

# 'Elijah' has good, bad moments

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Music Critic

Mendelsson himself saw his oratorio *Elijah* as a predominantly dramatic work.

"With a subject like *Elijah*," the composer wrote, "it appears to me that the dramatic element should predominate..."

Some days prior to conducting *Elijah* John Alldis had also said that he viewed the work as a dramatic one. He seemed to suggest, indeed, that the oratorio was operatic in its characterization and its liveliness.

It was no surprise, therefore, that when Mr. Alldis conducted the chorus, orchestra and soloists — during the culminating concert of this year's American Symposium for Choral Music in McCain Auditorium on Saturday evening — it was the dramatic element that was to the fore and the conductor kept things moving along at a fair pace throughout.

There were, I think, gains and losses to this strong and forceful interpretation.

On the one hand there is no doubt that any Victorian cobwebs that might have lingered around the edges of the work were swept away and moments such as "Let the Fire Descend" made their full impact. Yet there was a loss also. What was gained in overall architecture of the performance was lost in the lack of the full emotional weight given to individual details. Thus there was no slowing at all for the chorale passage, "For He the Lord Our God", and I for one missed the tingle of the spine that comes from giving those harmonies a special treatment.

On the other hand, it must not be forgotten that merely to mount so impressive a performance with people who met each other for the first time six days earlier is difficult enough a task without some critic asking for those "special" moments as well.

*Elijah* is not an easy work for a chorus to sing, the very opening chorus has a melodic line, "the harvest now is over...", which taxes the ability to sing on pitch and with even tone. Shortly thereafter, "Yet

Doth the Lord See It Not!" poses rhythmic problems for choral ensemble; and so on through the work. The role of *Elijah* himself calls for a singer capable of changing almost without a break from a declamatory style to a lyrical one, as with the change from the exhortation to call on Baal and the immediately following "draw nearer" section of the next aria. The rôle calls, in fact, for some kind of ideal Heldenbaritone.

Finally, the orchestra has many a moment in which various of the string sections are called upon to intone delicately and in tune and in a very exposed manner, and the brass have plenty of exposed minefields to negotiate.

Despite its popularity, *Elijah* is not an easy work for even professional forces to bring off so that it holds the interest of the listener throughout.

How much more difficult it must be, then, for a group of amateurs to come together for less than a week (which is crowded with other events) and to present a convincing portrayal of the oratorio.

It was evident from the opening chorus, "Help Lord..." with its full bodied, secure singing that maestro John Alldis had weaved his magic on the forces at his disposal.

He is a virtuoso conductor, holding together disparate forces — widely separated in abilities — and molding them into one with a technique that is clear and secure. This was evident, for example, during the complex

"Thanks Be to God". There is a quality to the explicitness of John Alldis' conducting style that reminds me of the equally clear directions given by good leaders of jazz bands.

Brian Steele was a believable prophet, though lacking the strength of tone and ringing quality that makes for the greatest of the interpreters of the role. Vernon Yenne was an ardent and sweet-toned Obadiah and Jennifer Edwards was a secure and attractive Angel throughout.

Unfortunately the soprano, Nancy Nelson, seemed to be having vocal problems, more noticeably during the second half, and had difficulty holding her voice together.

Of those within the chorus who sang solo roles, Carolyn James (from Manhattan) was a strikingly effective Youth.

The orchestra played extremely well for Mr. Alldis, yet I cannot help but think that a vocal performance of this caliber deserves to be sung with an orchestra like the Wichita or Kansas City Symphony.

In the American Symposium for Choral Music, Manhattan has a festival of song that deserves to be much more widely known.

In John Alldis, the Symposium has a conductor and inspirer of singers that more than justifies his continued welcome in the Flint Hills.

Under his capable hands, the old warhorse galloped across our musical consciousness one more time, and did so with majesty and power.