

# Listening for the “Still Small Voice” of Mendelssohn’s Domestic Elijah

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**T**he notion that there might be autobiographical, or personally confessional, registers at work in Mendelssohn’s *Elijah*—that the figure of Mendelssohn himself, and his own relationship to the world around him, might be meaningfully discerned in the figure, the worldview, and the impact of his title character—has been acknowledged since even before the oratorio’s premiere on 26 August 1846. Three interpretations have become commonly accepted.

To begin with, there is the familiar comparison on which no less a figure than Prince Albert put his early imprimatur, inscribing a program booklet from the 1847 London premiere with words that have since been quoted countless times: “To the noble artist who, when surrounded by the Baal-worship of the false, has, like a Second Elijah, employed his genius and his skill in the service of the true [. . .].”<sup>1</sup> The idea that Elijah’s victories might aptly be enfolded with Mendelssohn’s can be glimpsed even in the documentation surrounding the oratorio’s genesis: *Elijah*’s translator, William Bartholomew, wrote to Mendelssohn on 23 June 1846: “Go on, my dear Sir, go on! until you soar with your ‘Elijah’ on the returning fire to the height from which he called it down!”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Trans. in Schima Kaufman, *Mendelssohn: “A Second Elijah”* (New York: Tudor Publishing Company), 300.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in F. G. Edwards, *The History of Mendelssohn’s Oratorio “Elijah”* (London & New York: Novello, Ewer and Co., 1896), 52.

In a second angle of interpretive approach, which effectively holds in check the celebratory character of the first, there is a strong tradition of interpreting Elijah's aria "It is enough" as a confession to Mendelssohn's own despondent frame of mind at the time of the oratorio's composition. If the composer, like Elijah, had achieved tremendous successes, the effort had exhausted him and left him, as numerous contemporary letters attest, pining for respite. Werner lays out the picture thus:

The master's best friends, too, interpreted the resignation which is expressed in the aria "It is enough" as a personal confession of his weakening will to live. Nine years earlier [when Mendelssohn first began contemplating an oratorio on Elijah], Felix had interpreted the historical Elijah as "a prophet such as we could use again today—strong, zealous, angry, and gloomy, in opposition to the courtiers, the rabble, and practically the whole world." [...] [N]ow, at the end of his creative life, he was quite a different man. He was a creator who had mingled with "courtiers and rabble." He was no zealot, but a man who had fought and suffered for his principles. [...] [W]e can scarcely dismiss the possibility of an autobiographical element in *Elijah*—though Mendelssohn otherwise carefully avoided this.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, considerably more interpretive nuance has been called for in exploring the possibility that *Elijah* speaks from the heart of Mendelssohn's own relationship to the Judaism of his birth and/or to the Christianity of his youth and adulthood. Where long-standing critical tradition has regarded the work as an embrace, on Mendelssohn's part, of his Jewish heritage, Jeffrey Sposato has emerged as the most forceful advocate of a distinctly different view, arguing cogently that the work's Christological dimensions point more convincingly toward a Christian—or, rather, a reconciliatory—outlook.<sup>4</sup> (A vibrant 2009 conference dedicated more or less exclusively to this topic demonstrated just how far the matter is from being settled once and for all.)<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Eric Werner, *Mendelssohn: A New Image of the Composer and his Age*, trans. Dika Newlin (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), 461–42.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Sposato, *The Price of Assimilation: Felix Mendelssohn and the Nineteenth-Century Anti-Semitic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 128–47. On the Judeo-centric critical legacy he is pushing against, see Sposato's summary of the lay of the land on pp. 114 and 203. A most compelling earlier formulation of Sposato's Christological angle of attack is Martin Staehelin, "Elijah, Johann Sebastian Bach, and the New Covenant: On the Aria 'Es ist genug' in Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy's Oratorio *Elijah*," trans. Susan Gillespie, in R. Larry Todd, ed., *Mendelssohn and his World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 121–36. For the record, the analogy Staehelin draws between Mendelssohn's and Bach's arias is rejected by Friedhelm Krummacher in his "Art—History—Religion: On Mendelssohn's Oratorios *St. Paul* and *Elijah*," in Douglass Seaton, ed., *The Mendelssohn Companion* (Westport, Connecticut, and London: Greenwood Press, 2001), 348–49.

<sup>5</sup> "Viewing Mendelssohn, Viewing Elijah: Assimilation, Interpretation and Culture," Arizona State University (29 April–1 May 2009).

In the pages that follow, I pursue the possibility of a fourth interpretive path, a confessional register all but untested in existing scholarship. The concerns of the third tack mentioned above—religious commitments—I set altogether aside; it is to the first two approaches that I seek to develop a counterpart and, in some measure, perhaps a corrective.

At the moment he received the July 1845 invitation from the Birmingham Festival Committee to provide a new oratorio for their following season,<sup>6</sup> Mendelssohn was an extremely weary man. “[H]is grueling Leipzig schedule,” as R. Larry Todd has put it, “was taking its toll.”<sup>7</sup> Though Mendelssohn was at the peak of his fame and had established himself firmly as the leading German conductor and composer of his generation, his letters through the mid ‘40s speak time and again—as Werner’s remarks suggest—of a sense of profound alienation from his own public achievements, in particular from his work as a performer. In March 1845 he expressed himself to his friend Ignaz Moscheles in this way:

So little benefit is derived even by the public itself from all this directing and these musical performances—a little better, a little worse, what does it matter? How easily it is forgotten!<sup>8</sup>

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But if Mendelssohn shows signs of growing alienation from a public persona that appeared to have taken on a will of its own, we need not immediately diagnose, with Werner, a “weakening will to live.” It was living as he had that Mendelssohn seems to have found increasingly intolerable. But the composer in fact permitted himself, on more than one occasion, to fantasize about a life in which the ceaseless swirl of his public commitments might simply die away, permitting him to retreat to

<sup>6</sup> Details of the circumstances surrounding this invitation, and Mendelssohn’s initial ambivalence, are gathered in Edwards, *The History of Mendelssohn’s Oratorio “Elijah,”* 28–33. Edwards’s narrative remains engaging reading despite having been generously superseded in sheer documentary rigor by subsequent scholarly entanglements with this work’s complex genesis; see, e.g., Arntrud Kurzhals-Reuter, *Die Oratorien Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdys: Untersuchung zur Quellenlage, Entstehung, Gestaltung und Überlieferung* (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1978), and Jeffrey Sposato, “The Price of Assimilation: The Oratorios of Felix Mendelssohn and the Nineteenth-Century Anti-Semitic Tradition,” 2 vols. (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 2000), whose second volume contains transcriptions and translations of every known draft—however preliminary or partial—of the oratorio’s libretto.

<sup>7</sup> R. Larry Todd, *Mendelssohn: A Life in Music* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 509. Mendelssohn’s activities in general through the years 1844–1846 are narrated with unexcelled lucidity and precision on pp. 485–524.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Mendelssohn Bartholdy, ed., *Letters of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy from 1833 to 1847*, trans. Lady Wallace (Boston: O. Ditson & Co., 1870), 348 (translation emended). “Bei allem Dirigiren und öffentlichen Musik-Aufführen kommt auch sogar für das Öffentliche selbst so wenig heraus; — ein bißchen schöner, ein bißchen schlechter, — was that’s; wie leicht ist es vergessen.” Paul Mendelssohn Bartholdy, ed., *Briefe aus den Jahren 1833 bis 1847 von Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy* (Leipzig: Hermann Mendelssohn, 1863), 438.

a condition of untroubled domesticity with his wife, Cecile, and their children. In October 1845, as Mendelssohn was still sorting over the question of whether to take on the *Elijah* commission, he offered these reflections from Leipzig to a friend in his wife's hometown of Frankfurt:

I have considered in all seriousness giving you a commission (according to your promise) to buy me a house with a garden, or have one built, and then I would return permanently to that glorious country with its gay, easy life. But for the time being, of course, such good fortune cannot be mine. A few years will have to pass and the work I have begun here must have produced concrete results and be considerably further advanced (at least I must have tried to accomplish this), before I can think of such a thing [...] The sooner that occurs, the happier I shall be. I have always followed all my external musical pursuits, such as conducting, etc., purely from a sense of duty, never from inclination, so I hope, before many years are over, to turn up as a house builder.<sup>9</sup>

Certainly there is a despondency here that cuts against the grain of Prince Albert's celebratory vision of Mendelssohn's public achievements, but there is also a sense of hope that cuts just as strongly against the grain of Werner's diagnosis, a vision for a life of seclusion in the bosom of his family. We need not take Mendelssohn entirely at his word about all this—retirement from the public stage in his mid '30s would be a drastic step, to say the least—to grasp a powerful sense that the vision of a simple, domestic life was looming prominently in his imaginings, strongly coloring his professional experience.

