

Nantwich Choral Society

MEDELSSOHN

ELIJAH



SATURDAY 3RD APRIL 1993
The Parish Church of St. Mary, Nantwich
at 7.30 p.m.

NANTWICH CHORAL SOCIETY

NANTWICH SINFONIA

Leader: Andrew Long

Catrin Ley, soprano

Georgina West, contralto

Robin Green, tenor

Martin Bussey, bass

Lea Morris, treble

conducted by
Stephen Buckman



FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809 - 1847) - ELIJAH

"It appears to this Committee desirable that the services of Dr. Mendelssohn be obtained to act as Conductor at the next Festival; and that he be requested to consider whether he can provide a new oratorio, or other music, for the occasion."

This was the resolution passed on June 11, 1845 by the committee of Birmingham Musical Festival. In reply to the request, Mendelssohn wrote:

"Since some time I have begun an oratorio, and I 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 had just over a year in which to complete the work, but he had also just moved back to Leipzig with his family and had taken on a very busy schedule conducting the concerts at the Gewandhaus and teaching at the Conservatoire there. He was a fastidious and insatiable worker, but twenty years of unrelenting travel and work were beginning to take their toll on the composer's health and he was becoming increasingly prone to fits of depression and exhaustion. Nevertheless, and in spite of further commitments at music festivals in Flanders and Germany during the following winter and spring, Mendelssohn finished 'Elijah' by the end of July 1846 and the first performance took place in Birmingham's magnificent new Town Hall on August 26, with the composer conducting.

The new oratorio was an overwhelming success. 'The Times' said:

"Never was there a more complete triumph - never a more thorough and speedy recognition of a great work of art."

And in a letter to his brother the following day, Mendelssohn wrote:

"No work of mine ever went so admirably the first time of execution, or was received with such enthusiasm by both the musicians and the audience, as this oratorio. If you had only been there!... [They] were all so fully intent on the one object in question, that not the slightest sound was to be heard among the whole audience, so that I could sway at pleasure the enormous orchestra and choir. Not less than four choruses and four airs were encored, and... a young English tenor sang the last air so beautifully, that I was obliged to collect all my energies so as not to be affected and to continue beating time steadily. As I said, if you had only been there!"

Mendelssohn did, however, have some reservations about the piece, and as he prepared the score for publication he made considerable alterations to it, sometimes rewriting whole movements.

In April 1847, he returned to England to conduct the new version of 'Elijah', first in London and then in Manchester and Birmingham, giving a total of six performances in the space of a fortnight. As well as the concerts, there were also many official functions to attend - including one at Buckingham Palace - and the strain was more than Mendelssohn's weakened constitution could take. "One more week of this unremitting fatigue," he said when asked to extend his stay, "and I should be killed outright."

Sadly, the news of his beloved sister's sudden death, only a few days after his return to Germany, sent Mendelssohn into a decline from which he never really recovered, and within six months he too was dead.

Synopsis

The oratorio tells the story of Elijah as it appears in the Book of Kings, where the prophet brings a drought upon the people of Israel to punish them for turning away from the Lord and worshipping instead the god Baal. Elijah is sent away to escape the effects of the drought but returns after three years and tells King Ahab to summon all the people to Mount Carmel where he challenges the prophets of Baal to see if their god can set fire to the sacrifice they make there. When they fail, Elijah calls on Jehovah who sends fire, proving that he is the true God. The people praise the Lord and Elijah calls an end to the drought. His criticism of the king, however, angers the people and he has to flee for his life into the wilderness. There he encounters God and is given the courage to return and bring the people back to the Lord. Then, his mission fulfilled, he is taken up to heaven in a whirlwind, riding on a fiery chariot.

The Music

Right from the start, Mendelssohn shows us that his main interest is in the dramatic power of his subject. He begins, not with an overture, but with Elijah's solemn proclamation of God's curse. The fugal overture which follows begins quietly and anxiously, building in tension and rushing straight into the first chorus ("Help, Lord!") which portrays the people's fear and desperation at the effects of the drought and famine. In another chorus (with the two female soloists) their mood turns to hopelessness, and Obadiah the priest (tenor) tries to convince them of God's mercy if they will repent. At the words "His curse hath fallen down upon us" in the next chorus, Mendelssohn recalls the music of Elijah's opening recitative.

