

The Creation

Joseph Haydn (1832-1809)

Although Haydn was a composer whose innovations led the way for Beethoven, he also represented the end of a longstanding tradition. In 1790 when Prince Nicholas Esterházy died, Haydn had been the court composer at Eisenstadt and then Esterháza for almost 30 years, having been appointed by Nicholas's father Paul in 1761, and he eventually served under four successive Esterházy princes. By the end of the 18th century, the tradition of the composer as employee of an aristocratic or ecclesiastical patron was coming to its end. The revolutionary changes in the social structure which came about in the 19th century, both in terms of social class and in the development of the way musical activity was organised, made the position of composers radically different. It is difficult to imagine Beethoven or Wagner being employed in a position which was essentially that of a servant whose compositions could be dictated by the whim of his master in the same way as could the menus of the chef.

By 1790, Haydn had composed, among many other works, 92 symphonies and 126 trios for Nicholas's own instrument the baryton (a type of bass viol) and all his compositional activity was dictated by the tastes, requirements and musical forces available at his employer's court. The new prince, Anton, had nowhere near the interest in music that his father had had, and almost immediately disbanded the court orchestra. Although Haydn continued to have an official position with a small salary and maintained a somewhat strained relationship with Anton, composing a series of masses for him, the 58 year old composer was not expected to work on a regular basis and spent much more time in Vienna than on the rather remote Esterháza estate in Hungary. He also found himself with much greater freedom to respond to offers from elsewhere, and in 1791 he was enticed by Johan Peter Salomon, a German violinist who was very active promoting concerts in London, to visit England. He was contracted for a very substantial fee to write an opera and six symphonies for London and to conduct all performances. The visit was a huge success and Haydn visited Oxford, where he received an honorary Doctorate of Music. He also attended the Handel Commemoration performances of *Messiah* and *Israel in Egypt* at Westminster Abbey, which impressed him deeply and were a major influence on the choral works of his final years. Such was the success of Haydn's visit that Salomon contracted him for a second one for which he would compose another six symphonies, and in February 1794 the composer returned to London.

In 1795, when Haydn was leaving England, tradition says that Salomon handed him a new libretto entitled *The Creation of the World* based on Genesis and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. This is said to have been offered originally to Handel, but he had not used it. The libretto was probably given to Salomon by Thomas Linley, a Drury Lane oratorio and concert director. Linley himself could have written this original English libretto, but its authorship is not known with any certainty. Haydn saw its potential, and on returning to Vienna, he gave it to Baron Gottfried van Swieten, the Imperial Court Librarian who was a great patron of the arts. Van Swieten "resolved to clothe the English poem in German garb", as he put it. He attempted to translate the English text syllable by syllable where possible, but "often judged it necessary that much should be abridged or even omitted, on the one hand, and on the other, that much should be given greater emphasis, and much placed in the shade". When he had finished the German text, van Swieten produced a parallel English text. Although his English was good, it was not perfect and this version contains some less-than-idiomatic phraseology, (for example, in the aria "In native worth", we are told of the newly-created Adam's forehead that "The large and arched front sublime/of wisdom deep declares the seat"), though it also incorporates a fair amount of Milton and the Authorised Version of the Bible. Van Swieten also made suggestions to Haydn about how the text should be set, several of which Haydn

followed. For example, it was at van Swieten's insistence that the words "Let there be light/ And there was light" were to be sung only once, so the brilliant simplicity of this moment is at least partly van Swieten's inspiration.

The libretto was finished in 1796 and Haydn spent most of 1797 working on the music. The first performance took place on April 30th 1798 and was sponsored by a group of aristocrats, who paid the composer a considerable sum for the right to stage the premiere (Salomon was not happy, and threatened to sue on the grounds that he owned the English libretto which had therefore been translated illegally, but nothing came of the threat). This performance was a private affair, the invitations going only to the élite of Viennese society, but hundreds of people crowded into the street around the Schwarzenberg Palace in an attempt to hear the work. The streets near the palace became so crowded that 30 special police officers were needed to keep order. The performance was hugely successful.

The first public performance, with the, to our ears, very oddly balanced forces of an orchestra of around 120 and a chorus of 60, took place at Vienna's Burgtheater on March 19th 1799 and was sold out far in advance. The work, in its German version as *Die Schöpfung*, was performed nearly forty more times in the city during Haydn's lifetime, and, indeed, has been performed in Vienna every year since 1798. It had its London premiere the next year, in the English translation, at Covent Garden. The last performance Haydn attended was on March 27th 1808, five days before his 76th birthday and just a year before he died: the aged and ill Haydn was carried in with great honour on an armchair. The aria "In native worth" is probably the last music Haydn ever heard; it was sung to him a few days before his death in 1809 as a gesture of respect by an officer in Napoleon's invading army.

The Creation is set for orchestra, chorus and three soloists who represent angels who narrate and comment on the successive six days of creation: Gabriel (soprano), Uriel (tenor), and Raphael (bass). In Part III, Adam (bass) and Eve (soprano) are introduced.

Part I begins with one of the most remarkable pieces in the whole of the Classical period, the "Representation of Chaos", whose harmonic audacity was unprecedented in 1797. It continues with the creation of light, the heavens, the division of the waters and the land, plant life and the division of night and day. It ends with what is probably the most famous number in the work, the chorus "The heavens are telling", concluding the fourth day.

Part II continues with the creation of the creatures of the sea, the creatures of the air, the creatures of the land and finally of man himself.

Part III takes place in the Garden of Eden and tells of the happy days of man's first creation and of life in the earthly paradise before the fall.

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