Musical Culture and Social Ideology in Vienna circa 1800: Aristocratic Patronage and Bourgeois Reception of Joseph Haydn’s Oratorios

Jen-yen Chen
Graduate Institute of Musicology
National Taiwan University, Taiwan

Abstract

Central to the modern reception of Haydn’s *The Creation* and *The Seasons* is a sense of their humanist universality: to cite but a single example, Friedrich Blume asserted that “with the unique exception of *The Magic Flute*, there are simply no other works of the time in which the universal language spoke in such degree to all mankind.” Somewhat counterbalancing this notion, however, are the circumstances of the patronage of the oratorios by the aristocrats who constituted the Gesellschaft der Associierten Cavalieri. The expenditure of nearly 2,500 florins by just a single member of the Associierten, Prince Joseph von Schwarzenberg, provides an indication of the intensive involvement of the Austrian elite in these two projects. In this essay, I shall draw upon sociological theory to illuminate the striking and rather odd conjunction of aristocratic and bourgeois dimensions that characterizes these works and their place in modern musical culture. In particular, Norbert Elias’ *The Civilizing Process* and *The Court Society* will provide the theoretical framework for understanding the entanglement of interests of the two social classes. Elias’ conceptual categories of prestige consumption and aesthetic sensibility and his arguments concerning their transfer from aristocracy to bourgeoisie can help to clarify essential aspects of the bourgeois ideology that arose around the time of the oratorios’ first performances and which remains influential today, including the canonical status of a repertory taken to represent a high point of civilization and modernity. This sociological perspective permits a nuanced understanding of the complex societal transformations that occurred at the end of the eighteenth century and of their impact upon music; it is thus a mode of analysis which neither disregards the broad appeal of Haydn’s two late masterworks nor subsumes them neatly under a rubric of universality without consideration of their clear social dimensions.
Keywords
Haydn, oratorio, Vienna, aristocracy, bourgeois, Enlightenment, canon, modernity, civilization, Norbert Elias
Introduction

The decades surrounding 1800 are rightly regarded as seminal ones in European society, during which a paradigmatic transformation occurred that shifted the balance of power from aristocracy to the bourgeoisies. A cataclysmic historical event, the French Revolution, strongly epitomizes this change, as does the notion of enlightenment as exemplified both by philosophical works such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Du contrat social* (The Social Contract, published 1762) and literary works such as Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais’ *Le mariage de Figaro* (The Marriage of Figaro, first performed 1784). Music also reflected the shift, and indeed Beaumarchais’ play is today far better known in its incarnation as a comic opera by Mozart, *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786).

A study of the musical culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century not only offers insights on the recasting of European life according to a bourgeois mode, however. It also helps to expose the enormous complexities of the process of change, in which the “new,” far from simply displacing the “old,” interacted intensively with it and in some fundamental respects was even defined by it. This notion of a close entanglement of aristocratic and bourgeois social classes, which represents the main argument of the present essay, will be illustrated through a consideration of the circumstances under which two acknowledged masterpieces of the Western musical tradition came into being and then into public consciousness: the oratorios *Die Schöpfung* (The Creation, first performed 1798) and *Die Jahreszeiten* (The Seasons, first performed 1801) by Joseph Haydn. In part because of the genre of oratorio, whose strong associations with “common people” derived largely from their massed choral element (Haydn’s two contributions were inspired by the example of works by George Frideric Handel such as *Messiah* and *Israel in Egypt*), and in part because of the manifestly populist tone of their texts and music, *The Creation* and *The Seasons* have fostered a powerful mythology of their humanist universality. To cite but a single example, the eminent German musicologist Friedrich Blume has asserted that “with the unique exception of *The Magic Flute*, there are simply no other works of the time in which the universal language spoke in such degree to all mankind.”

Counterbalancing such a notion however is the extensive financial and material support of the two oratorios by a powerful group of Austrian aristocrats known as the Gesellschaft der Associierten.

---

1 It is worth noting as well that Rousseau was himself a musician of some note, having composed the opera *Le devin du village* of 1752, among other works.
2 See Blume 73. Cited in Temperley 8.
Cavaliere (Society of Associated Cavaliers, henceforth abbreviated “Associierten”). An immediate sense of the intimate involvement of this social elite in these late compositional projects by Haydn may be garnered from the expenditures of just a single member of the Associierten, Prince Joseph von Schwarzenberg: during the four years from 1798 to 1801, this nobleman contributed a total of nearly 2,500 florins to the costs of performing the oratorios, publishing them, and liberally rewarding Haydn for his efforts. The exorbitance of this amount emerges clearly when one considers that the most highly paid musician regularly in the employ of the prince, the oboist Philipp Teimer, earned an annual salary of 450 florins during the same four years.

Clearly, a simple concept of “revolution” cannot adequately account for the full range of social and political changes that affected Europe around 1800, or indeed for the thoroughgoing transformation of any society at any point in history. The ways in which traditional structures and practices are retained and appropriated by the dominant forces of a new order frequently define a paradigmatic shift as much as the genuine overthrow of elements of the past. The striking conjunction of aristocracy and bourgeois dimensions that characterizes the inception, premieres, and modern reception of The Creation and The Seasons stands as an exemplary case study for such a viewpoint. In this essay, I shall illuminate this conception of change as an intensely dialectical interaction of “old” and “new” by referring to sociological theory, particularly that of Norbert Elias. Two key studies by Elias, Über den Prozess der Zivilisation (The Civilizing Process, 1939) and Die höfische Gesellschaft (The Court Society, 1969), will provide the framework by which to interpret the social and cultural conditions whereby artworks of such aristocratic pedigree as Haydn’s two oratorios later acquired their bourgeois aura. The following citation from The Court Society indicates the extent to which an investigation of the aristocracy can deeply inform us about the bourgeois, though the two are sometimes taken to be opposing categories:

As a central figuration of that stage of development, which after a long struggle gave way abruptly or gradually to a professional-bourgeois-urban-industrial stage, this aristocratic court society

---

3 This figure is derived from the documentary information presented in Gerhard Croll, “Mitteilungen über die Schöpfung und die Jahreszeiten aus dem Schwarzenberg-Archiv,” Haydn-Studien 3 (1973-74), 85-92. The florin was the principal currency of Austria during the period under discussion.

