

Haydn *The Creation*
(King's Music edition ed. N. Jenkins)

PROGRAMME NOTE

ON PREPARING A NEW ENGLISH TEXT FOR “THE CREATION”

The success of Haydn's *The Creation* has always depended to a large extent upon the language in which it was being performed, and what the audience thought of the quality of the text. Within a few years of its first performances in Vienna and London this was being attacked as far inferior to the quality of Haydn's music:

*It is little wonder that the words translated from the German almost literally into English, should be neither sense nor grammar, nor that they should make wicked work with Milton.*¹

*Would he [Haydn] had been directed by you about the words to *The Creation*! It is lamentable to see such divine music joined with such miserable broken English.*²

The Creation is a remarkable work in that it is the first oratorio to have been composed and published in a bilingual format. The libretto that Haydn took back with him from England to Vienna was in English. He subsequently obtained a German translation from his friend and colleague Baron van Swieten; and when the work was eventually published, it contained both sets of text. Haydn wanted it to be performed both in Austria and in London, where Johann Peter Salomon had provided the initial enthusiasm for the work.

One might suppose that the English text contained in this first publication of 1800 would represent the libretto in its original state. Salomon handed it to Haydn in 1795 as he was leaving London for the last time. It is quite conceivable that he was expecting Haydn to compose the work in English. Haydn had demonstrated a certain ability with the English language (which he did not speak well) in his recent settings of *12 English Canzonettas*. The libretto of *The Creation* was said to have been written for Handel. Salomon could have been forgiven for thinking that Haydn would appreciate its quality and set the material as received.

¹ Anna Seward, letter of September 27th 1802

² Scottish music publisher George Thomson to Anne Hunter, poet of Haydn's "12 English Canzonettas", 1804

In fact, the English version contained in the first edition of *The Creation* can hardly represent the text that had been handed to Haydn. It displays many signs of having been put together hurriedly by inexperienced English speakers, with awkward lines such as “*Their flaming looks express, what feels the grateful heart*”; and “*With thee is life incessant bliss, thine it whole shall be*”. The original text was said to be derived from the Book of Genesis and the Book of Psalms in the King James Bible, and from Milton’s “Paradise Lost”. The biblical passages are often quoted word for word, but Milton’s original voice is harder to detect. There are passages in Part 2 where some phrases are quoted virtually word for word. But in many other places the true Miltonic voice has been overwhelmed by a two-way process of translation into, and out of, German.

In England the oratorio has suffered as a result of this less-than-ideal text. Many hands have had a go at turning the awkward passages into a text that can be sung more convincingly in the English speaking world. Editors with a better understanding of Milton’s style were not slow to begin their improvements. Muzio Clementi’s 1801 vocal score already addressed some of the problems of the 1800 score, and was further improved in 1827. Vincent Novello incorporated many improvements from the 1832 English edition by Haydn’s pupil Sigismund Neukomm into his own famous 1847 edition. It was this edition which did most to set in stone a version of the text that was thought to be as good as it could get. But Novello couldn’t eliminate the pervasive Germanic word-order; the underlay of the text in the choruses was far from ideal; and the solos were couched in a language that, while appearing both naive and unsatisfactory to some, was considered to be acceptably quaint by others. This is the version in which the work came to be known and loved throughout the English-speaking world.

My investigation into the origins of the “Creation” libretto were born out of a desire to improve this version for the 21st century. Although it was well-known and comfortably familiar to choirs, it was also seen as far from satisfactory by many choral directors. As I had previously done similar refurbishment to Bach’s major choral works,³ I was approached by various eminent conductors who felt that Haydn’s masterpiece needed the same reappraisal. I had already produced a new English edition of Haydn’s other great choral piece *The Seasons*⁴. During my work on this I had discovered, to my surprise, that *The Creation* employed lines of text taken from the James Thomson poem of that name (first published in 1730, and revised yearly until 1746.) For example: the Bass Aria “Rolling in foaming billows” (Aria no. 6) uses some lines of text from Milton’s “Paradise Lost”:

.... The mountains huge appear
Emergent, and their broad backs upheave
Into the clouds, their tops ascend the sky. [*Paradise Lost* Book VII, lines 285-7]

but is completed by others from Thomson’s “The Seasons”:

Lashed into foam, the fierce-conflicting brine

³ For the ‘New Novello Choral Edition’

