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Foreword: Mendelssohn and Birmingham

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy first visited Birmingham in 1837 at a time when the city was undergoing rapid development: the canal system, famous to this day (Birmingham claims to have more canals than Venice), was being expanded to carry goods all over England, and the town's first railway opened that year. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Birmingham expanded very quickly from being a Warwickshire market town to become 'the first manufacturing town in the world'¹ by 1791. It was characterized by thousands of small businesses sustained by highly skilled workers, and created great prosperity.

The Triennial Music Festival (1784–1912) had been established in order to raise funds for the city's General Hospital. In the early years, it was dominated by the music of George Frideric Handel, establishing an oratorio tradition in the city. The city's mighty Town Hall, with its famous organ by William Hill, was opened in 1834 to allow the festival to expand. Almost immediately, the festival became internationally renowned, attracting not only the best artists of the day, but also commissioning an extraordinary array of major works from, amongst others, Arthur Sullivan, Gioachino Rossini, Camille Saint-Saëns, Charles Gounod, Antonín Dvořák and Edward Elgar.

Mendelssohn, after the success of his first visit in 1837 (when he conducted the oratorio *St Paul* and played his Second Piano Concerto), was invited again in 1846. The Festival Committee asked the composer to conduct the whole festival but he declined the offer, instead agreeing to conduct his own works and tentatively (the performance was little more than a year away) undertaking to write a new oratorio, *Elijah*, which had been in his thoughts for almost a decade.

The Triennial Festival of 1846 ran from 25–28 August. There were four morning concerts:

25 August: Haydn's *The Creation* and four arias by Rossini

26 August: Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, followed by Handel's *The King shall rejoice* and arias by Mozart and Cimarosa

27 August: Handel's *Messiah*

28 August: Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, followed by organ works and arias

Additionally, on the evenings of 26 and 27 August, there were concerts of symphonies, concertos and arias.

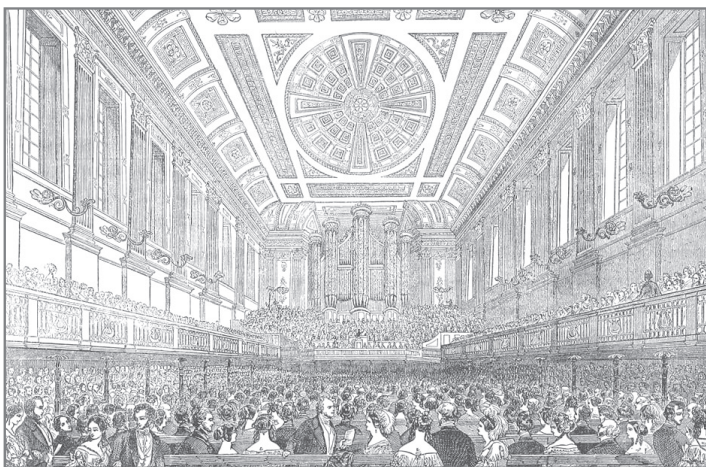


Birmingham, 1849. Engraving from the Birmingham Chronicle.

The orchestra for *Elijah* numbered 125 players (93 strings, quadruple wind and the wonderful Ophicleide amongst the brass); the chorus 271 (79 sopranos including four boy trebles, 60 altos (all male), 60 tenors and 72 basses). There were ten soloists, though the division of labour was not specified. The named roles would have been taken by different

singers and there were sufficient to cover the various octets, trios and quartets. The organ was played by Henry Gauntlett, composer of *Once in royal David's city*. He annotated his score and noted, amongst other things,

that he should play a huge C major chord in bar 30 of number 38: 'and when the Lord would take him away to heaven'; this chord is not to be found in Mendelssohn's manuscript or the first edition (published by Simrock in 1847), but is included in the present edition.



The first performance of *Elijah*, at Birmingham Town Hall. Engraving from the Illustrated London News.

The same hall today only accommodates

some 200 performers, so it is fascinating to imagine just how little space each performer had. The *Illustrated London News* of 29 August 1846 printed an engraving of the first performance: note the timpani appear at the very top right of the stage.

Elijah

Oratorio for Solo Voices, Choir and Orchestra

First Part

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809–1847)

Opus 70

English version: William Bartholomew

Vocal Score: Kurt Soldan / Klaus Burmeister

Introduction

Elijah
Basso solo

Grave ♩ = 60

p

As God the Lord of Is - ra - el

Pianoforte

Grave ♩ = 60

tutti

p

4

E. liv - eth, be - fore_ whom I stand: There shall not be dew nor rain these years, there shall not be

Cl., Fg.

f *p*

Timp. *pp*

8

E. dew nor rain but ac - cord - ing to my word.

+Ottoni

ff *pp*

Timp.