

## **St. Nicholas Mass**

**Franz Joseph Haydn** (1732 – 1809)

For much of his life Haydn's energies were devoted primarily to composing orchestral and instrumental music. The *St. Nicholas Mass*, which was written in 1772, is one of comparatively few choral works that he wrote before he was fifty. The supreme choral masterpieces of his old age – *The Creation*, *The Seasons* and the six great Masses, including the well-known *Nelson Mass* – were all composed during the last fifteen years of his life.

The autographed manuscript of the *St. Nicholas Mass* and all the original orchestral parts were found intact in the Esterhazy archives at Eisenstadt Castle. It seems more than likely, therefore, that it was written to celebrate the nameday – the Feast of St. Nicholas – of Haydn's employer, Prince Nicolaus Esterhazy, on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1772. The Mass follows the usual format of Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Benedictus and Agnus Dei. As was sometimes the custom, the Credo is in a compressed form, with different lines of the text sung simultaneously by the four sections of the choir. Whilst this may have been confusing for the people, for the composer it had the merit of keeping the mass shorter than it otherwise would have been, whilst at the same time complying with the church's stipulation that the text must not be cut. The *St. Nicholas Mass* is not on the same scale as the late masses (it is about half the length of the *Nelson Mass*) but it is nevertheless quintessential Haydn in its energy, tunefulness and infectious joy.

*programme notes by John Bawden*

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