2018.19 MSO Teen Series

Mendelssohn: ELIJAH

Randal Swiggum, conductor

STUDENT GUIDE

February 6, 2019
Uihlein Hall
USING THIS GUIDE

**Students**, spend some time listening to Elijah before the concert. There are lots of great recordings on YouTube and Spotify, and your public library will have multiple versions on CD to check out. A complete performance lasts about two hours—our version will be about 50 minutes, with several of the most exciting scenes.

Understanding a masterpiece takes time and some patience. But if you only have limited time, listen to the Overture and the Baal sequence (Numbers 10-17). You’ll be hooked.

**Teachers**, three things you can do to help:

1) **Elements of Music**
   Use these seven words to help break down the listening process: **Melody (Pitches)**, **Harmony**, **Rhythm**, **Timbre**, **Texture**, **Dynamics**, **Form**. Music can feel very abstract, but vocabulary means having tools—tools to name what’s actually happening in the music. Words give power, the power to understand. Give your students that power.

2) **Notice**
   A big piece of classical music—even a single movement—can feel overwhelming. Help students to pick out details, especially details that seem striking, unusual, even weird. Being an “expert noticer” (my favorite phrase) is one of the most powerful benefits of an arts education.

3) **Speculate**
   Noticing is Step One. But now go a step further. Use your imagination and ask “why?” Why did the composer do this, instead of that? What might be the meaning, whether intended or not? This kind of speculation is precisely the purpose of a work of art—to stir us to ask questions, to ponder, to wonder. In a world of standardized tests, having to consider possibilities that are not a single correct answer (which, of course, is more like real life) is genuine critical thinking.

Thanks for preparing your students—we can’t wait to share this thrilling piece with them.

Randal Swiggum, conductor
SPOILER ALERT: There aren’t any.

Seeing a movie for the first time, we usually don’t want to know how it ends. Or even the secret plot points.

Classical music is just the opposite—the more you know it ahead of time, even its ending—the better you understand it when you hear it live. And the better you understand it, the more likely you are to love it.

The more you know Elijah ahead of time, the more you’ll already have your favorite spots to look forward to. The more details you’ll catch and the deeper layers you’ll uncover.

The more familiar the piece, the more thrilling the concert. Guaranteed.
The Best Screen: Imagination

The morning dawned sunny and clear. Over two thousand eager, curious listeners had taken their seats in the magnificent Town Hall of Birmingham, England. It was August 26, 1846. The occasion? The premiere of a new oratorio, Mendelssohn’s Elijah.

The audience was hushed—everyone could feel the sense of anticipation. At precisely 11:00am, the conductor—Felix Mendelssohn himself—entered and stepped onto the podium. The audience exploded in cheers and applause. Mendelssohn was the most famous composer and conductor in the world—a true international sensation. Everyone wanted to catch a glimpse of the handsome, young celebrity, with his piercing black eyes and famous smile.

Mendelssohn’s arms went up. No one dared breathe. And then, four ominous chords rose from the orchestra, and the bass soloist, Josef Staudigl, thundered Elijah’s curse, “As God the Lord of Israel liveth…”

What was the audience expecting? They were expecting an experience. They were expecting to be moved, to have new emotions, new images in their heads, and an intensity of feeling that everyday life mostly does not provide. It’s the same reason we go to movies, or devour new shows on Netflix, or get excited about the latest videogame.

Except in 1846 there were no screens. No movies, TV, or Smartphones. Most people didn’t own lots of books and had never even seen a photograph. But they did have something our modern screens do not require: imagination. Our “screen culture” means that mostly we don’t have to do much except sit and stare—computer generated effects thrill us with things beyond our own imaginations. But an audience in 1846 had to use their own imagination; the “screen” was also thrilling, but it was in their head.

Mendelssohn understood this. He couldn’t rely on visuals to tell the story, but he could create his own “special effects,” through sound. And the audience would pay close attention to the sonic world he created, and their imaginations would fill in the rest, in splendid detail.

Of course, there was spectacle in 1846—a sense of overwhelming sensation, both in sound and sight. The chorus for Elijah was enormous and formidable—79 sopranos, 60 altos (all men), 60 tenors, and 72 basses. The orchestra was 175 players, nearly twice the size of today. But awe-inspiring as it was, that was not the most enthralling aspect of Elijah. That would be Mendelssohn’s music, and the way it told (without visuals) the spell-binding tale of Elijah.

The audience was mesmerized. A reviewer for The Times reported: “The last note of Elijah was drowned in a long, unanimous volley of cheers and applause, vociferous and deafening. It was as though enthusiasm, long checked, had suddenly burst its bonds and filled the air with shouts of exultation.”
Mendelssohn, evidently overpowered, bowed his acknowledgements and quickly descended from
his position on the conductor’s rostrum, but he was compelled to reappear again, amidst renewed
cheers and huzzahs. Never was there a more complete triumph—never a more thorough and speedy
recognition of a great work of art.”

Mendelssohn himself considered *Elijah* his greatest achievement, and it has captivated audiences
continuously since its premiere. Bring your imagination—it will beguile you too.

