

The Priory Singers  
&  
The Hexham Orpheus Choir

# Mendelssohn Elijah

18th May 2002  
The King's School  
Tynemouth



The Priory Singers & Hexham Orpheus Choir  
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and Northern Arts





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Presents

# Elijah

*Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy*

Conducted by Glenn Davis

With an invited Orchestra led by  
Julia Boulton

*Rehearsal Pianists*

Andrew Soulsby & Margaret Huntingdon

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## TONIGHT'S SOLOISTS

### **Robert Seaton (Bass): Elijah**

Robert is well known in the North of England for performances in all the major choral works including Beethoven's Choral Symphony, Haydn's *Creation* and *The Seasons*, and the Requiems of Mozart, Brahms and Faure, the Passions of Bach together with his Christmas Oratorio and B minor Mass, the many choral works of Handel, and tonight's oratorio. He has sung Rachmaninov's *The Bells* in Russian and Bloch's *Sacred Service* in Hebrew. In the recital field his repertoire embraces Lieder and French Melodie, together with a special emphasis on British composers. His career has included recitals with the pianist Keith Swallow, appearances at the Ashington and Cambridge Festivals, a performance of Verdi's Requiem in the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield as well as Charity concerts in Devon, Cheshire, Lancashire and the North East, (including a very recent performance of the St John Passion in Newcastle).

### **Rachel Orr (Soprano): An angel, also the widow**

Rachel is an established concert performer in the North East and a leading Soprano with Northern Opera, with an extensive repertoire. Major roles have included Adele in Johann Strauss' *Die Fledermaus*, Zerlina in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and most recently, Oscar in Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera*, all of which received excellent reviews. Her oratorio performances have included Handel's *Messiah*, Vivaldi's Gloria, Faure's Requiem and works by Mozart, Haydn and Mendelssohn.

Rachel has featured on BBC Radio and many theatrical and concert venues in the North East, and has given many performances for charity, both locally and nationally.

### **Susan Davis (Contralto): An angel, also Jezebel**

Born in Liverpool and raised in Doncaster, Susan has made the North East her home after gaining a degree in Sciences at Newcastle University. After both choral and solo experience with various Newcastle societies, her solo work developed under the teaching of Clarice Stringer. She gained further choral experience with the Sinfonia Chorus and small-group singing with Musica Johannis, and she has appeared as a soloist with a number of choirs in the area and the Northern Sinfonia Orchestra in a joint schools choral concert in the New Tyne Theatre. Her repertoire includes Masses by Beethoven, Charpentier, Haydn, Mozart and Rossini, cantatas and the St John Passion by J.S. Bach as well as Handel's *Messiah* and *Judas Maccabeus*.

### **Robyn Lyn Evans (Tenor): Obadiah**

Robyn comes from Ceredigion, in mid-Wales. A graduate of Trinity College, Carmarthen (in Theatre, Music and Media) he has won numerous awards including the title of International Young Singer at the Llangollen International Eisteddfod in 1999; the coveted Blue Ribbon awards in 2000 at both the National Eisteddfod at the Sir David James Festival at Lampeter. He was also awarded 'Best Tenor' prize at the national Mozart competition, Southport, in 2000 and again in 2001.

His repertoire includes works by Bach, Gounod, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Saint-Saens, Schumann and Weber, and the role of Abdullah in *Nabucco* and Alfred in *Die Fledermaus*. He has toured Germany with Aberystwyth Male Voice Choir and has appeared on both national radio and television.

## PROGRAMME NOTES

### 1. The Biblical Story

Elijah, the great prophet of Israel (ninth century B.C.) is a 'custodian of the faith against doubters and the powerful, as merciless against them as he is against himself. Through his person the voice of the Lord sounds for Israel' (Norbert Bolin). He came to prominence during the reign of King Ahab whose Queen, Jezebel, threatened the worship of Jehovah with the imported cult of Baal (a general term for any nature-god). At the opening of the oratorio this worship has already taken root to the extent that Elijah proclaims a three-year famine, as the Lord's due punishment for the back-sliding of the Israelites. The choir's role in all this is two-fold – to represent the Israelite people (and at one crucial stage, the priests of Baal themselves) – but also to reflect and comment on the story. After the people have voiced their desperation, they are reminded of its cause by Elijah's companion, Obadiah (though they remain unconvinced, even after his lyrical aria). Elijah, commanded throughout by angelic intervention, has three great scenes – the demonstration of God's mercy when he heals the widow of Zarephath's son, the famous contest by fire with the heathen priests – ending with their slaughter – finishing with his intercession with the Lord for the end of the drought, to understandable rejoicing by the people in the last chorus.