4 Schwarzenberg account books for 1798-1801, Státní oblastní archiv v Třeboňi pobočka Český Krumlov UP 276-79.
developed a civilizing and cultural physiognomy which was taken over by professional-bourgeois society partly as a heritage and partly as an antithesis and, preserved in this way, was further developed. By studying the structure of court society and seeking to understand one of the last great non-bourgeois figurations of the West, therefore, we indirectly gain increased understanding of our own professional-bourgeois, urban-industrial society.\(^5\)

A number of Elias’ specific conceptual categories, chief among them civilization, prestige consumption, and aesthetic sensibility, and his arguments concerning their transfer from the earlier to the later social class will help to clarify essential aspects of the bourgeois mindset that arose around the time of the oratorios’ first performances and which remains influential today. His formulation in *The Civilizing Process* of civilization as the self-conscious, self-defining behavior of a society keen on setting itself apart from other “lesser” and “primitive” societies offers a fundamentally valuable insight into the refined cultivation of the arts first by the aristocracy and then by the bourgeois, with such cultivation in the latter case resulting in the establishment of a musical canon of outstanding composers and works. The ideological power that this canon would later exert, not only within Europe but globally, by enforcing a notion of Western culture as the summit of human endeavor and therefore of universal significance to all peoples, represents a core issue for the understanding of modernity and its problematic aspects. Haydn, whose quintessential place in the canon is underscored by his membership in the triumvirate of “Classical” masters (the other two being Mozart and Beethoven),\(^6\) is a figure of self-evident importance in a consideration of this issue, and his two oratorios have unquestionably served as exemplars of the bourgeois concept of “great work.” Thus the older function of the arts within aristocratic life as a representation of status, so cogently depicted by Elias in *The Court Society*, was retained by the bourgeois in significant ways, if also with fundamentally new twists. More specifically, the aristocratic traits of prestige consumption (the conspicuous patronage of the “finer” things of life such as music, in an effort to articulate social superiority) and of aesthetic sensibility (the special sensitivity to the arts as the expression of a “higher” existence) have maintained a life in the post-Enlightenment world of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries:

---


Much that court people thought worthy of endeavour has paled and seems almost worthless now. But by no means everything. Closely bound up with court values that have lost their meaning and lustre are others that have lost very little. They include a large number of works of art and literature that are characteristic of the special cultivation of taste in court society; they also include a large number of buildings. We understand the language of forms better if we also understand the type of compulsion to display and of aesthetic sensibility characteristic of this society in conjunction with status competition.\footnote{Norbert Elias, \textit{The Court Society} 77.}

A brief caveat is in order before proceeding to a detailed consideration of the topics and issues outlined in this introduction. While the present essay attempts to promote a critical understanding of the canonical status of two beloved masterpieces of the European musical tradition, it does not intend to debunk their artistic distinction. Indeed, it is a fallacy to assume that skepticism towards the notion of canon automatically implies a wish to demonstrate that the works in the canon are somehow less great than formerly thought. The following discussion of \textit{The Creation} and \textit{The Seasons} rests upon a conviction that sociological and aesthetic viewpoints are not crudely opposed to one another, and that concern for the one perspective does not mean a devaluation of the other perspective. The literary scholars Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher have beautifully emphasized this point in defending their broadly contextual methodology: "Does this mean that we have constituted ourselves as, in the words of a detractor, ‘The School of Resentment’? Not at all: we are, if anything, inclined to piety. Nonetheless, any attempt at interpretation, as distinct from worship, bears a certain inescapable tinge of aggression, however much it is qualified by admiration and empathy" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 8-9). My ultimate aim here is to present a nuanced view of musical culture at the turn of the nineteenth century which neither disregards the broad appeal of Haydn’s two late masterworks nor subsumes them neatly under a rubric of universality without taking into account their manifest social dimensions.
Haydn’s Oratorios and Aristocratic Patronage

Haydn composed a total of four oratorios during the course of his long career: *Il ritorno di Tobia* (1775), *Die Sieben letzten Worte* (*The Seven Last Words*, originally an orchestral composition of circa 1786, first performed in an arrangement as an oratorio in 1796), *The Creation*, and *The Seasons*. By the time of these works, the genre of oratorio had enjoyed a long history in the Austrian lands, though one marked by a number of dramatic transformations in style and practice which corresponded to significant political and cultural changes. In Vienna during the first four decades of the eighteenth century, oratorios were the exclusive preserve of the Viennese imperial court, performed in a liturgical context as part of the somber observances of Lent, the penitential season extending over the forty days before Easter. This formal court liturgical practice came abruptly to an end with the death of Emperor Charles VI in 1740, following which the genre gradually entered the secular world of the Lenten concerts that took place in the Burgtheater, one of Vienna’s principal musical and theatrical venues. The court aspects of the oratorio by no means vanished wholly, however, for the Burgtheater stood immediately adjacent to the imperial palace and operated under court management. This link was consolidated in the early 1770s when Florian Leopold Gaßmann, who served as imperial music director at that time, founded the Tonkünstler-Societät (*Society of Musical Artists*), a charitable organization devoted to assisting the widows and children of deceased musicians through the funds collected from benefit performances of oratorios and other types of music.  

