

05. Heiligste Nacht

(MH 427; 1786)

Johann Michael Haydn
(1737-1806)
arr. William Melton

Haydn, Johann Michael

(baptized September 14, 1737 in Rohrau; died August 10, 1806 in Salzburg)

Michael Haydn followed his older brother Franz Joseph into the chorus of St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna, where both learned basic musicianship. Michael also gleaned much on his own from books, particularly *Gradus ad Parnassum*, the influential guide to counterpoint originally published in Latin in 1721 by Johann Joseph Fux and also studied by his older brother, Mozart, Cherubini, and a host of others. Church Kapellmeister at Großwardein (now Oradea, Romania) was the first post Michael landed in 1757, but five years later he was appointed music director to Archbishop Sigismund of Salzburg. He married the gifted soprano Maria Magdalena Lipp, daughter of the Salzburg organist, in 1768. The couple's existence was dogged by misfortune: their only child, daughter Aloisia Josepha, would die before her first birthday in 1771, and their material savings were devastated when the French army occupied Salzburg in 1800. Providentially, Haydn was a gifted pedagogue and opened a school of composition in Salzburg that produced many accomplished composers, including Carl Maria von Weber, Sigismund von Neukomm, and Anton Diabelli. Haydn also composed a great deal of music for performance in Salzburg, particularly sacred works. He was twice offered a post by his older brother's employer, Prince Esterhazy, but preferred to remain in Salzburg, where he died and was buried in the cemetery of St. Peter's.

Michael Haydn's compositions included operas, Singspiels, oratorios, 38 masses, Requiems (his last, like Mozart's great work, was unfinished), Te Deums, cantatas, many smaller sacred pieces, c. 40 symphonies, assorted concerti (including the Concertino for horn in D major), 30 divertimenti, serenades and smaller chamber pieces. Haydn famously declined offers from Breitkopf & Härtel to publish his works and most remained in manuscript form, which may explain his relatively modest reputation today. His contemporaries, however, saw a master composer: Mozart became a close friend, Franz Schubert wrote that no one venerated the younger Haydn more than he, and E. T. A. Hoffmann observed that "Michael Haydn ranks among the finest artists of any age or nation." A catalog of works, first begun in 1907, was produced complete in 1993 (C. Sherman and T. Thomas, Pendragon Press), and recent years have seen many manuscripts published by the University of Salzburg. The modern scholar Hans Jancik put the matter bluntly: "Michael Haydn possessed both strong talent and great industry."

“Heiligste Nacht” is a Catholic hymn text, perhaps of Tyrolean folk roots, that was first printed in 1783 in the *Salzburger Kirchengesangbuch*. Michael Haydn set it several times, including the version printed here dated December 20, 1786 (MH 427). The strophic *Adagio-Andantino* composed in the Alpine folk style is, as Reinhard G. Pauley observed of more than one work by Haydn, “simple, often homophonic, with attractive, easily singable melodic lines.”

Heiligste Nacht!
 Finsternis weicht, es glänzet hienieden,
 Harfen verbreiten den süßesten Klang,
 Engel erscheinen, verkünden den Frieden,
 Lieblich ertönet ihr froher Gesang.
 Christen, erwachet und kommet geschwind,
 Folget den Hirten zu göttlichen Kind.
 Eilet nach Bethlehem, seht eurer Diadem,
 hier liegt das Kind, hier liegt das Kind.

Göttliches Kind!
 Nacht ist vergangen, nun strahlt uns der Morgen.
 Gott hat sich unser in Liebe erbarmt.
 Wir sind in Gnade und Güte geborgen,
 Gott hat die Menschen, hat alle umarmt.
 Geht nun zur Krippe und sehet das Kind,
 Sehet die Hirten, wie fröhlich sie sind.
 Jubelt und singt dem Herrn, Menschen in Nah und Fern.
 Halleluja, halleluja.

Holy night!
Darkness softens, it shines down upon us,
Harpes are spreading the sweetest sound.
Angels appear, they proclaim peace,
Lovely resounds their happy song.
Christians, awake and come quickly,
Follow the shepherd to the Divine Child.
Hurry to Bethlehem, see your diadem,
Here lies the child, here lies the child.

Divine Child!
Night is gone, now the morning is shining.
God in love has mercy on us.
We are sheltered in grace and kindness,
God has embraced the people, everyone.
Now go to the manger and see the Child,
See the shepherds how happy they are.
Cheer and sing to the Lord, people near and far.
Hallelujah, hallelujah.

Text by William Melton