

'Fanny Hensel (née Mendelssohn Bartholdy) and her Circle': Proceedings of the Bicentenary Conference, Oxford, July 2005

Introduction

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The eight articles published here represent the selected proceedings of the conference held at St Catherine's College, Oxford, 22–24 July 2005, under the auspices of the University of Oxford, Faculty of Music, to mark the bicentenary of the birth of Fanny Hensel (née Mendelssohn Bartholdy). As conference organizer I was deeply gratified by the list of speakers and papers we were able to assemble for the conference programme.¹ The conference also featured two concerts given by Françoise Tillard (pianoforte) with Erika Klempner (violin) and Robert Max (cello), performing piano and chamber works of Fanny Hensel; and April Fredrick (soprano), with Briony Williams accompanying, in lieder of Fanny Hensel and her circle. Peter Ward Jones (Music Librarian, Bodleian Library, Oxford) arranged and introduced an exhibition of materials from the Bodleian's Mendelssohn collection as part of the conference. The opportunity to achieve a close concentration of attention on Fanny Hensel provided by the event is now further developed in the proceedings published in this special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*.²

Ever since that fine book entitled *Mendelssohn and his World* appeared, edited by R. Larry Todd, with its inclusion of an important essay on Fanny Hensel by Nancy B. Reich,³ I suspect I have been looking for an opportunity to

¹ It was evident that, for all of us present at the Oxford conference, the experience of spending three days in intensive contemplation of Fanny Hensel and her circle was an extremely rewarding one. For enabling this to happen, I am of course very grateful to all the speakers, performers, and indeed all the conference delegates for their participation; and I wish to record my thanks to the British Academy; the Board of the Faculty of Music (University of Oxford); Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford; and Ashgate Publishing, for their financial support of the event, which has its outcome in the present publication. Thanks are due also to Ian Taylor and Jonathan White, research assistants on these proceedings, for their valuable help in assembling the final copy.

² I wish to record my warm thanks to the journal's editor, Bennett Zon, for his encouragement and support of this project.

³ Nancy B. Reich, 'The Power of Class: Fanny Hensel', in *Mendelssohn and his World*, ed. R. Larry Todd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991): 86–99. I am delighted that both Larry Todd and Nancy Reich are represented by articles in the present collection.

stage an event along the lines of 'Fanny Hensel and her Circle' in which Felix Mendelssohn would figure similarly.⁴ The advent of the bicentenary year offered that opportunity, and as the Oxford event took shape it did seem that the timing was right in terms of scholarly developments in the field. 'Her circle' proved capable of both broad and flexible interpretation, ranging from a consideration of the environment created by the *Sonntagsmusiken* [Sunday 'musicales'] and other family musical activities at the Mendelssohns' family home, 'Leipziger Straße Drei' (investigated here by Beatrix Borchard), to detailed analysis of the creative relationship of Fanny and Felix (see particularly the contributions by Cornelia Bartsch and R. Larry Todd, below).⁵

Fanny (Cäcilie) Mendelssohn was born into a wealthy, cultured Jewish banking family on 14 November 1805 (already at birth manifesting 'Bach fingers', according to her mother Lea). She was the oldest of the four children of Abraham Mendelssohn and Lea, née Salomon; Fanny's paternal grandfather was the renowned scholar and philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. The births of Felix and Rebecka followed in 1809 and 1811 respectively, and finally their brother Paul was born in 1812.⁶ The family moved in 1811 from Hamburg to Berlin, where they eventually settled in the property at Leipziger Straße 3, which was to be Fanny's home for the remainder of her life: following her marriage in 1829 to the artist Wilhelm Hensel (the marriage produced one son, Sebastian Ludwig Felix), she and Hensel took apartments in the 'Garden House' at Leipziger Straße 3 as their personal residence.

Fanny's musical talent, like that of Felix, was nurtured early by their parents. Together with Felix she studied as a child with a series of distinguished teachers, and produced numerous compositions and performances within the family circle during those formative years.⁷ The two siblings' paths diverged on the threshold of their adult lives, as the famous letter from Abraham to the fourteen-year-old Fanny in 1820 makes clear: 'Perhaps music will be his profession, whereas for you it can and must be only an ornament, and never the 'fundamental bass' [*Grundbass*] of your existence and activity'.⁸ Dubbed by Goethe Felix's 'equally gifted sister', she composed in almost all the main genres of her time, producing orchestral, choral and chamber music as well as many lieder and solo piano works. Few of these were published in her lifetime, although following her sudden and early death in 1847, the family arranged for further publication of her works.⁹

⁴ For those unfamiliar with Fanny Hensel's life and work, a brief summary is provided below.

