

The Llewellyn Choir performs a dramatic *Elijah*

Mendelssohn's oratorio was given a performance of discipline and beauty.

April 18 2016

- Jennifer Gall

***Elijah* by Felix Mendelssohn. The Llewellyn Choir, Llewellyn Hall, Saturday April 15, 2016, 7.30pm.**

We have the Birmingham Music Festival committee to thank for commissioning Mendelssohn's composition of the oratorio *Elijah* for the 1846 Festival. The struggle to find a suitable libretto for his idea was lengthy, but it was Mendelssohn's old friend, the pastor Julius Schubring, who finally delivered the text. The lyrics combine convincing characterisation with biblical authority. This creates dramatic tension brought to life by the music, which verges at times on the operatic in style. The original audience numbered 2000 and packed the Birmingham Town Hall to hear the chorus of more than 270 and the orchestra of 125 musicians.



The Llewellyn Choir and orchestra were impressive in Mendelssohn's *Elijah*. *Photo: Supplied*

The Llewellyn Choir gave a performance that was true to the original vision of the composer. Rowan Harvey-Martin conducted the sizeable musical forces with formidable strength and stamina, ensuring that orchestra, soloists and chorus performed as one. My one reservation was the fact that the balance between orchestra and chorus was uneven, with the voices becoming lost at crucial times. Perhaps it would be feasible for future performances to

consider locating the orchestra in the pit (reducing the volume while maintaining clarity), if it is possible to position the conductor without risk to life or limb.

Douglas McNicol gave us a noble, courageous Elijah. His confident performance brought the protagonist to life to lead the audience through the unfolding narrative. Tenor Michael Martin's interpretation of Obadiah provided a most complementary performance to that of McNicol. His voice entered like sun shining onto the landscape. Soprano Rebecca Collins's dramatic conviction matched the power and purity of her vocal performance as she sang the roles of the Widow of Zarepath and an angel. Her partner, Christina Wilson sang superbly as co-angel and Queen Jezebel. Both women remained engaged in the drama of the oratorio even when not singing, assisting the story's continuity. Brave young Charlie Barnes as the Youth held his sustained notes well to contrast the treble responses with Elijah's baritone questions.



Conductor Rowan Harvey-Martin led the forces impressively. *Photo: Supplied*

Discipline and thorough rehearsal ensured that the Llewellyn Choir did not flag throughout the lengthy performance. The semi-chorus, angelic trio and chorus were really beautiful, combining delicacy with careful harmony. In the final chorus, "And Let Your Light Break Forth", the full exuberance of the singers built to the climactic lyrics, "Thou fillest heaven with Thy glory."

Under Pip Thompson's leadership the Llewellyn Sinfonia articulated the beauties and intricacies of Mendelssohn's orchestration, despite the scaled-down ensemble. Chayla Ueckert-Smith created a perfect interlude with the oboe solo introducing Elijah's Arioso. Well shaped phrasing culminated in a perfectly timed final note to set the appropriate mood for the lyrics, "Thy kindness shall not depart from me."

A well-satisfied audience provided rousing applause – a good omen for the Llewellyn Choir's performances for 2016.