

Elijah

Felix Mendelssohn (1809 – 1847)

Mendelssohn was born into a wealthy and cultured Berlin family. His grandfather, Moses Mendelssohn, was a renowned philosopher and his father, Abraham, was a highly successful banker. After Felix became famous Abraham would sometimes joke, *'I used to be known as the son of my father; now I am known as the father of my son!'*

Felix was a precociously gifted child, so much so that the finest musicians of the day hailed him as a second Mozart. This comparison was by no means without foundation; by the time he had reached his mid-teens Mendelssohn had composed a large number of mature works, including twelve string symphonies and his first symphony for full orchestra, written when he was only fifteen. He was sixteen when he wrote the *String Octet*, and the wonderful overture *A Midsummer Night's Dream* followed a year later. Mendelssohn's extraordinary gifts were not confined to composition; he went on to become a brilliant pianist and organist, a fine string player and an inspirational conductor. He was also a very good artist and was widely read.

Yet another dimension to Mendelssohn's glittering career was his far-reaching influence as an organiser and administrator. As a result of his tireless efforts with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra and the Leipzig Conservatory, which he founded in 1843, he raised performance standards to new heights and created many opportunities for contemporary composers and performers. He made a major contribution to the revival of interest in Bach's music, which at that time was virtually unknown to the general public. In 1829, when he was still only twenty, he conducted the first public performance of the *St. Matthew Passion* since Bach's death, an event which, probably more than any other, provided the impetus for the 19th century rediscovery of Bach. He was also a great admirer of the music of Handel and Haydn, whose oratorios he conducted in Leipzig. Mendelssohn visited England many times, where he was received with adulation, feted by the press, and became a great favourite of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.

No sooner had Mendelssohn's first oratorio, *St. Paul*, received its premiere at the Lower Rhine Festival in 1836, than he began thinking about a suitable subject for a new oratorio. The idea of one based on the life of the Old Testament prophet, Elijah, particularly appealed to him. In 1836 he wrote to his friend and librettist Carl Klingemann, *'If you would only give all the care and thought you bestowed upon St. Paul to an Elijah or a St. Peter or even an Og of Bashan!'* Unfortunately no suitable libretto was forthcoming, not even an *Og of Bashan*, and with the ever-pressing demands of his other work he regretfully put the idea to one side. It was to be another ten years before it came to fruition.

The subject of *Elijah* remained dear to his heart, however, so in 1838 he enlisted the help of his old friend, Pastor Julius Schubring, in drafting a libretto. Mendelssohn had very definite ideas about this. He wrote to Schubring, *'...the dramatic element should predominate. The personages should act and speak as if they were living beings.'* Schubring disagreed. He clearly felt that the oratorio should be in the nature of a sermon in music, stressing the moral and uplifting aspects of the Old Testament texts, and that any degree of dramatic realism was inappropriate in a sacred work. As a result of these disagreements the project was once more dropped.

Then in 1845 the Birmingham Festival committee wrote to Mendelssohn, asking him if he would write a new oratorio for the following year's Festival. Mendelssohn had attended previous Festivals in 1837, when he had conducted *St. Paul*, and in 1840, when the *Hymn of Praise* had been performed. On both occasions he had enjoyed great success. He wrote back accepting the new commission, adding, *'Since some time I have begun an oratorio and hope I shall be able to bring it out for the first time at your Festival; but it is still a mere beginning and I cannot yet give you any promise as to my finishing it in time.'* He returned to *Elijah* with renewed enthusiasm, mostly compiling the libretto himself this time, though he still required Schubring's assistance in selecting suitable texts. He worked feverishly on the score to ensure that it was completed according to schedule.

The first performance, conducted by Mendelssohn himself, took place on the 26th August 1846 before an audience of two thousand who had packed into Birmingham Town Hall for the eagerly-awaited event. It was an unprecedented success. No less than four choruses and four arias were encored, and the applause evidently bordered on the hysterical. Mendelssohn recounted the experience in a letter to his brother. *'No work of mine went so admirably the first time of execution, or was received with such enthusiasm by both the musicians and the audience,'* he wrote. The Times' music correspondent was even more effusive. *'The last note of Elijah was drowned in a long-continued unanimous volley of plaudits, vociferous, and deafening,'* he reported. *'Mendelssohn..... descended from his position on the conductor's rostrum; but he was compelled to appear again, amidst renewed cheers and huzzas. Never was there a more complete triumph; never a more thorough and speedy recognition of a great work of art.'*

It was without doubt the crowning glory of Mendelssohn's spectacularly successful career, but tragically it was to prove his last major triumph. A lifetime of overwork now brought rapidly failing health, and when his beloved sister Fanny unexpectedly died, he never recovered from the shock. He died on 4th November 1847.

Ever since Handel's *Messiah* had first captivated audiences in 1743, the oratorio form had occupied a pre-eminent position in the concert halls of England. After its resounding first performance, *Elijah* immediately established itself as second only to *Messiah* in the public's affections. It received countless performances in the years just after its composition and this enormous popularity continued scarcely unabated throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. Some measure of this may be judged by the fact that it was performed at the Three Choirs Festival every year from 1847 to 1930.

During the austere post-war period there was a considerable reaction against Mendelssohn's music. To what extent this was an after-effect of the rampant German anti-Semitism of the 1930s and 40s is difficult to determine, but the generally held view, particularly in some sections of the musical establishment, was that his life had been too easy and too comfortable, and that as a consequence his music, with its classical elegance and understated emotion, was superficial and distinctly inferior. In addition, the oratorio as a musical experience was by now less popular with audiences. Because of these changes in the musical climate, and also because of its previous over-exposure, *Elijah* almost disappeared from the repertoire of a great many choral societies. Thankfully, in recent years there has been a more balanced attitude to Mendelssohn, avoiding both the excessive adulation which surrounded him during his lifetime and the equally absurd denigration of more recent times.

Structurally the work is clearly influenced by the choral masterpieces of Bach and Handel, but its highly dramatic style, at times bordering on the operatic, constitutes a significant step forward from its Baroque predecessors. *Elijah* has many other outstanding qualities: the imaginative orchestration, the spontaneity and energy of the counterpoint, the variety which Mendelssohn brings to the recitatives to ensure that they always maintain the dramatic impetus, and the sheer beauty of many of the arias and choruses. Above all, there is no mistaking the work's considerable dramatic impact, epitomised by the vivid characterisation of Elijah himself.

programme notes by John Bawden

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