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Creating Chaos in Haydn’s Creation*

by Melanie Lowe

Abstract

Haydn’s oratorio The Creation opens with nothing short of a musical impossibility—the sound of infinite nothingness. What does nothing sound like? To open pathways of engagement with this piece, especially for those new to Haydn’s Creation, this essay engages matters of musical representation, from the decidedly not silent opening of the “Representation of Chaos” to the musical depictions of weather phenomena and beasts both proud and humble. Central in Haydn’s representations are his invocations of two contrasting aesthetic modes, the pastoral and the sublime, and I offer examples of each here. While the sublime has historically been the more celebrated of the two modes in The Creation, I discuss the organizational structures of the oratorio to demonstrate how Haydn’s sublime moments may be seen to frame pastoral pictures. Finally, I touch on the reception history of The Creation to suggest that what drama the oratorio may lack in and of itself has been amply supplied by its many critics. I conclude with a reevaluation of Haydn’s naturalisms that situates The Creation within the intellectual, political, and religious contexts of the Enlightenment.

I. Introduction

Haydn’s oratorio The Creation opens with nothing short of a musical impossibility—the sound of infinite nothingness. What does nothing sound like? The obvious answer would be silence. But don’t all works of music start with silence, at least in the abstract if not in the reality of performance? What precedes the opening bar? In the score, nothing, of course, but the margin of the page. What precedes the opening bar in performance? The orchestra tuning, the murmuring chatter of the audience, the chiming of cell phones

*This essay originated as my keynote address, given on 28 April 2012, for the Yale Institute of Sacred
powering down (if we're lucky), the rattling of programs and cough-drop wrappers, and finally the dramatic entrance of the conductor accompanied by applause. It's not silence, even if musically speaking, from any but a Cagean perspective, it's "nothing." But such "nothing" could never depict the awesome nothingness that preceded God's creation of the heavens and the earth. What would that kind of nothing sound like?

The human imagination seems nearly incapable of contemplating a depiction of nothingness without calling up sound, or more specifically, the absence of sound. Mathematician and Christian apologist Blaise Pascal captures perfectly our ready linking of silence with nothingness. In his most important theological work, *Penseés*, Pascal wrote, "the eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me." Indeed, it seems that the absence of sound more than the lack of any other physical stimulus has particular resonance with nothingness. For example, the absence of light—darkness—summons more sinister connotations. And the absence of taste, touch, or smell? Stimuli to those senses seem not to resonate at all. As composer and music philosopher Stan Link puts it, "quietness evokes nothingness as pointedly as human perception might allow." But quietness, of course, is not silence (as any practitioner of "silent" meditation knows all too well). And for Haydn, it was precisely quietness, not silence (*pace* Pascal), that could capture in music the sound of the void’s great nothingness before creation.

**II. Representing Chaos**

It is perhaps surprising, then, that Haydn's *Creation* begins not quietly at all but rather with a mighty and oppressive unison forte C played by nearly the full orchestra (Example 1). While it may be tempting to interpret this moment as the requisite "noise-killer" effect so often encountered at the beginning of late eighteenth-century works

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1 "Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m’effraie." Blaise Pascal, *Penseés sur la religion et sur quelques autres sujets* (Éditions eBooksFrance, 2001), loc. 932 of 1656.


composed for large public performance, it is helpful to remember that the opening movement of Haydn’s *Creation* is titled, plainly, “The Representation of Chaos,” and neither the more poetic Miltonian reference “The Vast Immeasurable Abyss” (*Paradise Lost* VII:211) nor the more scripturally accurate designation “The Earth without Form, and Void” (Genesis 1:2, KJV).

“Here is your infinite empty space!” wrote Donald Francis Tovey of this moment, perfectly capturing in exclamation the sentiment of Haydn’s opening gesture. Indeed, the first sound of the piece—a C with no harmony, no dissonance, no melody—is arguably as close to the void as music of the late eighteenth century can get. This opening sound is also truly sublime. Its ominous and primordial feeling is generated by a bizarre timbral mixture in Haydn’s orchestration: brass *sans* horns on middle C, trumpets doubled at the octave, winds on C above and below, muted strings no higher than middle C, and a timpani roll on C underneath.4 Dynamically, Haydn calls for great decrescendo on this one note, from forte to piano, while perhaps suggesting that this unearthly sound—this musical representation of the infinite nothingness of the void—existed indefinitely: this opening C enjoys the *only* fermata in the entire “Representation of Chaos.”5 To end such reverberation requires intervention: a directive from an all-powerful being, from God, or (thinking practically here) at the very least a baton-wielding conductor.

