

## Teresa Neff On *Elijah*



From the time it premiered in the morning of the Triennial Music Festival at Birmingham Town Hall in 1846 before Queen Victoria and Prince Albert (interior here) *Elijah* has been the second most popular oratorio before the English speaking world. That performance, with 125 instrumentalists and 271 in the chorus before and audience numbered about 2,000 was such a great success that eight numbers were encored. And applause obscured part of the final chorus. The British press remarked on the dramatic nature of the work and questioned why Mendelssohn did not write an opera.

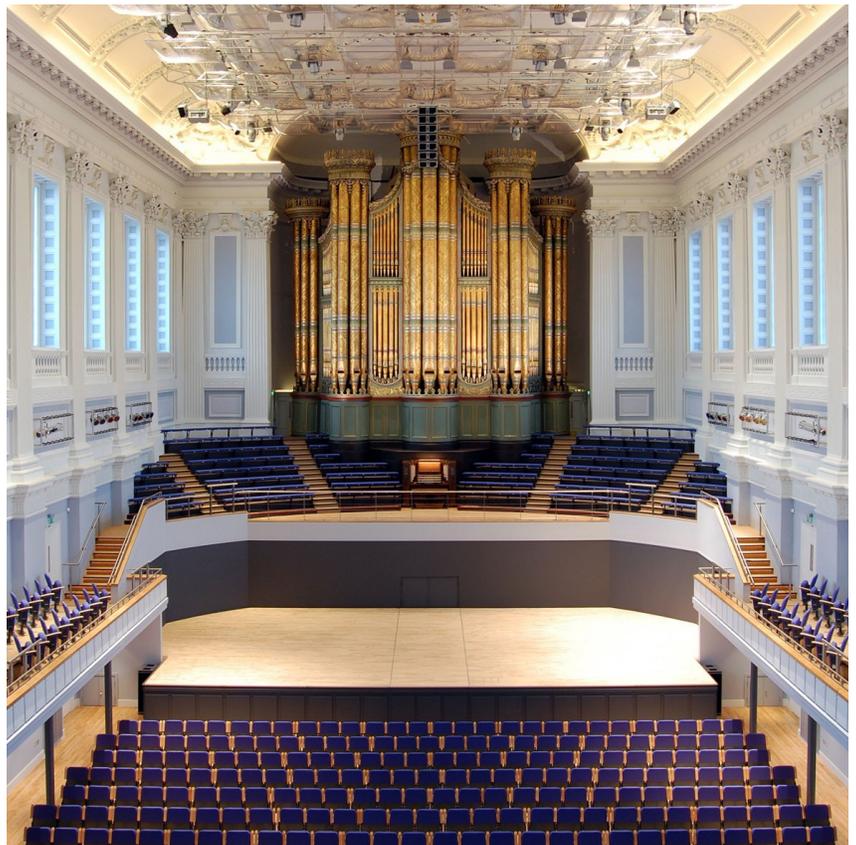
Jonas Chickering, founder of the piano manufacturers Chickering and Sons and then president of H+H, heard *Elijah* while traveling in England in the late 1840s and brought the score back to Boston with him.

H+H began rehearsing the oratorio in January 1848 and gave the Boston premiere on February 13, 1848. The oratorio was performed a total of nine times between the premiere and the end of that concert season, and along with Handel's *Messiah* and Haydn's *The Creation* became one of the most popular works performed by the Handel and Haydn Society. *Elijah*, like Handel's oratorios, is indeed richly vivid. For the H+H (and Boston) premiere of *Elijah*, there was a chorus of several hundred voices and an orchestra of about 50. The size of the H+H chorus was reduced beginning with Thomas Dunn, who conducted from 1967-1986. In 1980, the chorus was paid for the first time. In 1986, under the direction of Christopher Hogwood, H+H moved to historically informed performance practices.

For the next week's performance, there will be an orchestra of 49 with 38 in the chorus. One instrument that may not be as familiar to audiences today is the ophicleide, a brass instrument shaped like a bassoon. It was a popular bass instrument in early 19<sup>th</sup> century opera and orchestral music, but was replaced by the tuba by the end of the century. It has a full yet mellow sound that blends well with other brass instruments. I do believe the awe and richness of this oratorio will be clearly heard in Grant Lewellyn's approach.

Question from LE: The singer who impersonates Elijah has to carry much of the show. A YouTube sampler of next week's baritone Andrew Foster-Williams is [here](#). I can't resist adding a link to Bryn Terfel's recording [here](#). Do you think either interpretation is more historically correct?

I find both performances compelling. The role of Elijah is demanding and I think Andrew Foster-Williams will be wonderful.



Birmingham Town Hall, site of the *Elijah* premiere