

ABOUT THE MUSIC

The late Masses of **Joseph Haydn** (1732–1809) count as one of the supreme achievements in Western music. In the 1790s, the decade after Mozart’s death, Haydn was hailed across Europe as the undisputed master of the symphony and the string quartet. Freed from service—which he often experienced as servitude—to his princely patron, he enjoyed two lengthy residencies in London that left him a wealthy and famous man, and left us twelve brilliant and inventive symphonies. Upon his return to Vienna, in 1795, Haydn embarked on the final phase of his musical career, one that was to be occupied by large scale choral–orchestral works of a kind never experienced before, and rarely equaled since.

The Mass No. 11 in D minor (1798), commonly called the *Lord Nelson Mass* (in German, *Nelsonmesse*), is one of six settings of the Mass Ordinary that Haydn composed for the name-day of Princess Maria Hermenegild, wife of Prince Nikolaus II Esterházy. The Esterházy family owned swaths of modern-day Hungary and maintained palaces that rivaled those of the Emperor. For all their wealth and power, they are now known almost exclusively for their affiliation with Haydn. On succeeding to the Esterházy interests in 1794, Nikolaus set about restoring the musical splendor of his grandfather’s court. Recruiting, in Haydn, one of its leading lights was surely a major coup for the young prince.

Like its predecessor, the 1796 *Mass in Time of War*, the Lord Nelson Mass bears the stamp of the great European conflict that erupted from the French Revolution and the rise of Napoleon. The summer of 1798, when Haydn composed the *Mass*, saw the Hapsburg empire in a tense cease-fire with the French Republic. But the drums of war were never far off. Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt provoked swift action from Great Britain, and from August 1–3, 1798, a surprise attack led by Admiral Horatio Nelson smashed the French fleet lying at anchor in Aboukir Bay, near Alexandria. Legend has it that Nelson’s great victory at the Battle of the Nile gave this mass its popular title. In reality, news of the battle would not have reached Austria until some weeks after, by which time Haydn had finished the work. The Nelson sobriquet more likely came from the *Mass* having been played for the Admiral and his mistress, Lady Hamilton, on their visit to the Esterházy family seat at Eisenstadt in 1800. Haydn himself called it the *Missa in angustiis*, roughly speaking, in “troubled times” or “straitened circumstances.”

The spare instrumentation of the *Lord Nelson Mass*, a function of wartime economizing at the Esterházy court, distinguishes the work from Haydn’s more resplendent late compositions. It was scored only for strings, trumpets, timpani, and organ (played by the composer at the first performance), the available woodwind players having been

furloughed for the summer and fall months. Although Haydn sanctioned the addition of wind parts for publication and later performance, the raw sound of the original version remains extremely effective. As the Haydn scholar H. C. Robbins Landon observes, “the total absence of wind parts, the solemn key of D minor, and the acid, biting texture of the trumpets, all lend a special kind of asperity to the music.” The choral and solo writing is highly dramatic, and demands great energy and vocal agility.

Structurally, the *Lord Nelson Mass* is in the “symphonic mass” style perfected by Haydn in his later years. Individual sections of the Mass Ordinary are organized into “movements” within a coherent dramatic arc: The Kyrie—dark and portentous—anchors the Mass and expresses its signature musical themes, rhythmical devices and instrumental character. (Listen for the trumpet fanfares throughout the rest of the work!) The Gloria imbeds the pathos of the “Qui tollis” section within a larger hymn of praise. In the Credo, Haydn skillfully lays out the principal statement of Christian belief, with intense dramatic focus on the events of Jesus’ life on earth. The Sanctus conveys a sense of mystery becoming to the most ancient text used in the Mass. The Benedictus—famous for the trumpet interjections—has, like Haydn’s other settings of this section, some of the most inventive music in the entire work. In the Agnus Dei—*Dona nobis pacem* sequence that concludes the work, anxiety meets resolution. On the whole, it is a work “organized around the conceptual image of salvation, at once personal and communal, achieved at or

near the end: the musical realization of the desire for a state of grace.”

As the so-called Father of the Symphony, Haydn intended his music to project a “communal voice,” and to express musical ideas that were, in his own words, “writ large.” In his role as Father of the String Quartet, he mastered the art of conversation among instruments, and by extension, among voices. Hailed by his contemporaries as a musical Shakespeare, he understood profoundly the techniques of narrative, character development, action and pacing that give great theater—and indeed much of his music—its communicative power. (A biographer recounts Haydn’s statement that he “often portrayed moral characters in his symphonies.”) A master of musical rhetoric, he manipulated surprise, irony and humor to help make his points. In the late Masses, of which the *Lord Nelson Mass* is the most theatrical, and in the oratorios, Haydn synthesized all of his gifts as a composer. Taken together, these fruits of Haydn’s last active decade embody the life force of a man who wrote, “when I think of God I must simply be happy.”

—John Maclay