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PROGRAM NOTES

FELIX MENDELSSOHN-BARTHOLDY
ELIJAH, OPUS 70

Jakob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn was born in Hamburg on February 3, 1809, and died in Leipzig on November 4, 1847. Urged by his maternal uncle, Jakob, the family converted to Lutheranism, baptized the children and appended their name with "Bartholdy" to distinguish the Protestant Mendelssohns from the Jewish ones.

"Elijah" is a two-hour, 11-minute oratorio scored for soprano, alto, tenor, and bass soloists, solo octet, mixed chorus, and an orchestra consisting of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba (replacing the obsolute ophicleide called for by Mendelssohn), timpani, organ, and strings.

Dramatic vs Theological (Epic)

As early as August 1836, Mendelssohn asked his lifelong friend Karl Klingemann about writing a libretto for an oratorio based on Elijah, St. Peter, or even Og of Bashan to "stir me up to fresh activity…" Elijah and St. Peter both remained possible subjects for some time. Og of Bashan (one of the pagan kings conquered by the Hebrew armies under Moses (see Deuteronomy 3:1-11) was no more than a bit of Mendelssohian whimsy, however. Og was principally famous for having an enormous bed, nine cubits long and four wide—scarcely enough substance to build an oratorio on.

By approaching Klingemann (who had written the libretto for his one-act operetta *Die Heimkehr aus der Fremde*, known in English as *Son and Stranger*) rather than the pastor Julius Schubring, who had assembled the text for *St. Paul*, it is clear that Mendelssohn was in search of a conception more dramatic than theological. On a visit to London in August 1837, Mendelssohn and Klingemann spent about two weeks roughing out a plan for a dramatic oratorio on the subject of Elijah, leaning heavily on I Kings 17-19 and II Kings 1-2. During the winter, Mendelssohn wrote repeatedly to Klingemann, asking whether he would soon see some completed text for the oratorio, but either his friend was too busy to work on it or he had lost interest in the project. He returned the outline to Mendelssohn in May 1838 and took no further part in it.

At this point Mendelssohn finally let Schubring in on *Elijah*, but with the idea that he would merely find appropriate Biblical passages for arias and choruses to comment on the dramatic action. Though Schubring was willing to help, he disagreed with Mendelssohn's view of the piece. It was, to be sure, "interesting and exciting, but far from uplifting and edifying the listener and filling him with a spirit of devotion." This was the crux of their difference: The composer wanted to write a dramatic work, and the theologian wanted a piece of church music. To oversimplify a bit, Mendelssohn wanted to compose a Handel oratorio, and Schubring wanted him to write a Bach Passion.

Though these two great musical forebears had produced large-scale choral works that remained standard models throughout the 19th century and beyond, many writers identified Bach and Handel as "the two great singers of Christ." In other words, their oratorio-like words were considered to be sacred music for the church.

That was true enough of Bach, who composed his *Passion* settings for the Good Friday service of the Lutheran liturgy, using a text drawn literally from the Bible (with a narrator, or "Evangelist," relating events in the third person, and other singers representing individual characters). This was balanced by the insertion of contemplative recitatives, arias, and chorales, to point up the broader theological issues.

But it was a quite wrong idea for Handel, whose oratorios were dramatic compositions, intended for performance in the theater (though without staging), conceived as a way of avoiding the Lenten ban on operatic performances. Such Handel oratorios as *Saul* consisted of singers playing the part of individual characters consistently, as they would in an opera, without a narrator. (In this respect, as in most others, *Messiah* is utterly atypical of Handel's output.) The terms used by writers of the time, including Mendelssohn and Schubring, to describe these radically different approaches were "epic" for the Bach type and "dramatic" for the Handel type.

