

[Program Notes by Michael Moore](#)

## *Elijah*

**Performed April 21, 2007**

It was only natural that the directors of the Birmingham Festival turned to Mendelssohn in 1846 with a commission for a new oratorio. Not only was he the most celebrated musician in Europe, equally in demand as a composer, conductor and pianist, but he was a particular favorite in England and had already scored triumphs at Birmingham with his oratorio *St. Paul* and the choral symphony *Lobgesang*. Mendelssohn had long been attracted to the story of the prophet Elijah as material for an oratorio. The story itself contains some of the most dramatic moments in the Old Testament – Elijah’s epic confrontation with the priests of Baal, his raising of the widow’s son from the dead and his ascent into heaven in a whirlwind, borne on a fiery chariot. But Elijah is also one of the most fully developed Biblical characters. He is seen not only as the stern prophet, but also as a man who experiences grief, compassion, weariness and despair. Mendelssohn responded with an oratorio which is almost operatic in its scope and construction. It was an immediate success and still stands as one of the greatest works in the choral repertoire.

Felix Mendelssohn was born in 1809 in Hamburg, the son of a wealthy and influential banker and the grandson of the prominent Jewish philosopher and scholar Moses Mendelssohn. The family converted to the Lutheran faith when Felix was a young boy, adopting the additional surname Bartholdy, which was the name of a dairy owned by the family. It is likely that this was for pragmatic reasons more than religious ones. The family had been granted letters patent confirming their rights as citizens, and a court decree in 1812 extended rights to all Prussian Jews, but the very necessity of such letters patent and decrees seems to have validated the Mendelssohns’ decision.

Like Mozart before him, Mendelssohn was a precocious talent who dazzled audiences with his virtuosity, phenomenal memory, amazing sight reading ability and skill at improvisation. As a composer, he came into his mature style at a very early age, producing such unquestionable masterpieces as the *Octet for Strings* and the *Overture to A Midsummer Night’s Dream* while still in his teens. His father’s influence may have opened many doors for him, but it was Mendelssohn’s incredible talent which kept them open. He frequently played for Goethe, who had him sight read Mozart and Beethoven manuscripts from his own collection; he made the acquaintance of leading musicians throughout Europe; in Paris even the usually dyspeptic Cherubini praised him effusively.



A seminal event in Mendelssohn's musical training occurred when he met Carl Friedrich Zelter, director of the Berlin Singakademie. Mendelssohn began attending rehearsals and eventually joined the chorus as a boy alto, switching to tenor when his voice changed. The Singakademie was unique at the time in that it had been founded to promote the choral music of the Baroque period, especially that of J. S. Bach. While Bach's keyboard and orchestral music was still played, his choral music had largely been forgotten. Zelter also taught Mendelssohn composition and theory, drilling him in counterpoint, fugues and canons after the style of Bach. Bach's music profoundly influenced Mendelssohn's compositional style, and he developed a life-long affinity for choral music as well.

When he was 17, Mendelssohn received a manuscript copy of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* from his grandmother. This monumental work had not been performed since Bach's time a century earlier, and Mendelssohn proposed reviving the work with the Singakademie. Zelter opposed the project, for he considered it too daunting, but Mendelssohn eventually won him over. He spent three years studying and revising the score, paring it down to a manageable two hours, and rehearsing the chorus, orchestra and soloists. On March 11, 1829, the twenty-year old Mendelssohn led the landmark performance from the piano, playing continuo with his left hand and giving entrances with right, and conducting the massive work entirely from memory as someone had placed the wrong score on the piano! The performance was a great success and had to be repeated twice more. It not only established Mendelssohn as a conductor but it sparked a revival of interest in Bach's choral music which has endured to this day.

