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# SINGING *THE CREATION*: HAYDN'S LOVE SONG TO THE EARTH

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Though two and a quarter centuries have passed since Joseph Haydn wrote his magnificent oratorio *The Creation*, this music resounds with an almost shocking relevance for our own time. Contemporary anxieties about the climate—and about how humans have altered the course of nature, of the universe that our species was born into—make Haydn's late-period masterpiece “a work we need more than ever now,” as Grant Gershon puts it.

*The Creation* is “a love song to the earth,” according to the Kiki & David Gindler Artistic Director of the Los Angeles Master Chorale. “So much of it heightens our sense of wonder and gratitude about life. Coming back to it now, when we have a heightened awareness of environmental catastrophes, I think we experience this piece as a reminder of the miracle of the earth and creation and, therefore, of its fragility.”

One consequence of Haydn's two enormously successful residencies in London during the first half of the 1790s was a renewed interest in choral-symphonic music. While abroad, he had the opportunity to attend a Handel festival in Westminster Abbey and experience firsthand the powerful spell that his oratorios could cast on audiences—particularly when performed using expansive forces.

After completing the last of his symphonies, Haydn turned with renewed curiosity and vigor to sacred music. He was already a major celebrity before undertaking *The Creation*, but its ecstatic reception in Vienna brought him the greatest triumph of his career, solidifying his reputation as the top composer in Europe. Mozart was gone, and young Beethoven (one of his students) was still in the early stages of his career.

Along with climate angst, there is another reason why *The Creation* may strike us as peculiarly

apt for our own time. During the final decade of the 18th century, the social, economic, and political context of Vienna (to which Haydn had returned in 1795) was changing rapidly, as shown by the Habsburg elite's reaction to the fear of the violence triggered by the French Revolution. Against this “dark backdrop,” writes the musicologist Bruce MacIntyre, Haydn and his librettist collaborator, Baron Gottfried van Swieten, “conceived an oratorio of innocence, nature, and humanity that offered Vienna and the rest of Europe a most welcome musical escape from the harsh realities of daily life.”

Van Swieten, a music-loving diplomat and court librarian, was an “early music” early adapter, so to speak, who had enlisted Mozart to “update” some of Handel's oratorios for their long-overdue Viennese premieres. He didn't write the libretto per se but adapted and fine-tuned a pre-existing (and wordy) text in English—which Handel himself may have once contemplated setting—about the biblical story of the creation of the cosmos.

Perhaps an implied competition with his storied predecessor accounts for some part of the trepidation the normally confident Haydn confessed to feeling during the work's lengthy genesis (between 1796 and 1798). More likely, this resulted from the challenge of finding music adequate to depicting the Creation. “Only when I had reached the half-way mark in my composition did I perceive that it was succeeding,” the composer later recalled, “and I was never so devout as during the time when I was working on *The Creation*.”

The main sources for the libretto include the Book of Genesis and the Psalms, as well as extracts from the John Milton epic *Paradise Lost*. Van Swieten tailored the anonymous libretto and also crafted a German version, which he retrofit back into English so that Haydn could

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prepare performable editions in both languages. Though the score was published bilingually as *The Creation/Die Schöpfung* in 1800 (a novelty at the time), many conductors favor the German version Haydn actually used to compose. “The English version is problematic, because the words are just not fitted to the natural flow of the music,” Gershon explains. “So I feel the piece is much better served by the German.”

Haydn modeled *The Creation* on the three-part English oratorio perfected by Handel. Part One depicts the creation of light, the separation of heaven and earth, the heavenly bodies, and land, seas, and plant life. In Part Two we encounter the creation of animals and, ultimately, humans. Part Three paraphrases the Milton excerpts, reimagining the final day of rest as Adam and Eve experience the bliss of the Garden of Eden—Eve having the honor of being the first human to sing.

The chorus, which celebrates the achievements of each day, is also integrated with the solo vocalists. Haydn casts soprano, tenor, and bass soloists as the narrating archangels Gabriel, Uriel, and Raphael, respectively (figures taken not from *Genesis* but from *Paradise Lost*). The roles of Eve and Adam are moreover assigned to soprano and bass in a pair of folk-tinged duets, and an alto soloist is added to complete a solo quartet embedded within the final chorus. As for the orchestra, Haydn expands the usual Classical ensemble to incorporate a third flute, a contrabassoon, and trombones (especially evocative for the lion’s appearance), and a harpsichord or fortepiano accompanies the recitatives.

Haydn’s music makes each stage of this process feel like a genuine discovery—as if it were happening for the first time. The most celebrated example comes in the beginning, where the composer at his most experimental depicts

the state of chaos *before* the beginning of time. Haydn’s representation of this chaos shockingly subverts Classical order before reaffirming it. A unison C (neither major nor minor) heralds a mysterious sound picture of muted strings, wandering harmonies, deceptive cadences, and suspenseful dynamics.

The awe-filled sense of expectation is resolved only at the moment when light is created—this is music Beethoven would study closely, eagerly. Haydn adds the human voice (solo bass) and then a hushed chorus that leads to a sonic Big Bang with the words “Let there be light”: order at last established with an outburst of C major (the strings now unmuted) to dispel the darkness. Here, on the eve of the 19th century, Haydn already anticipates the paradigm that would give the symphony a new metaphysical identity.

Haydn moreover deploys his orchestral technique with an almost Mahlerian precision to delineate the wonderful diversity of the nature surrounding us. His signature wit is everywhere apparent in the virtuosity of imitative gestures that musically conjure the creatures being described. The composer draws on all the knowledge he had accumulated not only through his innovations in writing symphonies and string quartets but also from his profound love for the human voice. Haydn had, after all, started out as a child prodigy singer for what we today know as the famous Vienna Choirboys.

The hymn of thanksgiving to the Creator expressed by Adam and Eve, the oratorio’s most extensive number, is followed by a duet in which Haydn’s emphasis on joy (“Freude”) takes on an almost erotic dimension, implying the physicality of the first humans as well. “*The Creation* is one of the most fertile pieces that I can imagine,” says Gershon, “expressing love of everything, seen and unseen, that surrounds us.”

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