**ORATORIO** n. [o-rah-TOR-ee-o].

A large-scale work, often several hours in length, with soloists, chorus, and orchestra;
tells a story, like an opera, but without sets, costumes, or staging. Typically includes an
overture, choruses, solos (arias), duets, and recitatives (like spoken dialogue, somewhere
between speech and melodic songs). Operas were often stories from mythology,
novels, or secular theatre, while oratorios are mostly sacred (biblical). The most famous
example—today and in Mendelssohn’s time—was Handel’s *Messiah* (1741).
Who was Elijah?

The Biblical tale of Elijah dates from c.800 BCE and is found in the Book of Kings. Elijah was probably the single most important spiritual reformer in all of Hebrew scripture, and besides Moses, Abraham, and David, no ancient figure is mentioned more in the New Testament than Elijah. The Qu’uran names Elijah (Ilyas) one of Islam’s major prophets.

The name “Elijah” (Hebrew “Eliyahu”) means “Yahweh is my God.” This is significant because Elijah remained faithful to Yahweh—Israel’s God—against all odds, defying death and speaking truth to power, when it seemed everyone around him had abandoned the true faith.

Elijah appears suddenly and without warning in scripture—we don’t know his credentials or where he came from—to deliver a bitter curse. This sudden appearance, seemingly out of the blue, is a common theme in the Elijah narrative (marked even today in the Jewish Passover ritual). It was none other than Elijah who appeared, next to Moses, at the transfiguration of Christ (Matthew 17:3).

In Elijah’s first appearance he stands before King Ahab (c.874-853 BCE). About the infamous Ahab, scripture says, “Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him.” His queen, Jezebel, was a Phoenician princess who promoted the worship of the pagan Canaanite god Baal, and not Jehovah, the God of Israel. Elijah bravely stands before Ahab, Jezebel, and their court and proclaims a severe drought, as punishment for the sin of idolatry. There followed three years of no rain, and a terrible, deadly famine, which Ahab and the people blamed on Elijah.

When Elijah reappears three years later, the nation is in misery and Ahab is furious with Elijah, the “troubler of Israel.” Elijah challenges Ahab to a spiritual “showdown” on Mount Carmel, to prove once and for all that Yahweh is the one true God of Israel. This scene, one of the most suspenseful in scripture, is just one of many exciting episodes in the Elijah story, which include being fed by ravens in the wilderness, raising a widow’s son from the dead, the miracle of rain after drought, hiding in a cave and experiencing God in a whirlwind, and escaping Jezebel’s henchmen when she put out a death threat on his life. Even his glorious final day was cinematic: Elijah did not die, but ascended into the sky in a chariot of fire, with his friend Elisha watching in stunned amazement.

Elijah’s struggle against the worship of Baal has profound historical significance, especially regarding monotheism. When he prays, “Hear me, Yahweh, that the people may know that you, Yahweh, are God”, he reveals that worship is more than just acknowledging different gods and their sphere of influence. The Baalim (all the Baal gods) were earth-gods, (“forest-gods, mountain deities” as Elijah refers to them). But Elijah draws a line in the sand: only one God can be true and real and truly divine. After the fire miracle on Mount Carmel, the acclamation of the people, “Yahweh, he is God” expresses a true monotheism, which perhaps they had never fully understood before.

Mendelssohn was drawn powerfully to Elijah. He saw the prophet not as symbol or distant saint, but as a flesh-and-blood man. In a letter to a colleague he wrote: “In fact I imagined Elijah as a real, mighty prophet through and through, of the kind we could really do with today: Strong and zealous, yes, but also bad-tempered, angry and brooding — in contrast to the rabble you find both in court or in the populace, and indeed in contrast to almost the whole world — and yet borne aloft as if on angels’ wings.”
Introduction

Elijah

As God the Lord of Israel liveth, before whom I stand:
There shall not be dew nor rain these years,
but according to my word

Every opera, oratorio, and theatrical production in Mendelssohn’s time began just like musicals today: with an overture—an orchestra piece that serves to set the tone of the drama, quiet the audience, and perhaps introduce some musical ideas to be heard later.

Mendelssohn had a different idea. “No overture,” he said. “I will start with the voice of Elijah alone.”

It was a courageous decision, but one of the most exciting things Mendelssohn’s audiences had ever heard: the booming voice of the prophet over resolute chords from the brass.

These words are taken directly from the Bible. Elijah appears before King Ahab and pronounces a curse on the land for the people’s disobedience in worshipping the false god Baal. But Mendelssohn is doing more than just setting the text to music: he includes a couple musical secrets whose significance will be revealed later, as the drama unfolds.

(See Special Effect: Motif)
SPECIAL EFFECTS: Motif

A motif is a short musical idea—usually a short figure of 4-5 notes, or a special chord, or rhythm—that the composer uses throughout a piece. Sometimes it is transformed or varied in a way that helps the piece develop; often it is the musical DNA that unifies the piece organically.

In movies and operas, a motif can become a musical symbol of a character, a place, or even an abstract idea. Think of Star Wars: Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader each have their own distinct melody, which appears with them and not only helps us recognize them, but often suggests to us, the audience, extra information that even the characters don't know.

Mendelssohn begins Elijah with just such a motif. It's really just four solemn chords, played by strong, authoritative brass instruments—actually it's virtually the same chord four times, before Elijah makes his first prophecy, speaking for the Lord God Jehovah. What does it mean?

