

the creation: text and notes on the music

“I was never so devout as when I was at work on The Creation; I fell on my knees each day and begged God to give me the strength to finish the work....I spent much time over it because I expect it to last for a long time....”—F.J.H.

The last major work of Franz Joseph Haydn’s lengthy career is also one of the masterpieces of the choral-orchestral repertoire, and a microcosm of the optimistic faith of the composer and the Enlightenment era in which he lived. Haydn worked on the oratorio for a year and a half, and published editions in both German and English, making this the first bilingual major work in the canon. The 1798 Vienna premiere of the work, open only to a select private audience, caused such buzz (Haydn, by this point in his artistic life, had achieved rock-star status in both Austria and England) that the streets outside the Schwarzenberg Palace filled with curious spectators; it took thirty police officers to keep them contained. Two centuries later, the work remains enormously popular, thanks to its abundance of hummable melodies, pictorial text-setting, and irrepressible cheer. Surely any composer, looking over this “glorious work,” would have had to conclude that “it was good”—though the famously humble Haydn, who deflected an outburst of applause at an early performance by pointing demurely to the sky, would never have admitted as much.

*Anonymous English text compiled from biblical sources and from Paradise Lost by John Milton (1608–74),
reworked by Baron Gottfried von Snieten and edited by Nicholas Temperley*

Notes by Eliza Rubenstein

PART I

Representation of Chaos (orchestra)

Recitative (Raphael)

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.
And the earth was without form and void;
And darkness was upon the face of the deep.

Chorus

And the Spirit of God moved upon the face
of the waters;
And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

Recitative (Uriel)

And God saw the light, that it was good:
and God divided the Light from the darkness.

Aria (Uriel) with Chorus

Now vanish before the holy beams
The gloomy dismal shades of dark:
The first of days appears.
Disorder yields to order fair the place;
Affrighted fled hell’s spirits black in throngs;
Down they sink in the deep of abyss
to endless night.
Despairing cursing rage attends their rapid fall.
A new-created world springs up at God’s command.

The murky, roiling, dissonant orchestral opening of *The Creation* is among Haydn’s most famous and ingenious innovations: in his quest to depict the chaos of primordial nothingness, he ends up writing harmonic progressions that won’t be seen again for nearly a hundred years. Out of this darkness emerge the first stirrings of divine creativity (told by one of the three Archangels to whom the bulk of the oratorio’s narration is entrusted), culminating in one of the most celebrated musical surprises in musical history; if you’re new to the work, we won’t spoil it for you.

Gone with a sweep of God’s hand is the tumult of the opening movement, replaced by a “new-created world” of sunny A Major, into which the chorus steps with the tentative wonder of Dorothy into Oz. The “despairing rage” of the fallen spirits of hell is brutal but short-lived—a classic example not only of Haydn’s decisive text-painting, but also of his chronic inability to stay angry for very long at a stretch.

Recitative (Raphael)

And God made the firmament,
and divided the waters which were under the
firmament from the waters which were above the
firmament; and it was so.
Outrageous storms now dreadful arise;
As chaff by the winds are impelled the clouds.
By heaven's fire the sky is enflamed,
And awful roll the thunders on high.
Now from the floods in steams ascend
Reviving showers of rain,
The dreary wasteful hail, the light and flaky snow.

Aria (Gabriel) with Chorus

The marv'ulous work beholds amazed
The glorious hierarchy of heav'n,
And to th' ethereal vaults resounds
The praise of God,
And of the second day.

Recitative (Raphael)

And God said, Let the waters under the heaven
be gathered together unto one place,
and let the dry land appear: and it was so.
And God called the dry land Earth;
and the gathering of waters called he Seas;
and God saw that it was good.

Aria (Raphael)

Rolling in foaming billows
Uplifted roars the boist'rous sea.
Mountains and rocks now emerge:
Their tops into the clouds ascend.
Through open plains outstretching wide,
In serpent error rivers flow. Softly purling glideth on
Through silent vales the limpid brook.

Recitative (Gabriel)

And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass,
the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit
after his kind, whose seed is in itself upon the earth:
and it was so.

Aria (Gabriel)

With verdure clad the fields appear
Delightful to the ravished sense; by flowers sweet and
gay enhanced is the charming sight.
Here vent their fumes the fragrant herbs;
Here shoots the healing plant.
By loads of fruits th' expanded boughs are pressed;
to shady vaults are bent the tufty groves;
The mountain's brow is crowned with closed wood.

As God creates weather in the cosmos, so Haydn creates it in the orchestra: furiously fast-moving notes for the “dreadful” thunderstorms, gentle triplets for the spring rain, aimless tremolos for the “wasteful” hail, and soft spiky eighth notes for the snowfall. (In this recitative as in others later in the oratorio, Haydn illustrates the text in the orchestra *before* the singer voices it, as if to invite the audience into a guessing game.)

