Franz Josef Haydn
Born: March 31, 1732
Died: May 31, 1809

Franz Josef Haydn was born in 1732 in the small village of Rohrau, Austria. Taught at first by a relative, he joined the original Vienna Boy's Choir at the age of eight, where he learned how to read and perform music. As a composer, he was largely self-taught. Haydn is known as the “father of the symphony” because he helped to create and perfect this musical form. During his lifetime, Haydn composed 104 symphonies!

Haydn was employed for most of his life by the Esterházys, a family of wealthy Hungarian princes who lived in Vienna. While the system of patronage, under which a composer was an employee required to do as his master wished, could be restrictive, it did assure a regular income and guaranteed that new works would be both written and performed. In Haydn’s case, it also gave him an opportunity to experiment and to try out his music with an excellent small orchestra.

In 1766, Prince Nikolaus Esterházy built a magnificent summer castle, which he named Esterháza. The prince loved to entertain his family and friends there, and Haydn and his orchestra accompanied him on these visits. However, the musicians were not allowed to bring their wives and families along. One trip to Esterháza lasted much longer than usual, and the musicians became very homesick. They lived in cramped quarters, missed their loved ones and wanted desperately to return to Vienna. This situation inspired Haydn, who loved a good joke, to write one of his most famous symphonies, which is nicknamed “The Farewell.”

As each musician finished his part in the last movement of the work—and some played for a very short time!—he snuffed out the candle lighting his music and left the stage. First went the horn and oboe, then the bassoon, the double bass and so on. By the end of the performance, there were only two violinists left. Prince Nikolaus took the hint, because everyone packed up and left the estate the next day!

What do you Hear?

Name the instruments below. Circle the ones that you hear in the music.

A minuet is an elegant dance in 3/4 time (that is, each measure has three beats). It was very popular in the 18th century, especially in France; Louis XIV, the “Sun King,” and the members of his court loved to dance the minuet. After a while, minuets weren’t just for dancing any more. Haydn—and many other composers in his day—used this dance form as the third movement, or section, of a four-movement piece. Thus, the third movement of the “Farewell” Symphony is a minuet.
1732  Franz Joseph Haydn was born  March 31, at Rohrau, Austria-Hungary. George Washington was born.

1736  Glass is first made in Venice, Italy.

1740  Haydn joins choir and school of St. Stephens’s Cathedral, Vienna.

1749  Haydn struggles to make his way as a humble musician.

1752  Benjamin Franklin proves that lightning is electricity.

1756  First chocolate factory in Germany. Mozart is born.

1758  Haydn is appointed Kapellmeister (Director of Music) at court of Count Ferdinand von Morzin.

1761  Haydn appointed court musician to Prince Paul Esterházy, and then to his brother, Prince Nikolaus.

1766  Haydn becomes Kapellmeister at the Esterházy court.

1769  Watt patents the steam engine.

1770  James Cook discovers the coast of Australia. Beethoven is born.

1774  Priestly discovers oxygen.

1777-1790  American Revolution.

1787  Dollar bills first introduced in United States.

1790  Prince Nikolaus Esterházy dies. Haydn is retained, but is, in effect, a free man.

1791  Mozart dies in poverty.

1794  U.S. Navy established. Whitney patents the cotton gin.

1796  Jenner discovers a vaccine for smallpox.

1807  Fulton builds the first steamboat.

1809  Franz Joseph Haydn dies in Vienna, May 31. James Madison becomes the 4th president of the U.S.

1827  Beethoven dies.