

Elijah

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

For a century, the two central pillars of British musical life were Handel's *Messiah* and Mendelssohn's *Elijah*. Although the pre-eminence of both these works has been lost since the Second World War, Mendelssohn's oratorio still retains a place in the hearts of many English music-lovers.

Mendelssohn had a long-standing acquaintance with the oratorios of Bach and Handel. It is well-known that in 1829 he prepared and conducted the first performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* since Bach's own time, but he also conducted Handel's *Israel in Egypt*, *Samson* and *Jephtha*, at the Lower Rhine Music Festivals in Düsseldorf in the 1830s, works which were almost totally unknown in Germany at that time. These had a great influence on his own oratorios, and his first, *Paulus (St. Paul)*, had a great success at its premiere in 1836. The next year, it was performed in English at the Birmingham Festival, conducted by the composer.

The success of *St Paul* determined Mendelssohn to attempt a second oratorio, so in 1837 he approached his friend Karl Klingemann for a libretto (requesting it as wedding present!), suggesting St Peter and Elijah as possible subjects. Elijah was decided upon, and he wrote to a close English friend, John Horsley, that "I have chosen the splendid Bible story of Elijah for my next theme, and if I can only bring the magnificent text home to the hearts of my hearers, I shall do much to place my second oratorio on possibly a higher level in public opinion than the first". After preliminary discussions and planning, Klingemann lost interest and was replaced by Julius Schubring, a Lutheran pastor and family friend, though much of the choice of texts was made by the composer himself. He felt very drawn to the character of Elijah, telling Schubring "I imagined Elijah as a real prophet through and through, of the kind we could really do with today: strong, zealous, and yes, even bad-tempered, angry, and brooding ... and yet borne aloft as if on angels' wings."

However Mendelssohn was involved in almost non-stop, frenetic activity for the next decade; he became the director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, founded the Leipzig Conservatory and was a regular conductor in Berlin as well as making extensive tours of Europe (including several visits to England), and the project was shelved. In 1845, Joseph Moore, the manager of the Birmingham Music Festival, approached Mendelssohn for an oratorio for the following year's festival. The libretto had, of course, been written in German (as *Elias*), so Mendelssohn contacted William Bartholemew, an English writer and chemist with whom he had become friendly on one of his regular visits to Britain and who had provided the English version of *Hear my Prayer*, which RCS performed in our last concert. Bartholemew began his translation, and Mendelssohn happily adapted the music he had written to fit the rhythms and stresses of the Authorised Version of the bible which Bartholemew used as his source.

The premiere of *Elijah* was given in Birmingham on 26 August 1846 and was a huge success. A contemporary newspaper report said, "At the close of the performance, the long pent-up excitement which had been gathering strength with every new feature of the oratorio, burst forth in a torrent of applause, renewed again and again ... By the universal fiat of the vast assembly, the composer was placed high in the roll of fame, with the hallowed glories of Handel, Beethoven and Haydn. The illustrious composer bowed his acknowledgements, and his agitation was visible. He descended, and tried to escape the torrents of approbation; but another roar in which the audience and orchestra

joined, called him back again before them; and with a modest air he responded to the greeting of the assembly.” *The Times* considered that “Never was there a more complete triumph, never a more thorough and speedy recognition of a great work of art”. Mendelssohn, however, was not entirely happy, and on returning to Leipzig he undertook an extensive revision of the score prior to publication.

In April 1847, he returned to England for the tenth and last time, conducting four performances of *Elijah* in London and one each in Manchester and Birmingham, but on returning to Germany in May he received a devastating piece of news; his beloved sister Fanny had died. He seemed never to recover from this blow, and in July wrote his final large scale work, the quartet in F minor, Op.80, as a “Requiem for Fanny”. He became seriously ill himself, and in October suffered a series of strokes, dying on 3 November 1847, aged only 38.

The oratorio begins with a highly original masterstroke. Before the Overture, Elijah delivers his grim prophecy that God intends to curse the Israelites for their disobedience by sending a terrible drought. The Overture (a strict fugue) follows immediately, and depicts the increasingly desperate plight of the Israelites, who burst in at the climax with a plea to God not to destroy them. The curse is symbolised by the interval of the tritone (an interval called in medieval times “Diabolus in musica”), which recurs as a *leitmotif* at various points in the work.

In the first scene, the Israelites quake before God's anger and displeasure, but feel confident that he will show mercy. In the second, Elijah is sent to hide by Cherith's brook, where he is fed by ravens and guarded by angels. However the brook dries up and an Angel sends him to Zarephath, where he will be cared for by a poor widow. Her son is on the point of death and she begs Elijah to help him. Reluctantly Elijah agrees and prays three times to God for help. On the third plea, he is successful, and the Israelites rejoice in the miracle. In the next scene he confronts King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, who worship the pagan god Baal, and challenges the king to perform a sacrifice on Mount Carmel. The priests sing a pompous chorus exhorting Baal to light the sacrificial pyre. Nothing happens, and with sarcastic taunts, Elijah suggests that the priests of Baal sing louder, as perhaps their god is asleep. Their entreaties remain unanswered, and Elijah prays in the aria “Lord God of Abraham” and is answered by a chorus of angels. Fire descends and the pyre is lit. In a distinctly Old Testament response, Elijah orders that the priest of Baal be taken to Kidron's Brook and killed. The newly-faithful Israelites beg Elijah to pray to God to lift his curse of drought. He prays again, and God sends rain. Part One ends with a jubilant fugal chorus of thanks.

Part Two of the oratorio begins with the aria “Hear ye, Israel” written expressly for the soprano Jenny Lind, the so-called “Swedish Nightingale”, who was a great favourite of the composer. There then follows a sequence in which Elijah appears again before Ahab and his Queen, denouncing them for their idolatry. Jezebel accuses Elijah of causing the famine, and turns the people against him. He follows Obadiah's advice and flees into the wilderness. Downcast and despondent, he yearns for death in the aria “It is enough”. But as he sleeps under a juniper tree, a trio of angels brings him a message: “Lift thine eyes to the mountains”. Elijah is to travel to Mount Horeb, where, after forty days and forty nights in the wilderness, God will appear to him. As he stands on the mountain, the chorus tells of a mighty wind, followed by an earthquake and then by a fire, and finally God himself, in a still small voice. The chorus tells how Elijah, his faith renewed, leaves

the wilderness to continue his work of converting the unbelievers. Elijah's final deeds are described and his ascent into heaven in a fiery chariot.

It had been Mendelssohn's intention to conclude the work at this point, but Schubring persuaded him to write four more movements, making the moral explicit. The tenor aria "Then shall the righteous shine forth" tells of the eternal joy of the righteous, and the soprano warns of the Day of Judgment . The final chorus "And then shall your light break forth" praises God, though the bass line of the "Amen" recalls the tritone of God's original curse.

Paul Steinson
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