

Music and Carmel I: Mendelssohn's Elijah

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Oh rest in the Lord,
wait patiently for him and He shall give thee thy heart's desires.
Commit thy way unto Him
and trust in Him,
and fret not thyself because of evil-doers.

These words, set to gentle music and sung by an angel, represent the still centre at the heart of Mendelssohn's highly dramatic oratorio *Elijah*. They are timely words of comfort to the dejected prophet of Carmel whose life has reached its lowest ebb: 'O Lord, I have laboured in vain! Yea, I have spent my strength for naught! Oh, that I now might die!'

Taken as a whole, *Elijah* can be seen as a journey from darkness to light. The oratorio begins mysteriously with Elijah (a bass) singing this prologue: 'As God the Lord of Israel liveth, before whom I stand: There shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word.' Mendelssohn uses a very dark orchestration to accompany the words of the prophet. He omits the stringed instruments of the orchestra and creates a dark and uneasy atmosphere using only wind and brass instruments with a shivery effect on the timpani (kettle drums). Even the melody Elijah sings has a creepy feel to it; Mendelssohn deliberately, makes the distances between the notes create a sense of doom (in music theory these spaces or 'intervals' are known as diminished fifths). In contrast, when we come to the final chorus of the oratorio a total transformation has taken place. The key note used at the beginning of the prologue ('D' is the first note Elijah sings) is now part of a chorus of triumph which culminates in a jubilant 'Amen' (the 'D' is now part of a blazing chord of 'D major').

So the whole of Mendelssohn's *Elijah* can be seen to move from initial darkness to its culmination in light. Such a movement from darkness to light reflects a transformation in Elijah (as the hero of the drama) and in the people of Israel. And one thing is sure, in setting the Elijah story from the I Kings, Mendelssohn intended listeners in every age to be similarly transformed.

In recent years the Carmelite Order has sought to deepen its understanding of its Elijah heritage. In doing so Carmelites have gone back to the sources associated with the early years of the Order's existence (e.g. the Rule, the '*Rubrica Prima*' to the First Constitutions and the *Book of the First Monks*). Again and again Elijah emerges (along with Mary our mother and sister) as a vital inspiration for Carmelites who, as sons and daughters of Elijah, can read.' ily appreciate the power of Mendelssohn's music.

Life of Mendelssohn

Jakob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn was born in the German city of Hamburg on 3 February 1809. His parents, Abraham and Leah, had already one daughter (Fanny) and were to have two further children (Rebecka and Paul). The family moved to Berlin in 1811 on account of the French occupation of Hamburg. At this time Abraham and Leah were Jews. However, Leah's brother had recently become a Christian and had taken the name of Bartholdy. Abraham and Leah decided to have their children baptised in 1816 (they themselves waited until 1822). From henceforth they would adopt the surname Mendelssohn Bartholdy.

The young Felix grew up in an extremely privileged and profoundly cultured environment. His grandfather had been the great Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. Both Felix and his sister Fanny were very gifted musically and came to be taught by some of the best music teachers of their time. Felix began composition lessons at the age of eight with Carl Zelter. In time it looked like he might pursue a career in music. Although his son's exceptional musical abilities received encouragement from family and friends, Abraham had some doubts about the desirability of Felix making music his profession. The boy was taken to see Cherubini at the Paris Conservatoire who attested to his giftedness and assured the father that his son would indeed have a promising career as a musician.

As a young man Mendelssohn travelled widely. He went as far south as Naples and as far north as the Hebrides. Indeed Italy and Scotland were to provide the inspiration for two of his symphonies. He was city director of music in Dusseldorf and in 1835 became director of the prestigious Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig. In Leipzig (the town associated with J. S. Bach) Mendelssohn flourished. He was unhappy after returning to Berlin at the invitation of King Friedrich Wilhelm IV in 1841. Returning once again to Leipzig in 1843, Mendelssohn established a music conservatory and spent his final years there until his death at the age of thirty-eight on 4 November 1847, six months after the death of his beloved sister, Fanny.

