Dancing to Haydn's Fiddle: A Reply to Floyd Grave's "Metrical Dissonance in Haydn"

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Floyd Grave portrays Haydn as a wag who tricks us into hearing meters other than the written one.[1] Consider Grave's language: (1) "surface rhythm and melodic outline stand in unresolvable conflict"; (2) "heard as coherent melodic shape, and thus a temporal unit, the ostinato will cause a competing, dotted-quarter pulse to impose itself on our consciousness"; and (3) "the mutual confirmation of these elements leaves performers and listeners no choice but to recognize either a four-bar phrase in 4/4 or else eight bars in 2/4 time."[2] These words bespeak a determinism which does not always jibe with reality. Yes, Heinrich Christoph Koch and other classical theorists Grave cites use *imbroglio/Verwirrung* to describe their perceptions of "metrical dissonance." But must description dictate prescription? Modern recordings of Haydn's quartets reveal that not all performers wish to be so embroiled, nor should they be.

Take the Dekany Quartet's recording of the *Largo* from the Op. 9, No. 3 Quartet where the two violins phrase the "dissonant" arpeggio

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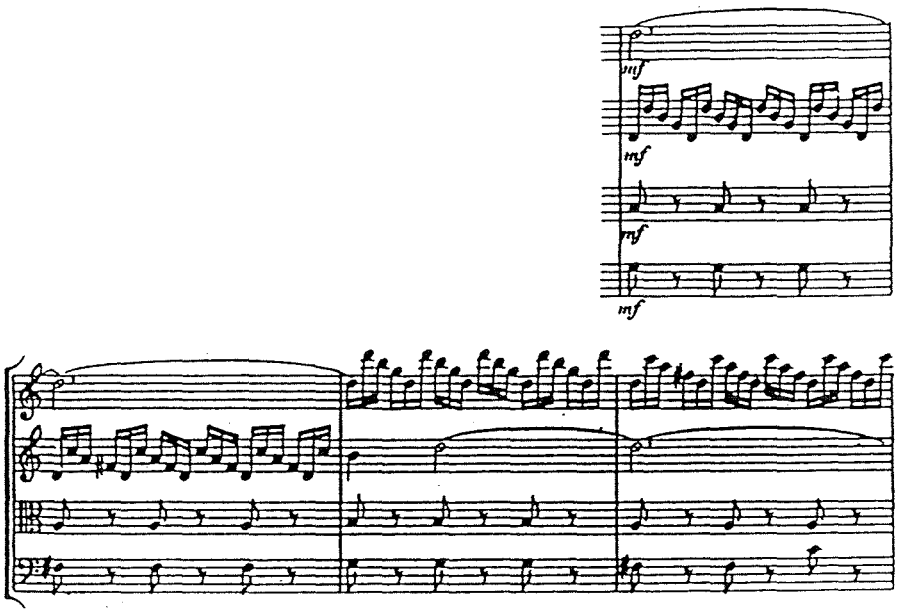
[1]Floyd Grave, "Metrical Dissonance in Haydn," *Journal of Musicology* 13, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 168-202.

[2]Ibid., 168-69, 184-85.

figures differently.[3] To be sure, violin 2 (mm. 16-17) lets the surface rhythm "stand in unresolvable conflict" with the 3/4, but violin 1 stubbornly upholds the meter by playing the first sixteenth of most beats *tenuto*. The inconsistency is striking, since one would like to think that the performers would have achieved consensus on so salient a figure (see Example 1, extended from Grave's Example 1).

