

# Program Page

HOUGH FAMILY FOUNDATION MASTERWORKS

## Mendelssohn's Elijah

Michael Francis, *Conductor* | The Master Chorale of Tampa Bay  
Ellie Dehn, *Soprano* | Lauren Decker, *Mezzo-Soprano*  
Isaiah Bell, *Tenor* | Donnie Ray Albert, *Baritone*  
Shriya Iyer, *Treble Voice*

Friday, May 5, 2023, Straz Center - Ferguson Hall at 8:00 pm  
Saturday, May 6, 2023, Mahaffey Theater at 8:00 pm  
Sunday, May 7, 2023, Ruth Eckerd Hall at 7:30 pm

**Felix Mendelssohn**  
(1809-1847)

**Elijah, Op. 70**

### PART I

**[Prologue] (Elijah):** As God the Lord of Israel liveth

### Overture

**Chorus:** Help Lord! Wilt thou quite destroy us?; The deeps afford no water

**Duet with Chorus:** Lord, Bow Thine ear

**[Recitative] (Obidiah):** Ye people, rend your hearts

**[Aria] (Obidiah):** If with all your hearts ye truly seek me

**Chorus (The People):** Yet doth the Lord see it not

**Chorus (The People):** Blessed are the men who fear Him

**Recitative with Chorus;  
Bass & Tenor Solo:** As God the Lord of Sabaoth liveth

**Chorus:** Baal, we cry to thee

**Recitative with Chorus; (Elijah):** Call him louder! For he is a god

**Recitative with Chorus:** Call him louder! He heareth not

**[Aria] (Elijah):** Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel

**[Quartet]:** Cast thy burden upon the Lord

**[Recitative] (Elijah) with Chorus:** O Thou, who makest thine Angels

**[Air] (Elijah):** Is not His word like a fire

**[Arioso] Alto Solo:** Woe, woe unto them who forsake Him!

**[Recitative with Chorus] [treble voice]  
(Elijah and Obadiah):** O man of God, help they people

**Chorus:** Thanks be to God

*Intermission*

**PART II**

**[Aria] Soprano Solo:** Hear ye, Israel! Hear what the Lord speaketh

**Chorus:** Be not afraid, saith God the Lord

**[Recitative with Chorus]  
(Elijah and Obadiah):** The Lord hath exalted thee

**Chorus:** Woe to him! He shall perish

**[Recitative]  
(Elijah & Obidiah):** Man of God, now let my words

**[Aria] (Elijah):** It is enough, O Lord

**[Recitative] Tenor Solo:** See, now he sleepeth beneath a juniper tree

**Chorus:** He, watching over Israel, slumber not

**[Recitative]  
(The Angel & Elijah):** Arise, Elijah

**[Aria] (The Angel):** O rest in the Lord, wait patiently for Him

**[Recitative]  
Soprano & (Elijah):** Night falleth round me, O Lord!

**Chorus:** Behold, God the Lord passed by

**Chorus & [Recitative] (Elijah):** Go, return upon thy way!

**Arioso (Elijah):** For the mountains shall depart

**Chorus:** Then did Elijah the prophet break forth

**[Aria] Tenor Solo:** Then, then shall the righteous shine forth

**Recitative (Soprano):** Behold, God hath sent Elijah the prophet

**[Quartet]:** O come everyone that thirsteth

**Chorus:** And then, then shall your light break

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## **Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)**

### ***Elijah, Op. 70***

Duration: ca. 2 hours, 13 min

It might be called an event of Biblical proportions. Rainstorms, floods, droughts, fire from heaven. A child brought back to life. A cloak of angels. The coming of a Messiah and the promise of eternal life.

That's a tall order, but Felix Mendelssohn pulls it off in his monumental oratorio, *Elijah*, a musical depiction of the tenacity and wisdom of an Old Testament prophet. The Florida Orchestra and Master Chorale of Tampa Bay – which last teamed up on *Elijah* in 1997 – this week offer three performances under the baton of TFO Music Director Michael Francis.

Famed for the brilliance of his *Octet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hebrides Overture*, *Italian Symphony*, *Violin Concerto* and *F-Minor String Quartet*, in no other work did Mendelssohn devote himself to such a large-scale structure and the complexities of bringing it to life on stage.

"I think it's a very personal oratorio, and that's what makes it such an extraordinary piece of music," says Matthew Abernathy, artistic director of the Master Chorale, who prepared the chorus. "Mendelssohn does a great job in making us feel all sides of Elijah's life. He makes it a deep emotional journey, and it's the closest Mendelssohn gets to an opera."

Mendelssohn composed the music in 1846 on a commission from the Birmingham Music Festival in England and finished the score in seven months. Suffering from congenital heart disease, the exhausted musician conducted the premiere and organized multi-city performances with an orchestra and choir of 400 people. He died the following year.

With its large orchestra, chorus and vocal soloists, *Elijah* is less a calm, contemplative work than a dramatic one. Mendelssohn and his librettist, Julius Schubring – a revisionist who wanted to insert New Testament beliefs into the story – didn't see eye-to-eye, and Mendelssohn refused to compromise.

In a letter to his colleague, the composer wrote: "It appears to me that the dramatic element should predominate. The personages should act and speak as if they were living beings, for heaven's sake. Let them not be a musical picture, but a real world."

Mendelssohn wanted to reflect the prophet as "energetic and zealous, but also stern, wrathful and gloomy ... yet borne on angels' wings."

Making this happen over the course of a long concert is no easy assignment, Abernathy says: "It's very intricate and beautifully crafted, so it sounds easy, but it's not. The chorus has to work very hard to get things tidy and deliver the meaning of the text. It's musically demanding."

The original 2-1/2 hour work spans 43 movements with 22 choruses across a dozen scenes, beginning with a proclamation of drought and ending with the prophecy of the coming Messiah. This can tax performers and audiences, a reason for so many edits and alterations over the years.

"It's traditional to take some cuts," Abernathy says. "The first and second parts are equal in length, but most of the drama is in the first half, and the second half is very introspective, so it makes it feel long. It's the opposite of opera, where most of the action is near the end."

Many choral conductors – notably the late Robert Shaw – felt the slow sections stymied the action, and made abridgements to keep momentum and listener attention. This creates a leaner and meaner concert experience that emphasizes human drama. Shaw said that "Elijah is an absolute miracle of a piece when it's engaged with Old Testament dramatic action, but less successful when it preaches a Victorian missionary moral."

Regardless of any tinkering, the visceral power of Mendelssohn's music propels the story to a higher level of consciousness, and mirrors the great choral works of Bach and Handel. The music percolates with counterpoint one moment, plaintive arias the next, and sweeping choral passages that seem to explode in the listener's lap.

Examples are many, including the solemn opening chords that suggest the word of God; a multi-textured overture; the stentorian chorus Help, Lord!; the double quartet by the angel soloists; Elijah's prayer Lord God of Abraham; the soprano aria Hear ye, Israel; the a cappella trio of angels singing *Lift thine Eyes*; and the choir's depiction of the ascension to heaven on a chariot of fire.

The day after its premiere more than 175 years ago, the *Times of London* wrote: "Never was there a more complete triumph – never a more thorough and speedy recognition of a great work of art."

***Program notes by Kurt Loft, a St. Petersburg-based freelance writer and former music critic for The Tampa Tribune.***