In this article I seek to show that *Elijah* can be understood as a rich, multi-faceted engagement with the notion of escape to untroubled domesticity. However unlikely a subject such as *Elijah* might provide for an affirmation of domesticity—between the grand public displays that

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Leipzig to Senator Bernus, 10 October 1845, *Felix Mendelssohn: Letters*, ed. [and trans.] G. Selden-Goth (New York: Vienna House, 1973 [1945]), 345. “[Es geht damit so weit,] daß ich mir schon oft allen Ernstes die Zeit ausgemalt habe, wo ich (Ihrem Versprechen zufolge) Ihnen Auftrag gäbe, mir ein Haus mit Garten zu kaufen oder bauen zu lassen, und wo ich für immer in das herrliche Land, und in das frohe, leichte Leben zurückkehrte. So gut wird mir's freilich für's erste nicht werden; einige Jahre doch wohl darüber vergehn müssen, und die hier angefangene Arbeit muß ein tüchtiges Resultat geliefert haben, und ein gut Stück weiter gebracht sein (wenigstens muß ich das versucht haben) ehe ich daran denken kann [...] Je eher das geschieht, desto lieber wird es mir sein; das ganze äußerliche Musiktreiben, Dirigiren u.s.w. habe ich von jeher doch nur aus Pflichtgefühl, nie aus Neigung übernommen, und so hoffe ich, ehe viele Jahre noch vergehn, melde ich mich zum Hausbau.” (Mendelssohn Bartholdy, ed., *Briefe*, 447–48). In a letter of 31 October 1846 to Jenny Lind, Mendelssohn makes clear his plan to leave Leipzig: “[I]n two or three years, at the utmost, I think I shall have done my duty here, after which I should scarcely stay any longer. Perhaps I might prefer Berlin; perhaps, the Rhine; somewhere where it is very pretty, and where I could compose all day long, as much as I liked.” Quoted in Todd, *Mendelssohn: A Life*, 540.

propel the oratorio's First Part and the absolute seclusion into which Elijah retires in the Second (speaking not a word to another human being for the final third of the oratorio)—I propose that just such an affirmation can be discerned here. Clearly the hazard of the “biographical fallacy” looms large. We do not need to seek out psychological motivations or confessional intentions to explain creative decisions in which a host of genre-related considerations come to bear (though, as I have shown, critics have routinely sought out just such motivations in *Elijah*). And the documentary evidence surrounding this oratorio, while suggestive, falls far short of confirming such motivations in the present case. But Mendelssohn provides so dense a gathering of artistic decisions that are consistent with the interpretation I advance here that we run the risk of doing the work and its creator a serious injustice by leaving this angle of interpretive approach unexplored.<sup>10</sup>

This exploration will unfold in three phases, moving from concerns on the smallest scale to those on the largest. In the first phase, I examine that climactic passage in *Elijah's* Second Part in which God is at last revealed to the prophet in the “still small voice.” Here the turn from divine absence to divine presence is articulated through two clear and powerful recollections of music that Elijah himself had sung in the oratorio's First Part, a move that I argue has the potential to reconfigure our evaluation of the priorities and commitments at work in those earlier passages. I turn then to Elijah's own brief sojourn in the domestic sphere, the “widow's scene” of the First Part (the melodic source of the “still small voice” itself), paying particular attention to the motivations that may have underlain the substantial revisions to the number that took place between the 1846 Birmingham premiere and the London premiere the following

<sup>10</sup> In speaking of Mendelssohn as this oratorio's “creator,” I raise a question that must be approached with delicacy: whose libretto this actually is. The complex tale of the libretto's genesis is lucidly laid out in Sposato, *Price of Assimilation*, 114–28, but the briefest summary here may help clarify the assumptions underpinning the present discussion. Mendelssohn's first serious work on an oratorio about Elijah began in consultation with Karl Klingemann in 1837. Klingemann's work on a libretto proving unsatisfactory, Mendelssohn turned, in the fall of 1838, to Pastor Julius Schubring, with whom he had worked closely on his first oratorio, *Paulus*. Schubring had developed a nearly complete prose draft by November 1838, soon after which point Mendelssohn abandoned the project. Though Schubring is often credited as the librettist of *Elijah*, Sposato demonstrates that, when Mendelssohn resumed work on the oratorio in 1845, the composer himself took control of its text's development. At this stage, Sposato observes, “Schubring's role would involve correcting and evaluating Mendelssohn's text, not providing a libretto of his own” (ibid., 124). Though Mendelssohn culled from Schubring's earlier work ideas with which he was still satisfied, his own first 1845 draft, Sposato indicates, “resembl[ed] Schubring's drafts from the 1830s only superficially . . . [A]lthough Schubring would continue to make suggestions over the next several months, at no time did he ever become Mendelssohn's librettist, as has been so often assumed” (ibid., 124–25). Though Schubring's role was scarcely trivial, I confidently follow Sposato in recognizing Mendelssohn's ultimate creative authority over the libretto.

year.<sup>11</sup> Finally, I explore the possibility that the widow and her son do not disappear from the work after the widow's scene itself, but may be understood to linger on as "para-characters," continuing to factor crucially in the unfolding drama.

When Fanny Price—one of the half-dozen heroines through whom Jane Austen would bring new dignity, psychological penetration, and moral insight to the English perspective on the domestic world—makes her welcome return to the grounds of Mansfield Park near her tale's denouement, she offers these optimistic reflections on the budding springtime greenery she beholds: "While much is actually given to the sight, more yet remains for the imagination."<sup>12</sup> This captures elegantly the spirit in which I offer the following interpretation; observation and imagination both have their role to play. The interpretation of *Elijah* offered here is not one we will find—or could reasonably expect to find—ratified in Mendelssohn's correspondence, nor that of contemporary onlookers. And the internal evidence provided by the work itself at no point rises to the level of the incontrovertible. But to leave this interpretation untested on the grounds that its testing cannot hope to yield proof may well mean disregarding a dimension of meaning that was, at least to *Elijah's* creator, deeply personal and deeply significant.

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However judiciously we measure out "the increasing weight of 'symbolic' movement" in *Elijah's* Second Part, which comes to supplant the "'dramatic' action" of the First,<sup>13</sup> it is clear that forward drive slackens considerably in the oratorio's later stretches. The First Part presses ever onward through a series of dramatic climaxes, each built around the anticipation and accomplishment of a miracle: the resuscitation of the widow's son, the calling down of fire from heaven, and the summoning of rain. *Elijah* works no miracles in the Second Part, spending most of its duration—after the brief flurry of activity that prompts his flight into the desert—in contemplative solitude, with angels as his only company (Nos. 26–37). Not even the prophet's fiery ascension into heaven received the dramatic handling Mendelssohn had long projected. Less than three months before the premiere, the composer decided to leave Elisha—*Elijah's* last conversation partner and the sole witness to the ascension—

<sup>11</sup> The London premiere took place on 16 April 1847.

<sup>12</sup> Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (London: G. Routledge and Co., 1857 [1814]), 272.

<sup>13</sup> Krummacher, "Art—History—Religion," 329. The notion that the Second Part of the oratorio might be valued chiefly in its embrace of the "symbolic" receives its first serious exposition in Otto Jahn, "On F. Mendelssohn-Bartholdy's Oratorio *Elijah*," trans. Susan Gillespie, in Todd, ed., *Mendelssohn and his World*, 366; Jahn's essay was first published as "Über F. Mendelssohn Bartholdy's Oratorium *Elias*," in *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 50 (1848): 137–43.

EXAMPLE 1. *Elijah*, No. 34 (mm. 110–21, vocal parts)

110 *f* But yet the Lord was not in the fire. \_\_\_\_\_ *pp* And

116 af - ter the fire there came a still small voice . . .

out of the story altogether, and to relegate the ascension to a single sentence of narration in No. 38. The long-sought appearance of God in the form of the “still small voice” (in No. 34) thus stands essentially uncontested as the Second Part’s dramatic climax, fulfilling as it does Elijah’s mournful, sustained (since No. 30) plea for the revelation that would justify and give meaning to the struggles that have brought him this far. The musical setting of that climactic moment—the onset of the “still small voice” in the wake of God’s failure to appear in wind, earthquake, or fire—is shown in example 1.

So what does Elijah hear when he hears the “still small voice”? What, at this watershed moment, must he leave behind in greeting it? What is it in Elijah’s path through the world that is ultimately justified? I suggest that Mendelssohn does not leave these questions to guesswork, and that their answers form a linchpin of the affirmation of domesticity I explore here.

Elements of melodic reminiscence in *Elijah* are scarcely regulated by any process as thoroughgoing as Richard Wagner would shortly bring into view, but they are clearly operative. Most celebrated is the “curse motive” (two interlocking, descending tritones, in its initial form), which appears first in Elijah’s opening recitative, returns with No. 5’s “His curse hath fallen down upon us” (mm. 15–16), returns again—with its second tritone mercifully expanded to a perfect fifth—in No. 10’s varied reprise of the introduction, and will continue to crop up as late as the closing measures of the work.<sup>14</sup> And the “curse motive” is not alone. The most

<sup>14</sup> Among these are Elijah’s return to something much like it in the two melodic falls (the tritone D-G# and the perfect fifth B-E) of his phrase “O Lord, I have labour’d in vain!”

systematic cataloguer of such “remembrance motives” in *Elijah*, Ross Ellison labels no fewer than eight: the “portent motive,” the “command motive,” the “curse motive,” the “thirst motive,” the “sorrow motive,” the “call motive,” the “prayer motive,” and the “Righteous Indignation motive.”<sup>15</sup> Though analytic methods are necessarily ad hoc, and attendant hermeneutic maneuvers necessarily cautious, there is no question that melodic reminiscence across broad spans of music has a role to play in Mendelssohn’s dramatic design. What does not appear to have been remarked upon before, however, is just how powerful a role the device plays in the pivotal passage shown in example 1. The two sites of musical reminiscence I seek to isolate here are both brief; one spans three pitches at most, the other five. But both are deployed with such apparent precision that the chance of pure coincidence in either case seems small. The first concerns the fire from which God is absent and the second the “still small voice” in which the divine is finally revealed.

The word fire in No. 34 occurs for the first time in this oratorio since late in the First Part. Its last appearance, however, was a difficult one to forget, comprising the opening simile of the aria, “Is not his word like a fire!” (No. 17), with which Elijah offered his theological justification for the slaughter of the Baal worshippers he has just mandated (No. 16). Indeed, if we are even vaguely attentive to the literal passage of diegetic time, we may well suppose that it is during this aria that Baal’s prophets are actually meeting their unenviable demise, that Elijah’s No. 17 provides the soundtrack to a mass execution.

What makes the association of these two mentions of fire (Nos. 17 and 34) so intriguing, even at so far a temporal remove, is that they tap in identical ways into that pool of tritone gestures to which the “curse” motive has given birth. The rising motion in No. 34 from A to D#—“But yet the Lord” in example 1—revisits precisely the tritone that lay at the heart of the opening line of Elijah’s No. 17 aria (shown in ex. 2). The subsequent fall of an octave (though occurring on E in No. 17 and on D# in No. 34) would seem to drive the point home.<sup>16</sup>

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in No. 30, and the falling tritones’ elaborate curtain call in the closing measures of the oratorio’s final number, only to be released once more into the final cadence (on this spot, see Todd, *Mendelssohn: A Life*, 550).

