Celebrating 50 years with a rousing ‘Elijah’

By Jeremy Eichler

David Hoose and the Cantata Singers (pictured in 2011) performed Mendelssohn’s “Elijah.”

‘Without Mendelssohn, there would be no Cantata Singers,” David Hoose, the chorus’s music director, said recently.

At first blush the comment might seem curious for a chorus far more closely associated with Bach, whose music receives top billing during the Cantata Singers’ current 50th anniversary season.
But Hoose was getting at something more layered, about how the past curates the past. After Bach’s death, Mendelssohn was among the first to publically celebrate his brilliance, and the first in particular to revive the “St. Matthew Passion.” Mendelssohn’s 1829 performance of that score became a turning point in Bach’s reputation and a landmark moment in classical music’s long 19th century.

To honor this Bach-Mendelssohn link, and to dip into a pool of repertoire usually reserved for larger choruses, Hoose programmed Mendelssohn’s “Elijah” as one of the central events of this anniversary season. Adding to the festive air, tickets for Saturday’s performance in Jordan Hall were offered without charge, thanks to sponsorship from the Free for All Concert Fund.

The 1846 British premiere of “Elijah” was the great success of Mendelssohn’s final years, and while the work’s critical fortunes have still been yoked to the vicissitudes of the composer’s own reputation, the oratorio speaks at a level of directness that requires no special pleading today. Echoes of Bach and Handel abound, yet the score’s presentation of episodes from the prophet’s life balances Victorian earnestness with an early-Romantic theatrical awareness. Elijah’s aria “Es ist genug,” for instance, arrives as both touching prayer and timeless meditation on human frailty. The music here, as in many occasions, gestures backward toward Bach but also sounds a universal note.

Saturday’s performance, in the original German, was one of rousing dramatic commitment and abundant sincerity. The chorus numbered only about 60 — on the small side for this repertoire — but its modest numbers allowed for greater clarity in certain densely scored moments, and the palpable engagement of Saturday’s forces.
helped this performance punch above its weight. Hoose’s conducting was also admirably alert to both the broader architecture and the wide variety of choral and instrumental textures in this score.

Seeing Jordan Hall packed with an audience that went well beyond core subscribers added to the sense of a broader grassroots community celebration for this distinguished chorus’s first 50 years. So did the fact that Hoose tapped one of the ensemble’s own member singers, Mark Andrew Cleveland, for the prominent title role, which he sang honorably and sensitively, surrounded by a cast of soloists that ranged for the most part from capable to more. Among them were William Hite (tenor), Karyl Ryczek (soprano), Janet Brown (soprano), Emily Marvosh (alto), Jennifer Webb (mezzo), Lynn Torgove (mezzo), Kynesha Patterson (soprano), and Jason Sabol (tenor). At one point during the vigorous ovation that capped the nearly three-hour performance, the musicians brushed aside Hoose’s entreaties to stand, as they clearly wanted to honor this essential conductor with his own solo bow.

For his part, Hoose has also made sure that the chorus over the decades has retained a relationship to the music of its own time. After a chamber concert next month (led by Allison Voth), the chorus’s anniversary season will fittingly conclude with music by Bach alongside the premiere of a new work by John Harbison, entitled “Supper at Emmaus,” slated for May 9 in Jordan Hall.

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