Example 1. Haydn, String Quartet, Op. 9, No. 3/iii, mm. 16-19



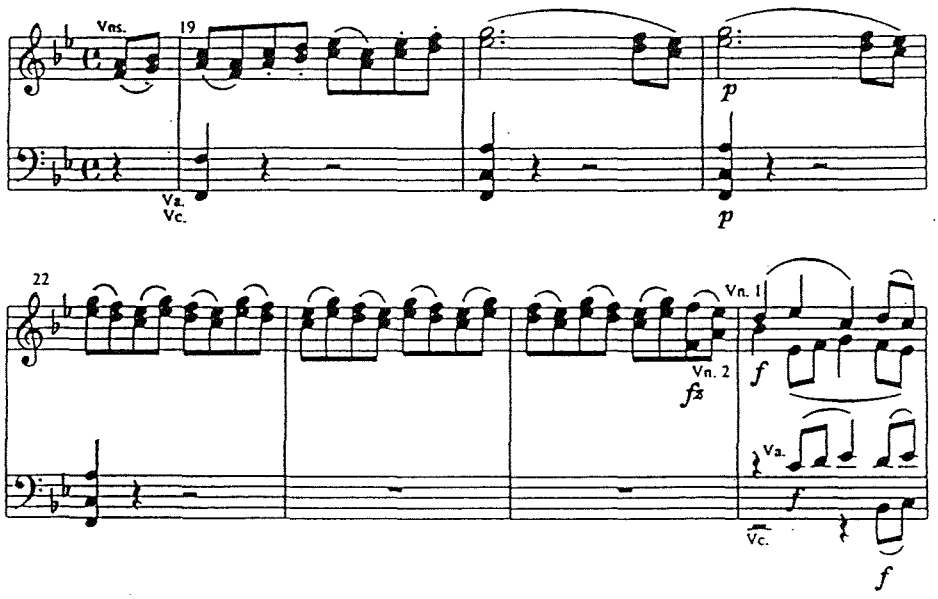
In the Fine Arts Quartet's reading of Op. 76, No. 4, I hear no conflict between the 4/4 meter and the three-note "ostinato" pitch contour of eighth-notes (G5-F5-E♭5), as Grave analyzes it.[4] Were violin 1 playing alone, his judgement might be tenable. However, the volley of E♭s between the violins—two distinct sound sources—precludes hearing the G5-F5-E♭5 as a *Gestalt*, that is, as a ". . . competing . . . dotted-quarter pulse to impose itself on our consciousness, sharpening the suspense as the music stands poised on a threshold of harmonic

[3]Dekany Quartet, *The Complete Haydn Quartets*, Vox SVBX 563.

[4]Same performers, SVBX 596. See Grave, 169-70.

resolution and thematic return.''[5] I hear the tension more from the G5-F5-E♭5 butting against the 4/4 rather than temporarily displacing it (see Example 2).

Example 2. Haydn, String Quartet, Op. 76, No. 4/iv, mm. 19-25



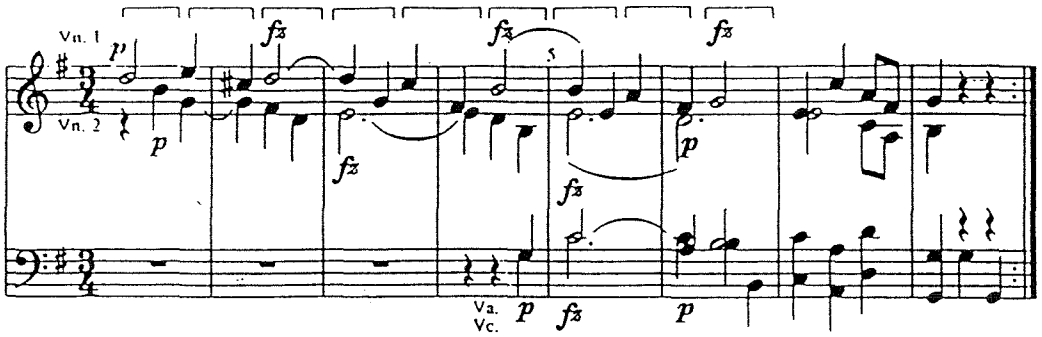
The Dekanys play Example 3, the Trio of Op. 9, No. 3/ii, audibly in three rather than as the hemiola chain Grave describes.[6] Their long notes and *sforzati* do not convey a duple meter as much as articulate an eight-measure period. Consequently, violin 1's first E5 acts as a double neighbor with C♯5 to the following D5, not as the downbeat of Grave's duple group. And D5 is not merely an arrival point but the initiator of a 5-4-3-2-1 descent to G4; so the D5 must be linked, both linearly and

[5]Grave, 169-70.

