

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy

(b. Hamburg, 3 February 1809; d. Leipzig, 4 November 1847)

Incidental music to Jean Racine's *Athalie*, in the German translation by Ernst Raupach and Mendelssohn, op. 74 (1843-5)

Toward the end of 1840 Felix Mendelssohn, then firmly ensconced in Leipzig at the height of his fame, received an unusual offer from the royal house of Prussia in Berlin: the newly ascended King Frederick William IV wished to establish a Berlin Academy of the Arts comparable to the French Académie Royale, and Mendelssohn, as the greatest living German musician, was invited to head its musical section. Flattered by this high honor and tempted by the large salary of 3,000 a year, Mendelssohn was inclined to accept, and asked for a further specification of his actual duties. This simple question was eventually to embroil him in five years of tedious correspondence with various high-level Prussian bureaucrats. Although he moved with his family to Berlin in 1841, step by step the scope of his duties and the size of his salary were reduced until finally, at the end of 1845, the appointment was terminated by mutual consent and Mendelssohn returned to the more hospitable climate of Leipzig.

The Berlin appointment can hardly be described as musically barren, however. The new king, himself an amateur draftsman with a keen interest in architecture and landscape gardening, was a confirmed adherent of the romantic movement in German arts and letters and sought a revival of classical theater in his private theater in Potsdam. Various projects were proposed to Mendelssohn for musical setting: Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, Racine's *Athalie*, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*. Of these, all but the latter were to reach fruition – spectacularly so in the case of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – and were duly performed before an invited audience in the king's private theater, followed a short while later by a public performance. Finally Mendelssohn balked at the king's proposal that he write music for the whole of Aeschylus' *Orestia* trilogy, arguing that no living composer was capable of handling such a task. Relations with the king instantaneously cooled; the interesting series of theatrical ventures came to an end; and through Mendelssohn's departure from Berlin and early death the world was withheld a successor to what has undoubtedly become his most popular score, the incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, op. 61.

*Athalie* is the last of Mendelssohn's theatrical projects for Frederick William IV to reach completion. Composed for solo vocalists, mixed chorus, and orchestra from 1843 to 12 November 1845, was given its première in Berlin-Charlottenburg on 1 December 1845 and its first public performance on 8 January 1846 in Potsdam. The play is a work of Racine's old age and one of the supreme achievements of his art. Originally written for the Parisian girl's school of Saint-Cyr, with musical interludes by Jean-Baptiste Moreau (1656-1733), it deals with a biblical subject found in II Kings 10-11: the attempt of Queen Athaliah to preserve the reign of her murdered son Ahaziah by slaying "all the royal seed," missing only the infant prince Joash. After reigning for seven years (c. 842-837 BC), she was deposed and executed by supporters of Joash as the rightful king. Mendelssohn's score, once famous for its overture and the "War March of the Priests," was published in a version for piano four-hands "without words" by Breitkopf & Härtel, Leipzig, in 1849 as "No. 2 of the posthumous works." The music, and especially the choral odes, represents mature Mendelssohn at a high level of inspiration.

The Plot: Athaliah, the daughter of King Ahab, takes revenge for the downfall of her dynasty by exterminating the entire royal house of Judah. A strange boy has thrice appeared to her in ominous dreams; now she bursts in the Temple of God in a lust for revenge and sees the boy

before her in the flesh. She attempts – in vain – to extract him from the custody of the priests. The High Priest reveals to his followers that the boy, Joash, is the last descendant of the house of David. He has protected the boy from persecution by the vengeful queen and now proclaims him to be king. He prophesies a new Zion and the arrival of a Redeemer born of Jewish descent. When Athaliah reappears in the temple with her armed retinue, she is shown Joash seated behind a curtain on the royal throne. Now she hesitates no longer to have the boy put to death, but finds herself in the decisive moment surrounded by armed Levites. Convinced that an implacable God has emerged victorious, she submits to her death.

Bradford Robinson, 2005

Performance material: Breitkopf und Härtel, Wiesbaden