Fanny Hensel
Birth name: Fanny Mendelssohn
Variants: Fanny Mendelssohn Bartholdy, Cäcilia Hensel, Cäcilia Mendelssohn, Cäcilia Mendelssohn Bartholdy
* 14 November 1805 in Hamburg, Deutschland
† 14 May 1847 in Berlin, Deutschland


"I almost forgot to thank you for concluding only by my engagement card that I am a woman like others, since a groom is a man like others. The fact that one’s female nature is daily, in every step of one’s life, pointed out by the gentlemen around one is a point that could cause one’s anger, and thus compromise one’s femininity, if it wasn’t for the fact that this would make the issue worse.”


Profile
Fanny Hensel is in many ways one of the most interesting characters amongst the 19th century women composers, with her substantial but only partially published, and thus authorised, oeuvre. Her work as composer, pianist and concert organiser questions the categories of musical history established in the 19th century and still valid today. One is forced to question and re-define the concept of work and to query whether the social space, in which her works were created in, was composed into the work. There are also complex questions regarding edition methods and performance practices. Fanny Hensel adopted on those genres allocated to her qua her sex by using them as experimental fields. Mostly without the attention of an anonymous public, she created compositions that were innovative in a number of ways: harmonically and in form, with its genre crossing character and by bridging the established borders between ‘the private’ and ‘the public’ common in her time.

Fanny Hensel’s life and work cannot be separated from the unique importance of Jewish families for Berlin’s cultural life. Women had an important role in supporting and organising concert events in private-public spaces. Fanny Hensel’s Sunday concerts at Leipziger Straße 3 as well as other social gatherings with musical focus in her own house were part of a tradition that stretched from her mother Lea Mendelssohn, nee Salomon (1777–1842), to Fanny von Arnstein (1758–1818) in Vienna and Sara Levy (1761–1854) in Berlin, and was of great importance for middle-class musical life. This tradition, which was mainly carried by women, was however forgotten when public musical life developed.

Cities an countries
Fanny Hensel lived and worked mostly in Berlin, where she revived the Mendelssohn family’s tradition of Sunday concerts in 1831, which was a lasting influence on the musical life in Berlin. Her travels took her to Paris, Switzerland, Dusseldorf, Leipzig, Cologne and Boulogne. However, her most important journey was the 1839/40 journey to Italy, which took her via Munich, Venice, Flo-
rence to Rome and Naples. The winter spent in Rome was a great musical inspiration to her due to her contact to the artists of the local Académie française. She found recognition as a composer, performed as a pianist and introduced members of the Académie, such as Charles Gounod (1818–1893), to the music of Bach and Beethoven.