[6]Ibid., 171-72.

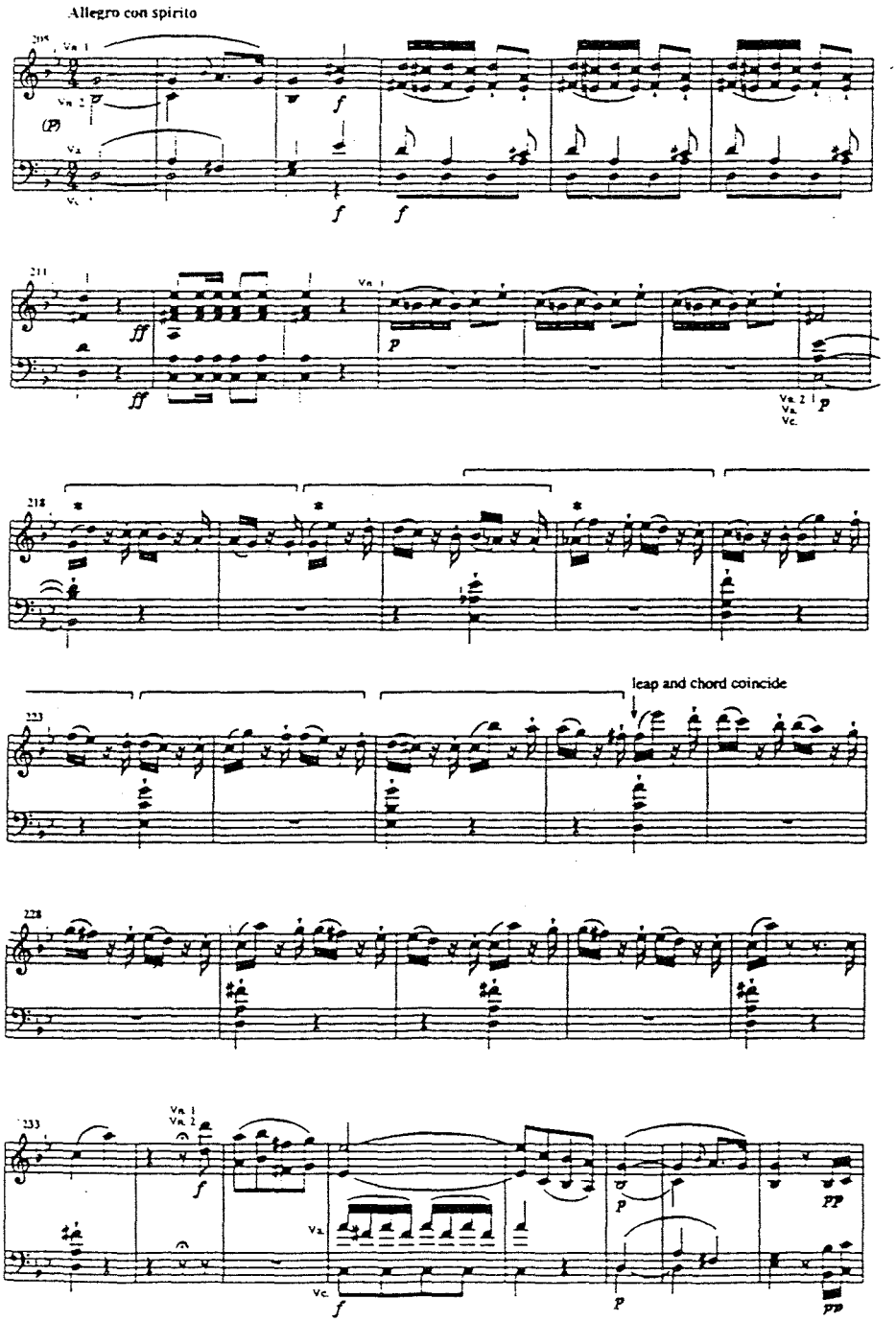
metrically, to the C5 (m. 3), a passing resolution of the 7-6 suspension over E4. In the Dekany recording, the *sforzati* literally reinforce the meter here.