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4 A. Peter Brown notes that muted trumpets and timpani were used in at least some of Haydn’s own performances of *The Creation*. Indeed, “con sordino” is written in the margin next to the trumpet, timpani, and horn parts on the first page of the engraver’s score (in the hand of Johann Elssler) but is crossed out. It is unknown when or by whom the strike was made, but the change was incorporated into the first edition. See Brown, *Performing Haydn’s The Creation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 11-12.

5 Lawrence Kramer also makes this observation. See Kramer, “Music and Representation: In the Beginning with Haydn’s *Creation*,” in *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 74.
The music that follows this sublime opening gesture, however, gives us a better sense of Haydn’s apprehension of the chaos of the earth “without form, and void” (Genesis 1:2, KJV). For Haydn, such chaos was clearly not understood in the more conventional way; that is, as a state of disorder. Rather, this particular chaos was that infinite space echoing the eerie quietness of the unformed matter that preceded God’s creation of the heavens and earth.

In the music that follows Haydn’s opening “fade to black” unison C, Haydn assembles the raw materials of music before our ears (Example 2). The listener hears two notes, creating merely an interval, followed by another note that joins to create a chord. But this first triad of the introduction is neither a tonic nor a dominant chord; rather, it is a flat sub-median in first inversion (♭VI6), a tonal relationship that, from the listener’s perspective, is entirely unknowable at this point. At this early stage of his Creation, Haydn denies the existence of tonal organization. The music that immediately follows this chord is likewise extraordinarily unusual within the stylistic conventions of the time: an unresolved dissonance and an unaccompanied melodic fragment lead only to yet another iteration of the as-yet tonally undefined A-flat major triad. Haydn’s audience would have been incapable of anticipating the direction of this music, its harmonic motion lacking rational meaning. This irrationality defines Haydn’s void. And his void is not a silent place but rather a quietness filled with a primordial stew of the ingredients of music, elements Haydn uses subsequently to fill the void, thereby reenacting musically the wondrous process of creation itself.


I borrow this imagery from Kramer. See Kramer, 75.
Interpreted thusly, a fair question naturally arises: just what, then, is “chaotic” in Haydn’s “Representation of Chaos”? If we cling to a conventional conception of chaos—disorder—then not very much. And we would not be alone in this observation. Even as early as the 1880s, in the first edition of the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* some “philistine” (Tovey’s tag for the author) complained that Haydn “represented chaos by means of an exceedingly unchaotic fugue.”7 The “chaos” itself of such a comment (or at least its author’s profound misunderstanding of fugal action) aside, structurally speaking this opening number is easily analyzed as a slow-movement sonata form.8 But it is Haydn himself who gives us the best answer to this not-quite-rhetorical question. After playing the movement at the piano for the Swedish Chargé-d’Affaires, he explained, “you have certainly noticed how I avoided the resolutions that you would most readily expect. The reason is, that there is no form in anything in the universe yet.”9 By his own explanation, then, Haydn represents chaos largely by undercutting the harmonic logic that underpins late eighteenth-century musical style. Not just to our ears, but to both Haydn’s ear and his original audience’s ears, the “Representation of Chaos” is, admittedly, hardly chaotic.

Indeed, the very idea of a “Representation of Chaos” is a philosophical conundrum: chaos remains literally, by definition, unthinkable by the human mind. Any representation of chaos in music, or at least one by which a merely human listener would be capable of grasping said chaos, could itself hardly be chaotic. Put more directly, to represent chaos artistically is an ontological impossibility. As Emily Dolan notes, such a representation would be “potentially self-contradictory, demanding that art embody

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7  Donald Francis Tovey, “Haydn, ‘The Creation,’” in *Essays in Musical Analysis*, vol. 5 (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 114.

