

Program Notes

By David Hoose

*Non moriar sed vivam
Et narrabo opera Domini*

“Die I shall not, but live and proclaim the works of the Lord.” The inscription on Joseph Haydn’s tomb reflects the whole of his long life’s work. From daring and impetuous youthful works to sublimely inventive mature compositions, Haydn’s music, much like the creations of the greatest musical preachers, Bach and Schütz, serves one purpose: to praise God. In Haydn’s devotion, there is little distinction between his secular compositions, the symphonies and string quartets, and the religious music, including his fourteen masses and the two great oratorios, *Die Schöpfung* and *Die Jahreszeiten*.

Haydn’s music lives in and, at the same time, removed from this world. The symphonies, particularly the subtitled *Lamentatione, Alleluia, Trauer, and La Passione* are nurtured by a spiritual impulse as powerful as the one that produced *The Time of War* and *Lord Nelson* masses, settings that are themselves inspired by purely symphonic sensibilities. In one work, however, Haydn achieved a perfect, shimmering balance between sacred and secular—*Die Schöpfung*.

Composed when he was sixty-six, the oratorio represents the pinnacle of a musical lifetime devoted to exploring, developing and stretching the possibilities of his, and his fellow composers’ musical thought. Even the music of his youth probed, reaching for the profound. But his life’s highest musical achievements began to emerge with his development of a fluid and subtle musical language so sophisticated that it could embrace both subtlety and directness. By his last years, those of *The Creation*, Haydn’s technique had become so advanced and mobile that listeners may fail to notice what he is doing to hold technique and emotion, the profane and the sacred, in unsurpassed equilibrium.

From the first measures of *Die Schöpfung*, Haydn is working at the highest level of imagination and technique. The idea of depicting time before time could be, for him and his audience, anything but chaotic; for all of the disorienting effect of “Chaos”—unanticipated chromaticism, ambiguous and deceptive harmonic changes (I once identified about thirty ear-twisting moments within just the first twenty measures), this orchestral introduction flows with amazing coherence. Despite the powerful logic guiding Haydn’s aural image of the infinite void, no more far-reaching music would be composed until at least fifty years later.

Every chorus, aria, and recitative in *The Creation*, including the unshocking ones, shows Haydn at his most fluidly adventurous. To single out any moment from a work whose marvels are unmistakable to anyone, music-lover or trained composer, new listener or old friend, risks pulling attention from the music’s unceasing level of invention. But I cannot resist glancing at one of the tiniest moments, a brief recitative in the first part. This magical moment never fails to make me smile.

Following the chorus “Stimmt an die Saiten, ergreift die Leier,” with its gloriously hectic strumming of lyres and strings that praise God’s having clothed the earth in foliage, Uriel introduces the fourth day with hushed awe and simplicity: “And God said: Let there be light in the firmament of the Heaven, to divide the day from the night and to give light upon the earth, and let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days, and years.” He finishes his thought, but then suddenly remembers, “He made the stars also.” In the Book of Genesis, the creation of the stars carries tremendous weight, but Haydn tosses off that final line with a couple of little leaps, as if the stars were merely an afterthought in God’s great plan. In the seeming effortlessness of the musical gesture, the enormity of this act becomes vivid.

The delicate balance between sacred and profane is revealed in the relationship between the two duets of Part Three. The just-created Eva and Adam, in their first duet, direct their thanks entirely toward the Lord, and the glowing voices of Heaven look on approvingly. All then join to celebrate, with increasing excitement, the highest fruit of God’s labor. In this, the oratorio’s grandest movement, nature and humanity live in untarnished harmony and with limitless possibility.

The attention then shifts. In the oratorio’s most involved recitative, Adam turns his attention to Eva, asking her to follow him, and she replies that his will—silently setting aside God’s—shall be her law. At the moment Eva pledges devotion to Adam, the harmony slips into G-flat major, the key lying the furthest from the purity of C major that had embraced the blinding moment of creation, the tenor aria in which humanity is created, and, most importantly, Eva and Adam’s first, Heaven-centered duet. The closing measures of their recitative turn dark and lonely, and the flirtation with exotic, if not dangerous, territory leads toward the very human key of E-flat major.

Their second duet parallels the large design of its lofty predecessor: it begins with a slow section, and it concludes with a lively second part. But this similarity only points to the duets’ crucial differences. In the second, Adam and Eva no longer sing their praises to God, but to each other, and the angels are silent. “The world, so great, so wonderful, is the work of Your hand,” of the first duet has become “All my life I live for you, your love is my reward.” The sublime angelic glow that had bathed the earlier slow section is set aside by sublime sensuality.

The quick music of this duet brings even greater change. That which had been flexible in its breathing, limitless in its excursions, becomes locked into four-by-four phrases, its rough-hewn tone is urged by hunting horns. The dance of Heaven has been replaced by a stomping, German folk dance. And while the two voices had first intertwined intricately, they now either sing, arm-in-arm, in parallel motion or stand to listen as the other flits about. For the first and only time in *The Creation*, music’s virtue (and virtuosity) of spirit and emotion turns showy and self-absorbed.

