Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy: Overture to *Elijah*, Arrangement for Piano Duet (1847)

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Few works by Mendelssohn have reflected the composer's shifting critical reception as compellingly as the oratorio *Elijah*. Hailed after its English premieres in 1846 and 1847 as a seminal masterpiece, *Elijah* remained a popular cornerstone in the oratorio repertory, though it withstood a later assault as the work of a composer whose polished, impeccable craftsmanship was somehow not consonant with newer directions in musical culture.

After the first performance in the Birmingham Town Hall on August 26, 1846, a critic in the *Times* reported unabashedly, "Never was there a more complete triumph--never a more thorough and speedy recognition of a great work of art."[1] And when the revised version of the oratorio, on which Mendelssohn labored intensively for several months, was performed in Exeter Hall, London, in April 1847, the scrupulous music critic Henry Fothergill Chorley went so far as to claim that "*Elijah* is not only *the* sacred work of our time, we dare fearlessly to assert, but it is a work 'for our children and for our children's children.'"[2] Perhaps the most remarkable tribute came from Prince Albert (the oratorio was performed before the prince and Queen Victoria), for whom Mendelssohn stood as a prophetic figure contending with the worshippers of false art: "To the Noble Artist, who, surrounded by the Baal-worship of debased art, has been able, by his genius and science, to preserve faithfully, like another Elijah, the worship of true art, and once more to accustom our ear, amid the whirl of empty, frivolous sounds, to the pure tones of sympathetic feeling and legitimate harmony: to the Great Master, who makes us conscious of the unity of his conception, through the whole maze of his creation, from the soft whispering to the mighty raging of the elements."[3]

Only a few months later, in November 1847, the musical world was shocked by Mendelssohn's death at the age of thirty-eight. A type of hero worship took root, especially in Leipzig and Berlin, where much of the composer's German career had unfolded, and in England, which Mendelssohn had visited numerous times between 1829 and 1847. To English musical taste, *Elijah* offered a worthy successor to the edifying oratorios of Handel, including *Israel in Egypt* (1739) and *Messiah* (1742), both of which Mendelssohn had often performed and championed at music festivals. To German music taste, *Elijah*

reflected as well the composer's abiding interest in the music of J. S. Bach. Having revived the *St. Matthew Passion* in Berlin in 1829 the twenty-year-old Mendelssohn would openly explore, in much of his music, complex contrapuntal idioms reminiscent of the Baroque splendor of Bach's works.

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed a reaction to the composer and to *Elijah*. While Mendelssohn had been the prime mover in the nineteenth-century Bach revival, his thorough assimilation of Bach's style into his own music nevertheless left him susceptible to the charge that he had relied too heavily on historical models and that his work, especially music such as *Elijah*, was stylistically derivative (and, by implication, wanting in originality). In 1855 Franz Liszt asserted that the historical oratorio had become a more or less effete, antiquated genre, and though he did not mention *Elijah*, he certainly had the Mendelssohnian oratorio in mind.[4] Hector Berlioz, who noted in his memoirs that Mendelssohn was "a little too fond of the dead"[5] and who had little use for traditional contrapuntal writing, no doubt preferred Mendelssohn's concert overtures and the secular cantata *Die erste Walpurgisnacht*

to *Elijah*. In 1850 Richard Wagner gave voice to a more insidious type of criticism by unleashing an anti-Semitic attack on Mendelssohn in the anonymously published article "Das Judenthum in der Musik."[6] And by the 1880s, George Bernard Shaw was criticizing Mendelssohn for his "kid glove gentility, his conventional sentimentality, and his despicable oratorio mongering." Shaw objected in particular to the "dreary fugue manufacture, with its Sunday-school sentimentalities and its Music-school ornamentalities" in such works as *Elijah* and its earlier companion oratorio *St. Paul* (1836).[7] Finally, by 1886 Friedrich Nietzsche, himself a musician and accomplished composer, summarized in *Beyond Good and Evil* Mendelssohn's position in German music as a "beautiful intermezzo" ("schöner Zwischenfall"), a kind of interlude that subsequent twentieth-century music historians located between Beethoven and Wagner.[8]

