

Fireworks! Mendelssohn's Elijah Takes Off on Guy Fawkes Day

DAVID PERLMAN

What are the odds that there would be three separate performances of Felix Mendelssohn's final completed oratorio, *Elijah*, all taking place this coming November 5? It's not as though there's some particularly significant Mendelssohnian anniversary in the offing: he was born in 1809 and died in 1847, at age 38, 14 months after *Elijah* premiered, in English, at the Birmingham Town Hall, as part of the Birmingham Festival. But by one of those odd twists of planning and timing (and without any discussion among themselves), Toronto Mendelssohn Choir, Pax Christi Chorale and Chorus Niagara have all scheduled the work, same day and time, as a major part of their respective 2016/17 seasons.

Chorus Niagara's conductor Robert Cooper shrugs off the coincidence, at first: "if it's not Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, it's *Carmina Burana*, one or the other – the two works seem always to collide, with several choirs doing them at the same time but it's purely coincidence."

Stephanie Martin and Noel Edison, on the other hand, are both entering significant anniversary seasons (20th) with their choirs – Edison with the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir and Martin with the Pax Christi Chorale – and acknowledge that in some way that might have influenced their decisions to mount this particular work at this time. For Martin this will be her last season at the Pax Christi helm, and it's an opportunity to revisit a work with which she has a history, with the choir, singing it before conducting it. Edison's Toronto Mendelssohn Choir performed the work for the first time in 1933, and has remounted it regularly; "I know Elmer [Iseler] did it several times, and Sir Ernest [MacMillan]," Edison says. This will be the third time Edison himself has done it with the choir, most recently in 2009. "It's the great choral period piece," he says.

Interestingly, for Robert Cooper the choice to take on the work this year has very little to do with how long he has been with Chorus Niagara (one of four choral or vocal ensembles he conducts). But it has everything to do with the availability of a particular singer to sing the role of Elijah. He explains:

"Last year Chorus Niagara celebrated its first year performing in the new FirstOntario Arts Centre in downtown St. Catharines, so I had other kinds of mandates regarding what we needed to perform in the first year. But I'm not going to be with Chorus Niagara forever; I've done the work four times already with them, and really want to do it again, it's a magnificent score." The very first time he did it, he explains, his Elijah was none other than Russell Braun. "Russell was a student and singing in my Opera in Concert Chorus – he was at the Glenn Gould School, and this year I thought I really want to get him back. So it's coincidence again – the timing worked for Russell and I wanted to do it and I thought now's the chance – now's the time to get us back together again, because he cut his teeth for his first Elijah with me, and it's one of his signature pieces now – he sings it all over the world. So I get him to come down to St Catharines to our new arts centre and do Elijah yet again with us."

Singer of stature: Right from the first performance in Birmingham in 1846, the success of the oratorio has revolved around the choice and calibre of the soloists, particularly the bass-baritone that sings the title role. Mendelssohn's *Elijah* at that first performance was an Austrian bass-baritone Josef Staudigl, who had become something of a fixture at Covent Garden over the preceding few years, and brought significant operatic presence to the role.

"You have to have a singer of real stature for the role," says Cooper, "someone who has a real sense of personality, who can take charge. It's a very operatic piece. You want someone who can stand up there and bring all of the operatic fervour that they can and I personally



Robert Cooper

only use Canadian artists...there are certainly a few other gentlemen who can do it but for me Russell is the signature Elijah. So I wanted to grab him while I could."

Toronto Mendelssohn Choir's Edison concurs when it comes to the type of performer needed for the role. "Our Elijah is not known in Canada at all; his name is David Pittsinger, making his role debut. When I was searching I wouldn't say he was my first choice but I'm glad now that he is. He comes from a musical theatre and opera background and he has done some significant oratorio; he's very well-known in the States. I definitely wanted someone with that theatrical background for this role. It's quite an imposing role, and it's a monumental sing, both emotionally and physically. You need somebody that has a very flexible voice and somebody that has got some good theatrical thinking about their musical phrasing because it's a real pull-and-push piece. And it's [a role that's] got to connect in and out of choruses and with other singers. [Elijah] is the constant, the main

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