Mendelssohn and his Elijah

As early as 1837 Mendelssohn had begun to plan an oratorio on the subject of the prophet Elijah. His first oratorio, *St Paul*, had been a tremendous success some months previously. For the next few years he regularly discussed his ideas with two literary friends, Carl Klingernan and Julius Schubring. In June 1845 Mendelssohn received a commission for a new oratorio from the Birmingham Festival Committee in England. Schubring worked as his librettist in preparing a German text, and the music was completed in 1846. Mendelssohn and his librettist changed the order of some of the episodes in the Elijah story for the sake of dramatic effect. They also inserted material. On the whole, however, Mendelssohn and Schubring were very faithful to the text of Scripture.

Mendelssohn corresponded regularly with one William Bartholomew in the preparation of an English translation of the libretto for *Elijah*. The first performance took place at Birmingham Town Hall on 26 August 1846 with Mendelssohn himself conducting. *Elijah* was a complete success and was received enthusiastically by critics, and public alike. For his part Mendelssohn was dissatisfied with some parts of the oratorio. For instance, he rewrote the scene with the widow. His final version received several performances in England. The second performance on 23 April 1847 was even attended by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.

Some listeners express surprise that the gentle and refined Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy chose the character of Elijah, prophet of Carmel and the fiercest and most vengeful of all the Old Testament prophets. Mendelssohn was a convinced Lutheran Christian, but it has to be recognised that Jewishness would always remain an important part of his identity (just as Jewishness remained an important part of the identity of the later Carmelite, Edith Stein). Commentators and listeners alike have long identified a strong Jewish 'lilt' in Mendelssohn's music (take the famous violin concerto for example). Some scholars have

made a convincing case for the Jewish origins of certain melodies employed by Mendelssohn in *Elijah* e.g., ‘Lord, bow Thine ear’ has a distinctly Hebrew flavour).

However, apart from a general identification with Judaism there is a more profound aspect to Mendelssohn’s choice of Elijah as a subject for his oratorio. Mendelssohn was a very principled man who was ‘convinced that his time was in need of reform. He was utterly disenchanted with the corruption and court intrigue at Berlin which had interfered with his plans for a musical revival. In a letter to Schubring he says: ‘I imagined Elijah as a real prophet through and through, of the kind we could really do with today: strong, zealous and yes, even bad-tempered, angry and brooding - in contrast to the riff-raff, whether of the court or of the people, and indeed at odds with almost the whole world - and yet borne aloft as if on angel’s wings.’

Mendelssohn and his Audience

There can be little doubt that Mendelssohn intended his *Elijah* for a British audience. Although the music was originally written for a German text he took constant care to consult his translator concerning the nuances of the English language. He even adjusted the music to make sure it fitted the English words.

It has to be recognised that his original English audience saw ‘*the Elijah*’ (as they called it) as something of an anti-Roman Catholic work. John Henry Newman had only recently converted to Roman Catholicism (in 1845) and feeling was running high among Nonconformists and Evangelical Anglicans alike. Low Protestants were very suspicious of the Oxford Movement with its espousal of Anglo-Catholicism. When a devout Victorian of the anti-Catholic kind heard of the prophets of Baal being routed and burned they were liable to make a simple identification between the Old Testament false prophets and “Roman (or ‘Papist’) idolaters.’ We know that for many Victorians to attend *Elijah* (or Handel’s *Messiah*) was to attend a profoundly religious event (almost an act of worship).

Mendelssohn cannot have been unaware of his audience’s predilections. However, it is unlikely he shared their evangelical piety in any kind of simplistic manner. He generally preferred to see his Elijah as an example of the kind of leadership needed for a thorough moral reform of his day. There is certainly no evidence to suggest that Mendelssohn himself saw his work as anti-Catholic. It is one of the great strengths of *Elijah* that it can appeal to audiences in any age. Elijah, prophet of Carmel, will always challenge audiences wherever and whenever Mendelssohn’s oratorio is performed. He will always be the bane of complacency and smugness. He will always both confound and inspire.

Elijah – Part I

Drought

The ominous Prologue (marked *grave* in the score) to Mendelssohn’s *Elijah* corresponds exactly to the first appearance of Elijah in I Kings 17: Elijah foretells the drought that is to come. This dark prelude is followed by an energetic overture for full orchestra which leads into the first chorus without a break.

The first chorus for full choir is extremely loud (marked *fortissimo* in the score). The people shout: 'Help, Lord! Wilt Thou quite destroy us?' The full brunt of the drought is being felt: 'The deeps afford no water! And the rivers are exhausted.' At one point the vigorous music abates to allow two sopranos to sing in dialogue with the choir: 'Zion spreadeth her hands for aid, and there is neither help nor comfort.'

