

Franz Joseph Haydn (1732 – 1809)

Franz Joseph Haydn was born at Rohrau in Lower Austria on 31 March 1732, the second son of a wheelwright. There was no history of musical talent in the family, but his father Mathias loved to sing and encouraged all twelve of his children to do the same. By the age of six, it was clear that young Joseph had a beautiful voice and an aptitude for music, so he was sent to a distant relative in Hainburg to receive an education in music and singing. When there, the Kapellmeister of St Stephen's Cathedral, Vienna, spotted him and it was agreed that he should go to the Cathedral Choir School when he was eight years old.

Haydn was to spend the next 20 years in the city, firstly at the cathedral and then as a freelance musician, living in near poverty, before getting his big break with the Esterházy family, which was to last almost 30 years. But before that, he had ten years of struggle teaching keyboard and other instruments and learning how to compose, as this had not really featured in the Choir School teaching. CPE Bach was the main influence, both his music and his famous book, *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments* (still available in English translation). Many of Haydn's early compositions are quite simple and clearly intended as teaching exercises for his pupils, but in 1759, he was noticed by Count Morzin, who hired him as his Kapellmeister. Haydn then wrote his Symphony No.1 and Prince Nikolaus Esterházy came to hear it, and was so impressed that he did a deal with Morzin allowing Haydn to become his Vice Kapellmeister at the Esterházy family's palace at Eisenstadt, on the Austro-Hungarian border, south of Vienna. Prince Nikolaus became head of the family in 1762, when his elder brother Anton Paul died, and decided to substantially rebuild his favourite hunting lodge far to the east on the Hungarian Plains at Süttör. It soon became the very grand palace, renamed Esterháza and it was here that Haydn wrote what was a truly enormous catalogue of innovative works of all descriptions. He said that the isolation forced him to be original.

Werner, the notional elderly Kapellmeister at Esterháza died in 1766, so Haydn was promoted. Prince Nikolaus also gave Haydn an injection of discipline such that he started to keep a catalogue of his works. Hoboken's catalogue, compiled in the 1950s, is vast, but Haydn is remembered mainly for his greatest achievement, his 104 numbered symphonies and 68 string quartets. (The catalogue shows many more symphonies and Masses, etc, still awaiting authentication.) He may not have invented either form as such, but his musical genius took their development to the point where others, such as Beethoven, could carry on his work into the 19th century. We can truly say that 'Papa' Haydn – a title first acquired at Esterháza - has a unique place in musical history.

Haydn was a jolly fellow and fond of practical jokes – a point fairly obvious from his music. And it was supposed to be such a joke that got him sacked from the cathedral choir, but in truth, it was more likely to be an excuse to get rid of him when his voice eventually broke. It is perhaps an irony that he contracted for what soon became a childless and unhappy marriage. His wife took no interest at all in his music, preferring men of the cloth, so he found female company elsewhere, one in particular, when he came to London. However, the concert-going Viennese of today still talk in hushed tones about 'Haydn's son', from an unnamed mother!

Music fell into decline at Esterháza when Prince Nikolaus died, so Haydn, by then quite famous, moved back to Vienna. A certain day in 1790 has gone down in history when he received a knock on his door. 'I am Salomon from London and I have come to fetch you', the caller declared. And so, they landed in Kent on New Year's Day, 1791 – Haydn had never experienced 'the sea' before. When they arrived in London, Haydn's fame had preceded him and he was mobbed by women, the like of which would not be seen again until the 1960s with pop idols. Haydn stayed in Britain for 18 months and formed a particularly close relationship with a recently widowed and musically appreciative lady, Rebecca Schroeter, but he could not be persuaded to remain after the second visit (February 1794 to August 1795) and returned to Vienna. His twelve 'London Symphonies', composed during the two stays remain popular, but the unforgettable products of his late years in Vienna, directly influenced by London and the works of Handel, are his two oratorios, *The Creation* and *The Seasons*. Both started off as English librettos given to him in London. Haydn had German translations done by Baron van Swieten, but he was proud of the fact that he was the first composer to produce an oratorio in two languages. He later authorised translations into other languages.

The Creation – A Musical Mystery

Haydn's grand oratorio *The Creation* is the pinnacle of his later years and it has remained popular with audiences and performers ever since. The story goes that during his second visit, Salomon presented him with a libretto, in English, of an oratorio intended for Handel, and based on the poetry of Milton and the Bible, which he took back to Vienna. Handel was old, not in good health and almost blind when he died in 1759,

so had not got around to setting the text. But Haydn started setting the text when he got back home and with none too good English, ask Baron van Swieten, the diplomat and amateur musician, if he would produce a German translation to help Haydn's understanding.

The situation then becomes somewhat confused as various music academics tried to 'improve' upon van Swieten's English version in the first half of the 19th Century. Enter Vincent Novello (1781-1861), an organist, choirmaster, editor and publisher, who chose to translate van Swieten's German text back into English in his 1847 edition. His back translation remained in place, with its acknowledged difficulties, until 1998 when Michael Pilkington was commissioned by Novello to modernise this word setting. They are known respectively as the 'Old' and 'New' Novello editions and they are completely incompatible, which causes considerable irritation to choral societies. Many conductors prefer the words of the old edition, but tonight we will sing to the New Novello edition.

