

Haydn's 'Creation' with a chorus at the forefront

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NEW HAVEN - Oratorios are not performed as often as they used to be. So it was especially rewarding last Sunday to hear the New Haven Symphony Orchestra perform "The Creation," an oratorio composed in 1798 by Franz Joseph Haydn.

The complex and appealing work, wildly popular in centuries past, took up the entire concert in Woolsey Hall and even ran into overtime.

Oratorio, a critic once said, is like a rehearsal for an opera, before the staging, sets and costumes come into play. There are other differences between opera and oratorio, of course. "The Creation," true to form, tells a biblical story but refrains from fully staging it.

Haydn chose as his text the oldest story of all, the creation of the universe, the world and the first human beings, before the emergence of Satan and the loss of Eden.

In an ideal performance, an oratorio would maintain an even balance among its three main musical elements: the chorus, the vocal soloists and the orchestral accompaniment. Haydn, after all, lavished detailed attention on all of them.

Instead, what we heard on Sunday was the dominance of a single element: the chorus.

And what a chorus it was. Since the group in question was the Providence Singers, the relative neglect of the soloists and orchestra was almost understandable. This choir not only took up half the stage with its 80 members; it also proved to be a tight, disciplined and strong-voiced performing machine.

This guest ensemble from Rhode Island made the most of its opportunities. Haydn took his inspiration from oratorios like George Frideric Handel's "Messiah" that abound in choral fugues. In a fugue, separate groups of performers repeat the same theme in quick succession. It's a more complex version of the form called a round (as in "Row, Row, Row Your Boat").

The choristers maintained remarkable balance and precision in these extended four-part fugues, often based on ornate, rapid note combinations. Their diction came across with surprising clarity for a group of this size. In the selection, "Ye valleys, hills, and shady woods," the chorus showed that it could increase or lower the volume at will, another demonstration of awesome concentration and control, as well as great expressivity.

Julian Wachner, the guest conductor for this performance, also happens to be the Providence Singers' artistic director. His obvious familiarity with the group helps explain the splendid choral results.

In the overture, Wachner had the large-scale orchestral effects well in hand, shaping the aimlessly meandering phrases effectively to suggest the composer's intended "representation of chaos." He failed, though, to maintain transparent textures that would have let individual woodwind passages emerge.

Haydn's orchestration throughout this work favors descriptive, imitative effects such as flutes to evoke birds, or dark, low double-bass tones for the whale, "th'immense Leviathan." Yet some details were swept aside in the great wash of choral tone - exciting in its own right, but sometimes overdone.

At other points Wachner allowed the orchestral and choral volume to muffle individual soloists. This took the worst toll on the two who came on late in the performance as Adam and Eve, baritone Aaron Engebret and soprano Marie-Eve Munger. Both singers negotiated their complex lines with energy but needed more support from the conductor.

Bass Curtis Streetman, in the longest role, as the angel Raphael who serves as narrator, revealed a commanding vocal timbre that had the least trouble prevailing against the orchestral and choral onslaught. He sang smoothly, forcefully and with good attention to detail.

In the role of the angel Gabriel, Joanna Mongiardo used her slender but appealing tone effectively. She handled difficult challenges well, including an optional high C, various rapid vocal ornaments and a well-controlled arched phrase crowning her solo, "With verdure clad."

Tenor Jason McStoots, also a lyrical, lightweight vocal presence, showed refinement and strong communication in passages accompanied only by the fortepiano (an antique keyboard instrument), as opposed to full orchestra.

The conductor's lively tempos were mostly welcome, though the NHSO players were occasionally rushed through passages where they could have had a greater impact. This occurred, for instance, in the lilting oboe line that introduces the duet, "By thee with bliss." For the most part, the orchestra performed very well, especially the flutes and other winds. Only the horns, in two separate incidents, seemed to be having an off night.