

2022 Evaluations Beginner Biography

Franz Joseph Haydn

1732-1809

Franz Joseph Haydn was born in Austria in a small village called Rohrau. By the time young Haydn was 5, he was very musical and could sing all of his father's favorite songs.

One day when Haydn was 6 years old, a relative came to visit. He was very impressed with young Haydn's musical talent and took him to a school to study music. He moved ten miles away from his parents and never returned to live with them. While at school he learned many instruments and became a very good singer. Two years later, Haydn was chosen to become a member of a choir at the Cathedral of St. Stephen in Vienna. A choir is a group of people singing. While there, he studied harpsichord (a keyboard instrument similar to a piano but the strings are plucked instead of hit with hammers), violin, and voice. He sang with the choir until his voice changed at the age of 18. He was rumored to be a trouble-maker; some say he was thrown out of the choir because he cut off the long braided hair of an unknowing choir student in front of him.

In 1750, at the age of 18, Haydn was poor and without a job. He tried to make money by teaching music and doing odd jobs. Even though he struggled to pay his bills and spent many years very poor, he continued to teach himself to composition. In 1759, he finally found work when he met an Austrian nobleman who hired him to direct an orchestra for a small salary. During this period Haydn wrote his first symphony and many quartets. His compositions (pieces) were very popular with his audiences.

In 1761, Haydn was hired by the Esterhazy family, one of the wealthiest and most powerful families in Hungary. Haydn's jobs were to compose music, lead performances, take care of instruments, and look after and teach other hired musicians. Haydn led two concerts and two operas every week in the palace and performed daily chamber music (music for a small group of musicians). In the 1770s and 1780s, Haydn's fame spread and he composed many commissioned works for people throughout Europe. A commissioned piece is a piece of music that someone asks to be written for them. The composer is then paid for their composition.

In 1781, Haydn met Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and became his teacher. They both thought highly of each other. Haydn once said of Mozart, "friends often flatter me about my talent, but (Mozart) was far above me." In 1790, after working for the Esterhazys for 30 years, Haydn went off to Vienna to work for himself.

While in Vienna he met a concert promoter sent Haydn to London to perform and compose music. The people of England loved Haydn and wanted him to stay. After two years he left London and met Ludwig van Beethoven on his return trip to Vienna. He was very impressed by Beethoven and offered to teach him. Beethoven became Haydn's student from 1792 until 1794. Both Mozart and Beethoven's music were greatly influenced by Haydn.

In 1794, he returned to London where he was still successful. In 1798, he returned to Vienna where he remained until he died in 1809 at age 77.

It is difficult to know exactly how many pieces Haydn wrote throughout his life. There are many pieces with Haydn's name on them that weren't written by Haydn. Because Haydn was a very famous composer and his original pieces are worth lots of money, many people thought that if they put Haydn's name on pieces they would be able to sell them for more money. The list of pieces proven to be Haydn's include 108 symphonies, 68 string quartets, many orchestral and chamber works, 47 piano sonatas, vocal pieces, and 26 operas. Because he wrote so many pieces, many of them were given nicknames. He is most famous for his symphonies and his string quartets and is often known as the "Father of the String Quartet" and the "Father of the Symphony".