Example 3. Haydn, String Quartet, Op. 9, No. 3/ii, mm. 1-8.



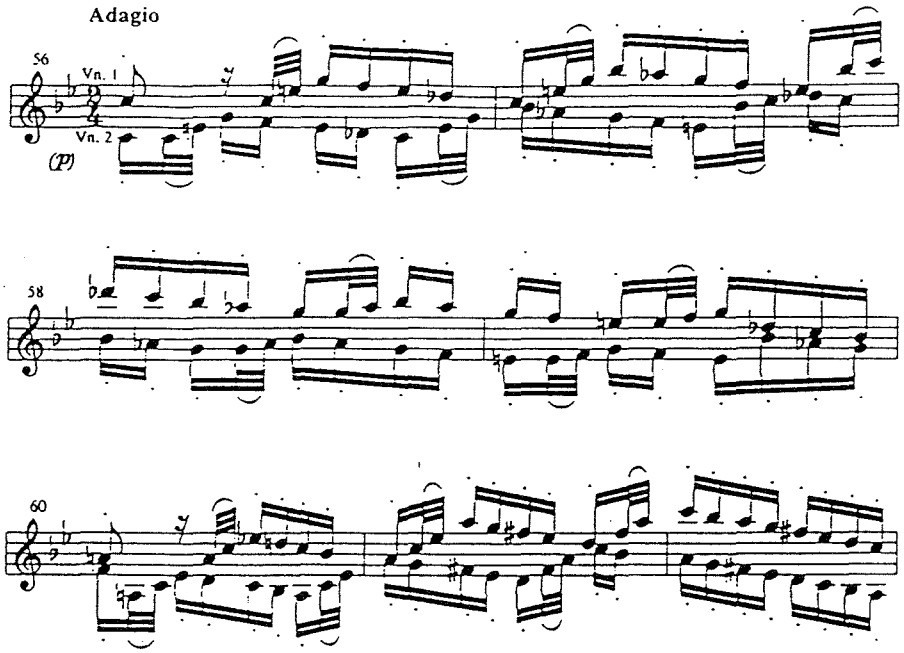
Not all metrical dissonances can or should be resolved and must be weighed on a case-by-case basis. For instance, in the *Allegro con spirito* of Op. 20, No. 3, motive, harmony, and texture so uproot the meter that a simple 2/4 reading would be unmusical, if not technically impossible. The isolated "downbeat" chords on the upbeats of mm. 220, 223, 226, and 230 played against the solo violin 1 frustrate normal articulation of the meter (see Example 4, Grave Example 20).

Example 4. Haydn, String Quartet, Op. 20, No. 3/i, mm. 205-40



In a similar vein, the scalar motive in Symphony No. 67/ii, framed by the arpeggio motive, straddles the midpoint of the 2/4 measure (see Example 5, Grave Example 14a).