Mendelssohn never spells this out, but it's clear that these four chords mean something—they carry a sense of tragic possibility. Perhaps they represent the voice of God, God's authority or his message for the people, through Elijah. How do we know? Because this motif reappears, when Elijah returns three years later to announce that the curse will be lifted and the drought will end. This time, however, the key is not D minor, but a higher, more hopeful and confident Eb major. But the motif (and Elijah's words) are identical:

Another Motif: The Curse

The opening of Elijah has another musical secret, for anyone paying attention. When Elijah pronounces God's curse (no dew or rain for three years), he sings a strange, eerie interval. In fact, he sings it twice (and the trombones blare it a third time):

It's neither a perfect fourth or perfect fifth, but rather a tritone (a diminished fifth). Try singing it. It's awkward and weird. In fact, for several centuries it was called the diabolus in musica (the “devil in music”) and was forbidden in church music. But here, Mendelssohn uses it to great effect to convey the foreboding darkness that is about to settle on the land, with God's curse. (A sinister timpani roll adds to the feeling of dread.)

However, we only really call the tritone a motif if it appears later, connected somehow with the curse. And indeed it does. Watch for it.
Overture (orchestra alone)

After Elijah’s curse comes one of Mendelssohn’s most thrilling musical creations—an overture that he said expressed “the three years of famine and misery.” One might expect a slow, mournful piece, but this is the opposite. It does begin quietly, but the tempo is very fast, and the musical gestures are short jabs and sighing figures.

Almost imperceptible, it begins with the low murmuring of just cellos and basses:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{F}_{\text{b}} \quad \text{G} \quad \text{F} \quad \text{E} \\
1 \quad 2 \quad 3 \quad 4 \\
\end{array}
\]

Look at this striking melody. (The note-numbers will make it easier to discuss.) The opening gesture (1-2) is tiny—just 2 notes a half-step apart. But it’s repeated three times (1-6) before it “takes off.” It’s very rhythmic music—there is an intensity which captures and holds our interest. And it starts low and gradually rises in pitch and intensity. Can you find the Curse Motif (tritone)? A reminder that this misery was part of a prophesy. What else do you notice about this melody? Any patterns? (For example, 11-12 is just 1-2, but inverted.) Listen to it several times. Try singing it. If you had to pick a single favorite note, which would it be? Why?

This is not just a descriptive orchestra piece—it’s also a fugue, one of the most complex and intricate kinds of music, and a great example of polyphony. (See Special Effect: Texture).

How does it work? After the basses/cellos introduce the subject (main melody), it is taken up by the next highest voice, the violas, who play it exactly the same except starting a perfect fourth higher. Against this, basses/cellos take up a countersubject:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{F}_{\text{b}} \quad \text{G} \quad \text{F} \quad \text{E} \\
34 \quad 35 \quad 36 \quad 37 \\
\end{array}
\]

Again, notice how this countersubject works. 34-35 are really just 1-2, but with two changes: what are they? Notice how the two melodies fit together like perfect interlocking puzzle pieces:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Violas} \\
\text{Basses/Cellos} \\
34 \quad 35 \quad 36 \quad 37 \\
\end{array}
\]

One more feature to notice: the descending half-steps (42-46)—a short chromatic scale. There is a certain mournful quality as these notes tread slowly downward. We will see this figure throughout Elijah. Watch for it.

**FUGUE** n. [fyooog]

A musical piece in which the theme (subject) is repeated or imitated by successively entering voices and developed polyphonically in a continuous interweaving of the voice parts. Many fugues were written by Bach and Handel in the 18th century. A simple round like “Row, Row Your Boat” is similar, except fugues are much longer, more complex, and each voice does not enter on the same pitch.
One more fascinating detail to notice. If you listen carefully, when the low strings are playing 26-33, the French horn plays an insistent rhythm of repeated notes:

Nothing is “extra” with Mendelssohn—everything has meaning or purpose. Just a few seconds earlier, in the Introduction, Elijah ended his prophecy with these words, also on repeated notes, even the same pitch, A. Compare:

But according to my word.

NOTICE • SPECULATE

1. Why do you suppose Mendelssohn inserts the 4-note French horn rhythm (quoting Elijah’s prophecy) in the midst of the fugue? What meaning is suggested?

2. Why does Mendelssohn choose a fast, rhythmic fugue, instead of a slow, mournful piece, to describe the passing of three years of drought and famine? Consider the way a fugue expands in texture and dynamics. Listen to the Overture again. What do you think it is expressing?

1. CHORUS: Help, Lord!

The People

Help, Lord! Wilt Thou quite destroy us?
The harvest now is over, the summer days are gone, and yet no power cometh to help us!
Will then the Lord be no more God in Zion?
The deeps afford no water!
And the rivers are exhausted!
The nursling’s tongue now cleaveth for thirst to his mouth!
The infant children ask for bread! And there is no one breaketh it to feed them.