Some early critics responded to this second duet negatively, and some, including the usually insightful 20th-century British observer of music, Sir Donald Francis Tovey, suggested that the oratorio should end after the first duet and chorus. I believe such commentators miss the point. Adam and Eva’s focus has shifted toward each other, away from God, and the world has shifted. This is an essential part of the Creation story.

Not for a moment, though, does Haydn paint Eva and Adam in any but the most sympathetic and loving tone, and their second duet is captivating. Yes, it is more earthbound and, at times, even banal. But the tone is intentional, and seldom has earthiness been so uplifting, shallowness so touching, or self-absorption so inviting. Adam and Eva have become the immediate ancestors of Mozart's Papageno and Papagena.

Leaving behind the warmth of E-flat major, Uriel offers a gentle moral. As his recitative glances back to C major, but quickly turns darker, he reminds the young couple of what had once been an unbroken, celestial connection, and gives them a gentle warning. He then quickly leads to the final, thrilling chorus. Now, everyone proclaims the glories of the Lord, but something has fallen. The pure luminosity of C major has been replaced by B-flat major—majestic, but not the same. Never to be regained on earth, Paradise is lost.

In Haydn's *Die Schöpfung*, there is not one uncertain move, and every moment reflects the broad vista that flows from, and into, every facet of the music. God looks over all and, at the same time, lives in every detail: this is the universe as Haydn knew it. From hard-earned, searching sophistication, unceasing joy effortlessly flows.

*Never was I so devout as when composing The Creation.
I knelt down every day and prayed to God to strengthen me for my work.*
—Haydn

Background and Choice of Language

Joseph Haydn completed the second of his three oratorios, *Die Schöpfung*, in 1798, and the first public performance was in Vienna on March 27 of 1799. The history of the libretto is not entirely clear, but an English version of it, based on John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the Bible, mainly from Genesis, seems to have been assembled in the early 1700s, with the idea that Handel might compose such an oratorio.

During Haydn's second visit (1794-1795) to London, he heard several Handel oratorios, given as part of celebration of the composer's 100th birthday, and the idea of composing a work in that model intrigued him. As he was about to leave for Vienna, the violinist, composer, conductor, and concert-producer Johann Peter Solomon, who had convinced Haydn to visit London for the first time, in 1790, by knocking on the composer's door in Vienna and greeting him with, "I am Solomon from London and have come to fetch you. Tomorrow we shall conclude an agreement," presented the composer with the libretto. Haydn was immediately interested, but his English was very poor, so he gave the English libretto to Gottfried van Swieten (friend, diplomat, amateur musician, and patron of Haydn, Mozart, and eventually, Beethoven) to translate into German. Although van Swieten's plan was to take Haydn's completed composition and then translate it back into English, it was this German text that Haydn set to music.

With van Swieten's translation of the libretto back into English, *Die Schöpfung*—

The Creation—became the first bilingual composition. Within only a few years, the oratorio had been translated into at least six languages, including Swedish—*Skapandet*.

Van Swieten's re-translation into English made for an awkward marriage of music and words. While van Swieten's translation of the original English text into German was masterful, his own English was not entirely natural, and his re-translation to English frequently placed musical and linguistic syntaxes at odds: shifting word orders became awkward, accents were frequently forced, and the musical phrasing was sometimes gracelessly marred. More elusive may have been the dissonance between the sound of Haydn's music—born of a German-speaking mind—and the English language.

Understandably, England feels pride in having instigated the composition of one of the great compositions of Western music, but their desire for ownership may have deafened them to the infelicities of the English language's collision with Haydn's emphatically Germanic music. Things are changing, though, and one hears increasing numbers of British performances of *Die Schöpfung*.

When Haydn is, sometimes, reproached for a lack of passion in his music, I have only to say that passion in music, as in all arts, is easier than people think. . . . It does not bear the marks of originality; it is a product of the moment, and in the opinion of the ancients it hides the purity of nature and impairs the beautiful.

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

The Performing Forces

Die Schöpfung was composed for four-part chorus, which variously acts as Greek chorus, chorus of praise, and an array of angels; and soprano, tenor and bass soloists, who represent the angels Gabriel, Uriel, and Raphael. In the third part of the oratorio, the characters of Eva and Adam appear, roles that are often taken by the singers who had sung the parts of Gabriel and Raphael. This performance, however, employs two additional singers, who play the roles of Adam and Eva.

The orchestra acts as the life force of the entire oratorio, assuming the roles of all of God's creations, animate and not. This was the largest Haydn ensemble had ever used (to be exceeded only slightly by that of his next oratorio, *Die Jahreszeiten*): three flutes (one of whom plays in only one movement), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, keyboard (likely to have been a piano), and string orchestra.