Haydn’s *Il ritorno di Tobia* of 1775, written during the composer’s first, extended stint of employment by the Esterházy aristocratic family (1761-90), belongs among the earliest oratorios presented under the auspices of the Tonkünstler-Societät. It reflects a further, crucial development in the social context of oratorio performance, for Haydn brought seven Esterházy musicians to Vienna for the work’s premiere and consequently generated resentment among the imperial musicians who felt that they held exclusive rights of participation in the society’s events (Heartz 380-82). This professional dispute, minor in and of itself, underscored an important shift in musical patronage from imperial court to aristocracy, a development that would culminate a decade later in the establishment of the Gesellschaft der Associerten by a number of the most prominent Austrian noblemen, with the Baron Gottfried van Swieten as organizational head. The

---

8 Carl Ferdinand Pohl, *Denkschrift aus Anlass des hundertjährigen Bestehens der Tonkünstler-Societät*, offers a comprehensive history of the society.
Associierten sponsored the first performances of Haydn’s remaining three oratorios, and Swieten himself prepared the librettos of *The Creation* and *The Seasons*.

In contrast to the benevolent function of the Tonkünstler-Societät, the primary aim of the new society seems to have been to cater to the refined musical tastes of its aristocratic members and thereby to reinforce the privileged status of this elite group. The effort to promote social distinction is evident first of all in the choice of the Esterházy and Schwarzenberg palaces as the exclusive settings for the oratorio performances arranged by the Associierten, though repeat performances in more public locations sometimes followed several days later. More significant, however, is the active cultivation of “serious” music as a self-redefinition by the aristocracy in face of changing conditions, particularly the growing influence of the middle class. Tia DeNora, who makes this argument in her *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius* (1995), notes Swieten’s fondness for the works of “old” composers such as Handel and Johann Sebastian Bach (which originated from his years as a diplomat in northern Germany) and regards this predilection as a driving force in the rise of serious music culture in late eighteenth-century Vienna (DeNora 20-27). Oratorios comfortably fit the new paradigm because of the formidable precedent offered by Handel’s works in the genre, whose unequaled impressiveness of choral writing contrasted so strikingly with the “lighter” music (such as arias and dances) favored by other aristocrats. Not unexpectedly then, the Associierten’s earliest events were dominated by performances of Handel’s music: *Judas Maccabaeus* (1786), *Acis and Galatea* (1788), *Messiah* (1789), *Ode for St. Cecilia’s Day* (1790), and *Alexander’s Feast* (1790), the first in an arrangement by Joseph Starzer and the last four in arrangements by Mozart. Later, *The Creation* and *The Seasons* would derive their central inspiration from the Handelian model, as shall be discussed below.

DeNora’s monograph, which is subtitled *Musical Politics in Vienna, 1792-1805*, presents substantial evidence in support of its thesis that the Viennese nobles actively patronized serious music in order to re-establish their social distance from the bourgeoisie, at a time when the formerly clear boundary between the two classes had come under threat. It goes to some length to challenge an older interpretation according to which the aristocracy was simply demonstrating its deep love of music. In offering this revised viewpoint, DeNora accomplishes the valuable service of fostering a sharper awareness of the multifaceted and complex ways in which musical works interact with their cultural milieux. Nevertheless, her argumentation problematically implies that sociological and aesthetic perspectives are largely opposed to one another. Elias more integratively (and hence more
insightfully) suggests that matters of taste are powerfully conditioned by social factors, and consequently are not definitively separable from them. In other words, “what we like” is a social behavior, in an important sense: “We understand the language of forms better if we also understand the type of compulsion to display and of aesthetic sensibility characteristic of this society in conjunction with status competition” (Elias, *The Court Society* 77). This linkage of “aesthetic sensibility” and “status competition” provides a comprehensive framework within which to consider the patronage of Haydn’s last oratorios by the Associierten.

*The Seven Last Words* originated as a liturgical orchestral composition commissioned by the church of Santa Cueva in Cádiz, Spain in 1784 or 1785. It contained seven separate movements each representing one of the last words spoken by Christ on the Cross. A first, unauthorized oratorio version of the work was prepared in 1795 by Joseph Friebert, who served as music director of the prince-bishops in Passau, on the Austro-German border. This version evidently motivated Haydn to make his own arrangement, which received its first performance in 1796 under the auspices of the Associierten. With all of its movements in slow tempo and of dark, somber cast, *The Seven Last Words* stands as an atypical and unique product of the Viennese oratorio tradition. *The Creation* belongs more firmly within the tradition, and at the same time reflects the profound impact upon Haydn of the experience of hearing Handel’s oratorios during his visits to England. The extraordinary expectations raised by the work among the aristocrats of the Associierten, partly the result of Swieten’s close involvement with the project from its earliest stages, help to account for the munificent funding of the earliest performances. An excellent sense of the full extent of this funding is available to modern scholars thanks to the research of Gerhard Croll, who uncovered a highly illuminating set of documents detailing the financial contributions of one of the members of the Associierten, Prince Joseph von Schwarzenberg (Croll, “Mitteilungen”). These documents are presently located in the Schwarzenberg family archive in Český Krumlov, Czech Republic.

Prince Joseph’s expenditures relating to Haydn’s final two oratorios began in 1798 with one-tenth of the remarkably impressive fee of 2,250 florins granted to Haydn for composing *The Creation*. The prince first heard the oratorio on 29 April, during which a dress rehearsal took place (the premiere followed one day later in the Schwarzenberg Palace in Vienna). The music clearly made a powerful impression upon him, for his response to the experience was to reward the composer with an additional 450 florins. The decision to compensate Haydn even

\[9\] See also Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste.*
further beyond the already enormous original fee suggests a deep aesthetic appreciation of a manifestly outstanding masterwork. At the same time, the generous remuneration of musicians for their compositions and performances was an important aristocratic practice of the eighteenth century, with the power to exhibit such generosity (and also to deny it!) serving as a marker of social superiority. The intertwining of aesthetic sensibility and prestige consumption is well illustrated here.

