In the fall of 1790, a man appeared at Haydn’s rooms in Vienna with the abrupt introduction, “I am Salomon of London and have come to fetch you. Tomorrow we will arrange an accord.” Johann Peter Salomon’s meeting with the 58-year old Haydn was a turning point in Haydn’s long career. Under the impresario’s canny direction, Haydn’s two extended visits to London were not only extremely lucrative, but also musically invigorating, and he wrote some of his greatest works including his last twelve symphonies and his last six concert masses after 1791. And his sojourn in London directly led to what is perhaps his most popular work, the extraordinary and daringly original oratorio The Creation.

Salomon’s proposal came at a particularly appropriate time for Haydn. Haydn was arguably the most renowned composer in Europe, despite having spent the last 30 years in the service of the House of Esterházy. Prince Nikolaus entertained lavishly and took every opportunity to showcase his increasingly famous Kapellmeister, arranging elaborate musical evenings and even building an amphitheater where Haydn could present operas. The prince gave Haydn the opportunity to accept outside commissions and to publish, and there arose such an insatiable demand for Haydn’s music that pirated editions flourished and unscrupulous publishers actually affixed Haydn’s name to music written by his brother Michael, his pupils, and even random composers. But Prince Nikolaus suddenly died in 1790, and his successor Prince Anton disbanded most of the Esterházy musical establishment. Haydn retained his nominal position as Kapellmeister, but had no official duties and was no longer required to be in residence. He moved to Vienna and was considering his options when Salomon came calling.

Haydn had the opportunity to attend London’s Handel Festival in the summer of 1791, where he heard Messiah and Israel in Egypt. While he was familiar with Handel’s music, he had never heard it performed in quite this way, with a massed choir and orchestra of hundreds of musicians, and he was stunned by the beauty and majesty of the music. He said of Handel, “He is the master of us all,” and began poring over Handel scores. Hoping to produce a work of similar substance and power that might serve as his legacy, he conceived the idea of writing an oratorio himself. He got his chance in 1795 when Salomon presented him with an anonymous English libretto entitled The Creation of the World that had originally been offered to Handel. Haydn pronounced the libretto well suited for an oratorio and immediately began jotting down musical ideas, but he was uncomfortable with setting the English text. When he returned to Vienna, he gave the libretto to Baron Gottfried van Swieten to translate into German. Van Swieten was a wealthy musical connoisseur, an amateur composer, a collector of manuscripts by Bach and Handel, and a sometimes patron of Mozart. He had translated several Handel oratorios into German for performances he had arranged, engaging Mozart to provide organ transcriptions or orchestrations for whatever forces were available.
Van Swieten pared the libretto down to a manageable length and provided the German translation that Haydn then set. Because Haydn wanted the oratorio to be performed in English when it was presented in England, van Swieten also provided him with an English version. It is often assumed that van Swieten retranslated his German version back into English because of the often awkward and unfortunate phrasing of the English text. But it is curious that van Swieten would undertake a complete retranslation of the German when he already had a workable, if long, English libretto to start with. And it is not that the English is uniformly bad, for much of it is quite poetic. Unfortunately, it is impossible to know how van Swieten dealt with the original libretto since both it and Haydn’s manuscript score have been lost since the early 1800s. The text is mainly taken from Genesis, the Psalms and John Milton’s epic Paradise Lost, but the latter two are mostly paraphrased rather than quoted explicitly, which provides little help. It is certainly possible that van Swieten overrated his facility with English, although his surviving correspondence in that language suggests a good grasp of both English syntax and nuance. Since Haydn composed from the German text, it is quite likely that van Swieten needed to alter some of the English text to fit Haydn’s phrasing, and may have also introduced a more German word order so that musical emphases fell on the right words. Finally, van Swieten later remarked that he not only cut the libretto but also added his own text to make certain parts more prominent, and his translation of his own textual additions may have been more awkward that the original libretto. Whatever the reasons, the English libretto has always been problematic, and editors have been tinkering with it from Muzio Clementi’s 1801 edition onward. This afternoon’s performance uses a 1957 translation by Robert Shaw and Alice Parker that provides a more faithful rendering of van Swieten’s German text.