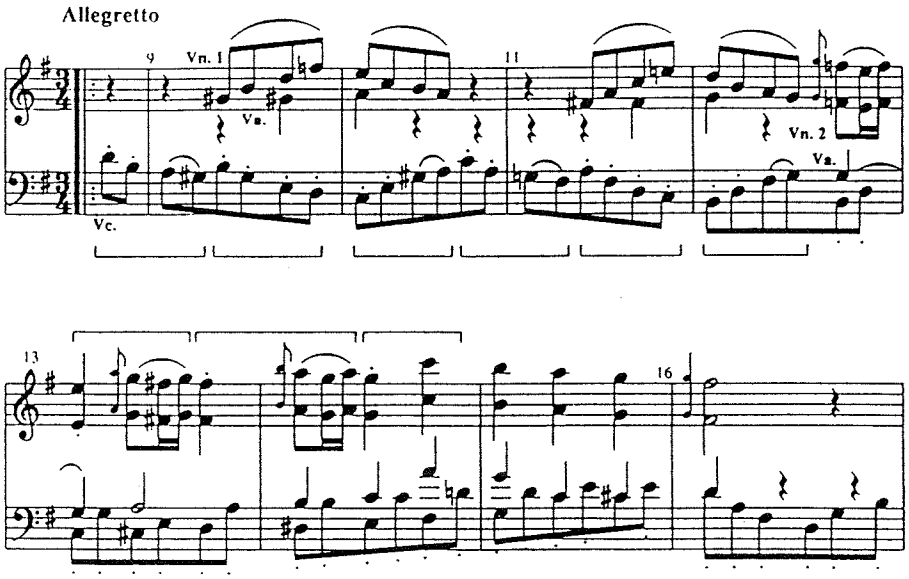
Example 5. Haydn, Symphony No. 67/ii, mm. 56-62



But in more malleable contexts, audibly resolved metrical dissonance helps unify the structure. Take the Trio of Op. 54, No. 1/iii. To my mind, Grave pointlessly ambiguates the meter by bracketing the cello part as he does in mm. 9-12. Such grouping alienates counterpoint from meter. The downbeat A3 of m. 9 is at first sight an accented passing tone to G♯3, but its larger role is as a structural appoggiatura hinting at the violin figures in mm. 12-14. Would not the music then flow better in one-measure impulses as the

Dekanys play them, rather than in Grave's syncopations?[7] Moreover, retaining the measure-pulse projects the retrograde of the slur (G♯4-A4) when it shifts to beat 2 of m. 9, likewise for the G3-F♯3 to F♯4-G4 in mm. 11-12 (see Example 6, Grave Example 9).

Example 6. Haydn, String Quartet, Op. 54, No. 1/iii, Trio, mm. 9-16



And what of the two-beat bracketing for the violins in mm. 13-14? Why doesn't Grave bracket the turn G-F♮-E-F to the downbeat E of m. 13? Downbeat E is not so much the start of the sequence-model (turn plus resolution) as its end, supported by V6/5/IV→IV.[8] The first transposition of the model on A likewise ends on F♯ (beat 3) supported by V6/5/V→V. And the second transposition, supported by V6/5/vi eliding into a IV6, moves to a C over V6/5 as a discrete upbeat to m. 15. We note also that the connection of beats one and two of m. 14

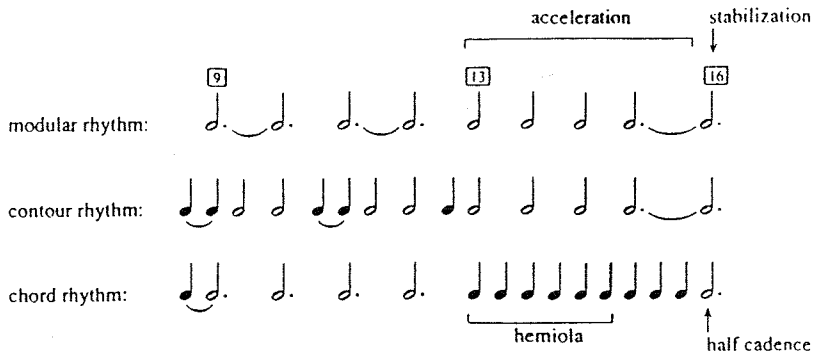
[7]SVBX 559.

[8]Note that all the parts save the viola are marked staccato, so that the subdominant resolution continues to move, i.e., to work as a propulsive metrical downbeat *and* as harmonic resolution.

predicates the free augmentation of the violins' B-A-G following.

