

## Program Notes for Haydn's *Seven Last Words*

### Introduction

This historic chapel itself provides the best introduction to Haydn's music. Here we sit in what is essentially "a sermon in stone" – a structure that uses art both to tell the story of faith and to comment and respond to this faith. Haydn's oratorio is a "sermon in music." It, too, is a structure that uses all the resources of its art to tell the story of faith and to comment and respond to this faith.

At the turn of the last century, the Sisters of Perpetual Adoration did not by any means "invent" the form of an ornate, devotional chapel. They simply designed and had built the best structure they could imagine. Those who know a little of the history of this chapel, know that it was an international effort. The artisans and artists who created it came from Germany and Switzerland. And they put their "German soul" into this beautiful building of the Catholic Church (whose main language at the time was Latin).

In his *Seven Last Words of our Savior on the Cross*, Haydn has put his German Catholic soul into a musical structure that is universal. He did not invent the oratorio, or the idea of setting to music the words which Jesus exclaimed from the cross. Heinrich Schütz, "the father of German music," was the first to do this in 1645.

Look around you. There is more art and artwork, more symbolism and meaning in this chapel than we will ever be able to "take in" ... in one sitting. Yet all its diverse parts form a whole.

So it is with Haydn's masterpiece. There is more art and artwork, symbolism and meaning in it than we will ever be able to assimilate in one hearing. It, too, is made up of separate parts that form a whole. It has a unique history whose facts illustrate both the specificity and the universality of music.

Haydn composed it first as orchestral music for the Good Friday

service at the church of Santa Cueva in Cádiz, Spain. He, of course, had the actual “words” in his head as he composed. But he had them there in Latin! How do we know this? When the orchestral score was published, well before the oratorio, Haydn insisted that the texts from the Latin Bible be printed underneath the music that “went with” them— the first violin part at the opening of each movement. This was in 1786.

He later made two instrumental arrangements of his orchestral piece, one for string quartet (which “our” Artaria Quartet performed here in La Crosse in 2001 and 2002) and one for piano. Only after these versions did he produce the choral version we are hearing. He did this in 1796. And as it was composed for his native Austria, the words of scripture and of the choral meditations that follow each scriptural passage were in German. This chapel, with all its Latin inscriptions again may be said to illustrate Haydn’s creative process – for he had to use his musical imagination to transform his original Latin settings of Christ’s words into German.

The notes that follow focus on the Biblical texts from the Gospels and from Psalm 22:1, and on the choral meditations that “accompany” these texts. I’m not being original when I state, “The music both explains itself and it defies explanation.” In any case, if you have questions about the music, ask a member of the Artaria Quartet or the Chamber Chorale, or Professor Paul Rusterholz himself. Don’t ask me. Here I’m like the monk in the old Xerox commercials: I don’t know how it works. All I can say is, “It’s a miracle!”

#### The First Word: Luke 23:34

*Vater, vergib ihnen,  
denn sie wissen nicht, was sie tun.*

*Father, forgive them,  
for they know not what they do.*

Vater im Himmel,  
o sieh hernieder vom ewigen Thron!  
Vater der Liebe,  
dein Eingeborner,

Father in heaven,  
look down from your eternal throne!  
Loving father,  
your only-begotten son

er fleht für Sünder,	prays for sinners,
für deine Kinder,	and for your children;
erhöre den Sohn!	harken to your son!
Ach, wir sind tief gefallen,	Ah, we have fallen low,
wir sündigten schwer;	and have sinned lamentably;
doch allen zum Heil,	yet for our salvation,
uns allen,	for that of us all
floss deines Sohnes Blut.	the blood of your son has flowed.
Das Blut des Lamms schreit nicht	The blood of the lamb cries not
um Rach’;	for vengeance;
es tilgt die Sünden.	it redeems sins.
Vater der Liebe,	Loving father
lass uns Gnade finden,	let us find mercy
erhöre den Sohn!	harken to your son!
O Vater, o Vater,	O father, O father,
erhöre den Sohn!	harken to your son!

