

Felix Mendelssohn's Influence on Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel as a Professional Composer*

By Marcia J. Citron

"Remember me to your good parents, your equally gifted sister, and your excellent master." Thus wrote Goethe in a letter to sixteen-year-old Felix Mendelssohn in 1825 upon receipt of Felix's B-minor Quartet dedicated to the venerated writer.¹ By "equally gifted sister," Goethe was referring to Felix's elder sister, Fanny, a musician he had met three years earlier and praised for her settings of his poems.

Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, born in 1805, was four years older than Felix. They were the elder two of the four Mendelssohn children, and, largely because of their similar musical abilities and training, developed a closeness that, with very few exceptions, lasted until their deaths in 1847. Both received their earliest piano instruction from their mother, and later from the Berliner Ludwig Berger; both entered the newly-founded Berlin Singakademie; and both received training in theory and composition from Carl Friedrich Zelter, the man most responsible for molding Berlin's musical life during the 1810s and 1820s.

The events leading to Felix's emergence as a celebrated composer are too well-known to be discussed here at length; but three events demonstrate sufficiently how both his family and Zelter were carefully grooming him and encouraging him to pursue music professionally: his introduction to Goethe at Weimar in 1821, his introduction to Cherubini in Paris in 1825, and his introduction to English musical society in 1829. In all of these challenges he triumphed and laid the foundation for a highly successful career as a composer.

Fanny, on the other hand, despite her extensive musical training and acknowledged talent in both piano and composition, was not given such opportunities. In large part this is due to the attitudes of her family, particularly her father Abraham. In contrast to their liberal views of society and culture—their home, after all, was a leading *salon* for the artistic notables of the day—the Mendelssohns held traditional views regarding the proper duties of women.

Abraham many times raised a stern, fatherly voice to Fanny in advising her about her future. A striking passage occurs in a letter to the fifteen-year-old Fanny of 16 July 1820:

What you wrote to me about your musical occupations with reference to

and in comparison with Felix was both rightly thought and expressed. Music will perhaps become his profession, while for *you* it can and must only be an ornament, never the root of your being and doing. We may therefore pardon him some ambition and desire to be acknowledged in a pursuit which appears very important to him, because he feels a vocation for it, while it does you credit that you have always shown yourself good and sensible in these matters; 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 is an ornament to your sex.²

On Fanny's birthday eight years later, Abraham expressed similar ideas:

You must prepare more earnestly and eagerly for your real calling, the *only* calling of a young woman—I mean the state of a housewife.³

Such advice undoubtedly made a deep impact upon Fanny's perceptions of herself as a musician. She did, nevertheless, remain active as a composer throughout her life, writing over 400 pieces. Yet very few of her works were published; she thus did not attain full professional status as a composer. Felix, her most influential musical confidant, supported and praised her musical creativity but stopped short of giving his approval for publishing. In an effort to explore the nature of Felix's impact upon Fanny's publishing ventures, this article will examine unpublished letters and diaries from the Bodleian Library in Oxford and the Staatsbibliothek in West Berlin.

It is clear that Felix played a crucial role in all facets of Fanny's creative endeavors, especially her publishing of only a small percentage of her fairly sizeable compositional output. Of Felix's overall influence on Fanny as a composer, it appears that he was a great stimulus to her creative instincts. Not only did he pass judgment on her pieces and encourage her to send him new ones, but he also performed her music at informal gatherings outside of Berlin and sent back frequent reports on his pride in being the brother of so talented a composer. Felix's opposition to Fanny becoming a professional composer was inherited from their father—a man who molded Felix much in the way that Leopold Mozart shaped Wolfgang. Abraham Mendelssohn's patriarchal code accepted witty, culturally pluralistic women capable of organizing and starring in brilliant *salons* at home, but forbade their launching of careers outside the sphere of husband, children, and extended family circle.

