

NOTES – Treasures of Michael Haydn November 18, 2006

By David Stein

In 2006, we celebrate not only the life and music of Mozart (1756-1791), but it is also the year that we commemorate the death of Johann Michael Haydn (1737-1806), who died 200 years ago on August 10, 1806. Both he and his older brother, Joseph, were born in the Austrian city of Rohrau. Because of his exceptionally fine soprano voice, he, like his brother, received his early music training singing in the choir of St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna, beginning at the age of eight.

Most of Michael Haydn's career was spent as concertmaster, organist, composer and music teacher in the court of the Archbishop of Salzburg from 1763 until his death. As such, his vocal church music compositions are the most prominent in his oeuvre. His official obligations required him to compose music for all the customary Catholic rites including some forty Latin and German masses, two Requiems, six Te Deums and about 200 shorter liturgical works.

It is unfortunate that Michael Haydn's music was overshadowed after his death by the popularity and importance of his brother Joseph's music. It must be remembered that during the late 18th century, Michael was acclaimed and acknowledged as a great master of the Classic style, the equal of his brother. Michael's extensive output of church music was highly regarded by his brother, and by both Leopold and Wolfgang Mozart.

The poet and composer E. T. A. Hoffmann, writing in the *Leipziger Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* of 1812 stated: "Every connoisseur of the art of music and its literature knows, and has long known, that as a church composer, Michael Haydn belongs among the first in this field, from any era and any nation."

Missa Sancti Hieronymi was completed in September of 1777, and performed on All Saints Day (November 1) of that year, mostly likely along with the Offertorium *Timete Dominum*. These works are written in a musical style that reflected the wishes of his employer, Archbishop Hieronymus Colloredo, concerning proper church music. It is probably not a coincidence that the name of the Mass is the same as the Archbishop. The Mass made a great impression on Leopold Mozart who was in attendance at the first performance. He wrote a letter concerning the Mass to Wolfgang, which in part reads:

I have come home this very moment from the service at the Cathedral. Haydn's oboe mass was done, he himself directing it. I liked everything exceptionally well because 6 oboes, 3 double basses, 2 bassoons, and the castrato who has been engaged for 6 months at a hundred gulden monthly, took part.

Ferlendis and Sandmayr had the oboe solos, the oboist at Lodron's, a certain student, further the chief watchman and Obkirchner were the ripieno oboes. Cassl and Canon Knozenbry were the double basses by the organ next to the trombones. Erstlinger was with the bassoons Hofer and Perwein next to the oboists in the violin-loft. What I especially liked was that, since oboes and bassoons so closely resemble the human voice, the Tutti seemed to be a pure, right strongly founded vocal sound, the sopranos and altos, reinforced by the 6 oboes and the alto trombone, maintaining the proper balance with the tenors and basses, and the pieno (full) was so majestic that I gladly would have done without the oboe solos. The whole affair lasted an hour and a quarter, and it was too short for me, for it was really excellently written. Everything proceeds naturally, the fugues, particularly the Et Vitam etc in

the Credo and the Dona Nobis are worked out in masterly fashion, their themes developed without exaggerated modulation or too sudden transition. If, sooner or later, I should be able to get this Mass, I certainly will send it to you.

Both the Mass and Offertorium reflect the less opulent ecclesiastical style that the Archbishop preferred. To accommodate this preference, Michael adopted a simpler homophonic style that featured the top voice, shorter phrase lengths with well-defined cadences, and melodies that tended to be much simpler than the florid Italian style of the period.

On the other hand, the Offertorium *Ave Regina*, composed in March of 1770, reflects a vastly different musical style, a style often referred to as "*in contrapuncto*," a neo-Palestrinian, a cappella style. Michael's early music training included a thorough grounding in counterpoint, particularly that found in the most famous counterpoint book of the period, the *Gradus ad Parnassum* by Johann Joseph Fux. *Ave Regina* is scored for two four-voice choirs that sing together as well as antiphonally. The simplicity of the part writing and the careful attention the composer pays to the text setting belie the sonorous beauty of the work.

Thus, two extremes of Michael Haydn's vocal writing are encountered in the works on tonight's concert. Both show him to be a masterful composer committed to the expression of the words of the liturgy. His sacred works were praised in a biographical sketch written two years after his death: "With his church music he drew hearts to God with irresistible power, gave rise to holy thoughts, awakened the sense of devotion, and knew how to maintain a constant warmth." The commemoration of his death this year has helped to renew or discover an acquaintance with his compositions that have lain dormant or unpublished and allowed us to experience the greatness of Michael's talent.

David Stein is Professor Emeritus and former Director of Choral Activities at California State University East Bay. He is a Michael Haydn scholar and an editor of Michael Haydn choral works. He is the conductor of the San Francisco Bay Area Chamber Choir.