

Felix Mendelssohn | Elijah

To the noble artist who, when surrounded by the Baal-worship of the false, has, like a second Elijah, employed his genius and his skill in the service of the true; who has . . . won [our ears with all] that is harmonious and pure — to the great master who has held in his firm control and revealed to us not only the gentle whisperings of the breeze, but also the majestic thundering of the tempest. — England's Prince Consort Albert, in a note to Mendelssohn¹

In late 18th- and early 19th-century Europe, Jews lobbied their governments for civil rights. Germany erupted in riots, speeding the Jewish attempt to assimilate, to become fully “German.” Felix Mendelssohn was born during this troubled period into a wealthy, cultured, Jewish family. His grandfather Moses was one of Europe’s most influential thinkers and the last major philosopher of the Enlightenment, and his father, Abraham, was a successful banker. Moses, who sought to modernize Judaism with reason and humanism, changed the family name from Mendel Dessau to Mendelssohn. Felix’s parents added Bartholdy to the family name, converted to Protestantism, and had their four children — Fanny, Rebekah, Felix, and Paul — baptized. Although Felix became a committed Lutheran, he refused to adopt Bartholdy as a surname.

As youngsters, both Felix and his sister Fanny were sent to Paris to study piano and the works of Mozart and Bach. Musicians of the day praised the precociously gifted Felix as the second Mozart. Fanny, too, was notably accomplished at playing and composing music, but social mores for upper-class women would lock her talent away. Finally, when she was 40, a musician outside the family circle encouraged her, and she published a few of her several hundred compositions to favorable review.

During Felix’s teens, he was already composing mature works, including 12 string symphonies, a symphony for full orchestra, and the overture *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, considered one of the most beautiful works of the Romantic period.

After completing his studies at Berlin University, Mendelssohn traveled and performed all over Europe. Not surprisingly, he became a favorite composer and personal friend of Queen Victoria and Prince Consort Albert. When he was 26, he became conductor of the Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig, performing many of the works of J.S. Bach and Beethoven. His concert seasons were unmatched in Europe, both in musical quality

and repertoire. When he conducted the first performance of Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion* since the composer's death 79 years earlier, he rescued Bach from obscurity. He would later rescue Franz Schubert in a similar way.

Mendelssohn and his contemporaries Hector Berlioz, Robert Schumann, Frédéric Chopin, Franz Liszt, and Richard Wagner, faced the early 19th-century challenge of appealing to the rising middle class, who were a much more diverse audience than music's formerly small, homogeneous, upper-class audience. Beethoven had disrupted "culture" forever with music that blazed the way for Romanticism. Now what was the new ideal in music to be — pure instrumental music or music with a literary orientation? Mendelssohn and his colleagues committed themselves to creating *program music*, in which the instrumentation is the vehicle for conveying the meaning of words and, ultimately, for expressing what words cannot. For Mendelssohn, deeply instilled with his grandfather's teachings to love truth and peace, the marriage of music with words was a holy task.

Mendelssohn used two musical forms — the chorale and large instrumental works with chorale-like finales — to advance themes of reconciliation and brotherhood. His selection of Biblical texts for his two great oratorios, *St. Paul* and *Elijah*, exemplify his devotion to the task. Both celebrate "faith in the divine work of enlightenment."²

Mendelssohn began drafting the libretto for *Elijah* with his friend Pastor Schubring in 1838, but disagreements prevailed and he set it aside. The 1845 Birmingham Festival committee asked him for a new oratorio, after having heard him conduct *St. Paul* at an earlier festival. The Old Testament story resonated deeply with Mendelssohn. The life of the prophet Elijah epitomized the evolution of Jewish faith from worship of the Babylonian pantheon of idols and myths to worshipping one monotheistic God. Elijah met with God on Mt. Sinai, where Moses received the Torah. Elijah's assignment: to return the dispersed Jewish tribes to Israel. Once again composer and friend set to work, with Schubring recommending suitable Old Testament texts and Mendelssohn compiling the libretto. Rather than a continuous story line, he created a series of tableaux.

Elijah is in two parts, each with its own climax. Part I begins with solemn chords that will later convey the word of God. The overture paints a fearsome picture of the effect of drought on the Jewish people, which carries into the chorus fugue, "Help, Lord! Wilt thou destroy us?"³ The slow tempo is that of the dying as they make their way along a winding path through the arid Palestinian desert. Their faith in a merciful God collides

with their experience at the hand of a wrathful God who withholds the rain. Angels arrive to urge Elijah to perform a miracle and reform the people. In their desperation, they have resorted to worshipping Baal, ancient god of lightning, thunder, and rain, whose death and resurrection was celebrated in annual fertility rites.

