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Music Review | The Leipzig String Quartet

Mr. Haydn, if You Please, Come Meet Mr. Ellington

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Anyone as prolific, pragmatic and busy as Haydn could hardly afford the luxury of dwelling on a project once it was completed. You would assume that once he had delivered “The Seven Last Words of Christ,” an orchestral work commissioned during the mid-1780s for Good Friday services in Cádiz, Spain, he might have considered his job done and moved on.

But this work — a potent sequence of seven adagio movements (called sonatas) framed by a slow introduction and a fiery finale — clearly lingered with Haydn, who was reported to have called it one of his finest creations. Responding to an unauthorized choral adaptation, Haydn made one of his own. He approved a solo piano arrangement prepared by a student and, at the very least, had a hand in creating a string quartet version now accepted as part of his official canon.

Fascination with the work lingers. Some recent performances have incorporated multimedia elements and new texts espousing disparate viewpoints. A presentation in Melbourne, Australia, last October involved seven string quartets, seven newly composed movements, an electric guitar and a didgeridoo.

The Leipzig String Quartet added its own wrinkle at Le Poisson Rouge on Wednesday night, playing Haydn’s movements in alternation with contributions by two jazz musicians, the pianist Pete Malinverni and

the saxophonist Steve Wilson.

The potential for fruitful contact was clear from the start. The quartet — an eloquent, refined ensemble that includes three former principals from the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra — leavened the dignified introduction with a warm humility and savored the first sonata’s genial bounce. Two brief interludes by Mr. Malinverni based on Haydn’s themes followed: one frisky and bluesy, the next with a supple Latin beat and puckish oblique asides.

The first transition felt slightly jarring. But Mr. Wilson’s buoyant, melodically resourceful playing and Mr. Malinverni’s airy touch were well gauged to complement the Leipzig players’ more decorous soulfulness. Four further interludes by Mr. Malinverni and three Duke Ellington compositions (“Heaven,” “Solitude” and “Come Sunday”) sounded increasingly comfortable among Haydn’s sonatas.

As at most chamber music affairs, no one clapped after the first few Haydn movements. But once Mr. Malinverni and Mr. Wilson evoked a jazz set’s customary applause, audience members freely expressed their approval after each movement that followed.