As Leon Botstein has recently argued, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century the "tenets of cultural modernism were linked to a generational revolt and a rejection of middle-class conceits of culture and art," and "[t]his triggered an aversion to Mendelssohn." So it was that Mendelssohn's music came to signify "a facile consumption of an art of optimism by educated urban classes, an art that neither questioned nor resisted the presumed

smugness of bourgeois aesthetic and moral values. *Elijah*. . . [was] viewed as emblematic of a vacuous and affirmative tradition of music making, undertaken thoughtlessly within a hypocritical and exploitative world."[9] By 1911, Donald Tovey, writing a summation of Mendelssohn's position for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, could aver, "Mendelssohn's reputation, except as the composer of a few inexplicably beautiful and original orchestral pieces, has vanished."[10] And, in 1957, Wilfrid Mellers concluded that Mendelssohn's music essentially had accommodated a "middle-class public that then, as now, feared change."[11]

Nevertheless, through all the shifting tides of the history of Mendelssohn's reception, *Elijah* has remained an incontrovertibly popular work. Indeed, in 1965, Jack Werner began his monograph on the oratorio by stating outright that alongside *Messiah*, Mendelssohn's *Elijah* was the most popular choral work in England. Recent efforts in Mendelssohn scholarship have begun to focus on reevaluating Mendelssohn's music and historical position, so that "freed of the quite arbitrary aesthetic and implicitly ideological (in the political sense) assumptions that have been applied to Mendelssohn's music since the middle of the nineteenth century, the audience at the end of our century might be able to recognize once again the invention, depth, significance, and emotional power of practically all of Mendelssohn's music."[12] Unquestionably, *Elijah* will occupy a central position in this endeavor. The complex history of the oratorio's creation is well-enough known and requires no review here.[13] But new light on the publication history of *Elijah* is shed by a little-known manuscript in the Moldenhauer collection at the Library of Congress, the composer's autograph arrangement of the overture for piano duet. A bit of musicological sleuthing enables us to establish that the arrangement, though undated, was completed in February 1847, at the height of Mendelssohn's preparations for seeing the oratorio through the press.

Soon after the Birmingham premiere of *Elijah* in August 1847 Mendelssohn began to undertake extensive revisions, in keeping with his typically hypercritical view of his music (indeed, none of Mendelssohn's major works escaped substantial reworking). In revising *Elijah* he was motivated by two particular goals: to complete an improved version of the oratorio in time for the London premiere, in April 1847, and to prepare the work in as timely a manner as possible for simultaneous publication in Germany by Simrock and in England by Ewer and Co. The composer's correspondence with these two firms in the early months of 1847 reveals in detail just how laborious and tedious a process Mendelssohn's was.[14] The publishers' interest in bringing out *Elijah* as quickly as possible was underscored as early as November 10, 1846, when Edward Buxton, the director of Ewer and Company, admonished Mendelssohn in these terms: "There is moreover some danger in keeping the work too long out of print, as there is the possibility of some of the single pieces being copied out and getting into the hands of any of the music sellers here, who would be unprincipled enough to publish them before I could enroll my copyright, which I can only do when it is all in print. I know there are several looking out for it and who have expressed their determination to print the songs if they could get hold of them."[15]

Not until the middle of January 1847 was Mendelssohn able to start sending parts of the oratorio to Simrock in Bonn. He dispatched first the choral parts for Part I of *Elijah*, and by the beginning of February the piano reduction for the piano-vocal score began to follow in installments. On February 8, the orchestral parts for Part I were ready, except for the Widow's Aria (No. 8), which was still undergoing revision. Mendelssohn sent explicit instructions that the aria was not yet ready to be engraved. By March, Mendelssohn was feverishly working on Part II, and in early April, just days before his departure for England, he was struggling to finish the piano-vocal score of Part II, even as he was correcting proofs for Part I, and writing frequent letters to Buxton, who, in turn, was maintaining an active correspondence with Simrock. But despite the composer's best efforts, the publication of the oratorio was delayed until June 1847, several weeks after he returned in May from England to Germany. Mendelssohn acknowledged receiving an exemplar of the piano-vocal score from Simrock in July 1847[16]; not until October, only days before the composer's death, was Simrock ready to send copies of the full score.[17] The English piano-vocal score[18] appeared simultaneously with the Simrock prints; Mendelssohn's letter of February 25, 1847, to Buxton makes it clear that this was, as he put it, a "*conditio sine que non*."[19]

