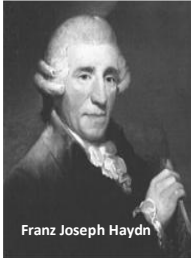


Celebrating Haydn and Handel!
March 20, 2010

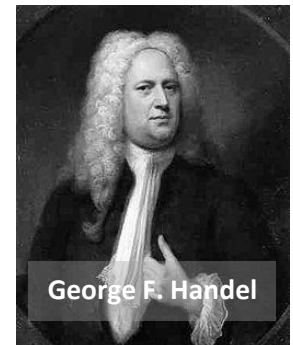


While there are many differences between George Frideric Handel (1685-1759) and Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809), one thing they have in common is the impact they left on choral music. Handel, from the earlier Baroque era, wrote what most critics believe is the greatest oratorical work of choral music, which our chorale sings every year at the Kennedy Center – his *Messiah*. Haydn from the latter classical era wrote

what many believe is the second best oratorio of all time – *The Creation*.

Both lived long prolific lives as musical composers, especially Haydn considered by some as the “Father of the Symphony” having written 104 of them. He began singing in a local Vienna cathedral choir and switched to playing a broken clavier (a small keyboard instrument like a harpsichord) and singing in the streets until he was recruited by nobility near Vienna. The sheer volume of this Austrian composer’s body of work may be partly attributed to his lack of distractions while working for many years as a court musician on a remote estate of his Hungarian patron Count Esterhazy thus isolating himself from other musical influences. As he put it, "set apart from the world, there was nobody in my vicinity to confuse or annoy me, and so I had to become original."

In contrast to Haydn’s rather insular lifestyle and cheerful temperament, Handel began his musical career as an organist, left his native Germany and lived in Italy and for many years in England. Unlike the modest and friendly Haydn, Handel was a blustery, proud, arrogant yet revered public figure in the England of his time. His persona seems to have carried over into his music, known for its sweeping brush strokes. This adopted Englishmen (he became an English citizen and was buried in Westminster



Abbey) produced sweeping dramatic music. It reminds one of the effect current American composer John Williams imprints on the listener in his epic film scores for such movies as *Star Wars* and *Superman*. Beethoven so revered Haydn he advised other composers to "Go to him to learn how to achieve great effects, by such simple means."

Haydn wrote the *Missa Brevis Sancti Joannis de Deo* in 1775. Because of its long organ solo in the *Benedictus*, it is also referred to as the “*Small or Little*

Organ Mass.” These liturgical miniatures or short masses of Haydn (of which there are four and possibly five) are known for their telescoping or compression of texts for the Gloria and Credo. Additionally, the simplicity of the organ solo is a function of the limitations of the small chapel organ where this work was most likely first performed, which lacked a pedal board.

Haydn wrote *Missa In Angustiis (Nelson Mass)* late in his life in 1798. Its title - literally translated “Mass in time of Anxiety or Constraint” - reflects Haydn’s situation at the time. Napoleon’s campaign against the Austro-Hungarian Empire played havoc on the imperial government’s economy causing Haydn’s patron to cut back on expenses including letting go of wind players as Haydn began this composition. The alternate more familiar title of *Nelson Mass* stems from a visit Lord Nelson made to the Esterhazy’s estate in September 1800. As part of the festivities, Haydn performed several works including this one. Coincidentally, at about the time this work premiered, Lord Nelson dealt Napoleon a stunning defeat in the major naval Battle of the Nile. Listen to the tail end of the Credo “Et incarnatus est” section and you will hear what our director describes as one of the most beautiful passages of the whole mass.

Finally, Handel composed four anthems for the coronation of George II of Great Britain in 1727. His first *Coronation Anthem Number 1 (Zadok the Priest)* has been used at every British coronation service since that first performance. Handel selected the text from King James Bible account of the anointing of Solomon. Zadok was a high priest in the time of David and with the court prophet Nathan anointed Solomon son of David as King of Israel. For the coronation of King George II, Handel used a chorus of 40 singers and orchestra of 160 instrumentalists to fill Westminster Abbey with the splendor of this short but powerful choral work.

It is time to enjoy the compositional gifts of a former Vienna street singer playing on a broken clavier and a German organist who found his groove in England.