As in Op. 76, No. 4, the wit of the Trio is Haydn's juggling an unstable rhythm over a stable one, here played (one hopes) by a strong cello and a stronger viola to bind the texture. Generally, metrical dissonance is most compelling when subordinated to the metrically consonant elements, rather than vice-versa: so doing conserves the implicit tension between temporal and pitch domains. To disengage the two, as exemplified in Grave's Figure 1, weakens not only the temporal-pitch tension but also the music's periodicity (see Example 7).

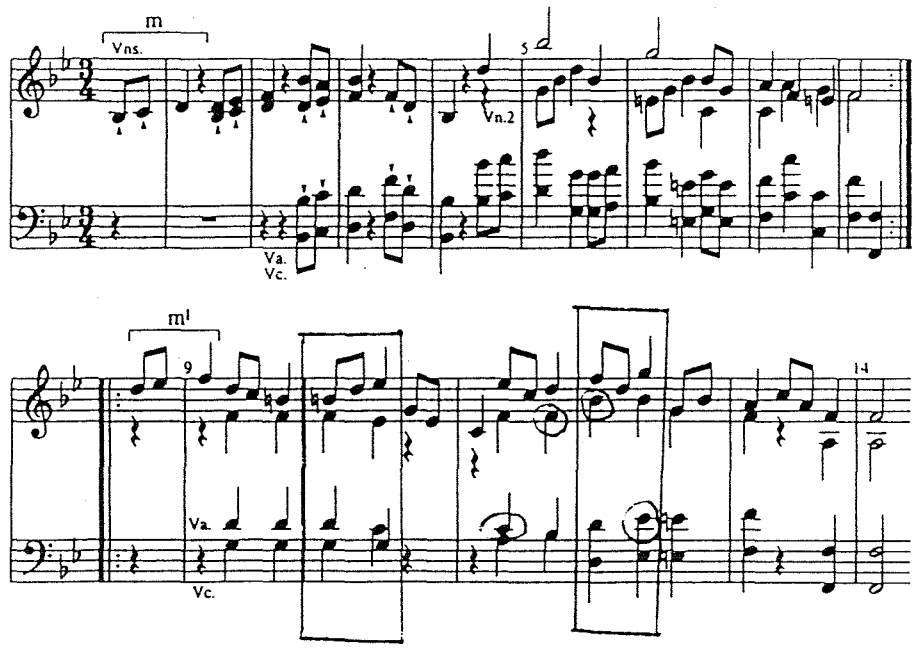
Example 7. Grave, Figure 1



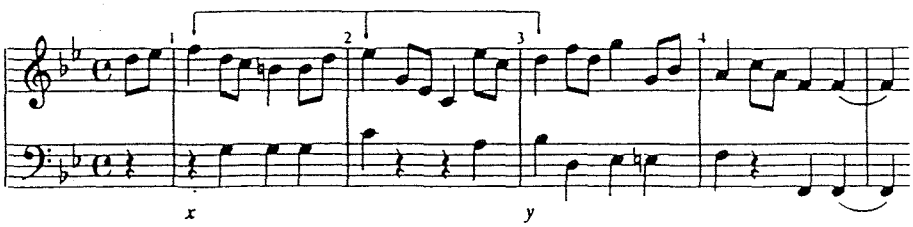
My last example (Example 8, Grave Example 12a-b) is speculative: it does not reference a specific performance but is vital to the argument. The focal questions are: Does Haydn conceal his art? Are his metrical dissonances (the resolvable ones at least) visual or auditory?

Example 8. Haydn, String Quartet, Op.2, No. 4/iv, Trio, mm. 1-14. Migrating fifths are circled, metrically parallel tonicizations are blocked

a.



b. Bars 9–14, rebarred in common time (violin 2 and viola omitted).



