

A Listener's Guide to Haydn's *Creation*

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Welcome to Haydn's *Creation*, performed this evening by the Messiah University Symphony Orchestra, Choral Arts Society, Concert Choir, and Men's and Women's Ensembles. I am grateful for your presence, and I hope these program notes help enrich your listening experience. Performing a large masterwork is often a once-in-a-lifetime experience for volunteer musicians, and we are fortunate to perform masterworks routinely at Messiah because of the talent and commitment of our fantastic students, the excellence and collaboration of our music faculty, and the support of our administration. The students, Dr. Dixon and I have enjoyed the rigor and beauty of rehearsing this joyful music, and we have appreciated reflecting on the Biblical creation account and connecting it to acts of creation care in our present day. I am grateful to Messiah's Sustainability Office for helping educate us this semester in ways our campus can care for God's beautiful creation here in Grantham and in our communities. This oratorio is lengthy (approximately two hours, with an intermission), and this guide can help you listen for musical specifics and understand the history and structure of the piece.

The Creation of Haydn's *Creation*:

In the summer of 1791 at the London's Handel Festival, Haydn heard Handel's *Messiah* and *Israel in Egypt* oratorios for the first time. Performed with an enormous choir and orchestra, these grandiose and lucrative oratorios left a considerable impression on Haydn, who then decided to write an oratorio of his own. Impresario Johann Peter Salomon presented Haydn with an English libretto titled *The Creation of the World*. German-speaking Haydn felt uncomfortable setting an English text to music, so he asked musical connoisseur and patron Baron Gottfried van Swieten to translate the libretto into German. Van Swieten parred down the original libretto and translated it into German. The text includes passages from *Genesis* and paraphrases of the *Psalms* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Haydn composed the *Creation* with the German libretto in mind, but then asked Van Swieten to retranslate the German back into English so the oratorio could be performed for English audiences. Van Swieten was not a native English speaker, and the resulting English translation lacks good syntax, syllabification, and idiomatic expressions. In 1957, Robert Shaw and Alice Parker published an improved English translation of the *Creation* for US audiences. Tonight's performance will feature the original English translation from Van Swieten.

The Structure of Haydn's *Creation*:

This masterwork is an oratorio – a dramatic, un-staged musical work that recounts a Biblical story with orchestra, soloists and choir. In many ways, oratorios are like operas, as they both include recitatives that narrate the story, arias that dramatize and elongate the emotion and meaning of the story, and choruses that commentate on the drama. Oratorios were originally composed for operagoers to enjoy during Lent, a pious season when opera houses closed, and forms of secular entertainment was discouraged. Unlike the oratorios of Handel which used a quartet of soloists or the Bach passion-oratorios that had distinct narrators and characters, Haydn composed for three soloists, each representing an archangel: Raphael (bass), Uriel (tenor) and Gabriel (soprano). *The Creation* is composed in three parts – the first two parts chronicle the seven days of creation, and the third part depicts Adam and Eve in the bliss of the Garden of Eden. In this blissful Part 3 scene, the music is happy, calm and peaceful, imitating the light arias of comic opera. In this performance, we will not perform the lengthy and carefree love duets between Adam and Eve in Part 3, both for performance

time's sake, and because the music isn't as interesting, chromatic and dramatic before sin enters the world!

The Relevance of Haydn's *Creation* for 2025 Audiences:

How did we get here? How is God revealed in the world? How does humanity relate to the rest of nature? Long before and long since Haydn composed his musical depiction of the Biblical account of creation, scientists have studied God's creation, discovering and defining ways to understand the beauty and complexity of the foundations of the world. In a similar way, artists, poets and composers help us make sense of creation by providing new visual and aural modes to bask in its grandeur, meditate on its beauty and hear its layers of complexity. There is a beauty in the mathematics of nature, and similarly in the mathematics of music – the fugues in this oratorio get increasingly intricate, complicated and brisk throughout the oratorio, as God's creation becomes more sophisticated, and Haydn's compositional mastery is on full display. During Haydn's lifetime, the Enlightenment was questioning the role of the church and God in society, and naturalists were making new scientific discoveries. Haydn wrote that composing *The Creation* was a "religious action." A voice whispered in his ear: "There are in this world so few happy and contented people; perhaps your labor will become a source in which the person burdened will find peace and rest."

Haydn's composing, in a way, recasts the Biblical creation story, opening up its grandeur, describing it musically as we the unfolding creative work of God, and gives us time and space to meditate on these foundational questions of life.

