

Franz Joseph Haydn

More than any other composer, Franz Joseph Haydn deserves to be named “father of the symphony.” Why? Haydn developed the first symphony and wrote 104 symphonies throughout his lifetime. He was so well known that many later composers, including Mozart and Beethoven, went to study with him. He was so well loved by his orchestra that they called him “Papa.”

Franz Joseph Haydn was born in 1732 in the small village of Rohrau, Austria. He was trained as a choirboy at St. Stephen’s Cathedral in Vienna. There, he learned how to read, write and perform music.

Haydn was employed by the Esterhazys, a family of wealthy Hungarian princes. Prince Nicolaus Esterhazy built a magnificent summer castle, which he named Esterhaza. Haydn and his orchestra would accompany the Prince and his court on summer trips to Esterhaza. Prince Nicolaus loved being at Esterhaza with his family and friends.

However, one trip lasted longer than usual. The musicians became bored and homesick for their families. They were also in cramped quarters and wanted desperately to get back to Vienna. This situation inspired Haydn to write one of his most famous symphonies. His “Farewell” Symphony has a special twist at the end of its fourth and final movement. As each musician finishes his part, he snuffs out his candle and leaves the stage. By the end of its first performance there were only two violinists playing, Haydn and Luigi Tomasini. Prince Nicolaus must have gotten Haydn’s hint because everyone packed up and left the next day.

Haydn also liked to play tricks with his music. When he was composing for the Esterhazy family it was fashionable for the Lords and Ladies of the court to enjoy a grand meal before attending a concert. By the time the music began many would fall asleep. Haydn’s “Surprise” Symphony received its nickname because the loud, sudden chord that appears in the second movement - after its soft, soothing first movement.

After retiring from his work for the Esterhazys, Haydn made two very successful trips to London. The audiences there welcomed him and his music. He spent his last years in Vienna, attending concerts and receiving many honors.