In order to show how Felix affected Fanny's publishing activities, it is first necessary to establish their closeness as brother and sister, and also as fellow musicians. It is not often easy, however, to separate their personal and musical relationship, because for them, as for the entire Mendelssohn family, music was an integral part of daily life, whether it be composing, performing, listening, organizing concerts, or conversing in the *salon*. Fanny and Felix held very special personal feelings for each other as was demonstrated when

Fanny strongly expressed her love for Felix around the time of her marriage to Wilhelm Hensel in October 1829. In August she wrote to her fiancé:

I love you both so very differently and yet so completely the same, that I believe it impossible to live happily without either of you. . . . I hope that you will also feel the strong unity of this trio.⁴

Her intense feelings were communicated to Felix in several letters. On 6 July she wrote:

You can never pull any of your love away from me, for you must know that I cannot do without even the smallest part of it. I'll tell you the same thing on my wedding day.⁵

And on her wedding day, 3 October, she wrote to the absent Felix that

Your picture is next to me, but as I write your name and imagine you actually here, I cry. . . . Your love has provided me with a great inner worth, and I will never stop believing in myself as long as you love me.⁶

Keeping in mind that these letters reflect the nineteenth-century penchant for heightened emotionalism, they nevertheless demonstrate that Fanny's feelings for her brother were intense and important to her. What these excerpts also reveal is her clear dependency on Felix's good opinions of her. The idea of dependency recurs in several letters. In a letter to Felix of 30 July 1836, Fanny writes:

I don't know what Goethe means by the demonic influence, but it's clear that if it exists, you exert it on me. If you seriously suggested that I become a good mathematician, I wouldn't have any special difficulty in doing it; if you thought that I was no longer any good at music then I'd give it up tomorrow.⁷

Ten years later, Fanny wrote to Felix regarding plans for publishing:

At age forty I'm afraid of my brother, as I was at fourteen of father—but afraid is really not the right word, but instead desirous of always pleasing you and everyone I love.⁸

In contrast to the hint of negativism that appears in this excerpt, it should be emphasized that, overall, theirs was a mutually affectionate relationship. Felix, for instance, used special nicknames for Fanny in his letters, such as "Fance" and "Fenichel." Fanny often signed her letters to him as "Fischotter," and she sometimes called him "Clown."

But what mainly concerns us here is their musical closeness. A sense of that closeness from their early years can be gleaned from Fanny's statement of 2 June 1837 referring to previous years:

I [had] immediately found out about every thought that passed through your head, and knew your latest pieces by heart before you wrote them

down. . . . Because of our common musical pursuits our relationship was certainly rare between siblings.⁹

Beginning in 1829, the demands of family and career allowed Fanny and Felix relatively little time together. They did, however, engage in a lively and frequent correspondence that kept their mutual musical interests alive. The letters mention all facets of their musical life. Especially significant for the present study are the many detailed exchanges regarding their music—from initial conception through revisions after the finished product. They both highly respected each other's musical judgments and were influenced by each other's comments.

Fanny, in particular, took quite seriously Felix's assessments of her work and he was generally quite pleased with her pieces. For example, on 14 November 1836 Felix thanked Fanny for some pieces she had sent him:

I'm again looking with the greatest pleasure at the piano pieces that Paul and Albertine brought me. There are some excellent ones among them and I thank you very much for the great joy I've derived from them. It's seldom that a piece of new music is so thoroughly pleasing.¹⁰

Fanny responded two days later:

You can imagine how happy I am that you like my piano pieces, which leads me to believe that I haven't totally gone downhill in music.¹¹

Although favorable comments by Felix far outnumber negative comments, a few letters contain extensive and detailed suggestions for revisions. For example, Fanny's orchestration and text-setting in a choral work are criticized by Felix in a letter of 28 December 1831.¹² Fanny on occasion reveals her sensitivity to Felix's negative remarks; for instance, after having received a lukewarm evaluation from Felix, she writes him on 10 January 1836:

I am therefore hurt—although not out of wounded pride—that you haven't liked my pieces for such a long time. Did I really compose better in the old days, or were you merely easier to satisfy?¹³

Felix answers on 30 January with a long letter of reassurance. He begins by telling Fanny that one reason it appears that he has been criticizing her music more is that she has recently composed fewer pieces and thus negative comments seem more prominent now. He goes on to say:

But you're totally wrong if you think that I consider your newer pieces somehow inferior to the earlier ones. I know of no better *lied* of yours than the one in g minor, or the close of the *Liederkreis*, and so many other recent ones.¹⁴

A brief incident captures the essence of Fanny and Felix's very special musical relationship. Felix made one of his many trips to England in July 1842 and was invited to Buckingham Palace for an audience with Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. During that visit the Queen was urged to sing

one of Felix's pieces from his Op. 8 *Lieder* collection, which was at hand. She selected "*Italien*," which she executed well, according to Felix's account. "Then," writes Felix to his mother on 19 July, "I was obliged to confess that Fanny had written the song (which I found very hard, but pride must have a fall), and to beg her to sing one of my own also."¹⁵