Concerning the Trio of Op. 2, No. 4/iv, Grave writes:

> The start of the second reprise further develops the principal rhythmic motive (*m*) by deleting the mid-bar rest. This simple change transforms the meter from triple to duple; and for a full

> five measures (9-13), the music sounds more like a bourrée than a minuet.[9]

In his Example 12b, Grave rebars mm. 9-13 in 4/4 time for these reasons: surface rhythm (consistent ♩⌐♩ ♩ grouping), the salient pitches F5-E♭5-D5, and the chord roots C, B♭, and F coinciding with the downbeats of the 4/4. He declares: "The mutual confirmation of these elements leaves performers and listeners no choice but to recognize either a four-bar phrase in 4/4 or else eight bars in 2/4 time."[10]

For me, such rigidity begs the question, since his 4/4 oversimplifies the music by deleting the inner voices. Take the "salient" E♭5 in m. 10 (m. 2 of the 4/4). Must violin 2 accent the octave-doubled resolution of the appoggiatura F-E♭, since it happens to fall on the "downbeat" of Grave's second 4/4 measure? More interestingly, how shall we read the voice-crossing in the cello and viola parts (C4-G3)? Says Grave in footnote 24:

> In m. 10, the cello rises to middle C as the viola descends to G a fourth below, so that a 6/4 sonority results. The listener is nevertheless likely to hear the cello part as the persisting, functional bass, despite the peculiar voice-leading.[11]

Why does Haydn bother to cross the voices at all? Because he does not want us to hear a 6/4; the harmony moves from V7/ii→ii6/4 linearly, not functionally. The "root" C of ii6/4 he assigns to the cello, who must use string tension to play it, whereas the viola need only skim the "fifth" G off the open string. (Or would a violist be moved to play the G on the C string to create a similar "functional" tension, thereby conflating both roots?) Stylistically, a secondary structural V in these confines would be ungainly, save at the cadences. But there

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[9]Grave, 183.

[10]Ibid., 184-85.

[11]Ibid.

is a place, if a necessity, for a circle of fifths progression (ii-V-I-IV). The fifths rocket diagonally from cello (C4) to violin 2 (F4-B♭4) back to viola/cello (E♭4/E♭3) in mm. 10-12 (pitches are circled in Example 8). Significantly, violin 2's B♭4 coincides with the downbeat of Haydn's m. 12, which transiently tonicizes the E♭ (IV), beat 2. So there is really a simple parallelism of 2 + 2 in mm. 9-12, thanks to metrically parallel "tonicizations" of ii and IV.

With respect to Grave's criterion of consistent surface rhythm, I feel that his 4/4 makes *in*consistent violin 1's ♪♩ ♩ rhythm by prematurely reversing the pattern to ♩ ♪♩ from beat 1 of the 4/4. If the music is played audibly in 3/4, however, the germinal rhythm will carry into the second reprise. (This is feasible if the inner voices carefully assert themselves, a rarity in much quartet playing.) Such a performance will (mis)match a rejoinder of six measures to the first reprise's eight.

Haydn's metrical dissonances are simpler *and* knottier than Grave's analyses suggest. Simpler, since no real metrical change need occur much of the time; knottier, because conventional analysis has predisposed us to hearing these dissonances as complication (anomaly) instead of complexity. Such analysis indeed tricks one into missing the full texture of the joke, so as to countenance a blatantly absurd thesis—bourrée invading a minuet—rather than savoring a sublime punchline—the lopsided periodicity heard from confounding line and chord.[12] In a word, Haydn spoofs our tendency to perceive time and texture disjunctly, that is, as "inevitable" distortions of meter.

Floyd Grave may be correct in suggesting that Haydn's metrical jokes are ingenious buffoonery. I find this view unsatisfying, however. In the right hands, philosophy can be funnier than vaudeville.

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[12]I hasten to add that Haydn's interest in the bourrée (or in any Baroque dance save the minuet) was probably marginal, even for a joke. He lacked Mozart's stylistic distance in these matters.