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Fanny Mendelssohn: the quandaries of a female composer in the 19th century

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FANNY MENDELSSOHN: THE QUANDARIES OF A FEMALE COMPOSER IN
THE 19TH CENTURY

by

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This Independent Study, submitted by Isabella Kumagai in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Music from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

Dr. Nariaki Sugiura (Committee Chair)

Dr. Anne Christopherson

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Isabella Kumagai
7/28/2021

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ABSTRACT

Gender inequality, such as inequality regarding salary and different treatment for men and women in the workplace, has been a polemic topic in various areas and for diverse reasons. In the music environment, the scene is not different, and the issue has been there for centuries. Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel (1805-1847) was a skilled pianist and composer who grew up in a culturally sophisticated home. Although Fanny and her younger brother, Felix Mendelssohn, shared a common music education, Fanny, like many women at the time, was not encouraged to become a professional musician, unlike her brother.

Despite her unconditional support to Felix and the known fact that he strongly depended on her opinion about his compositions, her brother was also opposed to her pieces being published, due to her gender. That is one of the main reasons why only a very small percentage of her compositions were published. As per society's norms and expectations, her performances were restricted to her private gatherings.

The intention of this research is to study the life and work of Fanny Mendelssohn, explore how her gender affected her career as a composer and pianist, and analyze her musical influences.

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of this Study

This research intends to study the life and work of Fanny Mendelssohn with focus on how her gender affected her musical career and the publication of her musical pieces. Although Fanny and her sister Rebecka received similar education to their brothers Felix and Paul in their early years, and their parents Abraham and Lea Mendelssohn strongly valued education despite gender, Fanny's musical studies were a shadow of Felix's, being discontinued as soon as he left for college.

Besides that, Fanny never received the support to pursue a musical career like Felix did, as the family's expectations for her future were that she would become a mother and housewife, keeping her musical talent to private gatherings only. But why did a talented woman agree to stay home and not publish for 40 years? It is known that she composed over 450 works; why do most of her works remain unavailable to students and scholars today?

This research will investigate Fanny's education, influences, family dynamic and the impacts of those in her personal life and in her musical style and output.

Chapter 1: Fanny Mendelssohn, Biography

Born in Hamburg on November 14th, 1805, the German composer and pianist Fanny Mendelssohn was the oldest of four children born to Abraham Mendelssohn Bartholdy and Lea Salomon. She was descended on both sides from distinguished Jewish families, but her parents had converted from Judaism to become Lutherans so she was baptized as a Christian in 1816, becoming Fanny Cacilie Mendelssohn Bartholdy.

Regarding education in the Mendelssohn home, one could say that intellect had no gender. Fanny and her younger sister Rebecka had access to education and culture that made them privileged women for that time. Lea gave great importance and attention to her children's education, and she had them start playing piano as early as possible, practicing five minutes at a time, gradually increasing the amount of time as the child was willing.

The Mendelssohn family discovered that music lessons could be an asset in their daughters' social image so they encouraged them to take piano or voice lessons. Expertise in music was seen both as an improvement in their chances for marriage and a good way to provide entertainment. Nevertheless, there was a strict and severe boundary around the subject: girls would never be encouraged to take music too seriously¹.

¹ Emily Tarpenning, "Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: A Bridge Between Felix Mendelssohn and Johannes Brahms" (Masters thesis, University of North Texas, 1997), 1.

Felix was born four years after Fanny so Fanny already had a solid musical lead over her younger brother which she maintained for some years. Despite the Mendelssohns having two child prodigies, one after the other, their last two children, Rebecka and Paul, were not endowed with talents as those of Fanny and Felix². However they also received musical education. Rebecka studied voice and Paul was a cellist.

Besides the piano lessons Fanny and Felix took from their mother, they also received piano lessons from other instructors. The first of these was Marie Bigot, a famous pianist who had lived in Vienna for many years. She started teaching them in 1816 and was the one and only female piano instructor the children had. The children's pianistic education was based more on the study of great masters, like Beethoven, Mozart, and Bach, than on a purely technical approach to the instrument³.

At the age of 13, Fanny surprised her father by playing, from memory, all 24 preludes of the first volume of the *Well-Tempered Klavier*, by Johann Sebastian Bach. When her aunt Henriette Mendelssohn heard about it, she demonstrated great concern that the child was being forced by her mother to practice too much. What she did not know was that not only was Fanny not being forced to practice, but her amazing musical memory and talent allowed her to accomplish this achievement with little effort. Great musical accomplishments came with ease to Fanny.

In 1818 the musician Carl Friedrich Zelter (1758-1832) was hired by the Mendelssohn family to teach composition to Fanny and Felix. In the following year, the philologist Karl Heyse (1797-1855) became their tutor in general subjects. All that

² Françoise Tillard, *Fanny Mendelssohn* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1992), 50.

³ Françoise Tillard, *Fanny Mendelssohn*, 51.

happened at their house, as the Mendelssohn children did not attend school. Although all the children had access to education and culture, the boys did receive a different education from the girls. Nevertheless, they were all expected to achieve a level of excellence, which could mislead to the conclusion that there was equal treatment despite gender.

Although Fanny received the same musical education that her brother did at a young age, and her musical studies and talent were equal to those acquired by her younger brother, it was always impressed on her that her focus was to become a good housewife. She was forbidden to perform for money or to have her music published, while Felix was encouraged to perform in public, to travel to different countries to experience music outside of their home, and to promote his musical career.

As Fanny did not start her diary until 1829⁴, long past her formative years, there are not many intimate details about her education and the development of her personality through childhood and youth.

In 1821, when Fanny was 16 years old, she met her future husband, Wilhelm Hensel, an up-and-coming painter in Berlin. He was eleven years older than Fanny, which, along with the fact that his sister was a Catholic mystic, concerned Fanny's parents, who strongly discouraged a Catholic connection. In the following year, Wilhelm was courting Fanny while the teenager was secretly setting some of his poems to music⁵. In 1823, Wilhelm left for a 5-year trip to Italy to study painting. Meanwhile, Fanny wrote him songs,

⁴ Angela Mace Christian, "Hensel [née Mendelssohn (-Bartholdy)], Fanny Cacilie," *Grove Music Online*, November 28, 2018, <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001/omo-9781561592630-e-3000000159>.

⁵ Maureen Buja, "Musicians and Artists: Mendelssohn and Wilhelm Hensel," accessed December 12, 2020, <https://interlude.hk/musicians-artists-mendelssohn-wilhelm-hensel/>.

as letter-writing was forbidden by her mother. Her songs tended to be about distance and absence.

The Mendelssohn family lived in a house in the *Neue Promenade 7*, in Berlin, which was owned by Lea's mother, Bella Salomon. In 1825 a major event happened in the family: Bella died and the home was inherited by others in the family, so Lea and Abraham would have to either purchase it or rent it. Instead, the Mendelssohn family chose to move to *Leipzigerstrasse 3*. After doing broad renovations, the house became an inspirational center of the Mendelssohns' daily life and played an important role in their educational and musical routine, shaping their whole lifestyle. The house, shaped like a "U", had a *Gartenhaus* (garden house) in the back, which became the central music room for Sunday Musicales run by Lea and Abraham and, later, by Fanny herself.

The Gartenhaus opened onto a lawn and spacious garden that could fit up to 200 guests. Music would spill from the open doors of the Gartenhaus, bringing a pleasant mood for the Sunday musical events that the Mendelssohn family started so that young Felix could listen to his compositions being played live by great musicians. The location became a significant part of the Mendelssohn family identity. In 1846, at the age 41, Fanny wrote, "I can't even express how happy the garden made me this summer. Our entire lifestyle depends so entirely on this location that I can only think with terror of having to crawl off somewhere else⁶."

⁶ Christian, "Hensel [née Mendelssohn (-Bartholdy)], Fanny Cacilie."



Figure 1: Image of the *Gartenhaus* by Wilhelm Hensel, showing Fanny Hensel's studio windows to the left of the columns.

After five years, in October 1828, Wilhelm returned from Italy. After such a long absence he had to work his way back into the Mendelssohn family circle. The fact that he was appointed Court Painter opened the way for their marriage, which happened on October 3rd, 1829.

Although Wilhelm made his way into the Mendelssohn family circle and married Fanny within a year of his return from the 5-year trip, he struggled to fit into their circle, which was called "The Wheel." Felix was the central figure of "The Wheel"⁷. Besides his

⁷ Françoise Tillard, *Fanny Mendelssohn*, 163.

long absence, Wilhelm was 11 years older than Fanny and had no musical background, hence his feeling of not belonging to “The Wheel.” On June 17th, 1829, Rebecka wrote to Felix, “Yesterday evening, while engaged in a delightful conversation in the magic moonlight with her extremely ardent fiance, Fanny fell asleep... Why? Because you are not there.” Wilhelm not only had to work his way into the family circle, but he also had a very high standard to live up to: Felix.