Part Two has a great prologue for Soprano soloist and chorus, reminding us (and Elijah) of the Lord's strengthening power against adversity. The prophet's need for this is immediately apparent when his second challenge to King Ahab is countered by the Queen. She insidiously works up the people to a blood-lust against Elijah, who, warned by Obadiah, flees to the wilderness. He is only saved from virtual suicide by angelic intervention and care (nos. 28, 29 and 31), his courage restored by his vision of the Lord Himself and the Angelic Host at the Holy mountain, Horeb. A grand chorus (No. 38) then describes the rest of the prophet's work, with its final consummation as he is taken to Heaven in a fiery chariot. At this point the oratorio could have ended, but Mendelssohn and his Lutheran librettist, Schubring give us an extended epilogue (Nos. 39-42) which explicitly link Elijah's work to the future coming of Christ. (A reference, surely, to the Mendelssohn family's conversion from Judaism to Christianity?)

### 2. An Oratorio for its Time?

Why did Mendelssohn choose this story for his second oratorio? The simple answer is that he received a commission from the Birmingham Music Festival Committee in 1845 for "a new oratorio, or other music". The project had been in his mind for much longer than that, in fact. After the considerable success of "St Paul", his first oratorio – another parable on the Mendelssohn family's conversion – he had explored the idea of an Elijah (or oddly enough an "Og of Bashan") as early as 1837. A more complex answer, according to a recent essay by Nicholas Temperley, is that the story fulfilled both personal and social needs for the composer. (Cash, the most usual stimulus for a work of art was less important here owing to the Mendelssohns' comfortable circumstances). Though a sincere Christian convert, Temperley suggests that "his inherited Jewishness perhaps craved emotional expression". What better way than to portray the most famous of all prophets? (Even the choir's chant in no. 2 has a slight Hebrew flavour). Then the whole concept of a stern prophet standing for traditional values in a slack world had great resonance for a conservative composer in the first half of the nineteenth century. In a period dominated by memories of the French Revolution, (repeated in 1830 and again in 1848, all over Europe) the susceptibility of the masses to "false" leaders was clear. Mendelssohn was no snob, incidentally. He was equally disgusted by what he termed "the court rabble" (=Ahab and Jezebel) that he had experienced at first hand in Berlin.

Temperley even extends the argument to the contemporary musical scene. There was already a clash between "The Music of the Future" – composers like Wagner and Liszt, pre-eminently, and more conservative romantics like Mendelssohn and Schumann. A composer who had revived Bach's St. Matthew Passion and edited Handel's oratorios – both of which influenced "Elijah's" musical style – may well have seen himself as the protector of "true values" against his more daring contemporaries, whose sexual promiscuity and/or bohemianism (in some cases) contrasted starkly with Mendelssohn's own happy family circumstances. That all of this is more than conjecture is surely borne out by Mendelssohn's letter to Schubring in 1838 where he writes: "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."

### 3. "Elijah's" Reception

"The last note ... was drowned in a long-continued and unanimous volley of plaudits, vociferous and deafening ... Mendelssohn, evidently overpowered, bowed his acknowledgements and quickly descended from his position in the conductor's rostrum; but was compelled to appear again, amidst renewed cheers and huzzas". (The Times, 27 August, 1847, on the first-ever performance in Birmingham). After the composer had extensively revised it, it was to be performed six more times in England before his sudden death in 1847 at the age of thirty-eight. Its place in the English oratorio tradition, with "Messiah" and "The Creation", was assured, for the rest of the century. By contrast the composer's native Germany was much more ambivalent. Wagner led the attack on Mendelssohn (notoriously, in his essay "Judaism and Music"). A later essay commented, "He gave to his art a delicate, smooth, quiet and agreeably tranquil form that excited nobody, and had no aim but to please the modern cultivated taste ...". Interestingly this kind of comment was to be echoed by George Bernard Shaw, referring to ... "His kid-glove gentility, his conventional sentimentality and his despicable oratorio mongering," (written in 1889 at a time when such thoughts about "Elijah" would have been heretical to most amateur choralists in England). Even a modern study of nineteenth-century Romanticism makes the "usual" reference to Mendelssohn's "over-comfortable" private circumstances. "It was all too easy" ... as if starving in a garret was an essential pre-requisite for great artistic

achievement. While he did suffer from over-extravagant praise – “Elijah has passed into a realm far beyond the reach of criticism,” in the words of C.E. Horsley, it seems to me that the composer and the work has equally suffered from a general over-reaction against that blanket term of abuse, “Victorian”. Interestingly, Horsley adds “Were it to English habits seemly, the whole oratorio ... might be placed on the stage with the greatest propriety, with scenery, costume and dramatic action” ... (“Reminiscences of Mendelssohn”, 1872) Drama was **precisely** the composer’s intention, and we hope that you will enjoy tonight’s performance in that light!

