THE MAGIC OF MENDELSSOHN – AND HIS 1846 MASTERPIECE
First heard at the 1846 Birmingham Festival, *Elijah* was alleged to have been accorded at its first hearing the greatest reception in all musical history. The enthusiastic manner of those present at what was, clearly, a glorious premiere in the sumptuous surroundings of Birmingham Town Hall is the stuff of legend.

Mendelssohn was, of course, the first musical polymath. His activities encompassed so much and ticked so many boxes – executant (viola, violin, piano, organ to name but four capacities), "music director"/concert organiser", speaker, public figure and, perhaps pre-eminently, his profound and seemingly ceaseless creative spirit as a composer – an art he developed prodigiously and very rapidly from a very young age.

It is truly remarkable that, at a time when most contemporary youngsters are tackling their GCSE exams, Mendelssohn had already composed one of the most perfect pieces of chamber music ever written – the Octet for strings. During the years when many adults are still in further education he had under his belt two Overtures that remain today corner-stones of the orchestral repertoire: that to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and a concert overture entitled *The Hebrides* [perhaps better know as *Fingal's Cave*] as well as his very first book of eight sets of *Songs without Words*.

His kindly, warm demeanour made him many friends – that is certain. But the number of commitments he undertook – many of them ensuing from such personal contacts and friendships – had a truly detrimental effect on his health and strength and he was dead from a stroke well before he was forty years of age.

JUST WHAT *IS* IT THAT MAKES *ELIJAH* SO VERY SPECIAL?
Perhaps mostly because it was such a pioneering work – a prototype in the experience of choral and orchestral music. It was its composer's second oratorio as such – the first being *St Paul* of exactly ten years previous, for the Lower Rhine Festival of 1836. There are far fewer *smash hit* numbers in *Elijah* than in *St Paul* – though the sustained level of the drama in the later work makes one increasingly regretful that Mendelssohn never wrote an opera. Another of Mendelssohn's works that *feels* like an oratorio, the *Hymn of Praise* [Lobgesang] is actually a cantata, and the concluding part of its composer's second symphony.

In the first part of *Elijah,* the momentum of the "trial" elements between Jehovah and Baal carries all before it whilst the dialogue between Ahab and Elijah involving the chorus – *Thou art Elijah, thou he that troubleth Israel* – is similarly spectacular and in stark contrast to the warm benevolence of the scene between the prophet and the widow, through which the son of the grief-stricken mother is brought back to life.

Besides the inherent scriptural narrative, which the composer maintains with persuasion and authority, there are a number of significant influences from earlier music: the hushed *Chorale* Cast thy burden upon the Lord, the undulating Jewish chant heard in *Lord, bown Thine ear to our prayer* and, particularly, the Handelian use of choral recitative. At the end of the opening chorus beginning at the words: *The deeps afford no water and the rivers are exhausted*…the composer is at his most persuasive with all factors combining to yield a powerful response from both performer and listener.

Handel had used a choral recitative to similar effect in *Israel in Egypt* a hundred years earlier in the chorus *He sent a thick darkness o'er all the land….a thick darkness….. even darkness which might be felt.*

Throughout the work, and most especially in the first half, there are a number of what might best be referred to as "motto" themes – especially in the orchestration. The sonorous and portentous opening chords heralding the opening recitative announcing God's drought to the people recur later as to the haunting descending intervals with the starkness of the use of a falling diminished fifth. These techniques are later used in his operas by Wagner and, of course, most notably of all in the very first English oratorio to establish an international reputation, namely Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius,* like *Elijah* premiered at the Birmingham Festival. Elgar's *Prelude* or overture to *The Dream* is reflective and motif-led with elements of procession, reflection, even miniature arias but its elements pervade the whole work.

Mendelssohn's Overture is much more conventional, though no less powerful. In particular, the startling use of rests in the main subject is stirred up at the climax to provide a gloriously exultant, yet suitably imploring, lead to the words of the opening Chorus – *Help, Lord, wilt Thou quite destroy us.*

There are a number of instances in the chorus writing where massive homophonic, chorale-like utterances take over the texture – as in *But yet the Lord seeth not* [at *For He, the Lord our God, He is jealous God*] and, most notably *The Lord is God, O Israel hear* during *The fire descends from heaven.*

In Part One, the continuous sequence of choruses [unknown before in music] known as the *Baal Choruses* is truly immense in its intensity, and at times almost, frenzied utterance. There is nothing in all music like it prior to Wagner.

The successor to Elijah, his heir, the young Elisha, is depicted by a treble voice during the course of a lengthy final movement at the end of the first half of the work when the young man is instructed to respond to the prophet's questions – *has my prayer been heard by the Lord.* Negative answers follow until finally a cloud of rain appears along with an accompanying storm wonderfully depicted in the chorus of victory *Thanks be to God, he laveth the thirsty land…..the waters gather, they rush along…the stormy billows are high, their fury is mighty* and, most original of all the setting of the layered texts at the words *but the Lord is above them and almighty* – this must have sounded amazingly modern to the ears of the early Victorian audiences.

Gradually, in Part Two, the mood of the people is incited to move against Elijah: *Woe to him* they sing at the tops of their voices: *Let the guilty prophet perish…He shall die.* A semi-chorus of angels sings the opening stanza of Psalm 121 – *Lift thine eyes* and a balm-like chorus, *He watching over Israel,* provides some of the most exquisite minutes in the work. The climax of the story and the paradox of divinity are wonderfully conjoined and we discover in the strongly-wrought chorus *Behold! God the Lord passed by* that the appearance of the deity is not through, or by means of earthquake, fire or storm but in the *still, small voice* after which follows a massive double Chorus – *Holy, holy, holy.* Other real highlights of the second half of the work are the simple, choral-like *He that shall endure to the end* and the prophet's dramatic ascent to heaven – *like a whirlwind* – in *Then did Elijah the Prophet break forth like a fire.* Ultimately, a consoling final quartet is followed by a resonant chorus of praise set to a text devised from Psalm 8 – *Lord, our Creator, how excellent Thy Name is in all the nations…Amen* sings the Choir at full force on the final page.