Prince Joseph was not the only aristocrat to react positively to *The Creation*. The furore generated among the Viennese nobility as a whole led to two additional performances in the Schwarzenberg Palace on 7 May and 10 May (Temperley 35), in support of which the prince provided 90 florins 8 kreuzer towards expenses including military guard (evidently to maintain order in the Neuer Markt, the public square where the palace was located).\(^\text{10}\) In the following year the oratorio featured again on the programmes of the Associerten, this time comprising a performance probably in the Schwarzenberg Palace that stretched over two days, 2 and 4 March, and the first public presentation of the work in the Burgtheater on 19 March. For these events, the archival documents show that Prince Joseph contributed a total of 339 florins 24 kreuzer, of which 240 florins were allotted towards unspecified expenses related to the public premiere. In 1800 the Viennese music dealer Artaria issued the score of *The Creation* in print, with the text of the oratorio in both German and English. The prince purchased six exemplars at the cost of 81 florins, again exemplifying prestige consumption as he had no obvious practical need for so many copies. In this year two more performances of the oratorio took place, the first over three days (4 April in the palace of the Count Fries and 6 and 7 April in the Burgtheater) and the second over two days (12 and 13 April in the Schwarzenberg Palace). For these Prince Joseph supplied a total of 159 florins 57 kreuzer towards organizational costs, including 61 florins 3 kreuzer for candle lighting on the latter occasion.

Haydn’s next and final oratorio, *The Seasons*, received its premiere on 24 April 1801 in the Schwarzenberg Palace and its public premiere five weeks later, on 29 May, in the Redoutensaal, located in the imperial palace. Once again, Prince Joseph provided generous financial support, amounting to 1,003 florins 7 kreuzer for candle lighting, guard, the clearing of vendors from the Neuer Markt, and other

---

\(^\text{10}\) There were sixty kreuzer in one florin.
expenses and also for Haydn’s fee.\footnote{According to the Schwarzenberg account book for 1801, 58 florins 49 kreuzer were paid on 11 April for the lighting. Croll believes that the early date of this payment suggests yet another performance of The Creation, shortly before the premiere of The Seasons (“Mitteilungen” 91-92).} Later in the year, the prince contributed 100 florins towards the costs of organizing a benefit performance of The Creation which took place on 27 December in the Redoutensaal, with the proceeds going to the St. Marxer Bürgerspital (a hospital for commoners).

In summary, between 1798 and 1801 Prince Joseph devoted the extremely considerable sum of 2,448 florins 36 kreuzer to the patronage of Haydn’s two last oratorios. Though he may have been exceptionally munificent in comparison to most of the other members of the Associierten, he nevertheless leaves no room for doubt concerning the degree of aristocratic commitment to Haydn and his oratorio projects. In a crucial sense, then, this music was the product of elite culture.

On the whole, the patronage conditions of the Viennese oratorio during the eighteenth century demonstrated both a marked process of transition and a significant aspect of continuity. At first cultivated exclusively at the imperial court, the genre later became more “democratized” through its gradual entry into the world of public concert life, yet never lost its associations with social privilege as prominent aristocrats keenly took an interest in the music and extensively sponsored it. This circumstance necessarily shapes any carefully considered view of the bourgeois dimensions of the oratorio.

**Haydn’s Oratorios and Bourgeois Reception**

The perception of The Creation and The Seasons as music for “all mankind” is nowhere more compellingly reinforced than in Haydn’s unforgettable depiction of the creation of light in the earlier work:
The overwhelming effect of the sudden *fortissimo* may be understood not only as a representation of God’s mighty powers but also as a paradigmatic expression of the conquest by the “light of reason” of “dark” (i.e. irrational) practices such as the determination of an individual’s worth solely according to his birth into a particular social class. Indeed, the notion of human progress towards a just society based on reason lies at the core of the concept of “Enlightenment,” one of whose principal meanings is “to bring light,” i.e. to those without it. In Vienna at the turn of the nineteenth century, the policies of the “Enlightenment” Emperor Joseph II (co-ruler with his mother Empress Maria Theresa from 1765 to 1780, sole ruler from 1780 to 1790) remained a powerful legacy, even though the more radical elements of his reform programme had been reversed by his successors Leopold II (ruled 1790 to 1792) and Francis II (ruled 1792 to 1835, from 1806 as Austrian Emperor Francis I following the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire). The egalitarian tradition that most directly shaped the character of Haydn’s last two oratorios was that of eighteenth-century England.

Earlier than any of the continental European nations, England developed a social and political model based on the concepts of representative government, free trade, and public discourse through the organs of media (especially newspapers). It fostered a literate culture in which authors such as Joseph Addison, Jonathan Swift, and Samuel Richardson hinted at the themes of bourgeois dignity and individualism in their writings. Musical culture likewise took on a pronounced middle-class character especially through the rise of an active commercial concert life. The imposing series of oratorios written by Handel between the 1730s and

---

12 See Habermas, esp. 58-67.
13 See Simon McVeigh, *Concert Life in London from Mozart to Haydn*. McVeigh notes, however, that for all the development of bourgeois society in London, strongly elitist attitudes continued to define artistic life, just as in Vienna.