<sup>15</sup> Ross suggests that “in no other oratorio of its time [...] are melodic motives so specifically connotative of moods, situations, or dramatic actions.” Ross W. Ellison, “Unity and Contrast in Mendelssohn’s ‘Elijah’” (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1978), 105. For his itemized list of remembrance motives, see pp. 104–11. Apart from my references to the “curse” motive, none of the melodic reminiscences to which I draw attention is encompassed in Ellison’s work or, to my knowledge, in anyone else’s.

<sup>16</sup> This last feature of Mendelssohn’s elegant conception—the closing octave fall—was in fact sacrificed to the practical necessities of the translation process. In English,



EXAMPLE 2. *Elijah*, No. 17 (mm. 3–5, bass solo)

3

Is not his word like a fire!  
Ist nicht des Herrn Wort wie ein Feuer,

EXAMPLE 3. *Elijah*, No. 16 (mm. 65–68, bass solo)

65

... and there let them be slain.

There is more to the story than this. As it happens, these melodic elements (the A-D# rise, the octave fall) already have the force of melodic recollection at the time of their appearance in No. 17, for Elijah had hit on a nearly identical melodic notion a few moments before, in No. 16, at the moment he calls for the executions (ex. 3). The only difference is that two Bs bisect the octave, E-E, fall.

Fleeting as these associations are, their alignment of textual and melodic motifs is provocatively precise, and stands to have unsettling consequences for our impression of Elijah's behavior in the scene with the Baal worshippers. For if we take the musical association of No. 34 with No. 17 to be cuing a comparison of these two dramatic moments—and Mendelssohn is playing a dangerous game if this is *not* his intention—there is a disquieting sense in which Elijah's rhetorical question in No. 17 (“Is not his word like a fire!”) is receiving an actual answer, a negative one: “the Lord was not in the fire.”

The possibility that Mendelssohn is casting a shadow of doubt across Elijah's execution of the Baal worshippers appears all the more plausible in light of that tradition of commentary on the oratorio that has discerned seeds of uncertainty, a pronounced lack of conviction, in the No. 17 aria itself.<sup>17</sup> The 1848 review of the oratorio that appeared in *Signale für die musikalische Welt* has nothing but praise for Mendelssohn's portrayal of Elijah's public might, except where this aria is concerned:

where the two-syllable “*Feuer*” is replaced with the one-syllable “fire,” the second E is eliminated, though it remains a feature of German performances, as example 2 shows.

<sup>17</sup> We should recall, too, that the biblical narrative cannot be held accountable for the text of aria No. 17, for Elijah does not step aside for reflections of this or any kind at this point in the biblical narrative. While Elijah does, indeed, command the execution of the Baal worshippers in *1 Kings* 18:40 (as No. 16 captures), the text of this aria, “Is not his word like a fire!” is pure interpolation, drawn from *Jeremiah* 23:29 and *Psalms* 7:11-12.

[I]f one regards strength as the ability to express strength, which must concentrate itself particularly here in the person of Elijah, then here [...] we have not found even the smallest thing to be lacking, with the exception of Elijah's aria in the first part: "Is not his word like a fire," which appears to us to conceal a certain lack of inner urgency among lively figurations.<sup>18</sup>

In his 1870 essay on the oratorio, H. R. Haweis stops short of calling Mendelssohn's artistic decision-making into question, but pointedly acknowledges (the term "murderous frenzy" leaves little to the imagination) that the composer's presentation of the dénouement of the Baal worshipers' scene is fraught with moral ambivalence:

In another moment the religious emotion has passed into a murderous frenzy, and the prophets of Baal are hewn down like corn beneath a pelting hailstorm. The carnage is over and the vengeance done ere night descends upon the tumultuous throng and the smoking altar of the true God.<sup>19</sup>

Eric Werner discerns the same ambivalence, but goes so far as to ascribe it (rightly, I think) to the composer himself:

Now, the furious Elijah demands the immediate death of the priests of Baal at the hands of the uncontrolled mob; this *auto-da-fé* is promptly carried out. A rather apologetic aria of the prophet, "Is not His word like a fire?" seeks to justify the massacre; however, neither librettist nor composer seems to have felt quite at ease about it.<sup>20</sup>

In sum, we must take seriously the possibility that No. 34's recollection of Elijah's own fire imagery, with its pointed reclamation of the musical gesture with which the prophet associated it in No. 17, has the strong potential to shake our confidence in the Elijah who reveled over the executions he called for, or to ratify such doubts as we might already have harbored.

We do not need to embrace so radical an idea, however, to recognize that the events of No. 34 revisit the grand public spectacle of the oratorio's First Part in order to pass beyond it. Elijah is on the verge of encountering the divine in a way that he did not encounter it in the course of the public life that went before, and this fleeting recollection

<sup>18</sup> W. L. [probably Wilhelm Lampadius, Mendelssohn's first biographer], "Elijah in Leipzig, 1848," trans. Laura Moore, in Seaton, ed., *Mendelssohn Companion*, 389; the review was originally published in *Signale für die musikalische Welt* 6 (1848): 49–52.

<sup>19</sup> H. R. Haweis, "Mendelssohn's 'Elijah': A Study," *The Contemporary Review* 14 (April–July 1870): 367.

<sup>20</sup> Werner, *Mendelssohn*, 468.

of his own past stands, at the very least, to underline the powerful sense that something new is at hand.

Maybe. But it may not be *entirely* new. And we may not need to press beyond Elijah's entire past to embrace it. The Lord is not in the fire, but Mendelssohn's depiction of the place the Lord *does* turn out to be lays a kind of benediction, I propose, on one particularly significant moment in Elijah's own history.

As I have suggested, the Lord's arrival—the entrance of the “still small voice” in example 1—brings with it another musical recollection, calling to mind another First-Part utterance from Elijah that could scarcely pose a greater dramatic contrast to the scene of the Baal worshippers' execution. With the entrance of the “still small voice” in example 1, we make an abrupt modal shift from the realm of E minor to that of E major. This is highly significant in itself, for E major is not a key that has factored heavily in the oratorio thus far. Indeed, this key signature has only appeared once before, then only briefly, and will not appear again after the conclusion of No. 34. But its one previous appearance was an important one.

No. 8—the widow's scene—opens with a sustained lament of the widow over her lifeless son, imploring Elijah to provide such help as he can; it unfolds in E minor. When Elijah speaks and takes the child into his own care, the key turns to E major (ex. 4).

The words Elijah speaks here are dramatically significant not least because they are the first words that we can be sure he spoke to another person. He has only said one thing before, in the introductory recitative in which he lays on the curse. In *1 Kings* (17:1) this curse is pronounced to Ahab, but no such audience—nor any audience at all—is presented to us at that point in the oratorio. Thus it is with these words to the widow, “Give me thy son,” that Elijah enters the realm of explicitly onstage human interaction.<sup>21</sup>

Elijah does not remain in E major for long; 18 measures later he returns to E minor for the repeated supplications. But in light of the significance his first words to the widow hold as our introduction to Elijah as a social creature, and the fact that we must wait over an hour for the key of E major to return (housing a moment of even greater dramatic significance, with the onset of the “still small voice”), it would seem foolhardy to assume that Mendelssohn is not inviting us to draw an association between these two moments.

<sup>21</sup> Tellingly, this is literally true of the staged version of the oratorio described in Francis E. Barrett, “‘Elijah’ on the Stage: Oratorio as Music-Drama,” *The Musical Times* (1 April 1912): 248–49, in which the curse was pronounced before the curtain rose.

EXAMPLE 4. Elijah's entrance in *Elijah*, No. 8 (mm. 65–68, bass solo)

65 *Recit.* *Andante sostenuto*

Give me thy son. Turn un - to her, O Lord, my God...

And Mendelssohn gives us more. As if to insure that the point will be unequivocally clear, Mendelssohn has made these two moments literal melodic bookends of each other. The soprano pitches of example 1's "And after the fire there came a still small voice" (E–G#–A–F#–B) are identical to the pitches of Elijah's "Give me thy son" (ex. 4: B–F#–A–G#–E), but reversed.<sup>22</sup>

The picture that emerges can be summarized thus: Mendelssohn seizes the dramatic climax of the Second Part, the moment at which God comes as close as he ever will to revealing himself to the prophet, as an opportunity to undertake a kind of divine stock-taking of the two markedly different faces Elijah showed in the oratorio's First Part. What must be left behind is Elijah as the public authority, the figure who—in the mass execution—was exercising for the first time that blind fidelity he had just won from the masses. What is comfortingly recalled is Elijah at his closest approach to domesticity, at the moment he was found begging admission to the familial dyad of mother and child, pleading to be entrusted with the role of care-giver (the widow's scene is, as Heinrich Jacob has pointed out, the only scene of the oratorio that takes place indoors).<sup>23</sup>

These are big claims to lay to the account of the 15 seconds of music shown in example 1, however compelling the events of that passage may be. I propose, however, that this passage is only a single, particularly vivid facet of a dramatic subtext that is articulated through a range of musical

<sup>22</sup> E major does crop up in the span that divides No. 8 from No. 34, though its appearances are very brief, and achieved with accidentals rather than a change of key signature. Where it does occur, it tends to bolster my larger point, forming dramatically calculated echoes of that salvific moment in No. 8. We turn, for example, from E minor to E major in the final chord of the chorus No. 16, at the close of the proclamation, "And we will have no other Gods before the Lord." In light of the weight placed on the E minor/E major relationships at work in Nos. 8 and 34, it takes no great leap of imagination to link this cadence in No. 16 with them, to suggest that by denouncing idolatry the chorus is gaining brief access to an over-arching tonal expression of the divine. A comparable argument could be made for the brief stretch of E major (mm. 25–30) that brightens the heart of the E minor alto arioso No. 18, "Woe unto them who forsake Him!" Given the role of this arioso as a kind of benign counterbalance to Elijah's aria of vengeance, No. 17, its tonal resonances with the benign face of Elijah shown in No. 8 seem altogether appropriate.