⁵ Larry Todd's Oxford conference paper, given under the title 'Fanny Hensel and Musical Style', is due to appear in a volume of his essays for Routledge; in place of it here he provides an account focused more specifically on a particular piece.

⁶ For detailed family trees of the Mendelssohn and Salomon families, see Hans-Günter Klein, *Das verborgene Band: Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy und seine Schwester Fanny Hensel* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1997).

⁷ For a detailed account of Felix's studies with Carl Friedrich Zelter, who also taught Fanny, see R. Larry Todd, *Mendelssohn's Musical Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁸ For further discussion of this letter and its ramifications see Susan Wollenberg, 'Master of her Art: Fanny Hensel (née Mendelssohn Bartholdy), 1805–1847', *Ad Parnassum: A Journal of Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Instrumental Music* 3/6 (Oct. 2005): 33–44 (40–41).

⁹ See Marcia J. Citron, 'Fanny (Cäcilie) Mendelssohn', in Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell, eds, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd rev. edn, 29 vols (London: Macmillan, 2001): vol. 16, 388–9.

Inevitably, and not unjustifiably, Fanny Hensel's life was traditionally related by her biographers in the context of the family, from Sebastian Hensel onwards.¹⁰ The growth of major reference works in twentieth-century musical scholarship offered seemingly the first opportunity for consideration of Hensel in her own right. Yet the first edition of *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (MGG) failed to include Fanny Hensel, mentioning her only incidentally in the entry on Felix Mendelssohn.¹¹ Some twenty years later, the laconically brief entry for Fanny Hensel in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* represented an opportunity missed, with its now notorious remarks to the effect that 'her historical importance consists in her having provided ... much essential source material for the biography of Felix', though conceding grudgingly that she was 'said to have been as musically gifted as her brother' and was 'apparently an excellent pianist'; and, perhaps most deeply unsatisfactory of all these comments, making the unsupported claim that she 'composed in the same style as he did'.¹² The *New Grove* in its second edition a quarter-century later repaired the damage with its adoption of Marcia J. Citron's article on Fanny Hensel (originally commissioned for the *New Grove Women Composers* dictionary in 1994).¹³ Finally, MGG in its second edition allotted a separate entry to Fanny Hensel (by Monika Schwarz-Danuser) within its multiple entry on the Mendelssohn family.¹⁴

Hensel scholarship is now able to resituate the detailed knowledge more recently acquired of her life, her personality and her work, re-embedding it in the context of the Mendelssohn family life and relationships. An understanding of that context is vital for a full evaluation of her achievements; the family context has itself been researched recently in greater depth and with a more searching agenda than previously.¹⁵ I have written elsewhere of the pressing need felt in recent decades to create for women composers 'such desiderata as a thematic catalogue, editions of the music, biographies and other studies'.¹⁶ In the case of

¹⁰ Sebastian Hensel, *Die Familie Mendelssohn, 1729–1847, nach Briefen und Tagebüchern*, 2nd edition, 2 vols (Berlin: B. Behr, 1880; orig. publ. 1879); trans. by Carl Klingemann [Jr] and an American collaborator as *The Mendelssohn Family (1729–1847) from Letters and Journals*, 2nd rev. edn, 2 vols (London: Sampson Low, Marston Searle & Rivington, 1881).

¹¹ *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. Friedrich Blume, 17 vols (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1949–); Eric Werner, 'Felix Mendelssohn': vol. 9 (1961), cols 59–98.

¹² *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, 20 vols (London: Macmillan, 1980); Karl-Heinz Köhler, 'Mendelssohn (-Bartholdy) [Hensel], Fanny (Cäcilie)': vol. 12, 134.

¹³ Citron, 'Fanny (Cäcilie) Mendelssohn' (*New Grove*, 2001). See also *The New Grove Dictionary of Women Composers*, ed. Julie Anne Sadie and Rhian Samuel (London: Macmillan, 1994): 322–5.