**Biography**

Fanny Hensel was born in Hamburg on 14th November 1805 as the oldest of four children to parents Abraham and Lea Mendelssohn (1776–1835 and 1777–1842 respectively). Her father Abraham was the son of the Jewish proponent of the Enlightenment Moses Mendelssohn (1729 or 1728–1786) from Berlin. Her mother Lea, nee Salomon, was a grand-daughter of Daniel Itzing (1723-1799), the “coin entrepreneur” to Frederick the Great. In Fanny Hensel’s maternal family there was an extraordinary musical tradition that was mainly carried by the women. Fanny Hensel’s father was a banker and had founded a banking business in Hamburg before his marriage. The family fled back to Berlin in 1811 due to problems with the French occupying power. In 1816 Fanny and her siblings were baptised as reformed protestants. The parents converted to the Christian faith in 1822. Both Fanny Hensel and her brother Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy received their first piano lessons from their mother. During a journey to Paris in 1816 the siblings were instructed by the Beethoven-expert Marie Bigot de Morogues (1786–1820). Ludwig Berger (1777–1839) was employed as piano teacher upon their return. Other piano teachers to the siblings were Ignaz Moscheles (1794–1870) and Johann Nepomuk Hummel (1778–1837). In 1819 Karl Friedrich Zelter (1758–1832) was employed as composing instructor, and in March 1820 Fanny and her younger siblings joined the Berlin "Sing-Akademie" led by him. Right from the start of her lessons with Zelter regular compositions by Fanny Hensel are on record: mainly songs but also piano sonatas and chamber music. She grew up in close artistic proximity with her brother Felix but was always reminded that her female role was incompatible with musical professionalism. When Fanny Hensel got engaged in 1829 her brother started an educational journey to England and Scotland and the siblings parted ways. After her wedding in October 1829 Fanny Hensel and her husband, the Prussian court painter Wilhelm Hensel, moved into the garden house of the parental estate at Leipziger Straße 3 in Berlin. The couple allowed each other space for their own work, which was a decisive factor for Fanny Hensel’s future performance and composing work. The first years of her marriage were indeed particularly productive. In 1831, the year after the birth of her only child Sebastian, for example, she composed all of her cantatas and performed these at family celebrations. In the same year she revived the family tradition of Sunday concerts and performed the works of Bach, Beethoven, Gluck, Weber, and of her brother Felix as well as her own composition to invited guests. Her life’s climax was the 1839/40 journey to Italy, which she made together with her husband and son and which earned her professional recognition as composer and pianist through their contact to young artists at the Académie française in Rome. Only shortly before her death, Fanny Hensel decided to publish some of her own work against the expressed wishes of her father and brother Felix. In May 1847 she suffered a suspected stroke while practicing for the next Sunday concert and died the following night.

**More on Biography**

**Family**

Fanny Hensel and her three siblings Felix (1809–1847), Rebecka (1811–1858) and Paul (1812–1874) were born into a family with extraordinary education tradition that was closely linked to Jewish acculturation in Prussia. Her paternal grandfather Moses Mendelssohn, who grew up in Dessau’s ghetto and spoke Yiddish and Hebrew as a child, considered a comprehensive education and acquiring fluency in German the keys to emancipation and tolerance. His son Abraham, Fanny Hensel’s father, would have liked to study science. However, due to the professional restraints on Jews in Prussia banker was the only option open to him. Music was her mother Lea’s, nee Salomon, heritage. Her grandfather Daniel Itzig, who lived close to the royal castle as financier to Frederick the Great, had already employed a piano teacher in his household. The daughters of Daniel Itzig and his wife Miriam, nee Wulff (1727-1788), including Lea Mendelssohn’s mother Bella Salomon, continued Berlin’s Bach tradition, which was represented at the Prussian court not only by the King himself but also by his younger sister Anna Amalia of Prussia (1727-1783). Lea Mendelssohn’s aunt Sara Levy collated one of the most extensive collections of sheet music of the 18th century, commissioned Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714–1788) with compositions and performed as cembalist in concerts at the Sing-Akademie zu Berlin. Her sisters Fanny von Arnstein and Cäcilie...
(Zippora) von Eskeles (1759–1836), who married to Vienna and became supporters and patrons for the incipient middle-class musical life there, were also outstanding pianists. Thus, naming her first daughter “Fanny Cäcilie (Zippora)” was linked to a programme for Lea Mendelssohn.