<sup>23</sup> Heinrich Jacob, *Felix Mendelssohn and his Times*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 253.

and textual strategies. It is to the oratorio's progress up to the point of No. 34 (and, briefly, beyond) that I now turn. If, as I have hinted, the widow and her son are to be thought of as providing a surrogate family of sorts for the prophet, it is well worth considering more fully what steps Mendelssohn took in the widow's scene to ensure that we experience that scene this way, and to consider what becomes of this family in the story that unfolds from there.

\* \* \*

In April 1846, about four months before *Elijah's* premiere, the Philadelphia-based *Graham's Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine* published what would become one of the century's most celebrated meditations on the prosaic machinery of the creative process, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition." Though his own "The Raven" is Poe's chief subject, his observations about the business of creation are surely equally germane to the oratorio Mendelssohn was scrambling to complete across the Atlantic.

Most writers—poets in especial—prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy—an ecstatic intuition—and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought—at the true purposes seized only at the last moment—at the innumerable glimpses of idea that arrived not at the maturity of full view—at the fully matured fancies discarded in despair as unmanageable [...] in a word, at the wheels and pinions [...].<sup>24</sup>

In this phase of the discussion, I put forward an image of the widow's scene, No. 8, as a *locus classicus* of "true purposes seized only at the last moment," of "glimpses of idea that arrived not at the maturity of full view." Among the extensive revisions the oratorio underwent between the time of its 1846 Birmingham premiere and its first London performance the following year, the widow's scene received a more thoroughgoing overhaul than any other part of the work. A comparison of the 1846 and 1847 versions of this scene sheds significant light on the dramatic significance Mendelssohn ultimately ascribed to it.

We have glimpsed already a splendid specimen of the kind of last-minute idea Poe points to in the melodic parallels that unite the line "Give me thy son" in the widow's scene with the arrival of the "still small voice" in No. 34. The literal reversal of those five pitches we see in the published version of the score (comparing, again, exx. 1 and 4) did not occur in the Birmingham version. At the 1846 premiere of the work

<sup>24</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition," *Graham's Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine* 28, no. 4 (April, 1846): 163.

Elijah's phrase "Give me thy son" did not conclude with a fall to E, but remained on G# for the word "son." This may, of course, be taken as an indication that the parallels I have drawn here are a matter of pure coincidence: if Mendelssohn actually conceived of these moments as mirrors of one another, why did he not make them function that way in the original score? But the reverse can just as easily be argued, and no less convincingly. Something must have prompted the change Mendelssohn finally imposed on Elijah's phrase, and we are hard-pressed to find a better explanation than the one I put forward. Local melodic considerations scarcely seem to demand the change; indeed, Elijah's arrival on E in the published version of the widow's scene lends a flat-footed quality to the melody as a whole, this early arrival on the tonic having the effect of stopping motion rather than propelling it forward into the ensuing phrase, in which E factors heavily. Thus, we might well imagine that Mendelssohn had originally conceived of a musical association between Nos. 8 and 34 that would depend on tonality alone (the distinctive role of E major in linking the two was already fully on display in 1846), realizing only in the course of the revision process that he had stumbled, perhaps by pure chance, on melodic incipits that so nearly mirrored one another that he might, at a stroke, make the retrograde relationship a perfect one. This example captures in microcosm the logic I extend to the widow's scene. The Birmingham version of the score scripts an important role for the widow in the drama, a role whose full potential Mendelssohn came to grasp only in the course of the revision process.

I have pointed already to the unique function of the widow's scene within the oratorio's plot as a whole; as the sole domestic scene in the drama, its very intimacy seems to cut against the grain of the tale of public conquest that otherwise governs the First Part from start to finish. As conceptually satisfying as we might find the idea of a scene prefiguring on a small scale the more public act of mercy soon to follow, not all critics have been convinced of the scene's dramatic value. Its critical history is telling.

For early reviewers of the oratorio in the English press, the widow's scene was a small masterpiece. Three days after the Birmingham premiere, a reviewer in *The Musical World* found nothing but praise for the way "in which grief and anxiety are conveyed in a manner perfectly original and impressive" in the widow's supplication.<sup>25</sup> The following year, after the premiere of the revised version in London, a reviewer in the same publication enthused at greater length:

<sup>25</sup> "Mendelssohn's Elijah," *The Musical World* 21, no. 35 (29 August 1846): 408.

The scene between Elijah and the widow is one of the most masterly passages in the oratorio. The supplications of the widow for the salvation of her son—the appeals of the prophet to heaven—the ultimate recovery of the sufferer, and the overflowing gratitude and veneration of the mother, are all expressed with fervour and vivid truth [. . .]. The air in which the widow portrays her anguish, in E minor, is absolutely heart-rending.<sup>26</sup>

The following year, however, Otto Jahn would chart a path toward a critical assessment that has become more common in the years since:

The episode of the widow weakens the impression of the preceding scene, and it is detrimental to what follows [. . .]. After his splendid prophecy, Elijah should not make his next appearance in this manner; he should reappear as equally mighty and sublime. The miracle that he works here is too insignificant compared to the other [. . .]. In addition, the long, drawn-out complaint of the mother is somehow emotionally awkward.<sup>27</sup>

Werner is no more charitable: “The second scene is the weakest one in the whole oratorio, and perhaps it would be best to leave it out entirely.”<sup>28</sup> Friedhelm Krummacher, in his probing 2001 examination of the piece, passes over the episode with the widow briefly and disparagingly, calling it simply “a delaying scene in the drama.”<sup>29</sup>

Such assessments acquire a particular potency from the fact that Mendelssohn himself had worries about the scene, and had, at various points in the work’s genesis, contemplated its removal.<sup>30</sup> Yet remove it he did not. And while Mendelssohn’s misgivings may have been rooted in worries about the scene’s pointlessness, they might just as easily have been rooted in self-consciousness about its daring. Understanding the dramatic risks involved, we can safely surmise that Mendelssohn ultimately overrode his own worries because he valued something in this scene highly enough to make its retention worth the gamble. I suggest that Mendelssohn came to realize fully what he needed this scene to accomplish or, rather, how he might accomplish his purpose more fully only after the Birmingham premiere.

<sup>26</sup> “Mendelssohn’s Elijah,” *The Musical World* 22, no. 18 (1 May 1847): 279.

<sup>27</sup> Jahn, “On F. Mendelssohn-Bartholdy’s Oratorio *Elijah*,” 371.

<sup>28</sup> Werner, *Mendelssohn*, 467.

<sup>29</sup> Krummacher, “Art—History—Religion,” 327.

<sup>30</sup> Though the widow is present in the earliest material pertaining to the development of this libretto (sketches and drafts of 1837-1838), she is absent from the drafts spanning the second half of 1845, returning only after Schubring pressed hard on her behalf (see Sposato, *Price of Assimilation*, 134–35). It is impossible to be sure whether Schubring’s enthusiasm for the scene was ultimately the decisive factor, though it is true that Mendelssohn’s first musical sketches were, in Sposato’s words, “based extensively on Schubring’s textual suggestions” (*ibid.*, 135).

Table 1 presents the two versions of the number that were performed in Mendelssohn's lifetime: to the left is the text as presented at the oratorio's 1846 premiere in Birmingham and to the right the London version of 1847, which would go into print.<sup>31</sup> (For ease of comparison, the texts are divided into three blocks: the widow's lamentation, Elijah's supplications, and the closing celebration.) The biblical passage that forms the narrative core of the scene, *I Kings* 17:17–24, is shown below them.<sup>32</sup>

The most obvious revisions to this scene lie in the amplification of its beginning and ending.<sup>33</sup> To begin with, where the Birmingham form of the number delved straightaway into an *Allegro agitato* aria for soprano, "Help me, man of God," this lament is preceded in the final version by three sentences of recitative: "What have I to do with thee, O man of

<sup>31</sup> There is some conjecture at work here. As Mendelssohn's 1846 score was cannibalized in the creation of the score that was published in 1847, no definitive form of this number, in its original version, exists. The translation I provide here is based on a program booklet from the Birmingham premiere, housed in the Oxford Bodleian Library as GB-Ob MS. M. Deneke, Mendelssohn c.51, fol. 51–61 (the widow's scene appears on fol. 54, recto). The text provided in that booklet, however, is here brought into alignment with a second document, a copy of the complete score from which the organist, Dr. Henry John Gauntlett, played at the Birmingham premiere (housed now in the Archives Division of the Birmingham Central Library as MS 1721). The trouble is that the text of this score is in German, with only occasional English incipits to anchor it to the text as actually sung. Though the text provided in the program booklet contains what appear to have been all the words sung at this performance, the score makes it clear that various repetitions are left out (the program booklet does not reflect, for example, the widow's return to the words "Help me, man of God," or Elijah's brief second supplication—"Lord, my God"—giving the impression that there are only two supplications before the son revives). In the version I put forward here, I have left out only those occasional moments of direct, immediate textual repetition (e.g., the widow's immediate repetition of the words "that there is no breath left in him" after she sings them the first time).

<sup>32</sup> While *I Kings* provides the host narrative, the libretto draws, too, on Psalm 6:6 ("I am weary with my groaning; all the night make I my bed to swim; I water my couch with my tears"), Psalm 86:16 ("O turn unto me, and have mercy upon me; give thy strength unto thy servant, and save the son of thine handmaid"), Psalm 88:10 ("Wilt thou shew wonders to the dead? shall the dead arise and praise thee?"), *Mark* 12:30 ("And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength"), and Psalm 128:1 ("Blessed is every one that feareth the LORD"). All English biblical quotations in this study are from translator William Bartholomew's own source, the King James Bible. Though Mendelssohn composed the work in German, working from Luther's Bible, he worked so closely with Bartholomew in the course of the translation process that the English text must be treated as the *Fassung letzter Hand*.

