

# **Fanny Mendelssohn the Composer, Pianist, Conductor and Organizer of the Sunday Concerts at Leipziger Straße 3 in Berlin**

## **How I met Fanny Mendelssohn**

This is the extraordinary story of a woman composer of the 19th century – the German Romantic period – Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel (1805-1847). She is in the news right now around the world and celebrated like a super star. “She even has 5 Twitter accounts,” Sheila Hayman, Fanny Mendelssohn’s great-great-great granddaughter tells us, as she reveals the secret of her great-great-great-grandmother’s long lost Easter Sonata, the Ostersonate. Fanny Mendelssohn may be long dead, but she’s finally in the spotlight. It is up to all of us to keep her there and increase her fame!

There are two points in particular that I would like to make about Fanny Mendelssohn: 1) I want to highlight her musical genius and 2) discuss how and why her father, Abraham Mendelssohn (1776-1835), discouraged her from that which Fanny Mendelssohn was born to do: to compose music and play for an adoring audience! Abraham Mendelssohn’s children experienced him as a stern father who expected his daughters to remain true and loving, devoted and obedient – as he did from all his children. He was adamantly opposed to his daughters having a public career, thus also spoiling a promising career as a singer for Rebecka.

I am sure that all of us assembled here this evening can easily name a dozen or more male composers of the 18th and 19th centuries just off the tops of our heads, and I am also sure that no matter whom we name, we must always begin with Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), because classical music, as we know it, began with Bach and takes us back to him!

When I still lived in East Germany, my older cousin Gerti, who had perfect pitch and later attended the Musikhochschule Franz Liszt in Weimar, always played piano when I visited her, and one day she said, “These notes are very old, it’s a Lied by Fanny Mendelssohn, Mendelssohn with two ss, don’t forget that.” I was so fascinated by Gerti’s playing that I knew I wanted to have piano music like this in my own home some day.

Decades later and after years of classical music concerts at my home in Culver City, I suddenly realized that the musicians were always playing music by the same male composers, and decided that I would add compositions by women composers. However, when I tried to think of a woman composer, whose work was equal to that of the male giants in music, not even one woman came to mind. How could this be? How frustrating! I even began to doubt my knowledge of classical music in general. After all, we can look back on several hundred years’ worth of the most beautiful music!

At the time I had just re-read a book called *Schwestern berühmter Männer (Sisters of Famous Men)*, giving twelve biographical portraits of women, among them Maria Anna Mozart (1751-1829), Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s (1756-1791) gifted older sister. Maria Anna Mozart was not only a great pianist and child prodigy, but she also composed. Mozart was surprised by how good she was and encouraged her to write more and send it to him. Unfortunately, none of her compositions survived, and when she got married she gave up playing the piano completely. And there is the famous pianist Clara Schumann Wieck (1819-1896), who gave concerts throughout Europe. She had to support first her father, Friedrich Wieck (1785-1873), and later herself, her eight children and her sick husband, Robert Schumann (1810-1846). She concertized until shortly before her death in 1896.

While reading about the Mozarts, I suddenly remembered Fanny Mendelssohn, Felix Mendelssohn's (1809-1847) older sister. I googled her and knew instantly that I had found my woman! From that day on I could not stop talking and reading about Fanny Mendelssohn and listening to her music. Why had I not paid attention to her when we all know her brother? How could it happen that her music was lost for over 130 years after her sudden death in 1847? How could her genius remain hidden for over a century?

### **Family background:**

Fanny Cäcilie Mendelssohn was the oldest daughter of Lea Mendelssohn, née Salomon (1777-1842), and Abraham Mendelssohn. The Mendelssohn family was one of the most prominent and illustrious German families, and over many generations contributed to the cultural and intellectual life, not only in Germany, but in all of Europe. The four Mendelssohn children were christened in 1816, their parents converted to Protestantism in 1820. In 1820 Fanny Mendelssohn celebrated her confirmation and became a member of the Singakademie in Berlin. The Mendelssohns wanted to fit into German society and had agreed to speak only German in public, never Yiddish. You will find few Yiddish words in their writings and letters.

By 1830 the fame of the Mendelssohns was spreading fast, and soon reached the United States. The family was acquainted with countless musicians and singers – men and women – as well as artists, historians and scientists during this highly creative and fast expanding technological period in European history between 1800 and 1850. They were truly cosmopolitan, spoke several languages and travelled throughout Europe, soon taking trains and steam ships, as these modern, safer, more convenient, faster and cheaper means of transportation became available.