When Baron Gottfried von Swieten took his editorial quill to the work of *The Creation's* now-anonymous English author, he brought with him an unmistakably (and sometimes regrettably) Teutonic sense of syntax; hence the confusing first clause of this charming number, which means to say that the hierarchy of heaven—i.e., the heavenly host—beholds (with amazement!) God's work-in-progress, not vice versa.

Water, water everywhere! Haydn follows the more staid, Biblically-based recitative with a particularly enthusiastically illustrated aria: The “boist'rous sea” churns in angry sixteenth notes, but yields midway through the aria to the softly gliding brook. Listen for Haydn's text-painting, most obviously in the wandering of the serpentine river, but subtly, too, in the spiky “mountains and rocks” poking through the clouds.

With lyricism and lilt the plant kingdom makes its soothing entrance into the new world. It's not hard to imagine a young twisting vine searching for sunlight at the long melismas that end the phrase “...shoots the healing plant.”

Recitative (Uriel)

And the heavenly host proclaimed the third day,
praising God and saying:

Chorus

Awake the harp, the lyre awake!
In shout and joy your voices raise!
In triumph sing the mighty Lord!
For he the heavens and earth has clothed
in stately dress.

Recitative (Uriel)

And God said,
Let there be lights in the firmament of heaven
to divide the day from the night,
and to give light upon the earth:
and let them be for signs, and for seasons,
and for days, and for years.
He made the stars also.

Recitative (Uriel)

In splendour bright is rising now the sun,
And darts his rays; an am'rous, joyful, happy spouse,
A giant proud and glad to run his measured course.
With softer beams and milder light
steps on the silver moon through silent night.
The space immense of th' azure sky
Innum'rous host of radiant orbs adorns.
And the sons of God announced the fourth day
In song divine, proclaiming thus his pow'r:

Chorus with Trio

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
The firmament displays the wonder of his works.
To day that is coming speaks it the day;
the night that is gone, to following night.
In all the land resounds the word,
Never unperceived, ever understood.

The chorus returns to exhort the masses (of angels—humans haven't yet been created, technically) to lift their voices and instruments in praise of God's unfolding works. Haydn gives us the oratorio's first fugue at the text "For he the heavens and earth has clothed in stately dress."

Is there a more glorious passage in all of Classical-Era music than the sunrise Haydn evokes at the midpoint of these two recitatives? Never, perhaps, has a harmonized D-Major scale been so expansive or so expressive. Alas, the text that follows represents the height of Enlightenment-Era overwriting, yet it's easy to forgive, both for its earnest eagerness and for its felicitous position between two of the work's most memorable moments.

The oratorio's most excerpted movement, well known to church-choir singers worldwide, concludes Part I in full C-Major splendor, with God's word transformed into a verdant, vibrant new planet ready for habitation.

LET THERE BE APPLAUSE

PART II

Recitative (Gabriel)

And God said,
Let the waters bring forth
abundantly the moving creature
that hath life, and fowl
that may fly above the earth
in the open firmament of heaven.

The birds are the first of the fauna to arrive, by means of one of the most elaborately virtuosic arias in the oratorio. Haydn's text-painting gets a full workout here: Listen for the soaring and hovering of the eagle, the trills of the cooing dove, and the sweet song of the nightingale, who in these young, fresh days of the earth has not yet acquired the mythologically mournfulness that will come to define her symbolically later on.

Aria (Gabriel)

On mighty pens uplifted soars the eagle aloft,
and cleaves the sky in swiftest flight to the blazing sun.
His welcome bids to morn the merry lark,
And cooing calls the tender dove his mate.
From ev'ry bush and grove resound
The nightingale's delightful notes;
No grief affected yet her breast,
Nor to a mournful tale were tuned
Her soft, enchanting lays.

Recitative (Raphael)

And God created great whales,
and ev'ry living creature that moveth.
And God blessed them, saying,
Be fruitful all, and multiply!
Ye winged tribes, be multiplied and sing on ev'ry tree!
Multiply, ye finny tribes, and fill each wat'ry deep!
Be fruitful, grow, and multiply!
And in your God and Lord rejoice.

Recitative (Raphael)

And the angels struck their immortal harps,
and the wonders of the fifth day sung.

Trio

Most beautiful appear,
With verdure young adorned,
The gently sloping hills.
The narrow, sinuous veins
Distil in crystal drops
The fountain fresh and bright.
In lofty circles plays
And hovers through the sky
The cheerful host of birds.
And in the flying whirl,
The glitt'ring plumes are dyed,
As rainbows, by the sun.
See flashing through the wet
In thronged swarms the fry
On thousand ways around.
Upheaved from the deep,
The immense leviathan
Sports on the foaming wave.
How many are thy works, O God!
Who may their numbers tell?