That does not mean Fanny agreed with her sister’s opinion about Wilhelm. A week after Rebecka’s letter, on June 24th, 1829, Fanny and her friends initiated Wilhelm into the close-knit family circle⁸. Later that same year, Wilhelm sent Felix a drawing of “The Wheel” (figure 2). Wilhelm painted himself on the outside of the wheel, connected to Fanny by a leash. He clearly felt like an outsider. Felix is shown right in the middle of the wheel, more evidence that the family dynamic centered on him, even after he moved to another country.

⁸ Christian, “Hensel [née Mendelssohn (-Bartholdy)], Fanny Cacilie.”

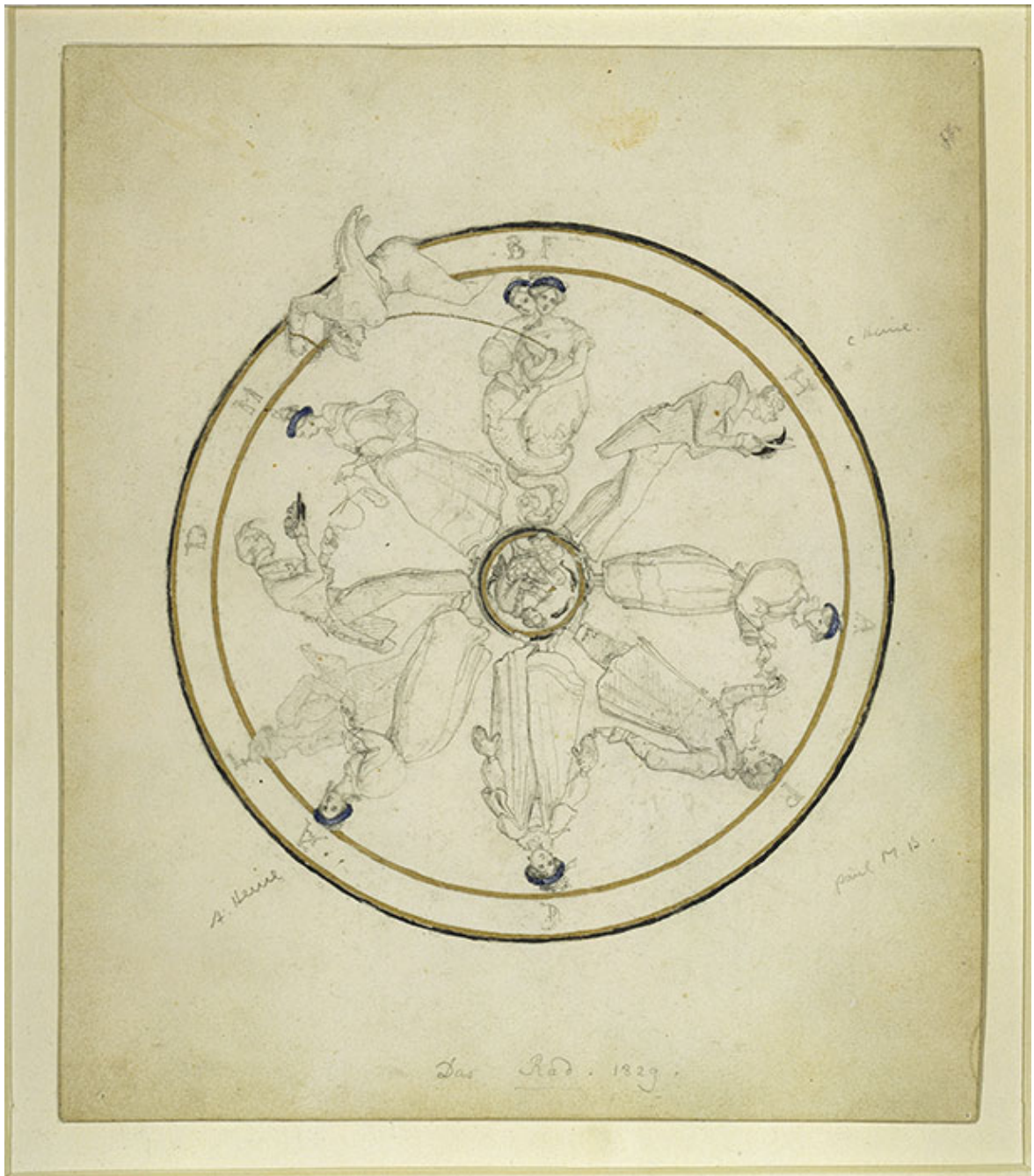


Figure 2: Wilhelm Hensel, "The Wheel", 1829.

In 1830, a year after their wedding, Fanny and Wilhelm had their first and only child. Sebastian Ludwig Felix Hensel, named after Fanny's three favorite composers, was born two months prematurely and after a difficult pregnancy. Fanny raised her only son

under humanist ideals and without the strict and disciplined environment she grew up in⁹. She wrote to her brother about the frustration she was facing for having trouble composing after she gave birth. Felix responded: “(...) The child is not yet a half year old, and you already want to have ideas other than Sebastian?” He continued, “Be happy that you have him, music is only absent when it just has no place.”

During their marriage, Fanny continued to set Hensel’s poems to music and dropped other poets from her repertoire. Although Fanny was strongly discouraged by her father and brothers to dedicate herself to composing and publishing, Wilhelm, along with Fanny’s mother Lea, was a great supporter of her talent. After many years, they finally convinced her to publish some of her work. Unfortunately, that only happened one year before her death¹⁰.

Despite the physical distance between her and Felix, who was now living in England, they kept working together. When he was being pressed by his publisher to give him material, Fanny let some of her Lieder appear under her brother’s name¹¹. Her song “Die Nonne”, for example, appeared as no. 12 in Felix Mendelssohn’s Op. 9. Numbers 7 and 10 in that same song collection were also Fanny’s compositions.

Although she had her husband’s and mother’s support to pursue her artistic virtuosity, despite society’s rules, Fanny relied strongly on her father’s and Felix’s

⁹ Crystal J. Whitaker, “A Comprehensive Biography and Pedagogical Analysis of Six Lieder by Fanny Cacilie Mendelssohn Hensel” (Masters thesis, University of North Dakota, 2007), 12.

¹⁰ Tarpinning, “Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: A Bridge Between Felix Mendelssohn and Johannes Brahms”, 27.

¹¹ Buja, “Musicians and Artists: Mendelssohn and Wilhelm Hensel.”

opinions, who repeatedly told her that “the home was stage enough for a woman¹².” Thus, she did not attempt to perform in public nor to publish her compositions. While Felix pursued his career in public, Fanny pursued hers in private. In 1831, approximately nine months after Sebastian’s birth, she revived her *Sonntagmusiken*, Sunday music get-togethers that became a popular invitation-only concert series. It was a continuation of the “Sunday Musicales.” Up to 200 people would attend Fanny’s weekly *Sonntagmusiken*. Well-known aristocrats who attended included Karl Zelter, Paganini, Franz Liszt, Clara Schumann, Gounod, and others. Fanny was famous for being a gracious hostess, extremely talented, and musically gifted, and was known as the best pianist in the city. Her concerts were considered the best that Berlin had to offer, and it was through her events that many works of Bach, Handel, and Gluck were heard for the first time. As the concerts became more elaborate, Fanny organized her own choir, which rehearsed every Friday evening¹³.

Performers in the *Sonntagmusiken* would include Clara Schumann, Franz Liszt, Fanny herself and also her younger sister Rebecka, who would often be the first to sing some of Fanny’s compositions. The musical events revived Fanny’s musical inspiration and, once again, she began to compose.

But after Rebecka, who was very close to her older sister, got married, her time for singing was significantly reduced. Not having the sister’s feedback whenever Fanny wanted discouraged Fanny from writing.

¹² Tarpinning, “Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: A Bridge Between Felix Mendelssohn and Johannes Brahms”, 29.

¹³ Tarpinning, “Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: A Bridge Between Felix Mendelssohn and Johannes Brahms”, 30.

It is important to note that Fanny's reputation was obtained solely through her performances at her home since she was not permitted to perform elsewhere. The *Sonntagmusiken* was a great opportunity for the hostess to transcend the private and public divide. Because it happened within the private sphere and no critics ever attended the performances, it was socially acceptable for her to perform. Therefore, Fanny reached a broad audience with her musical abilities and even brought prestige to the Mendelssohn family name in Berlin and abroad.

Besides the discouragement from Abraham and Felix, Fanny's lack of self-confidence constantly held her back. The fact that she pursued her role as a wife and a mother in the first place, dedicating herself and her time mainly for that, had her believing she was inferior to others in music. Her letters to Felix often showed she believed she had no talent for playing piano. That was a consequence of her father constantly reminding her, since the beginning of her childhood, that the most important role in her life was that of a housewife, and that anything else, including piano studies, should never get in the way. She grew up with the belief that her value was primarily related to her success in marriage and motherhood.

Despite Felix's clear disapproval of Fanny performing in public and publishing her pieces, he always encouraged his sister to keep playing and composing privately. During his tour in England in 1829, he wrote to his father that Fanny should choose which pieces of his or hers should be sent to the publisher Schlesinger in that year. Of course, all would be submitted under his own name.