Genesis, chapter 1, verses 1-4; English version from the King James Bible
the 1750s epitomized this populist shift, especially as they supplanted the opera, the elite musical art *par excellence* (and Handel’s principal focus of compositional activity until his turn to the oratorio). Opera certainly partook as well in a “democratizing” process over the course of the eighteenth century, with the preeminence of *opera seria* (Italian serious opera), which Charles Rosen has called “an explicit apology for absolutism,”\(^{14}\) giving way to other traditions less explicitly oriented around imperial ideologies, such as *opera buffa* (Italian comic opera) and especially *Singspiel* (German opera). However, a clear qualitative difference exists, I would argue, in the oratorio’s quintessential element of the chorus, which could be comfortably articulated to notions of massed, communal humanity. Such a linkage may well have helped to foster the proliferation of amateur singing societies beginning around 1800, but a comparable development could not occur so readily with the opera, with its greater emphasis on vocal soloism even in its later, less socially elitist forms. Still, the use of grand choruses as symbolic representations of the “people” did not shape the character only of oratorio in the bourgeois era, for this practice centrally defined the revolutionary aspect of the French grand opera of the early nineteenth century.

Thus, one may reasonably endeavor to elucidate the social implications of Handel’s epochal turn from a genre featuring star solo singers and Italian texts to one characterized by a predominance of choral textures and the use of vernacular English. Over half a century later, when Haydn visited London during two enormously successful, commercially motivated journeys, he encountered Handel’s oratorios in performances in the majestic space of Westminster Abbey. Specifically, the experience of hearing *Israel in Egypt* and *Messiah* rendered by massive choral and orchestral forces undoubtedly left its mark upon the style of *The Creation* and *The Seasons*. One of Haydn’s earliest biographers describes the impact upon the composer as follows: “[H]e meditated on every note and drew from those most learned scores the essence of true musical grandeur” (Carpani 162-63).\(^{15}\) This conception of musical grandeur, along with its populist overtones, made its way to Vienna with Haydn’s return home in 1795 and there found a welcome setting

---


thanks to the fertile ground already prepared in the 1780s during the height of the Austrian Enlightenment.

Following their triumphant premieres, Haydn’s two oratorios quickly transcended their originally exclusive contexts to become among the best known works in all of Europe. In the process, they helped crucially to define a modern concept of the musical canon, based on notions of “universal” approbation and permanence in concert repertoires. Articulating a sense of the landmark historical significance of *The Creation* and *The Seasons*, A. Peter Brown noted in an essay of 1993 that “No composer in the German-speaking lands could not be familiar with these frequently performed and studied Haydn oratorios, which were some of the first works to achieve canonicity” (Brown 26). Later in the same essay, Brown insightfully located this canonicity in the degree to which the oratorios attained the status of “classics,” that is, lasting benchmarks of compositional achievement which served as essential inspiration for composers throughout the nineteenth century:

For Beethoven, *The Creation* and *The Seasons* established a musical language that became so well known that the message of Haydn’s music existed independent of its text. Hence, as has been argued, Beethoven rewrote Haydn’s “Chaos to Light” several times over and, as has further been noted, Beethoven found other of Haydn’s ideas suitable for emulation. If for this reason alone, these oratorios were to become a primary source of nineteenth-century musical gestures and styles as composers continued to find in *The Creation* and *The Seasons* worthy allusions, quotations, and models. (Brown 54)

It is possible to trace at least the broad historical outlines of this “classicizing” process. Following their first performances in Vienna, *The Creation* and *The Seasons* were rapidly disseminated throughout Europe and beyond. For example, the premieres of *The Creation* in London and Paris took place in 1800, on 28 March and 24 December respectively, and by the first decade of the century the work had reached the United States, where an abridged version was heard in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania in 1810 (Temperley 39-42). A tradition of regular, repeated performances soon established itself, so that Vienna’s other major music society devoted to oratorios, the Tonkünstler-Societät, presented *The Creation* eighteen times and *The Seasons* fifteen times between 1798 and 1830 (the Gesellschaft der Associierten had ceased to exist following Swieten’s death in 1803). These numbers were rivaled only by Handel’s works, which collectively received a total of ten
performances by the Tonkünstler-Societät in the same period (Brown 26). The reconstituting of this society as the Haydn-Societät in 1862 provides a clear indication of the degree to which Haydn came to be perceived as the dominant figure in oratorio during the course of the nineteenth century, at least in Austria (Temperley 44). Nearly fifty years earlier, his central importance for the genre had similarly been enshrined in the foundation of the Handel and Haydn Society of Boston, which gave the first complete American performance of *The Creation* in 1815 (Temperley 42).\(^\text{16}\) Here, on the other side of the Atlantic, the work also gradually took permanent hold, so that by 1853 Thomas Hastings, a noted writer on music, could observe that “Haydn’s ‘Creation’, as well as Handel’s ‘Messiah’, has been extensively admired in this country, and it continues to be performed in many places, now after the lapse of some thirty years, almost with undiminished interest” (Temperley 42).

Haydn’s oratorios (and *The Creation* in particular) helped to initiate a new kind of musical practice which would later become so firmly entrenched as to obscure any awareness that it had not always existed: the repetition of old musical “classics,” year after year, as part of a standard concert repertory. This kind of longevity was an alien concept for much of the eighteenth century, during which a given work typically garnered a handful of performances and then disappeared from public consciousness (as a result of which composers tended to write an enormous quantity of music, in comparison to later periods). The new notion of “everlasting” art no doubt received an essential impetus from the equally new bourgeois ideology of “universality” that came into being in the wake of the French Revolution. Thus, Haydn’s music enjoyed an enormous success in France in spite of the ongoing war with Austria. One writer even proclaimed the popularity of his compositions “as much a triumph for France as for the fatherland of this immortal artist” (Temperley 41).

