

Felix Mendelssohn and *Elijah*

by Alan M. Rothenberg

A Child Prodigy

Like Wolfgang Mozart, Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) showed his talent at an early age. He started piano at the age of six, and performed in public for the first time at ten. He then began studying composition, publishing a piano quartet at thirteen. At the age of seventeen, Felix had already composed several masterpieces, including his First Symphony, the Octet for Strings, and the *Midsummer Night's Dream* Overture.

The difference between the two prodigies was money and class. In Mozart's time, being a musician was almost like being a low-paid servant. Mozart's father Leopold, a well-regarded violinist, exploited his son's talent, parading him to Europe's royalty, and constantly pushing Wolfgang to generate more income to support his father and family. Mendelssohn was the son of a Berlin banker and a well-educated, musically adept mother. He lived in an intellectual household that valued art, philosophy, and literature. He was introduced to composer Carl Maria von Weber and the writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, both of whom recognized the young prodigy's talent. And Mendelssohn was given every opportunity to learn and develop his talent out of the public eye.

A Multi-Talented Adult

Young Felix also showed his talents as a conductor and organizer of musical events. Through friends of the family, Mendelssohn was exposed to the choral works of J.S. Bach, even though at the time Bach was mainly known by musicians, and mostly for his keyboard music. In 1829, when he was only twenty years old, Mendelssohn conducted Bach's *Passion According to St. Matthew*, the first such performance since the Baroque master's death in 1750, prompting a revival of interest in Bach's music. From this point on, his life was a whirlwind of traveling, performing, conducting and composing. In 1835, he moved to Leipzig, becoming music director of the Gewandhaus Orchestra, a position he held for the rest of his life.

Felix Mendelssohn's position in music history has varied through the years, even though some of his works have never diminished in popularity. During his lifetime, and for some years after his death, he was seen as one of the great men of German music, but by 1860 he was denigrated as a musical lightweight, not worthy of being considered alongside Bach and Beethoven. Some disparaged the lack of Romantic-era innovation in his music; he straddled the line between the Classical and Romantic eras. But he left us many great and popular compositions, and as a conductor he helped establish the idea of a "core symphonic repertoire," a concept that has continued to influence music.

In the last fifty years, Mendelssohn's contributions to music have been undergoing a re-evaluation, recognizing the different aspects of his musical life and legacy. We are only now beginning to understand what Robert Schumann meant when he wrote that Mendelssohn was "the Mozart of the nineteenth-century, the one who most clearly sees through the contradictions of the age and for the first time, reconciles them."

The Beginnings of *Elijah*

Coming off the 1836 success of his oratorio, *St. Paul*, Mendelssohn began contemplating writing another, and wrote to his friend Karl Klingemann—an amateur poet/musician and career diplomat based in London—asking for assistance: "help me find a new text, and thus encourage me to write another oratorio...an 'Elijah,' or a 'St. Peter,' or even an 'Og of Bashan!'" The following year, Mendelssohn stayed with Klingemann during an appearance at the prestigious Birmingham Triennial Music Festival in London, and together they sketched out a plan for the new oratorio, the composer having settled on the Old Testament prophet Elijah as the subject. Klingemann was to use the plan to create the libretto, but made little progress, and returned it to the composer.

Mendelssohn then sent the *Elijah* plan to Julius Schubring, the author of the libretto for *St. Paul*, and a Lutheran minister in Dessau. Mendelssohn emphasized that he wanted to "see the dramatic element more prominent" than a deep spiritual probing of the biblical text: "I picture Elijah as a grand and mighty prophet of the kind we

would do well to have in our own day—powerful, zealous, but also harsh and angry...yet borne on the wings of angels.” Some months later, Schubring sent the composer a revised plan, but felt “the thing is becoming too objective—an interesting, even thrilling picture, but far from edifying the heart of the listener.” Schubring felt it important that the story should emphasize “Elijah’s meaning for the New Covenant, as the forerunner of the Messiah, pointing towards His coming,” and also that “as Elijah appeared to Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17), so Christ might come to Elijah, transfigure him, and show him from afar the streams of peace.”

Mendelssohn disagreed: “With a subject like Elijah, the dramatic element should predominate...The personages should act and speak as if they were living beings...let them not be a musical picture, but a real world, such as you find in every chapter of the Old Testament.”

