



CHORAL SINGER

ISSN 1540-0468
January 2006, Vol. 4, No. 5

|| *Building better ensembles voice by voice* ||

Mendelssohn's "Elijah"

Classical Drama for the Modern Age

Covenants, pagan rituals, fire and flood. A larger-than-life hero vs. a wicked queen. We could be talking about the latest sword and sorcery adventure, but all these dramatic elements and more are to be found in Felix Mendelssohn's spectacular choral work based on the prophet Elijah (see Resources).

According to the Bible, during the first millennium, B.C., God called upon a good and holy man named Elijah to intervene with the people of Israel. While pagan cults devoted to many different gods abounded, monotheism — belief in a single, all-powerful deity — set

the tribes of Israel apart. But Jezebel, wife of King Ahab, had convinced many Jews to worship her god, Baal (pronounced Bale). Elijah's assignment was to communicate the wrath of the Lord, so that the people of Israel might turn from their wicked ways and live.

Like G.F. Handel's "Messiah," "Elijah" is an *oratorio*, a drama based on a religious text. The principals provide insight into their character via solo *arias*, as in the

hero's weary reflection, "It Is Enough" (No. 26). The great *choruses* express common sentiment and move the action along. For example, in the opening movement, the chorus, representing the people of Israel, cries "Help, Lord!" in a recitation of their drought-induced sufferings. The *recitatives* — essentially, sung speech — provide the connecting tissue, helping to explain what has happened and

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Shouldst Thou, Walking

*He, watching over Israel, slumbers not, nor sleeps.
Shouldst thou, walking in grief, languish, He will quicken thee.*

Like a good show tune, "He, Watching Over Israel" is one chorus that can be understood perfectly well when taken away from the story for which it was written. Its reflective, reassuring text has made it a favorite in church settings. The lyric is simple and straightforward. Yet, while the translation of "Elijah" is modern English, this is not exactly the way most of us would express ourselves in daily conversation! A contemporary translation might be: The Lord is always watchful. If you ever find yourself overwhelmed by troubles, He will revive you and give you strength.

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Published monthly, September through May.

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Phrasing

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Mendelssohn sets the first phrase in a *fugue*-like succession of entrances. It's introduced by the sopranos, then repeated by the tenors, altos and basses, almost like a *mantra*. The music is dreamy and reflective, all piano except for one crescendo.

The tenors start the first half of the second phrase quietly enough, but each voice part follows with increasing urgency. The lines overlap and interweave, punctuated by *sforzandos* on the word **grief**, until they come together in the *forte* affirmation: "He will quicken thee."

Mendelssohn then immediately reintroduces the initial theme. While each voice part repeats "Shouldst thou, walking in grief" one more time, within nine measures everyone is back to the original theme, and the piece winds down to a *pianissimo* ending.

What could be more simple? Simple, yes, but with so much lyrical repetition, and so many **s** sounds, it's easy for the words to turn to mush for the audience. One way to prevent this, of course, is with careful diction. Another important tool is careful phrasing. Each choral director will give his or her own specific direction, but consider the following:

- Give each voice its moment in the spotlight. As in an instrumental fugue, the entering voice comes in strongly, but then drops back as each new voice takes over.

- Don't run words together. Try saying "He slumbers not," or "sleeps not" without a break. Enough said?

- Mind the commas. Most choirs sing "Shouldst thou walking in grief languish, He." While "shouldst thou walking, in grief languish" makes perfect sense, that is not what is written. "Walking in grief" is the *parenthetical* phrase.

Running everything together alters the meaning.

- Don't let the meter wreck the meaning. Because the word **He** often comes on a downbeat, the tendency is to give it a punch. Remember that, in the above phrase, **He** is just the beginning of the second clause; equal emphasis belongs on the verb, **quicken**.

