

## Potent numbers

**Thames Philharmonic Choir performance of Haydn's *Creation*, Cadogan Hall Saturday 13th June 2015**

Of course, it would have to be page number 13 that was misplaced. As conductor John Bate explained at the start of the concert, a glitch at the printers had shuffled the centre pages of the concert programme such that days one and two of creation were re-scheduled to come after days three and four – a telling parallel with the muddled wording in the most popular chorus in the work ('The heavens are telling' - number 13!) in which the English lyric provided by Haydn's librettist: 'The wonder of his works displays the firmament' bewilderingly switches the subject and object of its Psalm 19 original (where the firmament displays God's handiwork rather than the other way round) to better suit the rhythm of its matching German text .

But in a curious sort of way, I find that the oddities in the text rather add to the work's appeal (something that could never be claimed for some of our more popular operas' grotesque libretti!). The resulting potential for colourful and comic effect was certainly not lost on Haydn who produced one of his most engaging scores in a dazzling procession of striking tone-pictures that reveal his craftsmanship at its most inspired – with Saturday's gripping performance, under the masterful direction of John Bate, convincingly conveying every detail of Haydn's 'glorious work'. It formed a fitting highlight to Thames Philharmonic Choir's Golden Jubilee Season.

Although the choir was in terrific form, its numbers swollen with a few additional singers from other local choral societies as they were 50 years ago, there is not a huge amount for the chorus to do. The work comes across more as a sequence of back-to-back symphonies with occasional choral interjections, with a hard-working trio of soloists providing most of the singing. From the start the orchestra rose to the challenge with remarkable virtuosity and commitment, with particularly impressive playing from the strings, led by Adrian Levine. Their subtle and delicate interpretation of Haydn's 'Representation of Chaos', shimmering colours in the creation of the stars, swirling storms and billowing waves, and lively evocation of myriad creatures leaping and flying was a veritable tour-de-force pulled off with consummate grace. Haydn's fussy instrumental figuration sometimes comes in for criticism when to the performer it just doesn't seem worth the trouble - demisemiquaver padding for padding's sake - but here every single note earned its keep, rendered in fluent accord by an impressively dedicated and unified company of players.

The trio of soloists Rachel Chapman (soprano), Ben Johnson (tenor) and Matthew Hargreaves (bass) effectively carried the narrative with unflagging energy that was sustained right through to the exquisite duet between Adam and Eve at the end of the work, where the operatic credentials of the soloists shone in subtle expression of perfectly timed, consummate harmony.

This week the influential American Cornwall Foundation in an open letter to Pope Francis appropriated the words that so inspired Haydn: "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" to argue that: "By using fossil fuels to generate energy ... we liberate from the tomb of the earth the carbon dioxide on which plants and therefore all the rest of life depend." So much for skewed texts and dodgy numbers! The coal and oil to which they are referring sound rather like Haydn's "Hell's spirits black in throngs" that he so presciently dismisses to "sink in the deep abyss to endless night" as a

necessary prelude to his love-song to nature in its vibrant splendour, the “new created world”.

Haydn’s heartfelt celebration matches the spirit of St Francis’s *Canticle of the Sun*, referenced by Pope Francis in this week’s encyclical that urges us all to take better care of mother earth. It serves as a timely anthem to inspire believer and non-believer alike. Thames Phil’s knock-out performance was an invigorating and unforgettable experience.

Kevin Jones  
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