Further evidence of the canonical status of *The Creation* and *The Seasons* lies in the frequent use of their music as models by later composers. In his 1993 essay, Brown presented an impressive series of examples of such modeling, based on similarities of melody, harmony, rhythm, instrumentation, and gesture as well as of topic, such as the burst of Light upon darkness and chaos. No composer seems to have more directly taken account of the great precedent set by the two oratorios than Beethoven, who had studied with Haydn in the 1790s, and for him the Creation of Light was especially paradigmatic, for he recalled it in the first movement of the Fourth Symphony, the transition to the finale of the Fifth Symphony, the first movement of the String Quartet in C major, op. 59/3, and the chorus for male

\(^{16}\) The Handel and Haydn Society continues to exist to this day.
voices (no. 2) from the incidental music for King Stephan, op. 117. A related inspiration is evident in the Leonore Overture no. 3, in which a syncopated figure at measures 168-75 clearly evokes a comparable figure from measures 26-29 and 48-49 of “The Representation of Chaos” that opens The Creation. Concerning this particular citation, Brown writes “it follows the theme of Florestan’s second-act aria with the text ‘In des Lebens Frühlingstagen / In the springtime of life,’ evidently an indication of the freedoms of the past in contrast to the confinement in the darkness/chaos of the present” (Brown 44). In other words, the transcending of darkness conveyed the Enlightenment ideal of individual freedom, achieved through the rationalistic overcoming of superstition (i.e. darkness), whether social, as in the notion of birth as determinant of privilege, or political, as in Pizarro’s unjust imprisonment of Florestan in Beethoven’s opera. This metaphorical resonance surely helps to account for the profound impact of The Creation upon subsequent generations of composers and listeners.

Other influences of Haydn’s two oratorios on specific compositions by Beethoven include the pastoral pictorialism of the Sixth Symphony, which an 1809 review in the music periodical Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung particularly linked to The Seasons (Brown 46-48); and gestural, orchestral, and contrapuntal features of the Second, Fifth, and Ninth Symphonies, the Choral Fantasy, and Fidelio. Later composers also demonstrated a deep consciousness of Haydn’s masterpieces. The opening of Schubert’s Fourth Symphony clearly imitates the initial measures of The Creation, and the rising chordal progression at the opening of Mendelssohn’s Overture to A Midsummer Night’s Dream recalls a similar progression immediately following the words “wie ein Traum” (like a dream) from the recitative “Wo sind sie nun, die hoh’n Entwürfe” in The Seasons. Brown even goes so far as to suggest parallels between Haydn’s oratorios and much later works such as Wagner’s The Flying Dutchman, Schoenberg’s Gurrelieder, and Ravel’s Daphnis et Chloe, though in these instances the line of influence can no longer be considered direct since by this time The Creation and The Seasons had become fully assimilated within the canonical musical language to whose formation they so crucially contributed.

Inspired by Handel’s example, Haydn’s two late oratorios powerfully articulated a new bourgeois musical expression through their egalitarian overtones. The aristocratic circumstances of their inception notwithstanding, these works soon attained a broad popularity which transcended national and class boundaries. Their impact upon later composers reflects this bourgeois conception of musical practice, in that it corresponds to an idea of artistic creativity as the product of transcendentally
gifted individuals, with one genius passing the torch to the next, as it were. Indeed, precisely such a notion was expressed by the Count Waldstein in 1792, who wrote to a young Beethoven departing Bonn for the Austrian capital: “You are going to Vienna in fulfillment of your long frustrated wishes. . . . You will receive the spirit of Mozart from the hands of Haydn” (Rosen, The Classical Style 19). In this celebrated linking of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven lies one of the beginnings of the concept of canon, that is, an elite group of outstanding composers, almost superhuman in their sublime musical powers. The aspect of exclusivity embodied in the ideology of canon counterbalances the populist strivings that paralleled the rise of this ideology and produces one of the curious tensions and contradictions characteristic of the bourgeois mindset. In the concluding section of this essay, I offer a theorization of the seeming paradox by returning to the sociological theories of Norbert Elias, which offer fundamentally valuable insights into the interaction of aristocratic and bourgeois social practices and hence into a central condition of modernity.

**Haydn, Civilization, and Modernity**

The birth of a “Classical” canon of music during the nineteenth century derives to a large extent from the social transformations brought about by the advancement of industry. Increased availability of printed music and instruments as a result of technological development and commercialization meant more choices for ever greater numbers of middle-class musical consumers. The options available were by no means arbitrary or random. Rather, they reflected the bourgeois conviction that culture possessed a moral and ethical power, and could shape individuals for the better. Not surprisingly, then, the study of the arts occupied an important place in the bourgeois educational programme, and it was specifically at this time that music schools and conservatories, devoted to promoting “good” music, came into existence. The concept of “good” music necessarily depended on a contrast with “bad” music, and hence arose the dichotomy of “classical” and “popular” music (Middleton).

The ostensibly benevolent aim of this selection of certain types of music to “cultivate” the population at large should not obscure an awareness of its ideological dimensions. The ways in which artistic canons have served to reinforce

---

17 Of related interest is James Webster, “The Creation, Haydn’s Late Vocal Music, and the Musical Sublime,” which considers the transformation of meaning of the aesthetic category of the Sublime around 1800, as illustrated by the late oratorios and masses of Haydn.
social distinction and differentiation need hardly be mentioned. In the following
discussion, I shall contend that this aspect of exclusivity demonstrates the legacy of
aristocratic society as specifically manifested in the concept of civilization. Elias’
_The Civilizing Process_, though now some seven decades old, still represents a
quintessential work on the subject. His balanced and critical understanding of
civilization as neither “the most advanced of all humanly possible modes of
behaviour” nor “the worst form of life and one that is doomed,” but as an invaluable
means by which to foster insights into both the assets and problems of modern life,
informs the arguments presented below in a fundamentally important way (Elias,
_The Civilizing Process_ xiv).

