

Theresienmesse

Franz Joseph Haydn (1732 – 1809)

Haydn witnessed many radical changes in music during the course of his long life. He was eighteen when Bach died in 1750, not long before the close of the Baroque era, and seventy-two when Beethoven's 'Eroica' Symphony was first performed in 1804, ushering in the Romantic period. Old forms of music were superseded by the symphony, sonata and string quartet, patronage moved from the church to the royal court, and public concerts were rapidly becoming immensely popular. Throughout all these changes, Haydn remained a pioneering figure. Other composers had written symphonies, sonatas and string quartets before him, but it was Haydn who first exploited the untapped potential of these forms, expanding and developing them to a hitherto unimagined degree.

The almost childlike cheerfulness of Haydn's music, its inexhaustible inventiveness and its perfection of design conceal a considerable inner strength. This fusion of exuberance, originality, classical elegance and intellectual power explains to a large extent the compelling appeal of his music. These are the qualities that placed Haydn far and away above the level of all except Mozart amongst his contemporaries, and kept him at the forefront of music during most of the eighteenth century. No wonder he was hailed as a genius throughout Europe, admired and revered by the public and by his peers. Mozart said, '*Haydn alone has the secret both of making me smile and of touching my innermost soul*'. Even Napoleon, on capturing Vienna, immediately ordered a guard of honour to be placed round Haydn's house.

For much of his life Haydn's energies were devoted primarily to composing orchestral and instrumental music. The supreme choral masterpieces of his old age – *The Creation*, *The Seasons* and the six last masses – were all composed after 1795, the year in which he completed the last of his 104 symphonies. The 18th century Viennese mass had in the main been a relatively straightforward affair, usually with a modest accompaniment of an organ or perhaps a small orchestral band, and Haydn's early masses are mostly of this type. In 1795 Prince Nicholas II, Haydn's employer at Eisenstadt, commissioned him to compose a new setting of the mass each year. Haydn, by now in his sixties yet still alert to any opportunity for innovation, proceeded to expand the format by combining a much more extended and elaborate setting of the mass text with the full resources of the classical symphony orchestra. The result was the symphonic mass.

The superb *Nelson Mass* of 1798 is undoubtedly the most famous of these six last great masses. Equally masterly, though less theatrical in conception, is the fourth one of the series, the *Theresienmesse*, which Haydn composed the following year in between the completion of his two magnificent oratorios, *The Creation* and *The Seasons*. The title page of Haydn's score simply has the word 'Missa'; the origin of the nickname *Theresienmesse* remains a matter for conjecture, but is usually attributed to the work's supposed association with Marie Therese, the wife of the Emperor Franz II.

The scoring of the mass is a little unusual. Due to a shortage of wind players at Eisenstadt in 1798 and 1799, the wind section comprises just two clarinets, a bassoon and two trumpets. Haydn skilfully uses this relatively small group to great effect. The mass is a work of marked musical contrasts. Slow, quiet passages, such as the very opening of the Kyrie, are set against vigorous, loud sections like the final pages of the Credo. Simple hymn-like textures contrast with complex fugues, and hushed string writing gives way to brilliant orchestral passages in which the trumpets provide the musical icing on the cake. The quartet of soloists is sometimes heard in dialogue with the chorus and sometimes in extended sections of its own, notably at 'et incarnatus est' in the Credo. The *Theresienmesse* sparkles throughout with the vitality and unfailing inspiration so characteristic of this remarkable composer, who was still experimenting and still surprising his delighted audiences right up to the end of his life.

programme notes by John Bawden

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