Much of Mendelssohn's discussion with his librettists—and much critical discussion of *Elijah* since that time—has hinged on the question of dramatic versus epic treatment of the material. Mendelssohn opted for the former: "I am most anxious to do full justice to the dramatic element, and, as you say, no epic narrative must be introduced." Schubring kept arguing that by turning away from his favored approach, Mendelssohn would "turn away from Church music (i.e., music which refreshes, consoles)." Schubring went further. On the day before Mendelssohn's thirtieth birthday, he sent him felicitations and a suggestion that the oratorio might best conclude with the appearance of Christ to Elijah, for which there is no biblical foundation. Dissatisfied with the direction things were going, Mendelssohn simply put the project aside.

Let the Composing Begin

Mendelssohn began composing the music of *Elijah* in 1846 (six years after he first envisioned the project) when commissioned for a new piece to be performed under his direction at the Birmingham Festival. The official commission was dated August 26, 1845. He finished it just before the first performance in Birmingham, England, on August 26, 1846, which he conducted himself. Following that performance, he made extensive revisions before allowing publication and leading the first performance of the revised, definitive version in London on April 16, 1847.

Mendelssohn composed in some haste, working out the score for some passages while still settling details of text for others. He requested that William Bartholomew, his "translator *par excellence*," be commissioned to prepare the English translation of the passages originally taken from Luther's German Bible.

Mendelssohn sent off most of Part I in May 1846. A lively correspondence between the composer (who was fluent in English) and his translator dealt with the English text in detail. Mendelssohn made many counter-suggestions to Bartholomew's work, following two basic principles: (1) Make the musical stress correspond to the naturally stressed syllables of the text; and (2) insofar as possible, consistent with the first rule, retain the wording of the King James version. Given the composer's active participation, it is safe to consider the English text of *Elijah* every bit as authoritative as the German text that he had in front of him when composing.

It may have been Bartholomew who suggested the special treatment of the overture. Mendelssohn's original plan was to have none at all, but rather to move directly from Elijah's opening curse (in recitative) to the chorus, "Help, Lord!" After discussing the matter with Klingemann, Bartholomew wrote to the composer to say that it was a good idea to begin with the curse at the outset. But, he continued:

> *Then let an Introductory-movement be played, expressive, descriptive of the misery of the famine—for the chorus (I always thought) comes in so very quickly and suddenly after the curse that there seems to elapse no time to produce its results.*

Mendelssohn took this advice and wrote for an overture a splendid fugue that starts quietly and builds to a powerful climax at precisely the moment of the choral entrance.

Premiere and Revision

The premiere was sensationally successful. Eight numbers were encored, including the entire first finale! But the overwhelming success did not blind the composer to a number of flaws in the work, many of them the result of compromises with Schubring and of haste in putting together the second part of the piece. So before allowing further performances or publication, Mendelssohn undertook a complete overhaul. He—

- replaced some numbers; few were left untouched
- made the scene of Elijah and the widow (No. 8) more overtly "operatic" after Schubring had tried to tone down the drama
- rewrote Elijah's prayer "Lord God of Abraham" (No. 14)
- recast the scenes of Elijah with Ahab and of Jezebel with her followers (Nos. 23-24) so completely as to make them almost new
- reworked the fast middle section of Elijah's "It is enough" (No. 26)
- rewrote a duet for soprano and alto solos on "Lift thine eyes" as an ethereal unaccompanied trio of treble voices (No. 28)
- replaced a recitative for Elijah with the choral recitative "Go return upon they way" (No. 36)
- recomposed the closing chorus, "Lord, our Creator, how excellent they name is," using the original fugue subject

In the end, *Elijah* took its final form more from the Klingemann-

Mendelssohn outline than the writing/composing work done during the year preceding its 1846 premiere.

Even so, there is no doubt that the oratorio changes character between Part I and Part II. The first half is overtly dramatic, even quasi-operatic; it omits the kind of narration that Mendelssohn didn't want and thus follows the Handelian pattern of dramatic oratorio. It builds to its natural climax in moving from the scene of Elijah and the Widow to the contest of the priests of Baal to the miracle of the rain.

