

## Haydn's *The Creation* Program Notes

Unlike the six-day Biblical precedent, it took Haydn some seven years to finish *The Creation*. Under the auspices of the emigrant German violinist and impresario Johann Peter Salomon, Haydn first arrived in London in January 1791 to give concerts of his music which would include several new symphonies written especially for the British audiences. His success was immediate and complete, and he was lionized by the public and the aristocracy unlike any musician since Handel — within six months, he had been awarded an honorary doctorate by Oxford University. For his part, Haydn was overwhelmed by the intensity of his reception, both personal and artistic; by the bustle, diversity and size of London; by the open kindness of the many new friends he made; and by the wealth of musical life in the great city.

Among the most imposing of London's musical events were the Handel Festivals that had been held in Westminster Abbey since 1784, the supposed centennial of the composer's birth. (The British were one year early — the mistake is still inscribed on Handel's tomb in the Abbey.) Haydn attended four of the 1791 Festival concerts in late May and early June, and he was stirred as he seldom had been in his life. After hearing performances of *Messiah*, *Israel in Egypt*, *Joshua* and other oratorios and instrumental works, Haydn, still humble after being unrelentingly praised by the British public and aristocracy for the preceding half-year, said, "Handel is the master of us all." According to a friend, he admitted having "long been acquainted with music, but never knew half its powers before he heard it [i.e., *Joshua*], and he was perfectly certain that only one inspired author ever did, or ever would, pen so sublime a composition." Haydn, who had spent virtually his entire career writing to amuse a small group of noble *cognoscenti* at Esterháza, additionally observed the manner in which the huge audience, and, indeed, the entire country, was moved by Handel's music, and in him was born the desire to write such works of grand vision and popular appeal. His knowledge of English, however, was poor, and he put the idea of an oratorio out of his mind for the time being, though the following February he did compose a short chorus called *The Storm*, his first English setting, that enjoyed a fine success.

Just days before he left England in 1792, Haydn had another experience that bore on the work that was to become *The Creation*, and may have been, as the eminent English scholar and critic Sir Donald Tovey commented, the germ from which it actually grew. On June 15th, he traveled to Slough, near Windsor, to visit the famous astronomer William Herschel, noted as the discoverer of Uranus in 1781 and as a pioneer in the systematic exploration of the sky. Herschel, the son of a poor German musician, was led into the study of science by his interest in the theoretical mathematics of music. Composer and astronomer/musician fell into an easy German-language companionship, and Herschel told his new friend of the uncountable thousands of stars, galaxies and nebulae he had seen in his explorations. "The vastness of space was staggering to the imagination," wrote H.E. Jacob in his biography of the composer, "and Haydn was awe-stricken as he stood in the semi-darkness of the observatory ... but when his host led him up to the platform to show him the sky through the telescope, Haydn at first flatly refused to look. Later he did look, but very briefly. He was so shocked that he became cold. Trembling, he turned up his collar, although it was a June night. More than twenty minutes elapsed before he could utter a word. Then he

murmured, ‘So high ... so far ...’” Handel and Herschel were much on Haydn’s mind on his way home to Vienna.

In February 1794, Haydn returned to England for a second time, this residency lasting, like the first, eighteen months, and proving, if anything, more clamorously successful than the earlier one. His wish to compose a grand choral work — something, he said, “that will give permanent fame to my name in the world” — was still strong, particularly since he felt that he had uttered his last words on purely orchestral music with the second set of London symphonies. He asked for advice during a visit with his friend, the French violinist and composer François-Hippolyte Barthélémon. Barthélémon pulled a Bible from his shelf, flipped it open, and said, “There is the book; begin at the beginning.” Haydn may have therefore thought it providential when Salomon, who also sponsored the second London venture, presented him with an English libretto on the subject of the Creation shortly before he left England for the last time, in August 1795, and encouraged him to set it as an oratorio in the style of Handel. Haydn tucked the text in his trunk, and took it with him back to Vienna.

