

Quad City Symphony Orchestra

PROGRAM NOTES

Masterworks IV: The Stars Above & Sands Below

By Jacob Bancks

Associate Professor of Music

Augustana College

FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN (1732-1809)

“Die Vorstellung des Chaos” (“The Depiction of Chaos” from *Die Schöpfung* (*The Creation*))

Instrumentation: 2 Flutes, 2 Oboes, 2 Clarinets, 2 Bassoons, 2 Horns, 2 Trumpets, 3 Trombones, Timpani, and Strings.

Premiere: March 19, 1799, Burgtheater, Vienna. The work had been privately performed the preceding April.

QCSO Premiere. It’s been nearly 100 years since any portion of *The Creation* has been performed by the QCSO; a Masterworks concert in 1927 included the chorus entitled “The Heavens are Telling”, sung by a chorus named the “Lutheran A Capella Choir” and conducted by Ludwig Becker.

Baron Gottfried van Swieten is one of those historical figures who are almost too fascinating to be real. Born in the Netherlands, he was son of Gerard van Swieten, personal physician to the legendary Empress Maria Theresa. Like his father, he became an official in the Holy Roman Empire, first as diplomat and then in a number of administrative posts, including head of the imperial library (where he designed and implemented the first card catalog in history), education secretary, and head censor.

In between his many official duties, the Baron loved music. A composer himself, he

developed close relationships with many prominent Viennese musicians, including Mozart and later Beethoven. But he was closest of all to Haydn, providing texts for three of Haydn’s choral masterpieces from his mature years: *The Seven Last Words of Christ* (1795), *The Creation* (1798), and *The Seasons* (1801).

Both Haydn and von Swieten shared a love and admiration for the works of George Frederick Handel, and *The Creation* can be thought of as an inheritor to the oratorios of Handel, especially *Messiah*. The work’s prelude is a shadowy portrayal of the primeval elements of the universe prior to the creation of the world. The passage in the oratorio that immediately follows this prelude is its absolute opposite: to contrast to the creeping uncertainty of chaos, Haydn depicts the moment when God creates light with the resounding blast of a C major triad.



Depiction of Chaos Listening Guide

♪ **HARMONY.** The piece begins on a *unison C*, meaning everyone is playing the same pitch in various registers. This ends up being the passage's home note (i.e., *tonic*); Haydn sets his primordial chaos in a very murky version of C minor.

♪ **DYNAMICS.** Wide dynamic contrast is something of a calling card for Haydn; his *Surprise* symphony is another example of his experimentation with extremes of loudness and softness.

♪ **HARMONY.** We ordinarily feel the "gravity" of the end of a musical phrase by what's called a *cadence*, so Haydn very methodically inflicts musical "vertigo" by delaying or disguising the ends of phrases throughout this entire passage.

♪ **INSTRUMENTATION.** You can almost hear the "formless void" that will become the earth bubbling up in the constantly-rising figures. Listen especially for upward fleeting figures in the clarinet and flute.

the nation's capital, including the National Symphony and what would come to be named the Kennedy Center. Born in comfortable circumstances in Richmond, Virginia—her father was a successful lawyer—she married another successful lawyer, Walter Bruce Howe, and together their philanthropic activities put them at the center of Washington's growing cultural scene.

What set Mary Howe apart from other socialites and patrons of the arts was that she was herself a gifted artist. Having studied music at the famed Peabody Institute in Baltimore, as a young woman she toured successfully as a pianist. After marriage and motherhood, she continued performing publicly with her three children; the "Four Howes" specialized in early vocal music. But her greatest artistic passion was composing, and she wrote prolifically for piano, voice, and orchestra. Together with famed composer Amy Beach she formed the Association of American Women Composers, around the years that *Stars and Sand* were composed.

MARY HOWE (1882-1964)

Stars and Sand

Instrumentation: 2 Flutes (first doubling Piccolo), 1 Oboe, 1 Clarinet, 1 Bassoon, 2 Horns, 1 Trumpet, Timpani, Percussion, Harp, and Strings.

Premiere: Little (and conflicting) information is available on the premiere of these works. *Stars* was composed in 1927, and *Sand* in 1928.

QCSO Premieres.

As an affluent denizen of Washington D.C. during the middle decades of the twentieth century, Mary Howe had a hand in supporting a number of major musical institutions in



Though *Stars* and *Sand* are two distinct works, they are often performed together. In her liner notes to a recording of Howe's music, musicologist Dorothy Indenbaum quoted the composer's eloquent description of *Stars* as

a miniature tone-poem inspired by the gradually overwhelming effect of the dome of a starry night—its peace, beauty and space. The sonorous ensemble of the strings opens the work with the suggestion of the spreading immensity of the starry vault. As the music progresses, one's imagination is carried into the contemplation of the awesome depths of space and the sense of mystery which man compares his insignificance with infinity.