Part II is entirely different. It is mostly descriptive presented either by soloists or chorus. Possibly Mendelssohn fell back on the "epic" approach out of sheer necessity. *Elijah* is "dramatic" just as long as it can be, and then, of necessity, it becomes "epic." The effectiveness of the epic scenes (the tempest and fire followed by the epiphany of the still, small voice; the fiery chariot that takes Elijah to heaven) has never been denied.

A New Precedent

Rather than looking back at Mendelssohn's forebears in oratorio composition, it is worth looking ahead to his disciples. No 19th-century work outshone *Elijah* in popularity in England or America. It was ranked second only to *Messiah*. Naturally it inspired imitations. Mendelssohn's dramatic approach was pursued by many second-rate composers to supply a seemingly inexhaustible cantata and oratorio market, and by major composers as well. Most of the imitations are now (deservedly) forgotten. But even such original and important works as Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius* seems close in spirit (though not in musical style) to *Elijah*. Elgar might never have undertaken it without the tradition of dramatic oratorios that *Elijah* started.

Synopsis

Elijah offers a series of dramatic scenes in two parts, though not labeled "Acts," as Handel had done, because that would have smacked too much of the theater, which was always suspect to proper Victorians. The very beginning, with Elijah delivering God's curse on the sinful Israelites and prophesying three years of drought, is original and powerful. The fugal overture suggests the passage of time and builds intensity to the choral outburst "Help, Lord!" Elijah's follower exhorts the people to repentance, but without avail. Elijah himself, seeking to avoid the evil King Ahab, takes refuge with a widow. While he is there, her son dies, and Elijah revives the boy.

The second scene concerns the competition between Elijah and the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel. Baal's priests begin rather smugly calling for fire from heaven but become increasingly agitated as Elijah mocks them, echoing the melody of their final "Hear us!" with his "Call him louder," which is twisted harmonically by the woodwinds. Finally the priests are desperate that no answer is forthcoming. Elijah, in his turn, utters a lyric prayer and then asks but once for the fires to descend on the altar, which they do in a colorful orchestral blaze

(appropriately marked "Allegro con *fuoco*"!). The final scene of Part I is the summoning of the rain and the chorus of jubilation at the end of the drought.

Part II—following the soprano's angelic exhortation, "Be not afraid"—opens with yet another scene of dramatic conception. Elijah addresses Ahab. Queen Jezebel rouses her companions to seek out Elijah, that he might be executed. Warned by Obadiah, Elijah escapes, journeying into the wilderness. This scene begins in the dramatic style ("It is enough"), but gradually the contemplative numbers and descriptive choruses turn it into the "epic" style that predominates to the end. When Elijah is psychologically at low ebb, the angel warns him to prepare for the Lord's revelation.

The wonderful choral-orchestral panorama that follows opens in E minor, describing tempest, earthquake, and fire, finally resolving to a magical E major for the hush that attends God's approach. Heartened, Elijah returns to his work, but the rest of the story appears in a brief summary as the chorus describes his ascent to heaven in a fiery chariot. As the actual story of Elijah is finished, the remainder of the oratorio (influenced by Schubring's plan) includes a hint of the coming of Christ and closes with a festive fugue in D major, a bright response to the D-minor curse that opened the story.

A Great "Sing"

The Victorians liked *Elijah* because it was well-mannered, not too extravagant. The view of religion presented in much of it was as cozy and comfortable as a well-stuffed easy chair in a Victorian parlor. Obadiah sounds as if he had just stepped out of such a parlor (is it any wonder the people do not follow his call to repentance?). The general ease with which the choruses and quartets utter high-minded phrases in ingratiating harmonies and smooth part-writing makes *Elijah* one of the great "sings" for chorus. But the dramatic scenes (unusual for Mendelssohn) and the technical mastery remain. The sheer singability of the vocal parts, the color of the orchestration, the effectively planned climaxes, the variety of the whole—all these keep *Elijah* with us just as they did 150 years ago.

Edited from program notes by Steven Ledbetter (www.stevenledbetter.com))