

■ *Nantwich Choral Society* ■

HAYDN

THE SEASONS



SATURDAY 8th APRIL 1995

**The Parish Church of St. Mary, Nantwich
at 7.30pm.**

NANTWICH CHORAL SOCIETY

NANTWICH SINFONIA
(Leader: David Routledge)

Catrin Ley, *soprano*

Cato Fordham, *tenor*

Philip Ravenscroft, *bass*

Joy Roberts, *harpsichord*

Conducted by
Stephen Buckman

NATIONAL FEDERATION
OF MUSIC SOCIETIES



THE SEASONS

Haydn (1732 - 1809)

Following the enormous acclaim which greeted *The Creation* in 1798, Haydn's librettist and collaborator for that work, Baron van Swieten, was keen to find another subject which he hoped would inspire the ageing composer to repeat their success. He found what he wanted in the epic poem *THE SEASONS* by James Thomson, which since its first appearance in London in 1730 had become one of the most popular and admired literary works of the century. Certain that its wealth of nature imagery would appeal to Haydn, the Baron set about constructing a practicable libretto. Unfortunately, his reworking was so thorough that very little of the original poem or poetry was left, and Haydn complained bitterly about the difficulty of setting such a text to music, even blaming his subsequent physical decline on the efforts he had expended on *THE SEASONS*.

Haydn's lack of enthusiasm for the oratorio continued even after he had heard it, despite the warm reception audiences gave the work. He remarked to a friend that it was no *Creation* and never could be because, whereas in the one the protagonists are angels, in the other 'they are peasants'. And while it is true that nineteenth century morality entrenched the perception that the sacred *Creation* was intrinsically 'better' than the secular *SEASONS*, that the latter remains much less well-known of the two is a shame, because as far as musical quality is concerned, *THE SEASONS* is in no way inferior, and at points where comparison with *The Creation* is inevitable, such as the Introduction to 'Spring' or the Sunrise in 'Summer' (with its own depiction of 'light'), the Edenic love-duet in 'Autumn' or the pictorial representations of nature scattered throughout the piece, it yields nothing to the earlier work. And *The Creation*, for all its beauty and perfection, has nothing to compare with the charm of the whistling ploughman in 'Spring' or the ferocity of the storm in 'Summer', and certainly nothing like the raucous joie-de-vivre of the hunting and drinking choruses in 'Autumn'. If Haydn was disappointed with his last oratorio he had no reason to be ashamed of his contribution to the project. Every page shows it to be the work of a master craftsman at the very height of his creative powers.

SPRING

Each of the four *SEASONS* begins with an orchestral introduction linked to a recitative. The first of these 'depicts the passage from winter to spring' in a dramatically symphonic movement which is interrupted by the three soloists in turn. Simon, Lucas and Jane (stock country characters representing an older and a younger man and a girl whom we can imagine to be Simon's daughter) observe the eventual departure of winter's storms and their fellow villagers welcome the arrival of spring in a lilting pastoral chorus. In his first aria, Simon sings of a happy ploughman who whistles a merry tune as he sows the seed. (It should come as no 'surprise' that Haydn chose one of his own most popular melodies for this highly cultivated cultivator!). The rest of 'Spring' is given over to two large-scale movements for chorus and soloists: first, a serene prayer for heaven to bless the crops (during which Jane gives thanks for the first spring showers), and then a Song of Joy, which begins with Jane, Lucas and a chorus of lads and lasses describing the delights of springtime. (Listen out for the lambs and fish and bees and birds popping up all over the orchestra!). Simon reminds the young people that all these things come from God, when a dramatic key change and brass fanfares announce the final section, a glorious chorus in praise of the 'God of Light and Life'.

SUMMER

The second cantata in the oratorio describes the events of a single day in summer, from dawn to dusk, and falls into two parts. The first runs continuously in an unbroken span of music from the introduction's portrayal of daybreak (complete with crowing cockerel from the oboe); through Simon's account of the shepherd driving his flock along the hillside, gazing towards the brightening east; goes on to the utterly magical sunrise already mentioned, and culminates in a majestic chorus of praise to the sun, 'the source of light and life'.