¹⁴ *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 2nd rev. edn, 26 vols, ed. Ludwig Finscher (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1994–); Monika Schwarz-Danuser, '[Mendelssohn], Fanny (Caecilie)', *Personenteil*: vol. 11 (2004), cols 1534–42.

¹⁵ Among a number of key publications in these areas, see particularly the edition of Hensel's letters by Marcia J. Citron, *The Letters of Fanny Hensel to Felix Mendelssohn, Collected, Edited and Translated with Introductory Essays and Notes* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1987) and Citron's series of articles on Hensel, including 'The Lieder of Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel', *Musical Quarterly* 69 (1983): 570–94 and 'Felix Mendelssohn's Influence on Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel as a Professional Composer', *Current Musicology* 37–38 (1984): 9–17; and the collection of articles on Hensel edited by Michael P. Steinberg, *Musical Quarterly* 77 (1993): 648–748. Many milestones in the Hensel literature are mentioned and discussed in Marcia Citron's contribution to the present proceedings, below.

¹⁶ Wollenberg, 'Master of her Art', 37.

Hensel, work of these kinds has appeared in gratifying quantity over the last few decades, particularly although not exclusively through the efforts of German and American scholars,¹⁷ and more is planned for the future.¹⁸

Besides the growth of Hensel studies in recent years, the development of women's studies more generally has contributed to the ethos making such a conference as the Oxford one possible. Much attention has been attracted by the airing of ideas about women's lives, and considerable thought given to issues of constructing women's biographies. The emphasis on how to identify and interpret the especially significant aspects of these lives has produced some richly illuminating work. Harald Krebs contributes valuably to this area with his comparison here of the lives of Fanny Hensel and Josephine Lang. Analysis of Hensel's music has reached a more mature stage made possible by the emergence of source materials and modern editions, creating an increasingly accessible corpus of works on which to base judgements. A strong focus on Hensel's music was a noticeable feature of the Oxford conference, reflected in my own paper and that of Matthew Head among others, while an approach seeking to connect the life and work was taken by Briony Williams in her paper on Hensel's lieder (all these contributions are included here). Perhaps it is partly the integrity of Fanny Hensel's artistic vision that has, I feel, resulted in a comparable degree of integrity among the different offerings and approaches represented by the articles gathered in this issue. And collectively we hope to have done justice to her genius, by way of this bicentenary tribute.

Apart from the substance of the papers themselves, many who were present at the conference valued the chance to explore ideas and issues raised not only in the papers but also in discussion afterwards, and to forge new scholarly connections as well as renew existing ones. As Marcia Citron notes below, the weekend's programme brought together fruitfully an international community of Hensel scholars. Two of the most prominent figures from among this scholarly community – Citron herself, with her truly pioneering work on Hensel, and Nancy Reich, with her similarly key work on Clara Schumann – provide in the first two articles here (based on their papers delivered at the conference) compelling accounts of their subjects, drawing on the unique command of their field each has acquired over a long period of research and reflection. Citron surveys with a keen eye the state of Hensel research since the early 1980s, linking it with her view of broader trends in musicology and offering a rare personal insight into the background to her own work, while Reich, from her extensive knowledge of the documentary sources, constructs a many-faceted comparison of Fanny Hensel and Clara Schumann, with both a close focus on their individual characters and situations, and an examination of the (hitherto relatively unexplored) connections between the two women.

¹⁷ See for example the thematic catalogue by Renate Hellwig-Unruh, *Fanny Hensel geb. Mendelssohn Bartholdy: Thematisches Verzeichnis der Kompositionen* (Adliswil: Edition Kunzelmann, 2000); the documentary compilations by Hans-Günter Klein, including (edited with Rudolf Elvers), [Fanny Hensel] *Tagebücher* (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 2002) and [Fanny Hensel] *Briefe aus Venedig und Neapel an ihre Familie in Berlin, 1839/40* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2004); and the biography by Françoise Tillard, *Fanny Mendelssohn*, trans. from the original French by Camille Naish (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1996).

¹⁸ Among these plans, a major new biography of Fanny Hensel by R. Larry Todd is currently in prospect.