_The Civilizing Process_ eloquently and cogently articulates a view that
civilization is not a timeless and objective condition of human existence as
represented by certain social groups. Rather, it arose as a result of historical
processes which culminated in the heyday of court society during the period
extending from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century. The apex of this society
occurred during the so-called Age of Absolutism, whose paradigmatic figure was
King Louis XIV of France (reigned 1643-1715). By this time, the old feudal order
had passed irrevocably, and the triumph of the aristocratic way of life assumed
concrete form in a superbly refined mode of behavior:

The sociogenesis of absolutism indeed occupies a key position in the
overall process of civilization. The civilizing of conduct and the
corresponding transformation of the structure of mental and
emotional life cannot be understood without tracing the process of
state-formation, and within it the advancing centralization of society
which first found particularly visible expression in the absolutist form
of rule. (Elias, _The Civilizing Process_ 191)

It would be a special project (and a very fascinating one) to show
how much the specific mental orientation and ideals of a courtly-
absolutist society found expression in classical French tragedy… The
importance of good form, the specific mark of every genuine
“society”; the control of individual feelings by reason, a vital
necessity for every courtier; the reserved behaviour and elimination
of every plebeian expression, the specific mark of a particular stage
on the road to “civilization”—all this finds it purest expression in
classical tragedy. (Elias, _The Civilizing Process_ 15)
The sociopolitical nature of Absolutism, civilized behavior, and a highly dignified art form—all of these phenomena cluster into an indissolubly integrated whole which epitomizes the courtly worldview. In Elias’ interpretation, the development of polished, “cultured” conduct arose as a product of the powerful psychological drive within aristocratic society toward the marking out of class difference. Everything that could set the members of this society above the common, undistinguished masses acquired special value, including the arts. Consequently, the sociological and aesthetic dimensions of a highly sensitized appreciation of forms of culture became closely linked with one another. In other words, “liking music,” or more precisely the predisposition toward such liking, was socially modulated, and not solely the reflection of individual personalities. Elias refers to this “transformation of the structure of mental and emotional life” as affect molding. The specific product of the molding was “the aesthetic sensibility characteristic of this society” (Elias, The Court Society 77).

The later appropriation of “civilized” values by the bourgeoisie manifests a complex, dual relationship toward its aristocratic predecessor as both “heritage” and “antithesis” (Elias, The Court Society 40). Elias persuasively demonstrates that a far more negative attitude toward civilization which regarded it as superficial, shallow politeness emerged among the middle class in Germany than elsewhere in Europe, above all because of the absence of a dominant, centralized court. By contrast, in France, where such a court presided overwhelmingly over the nation, one can discern a continuity of aristocratic and bourgeois attitudes: “[T]hrough the close contact between aristocratic and middle-class circles, a great part of courtly manners had long before the revolution become middle-class manners. So it can be understood that the bourgeois revolution in France, though it destroyed the old political structure, did not disrupt the unity of traditional manners” (Elias, The Civilizing Process 42).

What about in Austria? Though German-speaking, the territories ruled by the Habsburg imperial family from Vienna much more closely resembled France in the absolutist character of governance. Elias surmises that a close association of bourgeois and aristocracy was found above all in Catholic countries, such as France, Austria, and Spain (Elias, The Civilizing Process 189-91). His suggestion possesses unquestionable merit, for in these nations the centuries-old heritage of Roman Catholicism imprinted an ideology of monolithic power upon society and culture, and specifically upon the institution of the monarchy. The notion of divine right, or heavenly validation of kingly rule, characterized the French royal house but is most strikingly illustrated by the Habsburg sovereigns in Vienna, who held the title not of
“Austrian Emperor” but of “Holy Roman Emperor” from the late fifteenth century until 1806. The musicologist Friedrich Wilhelm Riedel has coined the expression *Reichstil* to convey the centralization not only of politics but also of culture under the Habsburg monarchs (Riedel 33-36). According to this concept, which is well supported by empirical evidence, the imperial capital of Vienna stood as a model for the rest of the Austrian domains in the most diverse spheres, including the arts. Under these conditions, the development of “civilization” and the intertwined involvement of aristocracy and bourgeoisie in “civilized” life could proceed along the lines exemplified by France. The power of Elias’ sociological theory in explicating the aristocratic patronage of Haydn’s oratorios, on the one hand, and their active reception by the bourgeoisie, on the other hand, starts to become evident here.

A final aspect of Elias’ theoretical model which possesses relevance for the present discussion is the notion of civilization as a specifically Western self-identity, by means of which the European nations fostered its sense of superiority to the rest of the world:

> [T]his concept expresses the self-consciousness of the West. One could even say: the national consciousness. It sums up everything in which Western society of the last two or three centuries believes itself superior to earlier societies or ‘more primitive’ contemporary ones. By this term Western society seeks to describe what constitutes its special character and what it is proud of: the level of its technology, the nature of its manners, the development of its scientific knowledge or view of the world, and much more. (Elias, *The Civilizing Process* 5)

Elias furthermore argues that in the eighteenth century, that is, during the period of the Enlightenment, the civilizing process in Europe reached a culminating point such that Western self-identity became fully stabilized and the sense of civilization as the product of a historical development vanished from consciousness, to be replaced by a belief in its synchronic truth (Elias, *The Civilizing Process* 43). Europeans thus came to believe that they had always been civilized, and this sense of self-assurance helped to initiate the most intense era in the history of colonialism.