When Zelter died in 1832 Mendelssohn had hoped to succeed him, but the post was offered to a musician of lesser caliber. Mendelssohn instead became music director in Düsseldorf, a municipal post which made him responsible for the orchestra, choral society and ecclesiastical music, and also for conducting the opera. Three years later, he assumed the leadership of the historic Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. He was the first modern music director, solely responsible for programming, artistic direction, and musical interpretation, and under his leadership the Gewandhaus Orchestra became the premier ensemble in Europe. In order to provide financial security for his musicians, he negotiated the first contract with the municipal authority which gave the players a guaranteed salary and pension benefits. And he was a founder and faculty member of the Leipzig Conservatory, the first such school in Germany dedicated to the training of professional musicians.

Mendelssohn's compositional technique was formidable. He could toss off fugues and complex counterpoint with an almost nonchalant ease, and frequently incorporated such elements into his work. But his music was anything but academic and dry. Although he steadfastly refused to write program music, he had an extraordinary skill for tone painting, writing wonderfully evocative music even while limiting his musical forces to a small, classical sized orchestra.

Mendelssohn turned to Julius Schubring to prepare the libretto for *Elijah*. Schubring was a Lutheran minister and family friend, and he had provided the libretto for Mendelssohn's previous oratorio, *St. Paul*. The libretto caused Mendelssohn a great deal of trouble. He

wanted to emphasize the dramatic content of the story while Schubring saw it as an opportunity for Christian theology and moral lessons. Mendelssohn continually sent the libretto back for revision, requesting specific scenes and texts to be set. Eventually a satisfactory libretto was constructed. He engaged his friend William Bartholomew to prepare the English translation, and worked closely with him, fine tuning the exact wording and adjusting the music to conform to the English text. Mendelssohn worked feverishly on the score, finally completing it in mid-August of 1846, only two weeks from the scheduled premiere. After frenzied rehearsals, Mendelssohn conducted the premiere on August 26, 1846. The work was an immediate success, with thunderous applause and repeated encores. The ever-critical Mendelssohn immediately began a series of revisions, and he performed the revised version in England in the spring of 1847. Sadly, *Elijah* was to be the composer's last large-scale work. Exhausted by an extremely rigorous concert schedule and the demands of preparing the *Elijah* score for publication, and disconsolate over the death of his sister earlier that year, Mendelssohn suffered a series of strokes and died on November 4, 1847 at the age of thirty-eight.

Since the libretto does not provide a continuous narrative, a brief retelling of the story of Elijah may be in order. Israel in the 9th century B.C. enjoyed a rather precarious existence. A succession dispute after the death of Solomon had split it into the rival kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and relations between them were not entirely cordial. There were repeated conflicts with neighboring states over scarce resources. Israel's foreign policy was dominated by shifting alliances to play off one adversary against another, and to oppose incursions by the two regional superpowers of the day, Egypt and Assyria. In this King Ahab of Israel was extraordinarily successful. He subdued or made peace with his closest neighbors, and counted the king of Judah as a vassal. He cemented an alliance with the king of Tyre, whose domain extended up and down the Mediterranean coast, by marrying his daughter Jezebel. He put together a powerful coalition that turned back Assyrian invasions three times. The splendor of his court rivaled that of Solomon's, and Israel enjoyed great material prosperity.

Ahab's political and economic success came at a price, however. Jezebel had brought with her the cult of Baal, and Ahab lent his wholehearted support to the worship of the false god. When the priests and prophets of Israel objected, he had them rounded up and put to death. His chief minister, Obadiah, worked in secret to save those he could, creating a refuge for them in the desert.

It is at this point that Elijah, a hitherto unknown prophet, arrives on the scene. He abruptly appears at Ahab's palace, prophesies a drought, and just as abruptly disappears. Ahab sends soldiers after him, but Elijah has taken refuge in the desert. An angel directs him to a widow in Zarephath, whom he asks for food and lodging. She replies that she has only enough flour and oil to make a single meal for her and her son, and when they have eaten that, they will die. Elijah persuades her to take him in and to trust in the Lord, and her supply of flour and oil are miraculously replenished during the time he stays with her. Her son, however, sickens and dies. Elijah is moved with compassion and prays to the Lord, and her son's life is restored.