How did Fanny react to this incident? With humor—as conveyed in a letter to her husband of 26 July 1842:

Felix wrote a very funny letter today, in which he describes in detail his farewell audience with the Queen. Prince Albert played the organ for him, and the Queen sang. In fact it was "*Schöner und Schöner*" (i.e. "*Italien*"), which he then admitted was my property. The whole description will amuse you very much.¹⁶

In contrast to his approval and encouragement of Fanny's compositional activities, Felix was opposed to Fanny publishing her pieces. But before delving into Felix's role in Fanny's publishing ventures, let us briefly review her publishing history. Only a small percentage of the approximately 400 pieces she composed appeared in print. Table I lists her published works. The earliest published works were issued under Felix's authorship in his Op. 8 and Op. 9 *lieder* collections. It was a full decade before the next publication, which involved only one piece—a *lied*—in a Schlesinger anthology. With the exception of another single piece, published in 1839, no works were published until late 1846, at which point seven collections were issued in quick succession (Opp. 1–7). Four collections, as well as a few individual pieces, appeared posthumously (Opp. 8–11). It is interesting to note that Fanny's pieces were published under her own name only after the death of her father, in 1835. It is possible that she could not bring herself to undertake such a professional step while her father was alive, given his views on proper woman's work.

In late October 1836, Fanny began her inquiry to Felix about having her music published: "Lately I've become interested again in publishing something—should I do it?"¹⁷ Felix replied negatively. A month later, in a letter to Felix of 22 November, Fanny broached the subject again:

In regard to my publishing, I stand like a donkey between two piles of hay. I myself am quite neutral about it; . . . yet Hensel is for it, you are against it. In any other matter I'd naturally accede entirely to the wishes of my husband. But in this matter alone, it's crucial to have your approval; without it I might not undertake anything of the kind.¹⁸

Yet Fanny did go ahead and have a piece published, against Felix's wishes, in an anthology issued very early in 1837. After its appearance, Felix appeared glad her piece was published, as he wrote her from Leipzig on 24 January 1837:

Do you know, Fenchel, that your A-major *lied* in Schlesinger's *Album*

raises a furor here? . . . That all say it's the best thing in the album? (A poor compliment, for what else is good?) That people are pleased with it? Are you now a true composer and does that make you happy?¹⁹

Table I: Fanny Hensel's Published Compositions

- Op. 1: *6 Lieder für 1 Singstimme mit Pianoforte*. Berlin: Bote & Bock [1846].
Op. 2: *4 Lieder ohne Worte für Pianoforte*. Berlin: Bote & Bock, [1847].
Op. 3: *6 Gesänge für S.A.T.B.* Berlin: Bote & Bock, [1847].
Op. 4: *Mélo dies pour Pianoforte*. Berlin: Schlesinger, [1847].
Op. 5: *Mélo dies pour Pianoforte*. Berlin: Schlesinger, [1847].
Op. 6: *4 Lieder ohne Worte*. Berlin: Bote & Bock, [1847].
Op. 7: *6 Lieder für 1 Singstimme mit Pianoforte*. Berlin: Bote & Bock, [1847].
Op. 8: *4 Lieder ohne Worte*. Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, [1850].
Op. 9: *6 Lieder für 1 Singstimme mit Pianoforte*. Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, [1850].
Op. 10: *5 Lieder für 1 Singstimme mit Pianoforte*. Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, [1850].
Op. 11: *Trio pour Pianoforte, Violin, Violoncelle*. Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, [1850]. Reprint edition: New York: Da Capo, 1980 (new introduction by Victoria Sirota).

Works Without Opus Nos.

Die Schiffende (Lied) in *Album*. Berlin: Schlesinger, 1837.

Schloss Liebeneck (Lied) in *Rhein-Sagen und Lieder*. Köln & Bonn: J.M. Dunst, 1839.

2 Bagatellen (Piano) für die Schüler des Schindelmeisserschen Musik-Instituts. Berlin: T. Trautwein, 1848.

Pastorella (Piano). Berlin: Bote & Bock, [1852]

Works Published under Felix's Name

In Op. 8 (1827): *Das Heimweh* (No. 2), *Italien* (No. 3), *Suleika und Hatem* (No. 12).