The Creation had an unusually long gestation time for Haydn, requiring some eighteen months for its completion, with Haydn making copious drafts and sketches along the way. Although he was multitasking during this time, producing the Mass in Time of War, the Nelson Mass, several string quartets, the choral version of the Seven Last Words, and the patriotic hymn that became the Austrian national anthem, Gott erhalte Franz den Kaiser, it was the longest he had ever spent on a single composition. He explained, “I spent so much time over it because I expect it to last for a long time.” The oratorio was premiered in a private subscription performance on April 29, 1798. Haydn himself conducted from the podium and Antonio Salieri accompanied the recitatives on the piano. The performance was an immense success, both artistically and financially. The first public performance in March 1799 was sold out months in advance, drawing the largest audience ever at the Burgtheater. The Creation reached London the next year. Both Salomon and the rival impresario John Ashley, who directed the oratorio concerts at Covent Garden, had requested scores from Haydn. Ashley outmaneuvered Salomon by having his score delivered by diplomatic mail and was able to mount the
London premiere. Salomon countered with performances billed as more authentic based on his association with Haydn. But unlike the enthusiastic reception in Vienna, the English response to *The Creation* was decidedly tepid.

*The Creation* is set in three parts. Part I comprises the first four days in which the physical world and plants were created; Part II deals with the creation of fish, birds, animals and man on the fifth and sixth days; Part III features two long duets for Adam and Eve. While *The Creation*’s heritage is clear, Haydn moves beyond the model created by Handel. He expanded the classical orchestra by adding trombones and a contrabassoon, both to add color and sound. At the public premiere, he enlarged the orchestra further to 120 instrumentalists, clearly recalling the effect of those massed performances he heard in England. He combines the narrative and dramatic oratorio styles into one by assigning the narrative passages to three soloists portraying the archangels Gabriel (soprano), Uriel (tenor) and Raphael (bass), giving each a distinctive style.

Haydn also integrates the solo and choral music, with solo arias, duets and trios often alternating with choral parts. The music is highly inventive, colorful and abounds with beautifully lyrical melodies. It is work of faith, humor, and above all, joy, and reflects Haydn’s own personality.

The orchestral opening provides a wonderfully imaginative depiction of chaos. After a strong unison C, there are chords with ever-shifting tonalities, cadences which never quite resolve, long lines that descend by half steps, and rapid ascending passages by the winds that rush by like comets. This introduction segues into Raphael’s opening recitative, whose spare accompaniment suggests something “without form, and void.” The chorus enters sotto voce until the phrase “let there be light,” which explodes in a brilliant, forte C major chord at the word “light.” The following tenor aria contains the only reference to the fall of the rebellious angels, a major theme in *Paradise Lost*, and even that is counterbalanced by the delightfully dance-like “a new created world springs forth at God’s command.”

Haydn gives some of his most vividly descriptive music to Raphael. In the accompanied recitative No. 3, *And God made the firmament*, you hear the rolling waves driven by the tempest, lightning and thunder, rain, hail and snow. In a pattern that Haydn repeats, the musical description appears first and the text after, as if he is inviting the audience to guess what is being represented before he provides the answer. The tenor recitative No. 12, *In shining splendor*, opens with a long, majestic orchestral crescendo, a wonderfully evocative depiction of the first sunrise. Part I concludes with probably the most familiar music in *The Creation*, the trio and chorus *The heavens are telling*, a paraphrase of Psalm 19.
Haydn takes full advantage of the opportunities that the creation of birds and animals provides for some of his most charming and good-humored descriptive music. In Gabriel’s extended aria No. 15, *On mighty wings*, the music alternately soars, glides, flutters and trills in imitation of the myriad birds. In Raphael’s recitative No. 21, *Straight opening her fertile womb*, you hear the roaring of the lion, the leaping of the tiger, the galloping of the horse, the buzzing of insects, and the creeping “with sinuous trace” of the worm (snake). In another innovative touch, the massive chorus that concludes Part II (*Fulfilled at last*) is interrupted by a more introspective solo trio before resuming again in all its vigor. Haydn indulges in a little word painting here, stretching the word “ever” in a long crescendo over four measures.

Part III opens with another beautiful orchestral painting of dawn, this time gently breaking over a newly created world as yet untroubled by strife or discord. The duet and chorus No. 30, *By Thee, with grace*, set for Adam and Eve, is the longest section in *The Creation* and has the most complex construction. It is almost a mini-cantata, opening with a charming duet, softly accompanied by the chorus, and then moving to brighter music as Adam and Eve praise God through all of creation, their arias interrupted by a song of praise from the chorus. A brilliant series of overlapping modulations introduces the final choral statement. Traditionally, Eve and Adam are sung by the soprano and bass soloists who also sing Gabriel and Raphael, but Haydn gives their music a different character. It is somewhat less formal, without so many roulades and melismatic passages, and has a more folk-like sound. But in their final duet, No. 32, *Sweet companion*, the range and vocal agility required is scarcely less than that for the angelic music. For Haydn, man was truly created only “a little lower than the angels.” Haydn would write the words *Laus Deo* (praise to God) at the end of his compositions. He closes this remarkable oratorio with a musical *Laus Deo*, a majestic choral song of praise with a brilliant fugue.

— Michael Moore

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