A music critic of *The Athenaeum*, Henry Chorley, wrote, "Had Madame Hensel been a poor man's daughter, she must have become known to the world by the side of

Madame Schumann and Madame Pleyel, as a female pianist of the very highest class. Like her brother, she was as generally accomplished as she was specially gifted¹⁴."

After having three of her pieces published in Felix's Op. 8 (nos. 2, 3 and 12), in 1830, three more of Fanny's Lieder were published under her brother's name. This time, in his Op. 9 (nos. 7, 10 and 12). These are, currently, the six pieces that were confirmed to be published under her brother's name, although they were written by Fanny.

There are no entries in Fanny's diary from June of 1832 to May of the next year, time during which researchers believe she suffered the first of two or three miscarriages¹⁵. During each alleged miscarriage, there is a gap in her diary along with other possible indications, such as drawings by Wilhelm that infer the possible losses and a letter from Felix in 1837 in which he mentions "such a miserable accident" that was suffered by his older sister.

The death of Fanny's father, Abraham, in 1835 was a tragic loss for her but it did free her from the restrictions he always pressed upon her, preventing her from pursuing greater artistic goals. Nonetheless, Felix became her new paternal figure, and Fanny submitted to him as she had to her father. She did not go against his will until 1846, when she finally decided to publish, despite her brother's disapproval.

Another bold move by Fanny after her father's death was her first and only performance in a public concert; she performed Felix's Piano Concerto in G Minor for a benefit concert on February 27th, 1838. Besides the fact that her father was no longer alive

¹⁴ Tarpenning, "Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: A Bridge Between Felix Mendelssohn and Johannes Brahms", 31.

¹⁵ Whitaker, "A Comprehensive Biography and Pedagogical Analysis of Six Lieder by Fanny Cacilie Mendelssohn Hensel," 13-14.

to prevent this from happening, the concert was raising money for a good cause, which could explain the “act of rebellion.”

Shortly after Fanny and Wilhelm’s marriage, Felix had organized a trip for their family to go to Italy¹⁶. Although visiting that country had been Fanny’s desire for a long time, she had to refuse it due to insufficient financial conditions and adverse views of her parents and husband. Almost 10 years later, though, in 1839, Fanny could finally go to Italy with Wilhelm. They visited Milan, Venice, Florence and Rome, where she was admired as both a pianist and a composer as she had never been before. The composers in Rome looked to her to demonstrate what they should know about German music¹⁷.

It was during this trip that she met Charles Gounod and introduced him to many musical genres through works by her, Beethoven, Felix, and Bach. She is briefly mentioned in his memoirs, and it is believed that she had a great impact on his understanding of German music. The Hensels returned to Berlin on September 11th, 1840, a year after their departure.

During what would become a very productive year, in 1841 Fanny composed her piano cycle “*Das Jahr*”, a set of 13 pieces written on coloured paper and illustrated by Wilhelm. After that, the couple worked on another collection together: the “*Reisealbum*,” a work that put their trip to Italy into words, music and images.

In contrast with 1841, a great and productive year, in 1842 Fanny lost her mother, Lea, to an unexpected stroke. In that same year, she supposedly stopped her

¹⁶ Whitaker, “A Comprehensive Biography and Pedagogical Analysis of Six Lieder by Fanny Cacilie Mendelssohn Hensel,” 11.

¹⁷ Buja, “Musicians and Artists: Mendelssohn and Wilhelm Hensel.”

Sonntagmusiken. Some sources contradict this information, as they attest that she maintained her Sunday concerts until the day she died.

In 1845 the Hensels traveled to Rebecka's home in Florence to take care of her and her family. Wilhelm traveled to Rome to work, and Fanny stayed at her sister's to take care of Rebecka, who was sick. After her sister recovered, Fanny traveled to Rome to meet her husband. Before they went back to Berlin in August of that same year, they visited Rebecka again and traveled for a Mendelssohn family reunion that lasted 6 days.

After years of being denied the path of a public career, following the social barriers imposed by society and constantly reinforced by her father and brothers, Fanny finally decided to publish her Opus 1 through 7, dated 1846-1847. Although she had many compositions, her insecurity led her to choose only the few that she considered the best to publish under these works.

Unfortunately, the publication of these works approximately a year before Fanny, like her mother, died of an unexpected stroke on May 14th, 1847. After her death, Felix had one of his sister's notebooks and a Piano Trio of hers published, bringing the total to 11 Opus numbers. Most of her 450 works, though, were not published but are in manuscript form in *Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Julturbesitz* in Berlin. The news of her death caused a nervous breakdown in her brother, who also died from a stroke a mere six months after Fanny's death.

One day before passing away, Fanny wrote "*Bergeslust*," a setting of a poem by Eichendorff¹⁸. The last line of the poem says, "Our fantasies, as well as our songs, rise up

¹⁸ Buja, "Musicians and Artists: Mendelssohn and Wilhelm Hensel."

until they reach heaven.” This was engraved on her tombstone in the cemetery of the *Dreifaltigkeitskirche*, in Berlin¹⁹.

Even though Fanny was a very prolific composer and an active organizer, conductor, and performer in concerts for her community, all of these activities were essentially private affairs, and her central life was that of devoted wife, mother, hostess and doer of good works. She had to be content with a home and family career, which she never shrank from²⁰.

¹⁹ Françoise Tillard, *Fanny Mendelssohn*, 333.

²⁰ Françoise Tillard, *Fanny Mendelssohn*, 13.

Chapter 2: Fanny Mendelssohn, Gender Inequality

Status of Women

In order to understand the difficulties women faced in the nineteenth century in the music field, some details of the general situation of women must be considered. Women in Europe were not recognized as individuals in either the legal or liberal theoretical sense, and men held formal power over the family. Husbands had control over their wives' money and property by law. Besides that, women were mostly excluded from the public sphere²¹.

Although there were feminist movements rising in that era, formal equality for women did not come until much later. That directly affected female composers and performers: women were forbidden by their fathers and husbands to perform in public, publish their music and, many times, even accept money for teaching, since these activities would "wound the family's reputation." Thus, positions of influence in the musical world, teaching and publishing jobs, and committees for concerts and festivals organizations were all held by men²².

The attitude of male superiority was supported by several well-known authors and artists. Hans von Bülow, a respected pianist and conductor, described how creativity in any

²¹ Zillah Eisenstein, *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* (Northeastern University Press, 1986), 128.

²² Tarpenning, "Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: A Bridge Between Felix Mendelssohn and Johannes Brahms", 2.

form of art, such as music, belonged to men only. He affirms, “There will never be a woman composer, at best a misprinting copyist. I do not believe in the feminine form of the word *creator*.” This societal view discouraged female musicians from promoting their music in any way. They were also excluded from professional posts in the church, at court, with opera companies or any other music related jobs²³.

The famous philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), who influenced the development of all arts in that century, constantly stated that, although women could gather knowledge through hard work, they did not possess inspiration nor soul²⁴. He also believed that women had no artistic sensibilities, and made pronouncements such as, “There are no good morals for women outside of a withdrawn and domestic life” and “The whole education of women ought to be relative to men”. Such beliefs shaped society and affected the education of women in every sphere, particularly damaging the development of women in the artistic fields.

Even as late as 1885, French author Guy de Maupassant stated, “The experience of centuries have proved that woman is, without exception, incapable of any true artistic or scientific work. (...) The attempt is useless.” And he goes on to say, “Not a single female artist or musician has been produced²⁵.” This line of thought supported the radically different treatment Fanny and Felix received in their music careers.

²³ Tarpinning, “Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: A Bridge Between Felix Mendelssohn and Johannes Brahms”, 35.

²⁴ Tarpinning, “Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: A Bridge Between Felix Mendelssohn and Johannes Brahms”, 34.

²⁵ Tarpinning, “Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: A Bridge Between Felix Mendelssohn and Johannes Brahms”, 33-34.

Being born and raised under these circumstances, therefore, played an important role in Fanny's musical career. Although she was clear proof that musical talent and artistic sensibility had no gender, she did not publicize her musical talent in any way until one year before her death because her father Abraham and her brothers Felix and Paul pressured her to stay within the prescribed societal confines of wife and mother²⁶. "No respected woman indulges in public creativity," they would tell her.

When, at the young age of 13, Fanny performed all 24 of Bach's Preludes from the *Well-Tempered Klavier* from memory, she immediately received both positive and negative reactions from the family. As much as her father felt extremely proud, especially since this episode happened on his birthday, he also expressed great concern that the young girl was dedicating too much time towards music, when she should be spending more energy in learning how to take care of a house and family.

The performance was enjoyed privately by her family only, so it did not violate society's rules on women's behavior; however, it was still a fruit of significant musical dedication, which should not be her focus, but her brother's. It was probably difficult for a young girl to accept such a distinction, especially while watching her younger brother being publicly acknowledged for efforts she was also making, but in private only.

