Poets Playing Haydn: A Beginning Study of Haydn’s Literary Reception

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Abstract

In his poem “Playing Haydn for the Angel of Death,” Bill Holm plays a Haydn sonata in order to entice Death into a dance, an activity that erodes his appetite for ghoulish work: when the music ends, he will “nap a while and stay away.” Death’s visit is delayed, at least for the time being. “That’s the idea,” concludes Holm. “I got it from Haydn.” Holm’s poem is just one example of a phenomenon that runs throughout Haydn’s own lifetime and subsequent reception history, namely the invocation or appropriation of the composer and his music in poetry and literature. In addition to positioning these literary references among the central themes of Haydn reception—for example, characterizations of divinity or childlike naïveté—this essay begins to consider to how these texts might be used to inform aspects of analysis, interpretation, and performance, and hopefully invites more sustained investigation in this area of Haydn reception.