In the second part, as the morning continues, the villagers all rush to the fields to reap the corn; but with the full heat of noon (for which Lucas is accompanied by shimmering muted strings), it is too much for man or beast to bear. Jane describes the relief of finding a shady grove by a stream, and in a lovely aria with oboe solo welcomes 'the sweet and cooling breeze'. Soon, however, gathering clouds and a distant rumble of thunder presage the onset of the storm, whose fury sends everyone scattering in terror. The unprecedented ferocity of this astonishing movement - quite unlike anything they had ever heard before - must have overwhelmed Haydn's audiences; and the passage of time has done nothing to lessen the effect on modern ears.

In the final chorus of 'Summer', with the storm over, Nature smiles again, and as the evening bell tolls and the first stars appear, the tired villagers return to their homes, their beds and 'sweet repose'.

~INTERVAL~

AUTUMN

After an introduction whose subject is 'the countryman's feeling of joy occasioned by a good harvest' (in the style of a minuet), the three soloists sing of the rewards to be won by hard work. This movement develops into a sublime chorus that belies Haydn's reluctance in setting van Swieten's sanctimoniously unpoetic text: 'I have been an industrious man my whole life long,' the composer said, 'but it never occurred to me to set industry to music!' The scene that follows would fit just as happily into one of Haydn's many operas, with Jane and Lucas expressing their love for one another in music that is appropriately uncomplicated and tuneful, becoming, by the end, quite rapturous.

The rest of 'Autumn' concerns itself with the pleasures and pastimes of this best of all seasons - hunting and drinking. Simon, after setting the scene in the stubble fields, describes how the farmer goes hunting birds with his dog and gun. In a wonderfully pictorial aria we follow their progress as the dog, with increasing excitement (and increasing tempo), flushes out his prey; the bird flies up; the gun goes off (bang!) and the hunter gets his game. Lucas, reporting on the activities of the county set is interrupted, in a brilliant 'coup de theatre', by the horns blasting out 'la Quete', the first of more than a dozen authentic calls which chart the progress of this grand stag hunt through the magnificent chorus which follows. Thankfully, at the end of all this positively cinematic music Haydn 'cuts away' from the kill itself, leaving us instead with the cheers of the successful huntsmen.

The 'Weinfest' that rounds off this colourful picture of autumn is an exuberantly rowdy affair. It begins respectfully enough, with much toasting and 'hail to the wine!', but a breathless dance accompanied by the village band leaves the singers incapable of making any sense of the 'merry' fugue Haydn gives them (just as well the orchestra is still reasonably sober!), so in the end everyone gives up on that idea and they go back to toasting one another enthusiastically, aided and abetted by some very noisy percussion.

WINTER

In complete contrast to the revelries of 'Autumn', 'Winter' starts shrouded in 'thick mists'. In her Cavatina, Jane bemoans the dreariness of wintertime. Lucas describes the now desolate landscape and, in the first part of his aria, the increasing panic of a man wandering through it as night approaches. A gleam of light ahead brings him fresh hope and the traveller makes for the distant cottage. The busy domestic scene that welcomes him on his arrival is the subject of the following recitative, at the end of which Haydn anticipates the 'spinning wheel' motif of the next chorus. This movement (to a text by G A Burger) was added at Haydn's specific request, and its simple ballad style and onomatopoeic 'spinning wheel' accompanying figure inspired a whole genre of spinning songs from later composers.

When everyone's work is done, Jane tells the story of a country girl who tricks an amorous Lord and steals his horse. This movement, too, was added at Haydn's request and uses a poem that would already have been familiar to the audience. The tale certainly goes down well with Jane's audience, whose hearty laughter provides a refrain for each of her verses.

Simon, who so far has taken little part in the proceedings, breaks into the cosy atmosphere that has now developed. The icy storm raging outside leads him to muse on the vanity of man, comparing winter to old age, destroyers of life. This sombre movement, a strange hybrid neither aria nor recitative, is unique in Haydn's output. At the words 'Truth only lasts', it becomes recitative proper, introducing the truly grand finale. This movement, for soloists and double chorus, transposes the argument to a higher plane: each choir in turn asks what qualities are needed to enter heaven and is answered by the trio of soloists in the style of an antiphonal psalm. Perhaps, at last, the singers are approaching the angelic state that Haydn had wanted for them. For the concluding fugue, the choir returns to the usual four parts, but the thrilling fanfares of horns and trumpets at the coda is the signal for them to divide again momentarily, before ascending 'the holy hill of heavenly bliss' in a triumphant blaze of sound.

Colin Bromelow