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## Celebrating Fanny Hensel

The Mendelssohn scholar R. Larry Todd, not content just with having written the best biography there's ever been of Felix himself, has brought out the definitive biography of Fanny Hensel, Mendelssohn's sister. It is available now from OUP. An inspiring woman ahead of her time, Fanny was a superb composer, leaving some 400 works, and her relationship with her more famous brother sheds fascinating light on both of them, their family and their eminent colleagues. I asked Larry to give us an e-interview about her: here it is, following Fanny's beautiful duet *Aus meinen Tränen sprießen* which is sung by Barbara Bonney and Angelika Kirchschrager, with pianist Malcolm Martineau.

JD: How significant a composer do you feel Fanny Hensel is? And how significant might/should she have been if there had been fewer restrictions on what she, being a woman, was permitted to achieve? What qualities do you feel are strongest in her music and which of her works would you recommend we hear as a starting point?

RLT: With the revelations of the last twenty years or so, when many of her 450-odd compositions became available to the general public for the first time, I think it is now fair to say that Hensel is the most important woman composer of the nineteenth century. And she is a complex historical figure whose music offers new windows into a century that we always assumed we knew all too well. Unlike Clara Schumann, who came from a middle-class background, and did have a professional career as a touring concert pianist and composer, Fanny Hensel was a member of an upper-class Berlin Jewish family that converted to the Protestant faith. Her class and gender worked in tandem to rule out the possibility of a public career until, the year before she died, she began to publish her music under her name. We can only speculate about what she would have achieved had she enjoyed a professional career, but the evidence suggests that she was an extraordinary musician and that those in the know greatly respected her as a pianist, composer, and conductor. Her brother regarded her *Lieder* as among the very best examples of German songs, and there are accounts suggesting that as a pianist she rivaled her brother.

Hensel was a miniaturist par excellence who produced gem-like songs and piano character pieces that rival her brother's *Lieder ohne Worte* in their lyricism. But she also explored larger forms, and I would recommend for those coming to her music for the first time the String Quartet in E-flat major and Piano Trio in D minor, and the so-called Cholera Cantata, composed to mark the abatement of the cholera epidemic in Berlin in 1831. I would also recommend the ambitious piano cycle *Das Jahr*, a cycle of twelve character pieces on the months of the year, which I think can stand with some of the great piano cycles of Robert Schumann, and which dwarfs in size and scope the piano music of Mendelssohn.

JD: How strongly was she affected by brother Felix's advice, encouragement or discouragement?

RLT: Felix was the dominant musical influence in her life, though, if truth be told, she named her son Sebastian Ludwig Felix Hensel, after her three favorite composers, placed in historical order. She once referred to Felix exercising over her what Goethe had termed the demonic influence. The two grew up together in the same musical environment, and received their musical training from the same musicians — Ludwig Berger, Carl Friedrich Zelter, Ignaz Moscheles, and others, and there is little question that for a few years at least, the two engaged in some sibling rivalry.

Not surprisingly, there are many points of contact between Hensel's and Mendelssohn's music, including many passages where she seems to allude to her brother's works, as she does, for example, in her String Quartet (the opening is reminiscent of that of *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage* and of Mendelssohn's String Quartet Op. 12, in the same key). But it would be a mistake to view Hensel as primarily a figure in her brother's circle. There are fascinating points of stylistic discontinuity between the two. Hensel is harmonically more daring and more free in her applications of sonata form than Mendelssohn, and her music exudes a certain spontaneity and freedom of expression, with unpredictable and unconventional turns and harmonic colorations.

It is clear from Hensel's letters and diaries that she put great stock in securing her brother's approval and encouragement. But in 1820 her father, Abraham, effectively ruled out a public career for Fanny by reminding her that her role in society was to be that of a housewife. So composition for her was limited to music that could be performed "privately" at the Mendelssohn residence, before invited guests. The only way to go before the public was to publish her music anonymously, and indeed six of her songs were silently incorporated into her brother's Op. 8 and Op. 9. Not until 1846, when Hensel took the decision to begin publishing

under her name, did she secure her brother's professional "blessing." Then, in May 1847, she died, after suffering a stroke in the middle of rehearsing her brother's cantata *Die erste Walpurgisnacht*. A few more pieces were released up to 1850, and then virtually nothing until the closing decades of the twentieth century.

JD: Having already written the definitive biography of Felix, while

researching the book on Fanny did you find new or supplementary material that cast new/different light on events/issues you had tackled before?

RLT: Yes, her diaries, which appeared in 2000, and some new releases of her letters from Italy and France offer detailed looks at her private life — her relationship with her husband, a professional painter, her brother, parents, sister Rebecka, and son Sebastian. What is truly poignant is that Fanny rarely mentions her own music in her diaries, even though she was composing for much of her life on a more or less daily basis. Examining her manuscripts, and coming to know the full scope of her music really encouraged me to reassess her relationship with Mendelssohn, and, in the broader sense, the whole question of the Mendelssohnian style. Hensel had a role to play in its formation, though her role is really just now beginning to be assessed.

JD: Do you think that a full exploration of Fanny's work could lead us to

discover the importance of other vital 19th century women composers? Who else do you feel is overdue for rehabilitation?

RLT: Yes, I think it should encourage us to reconsider the whole question of women composers in the nineteenth century. Apart from established figures such as Clara Schumann, Cécile Chaminade, Amy Beach, and Ethel Smyth, there is Josephine Lang, who wrote some exquisite songs. When Mendelssohn met her in Munich, he gave her lessons in counterpoint and recommended that she study with his sister in Berlin. Even a familiar figure such as Clara Schumann deserves further consideration. Not many know her Piano Concerto, composed when she was only fourteen, and premiered under Mendelssohn at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig. Robert Schumann assisted in the orchestration, but there are also some ties between Clara's and Robert's later piano concerto.