For nearly three decades, from 1761 to 1790, Joseph Haydn was employed by the Esterházy Princes, scions of a powerful family of Austro-Hungarian aristocrats who ruled over vast expanses of Central Europe. A princely succession in September 1790 led to severe cutbacks in the court’s arts programs, leaving Haydn free to explore the world beyond the circuit of Esterházy castles in Austria and Hungary that had been his stomping grounds. The German-born violinist Johann Peter Salomon, now working as a concert impresario in England, had been angling to present Haydn for some time. The two quickly reached an accord whereby Haydn would travel to London and be richly rewarded for new works he was to unveil there, not to mention publication deals and income from a benefit concert — all of this taking place between January 1791 and the summer of 1792, when Haydn returned to Vienna.

Although he groused about the British audiences’ inattentiveness and their tendency to be noisy, Haydn loved his time in England and he returned for a second residency in 1794–95. For both of his visits he wrote sets of six symphonies — Nos. 93–98 for the first trip, Nos. 99–104 for the second — which ever since have been dubbed the “London” or “Salomon” symphonies. The works exhibit great diversity, but as a whole they are grander in scope and orchestration than anything Haydn had previously written, in every way representing the apex of his symphonic achievement. It appears that he came prepared with a few of his symphonies already written, but most were penned on English soil.

Symphony No. 96 may have been one that Haydn prepared in advance of his initial trip, since it seems quite possible that it was included in his very first London concert, on March 11, 1791, at the Hanover-Square Concert Rooms. It is often difficult to tell from advertisements, press reviews, and other documentation precisely which symphony was played at a given concert, since the pieces were almost uniformly referred to in such accounts as simply “a new grand overture by Mr. Haydn” or something along those lines. If it wasn’t played at that opening concert it certainly was at one of the ensuing dates, which were scattered through the spring. In any case, the symphony would have been just one item on a long and diverse evening. That opening concert was typical of the programs on which Haydn’s “London” symphonies were unveiled: an Overture by Rosetti; a song featuring Signore Tajana; an oboe concerto; a song featuring Signora Storace (that would be Nancy Storace, who had been the first-ever Susanna in Mozart’s Le nozze di Figaro); a recitative and aria with Signor

**In Short**

*Born:* March 31, 1732 (almost certainly, since he was baptized on April 1), in Rohrau, Lower Austria  
*Died:* May 31, 1809, in Vienna  
*Work composed: 1791*  
*World premiere: probably on March 11, 1791, at the Hanover-Square Concert Rooms in London, with Johann Peter Salomon leading the orchestra*  
*New York Philharmonic premiere:* November 21, 1954, Bruno Walter, conductor  
*Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:* November 19, 2011, Bernard Haitink, conductor  
*Estimated duration:* ca. 20 minutes
Listen for . . . a Concerto Spirit

Haydn wrote in his diary of the London audience’s appreciation for his Symphony No. 96, especially the demand for an encore of the Adagio. In The Symphony; A Listener’s Guide, the late Michael Steinberg, a former New York Philharmonic program annotator, pointed to the work’s other charms. The Andante, he wrote, “is delicately chamber-musical in character, something like an 18th-century Concerto for Orchestra,” with rewarding passages for solo winds and an attractive solo originally written for the impresario Johann Peter Salomon, who served as concertmaster for the premiere. “So concerto-like is the spirit that the orchestra even draws up on a six-four chord to introduce a cadenza, one that has an unexpected outcome indeed.” Steinberg added:

The Minuet is vigorous and laid out on a generous scale; the Trio is an enchanting oboe solo, and the sound of the high horn accompaniment is delectable. The Finale is a bubbly comedy whose first theme begins with that favorite Haydn device, one of those double upbeats that allow for inventive when-is-it-going-to-begin-again? games.

— The Editors

Haydn, ca. 1791