As in almost every Catholic Church, this chapel contains art that represents the Stations of the Cross. Most of these are located above the stained glass windows of the central nave. Each of these windows contains an angel holding a symbol of Christ’s passion, from the Crown of Thorns to the bowl that held the vinegar and gall given to the thirsty Savior.

The first Word can be compared to the 11<sup>th</sup> Station of the Cross, located here in the middle of the north wall of the nave. The verse prior to Luke 23:34 declares with stark simplicity, “There they crucified him.” This first word is then the cry of a human being in anguish. In modern terms it could be compared to the cry of a weight lifter or a karate champion. This effort to find a comparison is a helpful one, for the image of literal excruciating pain is really too terrible to think about directly. Our human aversion to pain helps us understand why the choral meditation concentrates on Jesus’ words, not on his suffering. This hymn interprets Jesus’ Word as a prayer – which it is, for it’s spoken to God. And the hymn is itself a prayer to God. It is both a confession and a plea, with one phrase repeated three times for emphasis: “Hearken to your Son!”

The Second Word: Luke 23:43

*Fürwahr, ich sag es dir: Heute wirst du bei mir im Paradiese sein.*      *Verily I say unto you: today you will be with me in Paradise.*

Ganz Erbarmen, Gnad' und Liebe, bist du Mittler, Gotteslamm.	Full of grace, mercy and love, you are the Mediator and Lamb of God.
Kaum ruft jener reuig auf zu dir:	No sooner did he, repentant, call out to you:
Wenn du kommest in dein Reich, ach, so denke mein! so versprichst du ihm voll Milde:	“When you come to your kingdom, remember me!” than you promised him compassionately:
heut wirst du bei mir im Paradiese sein.	“Today you will be with me in Paradise.”
Herr und Gott! Blick auf uns! Sieh an deines Kreuzes Fusse unsre wahre Reu' und Busse!	Lord and God! Look upon us! See at the foot of your cross our true contrition and atonement!
Gib uns auch zur letzten Stunde jenen Trost aus deinem Munde: Heut wirst du bei mir im Paradiese sein.	Give us too, in our final hour, that comfort from your lips: “Today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Jesus speaks these words to the “repentant thief” in Luke 23:43. They are in reply to this man’s prayer of entreaty, which we hear in the choral meditation, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom!”

Note how the hymn quickly adopts the perspective of the thief, and so it changes the “Today you will be with me,” to “Look upon us!” The comforting promise, “Today you will be with me in paradise,” is here repeated twice. Remember that the word “meditative” does not mean “theological.” There is no speculation about what “paradise” means, or about the tricky (Pauline) doctrine of the future resurrection at the Last Judgment. This hymn, too, is a prayer – one addressed to Jesus as the Mediator and the Lamb of God.

The Third Word: John 19:26-27

*Frau, hier siehe deinen Sohn,  
und du, siehe deine Mutter!*

Mutter Jesu,  
die du trostlos, weinend,  
seufzend bei dem Kreuze standst  
und die Qualen seines Leidens  
in der Stund des bittern Scheidens  
siebenfach in dir empfandst:  
Kaum mehr fähig, dich zu fassen,  
und doch standhaft und gelassen,  
nimmst als Sohn  
den treuen Jünger  
und mit ihm auch uns als Kinder an.

Mutter Jesu,  
o du Zuflucht aller Sünder,  
hör das Flehen deiner Kinder.  
Steh uns bei im letzten Streit,  
Mutter voll der Zärtlichkeit,  
o steh uns allen bei!  
Wenn wir mit dem Tode ringen  
und aus dem beklemmten Herzen  
unsre Seufzer zu dir dringen,  
lass uns, Mutter,  
lass uns da nicht unterliegen!  
Hilf uns dann den Feind besiegen!  
Und steh uns bei im letzten Streit!  
Wenn wir mit dem Tode Ringen,  
o da zeige dich als Mutter  
Und empfahl uns deinen Sohn,  
o Mutter!

*Woman, behold your son.  
And you, behold your mother!*

Mother of Jesus,  
you who stood by the cross  
cheerless, weeping, sighing,  
you who felt the agony of his passion  
in the hour of bitter parting,  
felt it sevenfold within yourself:  
Hardly able to bear it,  
yet steadfast and serene,  
you now take the faithful disciple  
as your son,  
and with him, us too as your children.

