

“Wie der Hirsch schreit nach frischem Wasser”

The KJV rendition of Psalm 42 is not the text on which Mendelssohn’s composition is based, and in order to understand his musical intentions one must know which words he actually set to music. Mendelssohn was using Luther’s German translation of the psalm, and whereas, e.g., the KJV rendition of the opening lines read “as the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God” (“hart” is an archaic term for “stag”), Luther’s translation (translated into English) reads “as the hart screams out...so my soul, O God, screams out to Thee.” The translation given below translates Luther’s German into English, whereby a note should be made about the German phrase “harre auf Gott,” which translates literally as “wait for God,” or “await God” (who will help in need). I have translated this phrase simply as “Have faith in God.”

1. Opening chorus

As the stag screams out for fresh water,
So my soul, O God, screams out to Thee.

2. Aria (soprano)

My soul thirsts for God,
For the living God.
When will I reach that distant place
Where I behold God’s countenance?

3a. Recitative (soprano)

My tears are my food by day and by night,
For every day I am asked,
“So where is thy God?”
When I contemplate this,
I pour out my heart in solitude.

3b. Aria (soprano, with women’s chorus)

For I truly wanted to go
With the multitudes on pilgrimage
To the house of God,
With rejoicing and with thanks,
And make pilgrimage to the house of
God,
With all the people that are celebrating.

4. Chorus

Why art thou disquieted, my soul,
And art so restless within me?
Have faith in God!
For I shall yet thank Him
For the help of His countenance.

5. Recitative (soprano)

My God, my soul is disquieted within me,
Therefore I remind myself of Thee!
Thy waters rush along,
So that here the depths,
And there the depths roar;
All the billows and waves of thy waters
Wash over me.
My God, my soul is troubled within me.

6. Quintet (men’s TTBB quartet with soprano solo)

Men:
By day the Lord
Has ordained his loving kindness,
And by night I shall sing to Him
And worship the God of my life.

Solo soprano:

My God, my soul is disquieted within me,
Why hast thou forgotten me?
Why must I go mourning
When my enemy oppresses me?

7. Final chorus

Why art thou disquieted, my soul,
And art so restless within me?
Have faith in God!
For I shall yet thank Him,
Who is the help of my countenance,
And my God.
Praised be the Lord, the God of Israel,
From now and in all eternity.