There follows a brief quasi-spoken interjection (recitative) by Obadiah, exhorting the people to abandon the worship of idols. Obadiah, a servant of Elijah, proceeds to sing the first of the famous solo arias of Mendelssohn's oratorio:

'If with all your hearts ye truly seek Me, ye shall ever surely find Me.' However, the people are still full of woe and sing in chorus: 'Yet doth the Lord see it not.' At the words 'his curse hath fallen upon us' we hear once again the dread music of the prologue. Some commentators call this dark melody the 'curse motif.'

Elijah at the wadi Carith

An angel (contralto) commands Elijah: 'Elijah! Get thee hence, Elijah! Depart and turn eastward: thither hide thee by Cherith's brook. There shalt thou drink its waters; and the Lord thy God hath commanded the ravens to feed thee there: so do according unto His word.' This is followed by a touching double quartet for two sopranos, two altos, two tenors and two basses: 'For he shall give His angels charge over thee.'

Elijah and the Widow

The angel then orders Elijah to go Zarephath. There he shall meet a widow who will feed him. The scene is set for what musically proves to be a moving dialogue and duet between the widow (soprano) and Elijah. Indeed more than one commentator has pointed to the operatic qualities of this episode. At first the widow is too distraught to be able to welcome Elijah with any enthusiasm. Her son is dead. However, Elijah implores the Lord to bring the son back to life: 'God, let the spirit of this child return, that he again may live!' He tries several times in vain and each time the widow replies scornfully. Finally, we know something is about to happen. On the third attempt we hear a trumpet fanfare accompanying Elijah's cry. The son is revived and the widow sings: 'The Lord hath heard thy prayer, the soul of my son reviveth; my son reviveth!' There follows a quasi-passionate duet (although this is not a love duet!) between Elijah and the widow. She has recognised Elijah as a man of God and her recognition leads them to praise God together. This is followed by the choir singing of the graciousness and compassion of God. For the first time the choir sings gently. The music bubbles and runs along registering in the music that a transformation has taken place through the intercession of Elijah.

Elijah and the Prophets of Baal

The next episode concerns Elijah's challenge to Ahab and to the prophets of Baal and their followers: 'Then we shall see whose God is the Lord.' In the music there is a huge climax at the word 'whose God is the Lord.' It is as if there is no doubt as to the identity of the true God. Several times the prophets call on Baal to send down fire and each time to no avail. Finally, gently and mysteriously Elijah sings: 'Draw near, all ye people, come to me.' He begins to sing a warm and tender aria (in contrast to all the huffing and puffing of the Baal

worshippers): ‘Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known that Thou art God, and that I am Thy servant!’ This is followed by a quartet of angels singing ‘cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee.’ Elijah then calls on his Lord to send down fire. A terrifying chorus ensues: ‘The fire descends from heaven! The flames consume his offering.’ The prophets of Baal are routed and consumed by fire.

The Little Cloud

Obadiah pleads with Elijah to ask for rain. The prophet of Carmel sings: ‘Open the heavens and send us relief. Help, help Thy servant now, O God!’ The people echo his words in chorus: ‘Open the heavens and send us relief.’ Then three times (fewer times than in the scriptural account) Elijah sends a boy (a boy soprano in the score) to see if there is any sign of rain. Brass fanfares accompany Elijah’s final plea signalling that something is beginning to happen. The boy sings: ‘Behold, a little cloud ariseth now from the waters; it is like a man’s hand! The heavens are black with cloud and with wind; the storm rusheth louder and louder!’ The people respond with delight and Elijah sings: ‘Thanks be to God! For He is gracious; and His mercy endureth for evermore!’ Part one of the oratorio ends with the exultant chorus: ‘Thanks be to God!’

Elijah – Part II

Part II of the oratorio begins (in manner reminiscent of Bach’s St Matthew Passion) with the famous soprano aria ‘Hear ye, Israel.’ We know that Mendelssohn intended this aria for one particular soprano. The first note (‘F sharp’) was apparently her best. This aria is followed by another rousing chorus: ‘Be not afraid.’

Queen Jezebel

In the next scene Elijah has another go at Ahab and incurs the wrath of Queen Jezebel (whose part is sung by a contralto). This particular scene is rather operatic in style (reminding us of the earlier scene with the widow). Jezebel condemns Elijah to death. The people echo her condemnation with relish: ‘He shall perish,’ they sing.