The message and presentation of this chorus are stunning in their simplicity. If only one person were singing, the meaning undoubtedly would be clear. With many voices, however, extra care must be taken with seemingly small details. Lyrical does not equal mushy! Take advantage of the emphasis already written into the phrases. The beauty and comfort of the words will be communicated that much more clearly. ||



Range Limitations, Part II

Smoking and Other Chronic Conditions

Vocal fold nodules, polyps and cysts, thought to be the result of vocal trauma, lead the list of lesions (abnormalities) that cause prolonged loss of range. These substantive, or *mass*, lesions dampen vocal fold vibrations, leading to a loss of range. They also tend to interfere with breath support by creating a persistent laryngeal opening (ideally there should be complete closure). This opening makes the larynx less efficient, because it allows air to leak through the larynx without contributing to voice production. The first line of treatment is voice therapy, which may help to increase function without surgery. Voice therapy will not heal nodules, but rather, coaxes better function from the larynx despite the nodules. Vocal fold nodules are *scar* on the vocal folds. As in other areas within the body, scar does not 'go away' with therapy. If the loss of range and stamina persist, surgical removal is recommended.

Polypoid corditis is swelling of the vocal folds resulting from cigarette smoking. Smoking causes progressive *pathologic* (disease-like) changes in function that eventually lead to the smoker's characteristic harsh, raspy and deep voice

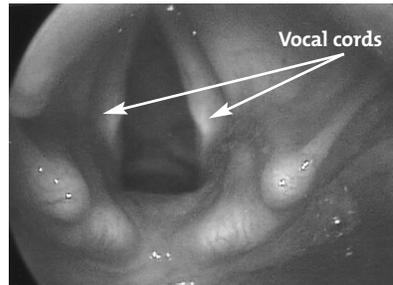


Figure 1. Example of normal vocal folds. Notice the triangular shape of the glottis (the space between the folds).

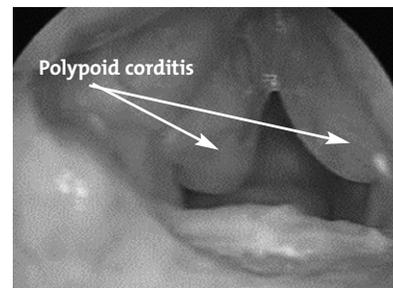


Figure 2. Example of polypoid corditis. Notice the large size of the vocal folds and how they narrow the glottis.

— with no top end. Smoking cessation will only halt the progression of the disease. Phonomicrosurgery to debulk the folds merely helps to approximate a normal voice, elevating the pitch into the range of a normal voice, but not fully restoring all of the normal character. When severe enough (see Fig. 2), the vocal folds obstruct the *glottis* (opening between the vocal folds), leading to air hunger and respiratory distress.

Injury to the nerves that control the vocal folds, namely the *superior laryngeal nerves* (SLN), and injury to the larynx from trauma

can lead to persistent loss of range. The SLN control the cricothyroid muscles that are responsible for the elevation and control of the head voice. Viral infections that affect the SLN can cause a frustrating temporary (three to six months) loss of control, and loss of most or all of the upper range. Permanent loss of range also is possible.

Arthritis of the *cricoarytenoid* (CA) and the *cricothyroid joints* (CT) can severely limit the upper register. Like any other *synovial* (meaning bathed in a lubricating fluid called *synovium*) joint, the cricoarytenoid and cricothyroid joints can be affected by arthritis, which limits their ability to function. The voice is dependent on the precise movement of the CA joints to move the vocal folds into the proper positions and of the CT joints to modify the tension (and therefore control pitch) on the vocal folds. There is no intervention to reliably restore function with any of these arthritic conditions. ■

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Repertoire

Mendelssohn

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what is to come.

In his choice of Elijah as a subject, the great 19th-century composer was following the conventions of an earlier era. As noted in our article about his sister, Fanny, (see “*Stille nacht, phantastische nacht*,” *CS*, May 05, pp. 1,6), writers, painters and composers of the Romantic period (roughly 1795-1835) had begun to express emotion, thoughts and feelings, and the connection of humans to the natural world. This was a radical departure from the noble themes typical of the 18th century’s Age of Classicism.

“Elijah” is unusual, also, in that Mendelssohn (see Resources) wrote the part of the hero for a baritone. We spoke recently with

opera baritone Robert Honeysucker (see Resources) about the work. “It really is a concert opera,” he explains. “As in any opera, there’s a *protagonist*, an *antagonist*, and a *chorus* that is not just a Greek Chorus [commenting on the action], but a contemporary, Romantic opera chorus that takes part in the action.

