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## MUSIC

## Choir and orchestra present Mendelssohn's dramatic 'Elijah'

By Keith Powers  
Contributing writer

Mendelssohn's oratorio "Elijah" tells the dramatic story of the Old Testament prophet who foretold the future, confronted kings and queens, ended droughts and raised the dead. It seems like there could hardly be a more fitting location to sing the great work than the Church of the Transfiguration at Rock Harbor.

Gloriae Dei Cantores, led by artistic director and chief conductor Richard K. Pugsley, presents "Elijah" Friday and Saturday at the glorious church in Orleans. The GDC choir and orchestra will be joined by four notable soloists: soprano Martha Guth, mezzo Jossie Pérez, tenor Limmie Pulliam and bass Andrew Nolen. They will all sing "Elijah" with the original German libretto.

"The English version was even approved by Mendelssohn himself, and gets used most of the time," Pugsley says, "but subtleties mean



Soprano Martha Guth (left) and bass soloist Andrew Nolen (right) will be two of four soloists for the Gloriae Dei Cantores presentation this weekend of Mendelssohn's oratorio "Elijah." COURTESY OF MARTHA GUTH AND KRISTIN HOEBERMANN

slightly different things. And the English version doesn't quite capture what he wrote. The tremendous harmonic language, lined up with the German, shows his genius more accurately.

"The work has stayed alive because of the gorgeous lines," he says. "There are some beautiful moments, that really grab hearts and souls."

Mendelssohn almost single-handedly brought the oratorio form back to life in the early 1800s. He re-instilled an interest in the work of Bach, famously performing and proselytizing for Bach's own great oratorio, the St. Matthew



Passion, which hadn't seen the stage in years. At a time when opera was also seeing a resurgence, Mendelssohn "began re-expressing some of these biblical stories," Pugsley says. "With a new harmonic language, a bridge between the classical and romantic."

The four soloists each boast international pedigrees. Pérez, a powerful lyric voice who has sung Mozart at the Met and an unforgettable Carmen on the Boston Common before an audience of 150,000, makes a return appearance with GDC, as do Nolen and Guth. Pulliam, a winner of multiple prizes in recent years, makes his GDC

### If you go

**What:** Gloriae Dei Cantores sings Mendelssohn's "Elijah"

**Where:** Church of the Transfiguration, 5 Bay View Drive, Rock Harbor, Orleans

**When:** 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday

**Tickets:** \$35, \$30 seniors, students and under 18 free

**Reservations and information:** [www.gdcchoir.org](http://www.gdcchoir.org) or 508-240-2400

debut.

Preparation for a work of this scale – the score of "Elijah" runs almost 350 pages, and performances last more than two hours – can present the biggest problem for conductors leading more than three dozen choristers (Pugsley serves as choir director as well), an even larger orchestra, and four soloists.

"Many recordings I've heard, and most performances, have such little rehearsal time to get to the subtleties," Pugsley says. "So many things. At one spot in the

score, the strings are playing this rhythmic 16th-note agitated section, and in almost every recording, the choir does the same thing with the vocal line. But Mendelssohn actually wrote this lyric vocal line. So we're working to have the choir hold that legato line.

"It's a challenge," Pugsley says, "and I have become frustrated, because of all the pressure to do more with less time. But we've had the past two-and-a-half weeks to dig into 'Elijah,' and the group has taken on lots of individual responsibility."

Pugsley first led performances of "Elijah" with GDC in 2002. "When I go back to it, I'm shocked at how dramatic this work is. It's really a staged oratorio, and the dramatic movement shows up in a number of places.

"In our space, and with the four soloists we have, who are like quiet rock stars just doing their thing, we have the ability to bring in different colors, and highlight the meaning in the text."

# Orleans-based choir on two-week Italy tour

By KATHI SCRIZZI DRISCOLL | Published: NOVEMBER 3, 2015 | [Leave a comment](#)



(Photo by Stu Rosner)

The Gloriae Dei Cantores choir from Orleans is making its sixth tour of Italy, starting Wednesday with a performance at the Pisa Cathedral. The two-week tour will also take the choir to Siena and Florence.

This 40-voice choir, based at the Community of Jesus and performing weekly at the Church of the Transfiguration, has previously performed in Rome, Venice, Sicily, Turin and Milan. Gloria Dei Cantores will give a concert Saturday at the Duomo di Siena and Nov. 11-12 at the Basilica of San Lorenzo in Florence.

The choir is directed by Richard Pugsley. Over its more than 25-year history, Gloriae Dei Cantores has performed in 24 countries, done invitational tours to Russia, opened the 900th anniversary celebration of the Basilica of San Marco in Venice, and collaborated with the Boston Pops as well as the BBC. The group's discography includes 50 recordings, including sacred choral music from Gregorian chant through 21st century.