In 1823, when the Mendelssohn family started the Sunday Musicales, they made it clear that it was an opportunity for Felix to develop his career in the music world. They would hire excellent musicians, such as members of the Prussian court orchestra, to read Felix's string symphonies and other orchestral works, giving the young composer an

²⁶ Tarpenning, "Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: A Bridge Between Felix Mendelssohn and Johannes Brahms", 4.

opportunity to hear his compositions, become familiar with the instruments, and conduct his newest works performed by professional musicians. Fanny frequently performed in these programmes, as they were not public professional concerts, and it was a great opportunity for the Mendelssohn family to exhibit their talented daughter who had received great musical education and who would, then, be a gifted or desirable wife.

Many visitors would make comments on how equal, if not more mature, Fanny's talent was compared to her brother's. For example, the singer Eduard Devrient (1801-1877), who participated in various Sunday Musicales along with his wife Therese, wrote, "I found Felix's playing extraordinarily dexterous and possessed of great musical assurance, but still it did not equal that of his older sister Fanny²⁷." It is important to note that, at that point, Felix was already becoming used to playing in public and outside his home. He took a trip with his father and brother to Silesia in 1823, but the daughters had to stay home.

Differently from most young women at the time, in the Sunday Musicales, Fanny would not be limited to playing Clementi "simple" sonatinas. Instead, she would perform *Lieder*, piano duets, piano sonatas, Prelude and Fugues by J. S. Bach, and even what is still the most virtuoso piano repertoire: the piano concerto. For this last genre, Fanny and Felix would accompany each other on the second piano or have a small string ensemble to do so.

Her concerto repertoire included that of Hummel, Felix Mendelssohn, and various Beethoven Piano Concertos. Besides daring to play such challenging repertoire, Fanny also wrote her own cadenza for Beethoven's Piano Concerto in C Major, on April

²⁷ Françoise Tillard, *Fanny Mendelssohn*, 117.

11th, 1823²⁸. That was not appreciated, since writing a cadenza requires vast creativity - a man's virtuosity which should not be explored by women. Still, Fanny's cadenza is preserved in one of her composition notebooks, and it shows how intimate she was with Beethoven's writing and style. It's also a sample of her great knowledge of themes, structure, and aesthetic position on cadenza styles in the nineteenth century, a probable fruit of her piano lessons and composition classes.

Although Fanny was also composing at that time, it is not clear that she performed much, if any, of her own music, as the Sunday Musicales were intended for her brother's professional development²⁹.

Nonetheless, Fanny kept composing, but the neglect of her works and lack of incentive, while Felix received all the support, certainly created a negative impact on her art.

A letter written to Fanny by her father Abraham is important evidence that the young girl expressed her annoyance and sorrow towards the neglect of her musical efforts compared to the strong support her brother received. Part of the letter is as follows: "What you wrote to me about your musical occupations with reference to and in comparison with Felix was both rightly thought and expressed. Music, perhaps, becomes his profession, whilst for you it can and must only be an ornament, never the root of your being and doing³⁰."

Abraham was correct indeed. For instance, while Fanny wrote a quartet in A-flat Major for piano, violin, viola and cello in November 1822, it was published only after

²⁸ Christian, "Hensel [née Mendelssohn (-Bartholdy)], Fanny Cacilie."

²⁹ Christian, "Hensel [née Mendelssohn (-Bartholdy)], Fanny Cacilie."

³⁰ Christian, "Hensel [née Mendelssohn (-Bartholdy)], Fanny Cacilie."

1990, while Felix's Quartet in C Minor, his first published work (Opus 1), completed in 1822, was published right after that.

Even with no encouragement to compose and publish, Fanny kept working on her music. A letter from Zelter to Goethe in 1824 stated that Fanny had just finished her 32nd Fugue³¹, and two years later, another of his letters mentions that both Fanny and he set music to a poem by Voss, but her version was "really more apposite than mine", so he sent her version to the poet Voss's widow. It makes one wonder how many more amazing works Fanny would have written had she been given the opportunities and support her brother was!

Although Fanny and Felix received similar musical education in their childhood, taking piano lessons from their mother and the teachers Ludwig Berger, Marie Bigot, and Ignaz Moscheles through their childhood and youth, as soon as Felix was leaving for college, his piano private lessons were no longer necessary. Though he was the only one going to college to continue his studies, Fanny was also taken out of private piano lessons. Therefore she no longer had any piano instructor, whereas Felix was going to college and, then, to travel Europe to engage in his musical career. Zelter, the children's composition teacher, was also dismissed. From then on more public and professional opportunities were sought for Felix.

It was not until the last half of the nineteenth century, when Fanny was no longer alive, that public music schools arose in Germany and began to admit women students to at least a few classes. But it was still difficult for a young woman to acquire an adequate musical education, as at least one of three factors were necessary: "early entrance into

³¹ Françoise Tillard, *Fanny Mendelssohn*, 116.

monastic life, birth into a family of professional musicians active in the apprenticeship system, or birth into a noble family which made good private instruction available³²."

In 1824, Felix went to Paris and was very disappointed by Parisian musical life. He complained about its poor educational level and mediocre artistic ambitions, unmercifully criticizing the entertainment and musicians there. Fanny raged with his complaints. She felt stuck in Berlin, pawing at the ground with eagerness at home, while he got to visit Paris and experience a completely different musical environment, and, still, he was not satisfied! Her letters from that period express certain sorrow, both for not being in Paris and also for seeing her brother's complaints about the city. She thought just the fact he was there was a reason good enough not to complain at all.

Through her letters, Fanny bombarded her brother with questions about everything he saw and experienced there - the museums, walks, visits, and anything he could tell her about. In a letter dated April 20th, 1824, from Fanny to her brother, she says, "I wish you and father had your dear mother, wife, daughters, and your own dearest sister there. When I read about your 'sensible' pleasures, my mouth waters³³."

Had Fanny gone to Paris with her brother and father, she would have probably been as critical as Felix was towards the musical scene, as they grew up in a musical family where days were filled with knowledge and culture. Nevertheless, she would have at least experienced a different country and culture, met different people, and shared her work.

Unfortunately, Fanny's great effort and talent were not enough to overcome the inequality between the way her musical career was treated in comparison to Felix's. In fact,

³² Tarpenning, "Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: A Bridge Between Felix Mendelssohn and Johannes Brahms", 35.

³³ Françoise Tillard, *Fanny Mendelssohn*, 122.

one cannot say she actually had a musical career until she was 40 years old and decided to finally publish some of her pieces. As a result, today the “Mendelssohn” name is automatically related to Felix, not to Fanny. Most pianists and music lovers have played and/or listened to his *Songs Without Words*, but do not know that his sister was also a composer who has over 450 works!

Most of Fanny’s works remain unavailable to students and scholars today. There are 24 pages devoted to Felix Mendelssohn in the New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, in contrast to the half page that is dedicated to Fanny Mendelssohn, barely mentioning her 450 works or her reputation as one of the best pianists in Berlin, even better than Felix, according to friends who heard both siblings perform in their home. It is important to note that her great reputation as a pianist was built only on private performances at the Mendelssohn home, as she only performed in a public concert once in her whole life. Still, the invited guests who would attend the Mendelssohn Sunday Musicales or to the Hensels’ *Sonntagmusiken* witnessed Fanny’s virtuosity and natural ability with the piano.

The year 1829 was a great one for Abraham Mendelssohn; what he hoped and dreamed for his older children was happening as successfully as he could ever expect. Fanny got engaged to the Court Painter, Wilhelm Hensel, whom she married the following year, and Felix was leaving to England to engage in his musical career. Traveling was an obligatory part of a musician’s career; through traveling one learns, meets colleagues and masters, exchanges ideas, measures oneself against others, and finds inspiration in diverse environments. Abraham had his older daughter becoming a housewife and his older son starting a musical tour, exactly what he raised them to be and do.

From then on, Felix's and Fanny's paths diverged. She now had a husband, a son, and a house to take care of, while he went on tour to develop his abilities in conducting, performing, and composing throughout Europe (skills which, so far, they both mastered equally).³⁴

While 1829 was a great year for Abraham, the same cannot be affirmed about Fanny. She went through a challenging phase during that year, when Felix had his first long absence. She began her diary on January 4th, 1829, with the sorrowful statement, "Felix, our soul, is leaving, the second half of my life stands before me." Besides him being away, she was also planning a wedding. Word has it that her mother, Lea, was not easy to please, making the wedding preparation stressful. "The Wheel" (as they would call their family circle) was vanishing as people were moving away, traveling, or getting married, so Fanny felt left behind. Furthermore, she had a conflict in her head; the young woman was worried about having to love two men equally - Wilhelm and Felix.

A year after getting married, Fanny faced a hard time after giving birth to her son, Sebastian. Her postpartum depression was related to the fact that she started struggling composing, and thus felt like she was losing her identity. 1831 was her least productive year in terms of quantity; she composed only seven pieces. She had to take care of her husband, their house, and their newborn son, so there was no time nor energy to focus on composing, as it took dedication and time. In addition to that, she also had to spend at least six weeks in bed rest after giving birth, a result of a difficult and turbulent pregnancy that came to an end with a premature labor.

³⁴ Tarpenning, "Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: A Bridge Between Felix Mendelssohn and Johannes Brahms", 22-23.