8  This is Charles Rosen’s structural interpretation, for one; see Rosen, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1997), 370-72. A. Peter Brown, on the other hand, argues that the most appropriate generic title is *ricercar*; see “Haydn’s Chaos: Genesis and Genre,” *The Musical Quarterly* 73:1 (1989), 18-59.

something that is antithetical to art."

In the opening movement of *The Creation*, then, Haydn “uses the means of art to frustrate the effects of art,” as James Webster so artfully writes, and “thusly renders this ‘impossible’ concept through music.”

But while such lack of musical chaos ultimately works brilliantly to represent chaos in the opening eight minutes of *The Creation*, the absence of disorder and conflict that characterizes the rest of the oratorio creates great challenges over the course of the two-hour work. A brief review of the story and structure of the oratorio as a whole will shed light on some of those challenges.

**III. Overall structure of The Creation**

The *Creation* libretto consists of three parts, which combined include a total of ten scenes. Parts 1 and 2 follow the biblical account of the six days of creation, while Part 3 introduces Adam and Eve as they discover this newly created world and give thanks to God. Narratively speaking, the story is straightforward. The text itself is made up of quotations from the Old Testament, specifically from the first and second chapters of Genesis and Psalms 19 and 104, along with derivations from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Parts 1 and 2 remain reasonably close to scripture while Part 3 is motivated entirely by Milton’s epic poem.

The large-scale design of the oratorio is quite logical and structurally consistent. Each of the six days of creation is treated as a group of movements, and each group of movements follows the same basic structural pattern (Figure 1): 1) each day begins with an angel, Raphael, Uriel, or Gabriel, reciting the appropriate verses from Genesis; 2) the biblical recitations are followed by accompanied recitatives and arias that amplify the verses and add details; and finally 3) each day is closed by a chorus of praise. Part 3 includes two shorter cycles of the same order of movement types. So, for example, on

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the second day of creation (Figure 2), Raphael recites “God made the firmament, and divided the waters,” just as it reads in Genesis (Example 3). Then Raphael expounds on this verse, adding textual details that easily lend themselves to musical depiction.

**Figure 1. Design of The Creation**

**Part One:** Texts from Genesis and Psalms, plus amplifications  
First Day: creation of heaven, earth, and light  
Second Day: creation of firmament; division of the waters  
Third Day: creation of land and seas; creation of flora  
Fourth Day: creation of sun, stars, and moon; division of day and night

**Part Two:** Texts from Genesis and Psalms, plus amplifications  
Fifth Day: creation of sea life and birds  
Sixth Day: creation of land animals; man and woman

**Part Three:** Poetic texts, echoing Milton’s *Paradise Lost*  
Adam and Eve awaken  
Adam and Eve discover love

**Figure 2: Structure of the Second Day**

**Biblical recitation:** Recitative (Raphael):  
“And God made the firmament...” Genesis 1:7-8 (KJV)

**Amplification of verse:** Accompanied recitative:  
“Outrageous storms now dreadful arose...”  
(original quatrains)

**Chorus of praise:** Chorus with solo (Gabriel):  
“The marv’lous work beholds amaz’d  
the glorious hierarchy of Heav’n...”  
derived from Genesis 1:8 and *Paradise Lost*, VII:274-75
storms now dreadful arose.

As chaff by the

winds are impelled the clouds;

by heaven's fire the sky is enflamed;
and awful rolled the thunders on high.

Now from the floods in steams ascend reviving
shower of rain,

the drea-ry waste-ful hail,

the light and fla-ky snow.
IV. Musical depiction and the Pastoral mode

Raphael will tell of outrageous storms, howling winds, heaven’s fire (lightening) and rolling thunder, rain showers, dreary wasteful hail, and light and flaky snow. And Haydn not only captures the essence of each aspect of nature as it is created, but he plays a guessing game of sorts with his audience. By painting the musical picture before Raphael sings the name for the particular phenomenon, he invites the listener to try to guess which element of nature is being illustrated. For example, note the musical depiction of the storms and the winds with clouds rolling in before the creation of dry land, which bring with them lightening and thunder, in Example 3 beginning in bar 7. Other weather phenomena, rain, hail and snow, soon follow (Example 3, bar 27). Once the division of the waters has been accomplished, Gabriel joins the chorus to sing praise to God for the creation work of the second day (Example 4).

