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A Performance

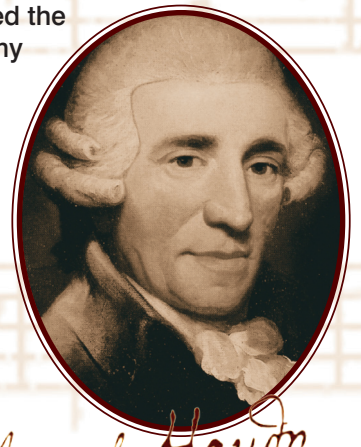


BY LYNETTE LOBBAN

In 1761, Joseph Haydn was hired as music director in the Palace Esterházy in Eisenstadt, Austria. Over the next 40 years, he would create some of his most important music for the pleasure of the court. The Princes Esterházy entertained in a magnificent room, three stories tall with gilt medallions and romantic fables told in fresco across the ceiling. Nearly three centuries later, Haydn's remains one of the most beautiful and acoustically perfect concert halls in the world.

This fall, in the same opulent space where Haydn premiered his symphonies, quartets and cantatas, a group of University of Oklahoma students will make a debut of their own—performing Haydn's masterpiece, *The Seasons*, as ballet with chorus and orchestra. What makes the performance all the more dizzying is that it came by personal invitation from the artistic director of the most prestigious Haydn festival in the world. *continued*

Dr. Zielinski, right, and Dr. Don V Moses stand in the grand concert hall in the Palace Esterházy. Dr. Z first attended the Eisenstadt Summer Academy as a young conductor to study with Moses, the academy's founder. In September, a group of OU ballet and vocal students, accompanied by OU faculty and administration, will present the European debut of *The Seasons* as ballet in the hall during International Haydnstage.



Joseph Haydn

Worthy of Princes

THIS FALL A GROUP OF OU SINGERS AND DANCERS WILL DELIVER A HAYDN MASTERPIECE IN THE AUSTRIAN HALL WHERE THE MAESTRO LIVES ON.

Two years ago, Haydn's Austrian director, Walter Reicher, experienced two Oklahoma phenomena that he would not soon forget: the touchdown of a spring tornado and the premiere of Haydn's *The Creation* performed as ballet. Colleague Richard Zielinski, who is both director of choral activities at OU and artistic director of the Eisenstadt Summer Academy, invited Reicher to attend the Norman premiere.

The famous oratorio, based on the Book of Genesis, traditionally is performed by chorus and orchestra alone. Original choreography by Mary Margaret Holt, director of the OU School of Dance, and Steve Brule, associate professor of ballet, brought a powerful, physical presence to the miracle of creation, both Biblical and artistic. When combined with OU choirs and the Norman Philharmonic, and faculty soloists under the direction of Dr. Z, Reicher was blown away, more by the performance than Oklahoma's tempestuous weather.

"I think that was our unofficial audition," says Holt. "That August we went to Eisenstadt to perform at the Summer Academy, also known as the Classical Music Festival. It was the first time ballet had ever been presented in the palace—or at any of the Haydn festivals—so we were curious as to whether it would be accepted or not."

"For Walter Reicher to trust these young singers and dancers to come over and open his festival? His baby? It's pretty heady stuff."

She need not have worried. At the end of the performance, Haydn devotees jumped to their feet, showing their delight in a 10-minute ovation. Reicher then extended an invitation to OU to return to Eisenstadt in 2014, to perform—not at the Academy—but at the International Haydn Festival, reserved for the most celebrated classical musicians in the world.

His proposal was this: from Haydn's oratorio *The Seasons*, OU would produce an original ballet, provide dancers and choir, and



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For nearly 40 years, Haydn served the royal Esterházy family in their palace in Eisenstadt, Austria. Most of his important work was premiered in the grand concert hall for the family and their guests.

the festival would select a professional chamber orchestra and four soloists from the Vienna Folk Opera—all under the baton of Dr. Z.

"Haydn Festival is the 10-day crown jewel of the festival," says Zielinski. "For Walter Reicher to trust these young singers and dancers to come over and open his festival? His baby? It's pretty heady stuff. We will be in the line-up with some of the finest musicians and ensembles in the world—the Academy of Ancient Music, the Academy of St. Martin in the Field, conductors like Sir Neville Martinson—and we're the opener."

By July, Reicher reported that the two OU performances were nearly sold out and that both the president of Austria and the governor of Burgenland would be in the audience opening night.

"I had not choreographed *The Seasons* when we were asked to present it at Haydn Festival," says Holt. "*The Seasons* was chosen for us. Basically they said, 'Here you go, here's a chance to make a ballet. No pressure, but we knew it had really better be something.'" Holt began pouring over the oratorio in August of last year with collaborator and dance professor Ilya Kozadayev.

Wendy Mutz



OU dancer Austin Linter was among the cast of *The Creation*, the first original ballet that OU School of Dance director Mary Margaret Holt choreographed and presented in Eisenstadt, Austria.

“We listened to the music together a lot,” she says. “We were truly guided by the score, not in a pantomimic way, but in a reflective way. From what I’ve read and discussed with Dr. Z, Haydn was in his later years when he wrote *The Seasons*—the winter of his life. I think really the whole design of *The Seasons* is an analogy for life, with winter being the most poignant and personal example.”

The story focuses on three characters—young lovers Hannah and Lucas, and the mystical Simon. When the music is presented in concert, Hannah is the same performer throughout, but Holt and Kozadayev thought Hannah should be a different dancer for each season. The casting would help differentiate the seasons while getting to

showcase more of Oklahoma Festival Ballet dancers.