Trio with Chorus

The Lord is great, and great his might.
His glory lasts for ever and for evermore.

In the depths of the ocean we find a classic example of Haydn's blend of humor and creativity: The violins sit silent while the lower strings, divided into multiple parts, slither and writhe like great watery beasts.

The abundance and diversity of God's blessings find voice in this rapturous sequence, which opens with an expository recitative, continues into a charming trio (the melody recalls the famous "La ci darem la mano" from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*), and closes with a rousing chorus of praise, lit thrillingly by vocal fireworks from the soloists.

Recitative (Raphael)

And God said, Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle and creeping thing, and beasts of the earth after their kind.

Recitative (Raphael)

Straight opening her fertile womb, the earth obeys the word, and teem creatures numberless, in perfect form and fully grown. Cheerful, roaring, stands the tawny lion; In sudden leaps the flexible tiger appears; The nimble stag bears up his branching head. With flying mane and fiery look impatient neighs the sprightly steed; the cattle in herds already seek Their food on fields and meadows green. And o'er the ground, as plants are spread the fleecy, meek, and bleating flocks. Unnumbered as the sands, In whirls arise the host of insects. In long dimensions creeps with sinuous trace the worm.

Aria (Raphael)

Now heav'n in all her glory shines;
Earth smiles in all her rich attire.
The room of air with fowl is filled,
The water swelled by shoals of fish;
By heavy beasts the ground is trod.
But all the work was not complete:
There wanted yet that wondrous being
That grateful should God's pow'r admire,
With heart and voice his goodness praise.

Recitative (Uriel)

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God created he him;
male and female created he them.
He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life,
and man became a living soul.

Aria (Uriel)

In native worth and honour clad,
With beauty, courage, strength adorned,
To heav'n erect and tall he stands a man,
The lord and king of nature all.
The large and arched brow sublime.
Of wisdom deep declares the seat,
And in his eyes with brightness shines the soul.
The breath and image of his God.
With fondness leans upon his breast
The partner for him formed,
A woman, fair and graceful spouse.
Her softly smiling virgin looks,
Of flow'ry spring the mirror,
Bespeak him love, and joy, and bliss.

Haydn must have practically drooled in anticipation when he saw all the opportunities this recitative offered him. He writes his very own “carnival of the animals,” complete with roaring lion, bounding tiger, rearing horse, lowing cattle, and baaing sheep (notice that the sheep don't have their own melody—they merely duplicate the cattle's tune, because they're *sheep*), but saves the best for last with an irritating swarm of insects and a slimy worm. The aria that follows, by contrast, is majestic and regal (except for the comic relief of the thunderous footfall of the “heavy beasts”), celebrating the near-complete animal kingdom. All that's missing is the human creature, who will make his-and-her entrance in the next movement.

The “beauty, courage, strength,” and “wisdom” of the newly-created Adam reflect the human qualities most prized in Enlightenment-era philosophy, and Eve embodies that age's ideal of womanhood with her grace and deference. (Listen to the lingering “joy” at the end of the movement; is it a suspended moment of pure happiness, or a melancholy foreshadowing of the fall to come, or both?) This aria may well have been among the last works Haydn ever heard performed: A soldier in Napoleon's invading army sang it for Haydn several days before the composer's death in 1809, as a gesture of appreciation and respect.

Recitative (Raphael)

And God saw ev'ry thing that he had made,
and, behold, it was very good.
And the heavenly choir in song divine
thus closed the sixth day:

Chorus and trio

Achieved is the glorious work:
The Lord beholds it, and is pleased.
In lofty strains let us rejoice!
Our song let be the praise of God!
On thee each living soul awaits;
From thee, O Lord, they beg their meat.
Thou openest thy hand, and sated all they are.
But when from them thy face is hid,
With sudden terror they are struck.
Thou tak'st their breath away; they vanish into dust.
Thou lett'st thy breath go forth again,
And life with vigor fresh returns.
Revived earth unfolds new force and new delights.
Achieved is the glorious work,
Our song must be the praise of God!
Glory to his name for ever!
He sole on high exalted reigns. Alleluia.

Part II concludes with a sequence that sandwiches a beautifully reflective trio—the last joint statement from the three Archangels—between two mighty choral movements. The trio reminds the new inhabitants of the earth of the “God giveth and God taketh away” rules under which their new world operates—note especially the bass’s chilling entrance at “But when from them thy face is hid.” The chorus, in joyous B-flat Major, gives no quarter to such conflict; Haydn ends the first (and shorter) of the choral sections with a bright and busy fugue, and the second with an even more ingenious *double* fugue. Creation is complete—but the story is not.