At the end of three years, Elijah returns to face Ahab, tasking him for his unfaithfulness to the Lord. He throws down a challenge to the priests of Baal. They are to prepare a sacrifice but light no fire under it. They will invoke Baal and he will pray to the Lord. Whoever answers the prayer and ignites the fire will be proven God. The priests of Baal call on him in vain, but the Lord answers Elijah's prayers and sends down fire to consume the sacrifice. On seeing this, the people repent. Elijah directs them to round up the priests of Baal and kill them all. Then he prays for an end to the drought and the Lord once again sends rain upon the land.

Elijah's triumph is short-lived. Jezebel will not brook this challenge to Ahab's authority (and her own influence) and stirs up the people against Elijah, reminding them of the curse he laid upon them. Elijah is forced to flee into the desert, where he despairs over his failure, and asks for death. The Lord sends angels to minister to him, and he is directed to go to Mount Horeb and wait for the Lord. There is a mighty wind, and then an earthquake, and then a fierce fire, but the Lord is in none of those, coming to Elijah instead as a small, still voice. Elijah has another confrontation with Ahab and with his son Ahaziah, but his main task is now to train his successor, Elisha. When that is accomplished, the Lord sends a fiery chariot with fiery horses to Elijah, who is taken up into heaven in a whirlwind.

Mendelssohn takes full advantage of the dramatic opportunities that Elijah's story provides. He dispenses with a narrator; almost everything is written in the first person – Elijah, Ahab, Jezebel and the people all speak with their own voices. Many of the movements are written as dialogues between characters, and the movements often follow each other without pause so as not to break up the story line. Mendelssohn had a deft solution to the bits of moralizing text that Schubring provided. He uses them to segment the story into smaller scenes, and they provide commentary or elaboration of the dramatic events, much like a Greek chorus. He also provides a unifying effect by means of repeated thematic material, especially in Part I. There is an ascending triad motif which is associated with the majesty and power of the Lord, and a descending tritone associated with the curse that Elijah laid upon Israel. Both are heard in Elijah's opening recitative.

The oratorio begins, not with the customary overture, but with Elijah's dramatic proclamation of the curse, much as the prophet himself appeared at Ahab's court. Mendelssohn intended to omit the overture altogether since it interrupted the flow of the story line, but was persuaded at the last minute by Bartholomew to add one, placing it, however, after Elijah's introduction. The overture reprises thematic material heard in subsequent choruses, and in accord with Mendelssohn's original concept has been omitted from this performance. One of the most interesting moments is the duet between Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. Schubring's libretto provides a dialogue which amplifies the Biblical account. The widow is suspicious of the prophet, and reproaches him with bitterness when her son dies, ("Wilt thou show wonders to the dead? Shall the dead arise and praise thee?") but when her son's life is restored, so is her faith.

The most dramatic scene in the oratorio is Elijah's confrontation with the priests of Baal. He goads them on, sarcastically mocking their god, and their invocations become more

and more frenzied, culminating with a fortissimo “Hear and answer!” which is followed by dead silence, surely one of the most effective moments in all oratorio. Elijah’s answering prayer to the Lord unfolds with a melody of great nobility and simplicity.

Part II of *Elijah* begins with the beautiful, introspective soprano aria “Hear ye, Israel!” (Amazingly enough, the soprano soloist at the first performance objected to this aria because she found it ungracious to her voice and insufficiently musical. When Mendelssohn suggested that the aria be given to the tenor instead, she quickly changed her mind!) Angels comfort Elijah with two of the best known movements from the oratorio, the trio “Lift thine eyes” and the chorus “He watching over Israel.” Mendelssohn provides some of his most vivid contrasts in “Behold, God the Lord,” setting the fury of the wind, earthquake and fire against the quiet serenity of the small, still voice of the Lord. Elijah is finally taken up to heaven in a whirlwind of ascending scales, and the oratorio concludes with a majestic chorale and fugue.

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