cadenza.

Classical music’s supreme and subtle humorist had a good one in store for the following movement. The *Menuet* is forthright enough, but in the central trio the winds (bassoons and horns) and strings have a serious disagreement about where the downbeat falls. From there the trio continues through a forest of potentially confusing syncopation.

At the beginning of the finale the key is not in question, with the cellos bouncing back and forth between two octaves of tonic Gs — but the skipping tune played by the first violins sounds as if it may have some wrong notes in it:

```markdown
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Violin I</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯ ♭♭♯</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
```

Yet once Haydn takes us through the melody a couple of times, we would be hard pressed to hear it any other way. This is an inherently interesting theme, whose peculiarities render it instantly identifiable even as the composer puts it through a full-dress parade of transformations.
the symphony certainly is, but it wears its mastery modestly; counterpoint is note-perfect here, for example, but sounds more like the jocular interplay of characters in a comic opera than a statement of weighty scholarship.

**Instrumentation:** flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings.

— Adapted from a note by James M. Keller

---

**At the Time**

In 1788, when Haydn may have been working on his Symphony No. 92, the following events were taking place:

In the United States, over the course of the year more than eight states ratify the Constitution (left) and enter the Union; New York City is designated as the country’s first federal capital; in New Orleans, a fire destroys much of the city and kills 25 percent of its population.

In England, King George III demonstrates his first extended episode of mental instability, which causes a crisis in Parliament; in London, the newspaper *The Daily Universal Register* changes its name to *The Times*.

In France, the Day of Tiles revolt takes place in Grenoble, an event that is seen as one of the first that would lead to the French Revolution; Élisabeth Vigée-Le Brun paints *Marie Antoinette* (far left); and Antoine-François Callet paints *Portrait of Louis XVI* (left).

— The Editors