Not surprisingly, Buxton's piano-vocal score essentially replicates the Simrock *Klavierauszug*, owing to the considerable efforts made to coordinate the simultaneous publication of the oratorio in England and Germany. Nevertheless, in one respect Buxton surpassed Simrock, for he was able to issue two English piano-vocal scores (one folio and one octavo) with two versions of the overture. The folio volume contained the arrangement of the overture for piano solo found in Simrock's *Klavierauszug*, which Mendelssohn finished by February 1, 1847.[20] The octavo volume, on the other hand, transmitted the overture arranged for piano duet, as found in Mendelssohn's autograph now in the Moldenhauer Archives. We may date this arrangement before February 17, 1847, for on that date Mendelssohn sent it, along with the revision of the Widow's Aria and a newly finished orchestration of the hymn *Hear My Prayer*, to Buxton, with this apologetic explanation: "I am sorry to hear the no. 8 was already engraved, but I cannot help asking you not to mind these plates and to have it engraved, *as it stands here*. I assure you it is an improvement and must *stand* thus! And in order that you may not be too angry with me, I send today (via Simrock) the Ouverture à 4 mains and an Orchestra-Score of my Hymn, which I hope will reconcile you to the trouble you had for me and my alterations sake."[21]

The Moldenhauer autograph was thus made expressly for Buxton. The composer laid out the duet on facing pages for the *primo* and *secondo* parts, and he took the trouble to rule the twelve bars for the introductory recitative, preceding the overture, in which Elijah announces the seven-year draught. Then, as if to save some precious time, Mendelssohn

canceled these bars and added a comment in English: "these 12 bars with the Voice as in the other Arrangement" (i.e., the previously dispatched installment of the opening numbers for the piano-vocal score with the overture for piano solo).

Mendelssohn's autograph presents a relatively clean copy with only occasional corrections. In the main, these concern minor details, such as the direction of note stems, that clarify the voice leading of the parts (e.g., bar 4 of the *secondo*). Occasionally, the alterations reflect practical concerns, such as the division of the music between the two pianists. Thus the original version of bar 10 produced an awkward encounter between the left hand of the first pianist and the right hand of the second pianist, and Mendelssohn was obliged to rearrange the distribution of the parts to simplify their execution. Apart from the notation and corrections in Mendelssohn's hand the only other markings in the manuscript were entered by the engraver, who recorded a series of numbers concerned with the layout of the overture (that is, determining the distribution of the music on each system of the printed version).

Mendelssohn's letter to Buxton suggests that the duet arrangement was intended as a special gift to his English publisher. But the letter does not reveal the composer's entire motivation. In arranging the overture as a duet, he was actually following a practice already established with his earlier oratorio, *St. Paul*, of which the first edition of the piano-vocal score had appeared from Simrock in 1836, with the overture arranged for piano duet.[22] As in *Elijah*, the overture to *St. Paul* was conceived as a fugue, and the contrapuntal complexity of the music may have encouraged Mendelssohn to undertake the duet arrangements in 1836 and 1847 to facilitate the performance of the overtures. After all, two pianists could offer at the keyboard a more complete and convincing rendition of a four-part orchestral fugue than could a single pianist.

But one final question remains: why did Mendelssohn offer the duet arrangement for *Elijah* only to Buxton and not to Simrock? The answer may be found, perhaps, in a particular request Buxton had made of Mendelssohn, as we learn in the composer's letter to Buxton of December 30, 1846: "I did what I could to reconcile myself to the idea of adding a few bars to the Overture to make it a separate piece and give it a conclusion, but I assure you, it is *impossible*. I tried hard to do what you want, in order to show my good will--but I could not find an end, and I am sure there is *none* to be found."[23] With a publisher's shrewd sense of marketing, Buxton had evidently asked Mendelssohn to provide a concert ending for the overture, so that it could be sold and performed as a separate piece, as a kind of programmatic concert overture. But Mendelssohn conceived the overture as an instrumental depiction of the draught and famine that led through a dramatic crescendo directly into the imploration of the first chorus, "Help Lord! Wilt Thou quite destroy us?"[24] The composer was unable to separate the instrumental depiction of the famine from the

vocal entreaty, the dramatic consequence of the overture, and thus could not oblige Buxton's request. In sum, the meticulously crafted duet arrangement that Mendelssohn produced in February 1847 may have been intended in part to compensate Buxton for this disappointment.

[1] Quoted in Jack Werner, *Mendelssohn's "Elijah"* (London: Chappell, 1965), p. 16.

[2] Ibid., p. 28.

[3] For a facsimile of the original testimonial, in German, see Werner, op. cit., p. 31; the English translation is by Baron Christian Bunsen, the Prussian ambassador in London who collaborated on what would have been Mendelssohn's third oratorio, *Christus*, some fragments of which appeared posthumously as op. 97.