Mother of Jesus,  
O you refuge of all sinners,  
hear the prayers of your children.  
Stand by us in the final struggle,  
Mother full of tenderness,  
O stand by us all!  
As we wrestle with death  
and as from our distressed souls,  
our sighs reach your ears,  
do not allow us, Mother,  
to be subdued!  
Help us, then, to conquer our foe!  
And stand by us in our final struggle!  
As we wrestle with death,  
O reveal yourself as mother,  
and commend us to your son,  
O Mother!

Here we are reminded of the truth of the French proverb, "I abbreviate in order to create." For Haydn (and his librettist, Baron van Swieten)

have condensed two verses from the Gospel of John into one. They've omitted the connecting material which tells us what everyone in Haydn's time would have of already known – how Jesus spoke the first part of this Word to his Mother, and the second part to “the disciple whom he loved,” who has always been identified as St. John himself. It is these two, together with the “other Marys,” – Mary Magdalene and Mary the wife of Clophas, who form the grouping around the cross in traditional paintings of the crucifixion.

Haydn and Baron van Swieten abbreviate or divide this Gospel text in order to focus solely on Mary, the Virgin Mother. And so the meditative chorale is in the form of a prayer to Mary. It of course makes us think of the most well-known prayer to the Virgin: the “Ave Maria,” or “Hail, Mary.”

The hymn is full of heartfelt, human pleas to the Mother of Jesus. But note how toward the end of the second verse she is addressed simply as “Mother,” with all the inevitable mixing of the human and the divine.

The other noteworthy moment in this hymn is when it imagines how Mary “felt the agony of Jesus' passion sevenfold.” And we suddenly receive the thought-provoking insight that Mary heard all seven “Words from the Cross” – not just the one spoken directly to her.

#### The Fourth Word: Psalm 22:1 and Matthew 27:46

*Mein Gott, mein Gott,  
warum hast du mich verlassen?*

Warum hast du mich verlassen?  
Wer sieht hier der Gottheit Spur?  
Wer kann fassen dies Geheimnis?  
O Gott der Kraft und Macht,  
O Gott der Macht und Stärke,  
Wir sind deiner Hände Werke,  
und deine Lieb, o Herr,  
hat uns erlöst.

*My God, my God,  
why have you forsaken me?*

Why have you forsaken me?  
Where is now the hand of God?  
Who can fathom this mystery?  
O God of power and might,  
O God of might and strength,  
we are the work of your hands,  
and your love, O Lord,  
has redeemed us.

O Herr, wir danken dir von Herzen. Unserwegen littst du Schmerzen, Spott, Verlassung, Angst und Pein. Herr, wir sollte dich nicht lieben, dich mit Sünden noch betrüben? Wer kann deine Huld verkennen? Nein, nichts soll uns von dir trennen allhier und dort in Ewigkeit.	O Lord, we thank you from the heart. For our sake you suffered pain, Contempt, abandonment, fear and torture. Lord, who would not love you, Who would sadden you with sins? Who can mistake your kindness? No, nothing shall separate us from you here on earth nor in eternity.
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This quote from Psalm 22:1 connects the Passion of Christ with the long and rich tradition of “songs of lament” in the Old Testament. Jesus cries out (or maybe sings out) this verse at “about the ninth hour” – that is, at the end of his three hour agony. These are the only Words from the Cross recorded in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. There they are first quoted in Aramaic, and then in Greek.

The hymn, however, does not indulge in the “modern sport” of textual criticism. Instead it borrows a verbal image from St. Paul with its concluding assertion: “Nothing shall separate us from you here on earth or in eternity.”

The hymn is very much in the spirit of the psalms, with its combination of questions, proclamations, thanksgiving, and with a little bit of preaching as well.

#### The Fifth Word: John 19:28

<i>Jesus rufet: Ach, mich dürstet!</i>	<i>Jesus cries out, “I thirst!”</i>
Hemmt nun die Rache, stillt eure Wut! Menschen, lasset Mitleid Euch erweichen, ruft Erbarmung in das Herz!	Check your vengeance, calm your rage! Mortals, let compassion move you, and pity fill your hearts!