An angel (alto) tells Elijah how he can escape the drought and a chorus of angels promises to protect him. The angel comes again when the brook has dried up and sends him to a widow who will look after him with God's aid. The scene between the widow (soprano) and Elijah, in which he brings her dead son back to life is operatic in style and it ends peacefully with a delicately orchestrated chorus, "Blessed are the men who fear Him".

With music that recalls his initial pronouncement, Elijah returns to the court of King Ahab (tenor) and challenges the prophets of Baal to test the power of their god. In three increasingly urgent choruses, interspersed with Elijah's goading cries, the prophets call upon Baal, but are met each time with silence. Then, in the first of his three great airs ("Lord God of Abraham"), Elijah prays before calling upon his God. Between prayer and call, Mendelssohn - like Bach in his passions - inserts a simple chorale, "Cast thy burden", although - unlike Bach - all Mendelssohn's chorale melodies in 'Elijah' are his own.

At the end of the graphic chorus "The fire descends from heaven", the people, awe-struck, promise that they 'will have no other gods before the Lord' and they readily agree to kill all the prophets of Baal. Elijah's next air, "Is not His word like a fire?", is the finest in the oratorio and recalls Handel's "For He is like a refiner's fire" in its furious energy. A contrastingly penitential alto air introduces the final scene of Part I. Elijah, prompted by Obadiah, prays for an end to the drought and when at length the rain comes, the people offer up a great chorus of thanksgiving.

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Part II begins with an air for soprano, the famous "Hear ye, Israel". The first section is full of pathos, while the second, vigorous and in the major key, expresses the same confidence in God's help as the chorus which follows. The narrative continues with Elijah confronting Ahab with his sins, but it is the queen, Jezebel, who speaks next and, in a vividly dramatic scene culminating in the chorus "Woe to him", she incites the people to turn on Elijah, blaming him for all their past afflictions. Obadiah warns Elijah of the plot to kill him, and the prophet escapes to the wilderness where, in the third of his great airs, he prays that God will let him die.

Echoes of Bach and Handel, whose music Mendelssohn loved and knew so well, pervade the whole oratorio, but with Elijah's prayer "It is enough", Mendelssohn clearly had in mind the aria "It is finished" from the St. John Passion - even using a solo cello in imitation of Bach's viola da gamba.

Elijah falls asleep, surrounded by angels who, in two serene choruses, comfort him. An angel then tells Elijah he must go to Mount Horeb, reassuring the despondent prophet in the air "O rest in the Lord". After a contemplative chorus we see Elijah ready to face his Lord, his reference to "a thirsty land" recalling music from the opening chorus. Another angel (soprano) tells him to prepare himself and then, in the most dramatic music in the oratorio, the chorus describes the mighty wind, the earthquake and the fire which precede the still small voice of the Lord. The tranquil mood at the end of this chorus continues into the next, until the cries of the Seraphim, heard first in the soft high voices of a semi-chorus, are repeated in the sonorous tones of the full choir and orchestra. In a choral recitative Elijah is told to go back to his people, and with renewed strength, he returns to his task. A fiery chorus depicting the power of his preaching, and how he was finally taken up into heaven leads into an air in which the tenor sings of the joy awaiting the righteous in their Father's realm.

The final section of the oratorio, beginning with a soprano recitative, puts Elijah's role into perspective as a forerunner of the Messiah. The prophecy of the Messiah's coming is recounted in the chorus "But the Lord, from the north hath raised one", and His fulfilment of Elijah's work in the quartet which follows ("O come, everyone that thirsteth"), in which we are shown that the drought suffered by the people of Israel is also a metaphor for life without God. This final chorus announces that the glory of the Lord is the reward of those that turn to Him, ending in a hymn of praise.

(Colin Bromelow)