Fanny Mendelssohn's paternal grandfather, Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), was the famous German philosopher of the age of enlightenment and a close friend of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Gottfried Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) and many more. In 1783 the monthly periodical "Berlinische Monatsschrift" had sent out a call to philosophers and theologians to answer the question: "What is enlightenment and what is truth"? This was 6 years before the French Revolution, when the individual and personal responsibility for one's life and actions, Kant's inflammatory, insurgent and liberating message, surfaced almost overnight. Moses Mendelssohn was the first to answer the question in an essay in 1784, to be followed by Kant, Lessing, Wieland, Schiller, Hamann, Herder and others.

In 1762 Moses Mendelssohn married Abraham Guggenheim's oldest daughter, Fromet Guggenheim (1737-1812). Two of their sons, Joseph and Abraham, established the Mendelssohn Bank in Berlin in 1795, which secured the family's wealth. They were forced to liquidate by the Nazis in 1938. Deutsche Bank took over the assets. Moses Mendelssohn also established the first literary salon in Berlin.

Their sister, Brendel Mendelssohn (1764-1839), changed her name to Dorothea, which was the popular thing to do in those days. Later she met the philosopher and writer Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829) and eventually divorced her husband, the merchant Simon Veit, after an unhappy arranged marriage, and married Schlegel. Dorothea Schlegel set up one of the famous literary salons in Berlin. Henriette Herz (1764-1847) was the first woman to establish a literary salon, another salon met in the home of Rahel Levin Varnhagen (1771-1833). At the time there were about 20 literary salons in Berlin, all lead by young Jewish women. All were young, brilliant, well educated and free-thinking Jewish women. The salons were their entry into the elegant, sophisticated Berlin society, where Jewish women were the first to speak and fight for the emancipation of women.

Abraham and Lea Mendelssohn lived in Hamburg from where they had to flee abruptly to Berlin in 1811 because of the occupation by the Napoleonic troops. Abraham Mendelssohn had supported the Prussian troops with large sums of money.

Lea Mendelssohn came from the very musical Salomon family and was herself an excellent pianist. When their first child Fanny was born, Lea remarked that she had the hands to play Bach's fugues. Abraham Mendelssohn was so pleased at this prophesy that he mentioned it on the birth announcement. Lea realized early that Fanny was indeed a musically gifted child who was eager to play the piano from the time she was little more than two years old. During her early years Abraham followed his daughter's progress at the piano proudly. However, he gave up this idea when Felix, who was born three years later, also displayed extraordinary musical talents, and from then on Abraham Mendelssohn concentrated all his efforts, parental pride and hope on him.

The Mendelssohns had two more children, the singer Rebecka Mendelssohn (1811-1858) and cellist Paul Mendelssohn (1812-1874), who became the family banker. Lea gave all her children their first piano lessons. Soon the best piano teachers were hired for Felix, and while Fanny liked being taught by her mother, she demanded an outside teacher too, because she did not want to lag behind her brother. Money was no obstacle. They were given lessons in music theory, composition, harmony, counterpoint and the art of the fugue. Their most influential and famous teacher was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's (1749-1832) friend, the musician, professor of music and composer Carl Friedrich Zelter (1758-1832), who founded the Singakademie in Berlin in 1791.

Their maternal grandmother, Bella Salomon (1749-1824), had the largest collection of Bach's Music at the time. During her daily piano practices Fanny Mendelssohn always began with Bach before moving on to other composers. The families were personally

acquainted with Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849), Franz Schubert (1797-1828), Franz Liszt (1811-1886), Robert Schumann (1810-1856), Clara Wieck, and the pianist and composer Johanna Kinkel (1810-1858), to name just a few.

### **Fanny Mendelssohn's musical education**

In 1818, when Fanny Mendelssohn was 13 years old, she played the 24 preludes of the first part of Bach's well tempered piano from memory – as a present for her father's 42nd birthday. By then she was already in fierce competition with her brother Felix and wanted to excel. With this performance, Fanny gave an example of her excellent skills at the piano, her insight into Bach's music, her stamina and her musical memory, which never failed her. We can compare her musical memory to that of Mozart. On her later travels, especially to Rome, Naples, Florence and Paris, she played almost daily to varied audiences from her copious memorized repertoire of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Gluck, Schumann, Ludwig Spohr (1784-1859), Johann Nepomuk Hummel (1778-1837), Ignaz Moscheles (1794-1870) and her brother Felix Mendelssohn.