<sup>33</sup> For a superb general description of the musical revisions that took place to this scene, see Joseph Bennett, "'Elijah': A Comparison of the Original and Revised Scores" [part 2], *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* 23, no. 477 (November 1882): 588–90. Though substantial stretches of the material provided in my own examples 6 and 7 are offered there, they appear in Bennett's article only in piano reductions. And certain features that will come to factor significantly in the present discussion—the oboe's recapitulatory passage at "The Lord hath heard thy prayer," for example, or the alteration to Elijah's "Give me thy son" melody—are not captured at all in Bennett's account. No more direct in its bearing on this discussion is Donald Mintz's exploration of *Elijah's* genesis in his "The Sketches and Drafts of Three of Felix Mendelssohn's Major Works" (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1960); *Elijah* is the first of the three major works indicated.



TABLE 1. The widow's scene (No. 8) and its biblical source

**Birmingham version (1846)**

*Widow:* Help me, man of God! My son is sick!  
And his sickness is so sore, that there is no  
breath left in him. Help me, help me man of  
God! Art thou come to call my sin to  
remembrance—to slay my son? Help me,  
man of God, there is no breath left in him.  
For if thou wiltest, he still by thy power may  
be assisted.

*Elijah:* Give me thy son. O Lord my God! turn  
unto her; in mercy help this widow's son!  
Lord, my God, let the spirit of this child  
return, that he again may live.

*Widow:* Wilt thou shew wonders to the dead?  
Say, will the dead arise and praise thee?

*Elijah:* Lord, my God.

*Widow:* Will they arise and praise thee?

*Elijah:* Lord, my God, O let the spirit of this  
child return.

*Widow:* The Lord hath heard thy prayer! the  
soul of my child is returning—my son  
reviveth!

*Elijah:* Now behold, thy son liveth!

*Widow:* Now by this I know that thou art a man  
of God, and that His word in thy mouth is  
the truth. O blessed are the men who fear  
him!

**Published version (1847)**

*Widow:* What have I to do with thee, O man of  
God? Art thou come to me to call my sin  
unto remembrance? To slay my son art thou  
come thither? Help me, man of God! My  
son is sick! And his sickness is so sore, that  
there is no breath left in him! I go  
mourning all the day long; I lie down and  
weep at night. See mine affliction. Be thou  
the orphan's helper. Help my son! There is  
no breath left in him.

*Elijah:* Give me thy son. Turn unto her, O Lord  
my God, O turn in mercy; in mercy help this  
widow's son. For Thou art gracious, and full  
of compassion, and plenteous in mercy and  
truth. Lord, my God, let the spirit of this  
child return, that he again may live!

*Widow:* Wilt thou show wonders to the dead?  
There is no breath in him!

*Elijah:* Lord, my God, let the spirit of this child  
return, that he again may live!

*Widow:* Shall the dead arise and praise thee?

*Elijah:* Lord, my God, O let the spirit of this  
child return, that he again may live!

*Widow:* The Lord hath heard thy prayer, the  
soul of my son reviveth!

*Elijah:* Now behold, thy son liveth.

*Widow:* Now by this I know that thou art a man  
of God, and that His word in thy mouth is  
the truth. What shall I render to the Lord  
for all his benefits to me?

*Elijah:* Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, love  
Him with all thine heart, and

*Both:* with all my/thy soul, and with all my/thy  
might. O blessed are they who fear Him!

**1 Kings 17:17–24**

(King James Version; text in **bold** is employed in oratorio libretto)

<sup>17</sup>And it came to pass after these things, that the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, fell sick; and **his sickness was so sore, that there was no breath left in him.** <sup>18</sup>And she said unto Elijah, **What have I to do with thee, O thou man of God? art thou come unto me to call my sin to remembrance, and to slay my son?** <sup>19</sup>And he said to her, **Give me thy son.** And he took him out of her bosom, and carried him up into a loft, where he abode, and laid him upon his own bed. <sup>20</sup>And he cried unto the LORD, and said, O LORD my God, has thou also brought evil upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by slaying her son? <sup>21</sup>And he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried unto the LORD, and said, **O LORD my God, I pray thee, let this child's soul come into him again.** <sup>22</sup>And the LORD heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived. <sup>23</sup>And Elijah took the child, and brought him down out of the chamber into the house, and delivered him unto his mother: and Elijah said, **See, thy son liveth.** <sup>24</sup>And the woman said to Elijah, **Now by this I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in thy mouth is truth.**

God?” Where this opening is concerned, neither version can really be said to be more faithful to the biblical narrative: the Birmingham version succeeds in keeping the material from biblical verses 17 and 18 in the proper order (i.e., the sickness is announced before her “Art thou come?” query); the published version retains more of the widow’s actual words (“What have I to do with thee?”). Thus heightened fidelity to scripture does not appear to have been the incentive behind the change; we would do well to seek out other factors.

The likeliest factors come into view only if we compare the alterations made to this opening stretch to those at the number’s conclusion. As table 1 shows, the Birmingham version does not involve Elijah returning at all once the soprano has launched into the number’s closing passage (“Now by this I know”). Rather, the widow herself, alone, cuts straight to the closing line, “Blessed are the men who fear him,” providing the textual and melodic kernel of the chorus, which follows without a break. It is only in the final version that the number ends as a duet, indeed—and this is the heart of the matter—as if it had been a duet all along.

I have argued that this scene may have held a value for Mendelssohn in the way it situates Elijah in a domestic setting, as a member of a domestic unit; I have gone so far as to raise the possibility that the woman and child in the oratorio play the role of a surrogate family for Elijah. As it happens, Mendelssohn’s post-Birmingham additions to both the beginning and end of this scene work powerfully toward precisely this end, for what he finally arrived at is a scene centered not only on Elijah’s performance of a miracle, registered in the widow’s emotional transformation (this is essentially what the Birmingham scene is about), but on the shifting dynamics of the interaction between Elijah and the widow. Where the Birmingham version’s task is to reveal something about Elijah’s relationship with God, the final version directs attention to his relationship with this woman. In short, an aria about death and resurrection is transformed into a duet about a couple’s progress from discord to union. It is worth exploring in some detail how this is achieved.

The Birmingham version already affords Elijah and the widow a much more fully developed relationship than the Bible, at least in this episode. In *1 Kings*, there is no dialogue between the two during this episode because the widow is not present at the resurrection of the boy; she certainly does not stand by mocking Elijah’s supplications. The libretto’s solution not only provides the scene with a cleaner dramatic line—after all, we do not tend to have characters exiting and entering in the course of individual musical numbers—but also provides a conceit for communicating in dialogue what the Bible communicates in third-person narrative: that Elijah “stretched himself upon the child three

times" (*I Kings* 17:21). The expansion of the Bible's single verbal supplication to three—with the widow's interruptions serving to articulate them—may well be calculated to get this plot element across.<sup>34</sup> This amplification of the relationship between the widow and Elijah is carried a great deal further, however, in the 1847 revisions.

The first step in this process occurs at the outset of the scene: "What have I to do with thee, O man of God? Art thou come to me to call my sin unto remembrance? To slay my son art thou come thither?" Where Jahn, as we have seen, found "the long, drawn-out complaint of the mother [...] somehow emotionally awkward," we may be able to isolate at least one sticking point. The most obvious difficulty is that the first two sentences out of the widow's mouth do not make any dramatic sense; as far as we can tell from the libretto, Elijah has just walked in the door here, fresh from the encounter (No. 7) in which the angel assured him that he and the widow would not be running out of oil or meal until rain returns. Elijah is thus the best provider—the only provider, in fact—in the land of Israel. The widow's apparent fury at his arrival is thus completely baffling if we are relying on the oratorio alone to tell the story. (We should recall that these words of complaint from the widow appear in the Bible only after seven verses about their relationship, *I Kings* 17:10–16, which Mendelssohn passes over.) For the first two sentences of the scene in its revised version, we are given no hint that the woman is worrying about her son; we see only her anger at the prophet.

Suspect as it may be from the standpoint of dramatic continuity, the addition of this introductory recitative in the 1847 score has the crucial effect of shifting our entire understanding of what the scene is about, and what is at stake in its outcome. The spotlight is now cast first on Elijah's relationship with the widow—one defined at this point by anger and resentment—only coming to rest in the third sentence on the immediate crisis at hand.

This transformation of the beginning of the number bears fruit at its conclusion. Rather than have the widow cap off the encounter on her own, as she did in the Birmingham version, Mendelssohn brings Elijah back into the picture to join the widow in song. As the curtain comes down on the scene, Elijah and the widow are linked in the kind of tight, largely parallel harmonies we associate with the closing stretch of a duet (ex. 5).

<sup>34</sup> Such adaptations were a crucial facet of Mendelssohn's thinking from very early on. In a letter of 2 November 1838 to Julius Schubring Mendelssohn writes, "I am most anxious to do full justice to the *dramatic* element, and, as you say, no epic narrative must be introduced. I am glad to learn that you are searching out the always heart-affecting sense of the Scriptural words; but if I might make one observation, it is that I would fain see the dramatic element more prominent, as well as more exuberant and defined—appeal and rejoinder, question and answer, sudden interruptions, etc., etc." Quoted and trans. in Edwards, *The History of Mendelssohn's Oratorio "Elijah,"* 13 (emphasis original).

EXAMPLE 5. *Elijah* (published version), No. 8 (mm. 137–43, bass and soprano solos) – No. 9 (m. 1)

137

*f* *sf* *sf*

with all thy soul and with all thy

with all thine heart, and with all thy soul and with all thy

140

*p* *p* *sf*

might, O, bless - ed are they who fear Him!

might. O, bless - ed are they are they who fear Him!

[No. 9: Chorus]  
*Allegro moderato*

The words *Elijah* provides here cannot really be said to add a great deal to the drama; the praise the widow offers in the briefer Birmingham version is surely sufficient.<sup>35</sup> But it is as though it takes a moment of unity like this one to discharge the tension established at the number's opening. Mendelssohn has thus bookended the dramatic trajectory of the Birmingham scene (the son's progress from death to life) with a second one (the widow and *Elijah*'s progress, as a couple, from discord to union), turning what was initially a scene about a miracle into something quite different, or, rather, bringing forcefully to the surface a second agenda that was only latent in the original version.

This picture becomes even more vivid if we consider the implications of these changes—and a couple of other crucial ones—on the musical structure of the entire number. Though that structure is a complicated one, not readily reducible to any standard schema, I propose that a fundamental shift in our broadest formal reference point has taken place in the course of the revision process.