[4] The comments appear in Liszt's article about Robert Schumann, published after Schumann's arrival at the asylum in Endenich: "[Schumann] tried to avoid stiff biblical subjects, formerly so appropriate, that Mendelssohn knew how to modernize even as their outmoded, antiquated features were becoming increasingly more perceptible." Franz Liszt, "Robert Schumann," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 42/14 (1855); see the new translation in *Schumann and His World*, ed. R. Larry Todd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

[5] *The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz*, trans. David Cairns (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), p. 294.

[6] *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (1850): 101, 109-12.

[7] *London Music in 1888-1889 As Heard By Corno di Bassetto (Later Known as Bernard Shaw) with Some Further Autobiographical Particulars* (London: Constable, 1937; 3rd ed., 1950), pp. 68ff.

[8] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966), p. 181 (no. 245): "It is different with Felix Mendelssohn, that halcyon master who, on account of his lighter, purer, more enchanted soul, was honored quickly and just as quickly forgotten: as the beautiful *intermezzo* of German music."

[9] Leon Botstein, "The Aesthetics of Assimilation and Affirmation: Reconstructing the Career of Felix Mendelssohn," in *Mendelssohn and His World*, ed. R. Larry Todd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 6.

[10] "Mendelssohn," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed. (Cambridge, 1911), vol. 18, p. 124.

[11] Wilfrid Mellers, *Man and His Music: Romanticism and the Twentieth Century* (London: Rockliff, 1957), p. 30. See further, Friedhelm Krummacher, "Composition as Accommodation? On Mendelssohn's Music in Relation to England," in *Mendelssohn Studies*, ed. R. L. Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 87, and, on *Elijah*, pp. 94ff.

[12] Botstein, op. cit., p. 9.

[13] See further Werner's monograph and the earlier work on which it draws, F. G. Edwards, *The History of Mendelssohn's Oratorio "Elijah"* (London and New York: Novello, 1896), and A. Kurzhals-Reuter, *Die Oratorien Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdys: Untersuchungen zur Quellenlage, Entstehung, Gestaltung und Überlieferung* (Tutzing: H. Schneider, 1978).

[14] For Mendelssohn's letters to Simrock, see Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, *Briefe an deutsche Verleger*, ed. Rudolf Elvers (Berlin, 1968), pp. 252ff. On Mendelssohn's relations with Edward Buxton, see Peter Ward Jones, "Mendelssohn and His English Publishers," in *Mendelssohn Studies*, pp. 254-55. Several of Mendelssohn's letters to Buxton are in the Library of Congress; some are cited in Werner, passim, and in "Mendelssohn and His English Publisher: Some Unpublished Letters," The *Musical Times* 46 (1905): 20-23.

[15] Letter of November 10, 1846, from Edward Buxton to Mendelssohn, in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, Margaret Deneke Mendelssohn Collection, Green Books, XXIV, No. 130.

[16] *Elias. Ein Oratorium nach Worten des alten Testaments componirt von Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Op. 70. Klavierauszug*.

[17] *Elias. Ein Oratorium nach Worten des alten Testaments componirt von Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Op. 70. Partitur*.

[18] *Elijah. An oratorio. The words selected from the Old Testament. The English version by Bartholomew Esqu. The music composed by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, Op. 70. Piano-forte arrangement by the author*.

[19] Autograph letter in the Library of Congress.

[20] On that day Mendelssohn sent the piano reduction of the Introduction, Overture, and first five numbers to Simrock. See *Briefe an deutsche Verleger*, p. 254.

[21] Autograph letter (in English) of February 17, 1847, to Edward Buxton, in the Library of Congress.

[22] *Paulus. Oratorium nach Worten der heiligen Schrift, componirt von Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Opus 36* (Bonn: Simrock); *St. Paul. An oratorio. The words selected from the Holy Scriptures (the English version adapted by Wm. Ball). The music composed by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy. The piano forte accompaniment arranged by the composer* (London: J. Alfred Novello).

[23] Letter (in English) from Mendelssohn to Edward Buxton in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, M. Deneke Mendelssohn Collection, C42, ff. 81-82.

[24] Mendelssohn originally intended to have no overture for *Elijah* but was convinced to write one by William Bartholomew, who provided the English translation of the German libretto; the overture was finished only some two weeks before the premiere in August 1846. See Werner, op.

cit., pp. 44-45, 77.