

6th December 1907

MR. FRANCIS J. FOOTE'S  
CHOIR.

MEDELSSOHN'S ORATORIO—  
"ELIJAH."

From an announcement which appears in the illustrated programme relating to Wednesday evening last, it would seem that the above choir was formed by Mr. Foote, in the autumn of 1904, primarily for the purpose of studying, and preparing for public performance, the greatest works of musical genius of various nationalities in a manner worthy of the demands which such works rightfully make; and we are glad to know that the laudable desire of the conductor has justified the efforts which such a scheme involved, in the hearty support which has been previously accorded the efforts made in this direction.

In submitting the "Elijah," Mr. Francis J. Foote could not have chosen any composition more likely to please a Tunbridge Wells audience. Not because Mendelssohn's sublime work is a stranger to us, when it is taken into consideration that the old-established Tunbridge Wells Vocal Association has presented it with complete success on many occasions—the last in 1905; and then, again, the oratorio was included in Mr. F. C. Hunnibell's category of works, and given at least three times during the existence of his Choral Society. Consequently, the choruses and solos are quite familiar to all music lovers of this town; and one never tires of listening to Mendelssohn's oratorio, representing as it does a really wonderful and intensely dramatic production, containing, as it has rightly been maintained, some of the finest music to be found in the repertoire appertaining to oratorio of any of the past and present composers; while there is no doubt that, next to the "Messiah," the "Elijah" is the most popular oratorio in England. It is somewhat shorter, and more dramatic than Handel's masterpiece, and full of the most stirring incidents, and thereby rivetting the attention of even an uncultivated audience, from the first recitative down to the last chorus. A good deal naturally depends upon the libretto, and here the historian goes on to state that Mendelssohn was himself ever a loving and reverent student of the Bible, selecting and arranging in a great measure the words of his own oratorios. It is, of course, well known that this oratorio, although considerably altered afterwards, was produced for the first time at the Birmingham Festival on August 26th, 1846, when Mendelssohn conducted; and it seems extremely sad to think that his death was mainly attributable to the incessant toil incident upon so great an undertaking.

The persistent wet evening on Wednesday doubtless prevented many from reaching the Great Hall, and the unoccupied chairs were far too numerous. Comprehensive details of this popular composition, whether relating to the subject of music, have been treated with in our columns from time to time, so that it is only necessary to briefly confine our remarks to the actual performance. The well-known, though very exacting choruses—the tempo of some being considerably quickened to what one is accustomed—were splendidly given, reaching a very high level of excellence throughout, forming quite the feature of the evening; the singers (always under control), numbering some 80 voices delivering the arduous passages in a manner which betokened, apart from familiarity, much care and attention on the part of their talented and enthusiastic conductor.

Mr. Foote was surrounded by an orchestra, led by Mr. Rowsby Woolf, of which he might well feel proud, composed principally of members from the orchestras of the Philharmonic, Queen's Hall, Royal Academy of Music, etc., aided by a few of our principal local amateurs; and although the accompaniments at times in the choruses and solos were obtrusive—for which the acoustic properties of the Hall may be answerable—yet one realised, especially in the Overture, the presence of a body of highly skilled musicians.

Miss Pitt Soper's correct rendering of the soprano music was acknowledged with well merited applause, and "Hear, ye Israel" received artistic treatment, and was accurately sung; but her voice does not possess the breadth of power necessary for a weighty solo of this character. Countess Maffei was responsible for the contralto items, which of course included the gem "O Rest in the Lord." Mr. Thomas Gibbs, the tenor, was in excellent voice, and created the same favourable impression as on the last occasion, when Bach's "Passion Music" was given at the Opera House. The air, "If, with all your hearts," was rendered with rare power and expression; and the same remark applies to "Then shall the Righteous," his efforts being received with unstinted acclamation. Mr. Percival Driver, in the role of the "Prophet," who we also had the pleasure of hearing on the same occasion, was entirely successful. The introductory recitative gave evidence at once of Mr. Driver's capabilities as a vocalist, and well befitted for the onerous task set before him. His legato singing of "Lord, God of Abraham," and "It is enough" was distinctly admirable. We must not omit to mention Master Sydney Collett's beautiful singing in the part allotted to the "Youth," he also assisting in the duet with Miss Pitt Soper, and in the double quartette, when were locally associated Miss Kate Villeneuve-Smith, Miss Beryl Wilkinson, Mr. Stanley Butter, and Mr. Leslie Mackay; and here we might express regret for the exclusion of the lovely trio, "Lift thine eyes," and the second double quartette, "Holy, Holy."

We understand that Mr. Francis J. Foote, who met with a hearty ovation on Wednesday, has arranged his next concert for April 30, 1908 when the programme will include Brahms' Requiem (by special request) Dvořák's Te Deum and Tchaikovsky's Night Concerts.