In Op. 9 (1830): *Sehnsucht* (No. 7), *Verlust* (No. 10), *Die Nonne* (No. 12).

And Felix wrote again six weeks later:

I, for my part, thank you on behalf of the public in Leipzig and other places for publishing your piece against my wishes.²⁰

The only known comment by Fanny about this venture concerns her an-

noyance at the clumsy way some business details were handled.²¹ But she apparently was not put off by the idea of publishing again, for her mother, Lea Mendelssohn, made a direct request to Felix later that year to assist Fanny in getting her works published. Lea Mendelssohn's letter of 7 June 1837 states:

Permit me a question and a request. Shouldn't she publish a selection of *lieder* and piano pieces? For about a year she's been composing many excellent works, especially for the piano. . . . That *you* haven't requested and encouraged her to do it—this alone holds her back. Wouldn't it therefore be appropriate for you to encourage her and help her find a publisher?²²

Felix's response, dated 24 June 1837 in the New York Public Library autograph but incorrectly dated 2 June in the *Briefe . . . 1830–1847*, is significant and worth quoting at length:

You write about Fanny's new pieces and tell me that I should persuade her to publish them. You praise her new compositions to me, which really isn't necessary . . . for I think they're splendid and lovely. In addition, I hope I don't need to say that if she decides to publish anything, I will help her all I can and alleviate any difficulties arising from it. But I cannot persuade her to publish anything, because it is against my views and convictions. We have previously spoken a great deal about it, and I still hold the same opinion. I consider publishing something serious (it should at least be that) and believe that one should do it only if one wants to appear as an author one's entire life and stick to it. But that necessitates a series of works, one after the other. . . . Fanny, as I know her, possesses neither the inclination nor calling for authorship. She is too much a woman for that, as is proper, and looks after her house and thinks neither about the public nor the musical world, unless that primary occupation is accomplished. Publishing would only disturb her in these duties, and I cannot reconcile myself to it. If she decides on her own to publish, or to please Hensel, I am, as I said, ready to be helpful as much as possible, but to encourage her towards something I don't consider right is what I cannot do.²³

Given the close nature of their relationship, and especially Fanny's desire to maintain Felix's good opinion of her, it is very likely that Felix's reluctance exerted a profound and lasting influence on her attitude towards herself as a potential professional composer.

With the exception of a *lied* published in an anthology in 1839, a decade passed until Fanny was again involved with publishing. In regard to her new publishing prospects in mid-1846, Fanny made it quite clear that she had not been active in pursuing publishers but rather merely passive in receiving offers from them—a role in line with Felix's expectations of his sister. Here is an excerpt from her letter to Felix of 9 July 1846:

I hope I won't disgrace you through my publishing, as I'm no *femme libre* and unfortunately not even an adherent of the *junges Deutschland* movement. Hopefully you will in no way be bothered by it, as I've proceeded, as you can see, completely independently, in order to spare you any unpleasant moment. If the venture succeeds, that is if the compositions are well-liked, it will be a great stimulus to me—something I've always needed to have anything published. Otherwise I'm very indifferent, as I've always been, and thus won't be upset or feel that anything has been lost if I subsequently work less or stop completely.²⁴

One detects a tinge of bitterness in Fanny's assurances to Felix of his being spared any bother in this venture. Her statement about needing encouragement to publish adds considerably to our understanding of the impact of Felix's views on her having not published works more often. As had occurred a decade earlier, Felix soon relented and extended congratulations to Fanny in a letter of 12 August 1846:

[I] send you my professional blessing on becoming a member of the craft. This I do now in full, Fance, and may you have much happiness in giving pleasure to others; may you taste only the sweets and none of the bitterness of authorship; may the public pelt you with roses, and never with sand; and may the printer's ink never draw black lines upon your soul—all of which I devoutly believe will be the case.²⁵

Fanny's diary entry of 14 August records her reaction:

At last Felix has written and given me his professional blessing in the kindest manner. I know that he is not quite satisfied in his heart of hearts, but I'm glad he has said a kind word to me about it.²⁶

By the time Fanny died nine months later—in May of 1847—six collections of her music had appeared, with Op. 7 to be issued later that year. Felix, of course, was devastated by the sudden death of his "Fenichel"; many close friends attributed his own death six months later in no small measure to his intense grief over his sister's passing. One modern writer, a descendant of the Hensels and former president of the International Mendelssohn Society, asserts that in those six months Felix was planning to have more of his sister's music published.²⁷ Although this may very well have been the situation, no corroborating documentary evidence has yet been found.