The Mendelssohns made a point of always playing the latest compositions of contemporary composers, which included waltzes by Johann Strauß, sen. (1804-1849). They loved to dance through the nights, the latest dances were the waltz, the gallop (in 2/4 time), the polka and can-can, favorites in all of Europe even until today.

Music was Fanny Mendelssohn's life, composing came to her naturally. No one ever had to tell her to practice, only to not overdo it. From the spring of 1820 on she composed seriously and she watched over Felix' works. They were very close in those early years and she continued to help him as well as critique his works – until he left home in 1831.

## **Abraham Mendelssohn tried to keep his daughter from having a public career in music**

Fanny Mendelssohn was proud of her accomplishments and sent her compositions to her father, who was away on frequent business trips throughout Germany, France, the Netherlands, Belgium and England. On July 16th, 1820, she was 15 at the time, her father sent her a letter from Paris, regarding her compositions: “What you wrote to me about your musical occupation with reference to and in comparison with Felix was both rightly thought and expressed. Music will perhaps become his profession, whilst for you it can and must only be an ornament, never the foundation for your being and doing ... and your very joy at the praise he earns proves that you might, in his place, have merited equal approval. Remain true to these sentiments and to this line of conduct; they are feminine, and only what is truly feminine adorns a woman.”

In 1828 Abraham Mendelssohn repeated in another letter the same advice to his daughter: “You must do more to pull yourself together, to collect yourself; you must work more seriously and assiduously to realize your actual calling, that of a housewife.” And he continues: “do this as long as you can freely, and before you are compelled ...”. These words must have sounded like a threat, like a continued attack on who she was as a woman, but Fanny did not heed his advice. (SH I, p. 84; MG, p. 14) She expresses her annoyance about the fact that she is frequently reduced to being just a woman, as we know from her letters and diary. (UBR S. 32)

I wonder what Abraham Mendelssohn was thinking when he wrote his brilliant daughter that she should not do the very thing that was most important to her, composing music, for which Felix earned the greatest admiration, praise and support from him? Was he, the free thinking, successful banker – who would have loved to pursue the life of an artist himself, yet the times and circumstances did not allow – so caught up in backward

thinking regarding women that he could not imagine a career as a composer for his daughter? Especially since he admitted that she was as much a musical genius as Felix?

From what we know from Fanny Mendelssohn's letters and her diary, her father must have talked like this to her often. I would say that his behavior towards her was cruelly unreasonable. She was hurt, felt treated unfairly and suffered from depression over the lack of recognition and the preference that was given to Felix, but she did not follow her father's advice. Fanny was driven to write music, she lived and breathed music, and used it to express her feelings, her mood and to come to terms with whatever happened to her. Another good example of her great talent is her composition "Das Jahr" that she wrote after their Italian sojourn, 12 pieces, one for each of the 12 months, and a postlude. The music was written on colored sheets of paper and illustrated by her husband Wilhelm. Each piece is accompanied by a poem.

In 1821 the first Sunday concerts, or Sonntagsmusiken, took place in the Mendelssohn house. All four Mendelssohn children contributed to its success. 1821 was also the year when Zelter travelled with his daughter Doris to Weimar to visit his friend Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832). Zelter invited Felix Mendelssohn to join them, a great honor for the Mendelssohn family. Fanny was deeply hurt and unjustly neglected because her father would not allow her to go along. She expressed her grief and disappointment in several heartbreaking letters to her brother as she admonished him not to forget anything about this most important visit to Goethe, who was adored by everyone and the absolute idol of the time. Felix was to remember every word this famous man would speak, everything he did, the way he lived. Fanny Mendelssohn put poems by Goethe to music as well as poems by many other famous poets of their day, among them Joseph von Eichendorff (1788-1857), Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), Ludwig Uhland (1787-1882) and Wilhelm Müller (1794-1827), the poet of the song cycles „Die Winterreise“ and „Die schöne Müllerin“. Goethe praised Fanny's compositions highly



and wrote some poems specifically for her to set to music. She also composed music to Goethe's "Walpurgisnacht" and other parts of Faust II.