The libretto that Salomon gave to Haydn had originally been intended for Handel (a further attraction to Haydn), who had never gotten around to setting it, perhaps because he felt unsure about tackling such a transcendent subject, but more probably because the text lacked the continuity of drama and characters that was the basis of all his oratorios, save only *Messiah*. The provenance of the libretto is unclear. Haydn reported to the Habsburg Court Librarian, Baron Gottfried van Swieten, that Salomon told him it was assembled from the Bible and Milton’s *Paradise Lost* by one “Mr. Lidley.” Tovey deduced that “Lidley” was actually the very young Thomas Linley (1738-1796), a London conductor and concert promoter whose daughter married the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan, though this theory remains unproven. At any rate, the libretto must have been in somebody’s desk for nearly a half century before Salomon tempted Haydn with it.

The composition of an oratorio about the Creation appealed to Haydn for several reasons. He was throughout his life a deeply religious man, regularly observant of his faith (he inscribed the words “*Laus Deo*” — “Praise God” — at the end of virtually all his compositions), and the thought of voicing his praise of the deity in such a grand work was immensely attractive to him. (“When I think upon my God, my heart is so full of joy that the notes dance and leap from my pen,” he maintained.) The work also would give him the chance to pay homage to Handel and his music in a form that Haydn, half way through his seventh decade, was convinced would outlive all his previous endeavors, even admitting to a friend after the piece was done, “I spent much time over it, for I wanted it to last a long time.” Additionally, the poem itself presented the Nature-loving Haydn with excellent opportunities for musical portrayals of its many pictorial images. Still, he needed encouragement to begin, and this he received from the Baron van Swieten, who exerted an enormous influence on the Viennese musical community, not least in his production of frequent concerts of “old music,” i.e., that of Bach, Handel and other Baroque masters. (Mozart made a new orchestration of *Messiah* for the Baron’s performances.) Not only did van Swieten translate (and edit) the libretto from English into German, but he also made specific recommendations to Haydn about setting the texts (these can still be seen in the margins of his original manuscript — Haydn utilized many of them) and got the backing of “twelve persons of the highest aristocracy,” including the Princes Lobkowitz, Kinsky and Lichnowsky, to underwrite the first

performance. Late in 1796, Haydn began writing the music for *The Creation*.

The composition of *The Creation* took some eighteen months. The manuscript shows considerable re-working, evidence of the melancholia Haydn was said to have suffered at the time. Work on the oratorio was also interrupted by other compositions — the *St. Bernardi Mass*, the *Mass in Time of War*, a vocal arrangement of the *Seven Last Words* (originally written in 1787 as a series of seven slow instrumental movements to accompany a traditional Lenten service in Cadiz, Spain), several quartets, the Trumpet Concerto, three piano trios and *Gott erhalte unsern Kaiser*, the Austrian national anthem that was one of Haydn's favorites among his pieces. To Haydn, who daily knelt to pray for Divine guidance and inspiration before beginning to compose, writing the oratorio was one of the greatest religious acts of his life: "I was never so devout as when I was at work on *The Creation*." On April 5, 1798, Haydn notified Prince Schwarzenberg, who was to host the first performance at his palace on the Mehlmarkt (today the Neuer Markt) in Vienna, that the work was finished. Preparations for the premiere, on April 29th and 30th, were begun immediately under the direction of Baron van Swieten.

