Franz Joseph Haydn was born in 1732 in a small village in lower Austria called Rohrau. He was the son of a wheelwright and began his musical career as a chorister in St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna. He remained there until he was 16 years old. When his voice changed, his career as a chorister came to an end. He then secured a dilapidated harpsichord, found himself an attic in Vienna, and began his compositional career. During his early years he was barely able to make a living as a teacher and accompanist and often joined bands of roving musicians who performed in the streets in Vienna. Because of this background in his formative years, Haydn would later incorporate into his compositions a great many of the folk tunes of Vienna and the region of Austria in which he grew up.

It wasn't long before Haydn attracted the notice of the aristocracy in Vienna. He was invited to live in the country house of a nobleman. This nobleman had a small group of musicians that functioned as an orchestra to him. For the next several years Haydn was able to experiment with different instruments and combinations of instruments as a part of this orchestra.

At the age of 29 in 1761, Haydn began his career with the Esterhazys, a family of Hungarian background who were famous for their patronage of the arts. This relationship would continue for nearly 30 years, the greater part of Haydn's creative career. The musicians who were acquired by the Esterhazys were among the finest in Europe, thus making the orchestra and any performances at the Esterhazys' court some of the best in all of Europe. Under Haydn's direction, the musical establishment of the Esterhazys included an orchestra, an opera company, a marionette theater, and a chapel. With the death of the prince, Haydn was released from the Esterhazys' service. He traveled to England twice – once in 1791 and again in 1794 – where his music gained him great acclaim. When he returned to Austria, he was very well-off and laden with honor. He died in 1809 and was acknowledged throughout Europe as one of the premiere musicians of his time.