

Symphony No. 103 in E-flat major ‘Drumroll’

- i. Adagio – Allegro con spirito**
- ii. Andante più tosto Allegretto**
- iii. Menuetto and Trio**
- iv. Finale: Allegro con spirito**

Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) spent most of his career in Vienna as the Kapellmeister under his patron, Prince Nicholas Esterházy. But in 1790, the Prince died and his successor was unwilling to continue spending such vast sums of money on musical entertainment. As one of Europe’s leading composers, Haydn was in high demand – nowhere more so than London, where his symphonies and chamber works had become favourites among audiences.

Following Prince Esterházy’s death, the violinist and impresario Johann Peter Salomon saw this as his chance to entice Haydn to London, an offer which the composer duly accepted. Haydn arrived in 1791 and after considerable success, went for a second time in 1794. The ‘London’ symphonies (nos 93-104) written during this period were Haydn’s crowning achievement as a symphonic composer, not least the Symphony No. 103 in E-flat major.

Throughout his career, Haydn gradually reshaped the nature of the symphony and expanded the expressive boundaries of the form – but in the last six symphonies in particular there is a clear determination to conquer new territory in each work. The Symphony No. 103 is one of Haydn’s longest and reveals at times daring experimentation with form and structure. It was premièred at the King’s Theatre on 2 March 1795 as part of a series of concerts put on by the violinist and composer Giovanni Battista Viotti. It takes its ‘Drumroll’ epithet from the opening, a resounding timpani roll demonstrating not only Haydn’s originality but also his use of surprise as a compositional device. It may also have served a practical purpose: London audiences loved Haydn’s wit and eccentricities but the composer also found them irritatingly noisy.

Haydn began most of his London symphonies with a slow introduction but at 39 bars, this is his longest and most unstable by far – neither key nor metre is clearly defined while the opening bass line carries echoes of the ‘Dies irae’ plainchant. The switch from minor-key introduction to major-key Allegro is a transcendent moment, foreshadowing the contrast between chaos and light in *The Creation*, which Haydn would write just a few years later. The first movement is a spritely *Allegro con spirito* in 6/8 time, with a reprise of the slow introduction at the end before a brief *Allegro* draws the movement to a close in a blaze of E-flat major. The second movement is a set of double variations with two alternating themes – one major and one minor. Both derive from Croatian folk melodies, while Haydn adds a further hint of exoticism by raising the fourth degree of the scale from F to F-sharp.

In London, Haydn was afforded a larger orchestra than he had at the Esterházy palace which meant that he could use instruments not previously available to him: more strings; a second flute and clarinets. The third movement is a minuet and trio and it's in the trio that the clarinets are given centre stage. The finale is comprised of just one theme, a thrilling harmonic and contrapuntal drama from the bare minimum of material. It is a symphonic apotheosis much like the finale of Mozart's 'Jupiter' Symphony, a superb example of the composer's wit and ingenuity.