

Felix Bartholdy Mendelssohn (1809–1847) “Elijah”

We are proud to present tonight one of the greatest oratorios ever composed. A Victorian favourite, the dramatic work “Elijah” is full of contrast, colour and variety. Mendelssohn, a child prodigy, died the year after it was first performed at the age of only 38. We are very fortunate to be joined by the wonderful Taunton Sinfonietta, led by Kathy Shave, and our great friends, the soloists Krystal Macmillan (Soprano) Sophie Yelland (Mezzo Soprano), Stuart Laing (Tenor) and Jamie Rock (Bass).

It is with regret that, for the sake of the choir and audience, I have made some cuts to the original score. With everyone’s stamina in mind, I have hopefully managed to balance capturing the essence of the story, retaining the most favourite works, whilst reducing the repetition and extension that occurs in several of the choruses and solos.

The Story

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 neighbouring 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 neighbours, 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 splendour of his court rivalled 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 uses the bits of moralizing text 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 to add one, placing it, however, after Elijah's introduction.

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.

Part I

Introduction		Elijah (Baritone)
Overture		
1. Chorus	"Help, Lord!"	SATB
2. Duet with Chorus	"Lord, bow thine ear to our prayer!"	SATB / Soprano & Alto
3. Recitative	"Ye people, rend your hearts"	Obadiah (Tenor)
4. Aria	"If with all your hearts"	Obadiah (Tenor)
5. Chorus	"Yet doth the Lord see it not"	SATB
6. Recitative	"Elijah! Get thee hence"	Angel (Alto)
7. Chorus	"For He Shall give His Angels charge"	SSAATTBB
7a. Recitative	"Now Cherith's Brook is dried up"	Angel (Alto)
	Omitted: 8. Aria / Duet "What have I to do with thee?"	Widow (Soprano) Elijah
9. Chorus	"Blessed are the men who fear Him"	SATB
10. Recitative / Chorus	"As God the Lord"	Elijah / Ahab (Tenor) / SATB
11. Chorus	"Baal we cry to thee"	SSAATTBB
12. Recitative / Chorus	"Call him louder" (1)	Elijah / SATB
	Omitted: 13. Recitative / Chorus "Call him louder" (2)	Elijah / SATB
14. Recitative and Aria	"Lord God of Abraham"	Elijah
15. Quartet	"Cast thy burden upon the Lord"	Soloists SATB
16. Recitative / Chorus	"O thou, who makest thine angels"	Elijah / SATB
17. Aria	"Is not his word like a fire?"	Elijah
	Omitted: 18. Aria "Woe unto them"	Woman (Alto)
	Omitted: 19. Recitative / Chorus "O man of God, help thy people"	Obadiah, Elijah, Youth (Sop)
20. Chorus	"Thanks be to God"	SATB

Interval

Part II

21. Aria	(part)	"Hear ye, Israel"	Israelite Woman (Soprano)
22. Chorus	(part)	"Be not afraid"	SATB
23. Recitative / Chorus		"The Lord hath exalted thee"	Elijah, The Queen (Alto) SATB
24. Chorus		"Woe to him"	SATB
25. Recitative		"Man of God"	Obadiah, Elijah
26. Aria	(part)	"It is enough"	Elijah
27. Recitative		"See, now he sleepeth"	Israelite Man (Tenor)

28. Trio	“Lift thine eyes”	SSA
29. Chorus	“He, watching over Israel”	SATB
	Omitted: 30. Recitative “Arise, Elijah”	Angel (Alto), Elijah
31. Aria	“O Rest in the Lord”	Angel (Alto)
	Omitted: 32. Chorus “He that shall endure”	SATB
33. Recitative	“Night falleth round me”	Angel (Soprano), Elijah
34. Chorus	“Behold, God the Lord”	SATB
35. Recitative / Chorus	“Holy is God the Lord”	Alto, Quartet, SATB
36. Chorus /Recitative	“I go on my way”	SATB, Elijah
37. Arioso	“For the mountains shall depart”	Elijah
38. Chorus	“Then did Elijah”	SATB
39. Aria	“Then shall the righteous shine forth”	Tenor
	Omitted: 40. Recitative “Behold, God hath sent Elijah”	Soprano
	Chorus “But the Lord”	SATB
41 Quartet	“O Come every one that thirsteth”	Quartet
42. Chorus	“And then shall your light break forth”	SATB

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