

Tafelmusik

Die Schöpfung ✧ The Creation

Music by Joseph Haydn
Text by Gottfried van Swieten

PROGRAMME NOTES

Haydn completed what he considered his greatest work, *Die Schöpfung* (*The Creation*) in 1797, at the age of 65. The initial inspiration for the work seems to have originated in England some two or three years earlier, during the second of Haydn's visits to London. Haydn had been greatly impressed by performances of Handel's *Messiah* and *Israel in Egypt*. The impresario Salomon apparently handed Haydn a libretto, by an unnamed author, on the subject of *Creation*, rumoured to have been intended originally for Handel. Recent scholarship suggests that the author of the libretto was in fact Charles Jennens, who provided the texts of many of Handel's oratorios. Haydn took the libretto back to Vienna and handed it over to Gottfried van Swieten, director of the court library in Vienna. An amateur composer, and former Viennese ambassador to Brussels, Frankfurt, Regensburg, Paris and Berlin, Swieten had introduced Vienna to the works of Bach and Handel. He organized a group of noblemen, the Gesellschaft der Associierten, to present concerts of large-scale choral works: these were the performances for which Mozart's arrangements of *Messiah* and other Handel works were made. Swieten had earlier tried to persuade Haydn to compose a work "in the manner and spirit of Handel," and was excited by the possibilities of the libretto delivered by Haydn: "I recognized at once that such an exalted subject would give Haydn the opportunity I had long desired, to show the whole compass of his profound accomplishments and to express the full power of his inexhaustible genius; I therefore encouraged him to take the work in hand."

A close collaboration between Swieten and Haydn followed. Swieten condensed and translated the English text, which had its origin in the Book of Genesis and the Book of Psalms from the King James Bible, Milton's *Paradise Lost* and James Thomson's 1730 poem *The Creation*. He also provided Haydn with suggestions for details of musical treatment of the text, worked closely with him on revisions, and arranged for the first performance. The latter, under the auspices of Swieten's Gesellschaft der Associierten, was held at the palace of Prince Joseph zu Schwarzenberg in April 1798 for a select audience. A Swedish diplomat, Frederick Samuel Silverstolpe, attended one of the rehearsals and left the following account:

Prince Schwarzenberg was so utterly enchanted by the many beauties of the work that he presented the composer with a roll containing 100 ducats, over and above the 500 that were part of the agreement. No one, not even Baron van Swieten, had seen the page of the score wherein the birth of light is described. That was the only passage of the work which Haydn had kept hidden. I think I see his face even now, as this part sounded in the orchestra. Haydn had the expression of someone who is thinking of biting his lips, either to conceal his embarrassment or to conceal a secret. And in that moment when light broke out for the first time, one would have said that rays darted from the composer's burning eyes.

The first performance impressed the Viennese aristocracy as never before and two additional performances were immediately organized. The larger public had to wait until the following year to hear the great work: a poster advertising the first public performance at the Burgtheater in Vienna included a request to the audience, in Haydn's name, to refrain from demanding encores of individual numbers, and a veritable riot ensued as crowds battled for tickets and seats. Annual performances at Christmas and during Lent quickly became a Viennese tradition, and within a few years of its first performance, *Die Schöpfung* enjoyed enormous success in England, France, Germany, Scandinavia, Spain, Italy, Russia and America. It has been said that perhaps no other piece of great music has enjoyed such immediate and universal acceptance, crossing political and religious boundaries.

The oratorio is divided into the three parts typical of English oratorio. Parts I and II recount the six days of the biblical *Creation*. The beginning of each day is announced in a *secco* recitative, followed by an accompanied recitative and/or aria evoking the picturesque elements, and finally a chorus offering praise and thanks. The story is told by three soloists: the archangels Gabriel, Uriel and Raphael. Part III is spent in the Garden of Eden on the seventh day, the day of rest. The soprano and bass soloists become Adam and Eve, blissfully content before their fall from grace. The oratorio ends with a joyous chorus of praise. Haydn draws on an expanded orchestra to paint elaborate sound pictures of the colourful libretto: the depiction of chaos and the creation of light; the storm, wind and rain of the second day; the sun, moon and stars of the fourth day; and the animals of both land and sea of the fifth day. These sound images, together with exquisite arias and jubilant choruses, combine to astonish and delight audiences today as they did 200 years ago.

A NOTE ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE

After Baron van Swieten provided Haydn with the re-worked German translation of the libretto of *The Creation*, he set about to write a complementary English version of the text. The original English text could not be retained because of the extensive cuts and revisions done by Swieten. Swieten's English text was provided, together with the German, in the original Viennese publication of the full score in 1800. Performances of *The Creation* in English-speaking countries often turn to this translation. We have chosen, however, to perform the work in German — it is the language Haydn had in mind while composing and therefore more closely suited to the music. It is also Swieten's native tongue, and his inadequacies in the English language are all too apparent in his often clumsy English translation. The translation given in these pages is not Swieten's, but rather a more literal translation of the German text.

We will be performing the work without intermission.