Elijah’s curse is followed by a powerful scene which is sweeping and ambitious, both dramatically and musically: an overture, chorus, choral recitative, and duet with chorus—a scene of ten minutes, which follow in close succession. The Overture does not really end. Instead, it builds in intensity and anguish, until it explodes with the cry of the people: “Help, Lord!” It is as if the curtain rises, the lights have come up, and we are in the midst of a protest against the suffering of the famine. The people shake their fists at God, who seems to have abandoned them. The deeps (streams and wells) are dried up, nursing babies are dying of thirst and infants starving to death. And no one, not even the king, has the power to bring rain. God is silent, as Elijah had warned.
SPECIAL EFFECTS: Texture

One of Mendelssohn's most powerful special effects is how he changes the texture, with very expressive results.

Texture—in music—can mean two things:
1) How thick or thin the music sounds (how many layers, etc.)
2) How the various layers interact.

This second kind of texture has basically three types: homophonic, polyphonic, and monophonic.

In the opening chorus, “Help, Lord!”, Mendelssohn uses all three, which makes it easy to see how they work.

The first words, “Help, Lord!” are sung in block chords, with all the singers singing the same words at the same time, like a hymn. This is called homophonic (Greek: “same sound”). Typically homophonic means one part is the melody, with the others accompanying. In these chords, we tend to hear the top voice (soprano) as the melody, and the altos, tenors, and basses in lockstep, creating a chord beneath them.

Suddenly the tenors sing by themselves, a mournful melody (with a drooping chromatic figure).
But the other voices don’t accompany the tenors—instead they each take up parts of this melody, and become the main melody themselves. In other words, each voice is independent and each is equally important as the melody. This texture is **polyphonic** (Greek: “many sounds”). It’s easy to hear this texture because the voices are often singing **different** words at the same time.

Instrumental music can be polyphonic too. It’s sometimes called counterpoint (“point against point”). The Overture to *Elijah* is a great example. It’s a fugue, which by design passes the main melody (the “subject”) around, so everyone’s part is equally important.

**Monophonic** music (Greek: “one sound”) means just a single line of melody, without accompaniment. An example is medieval chant. Taking away the excitement of polyphony or homophony puts the emphasis squarely on the melody. At the end of the opening chorus, as if the Israelites are weary and losing hope, Mendelssohn gives each section their own solitary melody, beginning with sopranos, who lament that even their streams and wells are dry.

If you listen carefully, you can hear that it’s not really just the sopranos—the strings are sustaining some quiet chords underneath them. But the effect of removing nearly everything except the lone soprano section is so striking, it virtually functions as a chant or **monophony**.

### 2. DUET WITH CHORUS: Lord, bow thine ear

**The People**

*Lord, bow Thine ear to our prayer!*

**Two Women**

*Zion spreadeth her hands for aid, and there is no one to give comfort.*

Now the epic feeling of the opening chorus becomes even more intense and personal. Two women take up a mournful lament, their voices intertwining in despair. The picture is of “Zion”—the name for God’s people, the Israelites—who is often characterized as a young woman, the “Daughter of Zion.” But here she is a beggar in rags, raising her hands, pleading for help.

The chorus sings the same haunting chant, over and over:

Hunger and profound suffering. Even with no visual, we can feel the despair.

And again, God is silent.
NOTICE • SPECULATE

The texture of this movement is striking—the two solo voices against the chorus, but the chorus singing a repetitive monophonic chant. What is the effect of this texture and these timbres together? What do you think Mendelssohn was trying to do?

SCENE 2: DUEL OF THE GODS

Three years have passed. Elijah had been hounded out of Israel by those who wanted him dead. But the story has a “re-boot.” Elijah now returns, and we hear the same dramatic chords from his first appearance before Ahab, except now in the brighter major key of Eb. (See Special Effect: Motif). The narrative is moving quickly now, and Mendelssohn introduces a vigorous galloping rhythm (perhaps Ahab on horseback) which halts abruptly when the two men confront each other face to face. The chorus—their bitterness toward Elijah palpable—repeat Ahab’s accusations.

Elijah, in brave, confident faith, proposes a challenge to Ahab. Assemble the priests of Baal—all 450 of them—for a “contest” on Mount Carmel. He and they will each sacrifice a bull and rather than setting fire to it, as usual, each will pray to their god to consume the sacrifice. The winner? The god who answers by fire.

In Samaria, Ahab’s capital city, priests in the temple of Baal could perform a trick where fire appeared magically, as if divine. But on the mountain, out in the open, Elijah knew they would be exposed as frauds. More importantly, he trusts Yahweh to hear his prayer and send down real fire.
10. As God the Lord of Sabaoth

The People

As God the Lord of Sabaoth livesth, before whom I stand:
three years this day fulfilled, I will show myself unto Ahab;
and the Lord will then send rain again upon the earth.

King Ahab

Art thou Elijah! Art thou he that troubleth Israel!

The People

Thou art Elijah, thou he that troubleth Israel!

Elijah

I never troubled Israel's peace!
It is thou, Ahab, and all thy father's house!
Ye have forsaken God's commands, and thou hast followed Baalim.
Now send, and gather to me the whole of Israel unto Mount Carmel;
there summon the prophets of Baal,
and also the prophets of the groves who are feasted at Jezebel's table.
Then, then we shall see whose God is the Lord.

The People

And then we shall see whose God is the Lord.

Elijah

Rise then, ye priests of Baal; select and slay a bullock, and put no fire under it;
uplift your voices and call the god ye worship, and then I will call on the Lord Jehovah!
And the god who by fire shall answer, let him be God.