⁴ published by King’s Music

Seems o'er a thousand raging waves to burn.
 Meantime the mountain billows, to the clouds
 In dreadful tumult swelled, surge above surge,
 Burst into chaos with tremendous roar. [Winter, lines 159-163]

The soprano aria, no. 15, seems to have been derived from these lines of Thomson:

..... the steep-ascending eagle soars
 With upward pinions through the flood of day,
 And, giving full his bosom to the blaze,
 Gains on the sun... [Summer, lines 608-11]

rather than this image by Milton, which has sometimes been cited as the original inspiration:

They summ'd their pens, and soaring th'air sublime,
 With clang despised the ground... [Paradise Lost Book VII, lines 421-3]

Thomson has a distinctive vocabulary. He uses words that are not found in Milton or the King James Bible. Many of these also occur in the Creation libretto. For example: '*Cheerful*' is a particularly favourite word of Thomson's, being found no less than 14 times in his poem with a meaning akin to 'balanced' or 'normal'. Whoever the unknown librettist was, he was certainly an avid admirer of Thomson, as well as of Milton. '*Cheerful*' makes two appearances in the Creation libretto: "*cheerful, roaring, stands the tawny lion*" (no. 20); "*the cheerful host of birds*" (no. 18a). Further examples of Thomsonian vocabulary abound. The expression '*dew-dropping*' (in Adam and Eve's Duet, no. 29) is Thomson's, appearing as '*dew-dropping coolness*' in *Summer*, at line 206. Other words found in Thomson and *The Creation*, but not in Milton, are: *tribes*, *ethereal*, *dreary*, *ravished*, *unperceived*, *limpid*, *purls*, *outrageous*, and *sated*.

With this as my starting point I began to search out all the possible sources for the Creation text. As this has only come down to us in the version inserted by Swieten into the 1800 score it was clear that I needed to do a lot of detective work. So I decided to learn all that I could about the libretto and its origins before beginning work on a new 'singable' text. I hoped to retain the original eighteenth century 'feel' in my new version by using as much as possible of the original sources. These were sometimes clearly identifiable in the Swieten re-translation, even though the Germanic word-order, together with his limited knowledge of English grammar, periodically masked them.

In the process of investigation I became convinced that some of the remarks about the work related by Haydn and Swieten probably contained a good kernel of truth. I was most intrigued by Swieten's statement that the libretto was an old one, originally intended for Handel. From the use of Thomson's poem, as well as other textual indications, it seemed likely that the date of composition could well have been c.1745 when Handel's librettists were Newburgh Hamilton and Charles Jennens. So I searched Hamilton's libretti, of which *Samson* (being based on Milton's poem *Samson Agonistes*) was the most relevant, for any similarities with "The Creation" libretto. I thought that there might

be some moments in the text when the vocabulary or style would betray a common author. Although Hamilton clearly wrote certain arias himself, without deriving them from lines in Milton's drama, I did not find any key words in them that recurred in a similar way in the *Creation* libretto. But an exhaustive research into Charles Jennens' libretti for Handel revealed remarkable similarities of language, style and content with "The Creation" text.

Jennens' libretto for *Il Moderato* (1740) was closely scrutinised to see if it could yield any similarities of vocabulary or expression. Within its modest length of just eight musical numbers occurred the significant use of several words common to both libretti, yet unusual enough to raise the question of a common authorship:

With her let **rosy** health appear (cf. In **rosy** mantle appears... *Creation* no. 26)

The **fumes** that did the mind involve (cf. Here vent their **fumes** the fragrant herbs *Creation* no. 8)

There were similar echoes in *Belshazzar* (1745), but just one will have to suffice:

God, only wise and just, **ordains**. (cf. So **God** our Lord **ordains**... *Creation* no. 28)

In Jennens' libretto for *Saul* (1739) there is a Recitativo that reads like a sketch for the *Creation* libretto. As it is often cut in performance, its relevance has not received the attention it merits. However, as will be shown, it is couched in language that harks back to many of Milton's lines in *Paradise Lost*.

