

FIERY CHARIOTS AT SNAPE MALTINGS

Review of Mendelssohn's *Elijah*

by Humphrey Burton

Aldeburgh Music Club began its 60th birthday season in fine style on Saturday November 26 with a rousing Maltings Concert Hall performance of *Elijah* by Mendelssohn. As the Club's president I might be expected to write enthusiastically. But I'm an ex-BBC man, trained to be objective, and I can still put my hand on my heart and say that it was a tremendous thrill to take part (2nd Bass, back row) and to judge from the lengthy applause and the positive buzz in the bar afterwards the audience found the performance very exciting, too.

First there's the thrill of re-discovering the work itself: *Elijah* is a masterpiece. For the best part of a century it was in every self-respecting choral society's repertoire and sung annually at the Three Choirs Festival, but by the 1950s much of Mendelssohn's music (though never his symphonic output) was being dismissed as sentimental and sanctimonious. Tastes change, however, and conductor Edmond Fivet's thoughtful and deeply-felt reading explains why our forbears rated the work so highly. Mendelssohn composed it in 1846, at the height of the Victorian era, on a commission from the Birmingham Festival, where he had already triumphed with his choral works *St Paul* and the *Hymn of Praise*. Although himself a third-generation Christian, he was nevertheless acutely aware of his Jewish inheritance and he had long been meditating an oratorio on an Old Testament subject; in Julius Schubring he found a collaborator who was every bit as sensitive to spiritual storytelling as Charles Jennens had been for Handel a century earlier. Indeed *Messiah* is the work with which *Elijah* can best be compared, though in Mendelssohn's case he actually

composed to German words skilfully selected from the 16th century Lutheran translation. He spoke fluent English, too, and he worked closely with William Bartholomew to prepare a very effective libretto (yes, *Elijah* is a concert opera) which uses the Authorised Version texts wherever possible. Musically he was at the top of his game, writing choruses for the Baal-worshippers as barbaric as anything in Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* while the meditational music is on a par with a Bach Passion or a Beethoven Mass. The scene of desolation conjured up by the opening chorus: "the harvest now is over, the summer days are gone", sets the tone for an almost cinematic series of tableaux (there are 42 numbers in all) concluding with a magnificent vision of the prophet being transported to heaven by a whirlwind "in a fiery chariot, with fiery horses". Mendelssohn was no slouch at scene-painting as we know from his *Midsummer Night's Dream* music and his *Fingal's Cave* overture; in *Elijah*, where he tapped into a spiritual dimension, he surpassed himself.

That spiritual quality was well caught by the young baritone Njabulo Madlala in the oratorio's title role. Originally from South Africa and still under thirty, he studied at the Guildhall and was a Britten-Pears Young Artist: in other words he has form. You could already hear in his opening declamation why he won the Kathleen Ferrier Prize last year: it's a voice that's both powerful and beautiful, capable of honeyed sweetness and great depth of feeling, supported by an impressive physical presence. Interestingly, he chose to wear what he called a "Mandela" shirt instead of conventional evening dress. The other principal soloists also came from the operatic world and brought a strong dramatic sense to their interpretations. The tenor, Michael Bracegirdle, a late change to the cast, has a bright Wagnerian ring to his voice; soprano Sally Harrison was touching as the widow whose son Elijah restores to life and even more affecting in the lovely aria "Hear ye, Israel" which opens Part Two. (It's a long work, nearly two and half hours, but the evening past in a flash.) Mezzo Fiona Kimm was dependable as

ever and sang with great clarity and forcefulness. The solo voices combined most melliflously in the final quartet, a tribute to Maestro Fivet's casting skill. And I mustn't forget soprano Phoebe Pimlott, a university student formerly at Ipswich School, who came out of the choir to sing the brief but intensely poignant role of the youth who eventually sights the "small cloud" (of rain) signifying - to Elijah's intense relief - the end of the three-year drought. Her pure voice rang like a radiant shaft of light among the Maltings rafters.

The Prometheus Orchestra, 51 strong, boasts a truly awesome brass section and we heard some exquisite solos from the woodwinds: flautist Stephanie Wingham, oboist Kim Haan and clarinettist Cliff Wybrow. Ideally the ensemble would have benefitted from a few more strings, but at the leader's desk the veteran Pam Munks was outstanding in her endeavours, attacking Mendelssohn's meaty violin writing with verve and an immense energy that clearly inspired her colleagues. Another hugely experienced musician, Gary Kettel, presided over the timpani and sent shock waves through the hall with his explosive attacks on what I suppose one might label the "Kettel" drums. The Prometheus Singers are an occasional group of mostly young voices, thirty strong, founded in 2008 by Edmond Fivet to sing in the Snape performance of *Belshazzar's Feast*; in the small intimate choruses and double choruses of *Elijah* they provided a lovely warm and rounded tone, perfectly in tune and, where appropriate, sweetly angelic. Finally, what of the 82-strong chorus of the Aldeburgh Music Club? Well, in my corner of the bass section I venture to claim that we never flagged and we had a great time; Mendelssohn's skill in writing for choirs is such that each part seems to have a good tune all the time. In his post-performance email to the members, Edmond Fivet told us "the choir was terrific -- the best I have heard you sing in performance. There was tremendous vitality and musicality in your singing and you soared over the orchestra to great effect." I'm quite happy with that assessment! And let me conclude by paying tribute to the maestro himself: he conducted the entire

evening with authority, dynamism and calm. It was an interpretation of festival quality and we must count ourselves lucky in Aldeburgh to have a conductor of national stature in charge of our musical affairs.

Humphrey Burton