Elijah goes to the home of the widow Zarephath to recall her dead son's soul. Mired in grief, she is more than skeptical and bluntly says, "What have I to do with thee, O man of God?" When Mendelssohn wrote the expressive soprano part of the widow, he had in mind his adoring and adored friend the "Swedish Nightingale," Jenny Lind.⁴

Elijah revives Zarephath's son, and they praise God with "Blessed are they who fear Him!" The chorus joins the praise and extends it with the magnificent ascending triads of the phrase "through darkness rises the light."

But when the now-proven Elijah returns to the people, they reject him as a troublemaker. Their keening in "Baal, we cry to thee" is interspersed with long pauses depicting their mouths frozen open in vain appeal. Elijah calls down a consuming fire from the heavens, which convinces everyone to turn again to God. They launch prayers for rain, bringing only a little white cloud at first and then, finally, the longed-for waters that "laveth the thirsty land," a downward rush of musical scales.

Part II asserts that God comforts those who follow his commandments. The soprano's contemplative "Hear ye, Israel" opens this movement. The chorus responds with the forcefully uplifting "Be not afraid."

In ridding the land of Baal worship, Elijah has challenged King Ahab, ruler of Israel. His wife, Queen Jezebel, incites the crowd against Elijah. Disheartened, Elijah sings "It is enough." This aria is but one of Mendelssohn's tributes to Classical composers in *Elijah*. This tribute to Bach's aria "Es ist vollbracht" ("It is accomplished") from *St. John Passion* is a fitting signpost to the New Testament message of salvation and a reference to John the Baptist as Elijah reincarnated.

Elijah awaits God on Mount Horeb, longing for death. Angels once again arrive to restore his spirit with the words, "Lift thine eyes to the mountains." The chorus sings the beautiful "He, watching over Israel, slumbers not, nor sleeps." Elijah's hope resurfaces, and the chorus launches into the towering climax, "Behold God the Lord

passed by!" This canon, with its rapid harmony changes, is based on a medieval tune sung in German synagogues since the 15th century.

Elijah returns to Israel, his spirit refreshed and faith restored. A fiery chariot drawn by fiery horses comes in a whirlwind and takes Elijah into the heavens. The last aria, "Then shall the righteous shine forth," and the final two choruses, based on the last chapters of Malachi and Isaiah, "But the Lord from the north hath raised one" and "And then shall your light break forth," anticipate the Messiah's coming.

The late 19th century was marked by English and German revolts against middle class aesthetics. That along with more anti-Semitism cast Mendelssohn into near obscurity for a century. Richard Wagner, who had once publicly admitted a musical debt to Mendelssohn, spent several decades denigrating his music for its "Jewishness." Wagner's vast public accepted this criticism, and its effect lasted well into the 20th century, when the Nazis destroyed Mendelssohn's statue in Leipzig and banned his music.⁵

Mendelssohn had faced similar virulent German anti-Semitism throughout his life, yet he maintained the masterly grace and gentle strength to create music that reaches deeply into listeners' hearts and invites introspection. His *Elijah* has joined the great oratorio triumvirate with Handel's *Messiah* and Haydn's *The Creation*.

- Notes by Carol Talbeck, reprinted with permission of San Francisco Choral Society.

1. Mendelssohn, "the second Elijah," Schima Kaufman, Tudor Publishing, NY, 1936.
2. "The Aesthetics of Assimilation and Affirmation: Reconstructing the Career of Felix Mendelssohn," Leon Botstein in *Mendelssohn and His World*, ed. R. Larry Todd, Princeton University Press, NJ, 1991.
3. *Elijah* was written in German. Mendelssohn oversaw its English translation by his friend William Bartholomew.
4. *Mendelssohn: a new image of the composer and his age*, Eric Werner, Macmillan Co., 1963.
5. The Nazis also filmed incarcerated Jewish musicians performing *Elijah*, footage used to "show the world how the 'resettled' Jews were living in cultural luxury." *How Can We Keep from Singing*, Joan Oliver Goldsmith, W.W. Norton, NY, 2001.