The People

Yea, and the God who by fire shall answer, let him be God.

Elijah

Call first upon your god, your numbers are many.
I, even I only, remain one prophet of the Lord.
Invoke your forest gods, and mountain deities.

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NOTICE • SPECULATE

1. The Curse Motif appears several times in this scene, like a bitter memory. Listen for it.

2. Notice that this scene includes a lot of text, but it moves quickly. Mendelssohn achieves this by using almost exclusively recitative. (See “Oratorio” above). There are few “tunes”—it is mostly like a scene in a film, with Elijah, Ahab, and Ahab's royal court in aggressive, fast-paced dialogue. And what a vivid scene it is—the orchestra's rhythms and harmonies help us track the action. Regal fanfares from horns and trumpets tell us that Elijah is in royal surroundings.
11. Baal, we cry to thee

Chorus (Priests of Baal)

Baal, we cry to thee, hear and answer us!
Heed the sacrifice we offer!
Hear us, Baal! Hear, mighty god! Baal, oh answer us!
Baal, let thy flames fall and devour the foe!

All morning, the priests of Baal prepare the sacrifice with elaborate ceremony. Their choruses will grow increasingly frantic and desperate, but at first they are confident and cheerful. This famous chorus is in two parts. The first half is a kind of bright march, features antiphonal chanting back and forth between the men’s voices (accompanied by dark trombones) and women’s voices (with bright woodwinds). This becomes a kind of “round dance” in ¾ meter, with the strings (who have been silent until now) skittering rhythmically up and down. The effect of this music has been described as “garish magnificence,” contrasting the richly adorned priests of Baal with the plain, simple Elijah.

SPECIAL EFFECTS

The Chorus

All the singers in Elijah take on the roles of specific characters. A bass soloist sings the part of Elijah, and King Ahab is sung by a tenor.

But besides Elijah himself, the most important “character” in the story is the chorus, which plays many different roles, including:

- People of Israel
- Priests of Baal
- Courtiers of Ahab
- Angels

Sometimes, though, the chorus functions more as a narrator, commenting on the action and reflecting on the implications of the story from the standpoint of the Christian believer—in other words, explaining the “moral of the story” at points along the way.

NOTICE • SPECULATE

Mendelssohn has Elijah taunt the priests in one of the few humorous touches in the oratorio. Their final furtive “hear us!” is the interval of a minor third:

Elijah echoes their plea with the same interval, and the shrill woodwinds follow, in exquisite mockery:

If it sounds familiar, it’s because we know this interval already—as the schoolyard chant for teasing!
12. Call him louder

**Elijah**

*Call him louder, for he is a god! He talketh, or he is meditating.*

*Or he is on a journey; or, peradventure he sleepest: so awaken him! Call him louder, call him louder!*

**Prophets of Baal**

*Hear our cry, o Baal! Now arise! Wherefore slumber?*

Dusk approaches. Still no fire. Still no sign of Baal. The priests become more frantic, and Elijah mocks them with humor and confidence. What? No answer? Maybe he’s busy, or meditating somewhere himself. Maybe he’s fallen asleep with boredom—call him louder!

This second Baal chorus is considerably more agitated and nervous, with woodwinds pounding eighth notes in desperation. The new key, now F# minor, conveys frazzled nerves. Notice the staggered entrances of the chorus: first bass, then tenor, then alto, etc.—it’s the beginning of a fugue, but quickly coalesces into pounding homophonic shouts: *Now arise! Why are you sleeping?! Baal, wake up!*

13. Call him louder

**Elijah**

*Call him louder! He heareth not.*

*With knives and lancets cut yourselves after your manner.*

*Leap upon the altar ye have made, call him and prophesy! Not a voice will answer you: none will listen, none heed you.*

**Prophets of Baal**

*Baal! Baal! Hear and answer, Baal! Mark how the scorner derideth us! [“See how Elijah is mocking us!?”]*

The third Baal chorus is, naturally, the wildest and most frenzied. It begins with Elijah even more aggressively mocking them, a half-step higher than before, and with the suggestion that they try drawing their own blood to get Baal’s attention. Mendelssohn’s librettist urged him to soften the text to something less violent, but Mendelssohn would hear none of it: he insisted on the words “with knives and lancets cut yourselves!” Mendelssohn pulls out every special effect for a chorus that reaches fever heat: stomping timpani, pounding brass chords, ferocious 16th notes from the strings, and men and women shouting in opposition. But the most spectacular effect is silence.

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**SPECIAL EFFECTS**

**Silence**

The third Baal chorus is one of the most famous pieces in music history, not just for its brutal sound, but for its use of silence. Even for those who know it well and anticipate it, the effect is chilling.

Each Baal chorus has surpassed the other in intensity, but now the priests reach a breaking point. They shout:

Notice the rest—a short silence at the end of each deafening shout, while the desperate priests plead with Baal and anxiously scan the sky for his fire.

But then Mendelssohn makes a courageous move: two more hysterical shouts, each followed by a full two measures of powerful, frozen silence. (Lest there be any doubt, Mendelssohn wrote the word “Silent” in the score.) It is into this deafening silence, that Elijah’s voice enters, with a simple prayer.
16. O Thou, who makest Thine angel spirits

Elijah

O Thou, who makest Thine angel spirits;
Thou, whose ministers are flaming fires: let them now descend!

