

## An Uplifting “Elijah”

In my younger days there were two, among countless others, tenets of received wisdom among musical pundits who should have known better: (1) Mendelssohn was, at best, a good but not a great composer and (2) his best works were written early in his (sadly short) composing career. *Elijah* has however given the lie to both and in its 162 years of existence musical connoisseurs have eagerly looked forward to taking part in or listening to performances of it. Unsurprisingly this was the case with Doncaster Choral Society’s unabridged reading under Alan Eost at Priory Methodist Church on June 14<sup>th</sup> and we were not disappointed.

It has been said that a performance of Mendelssohn’s masterpiece stands or falls by how well the title role is realised. To an extent this is true and more of this in a moment, but surely the chorus has claims to be reckoned the chief protagonist, one which has to fulfil several roles in the course of the work, including depicting the desperation of the Baal worshippers – rather simplistic, maybe, but Victorian devotees loved that – and, more strikingly, the changing emotions and allegiances of the Israelite people. The chorus is given marvellous music, often dramatic and always with an inspiring breadth, which is Mendelssohn’s hallmark, and a visionary quality which constitutes *Elijah*’s claim to be reckoned one of the greatest of works in the choral repertory. The Doncaster Choral Society responded to their opportunities with admirably prepared singing of great power, well judged balance and focus, most of all, maybe, in the chorus of thankfulness which concludes Part 1 (how ironical, in view of last year’s events, that a South Yorkshire choir should so enthusiastically salute the arrival of heavy rain), one of the supreme moments in all oratorio, though in this performance the final chorus (in which the singers, after a long and big ‘sing’, somehow found something to provide a memorable climax) rivalled it. Gentler choral movements – like ‘Lift Thine Eyes’ and ‘For He Shall Give His Angels’ – showed the Society’s sensitivity and burgeoning musicianship.

It was doubtless helped in the impact it made by the increased numbers brought about by its third “membership drive” in three years. The previous ones, the Mozart and Salieri *Requiems* and Brahms’ *Requiem* resulted in around half the “guests” staying with the Society and hopefully a similar encouraging outcome will be signalled this time as the new recruits realise they are part of something special.

Of course others contributed to this satisfying result. Mendelssohn was one of the finest orchestrators and *Elijah* affords much evidence of this. The South Yorkshire Symphony Orchestra (leader Amanda Roden-Martin), a generally reliable support to the Society down the years, realised many of the score’s felicities, not least in its woodwind section.

I come finally to the vocal soloists. Three of the four major ones (though I must not forget treble Adam Wright, a Doncaster Minster chorister and Danum School of Technology College pupil, who on the strength of his brief, but significant contribution at the end of Part 1, has undoubtedly much musical potential which I look forward to seeing developed

in the years to come) have delighted Choral Society audiences on several previous occasions. The newcomer was Nicholas Ransley (tenor), whose operatic experience was well suited to *Elijah's* dramatic qualities, although for me his delivery of the air 'Then Shall the Righteous' – which, by Mendelssohn's own account, is reputed to have moved him to tears at its 1846 Birmingham premiere – lacked something in lyricism. Soprano Debra Morley sang with enterprise, being heard at her best in the quasi-operatic exchanges between *Elijah* and the bereaved widow; perhaps Mendelssohn's little regarded operatic output might be worth exploring. Margaret McDonald, arguably this country's finest current contralto, was another soloist, who shared with us her delight in *Elijah's* dramatic opportunities (she is required to impersonate at different moments Jezebel and an angel and did both convincingly). Finally, though far from least, Adam Green (bass) gave a wonderfully authoritative account of the title role; his readings of 'Is Not His Word?' and 'It Is Enough', vastly different solos, will long live in my memory. He commanded the attention and not just in the vocal set pieces. Before long, perhaps, he may be challenging Bryn Terfel as our leading *Elijah*.

*Elijah* should always be an uplifting experience. This is the aim, not always, of course, attained, but how splendid for Doncaster that this one indeed was.

*Orpheus*