A Commission Renews *Elijah*

Mendelssohn had yet to write a note of music for the oratorio, and it appears that around 1838 Mendelssohn put aside the entire project. But in 1845, the organizers of the Birmingham festival contacted Mendelssohn in the hope of engaging him for the following year’s concerts, and requested him to bring some new works, preferably an oratorio. Mendelssohn replied in July 1845: “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.”

The pressure now on, Mendelssohn turned back to Schubring, writing and, at least once, meeting to work out the libretto. Accustomed to oratorios by Handel, the Birmingham audience expected texts to be sung in English. Although Mendelssohn spoke and wrote fluent English, he entrusted the translation to his friend, the writer and composer William Bartholomew. It was sometimes a delicate task, as many of the Biblical passages were famous, so English listeners would have been dismayed if they had heard literal translations of Luther’s German Bible, rather than the more familiar King James version.

Letters between the composer and his translator reveal that Mendelssohn examined Bartholomew’s translation in great detail, and that the unique opening of the piece was originally Bartholomew’s idea—one of his letters to the composer includes: “...Announce the curse [as the first number of the oratorio]. Then let an introductory movement be played, expressive, descriptive of the misery of the famine.”

It was something of a mad rush to get the oratorio completed on time. Mendelssohn was always a fast, facile composer—something that would later be held against him by his detractors—and he completed writing two and one-half hours of music in about three months. As he completed sections he would dispatch them to both Bartholomew for translation, and copyists to create the instrumental parts.

Triumph, Revision, and Death

The first performance took place on August 26, 1846, in Birmingham Town Hall. The forces were large—125 instrumentalists, and 271 choristers. The reviewer for the London newspaper *The Times* wrote, “The last note of *Elijah* was drowned in a long-continued unanimous volley of plaudits, vociferous and deafening. It was as though enthusiasm, long-checked, had suddenly burst its bounds and filled the air with shouts of exultation.” Mendelssohn wrote to his brother, “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.”

Within a few days of returning to his home in Leipzig, Mendelssohn and Bartholomew began working on revisions to the oratorio. In a December 1846 letter to Klingemann, Mendelssohn wrote: “I am sure you will be satisfied with the alterations which I may call improvements. *Elijah* has become far more impressive and solemn here...The parts that I have already remodeled prove to me again that I am right not to rest till such work is as good as it is in my power to make it.”

Mendelssohn returned to England in the spring of 1847 to lead performances of the revised oratorio. The first performance in Germany occurred in Hamburg on October 9, 1847. Mendelssohn himself was to conduct performances during November in Berlin, but he suffered a stroke at the beginning of the month, and died on November 4, 1847, at the age of 38. *Elijah* was Mendelssohn's last completed major work.

Elijah – The Story According to Mendelssohn and Schubring

Mendelssohn rejected Schubring's ideas of incorporating references to "the New Covenant." The final text includes large sections of I and II Kings, where almost all the events involving Elijah are found, along with quotations from Lamentations, Jeremiah, Psalms, and other Old Testament books. There are a few quotations from Ecclesiasticus (also known as Sirach) from the Apocrypha, but only one from the New Testament—a short quote from Matthew.

Elijah was a prophet who lived in the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the ninth-century BCE, during the reign of Ahab. The Bible provides very little information about the man; instead it includes a series of episodes, which provide the basis for the oratorio's storyline. Part I opens with Elijah predicting a famine because of the evil ways of the king, who has erected a temple to Baal. The overture depicts the suffering of the people during the famine. They then plead for rain, their prayers including some very Bach-like chorales. Elijah is sent to confront Ahab and his priests of Baal. In one of the most dramatic sections of the oratorio, the priests call upon Baal to light the fire under a sacrifice, but nothing happens. Mendelssohn's music illustrates the increasing frustration of the priests, exacerbated by Elijah's taunting. The prophet then calmly appeals to the Lord, and fire comes down from heaven to consume the sacrifice. The priests and the people repent, and rain falls, ending the famine.

Part II includes some of Mendelssohn's most inventive and illustrative music. It begins with hymns of reassurance, then Elijah again confronts Ahab. The king's wife Jezebel stirs up the people against the prophet, and he escapes to the desert. Elijah is consoled by angels, then experiences earthquakes, fire and wind, before hearing the "still, small voice" of the Lord. Re-invigorated, Elijah returns to Israel, where he is taken to heaven in a fiery chariot. The oratorio ends with another Bach-influenced moment—a grand fugue.