“This opera happens to be set in Biblical antiquity, but it’s the same sort of drama as anything you’ll find in Verdi, who, after all, took Shakespeare to the operatic stage. That Mendelssohn chose to write an oratorio on Biblical figures does make him different from other Romantic composers — more like Handel. But the story and music are very Romantic; like Don Quixote, Elijah is all alone against the world.

“Yes, it’s classic Old Testament: judgment, fire and brimstone, revenge — an eye for an eye. But the theme is basic and eternal: Good vs. Evil.” For this reason, Honeysucker believes “the Old Testament is quite accessible. It’s so full of stories. And these certainly would be well known to those of the Christian and Jewish traditions.”

And what a spectacular story “Elijah” is! The choruses are demanding and inspiring, from the tender “Lift Thine Eyes” (No. 28), usually sung by a children’s choir, to the dramatic and thrilling “Behold, God the Lord” (No. 34) with its earthquake, wind and fire.

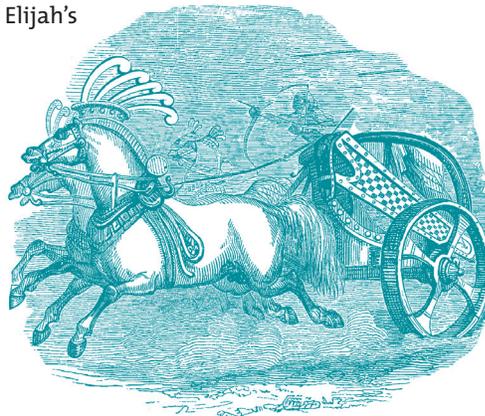
Unlike many who achieved recognition only after death, Mendelssohn was immensely admired and very successful in

his own lifetime. He created an enormous and varied body of work, both vocal and instrumental. Felix himself wrote the German text for “Elijah,” and the English translation prepared by William Bartholomew was considered to be brilliantly faithful to the Scriptural account. The work premiered to great acclaim at the Music Festival of 1846 in Birmingham, England. ||

Chariots of Fire

“And it came to pass... there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.” *The Holy Bible, King’s II, Chapter 2, v. 11*

As far as endings go, few can compete with Elijah’s ascent to heaven in a chariot of fire. That awesome vision provided inspiration for Romantic English poet William Blake’s “Prophetic Books.” Decades later, C. Hubert H. Parry set the stanzas to a hymn called “Jerusalem.” Much-beloved in England, this hymn inspired the title of the Academy Award-winning movie, “Chariots of Fire” (see Resources).





Exercise Tips From A Belly Dancer

Behind the Veil

Undulating hips, expressive hands, exotic costumes. If belly dancing doesn't seem to have much in common with singing, consider how a dancer develops the precise control required for this art form. Singers may never need to isolate and move specific muscles in public view the way a belly dancer does, but the two do share common objectives.

Energy and breath

Smooth continuity of physical motion may be compared to well-supported legato singing, and singing on the breath. According to the Boston-area dancer teaching and performing under the name of Phaedra, exclusive focus on the hips can make a dancer forget the rest of the body. Phaedra coaches her students to keep joints loose and pay attention to posture and alignment. Just as these help to make a dance routine more compelling to watch, they help a singer to support the breath and energize vocal tone.

A lifted ribcage will help. Breathing is difficult if the ribcage is constricted or flattened, and it's important for a dancer to breathe into the movement. Lifting the ribcage permits dance movements

to be seen better by the audience. Even more importantly, it automatically frees the breath — for dancer and singer alike.

Focus requires energy. “Dancers like a lot of external movement, because it's easy,” Phaedra explains. This is not as much of a problem for singers, but both will perform better when energy is internalized and controlled.

“Try walking across the floor as if you had a bad day,” she suggests. Then, as if you had a great day. Finally, “as if you were going nuts.” How does each make you feel? Somewhere among these extremes is a range that works for you. By keeping within this range, a dancer will generate much more visual interest and excitement. The same is true of singing. Energy that is focused and contained makes for a more compelling performance.

