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Pro Musica Presents Sublime 'Creation'

By D.S. Crafts
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When Haydn began writing “The Creation” in 1796, he was not only setting to music the Hebrew creation story by way of Milton’s “Paradise Lost,” he was also attentive to Kant’s newly coined Nebular Hypothesis, not to mention classical concepts of chaos.

Probably no other musical work is directly influenced by so many philosophical sources, not to mention at least a tip of the cap to Mozart’s “Magic Flute.”

Yet the work itself, like Haydn’s music in general, seems sublimely simple. Some have called it the sum of all his art, and his greatest creation.

This weekend, the Santa Fe Pro Musica took on an ambitious and important production of this great work that is too infrequently performed, and the result was nothing short of superb. Thomas O’Connor led the Pro Musica Chorus and Orchestra along with three soloists marvelously matched with beautifully focused voices, all singing an English translation.

O’Connor opened this monumental endeavor with a sense of hushed mystery as Haydn journeys outward from a single note, several times even venturing momentarily into the harmonic restlessness Wagner would explore in “Tristan.” From the joyousness of the first ensemble to the glorious double fugue in “Achieved is the glorious work,” the chorus sang crisply and with stirring sonority, providing the crowning touch to the story of each day’s accomplishments.

Ann Monoyios stepped in at the last minute to perform splendidly

the roles of Gabriel and Eve. If overpowered now and again by the ensemble, the gracious loveliness of her high soprano was more than a bargain. Her first outstanding aria “With verdure clad the fields appear” became a flower of tenderest blossom. In the Fifth Day aria, “On mighty pens uplifted soars the eagle aloft,” she combined with the flute flourishes of Carol Redman to celebrate the coming of the animals.

Irish tenor John Elwes, not only a veteran performer with Pro Musica but with scores of recordings to his credit, lent stentorian pronouncements and immaculate intonation to the role of Uriel.

In the dual role of Raphael and Adam, bass Curtis Streetman lent his creamy, mellow bass to some of the work’s most often excerpted music, particularly the two arias, “Rolling in foaming billows” and, on the Sixth Day, “Now heaven in fullest glory shone.” But perhaps the most touching vocal highlight came in the duet between Adam and Eve, “Graceful consort! At thy side,” where Streetman and Monoyios combined in dulcet tones celebrating the sheer delight of being alive.

Subtle lighting effects enhanced the performance— nothing dramatic, just tasteful suggestions to augment the mood: for example, the celestial firmament for the opening, and foliage for “With verdure clad.”

The audience at the Lensic Center for the Performing Arts heartily sounded its approval of a production that should serve as benchmark for Pro Musica.