Since this essay aspires to open pathways of engagement with this piece, especially for those new to Haydn’s Creation, I will offer one more instance of musical depiction here. On the Sixth Day, as we are told in Genesis 1:24 (KJV), God said: “Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind; cattle and creeping things, and beasts of the earth after their kind.” The animals are named in the textual amplification of this verse that follows. Haydn's musical depictions of these animals are mostly playful mimicries of their sounds or their movements, and just as with the weather phenomena, the sound of each animal enters before Raphael announces its name, thereby inviting his listeners once again to enjoy imagining the animal God has just created. Example 5 depicts the roar of the lion, the leaping tiger, the nimble stag, and the sprightly steed (Example 5a), followed by a host of buzzing insects; the number ends with the subterranean creation of the creeping worm (Example 5b).

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day.

And to th'e-the-realvaults re-sound the praise of

And to th'e-the-realvaults re-sound the praise of

And to th'e-the-realvaults re-sound the praise of

And to th'e-the-realvaults re-sound the praise of

God, the praise of God, and of the second day, and of the

God, the praise of God, and of the second day, the

God, the praise of God, and of the second day, the

God, the praise of God, and of the second day, the
The nimble stag bears up his branching head.

With flying mane and fiery look

Patient neighs the sprightly steed.
The only animals in this number that Haydn does not represent directly by imitating their sounds or movements are cattle and sheep. Instead, to suggest the image of these animals, Haydn employs the well-defined musical conventions of the pastoral topic. He taps the winds— instruments with long-established rustic and outdoor associations, here specifically the flute and bassoon—to play a serene and smooth melody in a siciliano rhythm (Figure 3), a rhythm that is directly associated with pastoral scenes and melancholy emotions.

Figure 3: Siciliano rhythm

Examples of siciliano pastoral tunes abound, but for many readers, perhaps the most accessible way to hear this association is to call to mind the quiet, somewhat melancholy Christmas carol “Silent Night.” Example 6 shows Haydn’s pastoral setting for the cattle and sheep, the siciliano rhythm indicated. These two numbers, the division of waters and the creation of some animals, should suffice to see that the word-painting in Haydn’s Creation is vivid and most effective. Quite Haydnesque, it’s also a lot of fun.

Elsewhere in the oratorio, in many if not most of the musical numbers, Haydn adopts the pastoral mode seen so clearly in his depiction of cattle and sheep. As a musical signifier of naïveté, the pastoral may seem opposed to the awesome sublimity of the topic of creation itself. Indeed, Haydn is idealizing nature in The Creation. Interestingly, in the two numbers discussed above he accomplishes this idealization not only by the musical representations, but also by ways he structures this music. Some of his structural devices are simple, others more complex and subtle, but overall his musical structures suggest that the naïveté of the pastoral is a mere projection. As Webster puts it so perfectly, “those sweetly mourning shepherds know more than they can say.”

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40
The cattle in heard already seeks his food onfields and meadows green.

48
And o'vr the ground, as

52
plants are spread the fleecy meek and bleating flock.
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Haydn's illustration of each natural phenomenon or animal is carried out through musical depictions that are immediately comprehensible to us humans, even though no humans had yet been created at this point in the creation story. And this projection of naïveté, this illusion, is accomplished through the specific musical structuring we just observed in Haydn’s guessing games: it is the result of naming the event or animal only after it has been imitated musically, only after focusing the listener’s attention entirely on the musical image before that image has any verbal (i.e. human) signification. This simple structural device, a reversal of the more obvious structure of “name it . . . play it,” suggests a certain subtle and sophisticated optimism: we humans may identify directly with nature, unmediated by signification, while nature remains an untainted, untouched, and perfect pastoral paradise. Or to put it more pessimistically, however uncharacteristic of Haydn: nature primordial, before we humans spoil it with either creations of our own, or even our mere cognitive faculties.