The ballet premiered at the 14th President’s Concert in OU’s Reynolds Performing Arts Center in April. From the moment Dr. Z raised his baton, the audience was captivated by the combined narrative power of dance, orchestra and chorale. Enhancing the ballet was the exquisite costume design of Lloyd Cracknell. Each of Hannah’s costumes defined the seasons from the golden light of summer to winter’s icy blue.

In late August, costumes, pointe shoes, tights and tuxes will be packed and on their way to Austria. Even though the 60 members of the chorale and 15 dancers with Oklahoma Festival Ballet will miss four days of the fall semester, both Holt and Zielinski are firm believers in travel-as-teacher.

“We always tell our students that dance is a physical language understood internationally. They will gain a first-hand experience of how this language crosses the barriers of time, generations and cultures,” says Holt.

“They also learn how to cope with being on tour. They do not have their own pillow, their own food, their own routine. Everything is different—except the cast.

“And in that way, the cast becomes your family. You learn to rely on each other. If you are fortunate, international travel will be part of your life as a dancer. Touring is a part of their education and an incredible opportunity for personal, intellectual and artistic growth.”

Zielinski says his own life changed its trajectory when he accepted a job teaching at an American high school in Toyko. “I was a small town kid from Wisconsin. I hadn’t done a lot of traveling. I took the job and thought, ‘What have I gotten

Wendy Mutz



The three principal characters of *The Seasons* are, from left, Lucas, Simon and Hannah, danced at the U.S. premiere by OU’s Brett Young, Zeek Wright and Amanda Carrick.



Wendy Mutz

Four “Hannahs” danced each of the four seasons in Mary Margaret Holt’s original choreography for Haydn’s masterpiece. Exquisite costume design by Lloyd Cracknell further enhanced the seasonal changes. From left, Nicole Reeherst, Elizabeth Harrison, Amanda Carrick and Melanie Jensen play the Hannahs of Autumn, Summer, Spring and Winter, respectively.

myself into?’ ”

Living in Japan changed the way he looked at the world—religion, politics, how people from different backgrounds worked together. Trips to China and Austria followed. As a young conductor, he first participated in the Eisenstadt Summer Academy in 1987 to study with its founder, Dr. Don V Moses. Zielinski then succeeded Moses as artistic director and principal conductor in 2007.

“I think this international experience is so necessary for our students. There is so much we can learn from countries that have been here 10 times as long as we have,” he says. “And it gives them real-world experience.

“We leave here on a Saturday, show up in Eisenstadt on Sunday. We have three days of rehearsal—and boom! We open the festival. Back on a plane Saturday. That’s an education in itself.”

Two of the students who will be making the trip are Zeek Wright, who danced in Eisenstadt two years ago, and Ashley Leisten, a member of the chorale, who will be going to Austria for the first time.

Wright, a senior dance major playing the role of Simon, says he is just as excited to be going back as he was on his first visit.

“It was my first time out of the country,” he says. “The palace is so beautiful. The architecture is gorgeous. There are paintings on the ceiling. The orchestra is playing right in front of us and the chorale right behind us. So every time we danced, we saw beauty all around us. It was truly a wow moment.”

Leisten, a public relations major from Keller, Texas, says she appreciates that OU gives non-music majors the oppor-



Wendy Mutz

OU music professors soprano Donna Mitchell-Cox and tenor Joel Burcham thrilled audiences at the April premiere of *The Seasons* in the Reynolds Performing Arts Center during President’s Art Week 2014.



Wendy Mutz

Zeek Wright executes a soaring grand jeté during a performance of *The Seasons* at OU's Reynolds Performing Arts Center. Wright, who danced with Ballet West during the summer, will be making his second trip to Austria to perform in the Palace Esterházy with Oklahoma Festival Ballet.



Wendy Mutz

The Seasons traditionally has been performed with chorus and orchestra alone, with one soprano voice for Hannah. When choreographed as ballet by Mary Margaret Holt, director of the OU School of Dance, and professor Ilya Kozadayev, each Hannah was played by a different dancer to further distinguish between the four seasons. Here autumn's Hannah, Nicole Reehorst, teases Lucas, danced by Brett Young.

tunity to participate.

"I joined Singing Sooners as a freshman my fall semester. Students who love music, but don't major in it, can still have this experience—people from everywhere, pre-law, pre-med, letters, education. It's just people who genuinely love music.


"The first day in chorale that we started doing the classics, I felt like I was in way over my head. But the more I stayed and practiced, the better I felt, and Dr. Z always said, 'You belong in this group.' I said to myself, 'OK, I trust you; you know more about music than I ever will.' And now I'm on my way to Austria."

Reicher often refers to Eisenstadt as "Haydn's Graceland," a fact that is not lost on the students. Both Wright and Leisten say that performing in the hall where Haydn conducted 300 years ago adds a dimension that borders on reverence. Fitting, since the oratorio itself concludes with a Psalm.

"Haydn wrote *The Seasons* near the end of his life," says Zielinski. "But the more I got into the score, I was in awe and amazed. He reflects on his life through music and ends with 'The Song of Salvation.' The choir asks, 'How do we get to heaven?' and the soloist answers, 'Be good to each other.' It's very powerful.

"I say hats off to the students, because they are the ones who are delivering the product. We can provide the score and the choreography, but it's the students who have to deliver."

Wright admits the *The Seasons* is a challenge for the dancers and musicians.

"The choreography by Mary Margaret and Ilya is wonderful. I'm always nervous beforehand, but when we step out onto that stage, I know it's going to be fantastic." 

Lynette Lobban is associate editor of Sooner Magazine.