

Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, 'Creation': review

Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic
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Like the Handel oratorios on which it is more or less explicitly modeled, Haydn's "Creation" is simultaneously narrative and reflective in nature. It boasts a killer plot - the first days of the universe, as related in Genesis - but it also makes time to expand and extol the details.

Both aspects of the piece came through in Friday's magnificent performance by Nicholas McGegan and the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, the conclusion and the high point of their 30th anniversary season. Leading an expanded performing ensemble in Herbst Theatre, McGegan invested Haydn's dramatic canvas with plentiful helpings of theatrical flair and sheer celebratory beauty.

Each of those qualities is essential in its own to "The Creation," premiered in 1798. Haydn's theatrical coups - most famously the sudden burst of C major as the word of God transforms primordial chaos into blazing light - are the work of a mature and canny creator extending the boundaries of what is possible in the way of musical drama.

Just as affecting, though, are the more traditional arias that stud the score, using lush, almost extravagant tone-painting to illustrate each successive phase of God's handiwork. The emergence of stars in a nighttime sky, luxuriant stretches of vegetation, the array of distinctive animal life - all these and more are vividly depicted.

"The Creation" does bog down a bit in its third and final section, when Adam and Eve show up to simper lovingly at one another and sing the praises of their Creator a few more times. But even there the intricate mastery of Haydn's vocal writing is enough to carry the day.

McGegan conducted with tenderness and vibrancy, drawing robust and richly colored playing from the orchestra. The Philharmonia Chorale, led by Bruce Lamott, made a glorious noise as the heavenly hosts.

Best of all, though, were the three vocal soloists, all of them regular presences on Philharmonia programs who have rarely sung with such extraordinary polish and virtuosity. Soprano Dominique Labelle was nothing short of exquisite, bringing silvery tone and pinpoint virtuosity to her assignment; her impersonation of the newly minted birds, complete with an array of vocal trills, was a tour de force. Tenor Thomas Cooley provided cool, fleet-footed contributions, and baritone Philip Cutlip was a lithe, muscular counterweight.

Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra: 8 p.m. Tuesday, Center for Performing Arts, Atherton; 8 p.m. Wednesday, Leshner Center for the Arts, Walnut Creek. \$25-\$85. (415) 252-1288, www.philharmonia.org.

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