It is perhaps easiest to think of the widow's scene in the Birmingham version as a highly eccentric take on the kind of two-tempo aria that

<sup>35</sup> Sposato points to these words as “the most important Christological addition to the published version of the widow's scene” (Sposato, *Price of Assimilation*, 137), and explains the logic of their inclusion thus. Within the parameters of his investigation, these words' significance is obvious, but it is—according to the logic of my own reading—closer to effect than cause.

abounded in the bel canto tradition of Bellini and Donizetti.<sup>36</sup> In its operatic context, such a number is assembled around an opening cavatina and a concluding cabaletta, often separated by, in Joseph Kerman's uncharitable formulation, "a passage of recitative or *parlante* [that] served to present some sort of excuse for the singer to change his or her mind."<sup>37</sup> Thus the soprano's opening lament ("Help me, man of God!") is divided from her cabaletta-like final stretch ("Now by this I know") by the resurrection sequence itself: the basic structural features of aria are all there.

The eccentricity lies chiefly in the matter of proportions. Though other characters often participate in that dividing stretch of *parlante* or recitative, such passages in arias rarely go on at quite this length (their dialogue occupies 49 measures out of a total of 128), or bear this degree of sheer musico-dramatic gravitas.<sup>38</sup> This much we might be inclined to overlook were it not for the sheer brevity of the cabaletta: on the face of it, it lasts a scant seven measures. But this does not tell the whole story for Mendelssohn has taken a couple of important steps in the closing stretch of this number that seem calculated to hold our attention on the widow, and on the two-tempo aria as our formal reference point. The first is subtle, the second less so.

The first concerns the passage that begins the transition to the cabaletta: the moment at which the widow realizes her son is reviving. As examples 6a (the beginning of the scene) and 6b (the widow's moment of joy) show, the latter is conceived as an extremely free, but no less structurally significant, return to the material of the opening. The harmonic context is different at measure 102, and the melody does not

<sup>36</sup> Though he was not a notable fan of contemporary Italian opera, it bears recalling that Mendelssohn developed this soprano role for Jenny Lind, whom he had seen, and been transfixed by, in a Berlin performance of Bellini's *Norma* in the fall of 1844; Mendelssohn conducted Lind a short time later in her Leipzig debut, a concert that included an aria from *Norma* and a duet from *I Capuleti e I Montecchi*. See Todd, *Mendelssohn: A Life*, 507–508.

<sup>37</sup> Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama*, new and revised edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988 [1956]), 124.

<sup>38</sup> Another obvious difficulty with this reading lies in the relative tempi of the two parts of this "aria." The cabaletta conventionally brings with it an increase in tempo. Whether that actually occurs here is far from clear. In light of the fact that in the Birmingham score the widow's opening lament is marked "All[egr]o agitato," and the cabaletta passage "Andante," quite the reverse would seem to be true. But the revised (i.e., published) version of the score renders the matter differently, more likely reflecting practical notation considerations rather than an actual rethinking of the tempi. In the published version the number opens at "Andante agitato," with a dotted quarter indicated at 66. The meter has been completely overhauled, however, a dotted quarter now standing in a  $\frac{6}{8}$  meter for the dotted half-note of the original  $\frac{3}{4}$ . The meter of the cabaletta has not been revised—it has been newly provided with a metronome marking, which paces the quarter note at 76. In short, the underlying pulse of the "cabaletta" is, in fact, faster than that of the opening section, though slower in terms of prevailing melodic motion.

EXAMPLE 6a. *Elijah* (Birmingham version), No. 11 [8] (mm. 1–11)

No. 11. *Allo agitato*  
*Solo*

Ob.

Bsn.

Corni in E

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Sop. Solo

Bassi

*Allo agitato*

remain intact for long, but the opening accompanimental pattern returns in the strings, melodic incipits in oboe and soprano alike begin at the same pitch level as before, and motivic reminiscences linger in the oboe's rising gesture even as the soprano moves into altogether new territory. The recapitulation is free and fleeting, but unmistakable, and it imparts a powerful sense that, however elaborate the resurrection sequence itself, the widow's opening lament is behaving as the governing material of this structural unit. All that has occurred has finally been hosted, in some sense, by her aria.

Even more important for our structural grasp of the number is the fact that the cabaletta that follows ("Now by this I know") is not really only seven measures long. For the widow's concluding section is so clearly elided with the number that follows that the effect is ultimately of something like a cabaletta with chorus (the way the two numbers run together is shown in example 7, where I have held to the German text as it appears in the score in order to keep speculation to a minimum). In

## EXAMPLE 6a. (Continued)

The musical score for Example 6a (Continued) consists of eight staves. The top staff is for Oboe (Ob.), followed by Bassoon (Bsn.), Corni in E, Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), Soprano Solo (Sop. Solo), and Bassi. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The score begins with a measure number '6' above the Oboe staff. The Oboe part features a melodic line with a dynamic marking of *sf* (sforzando) in the second measure. The Bassoon and Corni in E parts also have *sf* markings. The Violin II part has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The Viola part has a melodic line with a *sf* marking. The Soprano Solo part has the lyrics 'Hilf mir du Mann Got - tes' starting in the fifth measure. The Bassi part has a melodic line with a *sf* marking.

example 7 the chorus clearly takes its opening straight from the widow's closing phrase, which is itself a version of her opening "Nun erkenne ich." Thus the widow's cabaletta does not really end after its seventh measure but is taken up by the entire chorus.

In the 1847 version of the number, things go quite differently. To begin with, example 8 (the revised counterpart to the recapitulatory passage shown in example 6b) shows how the widow's joyful moment of discovery runs in the scene's published form. The sense of recapitulation is now essentially gone. Here the swiftly shifting harmonic backdrop has nothing to do with the opening of the aria, the oboe does not take the occasion to recapitulate its melody from the outset, and the soprano moves ahead without the slightest recollection of the melody with which she began. Yes, motivic instrumental recollections occur (chiefly in the oboe), but only as the most fleeting backward glimpses of a world we have left well behind us. The emphasis is thus no longer on rounding off the music of her lamentation, but building from the

EXAMPLE 6b. *Elijah* (Birmingham version), No. 11 [8] (mm. 100–19)

100 *Allo agitato com lme*

Ob.

Bsn.

Corni in E

Trombe in C

Tromboni

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Sop. Solo

Bass Solo

Bassi

*ff* *dim.* *pp* *sf*

*ff* *dim.* *pp* *pp*

*ff* *dim.* *pp* *pp*

*ff* *dim.* *pp* *pp*

*pp* *pp*

Der

Kind - es wie - der zu ihm komm - en.

*pp*

dramatic experience Elijah and the widow have just shared toward the discovery of the jubilant new musical realm they will now inhabit together. Our gaze is thus directed away from her individual past toward their collective future; it is their musical journey, not hers.

In example 5 we have glimpsed already the heart of those alterations to the ensuing cabaletta that work to transform our structural



## EXAMPLE 6b. (Continued)

106

Ob.

Bsn.

Corni in C

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Sop. Solo

Bassi

Herr er - hört dein ne Stim - me Die Seel - e des Kin - des kommt wie

understanding of it. With the addition of a role for the prophet, the cabaletta has expanded from seven measures to 17 (it now lasts nearly a minute), a *cabaletta a due* that is certainly brief, but substantial enough to feel like an arrival point in itself. While it still flows satisfyingly into the chorus that follows, several alterations work to anchor our sense of closure in the cabaletta's duet itself, rather than pressing it forward, as in the Birmingham score, into the chorus. The cabaletta no longer literally anticipates the text of the chorus ("Blessed are the men" has become "Blessed are they"), and—more significantly—that triadic falling gesture that so clearly united the Birmingham cabaletta with the ensuing chorus is now absent from both: the cabaletta's conclusion has been altered, and the second pitch of the chorus's melody has been changed from B to F#.

In sum, the revised version of the number has lost enough of the trappings of an aria that it no longer reminds us of one at all. And it has

## EXAMPLE 6b. (Continued)

113

Ob.

Bsn.

Corni in C

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Sop. Solo

Bassi

der es wird le - ben - dig!

meanwhile gained features that align it much more convincingly with a duet: an opening recitative places our focus immediately on Elijah and the widow's conflicted relationship; the two take turns setting forth substantial chunks of material (it helps that Elijah's initial solo appeal, "Give me thy son," has been expanded to 26 measures from the Birmingham version's 19); their interactions become more closely interwoven as Elijah's supplications intensify; and an epiphanic transition ("The Lord hath heard thy prayer!") presses into a *cabaletta a due* in which the pair unite in close, largely parallel harmony. The encounter in its final form thus takes the shape of something like a microscopic courtship narrative, in which Elijah is called on to prove himself worthy of the widow's trust and confidence, and she—as we see in the vitriol of her new opening lines and the plea for guidance in her new closing section—is called on to move from independence to submission. As the establishment of their couplehood comes to share center stage with the miracle itself, it is as

EXAMPLE 7. *Elijah* (Birmingham version), No. 11 [8] (mm. 122–28, soprano solo, then soprano chorus)—No 12 [9] (mm. 1–7, soprano)

122 [Andante]  
Nun er - ken - ne ich, daß du ein Mann Got - tes bist und des Herrn—

125 [Soprano]  
Wort in dein-em Mun-de ist Wahr - heit. Wohl dem der den Höch - sten fürcht - tet

3 [Chor]  
Wohl dem der den Höch - stet fürch - tet der auf Got - tes We - gen geht.

though the domestic sphere is presented not only as a backdrop for the working of a miracle, but the realm in which Elijah is shown seeking, successfully, acceptance and intimate human accord.

\* \* \*

A good deal remains to be said, however, about the role of Elijah's "surrogate family" in the oratorio's unfolding beyond the confines of the widow's scene. In this final phase of the discussion I explore first a fleeting, localized effect pertaining to the widow's music, where melodic reminiscence is once more in play, turning then to the much more significant question of the role those characters, or "para-characters," introduced in the widow's scene seem to play across the entire span of the drama.

