

The Memorial Church of Harvard University

Music Notes for Sunday, October 23, 2022

A true polymath, Felix Mendelssohn was known by family and friends as a gifted poet and translator of poetry, a brilliant letter-writer and diarist, an accomplished artist, and a distinguished classicist and theologian, as well as a versatile and prodigiously talented musician. A conductor, pianist, organist, violinist, professor of composition, and a pioneering editor and performer of early music—including that of Bach and Handel—Mendelssohn led the premiere of his oratorio *Elijah* in the Birmingham Festival of 1846. It was received enthusiastically: a reporter from *The Times* wrote, “The last note of *Elijah* was drowned in a long-continued unanimous volley of plaudits, vociferous, and deafening.” It was the crowning glory of the composer’s immensely successful career, but sadly it was also one of his last works: he died the following year at the age of 38. “And then shall your light break forth” is the oratorio’s majestic final chorus.

American composer Margaret (Maggie) Burk is Director of Choral Activities at Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Her lilting setting of Psalm 121 radiates warmth and comfort, and makes effective use of unison choral singing.

Mendelssohn’s works for organ set a new, forward-looking standard for organ composition in the nineteenth century, while simultaneously harking back to the traditions and spirit of the German Baroque—and specifically to the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. The six organ sonatas were written for the organs of St. Paul’s Cathedral, London; this morning’s prelude features the beautiful closing movement of the third sonata, alongside a free-standing work composed in the same year. Our postlude is the majestic opening of the third sonata: an exuberant opening leads into an extended fugato section incorporating the chorale “Out of the depths I cry to thee,” before returning to the initial material for its triumphant conclusion.