Baptism and Conversion

The fact that there is no entry in the Jewish boys’ birth register of Altona for the birth of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy is seen as an indication that Abraham and Lea Mendelssohn intended to have their children baptised Christian all along (see Elvers, frühe Quellen, p. 18). Given their family traditions this must have been a hard decision for them. Moses Mendelssohn, as leading representative of Jewish Enlightenment, and Daniel Itzig’s descendants were keen on linking Jewish religion with the ideas of Enlightenment and integrating these into middle-class society and culture. Thus, converting to Christianity equalled an admission of failure of Moses Mendelssohn’s vision for a society, where people with Christian and Jewish beliefs could live with each other as equals. However, the “naturalisation patent” that granted full citizen rights to Daniel Itzig’s descendants and their spouses was only valid up to Lea Mendelssohn’s generation, so that her children would have suffered the full extent of the disadvantages of a Jewish existence. Moreover, the anti-semitic mood was increasing again, even in Berlin, from 1815 onwards; in southern Germany, but also in Frankfurt and Hamburg, this even culminated in the persecution of Jews in late summer 1819. In 1816 the parents finally had all four children baptised as reformed protestants. The parents themselves converting to Christianity in autumn 1822 and, like Lea Mendelssohn’s brother Jakob, took the additional surname Bartholdy upon converting. The conversion was kept a secret from Lea Mendelssohn’s mother Bella, who the family lived with from 1820 in her house at Neue Promenade 7 in Berlin. There are no self-reported records on how this was possible in view of the numerous rules of everyday Jewish life.

For the parents Lea and Abraham Mendelssohn converting to Christianity was linked with the highest ethical demands on themselves and their children. The letter written by the still Jewish father Abraham Mendelssohn to his eldest daughter Fanny for her confirmation in spring is an example of this (Hensel/Familie, p. 93ff.). In it he describes high ethical ideals as the common ground of all religion and the mother as its embodiment to her. Close-ly linked to this was absolute adherence to the established middle-class gender roles.

Childhood and musical education – Fanny and Felix

Although Fanny Hensel grew up in close artistic proximity of her brother Felix, the distinction between his musical performance and her own were clearly marked from the beginning. While serious musical activity for her brother only depended on the condition that he’d be able to establish a middle-class existence for himself and publicly work as a conductor and composer; a similar professionalism was unthinkable for Fanny: her musical sphere was limited to ‘the house’, albeit the ‘open house’ as the established social space of the 19th century. While the father encouraged her brother to practice publicly recognised genres, Fanny Hensel was encouraged to limit her compositions to songs as the ‘female’ genre. In this context the often repeated story of a common education for the children Felix and Fanny has to be corrected. No details are known about the lessons with Zelter that probably started in 1819. Her mother Lea remarked towards her cousin Henriette von Pereira-Arnstein that she allowed the younger sister Rebecka to study Greek with Felix because he preferred to do things in company, which suggests that Fanny Hensel’s composing lessons with Zelter are also owed to her younger brother’s need for company: “Beckchen ist eine halbe Griechin; in ihrem Munde, der sich gewöhnlich nur zum Thorheitenreden öffnet, nimmt sich das erfreulich kontrastirend aus. Eigentlich lasse ich es sie Felixen zu Gefallen lernen; er liebt ungeheim, alles in Gesellschaft vorzunehmen” “Beckchen is almost Greek herself; for her mouth, which normally only opens for foolish talk, that makes a pleasant contrast. I really only let her study it for Felix’ sake; he loves to do everything in company.” Letter dated 6th May 1821, Staatsbibliothek Berlin, Mendelssohn Archiv, Nachl. 15, 13).

Fanny Hensel’s exercise book wasn’t preserved, unlike her brother’s, some counterpoint studies as well as corrections in Zelter’s hand can be found in her first composition album. In contrast to her brother, Fanny Hensel was not taught how to play the organ or a string instrument. Both were regarded as professionally qualifying and thus not intended for her. Discarding the fact that due to the age difference Fanny Hensel began her piano lessons with Marie Bigot, Johann Nikolaus Hummel and Ignaz Moscheles three and a half years later than Felix,
the children’s piano instructions ran virtually parallel. For his twelfth birthday the parents gave their son the opportunity to perform the singspiel "Die Soldatenliebschaft" he had composed for his father’s birthday with an orchestra for an invited audience (see letter dated 26th February 1821 from Lea Mendelssohn to Henriette von Pereira Arnstein, Staatsbibliothek Berlin, Mendelssohn Archiv, Nachl. 15, 11).