The premiere of *The Creation* was a private affair for the Viennese nobility. The market area in front of the Schwarzenberg Palace was cleared of merchants and stalls, and thirty police and assistants directed the movements of the ornate coaches as they arrived. Haydn, who was 66, found the excitement of the event almost more than he could bear. "One moment," he said, "I was as cold as ice, the next I seemed on fire. More than once I was afraid I should have a stroke." One Giuseppe Carpani left an account of the affair: "Who can describe the applause, the delight, the enthusiasm of this society? The flower of the literary and musical society of Vienna were assembled in the room, and Haydn himself directed the orchestra. The most profound silence, the most scrupulous attention, a sentiment, I might almost say, of religious respect, were dispositions which prevailed when the first stroke of the bow was given. The general expectation was not disappointed. A long train of beauties, to that moment unknown, unfolded themselves before us; our minds, overcome with pleasure and admiration, experienced during two successive hours what they had rarely felt — a happy existence, ever lively, ever renewed and never disappointed." The general public first heard the work at Vienna's Kärntnertor Theater on March 19, 1799. The receipts from the capacity audience broke a record for the theater, and press and public were ecstatic in their praises of the music's beauties and dramatic power. The score was published the following year, and quickly became the only serious rival in popularity to *Messiah*. Noted the esteemed Haydn scholar Jens Peter Larsen, "Perhaps no other piece of great music has even enjoyed such immediate and universal acceptance."

Among the most memorable early performances of *The Creation* was the one given in the auditorium of the old Vienna University by the Society of Amateur Concerts on March 27, 1808 to celebrate (four days early) Haydn's 76th birthday. Albert Christoph Dies, one of the composer's early biographers, left an account of the touching occasion: "On alighting from the Prince Esterházy's carriage, Haydn was received by distinguished personages of the nobility and by his student, Beethoven. The crowd was so great that the military had to keep order. He was carried, sitting in his arm-chair, into the hall, and was greeted upon his entrance with a flourish of trumpets and joyous shouts of 'Long live Haydn!' The people of highest rank in Vienna selected seats in his vicinity. Haydn thought he felt a little draught; the Princess Esterházy threw her shawl about him, many ladies following her example, and in a few moments he was

completely wrapped in shawls. Poems by Collin and Carpani were presented to him. He could no longer conceal his feelings. His overburdened heart sought and found relief in tears. When the passage, ‘And there was light’ came, and the audience broke out into tumultuous applause, he made a motion of his hands toward heaven, and said, ‘It came from thence.’ He remained in such an agitated condition that he was obliged to take his leave at the close of the first part. As he went out, the audience thronged about him to take leave of him, and Beethoven kissed his hand and his forehead devoutly. His departure completely overcame him. He could not address the audience, and could only give expression to his heartfelt gratitude with broken, feeble utterances and blessings. Upon every countenance there was deep pity, and tearful eyes followed him as he was taken to his carriage.” It was Haydn’s last public appearance before his death fourteen months later.

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Any detailed consideration of *The Creation* is beyond the limit of these notes, and, in any case, would not be as rewarding to the listener as careful attention to the text as the piece unfolds. As one encouragement for following the words, it might be mentioned that the musically graphic passages with which *The Creation* abounds always occur *before* the words describing them, so that the soloists tell what just happened rather than what is to come.

In summarizing the overall plan of *The Creation*, Tovey wrote the following paragraphs:

“The words of the Bible are divided between three archangels, Raphael, Uriel and Gabriel, and a chorus which, throughout the work, may be considered as that of the heavenly hosts. The list and description of created things is not distributed haphazardly among the three archangels: Uriel is distinctly the angel of the sun and of daylight; his is the tenor voice, and his is the description of Man. Raphael sings of the earth and the sea, of the beginning of all things, and (according to the unmistakable direction of the original edition of the score) of the Spirit of God moving upon the face of the waters. His is also the description of the beasts, the great whales, and ‘every living creature that moveth’; and it is he who reports God’s blessing, ‘Be fruitful and multiply,’ in a measured passage which is one of the sublimest incidents in Haydn’s recitatives. Gabriel, the soprano, leads the heavenly hosts and describes the vegetable kingdom and the world of bird life.

“Lastly, Adam and Eve (Soprano and Bass) appear and fulfill the purpose announced by Raphael while as yet ‘the end was not achieved; there wanted yet the masterwork that should acknowledge all this good.’ Or, as the first answer in the Shorter Catechism has it:

*Q. What is the chief end of Man?*

*A. To glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever.*

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