In contrast, *Sand* is an

imaginative piece on the substance itself—its consistency, grains, bulk, grittiness and its potential scattering quality; more or less what it appears to be when sifting through your fingers on the shore.

Stars and Sand Listening Guide

Stars

♩ **HARMONY.** In this work, Howe uses mellow-sounding harmonies familiar to our ears, with some pungent "blue" notes interjected, first in the trumpet. These notes end of creating a kind of pivot around which the harmony takes more radical turns.

♩ **FORM.** Listen for the very brief moment in the middle of the movement where the music seems to dissipate,

leaving only ephemeral tremolos in the strings and glissandos in the harp.

Sand

♩ **RHYTHM.** Listen carefully for the triplet rhythm that begins on the rim of the snare drum. This rat-a-tat rhythm pervades this entire piece, cycling through the sections of the orchestra.

♩ **MELODY.** Once the triplets make their way out of the drum, they are played each time with a whimsical combination of half steps and whole steps within a narrow range. Howe reflects this same kind of melodic movement in the slower-moving accompaniment parts that sound below the triplets.

♩ **INSTRUMENTATION.** Such skittish combinations of close intervals are inherently difficult on the horn. So, Howe gives the horn much more conventional tonal melodies as a contrast to the flighty triplets in the strings and winds.

MICHAEL ABELS (b. 1962)

Liquify

Instrumentation: 2 Flutes (both doubling piccolo), 2 Oboes, 2 Clarinets, 2 Bassoons, 4 Horns, 2 Trumpets, Trombone, Tuba, Timpani, 2 Percussion, Harp, and Strings.

QCSO Performance History: The QCSO performed the world premiere of *Liquify* on a Masterworks program in February 2017, repeating the work at that April's Side-by-Side concert. Both performances were conducted by Mark Russell Smith.

Composer Michael Abels writes:

Liquify is a piece depicting various scenes or stages of a river. It was commissioned by and for the QCSO, and premiered in Quad Cities. The scenes I invite people to imagine in the work are:

a) brilliant waterfall representing its source, b) a murky and vast commercial waterway with boating traffic, c) a fast-moving stream over rocky rapids, d) a peaceful, silent river in the moonlight, and e) watersports and waterspouts on a bright warm day. However, I do encourage everyone to listen with their own imagination and decide what visual depictions fit the music best. Also, now there is this wonderful film by Jose Francisco Salgado, which is also water-inspired but conceived independently of the descriptions I've given. So another way to listen to this music is to notice which of the original inspirations are offered in the film and which are not, and to appreciate how one artist's inspires another. I hope you enjoy our audio/visual collaboration!



Liquify
Listening Guide

♩ **TEXTURE.** Abels makes consistent use of *ostinatos*, or short patterns repeated many times. He uses these as a kind of background to establish the harmonic environment, and then throws in occasional “spoiler” long-tones in the brass

♩ **INSTRUMENTATION.** Listen for the *antiphonal* (played as an echo) clarinet lines and flute flourishes.

♩ **FORM.** Abels builds the first section of the piece from the top down, using relatively high *ostinatos* as a kind of “cloud cover”. In contrast, the middle section is built from below, with low repetitive elements growing closer and closer together as the section intensifies. Finally, the last section is built from the middle out, with the *ostinatos* beginning in the middle register.

♩ **RHYTHM.** Abels infuses the piece's conclusion with funky, pop-influenced accompanying rhythms, which support a long-growing melodic sequence in the upper strings.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

Symphony No. 6 in F major, “Pastoral”

Instrumentation: Piccolo, 2 Flutes, 2 Oboes, 2 Clarinets, 2 Bassoons, 2 Horns, 2 Trumpets, 2 Trombones, Timpani, and Strings.

Premiere: December 22, 1808, Theater an der Wien, Vienna, conducted by the composer. This epic concert also included the world premiere of Symphony No. 5.

QCSO Performance History: Of all Beethoven symphonies, the Sixth has been performed the least often here. The most recent performances were in 2012, conducted by Mark Russell Smith; prior to that, the work had been performed by the Quad/Tri City Symphony once before, in 1987, conducted by James Dixon.