LET THERE BE INTERMISSION

PART III

Hymn (Adam, Eve, and Chorus)

By thee with bliss, O bounteous Lord,
The heav'n and earth are filled.
This world, so great, so wonderful,
Thy mighty hand has framed.
For ever blessed be his pow'r!
His name be ever magnified!
Of stars the fairest, O how sweet
Thy smile at dawning morn!
How bright'nest thou, O sun, the day,
Thou eye and soul of all!
Proclaim in your extended course
The glorious pow'r and might of God.
And thou that rul'st the silent night,
And all ye starry host,
Spread wide and ev'rywhere his praise
In choral songs about.
Ye strong and cumbrous elements,
Who ceaseless changes make,
Ye dusky mists, and dewy steams,
Who rise and fall through the air:
Resound the praise of God our Lord!
Great is his name, and great his might.

Part III gives us the longest movement in the oratorio: the three-part Hymn sung by Adam, Eve, and the chorus of angels. In the adagio that begins the movement, we can imagine the newly-created pair exploring their new home with all the awe and delight of a young couple on HGTV, reviewing (and marveling at) the chronological catalog of God’s creations as described in Part I and Part II of the work. The chorus of angels encourages them along the way, first in hushed tones and then in sprightly counterpoint. The movement culminates with a massive homophonic statement of praise and another of Haydn’s masterful fugues. Ye purling fountains, tune his praise,

And wave your tops, ye pines!
Ye plants exhale, ye flowers breathe
At him your balmy scent!
Ye that on mountains stately tread,
And ye that lowly creep,
Ye birds that sing at heaven's gate,
Ye that through waters glide,
Ye living souls, extol the Lord!
Him celebrate, him magnify!
Ye valleys, hills, and shady woods,
Our raptured notes ye heard;
From morn to ev'n you shall repeat
Our grateful hymns of praise.
Hail, bounteous Lord! Almighty, hail!
Thy word called forth this wondrous frame.
Thy pow'r adore the heav'n and earth.
We praise thee now and evermore.

Recitative (Adam and Eve)

—Our duty we have now performed
In off'ring up to God our thanks.
Now follow me, dear partner of my life!
Thy guide I'll be, and ev'ry step
Pours new delights into our breast,
shows wonders ev'rywhere.
Then may'st thou feel and know
The high degree of bliss the Lord allotted us,
And with devoted heart his bounty celebrate.
Come follow me! Thy guide I'll be.
—O thou, for whom I am!
My help, my shield, my all! Thy will is law to me.
So God, our Lord, ordains,
And from obedience grows my pride and happiness.

Duet (Adam and Eve)

—Graceful consort! At thy side
softly fly the golden hours.
Ev'ry moment brings new rapture,
ev'ry care is put to rest.
—Spouse adored! At thy side
purest joys o'erflow the heart.
Life and all I am is thine; my reward thy love shall be.
—The dew dropping morn, O how she quickens all!
—The coolness of ev'n, O how she all restores!
—How grateful is of fruits the savour sweet!
—How pleasing is of fragrant bloom the smell!
—But without thee, what is to me
The morning dew, the breath of ev'n,
The sav'ry fruit? The fragrant bloom?
With thee is ev'ry joy enhanced;
With thee delight is ever new.
With thee is life incessant bliss. Thine it whole shall be.

Having admired their surroundings, Adam and Eve turn their attention to each other. (In Adam's opening line—"Our duty we have now performed / In off'ring up to God our thanks / Now follow me..."—there is almost a sense of crossing off an item on his to-do list in order to get to the exciting stuff. Haydn doesn't miss this; listen to the spring in the step of the fortepiano at these words.) The happy couple's love duet is reminiscent of Mozart opera in its lyricism and wit, and the hunting-horn calls from the orchestra at the quicker second section give the movement the feel of a folk dance at a country wedding.

Recitative (Uriel)

O happy pair, and ever happy still,
Unless, by false conceit misled,
Ye strive at more than granted is,
And more would know than know you should!

Chorus with Soli

Sing the Lord, ye voices all!
Utter thanks, all ye his works!
Celebrate his pow'r and glory!
Let his name resound on high!
The Lord is great; his praise shall never end. Amen.

Blink during this recitative, and you might miss the fact that the story of Adam and Eve does not, in fact, have a happy ending. How typical that the eternally optimistic Haydn should freeze the loving couple in permanent bliss, with only the barest hint of the transgression and eviction to come!

One more powerful hymn of praise; one more robust double fugue; one last flare of virtuosity from the soloists (plus a heretofore unused alto)—and the “glorious work” is achieved. Amen!

THE END

