



The Oratorio, *Elijah*

Felix Mendelssohn, 1809-1847

By Linda Foulsham

The oratorio was a popular musical genre of the Victorian era. This semi-dramatic musical form is usually based on a scriptural theme and performed by soloists, choir and orchestra without costume, scenery or props.

It was considered: 'more morally respectable' than 'the lurid art form of opera' and represented the Protestant foil to the Roman Catholic mass.

Mendelssohn was a devotee of the oratorios of the Baroque composers Bach and Handel; he often conducted the *Messiah* at the Düsseldorf Festivals. Whilst at the university in Berlin he personally revived interest in Bach by convincing the Academy to perform *St Matthew's Passion* much to the chagrin of the musical elite.

In *Elijah* he skilfully combines his musicality with Handel's dramatic approach and Bach's prayerful chorales. German audiences were accustomed to chorales interrupting the story line but Mendelssohn preferred plot movement to comment so used the chorale sparingly.

By the time he wrote *Elijah*, Mendelssohn had visited England eight times and was a devoted anglophile. His dramatic and lyrical ability had achieved great popularity in Victoria's England, a country known for attracting Europe's finest musicians such as Von Weber and Rossini who interestingly, sang duets with King William IV and who charged fifty pounds to appear at private soirées!

Because of his popularity and royal patronage, the Birmingham Festival commissioned him to provide an oratorio for the 1846 annual festival. (The Birmingham Festival is a hospital charity and the longest running classical music festival in the world, lasting from 1784 to 1912.)



Mendelssohn was working on several compositions and only managed to finish the final movements of *Elijah* nine days before the premier! One can only imagine the stress on the chorus master Mr James Stimpson, the English translator, William Bartholomew and the orchestral and vocal performers who had to learn the score!

But the show did go on and *Elijah* premiered at the Birmingham Festival in August 1846 with over 400 performers—125 orchestra players, 271 singers and 9 soloists—all of whom were transported from London in two chartered trains along with an entourage of friends and journalists. (Incidentally, Mendelssohn and the leading soloists were each offered a generous 200 guineas to perform.)

At the premier two thousand people filled the enormous Birmingham Town Hall—many were standing and others were listening outside. The accolades continued for hours. The critics strove to outdo one another. *The Musical World* wrote: 'never was there a more complete triumph...it was one of the greatest intellectual feasts ever listened to.'

When he started the Oratorio Mendelssohn wrote to Schubring, his German librettist and Lutheran pastor: 'The dramatic element should predominate...the personages should act as living beings'. So he always considered the drama more important than chronology, hence the scriptural passages in the Oratorio are taken from disparate Books of the Old Testament including: 1 Kings, Jeremiah, Psalms, Lamentations, Hosea, Deuteronomy, Samuel, Malachi, Exodus, 2 Chronicles and Job as well as Ecclesiasticus in the Apocrypha.

FAITH is the theme of *Elijah*. It is portrayed as tension between two protagonists; the first being *Elijah*, the only fully developed character. He is an unyielding Prophet of God of whom Mendelssohn wrote: 'I picture *Elijah* as a grand and mighty prophet...powerful, zealous but also harsh and angry and saturnine; a striking contrast to the court sycophants and the rabble...yet born on the wings of angels'.

Most of the story line is conveyed by the multi-tasking chorus which at various times represents the angels, the Israelite people, the obsequious court, Priests of Baal or merely comments somewhat like a Greek chorus.

The court sycophants and the fickle people of Israel represent the second protagonist. They are alternately swayed by the miracle of God's fire and the threats of the evil Queen Jezebel, wife of King Ahab of Northern Israel in the 9th century BC.

Jezebel was a devotee of the pagan cult of Baal, ancient god of lightening, thunder and rain and when she married Ahab, she brought her religion with its idols, priests and 850 false prophets from Phoenicia. Jezebel was a strong woman, known for her savagery and death marches who was determined to exterminate all who rejected Baal. When she introduced her cult of Baal, the kingdom of Israel degenerated into moral and spiritual abyss. She is known as the first female religious persecutor in history.

A verse from 1 Kings theatrically opens *Elijah* as he foretells the drought and plague about to descend on the people of Israel because of their desertion of the true God and their worship of Baal. The strong vocal bass proclamation and threatening orchestral chords immediately convey this unflinching prophet of God.

Mendelssohn then employs the fugue form in the overture and in the initial chorus where the slow tempo exemplifies the desperate cries of the starving Israelites.

We are next introduced to the tenor's character Obadiah, who is a follower of Elijah's God but is employed by King Ahab. He has personally saved many true prophets from Jezebel's unflinching death sentences. Distraught about his people, he urges them to forsake their idols and promises God's presence in the emotional, lyrical aria, quoting verses from Deuteronomy and Job: *'If with all your hearts you truly seek him'*.