### **The great trip through Switzerland in 1822**

In the summer of 1822 Abraham Mendelssohn took his entire family, including servants, tutors and a cook on an extended journey through Switzerland. They left Berlin in three coaches, the family called it the Mendelssohn caravan. 200 years ago this was a most unusual, exotic and expensive undertaking. On the trip to Switzerland and back they stopped in many towns throughout Germany, to visit relatives and friends and even visited Goethe in Weimar. These were exciting months; the journey through Switzerland was enchanting. Fanny Mendelssohn wrote the most detailed letters to friends and relatives about their travel adventures. In total awe she described the majestic mountains, the deep valleys and clear streams, the way people lived, the hotels, what they ate, the flowers and glaciers, the hikes they took. The travels up and down the narrow and steep Alpine roads must have been both thrilling and terribly dangerous, if not downright hazardous in those coaches. Fanny writes about her deep longing to continue on to Italy while standing on top of the St. Gotthard pass, adding, "if I had been a boy of 16 I may have done a very foolish thing and left everyone behind to hike to Rome," realizing once again the limitations put on her by society. Plaques on Swiss houses mention the Mendelssohn's visit.

The Mendelssohns were very aware of who they were. They kept every single letter and note they ever wrote and received, neatly sorted in huge green volumes. Fanny was the best communicator, giving detailed accounts on every area of their lives. Her letters, written in an immaculate German, were passed around in the family. Family members imposed on themselves a certain self-censorship; sordid details and problems, that we have in any family, were to be kept private.

## **The musical genius Fanny Mendelssohn**

Fanny and Felix Mendelssohn received extensive musical training, however, Fanny was over 3 years older than Felix at the start of these lessons. This is a big age difference in the early lives of children and it was actually late for Fanny to begin developing her extraordinary musical gift. While she was given, at least at first glance, an equally good education in composition as her brother, it was always with the understanding that she would not publish her works. We know from listening to Fanny Mendelssohn's music and what musicologists and music historians tell us, she tried out new ideas, was more flexible and composed more forward looking works, whereas Felix Mendelssohn remained more conservative, within the confines of German romanticism. Fanny was the most gifted of the Mendelssohn children. It is interesting to note that Felix Mendelssohn was the most frequently played composer of his time.

Because of her father's incessant admonitions, Fanny Mendelssohn knew that she needed a husband who would let her pursue her musical career – and she chose well. Against her parents' wishes she insisted on marrying the Prussian court painter at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin Wilhelm Hensel (1794-1861) whom she had met in 1821 at an exhibition of his works for *Lalla Rookh*, a poem by Thomas Moore, to which her mother had taken her. The poem and Hensel's drawings were all the rave in Berlin.

Fanny Mendelssohn was 16 at the time of their first meeting – he was 9 years older – and she must have sensed that he was a painter at heart and deeply involved in his work and career from the way he spoke to her as he took her around the exhibition, explaining his work. His demeanor convinced her that he would be the right man for her and that he would let her live for her music.

We may assume today that Fanny and Felix Mendelssohn were musically the more talented of the four Mendelssohn children, but we really do not know. Rebecka had a beautiful voice. She performed at the Sonntagsmusiken until her marriage with the mathematician Peter Gustav Lejeune Dirichlet (1805-1859), and sang Felix' songs at these concerts. He preferred Rebecka's interpretations to those of other singers, but would not use her as a singer in his public performances. In 1829 Rebecka sang a small role in the premiere of Felix' Singspiel *Die Heimkehr aus der Fremde*. Later she wrote: "My older brother and sister stole my reputation as an artist. In any other family I would have been highly regarded as a musician and perhaps been leader of a group. Next to Felix and Fanny, I could not aspire to any recognition." It is hard to understand that the Mendelssohn family, who was blessed with 4 extraordinarily gifted children, concentrated all their efforts on just one child – especially since money was abundantly available.

In 1823 Abraham Mendelssohn established the Sonntagsmusiken or Sunday concerts to give his children a platform to perform music before an audience consisting of family members and friends. In order to be able to accommodate larger audiences, he began looking for a home with an adequate concert room, and in 1825 he bought the largest residence available in Berlin, the Reck'sche Palais on Leipziger Straße 3. Today the address is the seat of the Deutsche Bundesrat. A plaque in memory of the Mendelssohns was placed next to the entrance.