As hard as Mendelssohn works to direct our gaze toward the relationship between Elijah and the widow in the final version of No. 8, I want to suggest that these efforts do not cease when the widow sings her last notes. For this impulse appears to be born out, too, in an altogether different dimension of the oratorio, one that carries us beyond the bounds of this scene itself. As the remainder of the oratorio's First Part unfolds and we are treated to increasingly powerful displays of Elijah's prophetic might, we are also treated to much subtler moments at which the widow is held forth, I propose, as a helpmeet of a kind, enfolding her work into his.

Nowhere in this First Part does Elijah's power receive more vivid symbolic expression, in musical terms, than in those moments at which

EXAMPLE 8. *Elijah* (published version), No. 8 (mm. 113–22)

113

Ob. *cresc.* *f*

Cl. in A *cresc.* *f*

Bsn. *f*

Corni in C *p* *cresc.* *f*

Timp. *mf*

Vln. I *p* *cresc.* *ff*

Vln. II *p* *cresc.* *ff*

Vla. *p* *cresc.* *ff*

Sop. Solo *f*  
The Widow  
The

Vc., Cb. *p* *cresc.* *ff*

he is shown dictating musical material to the assembled crowd. In No. 16, for example, no sooner has Elijah issued the death warrant for the prophets of Baal (“Take all the prophets of Baal,” mm. 60–4) than the crowd take up the fearsome melody themselves (mm. 69–72), summarily carrying out his command. With this unpleasantness behind them, Elijah performs a comparable, if more benign, feat in getting rain to fall again. In No. 19, eight bars into the recitative in which Elijah offers up to God his plea for rain, he sets forth a brief song of supplication that the chorus takes up at once (they will end up singing it twice; ex. 9 shows the first).

EXAMPLE 8. (Continued)

116

Ob.

Cl. in A

Bsn.

Corni in C

Timp.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Sop. Solo

Vc., Cb.

Lord hath heard thy pray - er, the soul of my son re -

If getting others to sing his tune can thus be taken as the central musical metaphor for Elijah’s public work through this first part of the oratorio, it is intriguing how successful the widow proves at accomplishing the same thing, achieving, if in much more modest terms, a subtle binding of her role to his. For the memorable, sharply etched melodic fall with which she initiates the epiphanic cabaletta of confession, “Now by this I know” (shown, in German, in ex. 7), continues to resonate long after she has vanished from the scene.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> The only melodic differences between example 7’s version (of 1846) and the final one, to which I am actually referring, are slight rhythmic adjustments apparently bound up

## EXAMPLE 8. (Continued)

119

Ob.

Cl. in A

Bsn.

Corni in C

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Sop. Solo

vi - veth, my son re - vi - veth!

Vc.,  
Cb.

Mendelssohn's original plan accomplished this in a most direct way with both melody and text of the widow's Birmingham "cabaletta" feeding straight into the chorus that followed (ex. 7). In the work's final form, as we have seen, the musical effect vanishes with the chorus's abandonment of the falling melodic triad. The widow no longer even provides them with their text: the line she sings ("Blessed are they who fear Him") now differs from the chorus's, and she shares it, in any case, with the prophet (ex. 5).

with the translation into English and, muddying the water just a bit, the fact that the first three measures of the widow's melody (i.e., before the more drastic revisions already discussed set in) are off-set by half a measure. That is, she begins on beat 3 in example 7, and on beat 1 in the final version.

EXAMPLE 9. *Elijah*, No. 19 (mm. 17–24, vocal parts)

17 *Elijah*

Bass

O - pen the heav - ens and send us re - lief! Help, help thy ser - vant now, O God!

21 *Chorus*

S.

O - pen the heav - ens and send us re - lief: Help, help thy ser - vant now, O God!

A.

O - pen the heav - ens and send us re - lief: Help, help thy ser - vant now, O God!

T.

O - pen the heav - ens and send us re - lief: Help, help thy ser - vant now, O God!

B.

O - pen the heav - ens and send us re - lief: Help, help thy ser - vant now, O God!

But the effect is not completely eradicated. For in the midst of the contrapuntal throes with which the chorus surges toward the conclusion of No. 9, there soars forth a melody that clearly harkens straight back to the five-note fall that formed the opening of the widow's cabaletta (ex. 10).

Nor do we hear it here for the last time. In the midst of the alto arioso No. 18, "Woe unto them who forsake him!"—a gentler, feminine counterweight to Elijah's fearsome "Is not his word like a fire!"—the widow's melody recurs nearly as forcefully, altered only in the addition of a passing note between its second and third pitches and the lowering (by a half step) of its fourth (ex. 11).<sup>40</sup> It is even in the same key as the earlier cabaletta.

<sup>40</sup> Though the matter takes some teasing out, it is worth observing that the widow herself was, in a sense, the first to add this passing note between the second and third pitches of this melody. In the Birmingham version of her cabaletta (ex. 7) it is clear that the falling triad of her opening ("Nun erkenne ich") is motivically recalled, though at half the pace, by the falling triad of her subsequent "Wohl dem der" (this much is made clear by the chorus that follows, which takes its melodic essentials from the latter, but at the pitch level of the former). Though these relationships have changed in the final version, we may still think of the analogous spot toward the end of the cabaletta—her "blessed are they" of example 5—as a version of that initial triadic fall. It now occurs at the same pitch level as the cabaletta's opening, after all, but also includes the same passing note we find later in the alto's No. 18 (ex. 11).

EXAMPLE 10. *Elijah*, No. 9 (mm. 50–54, soprano)

Through dark - ness ris - eth light, light\_\_\_\_\_ to the up - right.\_\_\_\_

EXAMPLE 11. *Elijah*, No. 18 (mm. 13–17, alto solo)

... though they are by Him re - deem - ed, yet they have spok - en — false - ly ...

The widow's testimony—"Now by this I know that thou art a man of God"—thus seems to take on the function of a musical marker of piety, not only recurring, but recurring at moments of frankest religious affirmation: "Through darkness riseth light"; "they are by Him redeemed." The effect of such reminiscences is neither startling nor, for my purposes, decisive. But if our interpretive framework encompasses the possibility that Mendelssohn placed symbolic value on Elijah's relationship with the widow—and we have examined many indications that he did—it may not be going too far to suggest that their common propensity for sowing pious seeds of musical influence across the oratorio's First Part serves to bind them even more closely together.

And we may not be finished with the widow even after the First Part's conclusion. For our picture of the widow's musical legacy, as it were, would be incomplete without some stock-taking of the curious situation we face at the beginning of the oratorio's Second Part. More than one adaptation of *Elijah* for the operatic stage—for better or worse, there have been many—has had the widow herself reappear to sing the soprano aria that opens the Second Part, "Hear ye, Israel" (No. 21).<sup>41</sup> This is clearly a matter of directorial fantasy; there is no indication in Mendelssohn's score that this aria comes from the character of the widow (it is labeled simply "Soprano Solo"). But it is not pure fantasy. We have just emerged, after all, from the tightly argued drama of the First Part; the Second will be playing by slightly different dramatic rules (the presumption that every note spoken comes from the mouth of a character—earthly or angelic, named or unnamed—becomes attenuated in the closing choruses), but

<sup>41</sup> This is made clear, for example, in reviews of two early twentieth-century productions: Francis E. Barrett, "'Elijah' on the Stage: Oratorio as Music-Drama," *The Musical Times* (1 April 1912): 248-49, and D.H., "The Old Vic.," *The Musical Times* (1 May 1932): 458.



we do not know that yet. And with no clue whatever as to the dramatic character, if any, from which this voice is emanating, it is surely a rare audience member who does not mentally test the notion that this is the voice of the soprano character we came to know so well in the First Part. After all, we had a closely parallel exhortation early in the First Part that did come from a named character speaking to an actual crowd (Obadiah's recitative and aria, Nos. 3 and 4); as we have a soprano character readily at hand, we might well assume she has stepped forward to carry on this work in the same fashion. And if we do not anchor the soprano voice of No. 21 in the figure of the widow, this aria represents the only appearance of a soloist through the opening stretch of the Second Part (Nos. 21–26) not to be thus anchored (the other solo appearances are firmly lodged in the characters of Elijah, The Queen, and Obadiah).

This is surely the kind of ambiguous situation Jahn had in mind when, in his 1848 essay, he dwelled at length on the challenges attending Mendelssohn's decision to do away with third-person narration:

Since the oratorio cannot achieve true action, but cannot do without the continuing thread of a plot, avoiding the natural form of the narrative must inevitably lead to artificialities and make it difficult to achieve complete clarity and definition [. . .]. [A]lternation of voices, of instruments, or whatever, does not suffice to identify a certain character in advance [. . .]. This applies, above all, to the secondary characters, who do not have independent roles, but who act as levers to keep the action moving forward. They do not achieve individual form and are therefore recognizable only in the context of the event.<sup>42</sup>

“Clarity and definition” near low ebb with “Hear ye, Israel,” where narrative context is all but absent. But it is not at all clear that this is a bad thing. For it seems to enable Mendelssohn to accord to the widow—or to a more generalized kind of “para-character” we might describe as “Elijah’s soprano helpmeet”—a scope of involvement and degree of impact that could be neither explained nor justified according to the literal events of the biblical narrative. That is, if the singer of “Hear ye, Israel” is presented in sufficiently soft focus that she might easily be (mis)taken for the widow, the symbolic force of the benign feminine figure’s reappearance is approximately the same whether we resolve that she actually is the widow or not.

The question would remain a matter of pure conjecture, and a perhaps trivial matter at that, were it not for the fact that this interpretive register comes even more urgently into play in connection with the silent third corner of that domestic triangle set forth in the widow’s scene: the son. The Bible does not give him any lines, and Mendelssohn does not,

<sup>42</sup> “On F. Mendelssohn-Bartholdy’s Oratorio *Elijah*,” 368–69.

either, at least not in the widow's scene itself. What happens to him thereafter is more ambiguous.

