

Akron Symphony & Choruses to present Mendelssohn's *Elijah*

by Daniel Hathaway



At least one scholar has pointed out that the British entered the 19th century as a nation of folk singers, but emerged as a nation of oratorio singers. The Birmingham Triennial Festival, founded in 1787, became one of the principal commissioners of new works for large choruses and orchestras, and one of that festival's favorite composers was Felix Mendelssohn.

Also a favorite of Queen Victoria and her Prince Consort Albert, Mendelssohn wrote and conducted *St. Paul* and his Second Piano Concerto for the 1837 Festival, and composed *Elijah* for the 1846 event, the year before he died. *Elijah* became so popular that it was performed at every successive festival until the series ended in 1912.

On Saturday, May 6 at 8:00 pm, Christopher Wilkins will conduct the Akron Symphony and the combined voices of the Akron Symphony Chorus, the Summit Choral Society's Masterworks Chorale, and the University of Akron choruses, prepared by Marie Bucoy-Calavan, in Mendelssohn's famous oratorio. The title role will be sung by baritone Brian Keith Johnson, whose fellow soloists include soprano Kathryn Papa, mezzo-soprano Kim Lauritsen, tenor Timothy Culver, and child soloist Amber Cocchiola.

Mendelssohn had contemplated writing an extended work on the subject of the Hebrew prophet in the late 1830s. Spurred on by the Birmingham commission, he turned to his *St. Paul* librettist, Julius Schubring, to produce a text that combined episodes from Elijah's life as recorded in the Books of Kings with material from the Psalms. Although Mendelssohn worked from Schubring's German text, he had the libretto translated into English by the composer and poet William Bartholomew for the Birmingham premiere.



Albert playing the organ for Victoria and Mendelssohn

The completed work includes the story of the resurrection of a dead youth, a contest between the prophets of the idol Baal and Elijah, the ending of a drought through Elijah's prayers, his retreat to the desert and eventual return to his life of prophecy, and his ascent to heaven in a chariot of fire.

Baritone Brian Keith Johnson, who is making a lightning transition between the role of the Count in *The Marriage of Figaro* last weekend with Cleveland Opera Theater and the character of a prophet of Israel this week in Akron, said in a telephone conversation that he originally came in contact with *Elijah* through his first voice teacher.

"I studied 'Is not his word like a fire' with Alfred Anderson, who was like a father figure for me, so that aria is a sentimental favorite. It's also one of the most challenging moments in the oratorio."



Saturday's concert will mark the third time that Johnson has taken on the title role. On two other occasions he sang in the solo quartet, including once at E.J. Thomas Hall with Sherrill Milnes as Elijah. "He held a master class with the four soloists. I was also his driver, so I got to pick his brain while running him back and forth to his hotel. He was a great inspiration to a young singer."

Milnes gave Johnson some important tips on vocal stamina. "A lot of the role is very declamatory, but he said that you can sound dramatic without hurting yourself vocally. You have to use a lot of technique, and a lot of diction. And he told me never to get too comfortable when you're singing in English. There's nothing more disappointing than having an English-speaking audience not understand your words."

Johnson has also developed his own techniques for dealing with the tricky acoustic of E.J. Thomas Hall. "It used to terrify me, but now I've sung there for over 20 years," he said. "The key is not to over-sing. You have to trust your technique and the ring of your voice, and not push even if you don't hear anything coming back."

His own severest critic, the baritone obsessively records everything he sings onstage. "I must have recordings of every moment I sang in rehearsals and performances during *The Marriage of Figaro*. Once you've sung something, you can't go back and fix it."

Johnson has also figured out how to balance his singing career with his day job — teaching music in an Akron elementary school. "When you're in your 20s, you're Superman and you can do anything. When you get older, your voice doesn't work in the same way. I've learned that I need much more rest. When Alfred Anderson and I were doing a show together, he asked me how much sleep I was getting and how much water I was drinking. When you teach all day, rehearse all evening, and drive back and forth, you simply don't get enough rest. You need seven to eight hours a night when you're singing."

As much as he looks forward to singing the role of Elijah on Saturday evening, Johnson is also thrilled just to be part of the whole experience, and especially to bask in its spectacular choral moments, where he will be joining 200 singers onstage.

"It's a great piece that tells a great story, with great parts for all the featured soloists, but the real star of the show is the chorus," he said. "The choruses in *Elijah* are my favorite of all time. It's going to be fabulous. I've never sung it with that many people. When I sit up there on the stage, I can't help singing along."

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