Furthermore, as she could not publish and could not perform in public, what motivation did she have to compose? She kept trying to maintain her art, but it is obvious that the neglect of her talent and work was an obstacle for her to keep motivated to compose. Since her compositions would not be published, she knew they would probably die with her.

Even though Fanny had a comfortable life in the Mendelssohn mansion with her family, her letters show “a restlessness and an uncertainty of how to consolidate her role as a mother with her role as a composer³⁵.” As much as she knew that her primary responsibilities were those of a housewife and a mother, she wanted to keep composing, but she had no energy left. Fanny wrote to Felix bemoaning that she could not reconcile the housework with composing, but the encouragement she was looking for was definitely not found in his words. He did not spare her feelings when echoing his father’s opinion that Fanny should not overly concern herself with music while she had a husband and a child who were her real responsibilities.

Although Felix would tell Fanny what a great blessing it was that she had other things to occupy her thoughts besides composing pretty songs, she had a different point of view over the situation. As she had a high level of achievement in her musical works, the fear of not being able to do that again after giving birth was overwhelming. Despite her fear, Fanny succeeded in getting back to composing. The revival of the *Sonntagmusiken*, now organized and hosted by herself, was a great motivation for her musical return.

³⁵ Tarpinning, “Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: A Bridge Between Felix Mendelssohn and Johannes Brahms”, 24-25.

Lea knew that Fanny had ambivalent feelings about publishing her music. She noticed that Felix's disapproval of women in the music profession was not only holding her back, but it was also contributing to Fanny's depression. Thus, in 1837, she wrote to him regarding his negative attitude. His response was not positive; Felix restated his position affirming that he could never persuade Fanny to publish when he really felt that she should not. His position on the subject was inherited from his father and grandfather, and he did not change his mind. Although, he said if she decided to go ahead on her own, he would help her, as her compositions were certainly praiseworthy³⁶. If Felix had given Fanny support for publishing, probably a much higher percentage of her compositions would have been published.

Still, when circumstances pressed Fanny to keep quiet, and no one took her compositions seriously, especially Felix, she continued privately composing³⁷. Her mother and husband were great supporters of her talent and would, unsuccessfully, try to encourage her to publish her works. Unfortunately, her great respect for her father and her lack of self-confidence, in addition to her dependence on Felix's opinion, would speak louder and prevent her from publishing. Her letters to her brother often indicate discouragement while she complains about her "lack of talent."

Felix would always fight Fanny's arguments that she was not talented, often encouraging her to keep writing and sending him new pieces. He would remind her that her music had soul, therefore she did not need to worry about new pianists in the musical

³⁶ Tarpenning, "Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: A Bridge Between Felix Mendelssohn and Johannes Brahms", 29.

³⁷ Françoise Tillard, *Fanny Mendelssohn*, 14.

scene, as "she could cut down all those pretty fellows with ease³⁸...". He was a great stimulus to his sister's creative musical instincts, as long as she kept them private and did not publish anything under her own name.

Felix would perform her music at informal gatherings outside of Berlin and send her feedback showing how proud he was to have such a talented sister. In 1842, for instance, Felix performed one of Fanny's compositions at Buckingham Palace. He had been invited for an audience with Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, and the Queen decided to sing one of Felix's *Lieder* from his Op. 8. However, she chose to sing "Italien", which was actually composed by Fanny, not Felix. He had to confess that, although it was published under his name, "Italien" was composed by his older sister. He then asked the Queen to sing one of his own songs as well.

Although Felix met many intellectually gifted people in Europe, conducted orchestras in every city he visited, and made important contacts with members of the elite, he continued to consult Fanny on musical matters for the rest of his life. That is how it had been since their youth; in 1822, Fanny wrote: "He [Felix] has no musical adviser but me and so does not commit a single thought to paper without having previously submitted it for my perusal. (...) I knew his operas by heart, before he wrote a note of them³⁹."

Fanny's Emotional Connection with Felix

Fanny and Felix were always very close. Emotional dependence started early in their lives. They were both music prodigies in the family, and this probably brought them

³⁸ Camilla Cai, "Fanny Hensel's 'Songs for Pianoforte' of 1836-37: Stylistic Interaction with Felix Mendelssohn," *J. of Musicological Research* 14, no. 1 (June 2008): 47.

³⁹ Françoise Tillard, *Fanny Mendelssohn*, 115.

even closer to each other. Although the younger siblings were also introduced in the musical world (Rebecka was a good singer and Paul was a good cellist), they never reached the musical level that Fanny and Felix did. The two older siblings had a similar musical education in their first years and were always asking each other for musical advice in their works. Eventually, they even started a musical “game”; they would start a composition and leave it unfinished so that the other would complete it.

This close relationship grew stronger over the years and led to dependence on each other’s opinions, especially by Fanny, since, as a woman, she was always in a submissive position. Besides, Felix went on with the musical career, studied in a University, traveled to different countries and, therefore, had a greater musical experience. That led Fanny to think that her musical level was way behind her brother’s and that she needed his approval in every composition.

Her musical insecurity was constant, which could also be related to her position as a woman in society; she was always trying to fit in the mold that was created for her, seeking for her brother’s approval before each and every step. Fanny had such a need for Felix to validate her musical work that a negative comment or harsh criticism by Felix was enough for her to quit composing a genre.

In 1831, Hensel solicited her brother’s feedback on her first cantata. He did not respond until December, months after her request. By that time, she had already completed three cantatas. His criticism towards the first one was sharp and depreciative, and Fanny never attempted to write a cantata again⁴⁰. Something similar happened with her String

⁴⁰ Christian, “Hensel [née Mendelssohn (-Bartholdy)], Fanny Cacilie.”

Quartet in Eb Major three years later; Felix criticized her work, and she never wrote another string quartet.

Her dependency on her brother was expressed on musical matters but, deeply, it was an emotional dependency. On her wedding day, Fanny wrote to Felix that she would always believe in herself, as long as he loved her. Furthermore, she said his love provided her great inner worth⁴¹.

Even a decade after being married, dedicating herself to her own family and house, the emotional dependence Fanny had on her brother was still present. In 1839, she wrote to him, “At age forty, I’m as afraid of my brothers as I was of Father when I was fourteen - or rather, fear is not the right word, it’s more that I wish to do right by you and everyone I love in every aspect of my life⁴²(...).”

Fanny’s Breakthrough

After a life of composing and second-guessing her works, finally, at the age of forty, Fanny felt artistically mature enough to stand on her own, to her brother’s surprise. She had met Robert von Keudell (1824-1903), a young man from a wealthy family who had a diplomatic career and possessed great pianistic technique, and spent two years in almost daily contact with him. In July 1846 she wrote, “[Keudell] keeps me breathless and in constant state of musical activity (...). He looks with great interest at each new thing I write and tells me if something is missing – and in general, he is right⁴³!”

⁴¹ Tarpenning, “Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: A Bridge Between Felix Mendelssohn and Johannes Brahms”, 39.

⁴² Françoise Tillard, *Fanny Mendelssohn*, 324-325.

⁴³ Françoise Tillard, *Fanny Mendelssohn*, 323.

It was Keudell that induced Fanny to take the decisive step of publishing her work, despite Felix's disapproval. She also had her husband's and mother's encouragement and two publishing houses making splendid offers. As a Berlin personality and sister of a famous musician, Fanny was a good prospect for the publishing companies at that time. And the fact that her sister Rebecka was unsatisfied with life, despite her good health and three children, was proof that the role of a mother and housewife was not enough to fulfill a gifted woman.

Although she confessed to Felix in 1839 that she was still "afraid" of him, like she had been of her father in her youth, and that she was always desirous of pleasing him and everyone else, she still decided to go against Felix's will and publish. She wrote to her brother on July 9th, 1846 telling him about her decision to publish despite his objections:

"I'm beginning to publish. I have finally lent a well-disposed ear to Herr Bock's sincere professions of affection for my lieder, and to his favorable terms. And since I made the decision on my own initiative and cannot blame anyone in my family if annoying consequences result (...), then I can, on the other hand, console myself with the knowledge that I in no way sought out or occasioned the kind of musical reputation that might have brought me such offers. I hope I shall not disgrace you all, for I am no *femme libre*-still less, alas, *young* Germany. I hope *you* will in no way be bothered by this, for as you see, in order to spare you every possible unpleasant moment, I have proceeded entirely on my own, and I hope you won't think badly of me. If it succeeds, that is, if people like the pieces and I receive further offers, I know it will be a great stimulus to me, which I have always needed in order to create. If not, I shall be at the point where I have always been, and not be upset; and then if I were to work less, or stop working altogether, nothing would be lost by it either."

Felix took a month to respond to her letter. On August 12th he replied giving her his blessing. He said, "Only today, do I, hard-hearted brother, get round to answering your kind letter and give you my professional blessing (...). May you know only the pleasures of being a composer, and none of the miseries." After that, Fanny confided to her diary that

even though she knew her brother was not happy with her decision, she was pleased that at least he finally said a kind word about it by congratulating her on her published pieces⁴⁴.

Fanny had often expressed to friends and family members that the biggest obstacle she faced in her musical life was a lack of sufficient encouragement, making it clear that the encouragement she received from her husband and mother was not enough to give her confidence to stand on her own until late in her life. Their opinions, unfortunately, did not speak louder than Felix's and Abraham's until 1846.

