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Review: Glowing Opener to May Festival season

In the beginning, there was chaos. And out of chaos came light.

When the May Festival Chorus burst upon the words, "and there was light," at the opening of "The Creation," Music Hall seemed to be suddenly flooded with sunshine. That warm atmosphere continued to the very last note of Haydn's oratorio, "The Creation," which opened the May Festival season on Friday.

The Cincinnati May Festival welcomed spring with Haydn's masterpiece based on the creation story found in Genesis and Milton's "Paradise Lost." The renowned choral festival has revisited this oratorio several times over its 142-year history. But what lingered long after the final "amen" of this performance was a lightness and freshness of spirit that echoed the music and words of Haydn's finest achievement.

The chorus and Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra were conducted by James Conlon, who was cheered by the audience as he begins his penultimate year as music director. Perhaps for this reason, every note had meaning, and Conlon's tempos conveyed a kind of relaxed joy. He brought out the humor of Haydn's pictorial music, while balancing moments of choral fervor against others that were deeply reflective.

Haydn was inspired after hearing Handel's oratorios while in London writing his final 12 symphonies. Its delights include the vivid tone painting that can be easily heard in the music – from chirping birds to roaring lions. The oratorio begins with the orchestra's depiction of "Chaos" before life, which was revolutionary for its time. It then celebrates the creation of all the species, including the lowly worm, in choruses, recitatives and arias. The performance was sung in German.

The May Festival chorus, numbering about 130, has never sounded more refined than in these choruses, which look back to the great choruses of Handel. Prepared by Robert Porco, who is celebrating his 25th season with the festival, the chorus articulated the German text with clarity and the choral sound was consistently buoyant.

Great choral fugues, as in "Awake the Harp," were pointed and controlled. The choral sound was energized and polished as they sang praise in choruses such as "The Heavens are telling the Glory of God."

Three fine soloists took on the roles of the three angels, and in Part III, Adam and Eve. It was a special treat to hear soprano Amanda Woodbury, who sang with effortless beauty

and sparkling high notes. She brought warmth and lovely vocal embellishments to the famous aria, "With Verdure Clad." Captivating to watch, she smiled through her "bird aria," "On Mighty Pens," and communicated with charm and stunning flights of coloratura. The graduate of the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music is clearly a rising star.

Equally impressive was the returning Icelandic bass-baritone, Kristinn Sigmundsson. He was an articulate storyteller, who soared through difficult leaps and florid passages with ease. He inspired chuckles from listeners as he sang of the animals, from tigers to slithering worms, and he brought noble weight to each word in "God Created Great Whales." His hymn with Woodbury, as Adam and Eve, was charming and operatic.

Tenor Ben Bliss, another rising star, also impressed with his lighter, lyrical voice. His aria "In Native Worth" was beautifully sung.

The 60-piece orchestra (with Michael Chertock playing harpsichord) played with rich character, particularly in the two big orchestral moments. In the opening of Part III, Conlon put down his baton to lead a stunning orchestral depiction of Adam and Eve's first sunrise.

We were left with Haydn's glorious choruses ringing in our ears in the brilliant finale, "Sing the Lord, Ye Voices All." With listeners on their feet, three tiny flower girls delivered their bouquets to the soloists. The evening ended on an unusual note for the season opener: Conlon led an audience sing-along of Handel's "Hallelujah" Chorus.

The May Festival continues on Saturday May 23 in Music Hall and on Sunday May 24 in the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption. Tickets: 513-381-3300, www.mayfestival.com.