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HAYDN *The Creation*. Robert Shaw, cond; Dawn Upshaw (Gabriel); Heidi Grant Murphy (*Eve*); Jon Humphrey (*Uriel*); James Michael McGuire (*Adam*); John Cheek (*Raphael*); Atlanta SO & C Ch. TELARC 80298 (2 CDs: 106:58 W)

The seeds for Haydn's oratorio *The Creation* ("Die Schopfung") may have been sewn in the waning days of the Baroque era. Some insight into this is found in a letter from a close friend of Handel, a certain Mrs. Delaney. Writing to her sister from London on March 10, 1744, she proudly noted, "Why, I have made a drama for an oratorio, out of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, to give Mr. Handel to compose to. . . ." Further along she added, "and I hope to prevail with Mr. Handel to set it without having *any of the lines put to verse*, for that will take from its dignity." A complete account of the story can be found on pp. 118-19 in *Haydn: The Years of The Creation* by H. C. Robbins Landon.

Haydn was attracted to the oratorio genre late in his distinguished career and long life, and it was to be his most brilliant and successful one. It was during his two London sojourns in 1791 and 1794 that Haydn heard a number of Handel's oratorios. During the second of these extended visits, Johann Peter Salomon – the impresario responsible for Haydn[']s being in London – made an effort to nudge Haydn in the direction of the oratorio. As an incentive, he gave him a copy of the alleged Delaney libretto, which Haydn had translated into German when he returned to Vienna in 1795. The noted Haydn authority, Jens Peter Larsen, acknowledges that the German translation of the libretto that Haydn set may have indeed been based on material provided to Handel, but stops short of unequivocally saying so. The translation or paraphrase of the original English was undertaken by one Baron Gottfried van Swieten, a wealthy, retired diplomat who was the administrator of the Austrian Imperial Library. Van Swieten knew and was an ardent admirer of Handel's choral works; in the 1780s, van Swieten commissioned Mozart to adapt four of them – including *Messiah* – for performances in Vienna. Van Swieten noted the following concerning his translation of the alleged Milton/Delaney libretto: "Whilst I followed the general outlines of the original piece, I changed details whenever it seemed prudent to do so for the sake of musical line or expression."

Raising the question of the provenance of the libretto elicits yet another interrogatory. Should *The Creation* be sung in the original English of the alleged Milton/Delaney version or, since Haydn had the work translated into German, should that be the language of choice? And what about the structure and archaic tone of Mrs. Delaney's adaptation? Obviously she was neither Milton nor Metastasio, so some tinkering with her work was surely in order and doubtless would have occurred even if Handel had set to work on the project. In my humble but unscholarly opinion, *The Creation* can be performed in either language without disturbing or destroying the flow of either text or music, and yes, the syntax of the libretto necessitates some changes.

In the years since Haydn assumed the task, there have been numerous and even vociferous complaints about the archaic language of the Milton/Delaney libretto, and some have undertaken efforts to adapt it to more conventional or contemporary tastes. Admittedly, this could be

construed as reinventing the wheel, but I prefer viewing these efforts as fine-tuning the engine on a vintage automobile. Among those who have updated the original English libretto are Robert Shaw and his longtime colleague Alice Parker. In 1957, they made emendations aimed at making the text more comprehensible and these were employed in this 1992 recording. The rationale of Shaw and Parker is set forth in detail in the annotations and excerpted here:

“. . . the English libretto he [van Swieten] started with was weak. . . with over-flowery language and [a] convoluted word order to match the poetry of Milton. The resulting English version is often incomprehensible, at times downright ludicrous, speaking of the ‘flexible’ tiger where supple would be a happier choice. . . . In the description of the newly-created man we find, ‘The large and arched front sublime. . . .’ In our version this has become, ‘His broad and arching, noble brow. . . .’”

Shaw and Parker added:

“It was an attempt to not only repair the worst lapses of the published libretto, but also to unite Haydn’s minutely picturesque musical language with the colorful and understandable English text which it deserves.”

I can readily see the need for the updated English version made by Shaw and Parker, but theirs isn’t the only one. More recently – in the 1990s, I believe – further emendations were made by Dr. Franklin Zimmerman, professor emeritus of music at the University of Pennsylvania and founder of the Philadelphia-based Pennsylvania Pro Musica. As of this writing, I have been unsuccessful in my efforts to reach Dr. Zimmerman to discuss his changes and request a copy of the revised libretto. Regarding the German translation, it has been pressed into service numerous times by conductors in both the concert hall and the recording studio, but since the original language was English, I say, “Stet!”

The source and questionable quality of the libretto aside, Haydn – fired by his religious faith coupled with the nature of the text – labored feverishly on *The Creation* in 1797 and 1798. He knew the task of creating a sacred work in the Handelian tradition was formidable but he also found a sea of inspiration in the music of the composer he deemed “the master of us all.” If one had to choose a single oratorio by Handel that provided the most influence for Haydn in this instance, it would probably be *Israel in Egypt*. One needs to look no further than the plague choruses in Part I to find the material that fostered Haydn’s musically onomatopoeic depiction of the elements and creatures, including snow, the sea, the leaping tiger, and even the lowly worm. The orchestral writing also shows Haydn at the apex of his creative ability; the empty octaves that open the “Representation of Chaos” – the orchestral introduction to Part I – and the unexpected but brilliant *fortissimo* on the final word of the chorus’s phrase “And there was Light” are two further examples.

The arias range in character from ones of simple beauty (“With verdure clad”) to the virtuosic (“On mighty pens”). The choruses are nothing short of spectacular, whether they are independent songs of praise (“The Heavens are telling”), a simple commentary that Haydn integrated into or appended to an aria or ensemble (“A new created world”), or the final chorus (“Sing to God, ye hosts unnumbered”) where Haydn not only approaches but also matches the grandeur of Handel with his counterpoint and powerful homophony. Had the great Handel been alive, he would surely have acknowledged *The Creation* as a worthy successor to his masterworks in the genre and just as proudly and gladly passed his mantle to Haydn.

The Creation follows the generally accepted blueprint for an oratorio of the time, in that it has three parts. Parts I and II parallel the biblical narrative and deal with the six days of creation. Each commences with appropriate verses extracted from *Genesis*, followed by accompanied recitatives and subsequent arias that accentuate the meaning of the text and append supplementary detail. The completion of each day is met with a chorus of praise. In the third

part, we are introduced to Adam and Eve, who discover and explore their new domain and appropriately offer their thanks to the Almighty before Haydn's magnificent final chorus.

Having been both mastered and mangled by amateur choral societies around the world and recorded by ensembles large and small on instruments old and new, *The Creation* has achieved the expected pride of place it deserves in the repertoire; it never fails to impress, especially when the forces marshaled for a performance are anywhere near as impressive as those found on this Telarc recording. The soloists are exceptional in every regard. Dawn Upshaw's clear and bright soprano, ringing true throughout Parts I and II, and Heidi Grant Murphy's Eve in Part III couldn't be handled better either. Tenor Jon Humphrey and basses James Michael McGuire and John Cheek – all Shaw favorites – are comfortable and confident in their respective roles, bringing the appropriate emotional content to their impressive contributions. As with any Robert Shaw endeavor, the choral singing is magnificent: well drilled, supple, responsive, clearly voiced, and cleanly articulated. The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra plays with strength, conviction, and the appropriate tenderness and muscularity. In short, nothing is left to chance; every *i* is dotted and every *t* crossed, resulting in as perfect a performance of Haydn's final masterpiece as one could desire. I proudly and eagerly welcome this masterfully engineered Telarc release to *Fanfare's* Classical Hall of Fame.

Michael Carter