The Sonntagsmusiken were semi-public events, but we must stress that these concerts were highly professional events, with professional musicians and a most knowledgeable, critical, sophisticated and elegant audience that assembled on a bi-weekly basis from all of Berlin and Europe. The family not only knew most contemporary musicians and composers personally, but poets, philosophers, painters, architects, bankers, professors,

historians, politicians and scientists. The society of Berlin including the court, and whoever was visiting from other European countries, clamored to be invited.

1829 is the year of Fanny Mendelssohn's *Ostersonate*. Lost for 150 years, and mistakenly – and I wonder if not willfully – attributed to her brother Felix when it was found in 1970, Fanny Mendelssohn's bold, complex and strong work is belatedly receiving the attention it merits as her *Easter Sonata*. It was performed on March 8th, 2017, on International Women's Day. Why the delay? What is the real story behind Fanny Mendelssohn's masterpiece?

I was surprised when I found references to Fanny Mendelssohn's *Easter Sonata* on March 8th, as I googled her name, as I often do, to see if I could find something new about her. I knew of the *Ostersonate* because I had read about this composition two years earlier in her diary and remembered that I had marked it, as is my custom, writing next to it: "Fanny's composition". I immediately looked for it, and was reminded that she had composed it before her wedding. She mentioned the *Ostersonate* on April 13th, 1829, after they had said farewell to Felix, who had left on another trip, on the 10th of April. Her entry reads: "... Hensel came after dinner, later Marx, Droysen, Albert Heydemann; Gans came by for an hour. Droysen brought me the sweetest, most adorable poem about Felix, which put me into a most pleasant mood, because a melody for it came to mind right away. I played my *Ostersonate* ..."

However, I had been unaware of the fact that it was attributed to Felix – even though he had never mentioned composing an *Easter Sonata* – only because the name "F. Mendelssohn" was written on one of the two parts that were found in different places in Europe, the most important section in Paris? After all, Fanny wrote it before her marriage, and F. Mendelssohn was here name too! Or because it was too good to come from a woman? Only men could persist until 1965 that Fanny Mendelssohn's music was

mediocre, the work of a housewife and therefore not worthy to be performed, that it consisted only of short pieces and should be forgotten altogether because she herself had asked that it should neither be played nor published after her death. With such defamatory, untrue statements, the keepers of the archives also disregarded the esteemed opinions of Fanny's contemporaries Charles Gounod, George Bousquet (1818-1854), Johanna Kinkel, Robert von Keudell (1824-1903), her brother Felix and her husband Wilhelm Hensel.

After 8 years of courtship, Lea Mendelssohn relented under pressure from other family members and finally agreed to give her blessing to the marriage of her daughter Fanny to the Prussian court painter Wilhelm Hensel. They were married on the 3rd of October, 1829. Hensel had become famous and Fanny would not marry anyone else – to escape admonitions from a husband similar to those she had received from her father. Their marriage is said to have been very happy. Fanny frequently played for her husband for hours while he was painting in his studio next to her music room.

Johanna Kinkel, who lived in Berlin from 1836 until 1839, gave a vivid account of Fanny's art of conducting, describing the fascination that emanated from her:

“I valued Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel's performance more highly than that of the greatest virtuosos and the most beautiful voices. She had a very special way of conducting. She was able to get through to the deepest part of the artistic spirit of a composition and enable it to flow into the souls of the singers and listeners. A sforzando of her small finger ran like an electric shock through our souls and carried us away like no wooden knocking of a baton on a music stand will ever be able to do.” (PS, S. 148/49; FF Briefwechsel, S. 113)

Fanny Mendelssohn, however, lived not only for music. She thirsted for knowledge in every field like her grandfather Moses and wanted to know as much as possible.

During the 1820s the guests that attended the Sunday concerts at the Mendelssohn house were mainly family members, friends and acquaintances like the Humboldt brothers, Hegel, Rahel and August Varnhagen von Ense, Droysen, Zelter, and visiting virtuosos and composers. When Fanny Mendelssohn took over the concerts in 1831, she took over the complete planning and leading of the Sunday concerts, which included choosing the music, rehearsing with the choir and orchestras, the solo singers and instrumentalists as well as planning for food, drinks and wine. And she sent out personal invitations to members of Berlin's society.

