

THE CREATION

by Josef Haydn (1732 – 1809)



The English Connection

It's early 1791 and the chattering classes of London are in a state of high excitement. It's easy to work out why. Armed with a set of newly composed symphonies ready for performance, the greatest musical personality of the age, Joseph Haydn, is in town. For the violinist turned concert promoter Joseph Salomon, this is nothing short of a bonanza, for it is he who has invited Haydn to London, commissioned his symphonies and welcomed him into his house to stay.

As Paris is, for a while, convulsed with revolution, London is the undisputed business and cultural centre of Europe. This is a London enlivened by the new tradition of theatre and concert going which is enjoying the additional bonus of George III's enthusiastic patronage of the arts. It is here that Haydn's greatest orchestral works, the 'London' or 'Salomon' symphonies are to be first performed.

Unlike the typical stereotype of a composer, Haydn is an affable and undemanding guest, a person of intelligence, wit and good humour, and, not least, an astute business man who is to launch himself wholeheartedly into the courtly and artistic scene of the time. Amongst the many concerts he attends as honoured guest is a notable performance of *The Messiah* with 200 singers in Westminster Abbey. During the 'Halleluiahs' the King rises to his feet, and this performance also has a most profound influence on Joseph Haydn. *The Messiah* together with Handel's earlier oratorio *Israel in Egypt* is undoubtedly a primary inspiration for what we are to hear tonight.

In the course of the time he spends with Haydn, Salomon offers the composer a libretto originally intended for Handel as a follow-up for the *Messiah*. The text is drawn not only from the Authorised Version of the Bible (Genesis and the Psalms), but also from Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*. It is entitled *The Creation of the World*.

But the busy round of concert giving, teaching, social appearances, composing of symphonies and a necessary interruption of a return to Vienna for 18 months (not to mention a deep romantic entanglement) all make great demands on the composer's time and energy. It means that Haydn is not able to embark on composing *The Creation* until after his return to Vienna in 1796. By then, a further visit to Britain by the 64-year-old maestro seems unlikely, so he has the text translated into German. Haydn starts composing the work in earnest in 1797.

Amongst the music he had taken back to Vienna in manuscript or cerebral form are melodies of English songs popular in the 1790s, among them 'Sweet Lass of Richmond Hill' by his London friend James Hook. This is reinvented as the Haydn's most celebrated chorus 'The Heavens are telling' which concludes Part 1 of the work we are to hear tonight.

The First Performances

'*Die Schöpfung*' is first publicly presented in Vienna in 1799 and is immediately a brilliant critical and popular success. Enthusiastic crowds assemble outside the *Burgtheater*, and inside, at the point where the choir sings 'Let there be light', such is the astonishment of the audience, the performance has to be temporarily suspended.

400 subscribers quickly arrange for the music to be published to facilitate further performances in England, Germany and Austria, but the translator, although he has proved to be expert at adapting the English libretto into German, is not so proficient when he comes to render the resulting text back into its original language. As a consequence the English version loses much of the elegance of its original Miltonian poetry and biblical prose. Nevertheless, the enthusiasm of the public and concert promoters for the work is undiminished. By the end of February 1800 *Die Schöpfung/The Creation* is printed — the first musical score ever to be published bilingually. Copies are quickly spirited to London.



But unfortunately for Salomon, the first London performance is not quite the *coup de théâtre* that he has been hoping for. His competitor, John Ashley gets hold of copies brought by King's messenger from Vienna at 9 o'clock in the evening of Saturday 22nd March. Astonishingly Ashley manages to get the parts copied out and the work rehearsed in time for a performance with 120 singers and instrumentalists in the Covent Garden Theatre the following Friday. This is a full 3 weeks before Salomon's first performance in the Haymarket.

However, Salomon's reputation is already secure and both the performances are the talk of the town. *The Creation* is further translated into French and Italian and is soon firmly established as a favourite of the concert repertoire throughout the western world.

Settled once more in Vienna, Joseph Haydn has become a confirmed Anglophile. He takes the lead later that year in the musical celebrations that mark the visit of Admiral Nelson, hero of the battle of the Nile. Indeed, besides spending considerable time with the Admiral, he composes music in his honour, and accompanies a performance by the remarkable Lady Hamilton (Nelson's mistress and a native of Ness) at a famous concert.

An English Oratorio?

Preceded by Handel's *Messiah* (1742), and succeeded by Mendelssohn's *Elijah* (1846), *The Creation* (1798) takes its place firmly at the centre of the trio of major oratorios by foreign born composers that are the pillars of what can paradoxically be called the 'English Oratorio Tradition'. All three works were initially conceived for a first performance in Britain or Ireland, and although they can also all be described as 'sacred', they were all intended to be presented, not in a church or cathedral, but in a theatre or town hall.

Tonight's work is less dominated by choruses than its companion pieces, but the overall structure of the three oratorios is otherwise remarkably similar. Whilst not designed to be

staged, they are all dramatic and narrative works, which consist of an orchestral introduction, followed by a carefully planned sequence of chorus, aria, recitative and instrumental interlude. But this similarity only serves to throw into sharp relief the differences in musical style which fully reflect the diversity of the musical personalities and historical eras in which they were composed.

Tonight's Performance

Haydn died in 1809 at the age of 77 and this year is therefore the two hundredth anniversary of his death (and by interesting irony the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin, author of a rather different account of the origin of species).

There is no better piece with which to commemorate Haydn's life, for of all his great works it is *The Creation* which most fully and evenly displays the variety and mastery of the composer's technique – and the composer's optimistic and sunny outlook on life is nowhere more evident than here. Watch out for dazzling orchestration, graceful vocal solos and ensembles, sparkling choruses and unexpected twists of harmony and melodic line, all executed with wit, verve and technical brilliance: at times the music bursts right out of its elegant classical wrapping.

What you will hear brings to life the creation of the heavens the earth and the seas, portrays tempests and pastoral scenes, and depicts creatures as varied as tigers, whales, insects and worms. One unidentified beast announces its presence simply with clump of its foot, 200 years before Spielberg's dinosaur will repeat the same trick in *Jurassic Park*. And if, during the course of the Part 2, you find some of the portrayals of nature rather naïve and laughable, well laugh!

If this isn't enough, just remember that around 9.20 p.m. you will be transported to the Garden of Eden to call in on Adam and Eve.

One particular approach to this performance that you might enjoy is to try and time travel back to March 1800, and imagine you are in the audience at the first performance in Britain, in Covent Garden Theatre in London.

You have already been astonished by Haydn's symphonies, and marvelled at his chamber music, but there is a rumour abroad that you are going to be excited and entertained by music of even greater daring, power and scale. You glance at the programme and your sense of anticipation of a journey into the unknown is further enhanced when you notice that the work begins with something called a 'Representation of Chaos'.

There's nothing for it but to sit back, hold tight and enjoy the ride!

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