Sadly, the unbelieving mob is not convinced and complain bitterly of the Lord's ill treatment. They rage: *'Yet doth the Lord see it not. He mocketh at us...'*

Then in musical and emotional contrast, echoing verses from Deuteronomy and Exodus, the crowd has second thoughts as it acknowledges that: *'His mercies fall on all them that love him'*.

The recitative from the Alto, representing an angel follows. (A recitative is like spoken singing, it is often dramatic and precedes the more lyrical aria.) The angel urges Elijah to hide in Cherith's brook - an isolated, wild ravine west of Jericho, where, he is promised, the ravens will feed him.

More angels arrive and in a celestial double quartet promise Elijah that: *'they shall protect'* him.

In the following operatic-like scene taken from 1 Kings, the angel directs Elijah to a grieving widow's home, promising food and oil. Here he performs the miracle of bringing her dead son to life. The expressive widow is a semi-developed character and in a moving duet, her skepticism turns to belief. The chorus, acting as commentator, asserts: *'blessed are the men who fear him, they ever walk in the ways of peace'*.

So now everything is going well but when Elijah returns great drama erupts as the angry mob accuses him of bringing trouble on Israel. Elijah reacts by challenging the priests of Baal, demanding a spectacular contest: whose god can bring fire to a cold, wet, sacrifice? He mocks the Priests of Baal, and their god of lightning and rain: *'Call him louder...he is on a journey...he sleepeth'*. The chorus representing the Priests, cries *'Baal! Hear our cry'* but godless silence greets their desperate calls.

Angels return and confirm the mercy of the Lord to Elijah and offer an alternative to the restless mob. Mendelssohn acknowledged his debt to Bach in the beautiful, affirming quartet of soloists: *'Cast thy burden on the Lord and He shall sustain thee'*.

In total assurance, Elijah calls on his God who answers convincingly with a dramatic, all-consuming fire. The fickle Israelites again turn from Baal, who was unable to bring fire, back to Elijah's God and resoundingly echo his cry to execute the prophets of Baal at Kishon's brook—a threatening place with dangerous torrents and quicksand winding through central Palestine.

Elijah is still angry with the people; he threatens their wavering belief in the thundering aria, echoed by vehement orchestral writing: *'Is not his word like a fire...like a hammer that breaketh the rock?'*. Then as further evidence of the strength of the true God, Elijah sends

a child to the mountain top to look for rain clouds. On the fourth sighting a black cloud with wind and storms approaches and the drought is relieved musically with surging arpeggios in the strings as the rejoicing voices praise, in a Handel like manner: *'Thanks be to God! He laveth the thirsty land'*.

Part 1 concludes with deliverance and spiritual renewal for the Israelites.



Part 2 is opened by a powerful soprano aria, echoed by the chorus of Israelites: *'Hear ye, Israel... be not afraid for I am thy God'*. However; their rejoicing does not last long for Jezebel is on the war path again. This time she accuses Elijah of challenging the power of King Ahab, of bringing famine and of eliminating her priests. She incites the fickle crowd who indulge her, crying in interweaving fugue form: *'Woe to him...he shall perish!'*

Obadiah quickly warns Elijah of the death threat and he flees to the desert. His heartfelt aria: *'It is enough'*, expresses the grief of his failure. The orchestra parallels his pleading slow, steady, triple time.

Asleep under a bush in the desert, Elijah is comforted by a trio of angels lyrically exhorting him to: *'Lift thine eyes to the mountain'* and heed the reassuring promise of the chorus of angels that: *'the God of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps'*. The angels also instruct Elijah to go to Mount Horeb, and wait patiently for 40 days and nights where his faith is rejuvenated and after a dramatic choral storm and earthquake, he hears the still small voice of the Lord accompanying a vision of seraphim proclaiming: *'Holy, Holy'*. He is now energised and returns to Israel to redeem the faithful 7,000 who have not bowed to Baal. His mission successful, he is dramatically transported to heaven in a whirlwind.

Elijah, the prophet is hailed as the forerunner of the Messiah in the lines from Isaiah: *'But the Lord from the North has raiseth one'*.

Mendelssohn's steadfast religious faith in God's mercy and grace are affirmed in the penultimate chorus: *'O! Come everyone that thirsteth...and your souls will live forever'* and the positive finale: *'the glory of the Lord ever shall reward you'*.



Looking briefly at the context of Mendelssohn's life it becomes evident that, though noted for his humility, he was able to make the most of his prodigious talent and heritage.

Felix Mendelssohn was born into a prominent cultured, liberal, wealthy Jewish family; his parents converted to Protestantism when he was seven at which time he and his three siblings were baptised into the Reformed Christian Church and he maintained a lifelong belief.