# The Boston Musical Intelligencer

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JULY 10, 2015

IN: REVIEWS

## Baal Heedless, יהיה Responsive

by LEE EISEMAN

On the quiet side of Cape Cod, a good-natured ecumenical community lives, worships and, in the mode of Benedict, glorifies God in music and art. Surrounded by vernacular white-shingled living quarters in Orleans stands the [Church of the Transfiguration](#), an imposing moderno-Byzantine basilica which William Rawn designed before becoming famous for Ozawa Hall. The 120-ft-long sanctuary is graced with stone carvings, glittering mosaics, and a gargantuan organ whose pipe chambers run the length of the nave. Gloriæ Dei Cantores, a chorus drawn from the religious community (and this is no ordinary community and no ordinary community chorus), arrayed itself behind a well-booked freelance orchestra in the theatrically lighted apse in order to offer up a sumptuously sounded *Elijah*.

Sister Mercy, my gracious minder and guide (not of my pen, of course), escorted me to a choice seat and joined me for the entire final rehearsal. Caveats therefore first: mercy must be shown in reviewing a not-quite-ready undertaking of such importance. One of the sopranos simply marked half of one of her arias, and no one could blame her, since she had already sung several rehearsals this week and was expecting to perform her role on the two subsequent days. In one difficult section, offbeat chorus and orchestra ensemble coordinated on the third try (perfectly). The wisdom of singing *Elijah* in German for English-speaking audiences eludes me, unless the German is perfectly articulated *Hochdeutsch*. If we are not hearing the sounds that Mendelssohn had in his head when composing, then why bother, especially since he prepared the English version for the world premiere, in Birmingham before Victoria and Albert? If we understand the words easily, the first half paints such a vivid narrative of idol worship, rain dances, still small voices, and healings from the dead as to suggest a Biblical movie epic. Why vitiate those effects in exchange for dubious, albeit fashionable, authenticity? And we missed the familiar texts from Scripture, such as "Lift thine eyes to the mountains, whence cometh help."

But here's the buried lede: there was a considerable amount to like about this community's take on the oratorio. Let's start with the chorus. The 40 sisters, brothers, and residents have in 25 years produced 50 CDs, attaining a level of execution that volunteer choruses from secular communities can only dream of. The sound was warm and articulate, never harsh or forced. They remained fresh to the end. Pitch and unanimity never failed, even though hard consonants and sibilants sometimes stuttered. If Gloriæ Dei Cantores did not quite pour forth the volume of tone able to equal an orchestra of 52 and the immersive 150-rank Skinner+ organ in partial cry, and if they rather lacked the pagan abandon of Baal worshipers, they nonetheless produced inspired, moving impersonations of angels, and were convincing as *voces populi*. "Cast Thy Burden...", intended for angelic solo quartet and here done by full chorus, showed



discipline and shaping allowing 40 to sound like four. Nuance, textural commitment, and consolation were notably evident in that number.

We also enjoyed organist David Chalmers's management of a part not usually not included in *Elijah* performances. Providing just the right underlining and emphasis, the organ's role was apparently derived from the improvisations of Henry Gauntlett at the premiere. Mendelssohn loved organs, having near the time of *Elijah* written six major sonatas in short order, so it's a subject of debate as to why he apparently failed to include the organ in the oratorio's urtext. An interesting essay is [here](#).

The well-chosen orchestra of Cape and Boston freelancers followed the Biblical dictate to "Be not afraid." They were dependably well-tuned and generally tight of ensemble, though they failed to rise to the status of a character in the narrative. This may have been due to the beaty, decidedly un-improvisatory conducting of Richard Pugsley. To be fair, understand that this was the final rehearsal of a piece apparently new to many of the players. And there still were gorgeous moments such as the cello section's big tune in "It is enough," which evoked "*Es ist vollbracht*." One can assume that Friday's and Saturday's performances will offer more surprises and contrasts. Baal worshipers should not sound like Hebrews, and do we really need to see fixed smiles on the choristers?

The three women soloists sounded unexciting in this preparatory reading; the fave trio "Lift Thine Eyes" fell flat, voices ill-matched, lacking in wonder, one wandering north of true pitch. As Ahab, Obadiah, and soloist, redoubtable tenor Limmie Pulliam, large of stature and stentorian of tone, projected ringing avowals in clear German.

Of course there's no reason to offer this oratorio without the services of a vivid and authoritative titulaire. In bass-baritone Andrew Nolen we had a *trump* of fame sounding the Lord's call. The tall, ascetic prophet demonstrated total commitment in torrents of tone. He acted compellingly as well through an evocative countenance. With pleasure I would open the door for him next Passover.



Performances of *Elijah* continue Friday and Saturday nights, and there is every possibility that by Saturday night it will be amazing. The organ as installed, restored, and augmented by Nelson Barden can be heard on Friday afternoons as part of the regular 3:00 tour. A concert of organ and brass comes next Friday and Saturday. More on this impressive and unusual choir and its many recordings can be found [here](#).

**Lee Eiseman is the publisher of the *Intelligencer*.**

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Delightful to know about this radiant Benedictine community and church on the Cape. John Ruskin would have loved it. Robert Lowell might have cited it in verse. New England is so rich with what we might call experimental traditionalism —

# MUSIC SCENE IN ORLEANS

BY SUSANNA GRAHAM-PYE

