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A Surpassing Prophet from Cantata Singers

by [Cashman Kerr Prince](#)

In its 50th season, Cantata Singers & Ensemble took to Jordan Hall Saturday with an oratorio much indebted to the Bach cantatas which constitute its musical cornerstone. Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, a complex and challenging work, was given a fiery, passionate, intimate, and moving performance.

Mendelssohn had started on this "oratorio after words in the Old Testament" upon the success of his first oratorio, *St Paul*, a decade before it was first performed in

1846 by the Birmingham (England) Choral Festival, the commissioners. *Elijah* was intended to be the middle of a trilogy of oratorios on the prophets; Mendelssohn left behind fragments of the third, *Christus*, at his untimely death. The music of *Elijah* is powerful and evocative, and individual movements make perfect sense. What connections and parallels, what divine music would we have had, if *Christus* had completed the tryptich. The connecting thread among all three is faith in the face of opposition; this was a deeply-felt issue for Felix Mendelssohn. The grandson of Moses Mendelssohn, the philosopher and theologian considered by many to be the father of Reform Judaism, Felix was nevertheless baptized into reform Christianity as a child and his father, Abraham, adopted the family name of “Bartholdy.” While it might be correct to refer to the composer as Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, he and his sister Fanny chafed at this name. We have little evidence Felix ever embraced his Jewish heritage beyond the famous quote attributed to him by Eduard Devient, “. . .and to think that it is an actor and Jew-boy (Juden junge) who brought the *Matthew Passion* back to the Christian people.” Perhaps these oratorios represent his own struggle with personal questions of religious belief and identity. At the same time, the music shows a deep engagement with that of J. S. Bach, a man for whom religious belief was paramount. As *Elijah* unfolds, we witness the story of this fiery prophet defending the supremacy of Yahweh before the worshippers of Baal, thwarted attempts by Queen Jezebel to martyr Elijah, the support of Obadiah, the head of King Ahab’s court and a believer in Yahweh, and the support of the Angels who succored Elijah during his time in the wilderness. The second part of this oratorio focuses more on Elijah’s faith, his own moment of doubt, and his deathless ascent into heaven. Mendelssohn wrote about *Elijah* that “The dramatic element should predominate” (quoted in David Hoose’s program note). It certainly does. The first part is a drama of action, while the second part of the oratorio is more a drama of interiority, focusing on the cries, and crises, of faith. The whole presents a compelling and complex portrait of this fascinating, and somewhat enigmatic, prophet, while also being a powerful testament to interior faith expressed in music.

With 59 in the chorus and 51 instrumentalists, this performance conveyed all the drama and pathos, ranging from quiet and peaceful to fiercely loud and wrathful as the music demanded. Mark Andrew Cleveland, bass, sang the title role with conviction and spirit, using a wide range of dynamics and expression throughout the performance. One outstanding moment, among many, came during the Recitative with Chorus (II.23) *Der Herr hat dich erhoben aus dem Volk* (The Lord hath exalted thee from among the people), when the word “Ahab” was loaded with utter contempt—a bravura display of Cleveland’s technical and musical prowess. His Aria *Es ist genug!* (It is enough) (II.26) was a world of music unto itself, paced and phrased with deep understanding. The small ensemble numbers showcased singers from within Cantata, as the duet (I.2), where Bonnie Gleason and Majie Zeller (sopranos) gave voice to beautifully matched phrasing and expression, supported by chorus and orchestra in delicious synchronicity. William Hite, tenor, as Obadiah, brought great insight to this role, striving to be a voice of reason in the face of those who remain fixed in their faith in Baal (a difficult role to embody in this work); the pace and phrasing worked wonderfully. Emily Marvosh, alto, sang the role of an Angel, first heard in *Elijah, gehe weg von hinnen* (Get thee hence, Elijah) (I.6), with a powerful voice which was gentle yet firm, befitting her role. Her later Aria, *Sei stille dem Herrn und warte auf ihn* (Oh rest in the Lord) (II.31) she sang in a manner peaceful and assured, again matching the role and the text. Throughout, she sang with a remarkable attention to technical detail and a peerless musicality, taking such delight in the singing that we could not help but join her in the pleasures of the song. The a cappella Trio (II.28), *Hebe deine Augen auf zu den Bergen* (Lift thine eyes to the mountains), sung by Marvosh, Janet Brown (soprano), and Jennifer Webb (mezzo-soprano) as Three Angels, was a thrilling study in beautifully blended voices and lines, sensitivity and nuance. The Recitative, Aria, and Duet (I.8) *Was hast du an mir getan, du Mann Gottes!* (What hast Thou done O man of God?), between Elijah and Cantata Singer Karyl Ryczek (soprano) as The Widow captured the anguish of the widow bereft of her son, her disbelief at Elijah’s power to raise him from the dead, and her wonder and profound gratitude when he succeeds. The following chorus *Wohl dem, der den Herrn fürchtet* (Blessed are they that fear the Lord) (I.9) was truly sublime. Lynn Torgove, mezzo-soprano, sang the Arioso (I.18) *Weh ihnen, daß sie von mir weichen!* (Woe unto them who forsake Him!) with a pity and sadness matched to the music; her later appearance as Queen Jezebel (in II.23) captured the frustration of this thwarted figure. In the Recitative with Chorus (I.19) beginning *Hilf deinem Volk, du Mann Gottes!* (Oh man of God, help thy people!), Kynesha Patterson, soprano, sang the role of The Youth, her adult voice capturing the prominent soaring line. Brown returned to prominence in the Aria *Höre, Israel, höre des Herren Stimme!* (Hear Thee Israel, hear what the Lord speaketh) (II.21), bringing a delicacy and plaintive quality to this meditative appeal. Throughout the orchestral ensemble brought Mendelssohn’s music to life with joy and made this difficult work seem easy; the *fugato* in II.22 perfectly captured the imminent destruction of Yahweh’s enemies and the protection offered his followers—one stellar moment among many.

At its premiere in Birmingham, *Elijah* (in the composer’s own English version), a large orchestra and 270 singers performed. Cantata Singers’s performance was also more intimate than the the last one I hear, by Boston Symphony Orchestra and Tanglewood Festival Chorus, Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos conducting, in Symphony Hall on Easter weekend, 2010. Moments of that performance stand out in my memory for their sheer force and power, notably *Gib uns Antwort, Baal!* (Hear and answer Baal!) in the first part, when the Chorus’ of Baal worshippers plangently appealed to their uncooperative deity for a sign. Those amassed singers better conveyed the anguish and hopes of the pagans. The Cantata performance stood out, though, for the strength of the soloists and the musicality, the performance making a far greater impact as a whole.

Cantata Singers & Ensemble, directed by Hoose, performed to a full house, in part, thanks to the Free for All Concert Fund. It was such a sell-out (or free-out) that the group added an open rehearsal to their calendar. It was a wonderful way for this powerful, and powerfully performed, music to reach the largest possible audience, and hopefully bring more to appreciate the strength and majesty of Mendelssohn’s music, as well as the focus and skill of all the performers.

Cashman Kerr Prince, trained in Classics and Comparative Literature, is now a Visiting Scholar in the Department of Classical Studies at Wellesley College. He is also a cellist of some accomplishment, currently playing with the Brookline Symphony Orchestra.

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