The People

The fire descends from heaven! The flames consume his offering!
Before Him upon your faces fall!
The Lord is God, the Lord is God! O Israel hear!
Our God is one Lord, and we will have no other gods before the Lord.

Elijah

Take all the prophets of Baal, and let not one of them escape you.
Bring them down to Kishon’s brook, and there let them be slain.

The People

Take all the prophets of Baal and let not one of them escape us!
Sieze them and slay them!

With the audience on the edge of its seat, Mendelssohn employs one of his favorite musical tricks: extreme contrast. The orchestra is silent, and Elijah prays, with quiet confidence. Yahweh will hear him.

And suddenly, fire! Fire raining down from the sky. Though Elijah doused his altar with water, for extra effect, the flames lick and consume the sacrifice. It is a spectacular display, far beyond even what the priests of Baal attempted. And with Mendelssohn’s special effects, we can see it all.

With a thunderclap from the timpani, the orchestra ignites first, a flash of fortissimo and then flickering strings, while the people, in awe, proclaim “The fire descends from heaven!” Mendelssohn’s skill as a composer is on display here, and it is red-hot. (Even his tempo marking, Allegro con fuoco, means “with fire”). He uses vigorous polyphony, with snatches of text flaring up all around the chorus, and wild melismas (many notes) on the word “flames,” an example of text-painting. And suddenly, in fear and awareness, the voices sing in unity (homophonic): Fall down before him. The extreme contrasts—especially dynamics and texture—make this one of Mendelssohn’s most thrilling choruses.

NOTICE • SPECULATE

When the people make their solemn vow, “We will have no other gods before the Lord” (essentially re-committing to the First Commandment of Moses), they are singing in a hushed, homophonic style. To a 19th century listener (and even to us) this sounds like religious music, like a church hymn.

Strangely though, their last note (“Lord”) is underscored by an ominous timpani roll. It functions not just as a transition, to keep the scene moving, but also to symbolize a change in Elijah’s tactic. He will channel the people’s awe for Yahweh into rage at the false prophets. Not one will escape—they will all be put to the sword. Notice how the timpani dominates this barbaric scene.
17. Is not His word like a fire?

Elijah

Is not His word like a fire,
and like a hammer that breaketh the rock into pieces!
For God is angry with the wicked every day.
And if the wicked turn not, the Lord will whet His sword;
and He hath bent His bow, and made it ready.

The climax of the scene belongs to Elijah. Throughout the Baal Sequence we have seen a breathtaking range of emotion from him: confrontation, tenderness, humility, sarcasm, humor, and anger. Now he caps off the scene with an aria (solo piece) of fiery confidence, even bravado. It is a virtuosic piece for the singer, with dramatic leaps in the melody, fast melismas (many notes on key words, like “word” and “fire,” and for the orchestra whose flickering 16th notes flare up and then fall back, like surging flames. Listen for the change of texture to a brief “boom-chick” section in the strings which conveys the strength of a “hammer that breaketh the rock.”

Mendelssohn didn’t invent this style of aria. In fact, it had a name—a “rage aria”—and it was popular with Baroque composers, especially Bach and Handel, whom Mendelssohn revered. To compare, listen to two rage arias from Handel’s Messiah: “For he is like a refiner’s fire” (bass) and “Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron” (tenor). Mendelssohn’s aria is a worthy tribute.
Part One of *Elijah* was full of action scenes—the public display of the prophet's greatest deeds. Part Two will reveal Elijah's inner life, as he struggles against feelings of isolation, futility, and ingratitude.

After the Baal Contest is won, Elijah prays to lift the drought and God sends a tiny cloud which billows into a torrent of rain, and ends the famine. Elijah has restored the bond between Yahweh and his grateful people. He now turns again to Ahab, whose idolatry and temple to Baal makes him unqualified to lead Israel. But Jezebel is incensed and turns viciously on Elijah, again inflaming the people to seize him, as the real “troubler of Israel,” the real cause of the famine.

His life in peril, Elijah flees to the desert, collapsing in exhaustion and bitter despair. His loneliness and sense of isolation are a test of faith, and he sinks into a profound depression, a suicidal weariness. This poignant aria is one of the most beloved pieces in all of *Elijah* and, like a classic Baroque aria by Bach or Handel, cast in ABA form. In the middle section, Elijah’s anger at the people of Israel and at Yahweh himself flares up, with a dramatic change in meter, dynamics, and rhythmic energy.

**NOTICE • SPECULATE**

1. Listen for the cellos. Although the entire cello section is featured in “It is enough,” it really functions more like a single cello, another solo voice. The range and dark color of the cello are virtually the same as Elijah’s baritone voice. Why did Mendelssohn not choose an instrument that would contrast with the voice?

