

ELIJAH- Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Felix Mendelssohn has often been described as a wealthy, cheerful, handsome, contented man with all the refined social graces expected of the upper class. This apparent lack of “romantic suffering,” dramatic intensity, and eroticism (his greatest love was for his sister) has provided much fuel for his detractors. Nonetheless, Mendelssohn was successful and during his lifetime the most famous musician in Europe. He seemed ambitiously compelled to hurry about the continent and back and forth to England—composing, conducting, performing, and organizing. He was prone to fits of depression and would isolate himself from others, especially following the deaths of each of his parents. Tragically, Felix Mendelssohn died at age 38, following a series of strokes and only months after the death of his beloved sister Fanny.

Elijah was composed for the Birmingham Music Festival in 1846, and the score for the final movement was delivered only days before the performance. Although Elijah is ranked in popularity with Messiah and A German Requiem, it is seldom performed in concert in full. Mendelssohn himself made numerous changes after the first performance, including a completely different ending. Not only is the work long, but there are several other flaws: some repetitive and pedantic choruses; some scenes that do not advance the story; and occasional movements that interrupt the dramatic flow.

Many of the problems lie with the text itself, as the librettist Schubring was interested in advancing theological concepts rather than the historical story or drama. He made suggestions such as having Christ appear to Elijah and wanting to include a trio sung by Peter, John, and Paul. Mendelssohn resisted many of these digressions, but he also found it difficult to find a balance between Elijah the powerful prophet and Elijah the forerunner of Christ. Wanting to avoid the operatic, the composer thus dispensed with much of the narrative recitative that might make the plot somewhat less difficult to follow. In addition, Mendelssohn used an English translation of the German Bible, creating wording which some find lacking by today’s standards. Despite its flaws Elijah is considered by many to be dramatically and musically one of the greatest oratorios of all time, perhaps second only to Handel’s Messiah.

The Story of Elijah the Prophet

The Biblical books of I and II Kings relate the long period of turmoil and strife between inept and evil kings of the divided kingdom of Israel. Especially misguided was King Ahab, who had married a Phoenician princess, Jezebel—a worshipper of a god of fertility, farms, and weather (Baal). Under her influence, Ahab had built a temple and altar for Baal worship. Queen Jezebel had campaigned to kill all possible prophets of Jahweh, but Obadiah (King Ahab’s chief of staff) had surreptitiously and bravely saved and hidden one hundred of them.

The prophet Elijah, whose name means “The Lord is my God,” was thrust onto this scene in dramatic fashion to remind the Israelites of their promise to serve the one true God. Elijah prophesied a drought and famine to last at least three years. He was guided to the home of a poor widow in Zarephath, in pagan territory near Queen

Jezebel's birthplace—an audacious place to escape notice! He saved the widow from starvation and begged God to heal her son.

Jezebel had been frantically seeking Elijah to kill him, so he summoned Ahab, huge crowds of people, and the 450 priests of Baal to Mt. Carmel for a dramatic showdown. Although archeological artifacts depict Baal as a weather god holding an axe and thunderbolt, his lightning to start the sacrificial fire was not forthcoming—despite the pleading cries of the people. Nor was he able later to bring rain to end the long drought.

Elijah and the one true God were clearly the winners, but Jezebel remained a danger. Elijah must escape “forty days and forty nights...to Horeb, the mount of God.” 175 (?) miles away. God's appearance there was not in the tempest, the earthquake, or the fire, but “in a still, small voice.” Elijah felt renewed and continued as spokesman for God, ultimately earning his reward ascending in a whirlwind to Heaven.