V. Summoning the Sublime

The abundance of the pastoral mode in The Creation notwithstanding, Haydn’s summoning of the sublime is undoubtedly the more widely celebrated aesthetic turn in the piece. In the decades around the turn of the nineteenth century, just at the time Haydn was composing this oratorio, a new sense of the musical sublime was developing, a sublime that was a central plank in an emerging Romanticism. Like the pastoral, this romantic sense of the sublime is heavily invested in Nature, but rather than evoking a naïve and earthly simplicity, the romantic sublime looks to the boundless, the untamed, and the awe-inspiring—in other words, a nature capable of inciting transcendence.

For Haydn, violent or unexpected contrast was the primary musical means of invoking the musical sublime. To demonstrate this compositional strategy, there is perhaps no better example in the repertoire than the depiction of the creation of light in Haydn’s Creation. At the end of the opening movement of the oratorio, “The Representation of

13 Webster makes nearly the identical point in noting the role of word-painting in articulating The Creation’s optimistic deism. Ibid., 155-56.
Chaos,” Raphael sings in recitative the opening verses of Genesis. For the creation of light, he is joined by the chorus and full orchestra. The sublimity of the moment at which “there was Light,” accomplished through shocking musical contrast, speaks for itself (Example 7).

The many glorious choral numbers, those climactic moments praising God at the end of each day of creation, provide opportunity to explore other ways in which Haydn summons the sublime in this work. The most famous chorus is undoubtedly “The Heavens are Telling,” marking the ending of the Fourth Day and therefore also serving to conclude Part 1 of the oratorio. As a whole, this chorus is triumphant and extroverted, and for those readers who know Handel’s oratorios, it is compelling (and quite easy) to hear the spirit of the older master of the English oratorio channeled through this chorus in particular. “The Heavens are Telling” also marks a return to the musical sublime after Haydn’s depictions of the creation of natural phenomena take the listener on extended excursions into the world of the pastoral. Indeed, Haydn concludes all three parts of The Creation with a marked return to the sublime, projecting on the large scale something structurally akin to sublime frames for pastoral pictures.

In “The Heavens are Telling” Haydn again uses sudden if less extreme contrasts to invoke the sublime, but he also uses several other of his usual means of summoning this aesthetic category in his late vocal music. Webster has identified several “classes of sublime passage” in Haydn’s late vocal music,\(^\text{14}\) and in this chorus we can hear examples of three of Webster’s classes clearly and distinctly: 1) majesty, 2) foregrounding of key text-phrase, and 3) climax. As Webster explains, majesty as sublime is associated “not with terror and the incommensurable, but with the traditional sublime of lofty grandeur.”\(^\text{15}\) With full orchestration, trumpets and drums, the celebratory key of C major, \textit{alle breve} meter and Allegro tempo, and occasional martial rhythms, Haydn invokes the topic of majesty right at the opening of this final chorus of Part 1 (Example 8).

\(^{14}\) Webster, “The Creation,” 70.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 73.
We can also observe in “The Heavens are Telling” the second of Webster’s classes of sublime passages mentioned above: the foregrounding of a key phrase of text, i.e. repeating the phrase or setting it off somehow to make it really “pop” out of the structure of the movement and momentary texture (Example 9). In fact, Haydn’s use of this device on the word “ever” (in German “keiner” is the parallel word of text) is so clear in this chorus that the passage is one Webster himself uses to demonstrate this particular compositional strategy. How perfectly he captures the moment: there is a “sudden forte outburst on ‘keiner,’ the equally sudden stop, and then the heavenly solo caress . . . of the simple C-major triad in root position and first inversion, with the remarkable slur from the soprano’s fermata C to the passing-tone C-sharp, and then the rush to the cadence and the abrupt choral entry.”