Jesus ruft: Ach, mich dürstet!	Jesus cries out, "I thirst!"
Ihm reicht man Wein,	He is given wine
den man mit Galle mischet.	mixed with gall.
So labt man ihn.	This is how he is treated.
Kann Grausamkeit noch weiter gehn?	Can cruelty go any further?
Nun kann er nicht mehr fassen	He can now no longer bear
den Schmerz,	the pain
der ihn allmächtig drückt,	which oppresses him so powerfully,
der Wohltun war.	he who was a blessing to us.
Ach im Durst	Ah, to quench his thirst
vor seinem Ende	before expiring,
reicht man ihm Galle dar.	one gave him gall.

The fifth and the sixth word are separated by just one verse in John 19. This verse is supplied in the choral meditation in the narrative line, "He is given wine mixed with gall." What is left out (again, Haydn "abbreviates in order to create") is how Jesus' word, "I thirst" and his receiving the bitter drink was "to fulfill the Scripture." This prophecy comes from the cry of lament in Psalm 69:21 where the speaker cries out, "They gave me gall ("wormwood") for food, and as I thirsted, they gave me vinegar to drink."

Once again, the hymn does not venture into any form of contentious theology. It does, though, break the pattern set so far in that it's not addressed to God, Jesus or Mary. It is perhaps the most human of the meditative chorales. If I had to give it a modern description, I'd call it "A mini-sermon delivered by cheer-leaders." Its down-to-earth nature may be related to the exclamatory word that is not in the Greek, but which had to be added to make the German fit the original Latin. This is the "Ach!" (or "Alas") which receives extra emphasis the second time it's heard when all the men sing it.

#### The Sixth Word: John 19:30

*Es ist vollbracht.*

*It is finished.*

Es ist vollbracht!

It is finished.

An das Opferholz geheftet, hanget Jesus in der Nacht; und dann ruft er laut: Es ist vollbracht. Was uns jenes Holz geschadet, wird durch dieses gut gemacht. Weh euch Bösen, weh euch Blinden, weh euch allen, die ihr Sünden immer häuft auf Sünden! Menschen denket nach! Werdet ihr Erbarmung finden, wenn er kommt in seiner Herrlichkeit und seiner Macht? Rett uns, Mittler, vom Verderben! Höre, Gottmensch, unser Schrein! Lass dein Leiden und dein Sterben nicht an uns verloren sein. Lass uns einst den Himmel erben und mit dir uns ewig freun.	Nailed to the cross, Jesus hangs in the night; and then he cries aloud: "It is finished!" The harm brought upon us by this cross will be redeemed by this same cross. Woe to the evil, woe to the blind, woe to you all, you who heap sins upon sins! Mortals, reflect! Will you find pity when he comes in his glory and his power? Save us, Intercessor, from perdition! Hear, God-man, our cries! Let not your suffering and your death be lost on us. Let us yet inherit heaven And rejoice forever with you.
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It was immediately after receiving the vinegar mixed with gall that Jesus said these words. It is only one word in the original Greek (as is the Fifth Word). Here, instead of abbreviation, we have an expansion of time. For Haydn and Baron van Swieten have left out the cause and effect that is clearly in John's text whereby the bitter drink hastens Jesus' death. The very next words after He says, "It is finished," are, "and He bowed His head and gave up His spirit."

Here we can pause and reflect on how the already existing tradition of the devotional use of the "Seven Last Words" required an artistic conflation of the four Gospel accounts. Another way to say this is to point out how Haydn and van Swieten in no way felt they had to "explain" how or why John and Luke have Jesus speak different words right before he dies. We can imagine Papa Haydn saying, "Such matters are for unmusical preachers and theologians of a later time. I still have to compose ... the 7<sup>th</sup> Word!"

But before we turn our attention to the final word and penultimate section of this oratorio, note how the very vocabulary of the German text assumes knowledge of theology. For no other language (except Kierkegaard's Danish) ever uses the single word *Gottmensch* ("God-man") without a lot of explanation!