He showed me his aria in D from The Creation, which is supposed to picture the movements of the sea and the rising of the cliffs out of the sea. 'Can you see,' he said very amused, 'how the notes behave like waves, up and down they go? Look, you can also see the mountains rising out of the depths of the sea. You have to amuse yourself sometimes, after having been serious for so long.

—Frederik Samuel Silverstolpe, who prepared the first Swedish performance, around 1798.

A Reflection on *Die Schöpfung's* Perennial Freshness

Most writers about *Die Schöpfung* focus on the music's colors, on the stunning (and often delightful) depictions of natural phenomena, and on the composer's "wit and clever twists and turns." The most prominent 'twist,' the genuine surprise that no one can miss, of course, is that incredible moment when, out of the ashes of "Chaos," light is created. To the first, unsuspecting audience, it was shocking. Silverstolpe, a Swedish diplomat who was at the very first rehearsal, wrote:

"No one, not even Baron van Swieten had seen the page of the score wherein the birth of light is described. This was the only passage of the work Haydn had kept hidden. I think I see his face even now, as this part sounded in the orchestra. Haydn had the expression of someone who is thinking of biting his lips, either to hide his embarrassment or to conceal a secret. And in that moment when light broke out for the first time, one would have said that rays darted from the composer's burning eyes."

Today—centuries later and with much music and many musical languages rattling around in our heads—this moment is still a stupefying miracle. But how can this be? By now, can we not anticipate the music's every turn? How can our hearts still race, our ears redden?

This is possible simply because of the amazing ability of sophisticated, brilliantly composed music to lead us astray, even when we have heard a piece many times. Nuanced music of the highest quality can make us "forget" what we already know.

No matter how many times I hear those repeating patterns in the first movement's development of Beethoven's *Pastoral* Symphony, I get a bit lost in the middle, unsure when they will change. Whenever I hear the last movement of Haydn's "Oxford" Symphony, the reappearance of the principal material after the discursive development section bamboozles me: I know the development will soon give way to the return, but it is delayed and delayed. Then, just as some small part of me begins to give up, it happens, and my metabolism leaps, "What? So soon?"

And no matter how many times I hear *The Creation*, its way of breathing enters me in renewing, enlivening ways. Some moments—like that first blaze of light—never fail to amaze, even though I know it's going to happen. But even the more seemingly straightforward musical material of *The Creation* moves in unfailingly fresh ways—irregular phrases, unexpected emphases, shifting nuances, flexible placements of musical stresses, ever superb melodic invention and harmonic adventure never fail to grab my ear, eager and entranced. Not all of the thousands of unexpected turns in *The Creation* are shocking, à la Stravinsky's *Le sacre*, but they needn't startle to satisfy. In Haydn, they often pulsate just below the surface, whirring like a finely tuned, sophisticated motor. We don't notice all the gear changes, but—my!—what a fluid, flexible powerhouse it is.

It is fairly easy to lose conscious track of the musical miracles Haydn has wrought. A century after Haydn, the composer Hugo Wolf observed: "It is the mark of [Haydn's] greatness as an artist that when we hear his music we are utterly unaware of the art."

Yes, the colors are amazing, and the depictions delight and often move us—remember the image of moonlight or of the great whales. In a lesser composer's hands, one without Haydn's musical sophistication and imagination, without his limitless skill and acute ear, similar musical ideas—this leaping figure, that worm-like chromaticism—would soon turn stale and decidedly uncharming. All would be predictable, too easily anticipated.

And, if one focuses only on the obvious, Haydn's music can seem guileless. The French composer Hector Berlioz wrote, "I have always felt a profound antipathy for [*The Creation*]...Its lowing oxen, its buzzing insects, its light in C which dazzles one like a Carcel lamp, and then its Adam, Uriel, Gabriel, and the flute solos and all the amiabilities really shrivel me up—they make me want to murder somebody. The English love a pudding surrounded with a layer of suet; I detest it. Suet is exactly what surrounds the musical pudding of papa Haydn. Naïveté is all very fine, but too much of it we don't need!"

"Papa Haydn" is a moniker that annoys me, because it distorts who Haydn was (and is), suggesting that his music is all charm and delight, not to be taken absolutely seriously. There is nothing naïve about Haydn's music, and when its spirits are life-affirming—as they often are—the musical optimism is profound, searching, and hard-earned. Even wit, in Haydn's hands, is a serious matter. To me, Berlioz's words say more about him than about Haydn. It seems that *The Creation*—and perhaps all of Haydn's mature music—operates in ways that even as imaginative a composer as Berlioz was unable to notice, let alone ponder.

In Joseph Haydn's hands, the world (musical and otherwise) unfolds in ever-shifting ways so intricate and nuanced that the complexities can fail to register in a conscious way. Maybe they do not need to. When we listen fully, attentively, openly, his music's soul is a deep one, and the world (musical and otherwise) is created anew, each time *Die Schöpfung* is performed and heard.

*Haydn's works are an ideal language of truth,
connected in all their parts by necessity, and full of life.*

—Goethe