Finally, the sublime as climax, Webster’s final and most important category of sublime passages in Haydn’s late vocal music, is easily heard in “The Heavens are Telling.” At the midpoint of this chorus, Haydn commences a long fugato passage and sustains it though the end of the number; in other words, half of this movement is apotheosis. Indeed, this extended contrapuntal passage is well known for its sublimity. It builds through several waves of fugal textures, each increasingly chromatic and harmonically only more “unfathomable,” until the music finally pushes through awe-inspiring chromaticism to resolve a mere fourteen measures before the end, a resolution that provides sudden clarity to set up the final drive to cadence. For Webster, the second half of “The Heavens are Telling” is also an excellent example of Haydn’s “one more time” procedure, a compositional process that summons the sublime by presenting a musical idea “normally” and then following it immediately by one that is “more so.” At 101 bars of ever increasing contrapuntal intensity and harmonic mystery, the second half of “The Heavens are Telling” is surely among the most inspired examples of the sublime as climax in this repertory.

16 Ibid., 75.

17 Ibid., 83.

18 For readers looking for a more detailed analysis of Haydn’s “one more time” procedure in this chorus or interested in other examples of this type of passage, see Webster, “The Creation,” 83-88.
VI. Reception

A few points about the narrative design of the oratorio and its reception history will conclude this topical introduction to Haydn’s Creation, for the reception of this piece has in fact become part of its story. A survey of the “plot” of the oratorio reveals a rather straight-forward story: following the opening “Representation of Chaos,” angels narrate the wonders of the natural world as God creates it day by day. And with each day, there are only more wonders and more beauty for us to appreciate, even though we humans have ourselves not yet been created. Once God creates the first humans Adam and Eve, they discover the rich splendor of this newly created natural world along with their love for each other. The oratorio ends with a sublime chorus of praise to thank God for his glorious works. Indeed, the emotional trajectory of Haydn’s uplifting story is entirely unidirectional; the world, once created, gets only better and more wondrous. Uriel does offer a tiny warning in the recitative just before the final chorus of the whole oratorio (No. 33):

    O happy pair, and always happy yet,
    if not, misled by false conceit,
    ye strive at more, as granted is,
    and more to know, as know ye should!

But this telling of the creation story ends before anyone gets too curious, causes trouble, and gets expelled.

Certainly this is an uplifting story! And yet, therein lies the narrative dilemma. The Creation libretto may be a wholly positive, “feel-good” kind of story, but narratively speaking, we must admit that it leaves much to be desired. It lacks that one ingredient essential in all good storytelling: drama. To be sure, absolute chaos is not a prerequisite, but a good story does require at least some taste of conflict or disorder. But here, in this particular telling of this particular story, there is none. Once light is created, there is no more darkness, no tension, no conflict, and therefore no drama. After the opening
movement, the listener is carried in an upward and entirely positive direction for nearly two hours.

But what drama the piece may lack in and of itself has been amply supplied by its many critics. For example, the textual style of the libretto, particularly the English libretto, has been under attack from the very beginning. The librettist, Baron Gottfried van Swieten, adapted the English libretto (believed to have been originally written for Handel) to become a German libretto, and then retranslated that German libretto back into a parallel English libretto for Haydn to set concurrently with the German text, resulting in the first truly bilingual piece of large-scale sacred vocal music published in Western music history. The Baron most certainly gave a valiant effort, and the result, to be fair, is rather admirable under the circumstances. But unfortunately, the English text that resulted was not only incomprehensible in places, but downright absurd, laughable even. The following are two short examples to make this case.

No. 21. Recitative (excerpt).

Cheerful, roaring, stands the tawny lion.

In sudden leaps the flexible tyger appears.

The nimble stag bears up his branching head.

Lions are certainly tawny and stags are of course nimble, but are tigers “flexible”? An odd word choice, indeed. And from Uriel’s Air describing the newly-created man:


The large and archèd front sublime

of wisdom deep declares the seat,

and in his eyes with brightness shines the soul,

the breath and image of his God.

These lines are incomprehensible. To give the listener some sense of what they actually mean, for their 1957 performance and recording Robert Shaw and Alice Parker altered the first two lines to read:
His broad and arching, noble brow
proclaims of wisdom’s deep abode.¹⁹

Still not great poetry, but at least the words makes some sense.

