



The Creation

The Creation, without doubt the crown of its composer's choral output, was written in 1797 and received its first hearing during the following year. The first public performance was in March of 1799.

It seems that Haydn's London agent, Salomon, had suggested a text as libretto – a version which, interestingly, Handel had refused to set earlier in the century. The origins of the verbiage are shrouded in the mists of antiquity and 18th century confusion. Tradition has it, however, that the words had been prepared for Handel by one Lidley. Sir Donald Tovey suggests that "Lidley might be Linley with a cold in the head" – thus ascribing the compilation to Thomas of the latter name, father of two famous musicians: Tom, a childhood prodigy and boyhood friend of Mozart, and Elizabeth, the celebrated singer.

The Creation underwent much alteration in textual terms. Haydn sought the help of Baron von Swieten (he who had commissioned Mozart's "additional accompaniments" to Handel choral works – notably *Messiah* and *Acis and Galatea*) in translating the efforts of "Lidley" into German. Having completed this task, the good Baron then proceeded to translate it back into his own concept of the English language. The result is colourful and often amusing. New more scholarly versions have not yet caught on, so attached have folk become to the English of the "original".

However, during tonight's performance, a number of very small adjustments to the text (mostly to do with the order in which verbal phrases are presented) are incorporated in an effort to add clarity of expression to beauty of language. Thus, in one number a simple transposition of words makes for greater comprehension:

the printed lines *his welcome bids to morn the merry lark*
being simply re-arranged as *the merry lark his welcome bids to morn*.

These procedures were basically those of the late Herbert Byard, produced at Dr Herbert Sumsion's request for the Gloucester Three Choirs' Festival about half a century ago, to which nucleus I have added a few of my own devising.

However, the listener may rest assured that much of the very considerable poetic beauty and character of the traditional Novello edition in English has been firmly retained in place.

The work opens with one of the greatest wonders of classical music. This is an extraordinary concept of primeval disorder entitled *The Representation of Chaos*. Richly harmonised, and peppered with some of its composer's most imaginative writing, this Prelude is set into the most brilliantly successful relief by virtue of the noble simplicity of the recitative and chorus which follow it.

This scene-setting is used by the composer at two further points. The exquisite, terse and incandescent music which prefaces the accompanied recitative *In splendour bright*. This is in turn followed by what is by far the most famous of the work's many fine choruses – *The Heavens are telling the glory of God*. Then again, at the beginning of Part III, a tender utterance is presented as the curtain-raiser for the section beginning *In rosy mantle appears*.

There is so much upon which to comment that it is difficult to know what to mention and what to leave to surprise the senses. The degree of illustrative imagery that Haydn achieves is a remarkable feature of the vividly-etched score.

Among many delightful and famous touches of word-painting are the interludes during the descriptions of the creation of the animals. Listen particularly for the rich parts at the creation of whales and "finny tribes" of the sea, the trembling for the insects and the lugubrious slow trace of the worm. The bass aria *Now heaven in fullest glory shone* brings in the wonderful effect of the heavy beasts. These are especially telling moments.

The chorus work throughout is superlative, and especially so in those movements involving soloists with chorus – either antiphonally or as in linking passages in the narrative. This combined vocal conjunction, so marked a characteristic of the composer's six great Masses, gives to this oratorio a hallmark at once highly dramatic yet translucent in musical texture.



In the first two parts, the three soloists represent the Archangels – Gabriel, Uriel and Raphael respectively for soprano, tenor and bass. They are much involved in the narrative of the Creation itself, as has been indicated already. One of the most famous sections is that for Bass (Recitative and Aria) outlining the creation of the animals. An amazing *tour-de-force* of musical writing, this features nearly every family in the animal kingdom in a comparatively short space of time. This is, in its turn, followed by the tenor air *In native worth* – a serene movement in affectionate style recounting the arrival of man and woman. The stupendous chorus which follows – *Achieved is the glorious work* – is in two sections, separated by a trio in homage to the Almighty. The first of the two choral parts opens with an orchestral introduction preceding a short and basically straightforward chorus. The reprise after the trio is much extended, with the Choir entering spectacularly after the briefest of instrumental arpeggio figures.

A similarly large-scale concept is deployed in the third part of the work, in which the Duet *By thee with bliss* is an extended paean of praise involving choruses as well as soprano and bass (the soloists now represent Adam and Eve). The oratorio ends with a final chorus – *Praise the Lord, ye voices all* – a tremendous affirmation involving solo quartet (as opposed to the trio used elsewhere in the big set piece numbers *The Lord is great* and *The Heavens are telling*).

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