## THE CHOIR

### Sopranos

Jean Aris  
Jill Armstrong  
Sarah Barker  
Anne Bartle  
Pip Emler\*  
Evelyn Blenkinsop  
Dorothy Booker  
Ruth Brownlee  
Elspeth Christie  
Lesley Crinson\*  
Janet Davies\*  
Emma Davis\*  
Anne Firth  
Dot Gibson  
Audrey Guthrie  
Frances Hughes  
Margaret Huntingdon  
Anne Jenkins  
Sabrina Lyall  
Harriet Morgan  
Rhiannon Perkins  
Chris Ramm\*  
Laura Read  
Ann Reed  
Elaine Rigg  
Gwyneth Robinson  
Marjorie Robinson  
Nuala Rose  
Brenda Waton  
Margaret Wheeler  
Carrie Winger  
Veronica Yarwood

### Basses

Don Beattie  
Chris Campbell  
Richard Dixon\*  
Robert Firth  
Charles Hedley\*  
Peter Kelly  
John Kent  
Keith Mallinson\*  
Tony May  
Owen McArdle\*  
Tom McCoulough  
Simon Partridge  
Ernest Scott  
Peter Stott  
Richard Taylor  
Jim Teasdale  
Larry Winger

### Tenors

David Barraclough\*  
John Barker  
Ken Bartle\*  
Ronald Bridgett\*  
Malcolm Chainey  
Andrew Clarence\*  
Val Cowan  
Tim Grew  
David Huntingdon  
Andrew Soulsby  
John Vyse  
Jeff Morgan

### Altos

Sheila Adams  
Margaret Bainbridge  
Margaret Barker  
Pam Beattie  
Marie Bridges\*  
Joy Campbell  
Pat Crompton  
Sheila Dance\*  
Margaret Danskin  
Mary Davis  
Elizabeth Dixon  
Davina Dwyer  
Anne O’Flanagan  
Jean Fisher  
Thelma Gilhespy  
Jean Hartwell  
Val Hooker  
Anita Jeffries  
Susan Kent\*  
Shelagh May  
Alison Mood  
Dorothy Peters  
Bronya Read  
Pat Rose  
Vicky Scurfield  
Jean Southwell  
Betty Stevens  
Jean Storrie  
Catherine Stott  
Gill Thompson  
Tina Tompkins  
Margaret Varley  
Jean Wilks\*

\*Members of the semi-chorus in numbers 7 and 15. The solos in numbers 28 and 35 are sung by Val Hooker and Emma Davis. Ahab (in number 10) is sung by Ronald Bridgett. The part of the youth (number 19) is sung by Katy McDermott.

## THE ORCHESTRA

### Violins

Julia Boulton (leader)  
Pauline Aitchison  
Jill Blakey  
Ann Britt-Hedley  
Rachel Byfield  
Susan Davis  
Calum Moulton  
Julie Roberts  
Gary Thompson  
Judith Thompson  
Kathryn Wakefield  
Helen West  
Nicola Weaver  
Michael Walton

### Violas

Ian Whaley  
Cicely Mortimer  
Anne Greaves  
John Pearce

### Cellos

Julia Watson (solo)  
Eleanor Brown  
Nigel Chandler  
Peter Richardson

### Double Basses

Gordon Callander  
James Crinson

### Flutes

Christine Ring  
Robert McBlain

### Oboes

David Tomson  
Robin Crinson

### Clarinets

Jennifer Murray  
Helen Pomfret

### Bassoons

Harriet Gilfillan  
Philip Noble

### Timpani

Vivien Wilkinson

### Horns

Richard Stent  
Tony Fairley  
David Milner  
Mary Walker

### Trumpets

Alan Docherty  
Gary Lancaster

### Trombones

Allan Bravey  
Paul Cooper  
John Flood