In 1834 she hired the orchestra of the Königstädter Theater to perform her C major overture. She led the concerts as pianist and conducted as the need arose. According to an entry from a concert in June of 1837, when the Paulus Oratory by Felix Mendelssohn was performed under Fanny Mendelssohn's leadership, she wrote in her diary that 300 guests had attended, among them Franz Liszt and Clara and Robert Schumann. Once she counted and recorded proudly that 22 coaches had entered the courtyard, including those of the Humboldts and Liszts, as well as eight coaches with 11 princesses. We still have the music programs that Fanny Mendelssohn put together for the Sonntagsmusiken that show how often she chose music from the various composers.

Fanny Mendelssohn lived during exciting, forward looking times. The beginning of the 19th century was a turning point in our human history. During the French Revolution the women's movement – le mouvement des femmes – began in Paris, where women demanded equal rights, to be allowed to speak in the assemblies and fought for the right to vote. Soon a real awakening swept through Europe, women's rights were talked about and pursued everywhere. The word Frauenbewegung was introduced in Germany in

1837, but the spirit was there earlier and had taken hold of Fanny and her sister Rebecka. They lived very much in the present and commented frequently on politics and cultural events in all European countries, read foreign newspapers and were intensely interested in all the technical and mechanical inventions of the day. Fanny Mendelssohn often remarked on such modern conveniences as the gas lanterns on city streets that made them safer, and gas lighting in public buildings like auditoriums, theaters, concert halls, and museums that before could be visited only during day time. But more importantly, for the first time ever, people had adequate lighting in their homes during the evenings to use the hours after dark as they wished and be more productive. And she loved to travel by train and could hardly wait until all cities in Europe would be connected by rail. Train travel, she said, was faster, cheaper, more comfortable, and train schedules made arrivals and departures more reliable.

The idea of a united Europe, was important to people in the 19th century. By 1850 the railroad connected all major European cities, having brought Europe closer together within two decades. Eichendorff commented in his historical writings that people in Königsberg, where he lived and worked, knew when they would arrive in Leipzig, Paris or Trieste. Steam ships made travel safer, faster and more affordable across the Atlantic to New York, the Channel to England or across the North sea from Hamburg to London. To satisfy her thirst for knowledge, Fanny Mendelssohn attended the public lectures given by Alexander von Humboldt at the Singakademie and wrote to the beloved family friend and diplomat Carl Klingemann (1798-1862) in London on December 23rd, 1827 detailed enthusiastic reports about these extraordinary events: (Read SH I, p. 151/52)

“You must have heard of Alexander von Humboldt’s (1769-1859) lectures on physical geography. But do you know that at his majesty’s request (Friedrich Wilhelm III, 1797-1840) he has begun a second course of lectures in the hall of the Singakademie attended by everybody who lays any claim to good breeding and fashion, from the king and the

whole court, ministers, generals, officers, artists, authors, beaux esprits (and ugly ones too) students and ladies, down to your unworthy correspondent? The crowd is fearful, the public imposing, and the lectures are very interesting indeed. Gentlemen may laugh as much as they like, but it is delightful that we too have the opportunity given us of listening to clever men. We fully enjoy this happiness, and must try to bear the scoffing. And now I will give up completely to your mockery, by confessing that we are hearing a course of lectures from a foreigner about experimental physics. These lectures are likewise attended chiefly by ladies. He reads in a newly built room, well lighted with gas.” This was at a time when women were not allowed to attend public schools and universities, and Friedrich Wilhelm III had made it possible even for women of his own court.

Just as Abraham Mendelssohn had not allowed his daughter Fanny to take up a career in music composition and public performances, Felix also steadfastly refused to help his sister; neither did he permit her to publish her work even after their father’s death in 1835. Instead he tried to prevent his older sister from publishing, by repeating that he could not advise it and that he wanted to spare her all the manifold problems with publishers. He never changed his mind, neither did her younger brother Paul. Felix’ position toward his sister was unfortunate because he knew that Fanny was his equal in every way; besides he needed her input and constructive criticism for his compositions. By the mid 1840s, after Fanny’s return from their Italian journey, Felix finally left the decision to publish up to his sister, seeing that he had lost his hold on her. However, by then it was almost too late.

