

Tampa Bay Times Masterworks

The Creation

Mar 22 - 24

FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN (1732-1809)

THE CREATION

Duration: ca. 109 minutes

Most rock stars are on the decline by their mid-60s, but not Haydn. His symphonies and string quartets were the rage of Europe in the late 1700s, particularly in London, where he attended feted concerts of his music and enjoyed the adulation over his 12 *London* symphonies.

For the English who so admired his music, Haydn wanted to write a dramatic oratorio with text in a language they could grasp, much like Handel did a half century earlier with his *Messiah*. So Haydn tackled what would be his most ambitious project ever: a musical story he called *The Creation*, a work of honest piety that may well have given Beethoven food for thought in crafting his *Ninth Symphony*.

“This piece is one of the great ones,” said TFO Music Director Michael Francis. “This was the zenith of the classical style that everyone knew at the time, and it was truly a *world* piece that anyone can relate to, even today. It makes for thrilling musical drama.”

Haydn based his ideas on Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, as well as passages from *Genesis* and the *Psalms*. The imagery is vivid and at times startling, even 220 years after its first performance in Vienna. Cast in three parts – the primordial darkness that begins the first four days, followed by days five and six, and concluding with the union of Adam and Eve – it borrows the model perfected by Handel, whom Haydn called “the master of us all.” This reverence can be heard in the Baroque style of the arias and highly contrapuntal choruses. The concision and brilliance of the choruses grow throughout the work, propelling the action forward.

The opening *Representation of Chaos* is ingenious, with the orchestra playing a unison C major chord to represent emergence from primordial chaos. Fragments of melody fly haphazardly against broken harmonies, dissonances fade in and out, and an eerie, mysterious atmosphere lingers until chorus and orchestra explode with the appearance of the first light. Robert Summer, founder of the Master Chorale and author of *Choral Masterworks from Bach to Britten: Reflections of a Conductor*, marvels at what Haydn achieved and the impact it had on the future of music.

“The first 27 measures exhibit an unusual vagueness of harmony reaching far beyond the Classical Period,” he writes. “This introduction takes a unique place in music history along with

Beethoven's *Praeludium* in his *Missa Solemnis* and the *Prelude to Tristan and Isolde* by Wagner."

The score of *The Creation* rarely left Haydn's side and would be performed at the last public concert he attended, in 1808, the year before his death. Nicholas Temperley, whose updated translation was used by the Master Chorale during its 2002 performances, called the work "a statement of warm optimism about the world and our place in it, clothed in some of the most gorgeous music of music's golden age."

Program notes by Kurt Loft, a freelance writer and former music critic for The Tampa Tribune.