

Hallelujah! – The Master Chorale is Reborn

Review by **Daniel Kepf** / VOICE

LAST WEEKEND'S FIRST PERFORMANCES by the Santa Barbara Master Chorale in nearly two years, Haydn's monumental oratorio, *The Creation*, revealed an organization that has completely re-invented itself. Sunday's performance, abetted by a crackerjack professional chamber orchestra, was first-rate. Shimmering with collective synergy, the Master Chorale is smaller now, leaner, and well prepared. The result, a handsome realization of Haydn's gloriously imaginative, colorful, and complicated masterpiece.

The Master Chorale has snagged a worthy new Artistic Director and Conductor for its 39th season,

David Lozano Torres. His résumé reveals a broad conducting interest and capability, easily visible at last Sunday's performance. Neither faux bravado nor maudlin angst clutter Torres' conducting dance card. Rather, his is a solidly dependable, focused, and importantly, calm helm. It's a strategy, together with clearly masterful preparation skills, that has elevated the Master Chorale's artistic ambitions. The results of Torres' leadership Sunday were magical; a performance that was as light on its musical feet as it was powerful and nuanced. Torres clarified and fine-tuned Haydn's complicated narrative patchwork stitched together from *Genesis*, *the Book of Psalms*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost* with admirable skill and finesse.

Soloists, soprano Christine Hollinger, tenor Lorenzo Johnson, Jr., and baritone Matthew Peterson sang the English language text with clarity of diction and unanimity of style. The Master Chorale enjoyed excellent ensemble balance and blend, spot-on pitch, clean articulation of difficult fugal and contrapuntal passagework, and above all energy. Considering the long hiatus before rehearsals resumed this past fall for *The Creation*, and acknowledging

this is a community choir, the quality of performance on Sunday represented an important artistic transformation for the group; musical light years now separate them from now.

Haydn (1732-1809) composed *The Creation* at the zenith of his career, 1797-1798, after two wildly successful trips to London to premiere his series of symphonies commissioned by the

impresario Johann Peter Salomon. He is known to have heard Handel's narrative oratorio, *Israel in Egypt* during one of those trips. Inspired, Haydn decided to compose a similarly large canvas for chorus, orchestra, and soloists, this time with no less a narrative story than the origin of the universe, and the creation of life on

planet earth.

The orchestral opening, *Representation of Chaos*, is a test of conducting stamina and pacing, that can make or break the spell of the work. In unskilled hands, Haydn's carefully imagined, orchestral imagery for the creation of the universe can be lost. Torres understood the task and followed the composer's orchestral roadmap clearly, beginning with a tasteful, Late Classical Period notion of the Big Bang chord which opens the work and launches Haydn's epic journey.

Throughout its three sections and nearly two-hours, *The Creation* is bejeweled with several orchestral interludes, each a wealth of musical imagination, energy, and compositional genius. The Master Chorale Orchestra, made up of some of the region's best professionals, performed these gems and additional colorfully orchestrated moments that pop up throughout the oratorio with tight dispatch and tasteful period stylings. Special salutations to timpanist Jonathan Palmquist and contrabassoonist Emilia Banninger.

Colorado transplant to Santa Barbara, baritone Matthew Peterson, was in excellent voice Sunday as archangel



Artistic Director and Conductor
David Lozano Torres



Raphael, the angel of the spirits of men. Presence, projection, a poise on stage that bespoke his budding operatic career, all paired nicely with Peterson's well-rounded and balanced sense of vocal color and theatrical inflection. Beginning with his first aria *Rolling in foaming billows*, and continuing through the entirety of his performance, Peterson engaged, and was engaging.

Pursuing his Doctor of Musical Arts in Vocal Performance at UCSB, tenor Lorenzo Johnson, Jr.'s mellifluous voice and malleable temperament as archangel Uriel, master of knowledge and archangel of wisdom, bound Haydn's complicated narrative journey together nicely from his first aria, *Now vanished by the holy beams*,

through various connective recitatives and a brief, colorful stint as Adam, culminating in the radiant aria, *And God saw everything that he had made*.

Santa Barbara-based soprano Christine Hollinger's delicate voice proved a good match for her role as the guardian of Israel, archangel Gabriel. Projection initially a problem, Hollinger found her acoustic niche in the large sanctuary by her second aria, *Now robed in cool refreshing green*. Her duo as Eve to Lorenzo Johnson's Adam, *By thee with grace*, and her trios with Johnson and Peterson, *In fairest raiment now*, and *From thee, O Lord, doth all proceed*, confirmed her collaborative skills and sense of balance, tone, and color.

Daniel Kepf has been writing music, theatre, and dance reviews for Santa Barbara publications since he was a teenager. His professional expertise is as an orchestra conductor.

For more reviews by Daniel Kepf visit: www.performingartsreview.net



Portugal, Castles, & Pipe Organs?

Santa Barbara music critic **Daniel Kepf** is taking a small group of participants on a 12-day tour of Portugal June 8-19, 2023, which will focus on visiting the cathedrals and historic pipe organs of the country. Stays in Lisbon and Porto will be supplemented by day trips to the Douro River Valley, Guimarães, Braga, Coimbra, Fátima, Malra, and the city of castles, Sintra. There are three spaces left for this trip. Full itinerary and costs: <https://emeritiphilharmonic.com/>

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