Felix and his older sister Fanny were equally gifted as young performers and composers, though their father strongly discouraged the publication of Fanny's vast output.

Initially their performances were held at home at their mother's 'salon'. (These small gatherings allowed upper class women to enjoy music and engage in intellectual discussion.)

Whilst still children, they gave concerts throughout Europe, playing great composers such as Bach and Beethoven.

In 1819, the year the Atlantic was first crossed by a steamship, Mendelssohn was composing his Piano Sonata in G minor. He was 10 years old. At only 12 Mendelssohn became a friend of the 72-year-old Goethe and together they enjoyed lively discussions on a variety of topics including Protestant theology, Hegel's lectures on aesthetics, Schiller, Walter Scott and attractive women!

And in his teens Mendelssohn's composing was already mature; it included 12 string symphonies, songs, and concertos for piano and orchestra. After completing studies at Berlin University he performed, conducted, taught and composed incessantly. Even sketching in Scotland he composed the popular *Hebrides Overture* and equally well known are the *Italian* symphonies, the oratorio *St Paul*, *8 Books of Songs Without Words* and vast amounts of beautiful songs and duets, his German lieder.

Felix moved in aristocratic circles. He was often received at Buckingham Palace and became the favourite composer and personal friend of Queen Victoria, nine years his junior. His works were included in the Royal Command Performances and later when their eldest daughter married she selected the March from '*A Midsummer Night's Dream*' for her wedding - thus creating a tradition still enjoyed today.

He was also familiar with King Fredrick IV of Prussia who commissioned him to compose music to plays of Shakespeare, Racine and Sophocles. Other close friends were the internationally renowned professional musicians, Robert and Clara Schumann, who named their last child after Felix.

To extend the cultural context, it is worth noting that Tennyson, Browning and Dickens, Verdi, Berlioz, Schubert, Chopin, List and Wagner were also contemporaries; all born within a few years of each other. Wagner, who was born 4 years after Mendelssohn, acknowledged a musical debt to Mendelssohn but still denigrated his music for its 'Jewishness', the ramifications of which extended into the twentieth century when the Nazis destroyed Mendelssohn's statue and banned his music.

Of course this was not unprecedented. Moses Mendelssohn, his grandfather, was one of Europe's most influential philosophers and advocate of civil rights. He was known as the Jewish Socrates. Moses was a friend of Emanuel Kant and the first Jew to publish a book in German. However, he endured similar bigotry, ironically during the enlightenment, a time of Jewish oppression when Jews were forced to pay for strange customs such as the compulsory purchase of wild boars killed at the royal hunting parties.

They also were obliged to pay special taxes upon marriage and death. In 1769 Fredrick the Great, decreed that all Jews must purchase items from his Royal Porcelain Factory in Berlin

because it was making a loss, unable to compete with the finer items produced by its competitors. Accordingly, Moses was ordered to purchase 20 life size expensive porcelain apes when he applied for a marriage license!

Fortunately, Felix's music survived the Nazi persecution. Two main scholarships exist today in his name. One in Germany and one in England. The English scholarship is administered by the Royal Academy of Music and was initiated by the soprano Jenny Lind, the acclaimed 'Swedish Nightingale', who was a personal friend. Mendelssohn had written the expressive widow's part in *Elijah* for Jenny but a contractual mix-up prevented her from performing in the premiere.

Tragically, only 14 months after the premiere, Mendelssohn died; the suspected cause was a series of paralytic strokes brought about by an excessive work load. He also never stopped grieving for the death of his beloved sister Fanny, six months earlier. The diary entries of friends refer to his deeply agitated state of mind and weakened physical state.

Jenny Lind was so devastated by her friend's early death that following a year of mourning, she performed the Widow's role in *Elijah* in London and raised £1,000 for a scholarship for young composers. The first recipient was the 14-year-old Arthur Sullivan who had composed his first anthem at age eight. He was later to become *Sir* for his contribution to the musical life of England, most memorably his collaboration with Gilbert for their famous operettas.

When Mendelssohn died, the mourning was universal. Thousands filled the streets of Leipzig for the funeral procession. Velvet, silver and palm leaves adorned the coffin as it wove through the streets and past the Gewandhaus where he had taught and conducted. That night the coffin went by in a special train to the family vault in Berlin—as it passed through towns the local choirs paid tribute by singing him to his final resting place.

He was indeed a well-loved maestro and now, a time-honored one. Child prodigy, prolific composer, international performer, conductor, professor, cartoonist, husband and father of five children...phenomenal achievements for a man who died tragically early at 38!

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Image: The manuscript used for the premiere, by a copyist with notes by Mendelssohn, now in the collection of the [Library of Birmingham](#)