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Program Notes

by Jud Barry
April 20, 1991

THE CREATION
Franz Joseph Haydn
born Rohrau, Austria,
March 31, 1732
died Vienna, May 31, 1809

"The Creation" of Franz Joseph "Papa" Haydn was the culmination of a long and fruitful career that began at the age of seven, when he was spirited away from his humble family to sing in the choir of a Viennese cathedral, and ended seventy years later, the simple choirboy having become a demigod of music. Piling work upon work - 104 symphonies, 83 string quartets, 52 piano sonatas, and 23 operas among them - Haydn became the chief architect of the Classical period. (Though often used as the generic label for any kind of highbrow or long-hair music, "Classical" more properly denotes the period in European music between 1750 and 1800.) Haydn solidified the forms that became the foundations for instrumental composition for the next century-and-a-half: sonata, symphony, and string quartet. In spite of his impressive output, Haydn did not have the fluid facility as a composer that Mozart had. Haydn inched along steadily and carefully, although not laboriously - his music reflects an irrepressibly optimistic outlook. As he himself said, "Since God has given me a cheerful heart, He will forgive me for serving Him cheerfully."

Musically, Haydn never served more cheerfully than in "The Creation." In 1797 he was getting on and, for all his impressive output, had never tried an oratorio. Handel's were still unmatched, even forty years after his death. Hearing them in London, where they were still the rage, and even receiving an unset libretto,

originally intended for Handel, based on the creation story, Haydn set about composing in a spirit of prayerful intensity what was to become his most successful work. Of its composition Haydn said, "Daily I fell on my knees and begged God to vouchsafe me strength for the fortunate outcome of my work." Fortunate it is indeed, and full of buoyant praise.

After an instrumental overture, "the representation of Chaos," the work tells the story of the first seven days as described in Genesis and amplified by John Milton in "Paradise Lost," with choral paraphrases of Psalms punctuating the narrative. Parts I and II describe the actual work - the first part the cosmic, geologic, and botanical; and the second part the zoological and human - while Part III takes a sabbatical of praise. The Miltonic archangels Raphael, Uriel, and Gabriel tell the story, with Gabriel and Raphael transmuting into Adam and Eve for Part III.

Aside from its overall joyous character, perhaps the most effective feature of the piece is the way in which Haydn reinforces verbal with musical description. This occurs throughout the piece, but some of the salient examples follow.

In the overture, Haydn describes chaos by using musical devices that underline the formlessness of the antecreate void: dissonance, undeveloped and oddly juxtaposed ideas, jarring key changes, a somber mood. (This music is sometimes seen as progressive, looking ahead to Wagner and the moderns, which is ironic, since Haydn uses this sound to describe a state neither to be desired nor emulated.) Then Raphael and the choir enter, whispering the recitative that brings on the light, at which point the orchestra explodes in the bright sunlight of C major. In the following aria and chorus (no. 2), there is much musical contrast between the "throng of hellish spirits" fleeing into "the dismal abyss of night without

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end" and the new world created in order and light.

Haydn paints the first sunrise and moonshine in no. 12. Strings and flutes lighten the horizon at dawn, which then yellows with oboes and bassoons, and then horns, until the orchestra is all ablaze. The low strings are the moon, gliding through the sky.

Throughout the rest of the narrative is much incidental tone-painting. No. 6 depicts raging sea, mountain-building, and a gently flowing brook. No. 15 describes the eagle, the lark, the turtle-dove and the nightingale; the mighty whale swims in no. 16; birds flock and fish school in no. 18; the land animals crawl forth in no. 21 - roaring lion, leaping tiger, proud stag, neighing horse, sheep in a meadow, swarming insects, and digging worm.

When Adam and Eve first speak, it is to sing the praise of God, and all is complete and orderly in Creation. But in the final recitative, Uriel acknowledges the happiness of the first couple, while suggesting how it might come to an end.

For all the long-lasting esteem that "The Creation" has brought its musical creator, the author of the libretto remains unknown. As mentioned before, it was intended for Handel and thus was an adaptation of Milton and the Bible written by an Englishman for the popular stage some forty years before it ever came into Haydn's possession. Haydn turned it over to the Count van Swieten, a patron and colleague, for translation into German. This van Swieten did freely, in his words "clothing the English poem in German garb." The English libretto subsequently disappeared, becoming something of an "invisible man" in German clothes. Attempts to re-create the original English have to go back to the whole cloth of Genesis and Milton. Tonight's translation is by Jane May.