---

18 See, for example, Jen-yen Chen 76-90. For more on the universalist ideology of the Habsburg rulers, see Andrew Wheatcroft, *The Habsburg: Embodying Empire* and Anna Coreth, *Pietas Austriaca*. 
To a certain extent, the concept of civilization plays down the national differences between peoples; it emphasizes what is common to all human beings or—in the view of its bearers—should be. It expresses the self-assurance of peoples whose national boundaries and national identity have for centuries been so fully established that they have ceased to be the subject of any particular discussion, peoples which have long expanded outside their borders and colonized beyond them. (Elias, The Civilizing Process 7)

This discourse of universality (“what is common to all human beings, or should be”) furnishes the context for pronouncements such as that by Friedrich Blume cited above concerning the significance of Western culture, or of exemplary artworks such as Haydn’s oratorios, for all humanity.

Conclusion

The dual, not wholly compatible aristocratic and bourgeois aspects of *The Creation* and *The Seasons* highlight a number of crucial features of modernity and the place of music within it. The active patronage of these works by the Gesellschaft der Associierten on the one hand and their extraordinary success among middle-class audiences on the other exemplify the circumstance that, in Europe during the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment, one social class was not simply replaced by another; rather, the two “entangled” in significant ways. More specifically, in absolutist Austria at the turn of the nineteenth century, the aspirations of the emergent bourgeois did not always conflict with aristocratic ones, but were continuous with them to an important extent. Thus, a powerful group of Viennese noblemen and an outstanding bourgeois artist mutually fostered each other’s eminence. The continuities of value included a conception of “high” culture, or what Pierre Bourdieu has termed “cultural nobility” (Bourdieu 2), as the special domain of privileged social groups (whether one defines privilege by birth, education, talent, or other parameters). The middle-class appropriation of the elitist attitude involved a reworking of exclusivity to incorporate a rhetoric of universality as a means of valorizing the composers and works selected to represent “high” art. This idiosyncratic juxtaposition of “music for some” and “music for all” quintessentially defines the idea of canon as it arose in Europe during the nineteenth century. *The Creation* and *The Seasons* were initially heard by an extremely select audience, then shortly afterwards by broader audiences, but their listenership never
came close to including all of humanity. This is true even today, when the ideology of Western civilization has helped to spread the European musical canon around the globe, in an extremely pervasive form of cultural colonialism.

Elias has vividly characterized the duality of the bourgeois mindset: “The doors below must remain shut. Those above must open” (Elias, The Civilizing Process 18). One may regard this double standard as a kind of duplicity, but a more tolerant view is possible in consideration of the confusions of modernity and the consequent desire for re-entrenchment. Reinhard Koselleck, in a celebrated work on the Enlightenment and Absolutism, identifies as an essential feature of modernity “the sense that we are being sucked into an open and unknown future, the pace of which has kept us in a constant state of breathlessness ever since the dissolution of the traditional ständische societies” (Koselleck 3). A different author, Nicholas Till, eloquently describes the response to the “unknown future” in the following words, from a study of Mozart’s operas and their relationship to the ideas of the Enlightenment:

People living in societies undergoing the fundamental transition from closed, customary and religious patterns of organization to more open, individualistic, relativistic and secular systems experience with special intensity humankind’s otherwise universal (since all human beings must abandon infancy) sense of a lost past in which order, wholeness and certainty prevailed. It is in these periods that the characteristic modern experiences of deracination, alienation and doubt arise, and in which people seek the new certainties of truth, virtue and beauty. (Till 6)

That The Magic Flute, The Creation, The Seasons, and other comparable works seem so compellingly to have fulfilled the urgent need for the “new certainties” is the mark of their greatness. For example, the broadly humane, populist appeal of The Seasons was noted already in a review of the oratorio which appeared a mere one week after the premiere: “These pieces [referring to the Autumn section of the work] were received with elation and enthusiasm by every listener, because they are so easily and generally comprehensible.”

appreciation of a music with such apparent power to transcend division and difference has continued to recent times. To cite but two commentators, H.C. Robbins Landon writes that “the Oratorio [The Creation] is in the great liberal, humanitarian tradition which brought forth [The Magic Flute] and would shortly give Fidelio to the world. To this tradition The Creation was one of the fundamental and lasting contributions” (Landon, IV 426); while Thomas Bauman, discussing an earlier Singspiel by Mozart, The Abduction from the Seraglio, notes that “The admixture makes possible the amalgamation of the sublime and the humane heard in the glorious Andantino, ‘Wenn unsrer Ehre wegen’—transfigured recomposition of ‘Placido è il mar’ in Idomeneo, hearing which we catch a first intimation of the hymnic humanism that pervades The Magic Flute” (Bauman 77). Thus the canonical status of this music is certainly not “wrong,” for individuals and societies who have undergone a specific type of historical and cultural experience (and not just from the West). However, the broader notion that such a status implies a universal validity for humankind whereby civilization is brought to all peoples represents a problematic issue of modernity and of an era in which the encounters of diverse cultures have reached a dizzying level. The present essay has aimed primarily to articulate this issue, the more detailed treatment of which remains to future studies.

Works Cited


Chen / Musical Culture 215


About the Author

Jen-yen Chen is Assistant Professor in the Graduate Institute of Musicology at National Taiwan University. He received his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 2000 with a dissertation on sacred music in eighteenth-century Vienna. His publications include articles in Journal of Musicological Research, Ad Parnassum, and Musiktheorie, chapters in About Bach (U of Illinois P, 2008) and Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Music (Cambridge UP, 2009), and volumes for the complete edition of the works of Johann Joseph Fux.
Email: jenyenc@ntu.edu.tw

[Received 15 Mar. 2009; accepted 28 Jan. 2010; revised 22 Feb. 2010]