As I have observed, Elijah's contact with other human beings draws to a close some two thirds of the way into this oratorio. This radical structural feature arrived very late in the creative process; a scant three months before the premiere of the piece Mendelssohn was still planning, as he had all along, to portray the character of Elisha at the event of Elijah's ascension.<sup>43</sup> Elisha's role in the biblical narrative is crucial, as we read in *2 Kings* 2:9–11:

<sup>9</sup>And it came to pass, when they were gone over, that Elijah said to Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee. And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me. <sup>10</sup>And he said, Thou hast asked a hard thing: nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so. <sup>11</sup>And it came to pass, as they went on, and talked, that behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.

In the piece Mendelssohn ultimately produced, Elisha is written out of the chorus, in which Elijah's ascension is narrated in the briefest terms. The relevant section, the closing stretch of No. 38, runs simply, "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." The circumstances of Elisha's ultimate ejection may feed substantively into the argument at hand. I thus turn my attention briefly away from the work as it was ultimately premiered and toward the work Mendelssohn envisioned, before his plan was proven impractical.

As a letter to Julius Schubring indicates, on 23 May 1846 Mendelssohn still has not made up his mind about Elisha, and he poses what he appears to have regarded as a crucial question:

(May Elisha sing soprano? or is this inadmissible, as in the same chapter he is described as a "bald head"? Seriously speaking, must he appear at the ascension as a prophet, or can he do so still as a youth?)<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> In the second letter Mendelssohn wrote to Karl Klingemann on the topic of what oratorio subject might form a worthy follow-up to *Paulus*, it appears that the scene of the ascension loomed much larger in the composer's imagination than we might guess from the brief form it ultimately took. Indeed, we get the impression that this scene alone tipped the scales toward Elijah over its closest competitor, St. Peter: "But I think Elijah, and his ascent to heaven in the end, would be the most beautiful" (Letter of 18 February 1837, quoted in Sposato, *Price of Assimilation*, 116). We can only assume that the scene Mendelssohn envisioned at that point would have followed the more robust biblical narrative much more closely than the published score.

<sup>44</sup> Edwards, *The History of Mendelssohn's Oratorio "Elijah,"* 24.

Schubring's response, dated 15 June, runs as follows:

Your enquiry whether Elisha may sing soprano is comical. Such a question should not be put by one who has set Christ's words for a chorus. There can be no doubt that at that time Elisha was no more a child [...]. One who ploughs with twelve yoke of oxen (I Kings xix., 19) is no child. Do you know any passage where Elisha is called a boy? I think there is none.<sup>45</sup>

Whether this report from Schubring is what ultimately clinched the deal for Mendelssohn is a matter of speculation; Elisha disappears from all subsequent versions of the libretto, but the drafts in which this decision is finalized are undated and may or may not have been undertaken before Mendelssohn received Schubring's reply. But there is no other obvious reason for Mendelssohn's summary abandonment of a character that he had long intended to include. And if the question of Elisha's age was, indeed, the decisive issue for Mendelssohn, an intriguing possibility comes into view.

As we have seen, the first words Elijah addresses to another "onstage" human being in this piece are delivered to the widow, who, I have argued, in some ways functions as a surrogate wife. In his eagerness to portray Elisha, Elijah's last conversation partner, as a boy, we may well discern an interest on Mendelssohn's part in creating what would amount to a dramatic bookend to the widow's scene, having Elijah's last human encounter be with a character who can function as a surrogate son, talking over matters of inheritance, bringing to symbolic completion the triad set forth in his first human interaction. And it may well have been at the moment Mendelssohn learned this intergenerational dynamic was impossible that he lost interest in the character.

This possibility is made more provocative in light of the musical and textual decisions surrounding Elijah's last appearance in the First Part of the oratorio. He sings for the last time in the First Part in No. 19, the text of which is the elaboration of the relevant passage from *1 Kings* 18 involving several compelling decisions relevant to the present argument (tab. 2).

It is thus a boy who takes on the role of Elijah's last conversation partner in the oratorio's First Part; Elijah speaks only to him and to God in this scene (the crowd is there, but the prophet never addresses them, and when he refers to them, he does so in the third person). Moreover, with the three supplications that organize Elijah's interaction with the boy, Mendelssohn has taken what would seem to be careful, entirely non-biblical steps to insure that the scene resonates with the one in which

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

TABLE 2. *Elijah*, No. 19, and its biblical source**No. 19. Recit. Con Coro.**

*Obadiah*: O man of God, help thy people! Among the idols of the Gentiles, are there any that can command the rain, or cause the heav'ns to give their showers? The Lord our God alone can do these things.

*Elijah*: O Lord, Thou hast overthrown thine enemies and destroyed them:

Look down on us from heaven, O Lord; regard the distress of thy people!

Open the heavens, and send us relief, help, help thy servant now, O God!

*The People*: Open the heavens and send us relief: Help, help thy servant now, O God!

*Elijah*: Go up now, child, and look toward the sea. Hath my prayer been heard by the Lord?

*The Youth*: There is nothing. The heavens are as brass, they are as brass above me.

*Elijah*: When the heavens are closed up because they have sinned against Thee; Yet if they pray and confess thy Name, and turn from their sin when Thou didst afflict them: Then hear from heav'n, and forgive the sin; Help, send thy servant help, O God!

*The People*: Then hear from heav'n, and forgive the sin; Help, send thy servant help, O God!

*Elijah*: Go up again, and still look toward the sea.

*The Youth*: There is nothing. The earth is as iron under me.

*Elijah*: Hearest thou no sound of rain? seest thou nothing arise from the deep?

*The Youth*: No; there is nothing.

*Elijah*: Have respect to the prayer of thy servant, O Lord my God! Unto Thee will I cry, Lord, my rock; be not silent to me; and Thy great mercies remember, Lord!

*The Youth*: Behold, a little cloud ariseth now from the waters; it is like a man's hand! The heavens are black with clouds and wind: the storm rusheth louder and louder!

*The People*: Thanks be to God for all his mercies!

*Elijah*: Thanks be to God! for He is gracious; and His mercy endureth forevermore!

**1 Kings 18: 43–4**

(King James Version)

<sup>43</sup>And [Elijah] said to his servant, Go up now, look toward the sea. And he went up, and looked, and said, there is nothing. And he said, Go again seven times. <sup>44</sup>And it came to pass at the seventh time, that he said, Behold, there ariseth a little cloud out of the sea, like a man's hand.

Elijah returned the widow's son to life. In short, if listeners struggling to make sense of the imprecisely sketched cast of secondary characters in this work are at all inclined to apply Occam's razor to the situation (*entia non sunt multiplicande praeter necessitatem*—"entities must not be multiplied beyond necessity"), there is no logical reason this cannot actually be the one boy we have met thus far in the oratorio—the widow's son himself—rather than a character newly conjured for this single appearance.

When we add to these decisions the fact that Mendelssohn evidently planned to have the voice of the youth return in the figure of Elisha, Elijah's last conversation partner in the Second Part, as well, an intriguing picture comes into focus. The prophet enters the realm of human interaction in the First Part in conversation with the widow (and in the company of the then-silent boy), and ends the First Part in conversation with a boy; the Second Part opens with a figure readily elided with the widow, and Mendelssohn had initially intended to show Elijah withdrawing from the scene for the last time in the company, once more, of a boy. Far from being a "delaying scene in the drama," as Krummacher takes it, the widow's scene may thus be understood as our introduction to the dramatic figures—a surrogate family comprised of the "para-characters" of the adult female helpmeet and the young male aide-cum-heir—who are (or almost were, in Elisha's case) judiciously deployed to bracket the entire course of Elijah's human interactions in the First and Second Parts alike. Only lightly sketched as the identities of these secondary characters themselves may be—no less potent for being more abstractly symbolic than dramatically literal—it is within these relationships that Mendelssohn seems to have been bent on nesting the entire narrative course of Elijah's encounter with the world.

\* \* \*

*Elijah's* engagement with domestic family life represents itself a still small voice, one that will not be heard at all above the noise of Elijah's magnificent public achievements unless listened for with attentiveness and discernment. What I have gathered in these pages is an assemblage of suggestions and fleeting associations, resistant, by their nature, to clear documentary verification. However powerfully Mendelssohn himself was feeling the allure of a simple domestic existence at the time of this oratorio's composition, Elijah's story offers scarcely any opportunity for the expression, much less affirmation, of such longing. But it offers opportunity enough. And what I hope to have revealed is a work that appears to be pressing as hard as it can to set just such an affirmation into motion beneath the public spectacle itself.

## ABSTRACT

The notion that there might be autobiographical, or personally confessional, registers at work in Mendelssohn's 1846 *Elijah* has long been established, with three interpretive approaches prevailing: the first, famously advanced by Prince Albert, compares Mendelssohn's own artistic achievements with Elijah's prophetic ones; the second, in Eric Werner's dramatic formulation, discerns in the aria "It is enough" a confession of Mendelssohn's own "weakening will to live"; the third portrays *Elijah* as a testimonial on Mendelssohn's relationship to the Judaism of his birth and/or to the Christianity of his youth and adulthood.

This article explores a fourth, essentially untested, interpretive approach: the possibility that Mendelssohn crafts from Elijah's story a heartfelt affirmation of domesticity, an expression of his growing fascination with retiring to a quiet existence in the bosom of his family.

The argument unfolds in three phases. In the first, the focus is on that climactic passage in *Elijah's* Second Part in which God is revealed to the prophet in the "still small voice." The turn from divine absence to divine presence is articulated through two clear and powerful recollections of music that Elijah had sung in the oratorio's First Part, a move that has the potential to reconfigure our evaluation of his role in the public and private spheres in those earlier passages. The second phase turns to Elijah's own brief sojourn into the domestic realm, the widow's scene, paying particular attention to the motivations that may have underlain the substantial revisions to the scene that took place between the Birmingham premiere and the London premiere the following year. The final phase explores the possibility that the widow and her son, the "surrogate family" in the oratorio, do not disappear after the widow's scene, but linger on as "para-characters" with crucial roles in the unfolding drama.

Keywords: domesticity, *Elijah*, Felix Mendelssohn, oratorio