2. Listen to how the cello line interacts with the vocal line—sometimes leading, sometimes supporting or commenting, sometimes disappearing entirely. It’s not only achingly beautiful—it seems to carry its own meaning, even without text. What is it saying? Why is it there?
28. Lift thine eyes

**Angels**

*Lift thine eyes to the mountains, whence cometh help.*  
*Thy help cometh from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.*  
*He hath said, thy foot shall not be moved, thy Keeper will never slumber.*

Elijah sinks into a dejected sleep. Under a canopy of stars, angels watch over him, and bring comfort. This is also one of the most famous pieces from all of *Elijah*, a trio of treble voices (soprano and alto). The chorus men and the orchestra are silent, giving the voices an ethereal, “other-worldly” quality. This is a miniature piece of radiant beauty and childlike simplicity. Its text (taken from Psalm 121) harkens all the way back to the Baal Scene: a reminder that while Baal may doze off, the God of Israel is always vigilant, watching over his children.

![Elijah in the Wilderness](image1)  
Frederic Leighton (1878)

![Being Asleep in the desert where he had retired to wait for death, Elijah has been awakened and cheered by an angel.](image2)  
Marc Chagall (1956)

38. Then did Elijah

**Chorus**

*Then did Elijah the prophet break forth like a fire;*  
*his words appeared like burning torches.*  
*Mighty kings by him were overthrown.*  
*He stood on the mount of Sinai and heard the judgments of the future,*  
*and in Horeb its vengeance.*

*And when the Lord would take him away to heaven,*  
*Lo! There came a fiery chariot with fiery horses,*  
*and he went by a whirlwind to heaven.*
This is the climax of the Elijah story: a dramatic recap of his mighty deeds and the action scenes. It is cinematic—like watching a captivating trailer to an epic movie. The text, evoking fire and "burning torches" recalls not only Elijah's words but his fiery temperament, and the light of God's presence. The reference to Sinai and Horeb (two names for the same holy mountain) refers to Elijah's earlier experience of God's still, small voice in the midst of a whirlwind and tempest.

But halfway through the chorus, we are back in the present, to the final moments of Elijah's life on earth. The Book of Kings says that Elijah and his disciple Elisha journeyed together to the banks of the Jordan River. Elijah struck the waters with his cloak and the river parted, so they could pass through. But just as Elijah began to cross, a chariot of fire, with fiery horses, suddenly appeared and whisked Elijah off into the heavens, with Elisha looking on in amazement.

What makes this chorus so thrilling? Besides a text full of visual pictures, it is a series of short musical "scenes"—each with its own characteristic melody, texture, and rhythmic groove. Mendelsohn deftly alternates monumental blocks of homophonic text with snakey lines of counterpoint (polyphony) and everything moves quickly, like a series of magic tricks. The way the "burning torches" flash back and forth, the mighty sound of the pipe organ at the appearance of the chariot, the way the melody ascends on "take him away to heaven" so the word "heaven" is a brilliant (and high) C major chord—this is the kind of attention to detail that Mendelssohn is famous for, and creates that "you are there" effect.

SPECIAL EFFECTS: Harmony

Harmony is a hard element of music to talk about, at least until you understand how it works and how it can totally color the feeling of a melody or a rhythm.

Mendelssohn uses abrupt changes of harmony (changing the key, or tonal center) to announce new sections of the text. Knowing which chord to use next is part of his game because a change of harmony can feel like a supernatural moment, or like being transported to a new location or a new time, or feel like….well, they're hard to explain, like real magic.

Listen for these:

- The opening. The minor chords set a tone of mystery and awe.
- Soprano sing “like burning torches” and basses start a new section with “Mighty kings,” taking the same note as the sopranos. But the harmony beneath them shifts dramatically, down a third from C to Ab. It feels like time travel.
- When the pipe organ thunders out its brilliant chord, we’re back to C major, but it doesn’t feel familiar—it feels like a surprise, just like the sudden appearance of the chariot.
- But then, after the words “take him away to heaven”, another shift down a third, but this time from C to A major, which perfectly captures the awe in the choir’s breathless “Lo!” as the chariot draws near.

Elijah is taken to heaven in a chariot of fire
Marc Chagall (1956)
SPECIAL EFFECTS: Rhythm

Mendelssohn’s setting of the text feels so natural that it’s easy to forget that he wrote Elijah originally in German, and had it translated into English quickly for the Birmingham premiere. (Mendelssohn’s own English was perfect, so he had a strong hand in overseeing the translation.)

Again, Mendelssohn paid close attention to details, especially the rhythm of words and their possibilities. His melodies reflect this attention to language, but also are doing other work, giving us information through the notes, apart from the words.

For example, dotted rhythms, which for centuries have been associated with royalty. The appearance of Elijah’s name is built on a regal dotted rhythm.

It’s not coincidence, then, that when the text refers to King Ahab’s demise, we hear more royal dotted rhythms.

Sometimes Mendelssohn manipulates the text for effect—repeating a word or a phrase, deciding to stretch a syllable (like the “whirl” of “whirlwind” in this piece). Another example of his attention to detail: the text says “a fiery chariot, with fiery horses.” Mendelssohn was intrigued by the rhythm of “fiery” and repeats the word, so the phrase becomes “fiery, fiery horses.”

The effect is rhythmic and exciting, but it also paints a sound picture—we can actually hear the hoofbeats of these approaching supernatural horses of fire!

43. And then shall your light break forth

Chorus

And then shall your light break forth as the light of morning breaketh,
and your health shall speedily spring forth then,
and the glory of the Lord ever shall reward you.