SAUL : Accompagnato

<i>By thee <u>this universal frame</u></i>	<i>Nature began, of labour eased,</i>
<i>From its Almighty Maker's hand</i>	<i>Her latent beauties to disclose.</i>
<i>In primitive perfection came,</i>	<i>A fair harmonious world arose;</i>
<i>By thee produced, in thee contained:</i>	<i>And though, by diabolic guile,</i>
<i>No sooner did th'eternal word dispense</i>	<i>Disorder lord it for a while,</i>
<i>Thy vast mysterious influence,</i>	<i>The time will come, when Nature shall</i>
<i>Than chaos his old discord ceased.</i>	<i>Her pristine form regain</i>
	<i>And harmony for ever reign.</i>

By comparing this verse firstly with Milton, and then with the *Creation* libretto, it will be possible to see how closely the language and ideas are related to each other. The opening lines are related to the Duet and Chorus in part 3 of *The Creation*, beginning as it does:

*By thee, with bliss, O bounteous Lord, / The Heaven and Earth are filled.
This world, so great, so wonderful, / Thy mighty hand has framed.*

Milton had written:

*These are thy glorious works, Parent of good,
Almighty! Thine this universal frame,
Thus wondrous fair: thyself how wondrous then!*

The use of the phrase *this universal frame* proves that Jennens was quoting Milton's "Paradise Lost" in his libretti as early as 1739.

Later lines introduce the concept of 'the word', which is so integral to the idea of God's creation in both Testaments. Later lines remind us of Aria no. 2: "*Disorder yields to order fair the place*"; whilst "*A fair harmonious world arose*" is very similar to "*A new created world springs up at God's command.*"

In the final lines the one particular Miltonic conceit - apart from the veiled reference to Satan's presence at "*by diabolic guile*" - is the idea that harmony reigned on earth before the Fall of Man. This is reiterated many times in '*Paradise Lost*' and other minor poems. Just one example will suffice for the present purpose:

<i>Such music (as 'tis said)</i>	<i>His constellations set,</i>
<i>Before was never made,</i>	<i>And the well balanced World on hinges hung,</i>
<i>But when of old the Sons of Morning sung,</i>	<i>And cast the dark foundations deep,</i>
<i>While the Creator great</i>	<i>And bid the weltering waves their oozy</i> <i>channels keep.⁵</i>

Another small point that may lead to Jennens being identifiable as the original librettist is the spelling of the first word in the chorus "*Achievéd is the glorious work*" (nos. 25a & 25c). It appears in Haydn's 1800 edition with an extra 't' as '*atchiévé*'. That this spelling can be traced back to Jennens himself is proved by the existence of the following line in his pamphlet: "*The Vindication of 'King Lear'*"⁶: "... and to the atchievement of his publication it is allowed, that patience and industry were required". It appears that this was Jennens' favoured spelling for the whole of his life, even though it had fallen out of normal usage and is not given in Dr Johnson's 1755 Dictionary.

A final and extremely important clue that Jennens had been interested in preparing a libretto for Handel on the theme of '*Paradise Lost*' came to light in some recently published correspondence between Charles Jennens, James Harris, and their circle of friends. Between them they had provided Handel with the libretto for '*L'Allegro, il Penseroso, ed il Moderato*' some few years earlier; and seem to have been planning a further work based, once again, on Milton in 1744. The following lines occur in a letter of 14th September 1744 from the 4th Earl of Shaftesbury to James Harris:

"Pray did you settle the oratorio of 'Paradise Lost' &c whilst at Packington? Has Mr Jennens finished his, and sent it to Handel yet?"⁷

Whilst it is clear from the date of the letter that Jennens would also have been working on the *Belshazzar* libretto for Handel at the time, it is still intriguing to see the reference to "Paradise Lost". Donald Burrows interprets the Earl of Shaftesbury's comments as implying that he already knew of a plan to base a new oratorio text on '*Paradise Lost*', much in the manner that the *L'Allegro ed il Penseroso* libretto had been prepared from

⁵ Milton, "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity"

⁶ published in 1772

⁷ Burrows & Dunhill *Music and Theatre in Handel's World*, Oxford 2002

Milton's minor poems. A letter also exists from Jennens to James Harris dated a couple of months later in which it appears that Harris may not have progressed very far with his part of the labour:

*"I am sorry to hear (for I have heard) that you are no further advanced in your Miltonics. For shame, don't be so lazy".*⁸

It certainly looks as though the question of authorship and date of the original libretto can now be established with some certainty; although it will be impossible to tell how much input James Harris had in its composition, unless a manuscript were to re-emerge one day.