Shortly afterwards they established two-weekly Sunday concerts as practice matinees to give their son the opportunity to conduct and perform his symphonies, piano concerts and chamber music as well as the works of Beethoven and Mozart with the best guest instrumentalists in Berlin and members of the royal orchestra to an invited audience. Fanny Hensel took part as a pianist. In autumn 1821 her brother Felix travelled to Goethe in Weimar with Carl Friedrich Zelter. The poet, who’s verdict was regarded a stepping stone for aspiring artists of the time, was a cultural figure the Mendelssohn family and many other educated Jews in Germany identified with because their Christian-middle-class environment offered only a shaky political and social home to them. Fanny Hensel’s letters to her brother during the journey to Weimar show how much she would have liked to join them. In a letter to Zelter during the family’s Swiss journey of summer 1822 Fanny Hensel refers to her brother as her “better self” (besseres Ich - letter dated 29th August 1822, Staatsbibliothek Berlin, Handschriftenabteilung, Nachlass Fam. Mendelssohn 4.1, fol. 4.). As the older of the two, she took on the “teacher” role, ensuring that he would follow the path she couldn’t take to the best of his abilities. Upon their return from Switzerland the 17-year-old started to catalogue her younger brother’s works and began to write his biography. When she stresses her role as his closest advisor in this, who “knew his operas by heart before he’d written a single note” (“seine Opern auswendig gewusst [habe], ehe eine Note aufgeschrieben war” (Hensel, Familie Mendelssohn Bd. 1, p.135), that is not only a sign of the siblings’ close artistic proximity but also of the deliberate separation of their artistic paths, which she was aware of from the start and that only allowed her to imagine herself as her brother’s alter ego. Nonetheless Fanny Hensel was a very productive composer during those early years. There are numerous songs and exercise pieces by her from 1819 onwards as well as works that show her ambition to go beyond the social constraints she’d been set. When Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, following his father’s wishes, gained his first music-dramatic experiences, she composed song parts for French pastoral novels that can be scenically interpreted (Fanny Hensel, “Frühe französische Lieder, Ulrike Merk (ed), Kassel 2006). Among her early compositions are also two clerical works for solo, choir and piano (“Ist uns der Sündenlast zu schwer” and “Ob deiner Wunderzei-chen staunen”, December 1820 and January 1821 respectively) and a piano quartet. From 1826 onwards there is an increasing number of piano pieces, very similar to the type of lyrical piano piece that would later become known as her brother Felix’ trade mark “song without words”. Many years later Fanny Hensel referred to the creation of lyrics for songs without words as “childhood fun” towards her brother. The playing with the “possible meaning” of music, that can also be found in musical incipits in letters, developed into musical forms of communication. Traces of these can be found in Fanny Hensel’s compositions as well as in those by her brother Felix. Fanny Hensel’s musical education ended in 1826 when, after a performance of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’s overture for “Midsummer Night’s Dream”, the father decided that his son’s home education was complete. In autumn of the previous year he had introduced Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy to Luigi Cherubini in Paris. Due to Cherubini’s positive verdict regarding his musical talents, Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’s career as a professional musical was decided and the parents’ supporting activities moved from the home to the public. The siblings’ spheres began to increasingly separate.

1825–1829: "Spaces between"

After Lea Mendelssohn’s mother Bella died, the family purchased a house with a park-like garden in 1825. The address, Leipziger Straße 3, soon became the epitome of middle-class and musical sociability in Berlin. For the siblings Fanny and Felix the years between 1825 and the eventual start of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’s professional career became a “waiting period” between their childhood and the walks of life their parents had chosen for them. Supported by the Mendelssohn children and their friends an artistic social life developed during their first summer at Leipziger Straße 3 in 1826. Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy later described the musical products of that life as an ideal of “natural music” that does not differentiate between performers and audience (e.g. in a letter to Karl Klingemann dated 1st August 1839, Klingemann, Briefwechsel, p. 241, vgl. Borchard, Opferaltäre, 1999, p. 34).