(Fugue) Lord, our Creator, how excellent Thy Name is in all the nations!
Thou fillest heaven with Thy glory. Amen.

Besides a thrilling drama, Mendelssohn believed his Elijah could be more. To him, it was an expression of faith, a confidence in the God of his fathers, an act of worship. So Elijah closes with a majestic song of praise, a chance for Mendelssohn to acknowledge the divine inspiration of his great accomplishment.

The chorus is in two sections, like a Bach prelude and fugue. After a bracing upward flourish from the strings, the chorus sings a mostly homophonic hymn of light and glory (the prelude). And then, Elijah ends just as it began—with a fugue. Except gone is the sorrow and darkness of the opening fugue. Here is all joy, energy, and light.

Lord, our Cre-a-tor, how ex-cel-lent Thy name is in all the na-tions!
Conductor Randal Swiggum returns for this year’s Milwaukee Symphony’s Teen Choral Partners concert, having previously conducted the Vivaldi Gloria, Fauré Requiem, Vaughan Williams Dona Nobis Pacem, Poulenc Gloria, and last year’s Chichester Psalms of Leonard Bernstein. Widely known as a conductor of concerts for young audiences, Swiggum has created ten seasons of original education concerts for the award-winning Elgin Symphony Orchestra, The Florida Orchestra, the Madison Symphony, and other regional and professional orchestras. Popular concerts like Dvorak in America; Traveling Music; The Amazing Mr. Copland; Fascinating Rhythm; Leonard Bernstein: Humor in Music; What’s So Scary About a Rubber Shark?—The Magic of Movie Music; and Through Sound-Colored Glasses: The Amazing Technicolor Orchestra have been praised by kids and teachers alike for their imaginative approach in getting young people excited about symphonic music.

Recently Swiggum premiered another original concert, Symphony Safari: What Nature Tells Us About the Orchestra, which examined patterns, sequences, imitation, the acoustic “ecosystem,” and motifs as DNA, and featured the music of Mahler, Tchaikovsky, Shostakovich, Schubert, and Vivaldi. Symphony Safari played to three sold out audiences of enthusiastic young audiences in Madison’s Overture Hall. He has led the Madison Symphony in their K-3 series “Symphony Soup.” Another favorite with Madison Symphony young audiences was his Beethoven Superhero, and the annual Carnegie Hall Link-Up concert, The Orchestra Sings. He has also conducted youth orchestras around the world, including All-State orchestras in the U.S., the Scottish National Youth Symphony in Glasgow, and festivals in Seoul, Singapore, and Hong Kong. He frequently leads workshops for teachers, especially at Carnegie Hall’s Weill Center, where he worked with young musicians in the National Youth Orchestra of the USA.

Mr. Swiggum is Artistic Director of the acclaimed Elgin Youth Symphony Orchestra, a thriving program of five orchestras, brass choir, percussion ensemble, and a vibrant Chamber Music Institute. It serves nearly 400 young musicians ages 9-21 from over sixty different communities from suburban Chicago to Rockford and southern Wisconsin. The EYSO has performed with Yo Yo Ma, Midori, and the Jersey Boys, and appeared on NPR’s From the Top, WFMT’s “Introductions” and the Ravinia Festival. He makes his home in Madison, where he also co-conducts the Madison Boychoir. As a longtime fan of the MSO, he is always grateful to be “back home” in Milwaukee where he lived for fifteen years, and working with longtime colleagues and friends on this magnificent piece.

Evan Bravos, Greek-American baritone, has been praised by the Chicago Tribune for his “strong singing and acting” and marked as “a young talent to watch.” The 2018-2019 season includes a return to Virginia Opera to sing the roles of Mr. Jones in Kurt Weill’s Street Scene and Masetto in Mozart’s Don Giovanni, and a company debut in the winter at Sarasota Opera, where he will cover two roles, Papageno (The Magic Flute) and Count (Il Segreto di Susanna). This past season at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, he created the roles of Pvt. Johnson and Sgt. Brown in the world premiere of Huang Rao’s An American Soldier and performed the role of John Bagtry in Regina alongside mezzo-soprano Susan Graham. Previously at Saint Louis, he covered the role of Tom Joad in Ricky Ian Gordon’s The Grapes of Wrath. Other operatic credits include: Opera Santa Barbara, Central City Opera, Aspen Music Festival, and Lyric Opera of Chicago’s Unlimited series.

In 2016, Evan joined the Colorado Symphony Chorus as baritone soloist on Faure Requiem in Paris, Strasbourg and Munich and the following summer was featured at the Horto Music Festival in Pelion, Greece. Concert repertoire favorites include the Brahms Requiem, the Vaughan Williams Five Mystical Songs, and role of Jesus in James Macmillan’s St. John Passion. An avid recitalist, Bravos was most recently heard as a Vocal Fellow at the Ravinia Steans Music Institute. Last season, he performed in a production of The Fine Things of Youth: Willa Cather’s Lucy Gayheart in Words and Music with pianist Shannon McGinnis and the Collaborative Arts Institute of Chicago.

Evan has received awards from Pasadena Opera Guild, Central City Opera, and the Metropolitan National Council Auditions. He holds degrees from Lawrence University Conservatory and Northwestern University’s Bienen School of Music.

www.evanbravos.com
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