A Narrative Summary of Haydn's *Creation*:

PART ONE

Day One: Light

In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. The universe begins in mystery, beyond the full grasp of human understanding, and *The Creation* openings with an extended overture titled "The Representation of Chaos." Shifting, ambiguous harmonies, muted strings, brass and timpani, non-standard phrase lengths, and rhythmic uncertainty capture the attention and incite the imagination of listeners as they ponder the formless void that existed prior to the creation of the world. Out of this chaos, the angel Raphael appears to narrate day one, God's creation of heaven and earth, and the remarkable and transcendent order of creation begins! The chorus and unmuted full orchestra enter, proclaiming the creation of light with a startling, dramatic fortissimo C major chord. Uriel and the chorus declare the light is good and thus establishes the eternal chasm between Satan's darkness and God's heavenly light as a source of life.

Day Two: Land and Water

Raphael describes the separation of the land and the waters and provides the first weather report. Violent seas, thunder claps and lightning strikes are heard in the strings and brass, and always the orchestra depicts the creation before it is narrated, as if to suggest the order that God creates, then man perceives. Gabriel and the chorus end the second day as the heavenly hosts, praising God for his creations.

Day Three: *Seas, Mountains, Plants*

On the third day, God created the seas, mountains, grasses and plants. Each aria depicts a single creation, and the expressive and programmatic orchestration helps the listener envision boisterous seas, tall mountain peaks, and graceful flowers. The chorus concludes the third day with “Awake the Harp”, which includes a long fugue in praise of God’s newest creations.

Day Four: *Sun, Moon and Stars*

Day four includes the most stunning instrumental material of the oratorio – an orchestral depiction of the first sunrise. Haydn writes a beautifully harmonized ascent of the D Major scale to portray this extraordinary event. Arias portray the creation of the stars, sun and moon on the fourth day, and the chorus concludes part one of the oratorio with the lively and well-known chorus of praise: “The heavens are telling the glory of God.”

PART TWO

Day Five: *Birds, Fish Animals*

Birds and fish feature prominently on the fifth day of creation. Gabriel and Raphael sing contrasting arias that fit appropriately with their voice types. The soprano and flutes sing bird song in the aria “On might pens soars the eagle lifted aloft,” capturing the spirit of gentle doves and soaring eagles, while the bass and low brass and strings depict the great whales and other large creatures found in the depths of the sea. The most humorous recitative appears in day five, with the creation of the tawny lion, the flexible tiger, the nimble stag, the noble steed, swarms of insects and the sinuous worm. Each animal is portrayed first by the orchestra then narrated by Raphael, and it is fun to hear Haydn’s creative and operatic writing illustrate the unique qualities of these creatures. The chorus once again concludes the day with a chorus of praise for God and creation.

Day Six: *Man*

Day Six is sobering and serious at first, as Raphael prepares the listener for God’s most profound and complex creation: man and woman. Uriel narrates the creation of man in God’s image, and this aria is joyful, strong and heroic. The angels and chorus reflect on the idea that God saw everything and it was good, and the sixth day concludes with the celebratory chorus “Achieved is Thy glorious work”, which includes a grandiose double fugue praising God, representing the complexity and of the most advanced lifeforms of the planet, capable of pondering abstractions like right and wrong, the meaning of life and belief in God.

PART THREE

Day Seven: *Adam and Eve in the Garden*

God rested on the seventh day, and the focus now shifts to God’s newest creations, Adam and Eve. Part 3 will feel quite short this evening, as the arias, duets and one chorus has been cut. The angel Uriel appears on the scene, declaring how the couple can remain happy and satisfied, briefly referencing the fall of humanity. The final chorus for soloists and choir includes an impressive double fugue and a large homophonic section, in praise of the complexity of creation and the enduring nature of God.

The Creation

Franz Joseph Haydn
(1732-1809)

Part I:

1. Introduction: The Representation of Chaos
2. Bass Recitative: In the beginning
3. Bass Recitative: And God made the firmament
4. Soprano Solo and Chorus: What marvelous works
5. Bass Recitative: Let the waters
6. Bass Aria: Rolling in foaming billows
7. Soprano Recitative: Let all the earth
8. Soprano Aria: Now cooling green
9. Tenor Recitative: And the heavenly host
10. Chorus: Awake the harp
11. Tenor Recitative: Let there be lights
12. Tenor Recitative: In shining splendor
13. Chorus: The heavens are telling

Part II:

14. Soprano Recitative: Let the waters bring forth
15. Soprano Aria: On mighty wings
16. Bass Recitative: And God created great whales
17. Bass Recitative: And the angels
18. Trio: In fairest raiment now
19. Trio and Chorus: The Lord is great
20. Bass Recitative: Let the earth bring forth
21. Bass Recitative: Straight opening her fertile womb
22. Bass Aria: Now shines the brightest glory
23. Tenor Recitative: And God created man
24. Tenor Aria: In native worth
25. Bass Recitative: And God saw everything
26. Chorus: Achieved is the glorious work
27. Trio: From thee, O Lord, doth all prevail
28. Chorus: Achieved is the glorious work

Part III:

29. Tenor Recitative: In rosy mantle
30. Tenor Recitative: O happy pair
31. Final Chorus and Soli: Sing to God