Full body warm-up

Head Start with a gentle, basic movement, side to side, back and forth.

Shoulders Roll shoulders both back and forth, then in an alternating, undulating motion that starts from the middle of the back.

Ribcage Try to isolate the ribcage. First move it from side to side, then forward and back, without

Hip Work— Veil Not Required

According to Phaedra, it's impossible to isolate the hips with straight legs, so hip work also strengthens the quadriceps muscles. (Helpful for long choral works, such as “Elijah”!)

- Bend knees slightly, with feet planted about a foot apart. Then move just the hips forward and back (i.e., in a *pelvic tilt*) and side to side.
- Now circle the hips, engaging the entire body. The upper torso moves opposite to the lower, the rib cage opposite to the hip. Keep arms raised.
- Finally, imagine there is a figure 8 sketched on the floor, and another written on the wall. Try to move your hips along the patterns, first horizontally to the floor, then vertically to the wall.

Since the 1970s, belly dancing has been a popular form of entertainment at Middle Eastern restaurants, and a fun way to exercise, as well. Few take it up in pursuit of a career; most take lessons and workshops just for the fun of it. Try it yourself!

moving the rest of the body. Next, combine these movements to form a circular motion.

Belly Lie on the floor, as if doing a hip roll, only focus and “tighten” the movement (in other words, don't lift the hips off the floor). ■

CS would like to thank **Mary Anna Brown** (aka Phaedra) for her help with this article.



Robert Honeysucker on Pacing

Words from the Wise

E“Elijah is a musical trap!”
Baritone Robert Honeysucker ought to know. This gigantic Romantic choral opera requires super effort from soloists and choristers alike. “It’s important for the singers to know how to get into character, but not go overboard,” he says. “It’s easy to get caught up and blow your wad.”

Despite some truly *stentorian* (loud) passages, Honeysucker advises — “The cry to Baal is as intense as it gets” — the conductor would want intense singing, but not to be blasted. “Not everything is *forte*. Mendelssohn wrote in great variation for dramatic effect. Keep vibrant and energized, but stay open and relaxed. And make sure you are supporting properly.” Members of the chorus have to

remember “It’s not all about you!” In order to stay energized and avoid oversinging, the baritone recommends any exercise that stimulates breathing and gets the air flowing. “You have to keep the air moving through the sound in sustained passages,” he says. You want the same kind of energy [throughout] as in the “whirlwind,” (No. 34, see page 4) but without the volume. The demands for loud or soft are no different.” When he warms up, he does lots of moving exercises and *melismas*. “In music,” he cautions, “a little is good, but a lot is not necessarily better. What you want is lots of buoyancy, energy, breathing — not sound.”

Every singer has vocal issues. We asked this stage veteran about technical hurdles he has had to overcome. “Trying to maintain an

open and even legato and sing lightly in the middle voice is still a struggle and a challenge,” he admits. “Over time you learn enough about your own instrument to be able to cope with many of your weaknesses and difficulties. But there will always be times when you have to have someone [a teacher] help you. This just goes with the territory. One can learn to sing in six months to a year, but it takes a lifetime to be able to sing consistently.” His advice: “Get to know your instrument. And don’t be discouraged.” ■

Note WORTHY

CS would like to give special thanks to **Bisse Bowman** for her help with our Swedish Christmas feature (Dec. 05). We also note, with great sadness, the passing of **John Langstaff**, founder of the Revels (see “The Gift of Simplicity,” CS, Oct. 04, p. 1).

RESOURCES

ONLINE

www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/Elijah.html
www.classicalarchives.com/bios/codm/mendelssohn.html
www.operaonline.us/honeysucker_001.htm
www.truthinhistory.org/Jerusalem.htm
<http://movies.yahoo.com/movie/1800046058/details>

RECORDING

Felix Mendelssohn: Elijah. Bryn Terfel, Renee Fleming, Paul Daniel and the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, Decca, Recording 455688, New York, NY.

For additional resources, including live links, visit us at www.bluelanternpress.com and click on [View Content](#).

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