Beethoven, Goethe and Jean Paul effectively became “vir-
tual” guests in the circle of friends. In 1827 Fanny Hensel together with her brother discovered the late string quartets by Ludwig van Beethoven. She composed songs her brother liked so much that he included them in his first song collections op. 19 (1827) and op. 30 (1830). The performance of Johann Sebastian Bach’s “Matthäuspassion” at the “Sing-Akademie” in Berlin under Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’s direction in April 1829 was a huge event. Fanny Hensel participated by singing alto. It is not clear what her part during the preparation of the performance was. The work’s copy enabling this performance had been a Christmas present of great aunt Sara Levy or grandmother Bella Salomon and was probably part of Sara Levy’s sheet music collection. Shortly after the legendary performance Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy started the first of his big tours that had the purposes education and of establishing a name for himself in the music world. Fanny Hensel noted in her first diary entry of the year 1829 she was facing “the start of my life’s second half” (Tagebücher, p. 1).

Spaced in Marriage

It was to no small extent thanks to her husband that Fanny Hensel was able to continue composing all her life despite the constraints imposed on her. She met painter Wilhelm Hensel (1794–1861) as early as 1821. Her parents, however, did not allow the couple to get engaged or even correspond by personal letters until after his perennial study visit to Italy, which earned him the position as Prussian court painter. Wilhelm Hensel tried to correspond directly with his future fiancée by sending her drawings to Berlin. She composed music for poems by his friend Wilhelm Müller (1794–1827) that he had given her as a Christmas present shortly before his departure. When Wilhelm Hensel returned after five years of separation in autumn 1828, it was difficult for him to enter the circle of friends that had formed around his future wife. Fanny Hensel’s extreme closeness to her brother Felix was probably also a source of irritation. Another source of conflict with Abraham and Lea Mendelssohn was his intention to convert to Catholicism, which he did, however, give up. The engagement period was a time of tension for Fanny Hensel because she was concerned about losing the opportunity to work musically. Her brother’s departure not only lost her her most important audience, she was also afraid to lose her art together with her “girlhood”. Time and again her letters address the subject whether she’ll be able to preserve music through the engagement period into her marriage. The fact that she was able to do so, is due to no small extent to the fact that Wilhelm Hensel supported and encouraged her music from the first day of their marriage and actively sought an artistic collaboration with his young wife. The spacial situation at the garden house of Leipziger Straße 3, where the couple lived, was of advantage. Directly beside the garden hall, which was in the middle of the apartment, the parents’ had a studio built so that Wilhelm and Fanny Hensel were able to combine their family and work lives in the confined space. The close proximity led to various forms of artistic collaboration. Wilhelm Hensel added matching drawings to his wife’s compositions, which encouraged her to make clean copies of the sheet music. During the first years of their marriage she almost exclusively composed music to her husband’s poetry. The second year in particular was a productive time for her composing. In the course of a single year she composed her orchestra overture as well as her cantatas. All three were composed for family celebrations; “Lobgesang” was a present for her son Sebastian’s first birthday, which she performed at her husband’s birthday. The cantata “Hiob” was created as a present to her husband Wilhelm on their second wedding day and the so-called “Cholera-Musik” was a birthday present to her father Abraham Mendelssohn. In winter 1831/32 she composed the dramatic scene “Hero and Leander” based on Friedrich Schiller, which Wilhelm Hensel had written the lyrics for. The overture for orchestra in C major followed in spring 1832. This was directed by Fanny Hensel and performed by musicians of the “Königstädtische Theater” during a Sunday concert two years later in June 1834. She told her brother Felix in a letter that this had been the first time she took up the conductor’s baton. The Sunday concerts were also supported by Wilhelm Hensel who found inspiration for his paintings in his wife’s music.