Another facet of the reception history of The Creation is the inevitable comparison with Handel that Haydn faced, especially in England. Simply put, there was no way that either the English public or the English press was going to find the piece anything but inferior to the oratorios of the German composer who became their one of their own. On this point it is important to remember that despite his beloved status, Haydn went home to Austria after his two extended visits to London; Handel stayed, and made London his home.

But beyond the inevitable comparison with Handel, Haydn’s Creation has been most widely criticized for its word-painting, especially the types of musical depictions discussed above. The piece was (perhaps unfortunately) composed just before the aesthetics of “absolute music” would take hold in the thought and writings of the early romantics. Even early on in its reception history, just as romantic aesthetics were blossoming in Germany, critics took issue with Haydn’s musical pictorialisms. For example, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling criticized Haydn’s illustrative mode as something that “only a decadent and debased taste can demand of music.”²⁰ But it was the romantic composer Hector Berlioz who supplies arguably the most scathing (albeit entertaining) criticisms leveled at the piece in its two-hundred-year reception history. This delicious quote comes from a private letter written in 1859, some twenty years after Berlioz reviewed The Creation somewhat more favorably in print:


The Conservatoire presented Haydn’s *Creation* complete last Sunday. I stayed away; I have always felt a profound antipathy for this work . . . I give you that opinion for what it’s worth. Its lowing oxen, its buzzing insects, its light in C which dazzles one like a Carcel lamp, and then its Adam, Uriel, Gabriel, and the flute solos and all the amiabilities really shrivel me up—they make me want to murder somebody. The English love a pudding surrounded with a layer of suet; I detest it. Suet is exactly what surrounds the musical pudding of Papa Haydn. Naïveté is all very fine, but too much of it we don’t need! . . . I wouldn’t give an apple for the privilege of meeting Eve in the woods; I am sure she is stupid enough to bring shame to the good God, and is just what her husband deserves.21

This little gem from Berlioz keeps much company among the critical literature on the piece, even if few of the reviews or criticisms sparkle with quite his most amusing sense of humor.22

But more recently two contemporary critics have helped us re-evaluate the naturalisms in Haydn’s *The Creation*. First, Charles Rosen, writing in his landmark book *The Classical Style* of 1972, notes that “the imposed simplicity of the pastoral style was the condition which made it possible to grasp subjects of such immensity. . . . The subject of the pastoral is not Nature itself, but man’s relation to nature and what is ‘natural.’”23 And even further, James Webster argues that to understand Haydn’s oratorio as *pastoral* exposes many criticisms of the work as misguided.24 In other words, such complaints measure Haydn’s *Creation*, both its music and its story, against a romantic


24 Webster is responding specifically to criticism of Part 3, but his point easily extends to the oratorio as a whole. See Webster, “The sublime and the pastoral,” 157.
aesthetic expectation of transcendence or overcoming. Against such expectations, the work’s movement from the “high” style of the sublime in the opening “Representation of Chaos” to the “low” style of nature’s pastoral expression will no doubt prove anticlimactic.

To truly understand and appreciate Haydn’s oratorio for the work that it is, and not measure it unfairly with anachronistic yardsticks, we must remember that The Creation was a product of the intellectual, political, and religious contexts of the Enlightenment, a philosophical worldview in which an unwavering commitment to the values of truth, nature, and reason led to the belief in an unending progress in all things, from scientific discovery to moral values. In other words, the Enlightenment, too, is unidirectional. As Webster puts it, Haydn’s Creation “does not address differences of class or the existence of human misery, but subsumes them in a larger vision which, in one of those miracles that only art can convey, rings true despite everything.”

Indeed, the transcendence of misfortunes and inequities is not the philosophically conservative Enlightenment’s concern but is rather the stuff of Romanticism, that aesthetic stance just around the corner in the nineteenth century. Rather, as one of the last musical testaments of the Enlightenment, once light has succeeded chaos, Haydn’s Creation absorbs and dispels all such trials and tribulations with its unabashed and unwavering pastoral optimism.

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25 Webster, “The sublime and the pastoral,” 158. For more on the place of The Creation within the philosophical and various religious contexts of the late eighteenth century, see Temperley, Haydn: The Creation, especially Chapter 2: Theology, 9-18.
VII. Works Cited