Her son, Sebastian Hensel, wrote about her father's impact on Fanny: "She [Fanny] never in her thoughts loses sight of that letter of her father's in which he calls the vocation of a housewife the only true aim and study of a young woman, and in thinking of the man of her choice, she earnestly devotes herself to this aim⁴⁵." She grew up listening to that and, even after leaving home, her father would always remind her about it in his letters. Adding that to the fact that she did not have much contact with other composers (except for Felix) during her adult life, one can understand how she strongly relied on Abraham's and Felix's opinions and how insecure she felt about pursuing a music career on her own.

As Felix was traveling abroad to do music and, thus gathering diverse musical experiences from different cultures, countries, and composers, Fanny strongly relied on his professional opinion. For many years, she felt like Felix's validation was necessary, as she did not experience music outside of her own home. Felix had been her most important colleague since the beginning of her career as a composer, so the dependence on his opinion and support had been developed throughout her life.

⁴⁴ Françoise Tillard, *Fanny Mendelssohn*, 325-327.

⁴⁵ Tarpenning, "Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: A Bridge Between Felix Mendelssohn and Johannes Brahms", 38.

After struggling her entire life with the conflicting impulses of authorship versus the social expectations of her high class status, finally, in 1846, Fanny published her music under her own name. She had received outstanding offers from two well-known publishing houses: Schlesinger and Bote & Block. Even though she had already written hundreds of pieces, she chose just a few that she felt were worthy of publishing and sent them, regardless of her brother's clear disapproval. She always had her mother's and husband's support, and her friends Gounod and Keudell, who were really important to her, were also encouraging her to take this big step.

At one point, she sent two pieces to Klingermann in London with the following note, "It is a pleasure for me to find a public for my little pieces in London, for here I have none at all. Once a year, perhaps, someone will copy a piece of mine, or ask me to play something special—certainly not often... If nobody ever offers an opinion, or takes the slightest interest in one's productions, one loses in time not only all pleasure in them, but all power of judging their value." The negative impact that not publishing had in her sanity and musical productivity is clear with that statement. Fanny's motivation to compose was diminished by the lack of audience and goals.

The circumstances were not propitious for Fanny to compose, but the young woman still wrote an impressive amount of works. Her work counts over 450 compositions, an impressive number for someone who struggled through her whole life with neglect, oppression, and living up to the expectations of being a mother and a housewife. But why did a talented woman agree to stay home and not publish for 40 years?

The fear of her father and brother, society pressure on women, and Fanny's insecurity could already explain why she did not publish until 1846, but there was one more

obstacle for the composer to overcome. Fanny had to deal with the moral duty of the Mendelssohn family; her paternal grandfather, the German-Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, had left the ghetto, braving poverty and the disapproval of Jewish and Christian communities in his quest for learning⁴⁶. That gave him and his family fame and a special and enduring renown. However, with renown comes moral duty.

Thus, the Mendelssohn family had to live up to a good standard to keep the family's legacy. They believed a converted Jew must prove he is good. Moses Mendelssohn fought for Enlightenment in the Berlin Jewish ghettos, and his six children became influential leaders in diverse fields: arts, finances and natural sciences. Abraham, for instance, was a banker and philanthropist, but gave up banking when he became a Christian. He expected all his children to live up to required standards and to maintain the Mendelssohn legacy.

Besides the Mendelssohn name, the fact that they were an upper class family was also an obstacle that prevented Fanny from engaging in a public career like Clara Wieck Schumann did. It was not acceptable for women from affluent families to perform in public or publish pieces, but Clara Schumann was an exception at that time: she served as an advertisement for her piano teacher (her father), who stood low on the social and economic ladder⁴⁷.

Although men considered it dangerous for women to acquire knowledge, as it represented a possibility of deviating from their true intended vocation of wife and mother, the fact that Clara Schumann's family did not have good resources like the Mendelssohns did, justified her public performances. It is possible that Fanny Mendelssohn would have

⁴⁶ Françoise Tillard, *Fanny Mendelssohn*, 50.

⁴⁷ Tarpenting, "Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: A Bridge Between Felix Mendelssohn and Johannes Brahms", 35.

had a career as important and far-reaching as Clara Schumann's, had she been driven by economic necessity instead of familiar duties.

Because she was raised to be a primary caretaker of home and children and spent her whole life trying to fit in that role, it took Fanny forty years to finally publish some of her pieces. Unfortunately, she died in the following year, so most of her music was neither discovered, attributed to her, nor published until after her death. Much of it is still in private collections, passed down as part of the Mendelssohn estate. Some of her works are in the collections of the New York Public Library, the Bodleian Library in Oxford, the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., and the Mendelssohn-Archiv in Berlin as well as the Goethe-Museum and the Heinrich Heine Institut in Dusseldorf⁴⁸.

⁴⁸ Tarpinning, "Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: A Bridge Between Felix Mendelssohn and Johannes Brahms", 5.

Chapter 3: Fanny Mendelssohn's Compositional Style

A Prolific Composer

Over the course of her life, Fanny Mendelssohn wrote over 450 musical pieces, including over one hundred solo piano pieces, two pieces for four hands piano, one piano trio, organ pieces, vocal duets and trios, string quartets, thirty choral works, five oratorios, one overture, one orchestral piece, various chamber music pieces, and over 250 *Lieder*⁴⁹. The genre she composed most often was *Lieder* and this chapter intends to explore her compositional style and why she focused so much on it. Was it a personal preference? Or was it imposed on her due to her gender?

It is known that the Mendelssohn family wrote a lot of letters. Felix himself wrote over 900 letters⁵⁰, and he and Fanny exchanged letters frequently throughout their lives. Perhaps this literary environment Fanny grew up in influenced her compositions, as her pieces often assume the character of a musical diary, and the *Lieder*, which are shorter musical forms, predominate in her manuscript books. Longer forms, such as sonatas, are rare, and Fanny only wrote one solo orchestral work.

⁴⁹ "Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel," Naxos Records, accessed May 24, 2021, https://www.naxos.com/person/Fanny_Mendelssohn_Hensel/27352.htm.

⁵⁰ Françoise Tillard, *Fanny Mendelssohn*, 18.

Nevertheless, the literary and epistolary environment she grew up in was not the only reason behind the predominance of short musical forms in Fanny's manuscripts. As creativity was considered a male's virtuosity during that time, the complex genres such as Piano Concertos, Piano Sonatas and Cantatas were considered "men's genres". Women would not be taught how to compose a solo orchestral work, for example, but they also did not have access to an orchestra with the same ease as men did.

The Mendelssohn family, for instance, started the Sunday Musicales with the intention of having small orchestras and/or ensembles that would play Felix's compositions so he would know how they sounded. Meanwhile, it is not known if Fanny ever got to perform any of her personal compositions in her parents' *Sunday Musicales*, although she had also been composing.

If female composers wanted to dedicate their time to these longer musical forms, they would have to do so without formal studies in the area and without access to an orchestra. The result, therefore, was that *Lieder* would be the common choice for female composers. Furthermore, it was considered an appropriate genre for women to compose, both because it was associated with home music making, and because it was a relatively simple form, unlike symphonies and sonatas⁵¹.

Although *Lieder* was Fanny's favorite domain, she discovered her true style in the genre entitled "salon pieces" for piano, with or without lyrics. The "Songs Without Words" were also a way of communication and interaction between Felix and Fanny. They would playfully send the beginning of a piece to each other so the other sibling could finish

⁵¹ Whitaker, "A Comprehensive Biography and Pedagogical Analysis of Six Lieder by Fanny Cacilie Mendelssohn Hensel," 21.

the composition. Gounod claimed in his memoirs that Felix published under his own name many “Songs Without Words” composed by his sister, even though there is nothing to prove or disprove it⁵².

Phases in her compositional style

Fanny’s work could be divided in three phases: the first ranges from 1819, when she composed her first *Lied*, until her marriage in 1829; the second phase is between 1829 to 1839, when the Hensel family traveled to Italy; and the third and last phase ranges from 1839 until her death in 1846.

The first phase started with her first composition in 1819: a *Lied* titled, “Ihr Töne, schwingt euch frohlich”, which she composed for her father’s birthday. During this phase, Fanny maintained a steady composition output, which decreased in 1829 after her wedding with Wilhelm. For instance, in 1823 Fanny composed over 30 *Lieder*, and 1824 followed closely, when she composed 20 *Lieder*. The output remained steady for the ten years of her first phase, dropping to an average of four *Lieder* per year during her second phase⁵³.

The amount of compositions she was writing is not the only difference between her first phase to the following ones: Fanny’s earlier *Lieder* were written in strophic form, and, for the most part, they were simple and direct, as Zelter and her father instructed her to do. Her remarkable musical character, though, developed as she constantly experimented with irregular phrasing and chromaticism. Although Abraham was never a fan of Beethoven’s work, the Mendelssohn siblings were strongly influenced by his style.

⁵² Françoise Tillard, *Fanny Mendelssohn*, 130.

