

Review by Ed Jewell on May 2011 Concert: Haydn's creation

Musical performances are small miracles, creating not just pleasing sounds, but provoking emotions and forming ideas from the vibrating air. On Saturday 21st May in St. James Concert Hall, the Guernsey Choral and Orchestral Society, kindly sponsored by Credit Suisse as part of its 25th Anniversary celebrations, gathered to perform an *ex nihilo* wonder on Haydn's *Creation*.

Completed in 1798 the *Creation* reflects the exuberant optimism that coursed through Europe as the chaos unleashed by the French Revolution temporarily abated. Following the biblical creation story from the Book of Genesis and using a libretto based on John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, The Creation captures a unique moment of spiritual innocence, before the leaden hand of scientific rationalism tethered 'mighty pens' firmly down.

From the start it was clear that this would be a playful and positive performance. The first orchestral movement, *The Representation of Chaos*, appeared to be refined and well ordered. But by withholding musical cadences from the ends of phrases Haydn created a subtle sense of unease, a lack of completeness that could only be rectified through the performance of the *Creation* and the establishment of a world in which man lived in harmony with God.

The performance buzzed with joy as each movement and act of creation took the audience closer to that end goal. The sheer thrill and drama of the choir's first declamation of 'and there was light', bursting forth as it did from their initially poised pianissimo entrance, made clear that this was going to be a grand and gripping retelling of the oldest story.

And what story tellers we had. Soprano Helen Groves's voice, consummately beguiling, dipping and turning as graceful as a swift during movements like *And God said; Let the earth bring forth grass*; elegantly sustained and austere in *Our duty we performed now*. Tenor Darren Abrahams; completely engaging and demonstrating a great range of register from the very start as he celebrated the first act of creation in *Now vanish before the holy beams despairing, cursing rage*. Bass Mark Wildman gave a wonderfully rich interpretation of the libretto, instantly conveying the character of the 'cheerful roaring' lion, the 'flexible' tiger and the 'creeping, sinuous' worm.

The choir brought a skillful balance of weight and light to the soloists' tale; underpinned with good intonation, which allowed their contribution to be clearly understood at the back of the concert hall. Lead by conductor Helen Grand the choir negotiated tricky, understated entries as well as fiercely complex fugues, such as *Sing the Lord, ye voices all*, maintaining timing and clarity throughout. Considerable preparation had evidently been done, as this was a choir that clearly felt confident enough to move beyond simple concentration to focus on performance, allowing choruses like *The heavens are telling* to build and flare into life.

The orchestra, lead by Sarah van Vlymen, played a broad range of roles throughout the performance, moving from the stately, pulsing, full orchestral *Introduction* of Part III, to the intimate ensemble of harpsichord, cello and soloists in *Our duty we performed now*. The orchestra also interacted exceptionally well with the soloists. In passages such as the delicate "his works are never understood" in *The heavens are telling*, a palpable bond

connected conductor, soloists and orchestra, as each observed the other in the placing of their notes.

The Guernsey Choral and Orchestral Society will be taking the *The Creation* on tour, performing for a French audience on Saturday 28th May in St. Malo Cathedral. Given the quality of their performance in St. James, I suspect they may attract their very own Guernsey Groupies, intent on seeing small miracles worked again.