The Sunday Concerts

Casual musical sessions on Sundays with a circle of friends became the “new Sunday concerts” under Fanny Hensel’s direction from 1831 onwards and developed into a “non-institutionalised institution” of Berlin’s musical life. The preserved matinee programmes show that Fanny Hensel was keen to bring her performing and listening Sunday guests in contact with “good music” of the past as well as music by contemporary composers. This educational function of the Sunday concerts can be tra-
Fanny Hensel received back to her draft “proposal to found an amateur society for instrumental music” dating back to 1825, many aspects of which are closely mirrored by the philharmonic society founded by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’s friend the violinist Eduard Rietz one year later. However, Fanny Hensel’s concerts were more casual and more variable. The concerts’ cast kept changing and it was not always possible to plan ahead. Musicians of the “Königstädtische Orchester” and the court orchestra (Königliche Kapelle), singers of Berlin’s stages, guest performers as well as so-called amateurs participated. The latter were friends and relatives but also “professional” musicians, such as the soprano Pauline Decker, nee von Schätzel (1811–1882), who retired from the stage upon her marriage. There is proof for later Sunday concerts that Fanny Hensel founded a small choir that practiced regularly and participated in the concerts. The programmes included lyrical and instrumental music, chamber music genres as well as cantatas, opera and, although very rarely, orchestra music. On the one hand, Fanny Hensel created a field of activity for herself with the Sunday concerts that very likely contributed to the fact that she kept performing and composing music all her life, despite the lack of external stimulation. On the other hand, the Sunday concerts’ history also documents how fragile Fanny Hensel’s musical activities were. Dramatic family events, such as her father’s death in 1835 and her mother’s death in 1842, but also illness of family members or Wilhelm Hensel’s absence led to long pauses, after which Fanny Hensel often struggled to revive her Sunday matinees. Particularly destabilising were her numerous miscarriages and still-births, although she rarely mentions these herself. The golden periods of Fanny Hensel’s Sunday concerts are particularly remarkable in view of these circumstances. In the 1833/34 season she established her collaboration with Pauline Decker who performed opera soirees at her house on Thursdays. During the initial phase of the Sunday concerts Fanny Hensel performed operas in their entirety or in parts, including Beethoven’s “Fidelio”. The Berlin premiere of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’s “Paulus” took place in January 1837 in the rear building at Leipziger Straße 3. The Sunday concerts’ programmes continually included works by Johann Sebastian Bach, Beethoven and Mozart as well as Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy. Opera sections by Gluck and Weber also featured often in the programme. The “Vogelkantate” by Johanna Kinkel (1810–1858) was performed in the composer’s presence. Fanny Hensel also performed her own works but this was never a key point of the programmes.

Guests were invited. By the final two matinee seasons in 1843/44 and 1846/46, however, the concerts had developed a life of their own and Fanny Hensel called them “wunderliches Mittelding zwischen Privat und öffentlichem Wesen” (“a wonderful mix of private and public being”) (letter to Julius Elsasser dated 6th May 1846, Klein 2003b, p. 157).

“Wie der Esel zwischen zwei Heubündeln” (“Like a donkey between two bundles of hay”) – Publishing and Public Fanny Hensel seems to have had an ambivalent view regarding publication of her music. She initially internalised her father’s rejection of the idea, which was shared by her brother Felix after the father’s death. However, her letter to her brother dated 9th July 1846, which states that she will start publishing, is telling: “[…] ich habe zu 40 Jahren eine Furcht vor meinen Brüdern, wie ich sie zu 14 vor meinem Vater gehabt habe, oder vielmehr Furcht ist nicht das rechte Wort, sondern der Wunsch, Euch u. Allen die ich liebe, es in meinem ganzen Leben recht zu machen, u. wenn ich nun vorher weiß, daß es nicht der Fall seyn wird, so fühle ich mich rather unbehanglich dabei.” (“[…] at the age of 40 I have a fear of my brothers, as I had a fear of my father at the age of 14, or rather, fear is not the right word, but a wish to please you and all I love all my life; and now that I know in advance that this will not be the case I feel rather uncomfortable with it.” (Citron, Letters, p. 611 f.)