Once I began to concentrate on Jennens it seemed more and more likely that the libretto was his, rather than one of the others that have at various times been proposed as the original (by Mrs Delany⁹, John Upton¹⁰, and Benjamin Stillingfleet¹¹.) Jennens' love of Shakespeare (which he went on to edit) could be the reason that some of the language appears so old-fashioned. His eclectic knowledge of the Scriptures and of Virgil's poetry makes sense of other passages. Thomson's poetry was enjoying enormous fame in the 1740s, and would have been well-known to Jennens' circle of dilettanti friends. The fact that Jennens' libretti were always too long for Handel makes sense of Haydn's remark that the text that he was given on leaving London in 1795 was too long and needed pruning. How much it was altered by Swieten is not clear; but I have made some conjectural suggestions elsewhere¹², based on the literary structures that Jennens uses in "Messiah", "Saul", "Belshazzar" and his other libretti.

One thing on which it is impossible to make a secure pronouncement is: what happened to the libretto after its presumed rejection by Handel? Handel's music, scores and papers can be traced through to John Christopher Smith via his father who inherited them in 1759 and subsequently passed them on to his son. Haydn visited Bath in 1794, where the elderly Smith was living. Although there is no record of them meeting, it is likely that Haydn would have wanted to meet the one living person who had a first-hand knowledge of the composer whose oratorios he so revered. He mentions some of the musicians he met in Bath in his notebooks,¹³ but there is no mention of Smith. However, his desire to write an oratorio in the style of Handel must have become known to his circle of musical friends. Smith would have been one of the very few people alive who would have known of the old libretto; especially in view of the fact that it was he who – in 1760 – performed an oratorio of his own on the Miltonic theme of "*Paradise Lost*". The libretto for this is the one by Benjamin Stillingfleet mentioned earlier; which implies that J.C. Smith would

⁸ Charles Jennens to James Harris, 30th November 1744

⁹ in her letter of 10th March 1744 to her sister Mrs Dewes she mentions that she had been amusing herself writing "*a drama for an oratorio out of Milton's 'Paradise Lost', to give Mr Handel to compose to*".

¹⁰ in his letter of 22nd March 1746 to James Harris he states: "*When last I came from Handel's oratorio I was so charmed, that to work I went, & from Milton's 'Paradise Lost' drew out a plan of a new oratorio*".

¹¹ Libretto of 'Paradise Lost', 'Literary life and select works of Benjamin Stillingfleet', London 1811

¹² in my article "The Text of Haydn's *Creation*; New sources and a possible librettist", Haydn Society of Great Britain,

Journal no.24 Part 2, 2005

¹³ Landon, H.C Robbins, 'The Collected Correspondence and London Notebooks of Joseph Haydn'

have been either unaware of the other libretto until he inherited it, or that he had deliberately rejected it in favour of a new one when he was composing his own oratorio in 1757-8. If Salomon - in an endeavour to get Haydn to return to England for a third visit - had been enquiring after an unused Handelian libretto in 1795, it is likely that J. C. Smith would have been the only man to know where to find one.

Salomon did get his oratorio from Haydn, and gave very nearly the first performance of it in English on 21st April 1800. But then the problems with the text began. It has been to address this that I finally committed myself to producing a new, singable, English translation.¹⁴ This is based on all the available sources, taking careful note of the libretto contained in Haydn's meticulously prepared 1800 edition, but incorporating improvements from the 1800 *London Wordbooks*, and later editions by Clementi and Neukomm. I have consulted the poems of John Milton and James Thomson in order to try and incorporate more authentic versions of the lines that derive from their works. I have also consulted the Biblical texts in circulation in the 18th century, and metrical versions of the Psalms that were in usage at that time (by Sternhold & Hopkins, and Tate & Brady), as well as the translations of Virgil that Jennens was writing about in his correspondence with Edward Holdsworth.¹⁵ In the choruses there are moments when Swieten's text has been rearranged into something more idiomatically English [particularly in nos. 4, 13 & 27]. In other places the addition of a syllable or two has allowed the underlay to match the German better [in nos. 2, 10 & 31].

Anyone who would like to read about my research in depth, and the reasons behind the changes to the familiar lines of the old Novello edition, can find it discussed at length in my recently published article, "The Text of Haydn's *Creation*; New sources and a possible librettist", published in 2005 by the Haydn Society of Great Britain in their Journal no.24 Part 2.

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¹⁴ published by King's Music

¹⁵ The image of the *horse* in Raphael's Recitative "Straight opening her fertile womb" cannot derive from Milton, as he does not describe it as appearing at the moment of Creation in Book VII of *Paradise Lost*. However it is similar to a description in Joseph Trapp's 1731 translation of the *Aeneid*: [The Works of Virgil, 1731] Book the Eleventh.