The original English text used by Haydn was placed in van Swieten's library, but disappeared long ago, further confusing the matter of just what was intended by the original librettist. All we know is that this English libretto was unsigned. However, in our search for the true origin of the libretto, we need to go back to 1711, not long after Handel arrived in England for the first time, in order to meet the first of our two possible librettists. Handel was interested in promoting himself and his music, and made the acquaintance of several influential young men who might help him. There were the Dukes of Burlington and Chandos, but another who became a lifelong friend and supporter was Bernard Granville. However, our story begins with his 10-year-old sister Mary, who became a prodigious letter writer, artist and was a valued music critic, particularly on the works of Handel.

Mary Delany (nee Granville, 1700-1788) must have been quite a girl! Her first meeting with Handel was not quite what you might think of a 10-year-old. Together with her brother Bernard Granville, her love of Handel's music was firm, but not uncritical, as her many letters confirm. She was well educated and intelligent and has even been described as a 'bluestocking', given that the term first came into use in the 1750s. Her letters and autobiography were published many years after her death.

She was married and widowed twice. She married her second husband, the Revd Dr Patrick Delany, in 1743 and they lived in London before moving to Dr Delany's home in Dublin when he was appointed Dean of Downpatrick in 1744. Mary Delany wrote a series of letters to her sister making extraordinary comments about recent performances of *Samson*, *Semele* and other Handel oratorios. Mary and Patrick had a mutual interest in botany and gardening, which led to the development of her work as an artist and her detailed paintings of flowers, for which she is mainly remembered. Queen Charlotte was a friend and granted her a pension of £300 pa and a house on the Windsor estate in her second widowhood. Her two books of paintings have been published relatively recently, but she clearly also had a passion for the written word and the poetry of Milton.

We now skip forward to the 20th Century, where two notable musicologists took an interest in Mary Delany - Edward J Dent (1876-1951) and HC Robbins Landon (1926-2009), both noted for the thoroughness of their research. In a nutshell, they both considered that Mary Delany's Milton-based libretto for Handel formed the basis of the actual final version of *The Creation* by Haydn. Dent returned to Cambridge in 1926 as Professor of Music after Stanford's death, where he was noted for his research into and performance of the music of long-forgotten composers. Robbins Landon was an American academic, who spent most of his life studying and writing about Haydn.

I need to mention briefly a shadowy figure in musical history, Georg August Griesinger (probably 1769-1845). He was a friend of Gottfried van Swieten and fellow diplomat, who came to Vienna in 1799 and became friendly with Haydn. He wrote an essay on the life of Haydn, shortly after Haydn's death and mentioned that a person by the name of 'Lidney' had written the libretto for *The Creation*, but there is no evidence whatsoever to support this statement. I have made an exhaustive search of literary figures in England during the period in question and no one with a name vaguely similar appears as possible. None of Handel's literary associates seem remotely possible, except for one. We know that the libretto that Haydn had received from Salomon was unsigned and that the Genesis section had been added by an unknown person. It appears that neither Haydn nor van Swieten knew, or even cared, who had written the original libretto and that Griesinger's comment relates to something misheard on his behalf. The original libretto that Haydn passed to van Swieten has been 'lost' for many years.

Vincent Novello came up with his edition of *The Creation* in 1847 to meet the growing demand by amateur singers in which he made a new English translation of van Swieten's German text. This is basically what we still have today in the 'Old Novello Edition' and it has been loved by choral society members and their conductors ever since. The question still remains who took Mary Delany's work based solely on Milton and produced the 'final' version, adding the Genesis section? I do have a potential answer!

The Missing Librettist

We know with a reasonable amount of certainty that the first version of a libretto on *The Creation*, written for Handel, was prepared by Mary Delany and finished on 10 March 1744, and that it was solely and quite deliberately based on Milton's *Paradise Lost*. This has been supported over the years by EJ Dent and HC Robbins-Landon. We suspect that Handel, being a life-long Lutheran and not too fussed about sticking so strictly to Milton, had considered that he must have reference to the Biblical text from Genesis if he was going to write an oratorio on the subject. That being so, the question arises, who did he ask to do it? There is no direct evidence left available to us, but we can gather circumstantial evidence to build a case that puts **Charles Jennens** (1700-1773) as the most likely candidate. Jennens consider himself an expert in setting Milton's verse in a libretto as he had already done for Handel and, significantly, never signed his librettos as a point of principle. He did the work for the love of it and considered that it should not be regarded as his personal property. The next strand of evidence is that Handel and Jennens were at the peak of their professional collaboration. They were both irascible types and we may think from Jennens' surviving correspondence that the personal relationship was poor, but they were really the best of friends. Handel often stayed with Jennens in his Leicestershire country house and remembered Jennens in his will. And let us face it directly; Jennens was a superb interpreter of Biblical texts and Milton's verse. A check on the handwriting in the original would certainly reveal the answer, but sadly, that option is not available.

