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Cantata Singers Tell Haydn's Creation Story

by SUDEEP AGARWALA

With Friday evening's performance of *Die Schöpfung* (*The Creation*) in Jordan Hall, the Cantata Singers took a break from their current season of Harbison, Primosch, Pärt, Stravinsky, and Bartók. This turn from technically challenging fare (for both audience and ensemble) was not without rewards: under David Hoose, the Cantata Singers and ensemble gave a thrilling account of Haydn's great oratorio.

Die Schöpfung, the second of Haydn's collaborations with librettist Baron Gottfried van Swieten, stands between the much earlier *Die sieben letzten Worte unseres Erlösers am Kreuze* (*The Seven Last Words of Christ on the Cross*), and *The Seasons* (*Die Jahreszeiten*). Haydn conceived *Die Schöpfung* during his second visit to London (1794-95), where he heard many of Handel's oratorios, which were being performed in the city as part of the composer's 110th birthday. Composer, conductor, and music entrepreneur Johann Peter Salomon approached Haydn with an English libretto based off the first chapter of the Book of Genesis. Van Swieten subsequently converted the text into the German libretto for *Die Schöpfung*, which subsequently premiered in Vienna in 1799. The oratorio's popularity necessitated translations into multiple languages; Cantata Singers preferred the original German version on Friday, citing a more natural marriage between the text and the music.

Haydn heavily based his telling of the Creation on Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Early on, we are introduced to the archangels Uriel, Raphael, Gabriel, who appear shortly after a spectacular splitting of the Chaos into darkness and light. But this universe always seems to be tottering on the edge of destruction by the visceral, animalistic id embodied by the orchestra. One gets the sense that, without tempering angelic forces, all of creation might explode into a cacophony of roaring lions, rushing waters, and squawking birds. In fact, despite the best efforts of the chorus and soloists, it sometimes does anyway. The miracle here is that the world is tamed and becomes habitable; that the instinctual, primitive wilderness that constantly seems to be threatening violence can be tamed to make room for humans. When, in the final movement Adam and Eve exclaim "*Die Welt, so groß, so wunderbar ist deiner Hände Werk,*" (The world, so big, so wonderful is the work of [the Lord's] hand), we, the audience, who have seen Earth emerge from Chaos, are moved to marvel at it ourselves.



Amanda Forsyth (file photo)

Managing the forces of creation and destruction is no small task, and David Hoose coordinated chorus, orchestra, and soloists in a tight, riveting traversal. A full orchestra responded sensitively to the bright colors and dramatic flourishes of this version of the Creation, as Hoose coaxed wild beasts and seething Chaos to alternately challenge and play with humans and archangels. Although the ensemble responded exquisitely to Hoose's dynamics, over-zealous accompaniment of the chorus or soloists sometimes caused issues with balance. In more intimate recitatives, the full orchestra fell away to reveal a nimble continuo with cello (Rafael Popper-Keizer) and period fortepiano (Elika Akahori).

While the orchestra is an unnamed fourth character in this story, the chorus is taken straight from Greek drama, observing and commenting on the story as it progresses. Pitted against a full orchestra, the 44-member chorus united with unflagging commitment to the Hoose's vision. The Cantata Singers appeared to have minor issues early on, particularly with German enunciation and cohesion, but quickly found their footing, producing a rich, well-blended sound that unified the large numbers in each of the sections. Haydn does no favors for tenor and soprano voices, singing in the stratospheric upper ranges of their respective parts; these technical challenges posed no obstacles for those robust sections. The three choruses that concluded each of the three parts of the oratorio proved particularly satisfying, displaying spirited, sensitively shaped, contrapuntal lines in balance with orchestra and soloists. Taut, disciplined attention to Hoose's leadership resulted in a dazzling presentation of Hadyn's brilliance.

Three stellar archangels, Gabriel (soprano Amanda Forsythe), Uriel (tenor William Hite), and Raphael (bass Mark Andrew Cleveland) drive most of the story for the first two portions. Amanda Forsythe is no stranger to the role of Gabriel, having performed and recorded it with *Boston Baroque*. Her blithe interpretation on Friday made full use of her florid, operatic voice with a seemingly endless range and exquisite control. Mark Andrew Cleveland's rich, profound bass portrayed a commanding Raphael, particularly in his description of the separation of the land from the waters ("*Rollend in schäumenmenden Wellen*"). William Hite painted Uriel with a warm, stentorian tenor. In the final act of the drama, Adam (bass Brian Church) and Eve (soprano Alexandra Whitfield) enter as wide-eyed neophytes in a world that does not know the tree of knowledge. In duet, Church's poised, unshakeable baritone provided a solid basis for Whitfield's ornate soprano; as soloists, both gave intelligent, masterful renditions.

Sudeep Agarwala is a scientist by day and an amateur musician who has performed with many choral groups in and around Boston (including Cantata Singers). He has been writing for the *Intelligencer* since 2011.

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All I can add to this splendid review is that I was thrilled to hear flutist Christopher Krueger, persuaded to take his modern flute out of deep storage for this very special concert. To hear him was such a joy. Ditto to Bruce Creditor on clarinet and Peggy Pearson on oboe. David Hoose led a truly spectacular concert.

Comment by Susan Miron — March 23, 2019 at 6:04 pm

1983 from 2019 is 36. 36 years ago, or maybe 37 years ago if in 1982, David Hoose and the Cantata Singers did this same work in a memorable performance which was later listed as one of the “Top Ten” for that year. I myself was there having borrowed both a piano reduction and a full score of the work to follow; yes, this was Symphony Hall. At the A-flat chord about bar 8 of the Introduction Representation of Chaos I just closed the scores and listened for the rest of the evening. Superb. Ethereal. For years a poster for this performance was on the wall in my office for visitors to see. Because I thought this was likely the GOAT (to use a Bradyism) Creation I would ever hear I chose to do the Purcell on Friday night. Now, to anyone who was at both performances, how was this compared to the earlier one? Same work same conductor, probably some changes in musicians and audience—how’d they do? Thanks.

Comment by Nathan Redshield — March 24, 2019 at 11:44 pm

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