⁵³ Christian, “Hensel [née Mendelssohn (-Bartholdy)], Fanny Cacilie.”

Finally, in regards to the piano accompaniment, they seem to serve no purpose besides supporting the vocal line. Her early pieces show a composer in development, discovering her personal tendencies and strong characteristics. By then, her themes were already representing her personality: she wrote many pieces on romantic themes, such as love, distance, and longing.

Fanny's piano technique and compositional skills were in constant development. Besides the *Lieder*, Fanny explored other piano pieces, such as the "Songs Without Words" and the Piano Sonata. Her first attempt of a Sonata was in the Autumn of 1821: a Sonata in F Major, which does not survive⁵⁴. The next attempt happened early in 1822, with a 140-bars-long movement of a Sonata in E Major.

Before she attempted to write another Piano Sonata, she started writing her Piano Quartet in Ab Major, which could be an attempt to equal the activities of Felix, who had, at that time, just completed and published his first Piano Quartet. Unlike Felix's, Fanny's Piano Quartet, in which she worked for seven months, was only published decades after her death. She put it away and returned to piano pieces for another year. The Piano Etude in D Minor from December 1823 exhibits virtuoso techniques of pianists she was meeting and hearing, such as the running octaves in the left hand, which were a hallmark of Frederic Kalkbrenner's style⁵⁵.

In February 1824, Fanny attempted to write another Piano Sonata, and it was once again a one-movement work. Four months later she wrote her first multi-movement Piano Sonata, a work in C Minor (Appendix 1) with three movements and a clear

⁵⁴ Christian, "Hensel [née Mendelssohn (-Bartholdy)], Fanny Cacilie."

⁵⁵ Christian, "Hensel [née Mendelssohn (-Bartholdy)], Fanny Cacilie."

impression of her tutelage with Berger and Zelter. According to a letter from Zelter, in that same year, Fanny finished her 32nd fugue and also a lengthy Toccata in C minor⁵⁶. During that year, Felix had received a copy of J. S. Bach's "St Matthew Passion", which became a central focus of the Mendelssohn family's musical study for the next few years.

At some point in 1827, Fanny finished a "Piano Book in E Minor" and, in the following year, what is believed to be her "finishing piece" for her musical education: the Piano Easter Sonata. That was the last Piano Sonata she composed before her marriage and, therefore, marked the end of her first compositional phase.

After Fanny and Wilhelm got married in October 1829, her compositions changed in quantity and quality, establishing the beginning of her second phase. It was in the beginning of this phase that Fanny went through delicate times in her personal life, struggling with her brother's departure, the start of a new life, the high-risk pregnancy, premature labor and the depression after she gave birth to Sebastian. It was expected, therefore, that her composition output would decrease. Nevertheless, she worked in some of the largest genres she had explored so far and launched her own version of her parent's Sunday Musicales, her *Sonntagsmusiken*.

Although she was composing significantly less, her work continually improved and she began composing larger works, such as another multi-movements piano sonata, a cantata, a string quartet, concert arias and three song cycles.

The first song cycle, "*Liederkreis*", was composed in 1829, with text by Gustav Droysen. It contained five *Lieder* and was dedicated to her brother Felix. She was still working through the separation from her brother who had recently moved away, and this

⁵⁶ Françoise Tillard, *Fanny Mendelssohn*, 116.

meaningful work was a response to Felix's departure. The second song cycle was composed five years later, with poetry from Heinrich Heine. It also contained five *Lieder*. There is no date nor any information about who wrote the text Fanny used in her third song cycle, but the similar style indicates it was also written during her second phase⁵⁷.

During her early years, Fanny did not seem to give much importance to connecting piano accompaniment with vocal line. The piano served as a base for the singer and nothing else. The compositions from 1829 through 1839, though, have a strong relation between piano and vocal line. In "*Schwanenlied*" (Figure 3), for instance, the piano part imitates the paddling feet of the swan, while the swan's smooth gliding upon the water is represented by the vocal line⁵⁸.

⁵⁷ Whitaker, "A Comprehensive Biography and Pedagogical Analysis of Six Lieder by Fanny Cacilie Mendelssohn Hensel," 21.

⁵⁸ Whitaker, "A Comprehensive Biography and Pedagogical Analysis of Six Lieder by Fanny Cacilie Mendelssohn Hensel," 22.

Nº1.
Gesang. *Andante.*
 Es fällt ein Stern her - in - - - ter

Piano.
tutto legato. ♦ Ped. ♦ Ped.. ♦ Ped.

4
 aus sei - ner funkeln - den Höh, *p* das ist der Stern der

♦ Ped. e simlic. *p*

7
 Lie - - be, *poco ritard.* den ich dort sul - - len seh. *a Tempo.* Es

poco ritard. *a Tempo.*

10
cresc. fallen von A - pfel - bau - me, der wei - ssen Blätter so viel; *cresc.* es

Scanned with CamScanner

(Figure 3: "Schwanenlied" Op. 1 No. 1 mm. 1-13)

In the summer of 1837, Fanny composed “*Wanderlied*”, set on a Goethe text that speaks of fulfillment and finding happiness through travel and lack of inhibition. Fanny probably found personal meaning in the poem, as she had been longing to travel for several years. Years later, this *Lied* was chosen by her to be published in her Op. 1 in 1846.

Regarding piano pieces in this phase, right after her wedding in 1829 Fanny wrote a Piano Sonata in Eb with three movements, which she converted into a String Quartet five years later. Before this, she had composed other chamber works, such as the “Sonata Fantasia” and the “Capriccio” from 1829, both for cello and piano⁵⁹.

In 1831, the beginning of her *Sonntagsmusiken* brought back Fanny’s inspiration to compose, and between February and November she completed three cantatas: “*Lobgesang*”, “*Hiob*” and “*Cholera music*”. Each cantata took progressively less time: “*Lobgesang*”, translated to English as “Song of Praise,” took four months and was written for her son, praising God for sparing their lives during the delivery; “*Hiob*”, translated to English as “Job”, took two months and was dedicated to Wilhelm in celebration of their second anniversary; the third cantata, “*Cholera music*” (“Cholera Cantata”), took only seven weeks to compose and was intended to mark the cessation of the cholera epidemic in Berlin⁶⁰.

The trip to Italy in 1839 marks the end of Fanny’s second phase and beginning of the third one: her compositions now present more use of irregular phrasing and chromaticism. Besides that, after years of dreaming about going to Italy and exploring new

⁵⁹ Christian, “Hensel [née Mendelssohn (-Bartholdy)], Fanny Cacilie.”

⁶⁰ Christian, “Hensel [née Mendelssohn (-Bartholdy)], Fanny Cacilie.”

scenarios, and expressing certain frustration in her music for not being able to travel abroad like her brother, now Fanny can finally write about places she has seen.

The trip inspired Fanny in a way that, in 1841, she wrote 12 *Lieder*, three times more than the average she would compose per year between 1829 and 1839. Another increase in activity occurred after she became a published composer for the first time, in 1846, when she composed 15 *Lieder*⁶¹.

During Fanny's early years of composition, Abraham had written to his daughter, "I strongly advise you to keep as much as possible to this lightness and naturalness in your future compositions." His advice probably influenced her to stop experimenting with chromaticism and phrasing in those early years. Therefore, the trip to Italy was probably not the only reason her style changed: the fact that her father was no longer alive during this third phase could have also been one reason for her to experiment again, now that she was freeing herself from his influence.

Besides the irregular phrasing and use of chromaticism, Fanny was also giving more consideration to correct declamation. In measure 52 of "*Der Abendstern*", composed during her first phase, there is an example of inappropriate declamation: the word "dieser", which would not be emphasized when speaking the text, is emphasized with longer duration and on a strong beat in the piece⁶² (Figure 4). That was frequent in her early compositions, where she did not seem to care about declamation.

⁶¹ Christian, "Hensel [née Mendelssohn (-Bartholdy)], Fanny Cacilie."

⁶² Whitaker, "A Comprehensive Biography and Pedagogical Analysis of Six Lieder by Fanny Cacilie Mendelssohn Hensel," 22.

21

p

Wenn die - ser Stern dir

Figure 4: “*Der Abendstern*” mm. 21-23.

Just like in the second phase, the piano accompaniment and the vocal line work together in the third phase, showing how her skills as a composer kept developing, even though she no longer had a composition teacher. Another similarity between second and third phases is that the number of poets she used for her works decreased significantly. After her marriage with Wilhelm, she started using more of his art on her compositions than anyone else’s.

Nonetheless, Fanny would still use other poet’s texts in her music, and she would usually do so in blocked time spans. This obsession with one poet at a time was quite typical of her compositional practice⁶³. For instance, between January and September of 1824, she set nine of Ludwig Tieck’s poems; from September 1824 to January 1825, she set six of Johann Peter Eckermann’s poems; from December 1837 and September 1838, she only used texts by Heinrich Heine, and so on.