Beethoven is not generally known to music lovers as a musical “pictorialist”. When we think of composers whose music is highly descriptive of non-musical things, the names Robert Schumann (*Scenes from Childhood*,

Spring symphony), Hector Berlioz (*Symphonie Fantastique*), and Debussy (*La mer, The Girl with the Flaxen Hair*) are much more likely to come to mind. This is not because Beethoven's music is somehow not emotional or evocative – indeed he himself said that every piece he wrote had behind it an emotion, experience, or image. Rather, these descriptive subjects were almost always his secret; most of the works we love of his have abstract titles like *sonata*, *quartet*, and *symphony*, fully open to personal interpretation.

But there's always an exception. At roughly the same time he was composing his fierce and fiery Symphony No. 5, Beethoven was also composing his most endearingly descriptive work of music, the "Pastoral" Symphony depicting life in the bucolic countryside. Beethoven was a great lover of nature and admired the dignity of rural life, and his symphony is full of shepherd songs, country dances, and the beauty of the natural world.

The composer himself seemed a bit hesitant to give too much information to his audience. The year the work premiered, he shared the following caution to his audience:

It is left to the listener to discover the situation... Every kind of painting loses by being carried to far in instrumental music... Anyone who has the faintest idea of country life will not need many descriptive titles to be able to imagine for himself what the author intends. Even without a description one will be able to recognize it all for its sentiments rather than a painting in sounds.

Beethoven 6 Listening Guide

First movement: **Allegro ma non troppo** (Awakening of Cheerful Feelings on Arrival in the Countryside)

♪ **DYNAMICS.** We often think of Beethoven as a bold, brash composer who starts big and ends bigger. Thus, the opening of Symphony No. 6 might surprise us in its quietude. The closing of the *exposition* (first large section that repeats back to the beginning) is similarly muted; you might almost not notice that the repeat back to the opening has taken place!

♪ **HARMONY.** Like the chords you might hear on the Austrian countryside, Beethoven frequently utilizes repetitive, oscillating 2-chord harmonies.

♪ **MELODY.** While later movements include some elegant and sweeping melodies, notice how frequently Beethoven uses short, fragmented melodies in this first movement. Perhaps these are separate "cheerful feelings" awakening individually.

♪ **INSTRUMENTATION.** Near the end of the first movement, Beethoven gives the clarinet a solo for the ages. This symphony is actually a favorite of clarinetists, as the second and third movements also contain famous clarinet features.

Second movement: **Andante molto moto**

(Scene by the Brook)

♪ **ORCHESTRATION.** This slow movement features a very restless foreground in the strings (notice how they mostly play short and murmuring figures), coupled with a background of much longer tones, first in the horns, then in the winds. We can compare this to the

combination of activity and peacefulness that we might experience while looking at a stream in the country.

♪ **METER.** This entire movement is in *compound meter*, which means that beats are ordinarily separated into three parts. “Greensleeves” and “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” are both in *compound meter*, as are many other folk songs; certainly Beethoven had this in mind when writing this movement.

Third and Fourth movements: Allegro – Allegro

(Merry Gathering of Country Folk/Thunder, Storm)

♪ **HARMONY.** This merry gathering includes some rather festive and jarring changes in key, including between keys we don’t ordinarily consider closely related.

♪ **INSTRUMENTATION.** The oboe is an instrument with roots in rural music, so Beethoven unsurprisingly gives the oboe a merry shepherd’s tune. Don’t miss the humorously straightforward counter-melody in the bassoon!

♪ **FORM.** Beethoven does not follow the traditional ABA form usually used in symphonic dance movements. First and foremost, the contrast of tempos between the main section and the “trio” is extreme. Even more unusually, the form is more like ABAB...C?! The bumptious “trio” repeats, and this is followed by a shockingly unusual passage wherein Beethoven depicts a violent thunder-storm.

♪ **ORCHESTRATION.** Beethoven uses many musical methods to depict the intensity of his storm, but one that might escape your immediate notice is his writing for cellos and basses. Usually these sections play the same music an octave

apart, but to add to a kind of rumbling effect, Beethoven has the cellos play five fast notes in the same span of time that the basses play four. You may not explicitly hear this rhythm, but you will definitely feel it!

Fifth movement: Allegretto (Shepherd’s Song. Cheerful and Thank- ful Feelings After the Storm.)

♪ **MELODY.** Beethoven saves his most glorious tune for the last movement, and then repeats it many, many times.

♪ **TEXTURE.** If you can pull your ears away from the elegant lilting melody, notice how the accompaniment is constantly changing with each repetition of the tune. Listen especially for when the violins float with rapid, fluid, and comforting notes high above.