Charles Jennens knew Handel from the early 1730s. They collaborated on the librettos of several works, including the oratorios *Saul*, *Israel in Egypt*, *Messiah* and *Belshazzar*. In 1744-45, after *Belshazzar*, it is possible, if not highly likely, that Handel then asked Jennens to add the Genesis section to the libretto for *The Creation*, which was to provide a brooding and magnificent opening to the work. It is also clear that van Swieten's German translation of the Genesis text was taken from the English King James Bible, not the German Bible, hence confirming its English origin.

The strongest piece of evidence that I can find so far comes from the Haydn scholar, Jens Peter Larsen. He was commissioned to write a new and substantial contribution for the 1980 edition of *New Grove, Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. It subsequently appeared in a revised book form in its own right. Larsen indicates quite clearly that the inspiration for Haydn's *Creation* was Handel's *Israel In Egypt*. He says:

'No doubt Handel's *Israel In Egypt* (which Haydn heard in London) provided the strongest impulse for *The Creation*. The many examples of descriptive writing in Handel's depiction of the plagues of Egypt are reflected in Haydn's fresh and charming pictures of the wonders of creation, from the naïve but always impressive, "And there was LIGHT", to the glimpse of the leaping tiger and the creeping worm'.

Larsen is making the point that the two works are so structurally similar, but he does not draw directly the obvious conclusion that it is because the original libretti were written by the same person. I suppose that the musical community in the mid 1970s was less secure in the knowledge that the *Israel In Egypt* libretto was indeed written by Jennens. However, a point that is not common knowledge is that van Swieten was in London in 1791 at the same time as Haydn. We do not know the purpose of this visit, but it might have been just to foster his musical interests. Perhaps Salomon had invited him to join Haydn and in particular to listen to Handel oratorios, which were still regularly produced. William Shield in his book of 1800 records Haydn and van Swieten's utter amazement on hearing the Handel oratorios and determined that they should be known in Vienna. On his return, van Swieten then took steps to introduce Handel scores into the court library in Vienna, as well as his extensive private music library, and also to organise the production of Handel oratorios at the Schwarzenberg Palace, hence laying the ground work for his friend Joseph Haydn.

Why did Handel write *Israel In Egypt* so quickly after Jennens had finished the libretto, when he normally took his time? It is because Jennens badgered him! Persuaded, cajoled, proposed ways of doing the settings and even musical solutions, and got out of Handel a work that is unique among his oratorios. In this respect, van Swieten was exactly the same with Haydn. He had clearly decided in London that he was going to get a Handel style oratorio out of the somewhat nervous Haydn, who had written nothing like it in his long composing career, and get it the way he thought it ought to be as well. Haydn's new house was in the Vienna

suburbs (shared with his estranged wife living at one end and he at the other), but during the composition, he took a flat in central Vienna so that he and van Swieten could work on it on a daily basis. A very productive partnership emerged and another truly unique masterpiece was the result. I am sure that Handel and Jennens would have been rather pleased.

Finally, I should perhaps answer the question of how did Salomon get the libretto of *The Creation* to give to Haydn, as it is not difficult to figure out? This is most likely how it happened. Salomon had won a reputation as a young violin virtuoso, but in middle life had become a particularly successful impresario. He must have been a wily character on all matters of music and must have seen Haydn and van Swieten's amazement at hearing the Handel oratorios, and asked himself what he could do about it. The opportunity presented itself during Haydn's second visit to London. He had heard that John Christopher Smith the younger (1712-1795) was in poor health and likely to die, so he paid him a visit. Smith, who is described as a 'sweet, gentle, modest man' had inherited Handel's entire library from his father, Johann Christophe Schmidt (later anglicised – c.1685-1763). He was Handel's friend, who had come to England in 1720 to be Handel's copyist, secretary and general musical dogs-body, until his son took on the role in 1752. Handel by then was almost blind from cataracts, so Smith the younger acted as amanuensis to the later works. Handel had left his entire library to Smith senior which was then passed to his son, complete, and it would have contained all the unused libretti. Salomon approached the dying Smith and asked the question, 'what do you have that Handel didn't quite get around to?' He clearly persuaded the good-natured Smith to part with the libretto for *The Creation* and that was that! Smith had agreed to leave all Handel's manuscripts to the Crown in exchange for a generous pension, but it presumably did not include this libretto, as Handel had not actually used it.

Haydn had said that he never felt more devout than when he was writing *The Creation*. He was very nervous about its first performance in Vienna, which was given privately to the nobility. He ranged from icy cold to boiling hot as the start approached, but it was a tremendous success and has remained so ever since. In the last nine years of his life, Vienna celebrated their great international star with his greatest work, *The Creation*, foremost in their minds. Haydn's last public appearance was in May 1808, where he was carried aloft into a performance of *The Creation*. He died a year later at the grand age of 77. However, we should not forget how it all started and no doubt was inspired by the English words of Mary Delany and Charles Jennens.

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(The above is based on a longer research paper by the author published in 2020)