Felix Mendelssohn never played a piece by his sister as music director and/or conductor in Düsseldorf, Berlin, Frankfurt, Dresden, Leipzig, Paris, Birmingham and London, to name some of the cities, although Fanny continued sending him her latest works, asking, almost pleading with him to play her music. Now and then he would publish one or two



of her Lieder, including them in his publications under his name, except for once when he published one Lied with her name among his works and then made a big deal about it to Fanny, which infuriated her. “One song is like no song at all,” Fanny screamed, throwing the notes at his feet. In the light of their close working relationship it is even more perplexing that Felix Mendelssohn would not acknowledge his sister’s genius publicly. Besides Felix Mendelssohn praised and helped other famous women to publish and to perform in public, among them Jenny Lind (1820-1887) whose career he followed, he praised the composer Johanna Kinkel, and adored the mezzo soprano Maria Malibran (1808-1836), he furthered the career of Clara Schumann Wieck (1819-1896) and Louise Farrenc (1804-1875).

### **Queen Victoria: Fanny’s song, a ring for Hensel**

Sheila Hayman, Fanny Mendelssohn’s great-great-great granddaughter, wrote in a personal reflection for “The Guardian”, that the brother published some of Fanny’s songs under his own name, which led to red faces in front of Queen Victoria when he asked her which of his songs she liked best and it turned out to be one of Fanny’s. (see also SH II, S. 190ff)

After the Italian year, Fanny Mendelssohn’s struggle to find her own way was over. She felt free to go against all restrictions, and began sorting her compositions. She laid out works for 6 books to start with.

After their return to Berlin, Gounod came to visit Fanny Mendelssohn three years later. Fanny also composed works to Faust II, which was considered a male topic. Robert von Keudell, a young Prussian diplomat and excellent pianist, befriended the family because he knew of the Mendelssohn’s love for music. Von Keudell and Fanny Mendelssohn played the piano every afternoon for several months. He realized Fanny’s great gift

immediately, and it was because of von Keudell's persistent persuasion that Fanny finally decided to sort and publish some of her music in 1846. (SH II, p. 325 - SH II, S. 365) Gounod had pleaded with Fanny to publish her work, and Wilhelm Hensel encouraged his wife. Fanny Mendelssohn's music became an immediate success. Two publishers had made her extraordinary offers and could not get enough of her composition. (SH II, p. 325) For them it was instantly a highly profitable and successful venture. Wilhelm Hensel provided the artistic decorations of the cover pages. Fanny Mendelssohn received the first printed copies a day before her death. More compositions were ready to go to print, which Felix helped publish after her death.

Felix was devastated by Fanny's sudden death and never recovered from the loss. The only work he wrote is known today as "A Requiem for Fanny". He died 6 months later also of a stroke. The greater part of Fanny Mendelssohn's music was left in her estate or kept by family members and later locked away in archives. For over 100 years no one received access to her musical legacy and her work was mostly forgotten.

Fanny Mendelssohn worked very hard all her life and expected much of herself. She never gave in to her illness and did what she thought needed to be done. At the height of her success, as she was entering public life, Fanny Mendelssohn died suddenly of a stroke on the 14th of May 1847, as she was rehearsing her brother's *Walpurgisnacht* with orchestra and choir for the upcoming Sunday concert. Fanny Mendelssohn experienced the spring of 1847, nature and all the flowers as an extraordinary happy period in her life. She had so many plans after the successful publication of her first compositions and was earning money for the family. At last she had arrived as a professional composer, after stepping out of her brother's shadow. Many maintain that she was the better composer. Countless possibilities of making music and composing were opening up for her, she was in great demand. Sebastian was grown up, preparing for his Abitur and then to leave the house. She and her husband were making plans for another trip to Italy like

the one in 1839/40. Fanny was free at last, full of energy and hope, she felt like a new life, her real life, was beginning at last, when she died of a stroke at 11 pm on May 14th, 1847. Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel did not die – as many have blindly and thoughtlessly suggested – at the height of her career, but it was actually the beginning of her career.

