

Program Note by Dr. Charles Carson

Oratorio

Mendelssohn's *Elijah* is an oratorio.

An oratorio is like an opera. Only it's not. But it also kind of is.

Like opera, it uses voices an orchestra to tell a narrative wherein solo singers embody the main characters while a chorus either provides commentary or participates in the story as characters themselves. But unlike opera, that story is often not theatrically staged: the singers don't act out their parts, there are no costumes, and no sets or scenery.

Whereas opera can include characters from The Bible without being religious, *per se*, oratorios are *intended* to be sacred works, with libretti (lyrics) often drawn directly from the Bible or other related religious texts. To be clear, oratorios are sacred, not *liturgical*. Oratorios did not play a role in the formal church services of the day, and like opera, they were typically performed in theaters or concert halls.

And as if it wasn't already confusing enough, many early oratorios are stylistically indistinguishable from early operas, save for the fact that they are not staged. Such was the case with many works by the person we most associate with oratorios today, George Friderich Handel (1685-1759), who became famous for composing--you guessed it--operas (42 of them!) long before he produced the most famous oratorio of all time*: Messiah*.

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Handel—following the English audience's change in taste—had started shifting his focus away from producing expensive, increasingly unpopular, foreign-language operas and towards crafting more acceptable oratorios (which could be performed during Lent, when other staged genres are banned) starting around 1730. His last opera was composed in 1741, and *Messiah* was premiered the following year.

Messiah looms large over *Elijah*. Handel's masterful blend of Italian-style operatic structure, the German Protestant chorale tradition, and English anthem helped shape *Elijah*, as did Bach's large choral works, with their brilliant mix of chorale settings and intricate, harmonically complex counterpoint.

Elijah is narrative, but episodic. That is, it recounts specific moments from the life of Elijah, a prophet who figures significantly in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. The oratorio is structured in two parts, comprised of 42 sections. These sections are a mix of common operatic structures for the soloists--arias (songs), duets, trios, quartets, and recitative (semi-sung dialog)--and a variety of sections for the chorus that range from smaller ensembles, to massive block-chord chorales, to elaborate, dramatic fugues. Mendelssohn blends these elements to maximum effect, creating a work that is both exceptional and accessible.

Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1809-1847) was a musical prodigy. He was perhaps second only to W. A. Mozart (1756-1791), at least where composition is concerned. Both reached their musical "maturity" by about age 17 (when Mozart completed his "Little" G Minor Symphony, and Mendelssohn composed his remarkable Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), but, sadly, neither would see their 40th birthday.

While chronologically a Romantic Era composer, Mendelssohn's appreciation for eighteenth-century composers like Bach, Handel, Haydn, and (of course) Mozart is evident in the uses of counterpoint, the clarity of form, and the structural equilibrium he brings to the piece. For example, scholars point out that the work opens with a solo recitative ("As God the Lord..."), followed by an instrumental fugue (Overture), followed by a choral fugue ("Help! Lord!"), followed by a choral recitative ("The Deep Affords..."). This palindromic pattern--recitative|fugue|fugue|recitative--shows Mendelssohn's clever use of smaller structures to build larger, symmetrical forms, reflecting the kind of attention to balance and proportion that characterized the Classical Style.

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Mendelssohn's romanticism, however, is confirmed by his use of musical motives, or gestures, to unify the piece. The rising four-note motif that opens the piece ("As God the Lord"), for example, is used throughout the oratorio to identify Elijah (or, rather, God's power *through* Elijah); while the falling, dissonant two-note figure at the end of the very next phrase (...there shall not be dew ***nor rain***") comes to stand in for the drought itself. This technique would become a hallmark of the Romantic Era style when taken to the extreme by composers like Richard Wagner in his later works such *Tristan und Isolde* (1865)--an *opera*.

Ultimately, Elijah is greater than the sum of its parts. With one foot in the eighteenth century, and another in the nineteenth, it—like Mendelssohn himself—serves as a bridge between these two eras and styles, elevating the oratorio genre once again. Thus, Mendelssohn's *Elijah* (1846) carries on its shoulders not only the profundity of its topic, but also the weight of a musical tradition stretching back through beloved oratorios like Beethoven's *Christ on the Mount of Olives* (1803), Haydn's *The Seasons* (1801) and *The Creation* (1789), *Messiah* (1742), to sixteenth-century Italy, where it developed *right alongside opera*.