Elijah in the wilderness

Elijah has had enough. To music laden with doom he sings (in reply to Obadiah): ‘I journey hence to the wilderness.’ There follows possibly the most moving aria of the whole oratorio ‘It is enough!’ The words and music fit together in a most heart-wrenching manner. The whole effect is strengthened by aching phrases on the cello which weave their way into the rest of the music. Eventually Elijah falls asleep and a tenor sings: ‘See, now he sleepeth beneath a juniper tree in the wilderness, but the angels of the Lord encamp round about all them that fear him.’ At this point three angels sing the famous trio ‘Lift thine eyes to the mountains, whence cometh help.’ Commentators often single out this chorus for its beauty and poetry and for its lack of sentimentality. An angel appears to Elijah and commands him to journey to Horeb, the mountain of the Lord: ‘Forty days and forty nights shalt thou go.’

Mount Horeb

Elijah does not seem to be very comforted by the words of the angel. In fact his response is angry: ‘O Lord, I have laboured in vain! Yea, I have spent my strength for naught!’ He even sings: ‘Oh, that I now might die!’ It is at this point that the angel sings the well-known aria

'Oh rest in the Lord.' It is in total contrast to the angry and hopeless words of Elijah. The words of the angel are full of tenderness and reassuring strength. It is small wonder that this aria has often been sung at funerals. The chorus echoes the words of the angel: 'He that shall endure to the end, shall be saved.'

Night is falling and Elijah sings: 'Night falleth round me, O Lord! Be Thou not far from me! Hide not Thy face, O Lord, from me, my soul is thirsting for Thee, as a thirsty land.' It is interesting to note that at this point the music echoes the music of the opening chorus of the oratorio (where the people sing of drought). The angel urges him to go to stand on the mountain before the Lord: 'Thy face must be veiled, for He draweth near.' In one of the most memorable moments of the oratorio the chorus sing of the theophany on Horeb. The Lord is not in the tempest, He is not in the earthquake and He is not in the fire. Finally the chorus sing: 'And after the fire there came a still small voice. And in that still voice onward came the Lord.' This music depicting the wind, the earthquake and the fire has tremendous vigour, urgency and attack. Yet Mendelssohn is able to achieve a gentle serenity in the music which accompanies the 'still small voice' of the Lord.

Conclusion

After the manifestation of the Lord on Horeb there are a series of choruses and arias emphasising the transformation that has taken place in the prophet of Carmel. He is now strengthened for his ongoing mission: 'I go on my way in the strength of the Lord. For Thou art my Lord; and I will suffer for Thy sake. My heart is therefore glad, my glory rejoiceth; and my flesh shall also rest in hope.' The chorus describing Elijah's ascent into heaven is particularly effective. Mendelssohn uses some daring changes of key at the passage describing the chariot of fire and the horse. The penultimate number in the oratorio is a quartet: 'Oh come everyone that thirsteth, oh come to the waters, oh come unto Him! Oh hear, and your souls shall live for ever.' Just before Mendelssohn launches into the closing triumphant chorus he quotes once again the dreaded music of the prologue (the 'curse motif'). The effect is to remind us that the lives of the people of Israel have been transformed by the saving work of their Lord and God. The people have been brought from darkness into light. And such transformation has also worked on a personal level in the life of the prophet Elijah who has learned much about discerning the presence of the Lord amidst the apparent darkness of his time. The final chorus is a blaze of light: 'And then shall your light break forth as the light of morning breaketh: and your health shall speedily spring forth then: and the glory of the Lord shall reward you. Lord, Our Creator, how excellent Thy Name is in all the nations! Thou fillest heaven with Thy glory. Amen.' It is clearly Mendelssohn's intention that these final movements look forward to the coming of Christ.

Elijah: A Man for All Seasons

In common with generations of Carmelites, Felix Mendelssohn saw Elijah as a profound challenge to contemporary moral decay and social-political corruption. Mendelssohn was also sensitive to the contemplative dimension of Elijah's life (just listen to the more reflective arias and gentle recitatives). For Mendelssohn Elijah is a man for all seasons, whose fiery words and deeds can have a profound impact, transcending the limitations of time and place. This article has been merely words. It remains for the reader to listen and to discover the compelling power of Mendelssohn's *Elijah* at first hand.