### The Seventh Word: Luke 23:46

*Vater, in deine Hände  
empfehle ich meinen Geist.*

*Father, into your hands  
I commend my spirit.*

In deine Händ', o Herr,  
empfehl ich meinen Geist.  
Nun steigt sein Leiden höher nicht,  
Nun triumphiert er laut und spricht:  
nimm, Vater, meine Seele,  
dir empfehl ich meinen Geist.  
Und dann neight er sein Haupt  
und stirbt.  
Vom ewigen Verderben  
hat uns sein Blut errettet;  
aus Liebe für uns Menschen  
starb er den Tod der Sünder.  
Du gabst uns neues Leben;  
was können wir dir geben?  
Was können wir?  
Zu deinen Füßen leigen wir,  
O Jesu, tief gerührt;  
nimm unser Herz als Opfer an!

Into your hands, O Lord,  
I commend my spirit.  
Now his agony can increase no more,  
now he triumphs and speaks aloud:  
"Father, take my soul,  
I commend my spirit to you."  
And then he lowers his head  
and dies.  
From eternal damnation  
his blood has saved us.  
out of love for mankind  
he died the death of sinners.  
You gave us new life;  
what can we give you?  
What can we do?  
We lie at your feet,  
O Jesus, deeply moved,  
take our hearts as a sacrifice!

In the 4<sup>th</sup> Word we have Matthew's account of what was said "at the ninth hour." And in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Words we have John's version. Here we have Luke's. The prefatory words found in 23:46 say, "Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said..."

The choral meditation returns to the "safer" mode of a devotional prayer addressed directly to Jesus. The main idea here is almost like a

play on words – on holy words. The final prayer, “Take our hearts,” hearkens back to the variation of the 7<sup>th</sup> Word stated in the first line: “Father, take my soul,” with “take” in place of “commend,” and “soul” in place of “spirit.” The meditation teaches us that spirit, soul and heart are all one and the same.

(The Eighth Word)

*Il Terremoto*

Er ist nicht mehr.  
Der Erde Tiefen schallen wider:  
er ist nicht mehr.  
Erzitter, Golgatha, erzitter!  
Er starb auf deinen Höhen.  
O Sonne, fleuch und leuchte  
diesem Tage nicht!  
Zerreisse, zerreisse Land,  
Worauf die Mörder stehen.  
Ihr Gräber, tut euch auf,  
ihr Väter, steigt  
ans Licht!  
Das Erdreich, das euch deckt,  
ist ganz mit Blut befleckt.

*The Earthquake*

He is no more.  
The depths of the earth ring out:  
“He is no more.”  
Tremble, Golgatha, tremble!  
He died on your heights.  
O sun, flee, and abstain  
from lighting this day!  
Break open, break open, earth,  
on which murderers stand.  
Open, graves,  
and you, forefathers, rise toward  
the light!  
The earth that covers you  
is utterly drenched with blood.

There is, of course, no word of Jesus here. There are, however, Gospel texts behind this final chorale. They can be found in Matthew 27:51-53 and Luke 23:45: “The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs were also opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. And the sunlight darkened.”

If we ever need proof that Haydn did not know Bach’s masterful *St. Matthew’s Passion*, we have it right here. For Bach “covered the same ground” in his 1727 work. The quiet devotional chorale that Bach places at this moment – “When once I must depart” – is in complete contrast to Haydn’s “blood and fire” outburst. Perhaps Haydn wrote

this with the ponderously forceful model of the “Spanish Christ” in mind. This model focuses much more on the death and agony of the crucifixion than on the peace of Jesus’ atoning sacrifice.

Haydn, no doubt, knew what he was doing. Composers are invariably better theologians than the theologians. Good Friday is not the final movement in the drama, even though here it seems to be. Haydn simply assumes that everyone will be back on Easter Sunday for “the rest of the story.”

– Program notes by Rev. Donald H. Fox, Staff Chaplain at the La Crosse campus of Franciscan Skemp Healthcare and Pastor of Lower Coon Valley Lutheran Church

*May Feaste-  
P.S. I Love You*



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