She left us 500 works, and there will be more coming to light. Her compositions include piano trios, sonatas and several books of solo piano pieces and countless songs. She wrote a string quartet, cantatas, music for choir, chamber music, orchestral works, an orchestra overture, *Lieder ohne Worte* (*Song without Words*), a song cycle *Das Jahr* (*The Year*). A number of her songs were originally published under Felix' name in his opus 8 and 9 collections.

Fanny Mendelssohn is the only female musical genius of the 19th century who can stand next to all the other male composers whose music is being played everywhere every day. Her compositions remained in family possession until 1965, when they were finally given to the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin. From 1965 on it took almost another 20 years before the women's movement in Germany in 1982 "discovered" her music and we finally know about her today. Occasionally orchestras will play one of her pieces and we can hear her works more frequently on the radio. I would like to have her music recognized more widely at last and become part of the repertoires of all classical orchestras worldwide.

In light of the latest political developments in our western democracies, I want to say something about religion. About 4 years ago I began searching for a woman composer, equal to all the composers of the 18th and 19th centuries and discovered for me Fanny Mendelssohn the woman and the musical genius. Only today are we beginning to realize in Germany again, how significant the Mendelssohn family was for German culture and Geistesgeschichte – intellectual history. However, in the middle of a shake-up in world

politics, I suddenly realized that had Fanny Mendelssohn been born in 1905 instead of 1805, she may have encountered a very different fate – instead of dying much too early of a stroke in Berlin at age 42 in 1847. The Nazis froze Jewish assets immediately after Hitler was elected chancellor, and the Swiss are keeping number accounts of Jewish people secret until this day. So even the wealthy Mendelssohns may have gotten stuck in Germany, without enough money to entice American politicians to accept them as refugees, especially since Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who was president from March 4, 1933 until April 12, 1945, cut more than in half the quota of Jewish refugees that were allowed to enter the United States every year – instead of increasing the annual number – to prevent antisemitism from growing in the US. Abraham and Lea Mendelssohn and their children Fanny, Felix, Rebecka and Paul, had not been practicing Jews nor were they believing Christians after their conversion to Protestantism in 1816 and 1820. It's a disturbing topic and worth looking into. The Mendelssohns wanted to belong to the German society, a fact that should still make us proud and thankful today.

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## **Publishers of Fanny Mendelssohn's works:**

Die Autographen ihrer Werke befinden sich im Mendelssohn-Archiv der Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin sowie in Privatbesitz.

1827 [Fanny Hensel: 6 Lieder] bei Breitkopf & Härtel, Leipzig unter *Felix*

*Mendelssohn-Bartholdy*: op. 8. Nummern 2, 3, 12 und op. 9, Nummern 7, 10, 12.

Weihnachten 1846, Berliner Verlag Bote & Bock, drei Hefte mit ausgewählten Werken:

- *Sechs Lieder für eine Singstimme mit Begleitung des Pianoforte*, op. 1
- *Vier Lieder für das Pianoforte, vol. 1*, op. 2
- *Gartenlieder. Sechs Gesänge für Sopran, Alt, Tenor und Baß*, op. 3[19]

1847 folgte die Veröffentlichung weiterer vier Hefte im Verlag A. M. Schlesinger (op. 4 u. 5) und Bote & Bock (op. 6 u. 7):

- *Six Mélodies pour le Piano, vol. 1*, op. 4
- *Six Mélodies pour le Piano, vol. 2*, op. 5
- *Vier Lieder für das Pianoforte, vol. 2*, op. 6 mit dem Finalstück *Il saltarello romano*
- *Sechs Lieder für eine Stimme mit Begleitung des Pianoforte*, op. 7

Nach ihrem plötzlichen Tod erschienen 1850 postum im Leipziger Verlag Breitkopf & Härtel noch vier Bände nachgelassener Werke: [20]

- *Vier Lieder für das Pianoforte*, op. 8
- *Lieder mit Begleitung des Pianoforte*, op. 9
- *Fünf Lieder mit Begleitung des Pianoforte*, op. 10
- *Trio für Pianoforte, Violine und Violoncello*, op. 11

The publishers, Breitkopf & Härtel and the publisher 1827 [Fanny Hensel: 6 Lieder] bei Breitkopf & Härtel, Leipzig unter *Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy*: op. 8. Nummern 2, 3, 12 und op. 9, Nummern 7, 10, 12. Weihnachten 1846, Berliner Verlag Bote & Bock, drei Hefte mit ausgewählten Werken.