Although the language could vary, since Fanny wrote *Lieder* in English, German, Latin and Italian, the choice of themes for her *Lieder* was predominantly the same throughout her life: romance, love, nature, and longing. In her third phase, however, the

⁶³ Christian, “Hensel [née Mendelssohn (-Bartholdy)], Fanny Cacilie.”

landscape and scenery of Italy was an inspiration for her pieces, and the theme of longing for a distant place that was voiced in her earlier *Lieder*, was now substituted by the inspiration that Italy brought her.

In addition to the inspiring scenery, many composers, musicians, poets, and artists she met at the French Academy in Rome brought her new inspiration. Fanny met artists such as the mezzo-soprano Pauline Ciardot Garcia (1821-1910) and the composer Charles Gounod (1818-1893), who was deeply impressed with her memory and skills both as a pianist and composer⁶⁴.

This trip was remarkable not only for Fanny, but also for her husband Wilhelm. Following their vacation in Italy, in 1841 she composed “*Nach Suden*” on a text by her husband. The work captures the Hensel’s love for the South⁶⁵.

Lieder was not the only genre Fanny dedicated herself to. Her evolution as a composer was notable in other genres, such as the “Songs Without Words”, for which her brother is very well known. Through her youth, she would not write many instructions to the performer, but as she started getting more concerned with the virtuosity of performers, which was becoming more prevalent, Fanny started giving more specific tempo, dynamics, phrasing and also pedal instructions. She also started experimenting more with hand-crossing, thicker textures and wider range⁶⁶.

⁶⁴ Xi Zhang, “A Study of Exoticism in Fanny Hensel’s *Lieder*,” (Honors in Music, Wellesley College, 2015), 30.

⁶⁵ Zhang, “A Study of Exoticism in Fanny Hensel’s *Lieder*,” 37.

⁶⁶ Tarpenning, “Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: A Bridge Between Felix Mendelssohn and Johannes Brahms”, 43.

Although the larger works don't form the backbone of Fanny's work as her *Lieder* do, they show that she was not always exclusively a *Lied* composer, cultivating a range of other genres even when she was not encouraged nor instructed to do so.

Musical Influence

Fanny's choice of name for her son reflects her musical influences; Felix Ludwig Sebastian Hensel was named after his mother's three favorite composers: Felix Mendelssohn, Ludwig van Beethoven and Johann Sebastian Bach.

Her music reflects her reverence for Bach, the clear influence of Beethoven, and a very similar style to her brother. She and Felix studied together through their youth and even after their composition and piano teachers were dismissed so Felix would go to college. Fanny and he always kept in touch exchanging compositions and musical ideas. The Mendelssohnian style exhibits ability and lyricism, and Fanny adds to it with her own experimental and inventive approach to form and content.

Fanny's progressive harmonic language resembles Beethoven's influence in her writing, as well as in Felix's. "She emphasizes the subdominant as well as vocabulary based on tertiary relationships and common tone modulations⁶⁷." Although her father Abraham and their first composition teacher Zelter were critical of Beethoven, their piano teacher Ignaz Moscheles was close to Beethoven in his last years, and therefore influenced the Mendelssohn siblings regarding Beethoven's geniality.

⁶⁷ Tarpenning, "Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: A Bridge Between Felix Mendelssohn and Johannes Brahms", 41.

Her acquaintance with J. S. Bach's keyboard music and with "St. Matthew's Passion", provided her an extensive knowledge of counterpoint, motivic inversion, and interest in the inner voices, showing her solid schooling and self-discipline⁶⁸. Nonetheless, it was never the focal point of her creative energies.

Although Fanny and Felix show a strong similarity in their musical influences, they diverged in many aspects. While Fanny's themes were usually longing for distant lands she had never been to, her brother was typically at ease with his location and showed it through his selections of texts. In addition to that, the use of difficult octave doublings was frequent in Fanny's piano pieces and rare in Felix's. Another difference was regarding texture. Felix would usually retain one pianistic texture throughout each piece, while Fanny would often use more than one textural type.

Both Fanny and Felix shared a love for Italy, which was shown in many of their compositions. Nonetheless, Camilla Cai states that Fanny's compositions from the period she was in Rome had "expansive lengths, multiple themes, developmental techniques and difficult pianistic figures", contrasting with Mendelssohn's "more compact, mostly monothematic, less technically demanding" 'Songs without Words' from the same period⁶⁹.

Despite their individualities, the strong connection between Fanny and Felix remained even during the periods when they were not sending many letters to each other. In February of 1836, for example, Fanny wrote "*Fruhzeitiger Fruhling*" and "*Wid Feld*

⁶⁸ Tarpenning, "Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: A Bridge Between Felix Mendelssohn and Johannes Brahms", 41.

⁶⁹ Tarpenning, "Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: A Bridge Between Felix Mendelssohn and Johannes Brahms", 49-50.

und Au”, two vocal trios for a cappella sopranos and tenor that later inspired her brother to set music to the same text with his Op. 59 No. 2. Both feature soprano leaps with a supportive bass throughout.

Lea Mendelssohn remarked how Fanny’s and Felix’s *Lieder* bore resemblance to each other, stating that even when they were not communicating as much, their independently-composed pieces were exceptionally similar. The same was valid with their piano pieces, such as Fanny’s “Andante con espressione in B-Flat Major” (Figure X) and Felix’s “Prelude in B-Flat Major Op. 35 No. 6⁷⁰.” (Figure Y) Both pieces feature a bass figuration that rolls to the treble to meet the high melodic line.

Andante con espressione 1

Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel
(1805–1847)

Figure 5: “Andante con espressione” mm. 1-9.

⁷⁰ Tarpinning, “Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: A Bridge Between Felix Mendelssohn and Johannes Brahms”, 17-20.

Praeludium VI.

Componirt 1837.

Maestoso moderato.

The musical score for Praeludium VI, Op. 35 No. 6, is presented in two systems. The first system contains seven measures, and the second system contains four measures. The tempo is marked 'Maestoso moderato'. The score includes dynamic markings such as 'f' and 'mf', and performance instructions like 'sempre col Pedale'. There are asterisks under some bass notes in both systems.

Figure 6: “Prelude in B-Flat Major, Op. 35 No. 6” mm. 1-8.

Another example of strong resemblance is between Fanny’s “*Saltarello Romano*” Op. 6 No. 4⁷¹ (1841) and the fourth movement in Felix’s “*Italian Symphony*” Op. 90 (1834). Both works are in A Minor, called “*Saltarello*” and end intensely and fiercely, with syncopated accents and a distinctive use of triplets. In addition, both works embody Italian folk music.

In spite of the divergences between Fanny and Felix, the similarities in their music is proof of their deep connection. Overcome by grief at her death, Felix Mendelssohn wrote the String Quartet No. 6 in F Minor in memory of his sister. He died shortly after her, and even the proximity of their deaths seems to show how much they relied upon each other.

⁷¹ Hensel, Fanny Mendelssohn. *4 Lieder For Piano Op. 6*. Berlin: Bote & Bock, 1847.

CONCLUSION

Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel received great musical instruction from her composition and piano instructors during her childhood, but she was never encouraged to dedicate herself to a musical career. Instead, she would often be discouraged from spending too much time and energy with practicing and composing.

Also, Fanny was not allowed to publish her pieces nor to perform in public. She had to constantly deal with Felix being publicly recognized for his musical accomplishments while she kept her talent private. The letters she wrote both to her father Abraham and brother Felix show the impact that this neglect towards her compositions had on her art.

Even though she did not perform in public concerts, Fanny built a great reputation in Berlin through private performances at the Mendelssohn home. And after she and Wilhelm Hensel married, as much as she knew that her primary responsibilities were those of a housewife and a mother, Fanny still managed to keep composing and organizing the *Sonntagmusiken* every Sunday at the Hensels' home.

As Felix was traveling to acquire musical knowledge, meeting artists, musicians and composers, and experiencing different cultures, Fanny strongly relied on his professional opinion. She believed her compositions needed his approval. Felix was her most important and closest colleague since the beginning of her career as a composer, so

the dependence on his opinion and support had been developed throughout her whole life, increasing her emotional dependence and lack of confidence.

Although Wilhelm and her mother Lea encouraged her to publish, Fanny often expressed to friends and family members that the biggest obstacle she faced in her musical life was a lack of sufficient encouragement, probably because she wanted the approval of her biggest idol and inspiration: Felix.

The negative impact that not publishing had in her sanity and musical productivity is clear. Fanny's motivation to compose was diminished by the lack of audience and goals. The fear of her father and brother, her own insecurity and society pressure on women were added to the fact that Fanny had to deal with the moral duty of the Mendelssohn family, creating the obstacle that prevented her from publishing until 1846, only one year before her death. For that reason, most of her music was neither discovered, attributed to her, nor published until after her death. Her compositions include, but are not limited to: *Lieder*, Songs Without Words, Piano Sonatas, several books with piano solo works, chamber works such as piano and cello duos and string quartets, cantatas, oratorios and choral works.

Many of her works are currently in private collections, passed down as part of the Mendelssohn estate, while some of them are in libraries in the United States (New York and Washington D.C.,) United Kingdom and Germany.

APPENDIX 1:

Piano Sonata in C Minor, H. 128: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLCIgyDTVg0>.

Pianist: Heather Schmidt.

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