Each of Fanny's collections from 1846 and 1847 was reviewed in at least one journal, with the exception of the Op.3 partsongs. The general tone of these reviews is favorable. One particular assessment—a review of her four piano collections in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* in June 1847—lavishes high praise on Fanny's compositional talents. Unusual not only for its length, the article isolates the various stylistic features that contribute to the music's success; it attributes a large part of Fanny's writing mastery to her study of Bach in her early years. The review concludes: "We express our sincere

thanks to the artist for the publication of these works. They will be welcomed by everyone who cherishes beauty within art."²⁸

Felix Mendelssohn clearly cherished the musical creations of his elder sister, Fanny Hensel. His reluctance for her to publish stemmed more from societal and familial attitudes than from a lack of confidence in the quality of her works. As more of Hensel's music enters the public domain, a truer assessment of this largely forgotten 19th-century musician will emerge.

NOTES

* This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Musicological Society, Boston, November 1981.

¹ Letter written from Weimar on 18 June 1825, in Karl Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, *Goethe and Mendelssohn*, M.E. von Glehn, transl., 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1874), p. 50.

² Sebastian Hensel, *The Mendelssohn Family (1729–1847)*, Karl Klingemann, transl., 2nd ed., 2 vols.; reprint of 1882 edition (New York: Haskell House, 1969), vol. I, p. 82.

³ *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 84.

⁴ Letter of 23 August 1829, Depositum Berlin No. 105, in the Mendelssohn-Archiv of the Staatsbibliothek Preußischer Kulturbesitz in West Berlin [=MA]. Fanny uses the word "Dreieinigkeit"—a strong identification with the concept of the Trinity. (This translation and subsequent translations are by the author, unless otherwise designated.)

⁵ 6–8 July 1829, No. 69 of Volume I of the Green Books letters collection at the Bodleian Library, Oxford [=GB]. The author is preparing an edition for Pendragon Press of Hensel's letters to Felix, in the original German and in English translation.

⁶ 3 October 1829, GB vol. I, No. 98.

⁷ 30 July 1836, GB vol. V, No. 112.

⁸ 9 July 1846, GB vol. XXIV, No. 3.

⁹ 2 June 1837, GB vol. VI, No. 43.

¹⁰ 14 November 1836, MA Dep. Berlin 3, No. 15.

¹¹ 16 November 1836, GB vol. V, No. 135.

¹² Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1830–1847*, Paul Mendelssohn Bartholdy and Carl Mendelssohn Bartholdy, eds., 3rd ed. (Leipzig: Hermann Mendelssohn, 1875), vol. I, pp. 230–32.

¹³ 10 January 1836, GB vol. V, No. 7.

¹⁴ The autograph of Hensel's *Liederkreis* is in the Bodleian Library. The letter (30 January 1836) is in the MA, Dep. Berlin 3, No. 10.

¹⁵ Hensel, *Family*, vol. II, p. 170.

¹⁶ 26 July 1842, MA Briefe meiner Ur.ur Großmutter . . . , No. 177.

¹⁷ 28 October 1836, GB vol. V, No. 132.

¹⁸ 22 November 1836, GB vol. V, No. 139. The donkey imagery derives from a fable by Buridan.

¹⁹ 24 January 1837, MA Dep. Berlin 3, No. 18; published in Hensel, *Family*, vol. II, p. 31.

²⁰ 7 March 1837, MA Dep. Berlin 3, No. 19.

²¹ Letter to Felix, 27 January 1837, GB vol. VI, No. 9.

²² 7 June 1837, GB vol. VI, No. 44.

²³ *Briefe . . . 1830–1847*, vol. II, pp. 88–89.

²⁴ 9 July 1846, GB vol. XXIV, No. 3.

²⁵ Hensel, *Family*, vol. II, p. 326.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Cécile Lowenthal-Hensel, "F in Dur und F in Moll, Fanny and Felix Mendelssohn in Berlin," *Berlin in Dur und Moll* (Berlin: Axel Springer, 1970), n.p.

²⁸ "Über die Clavier-Kompositionen von Fanny Hensel," *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 49 (1847) pp. 381–83.