Although Fanny Hensel occasionally claims not to care, it becomes clear very early on, that she would have liked to experience a public and professional response to her music. As early as 1829 she teased her brother with the remark that “England ja ein prächtiges Land [ist], wo die Lieder mit 10 Guineen pro Stück bezahlt werden.” (“England [is] a fine country where songs are paid for at 10 guineas a piece”) and asks: “kannst Du mich da empfehlen? Wenn sie mir 12 abnehmen, kriegen sie das 13te im Kauf.” (“could you recommend me there? If they purchase 12 of me they will get the 13th in the bargain.” (Unpublished letter to her brother Felix dated 17th October 1829, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Green Book I, Nr. 102) In 1836 she prepared several of her piano pieces for publication (Konvolut MA Ms 44, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, s. sources, published by Camilla Cai: Cai, Songs for Piano forte, 1994) and only her brother’s negative attitude prevented her from realising her plan. Lea Mendelssohn attempted to change her son’s mind. Wilhelm Hensel indeed insisted on a publication of his wife’s music and Fan-
ny Hensel felt between his wish and her brother’s attitude "wie der Esel zwischen zwei Heubündeln" ("like a donkey between two bundles of hay", letter to Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy dated 22nd November 1836, Citron, Letters, p. 521). In musical matters her brother Felix remained the authority: his approval was decisive for her. This, however, remained absent.

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy's inconsistent attitude towards the "public" and his status as public musician respectively probably contributed to her struggle to find her own point of view regarding publication. His sister's private and family-based circle of musical activity that also represented his own musical roots is often portrayed in his letters as an ideal place of untainted communication in music. This ambivalence towards his sister manifested itself in a variety of ways: even during the years when Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy established himself as conductor and composer all over Europe he still tried to maintain a connection to the family sources of his music; for example he continued to send his sister Fanny a new piece of music for her birthday each year that he noted as created on her birthday at the bottom of the sheet. Much like he did during their shared childhood, he expected and received her advice and collegial critique. The exchange of letters regarding the question of her publishing in 1836 and 1837 also seems strangely ambivalent. Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy's negative response is accompanied by the request for his sister's musical contribution to the memory book of his future wife, Cécile Jeanrenaud, i.e. a private form of music distribution, and closes by praising her compositions above composers such as Lachner and Reissiger, who’s works were being publicly performed (see letters dated from 23rd October 1836 to summer 1837, Weissweiler, Briefwechsel, 1997, p. 229–261). His report about the only proven exception from the rule to keep his sister's music from public performance, the performance of her song "Die Schiffende" at "Gewandhaus" in Leipzig in March 1837, despite his praise for her, also shows that the sphere of public concert life and the private sphere, that he thought his sister's music belonged to, were mutually exclusive to him. This is also paired with praise for the "private Sphäre" ("private sphere") of music: he considered his sister Rebecka's voice when she sang Fanny Hensel's songs more beautiful than the voice of Henriette Grabau, who performed this particular song in 1837, and the "graue Kupferstichzimmer" ("grey etching room") in Berlin as a more suitable venue than the noisy "Gewandhaus" (concert hall) (letter dated 7th March 1837, Weissweiler, Briefwechsel 1997, p. 249f). Her brother's reactions to the question of publication carried mixed messages to Fanny Hensel. She very slowly freed herself of her brother's influence on her. It was probably important for this development that she found another audience for her music. On the occasion of their 10th wedding anniversary 1839 she gave her husband Wilhelm Hensel a retrospective of her songs. For this purpose she prepared clean copies and revisions for some of the songs for the first time ("Auswahl aus meinen Büchern. Sieben und sechzig Stimmen. F.H. für W.H.", Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, MA Ms. 128, s. sources).

Italy

The journey to Italy from 1839 to 1840 marked a turning point in Fanny Hensel's artistic life. The siblings Fanny, Felix and Rebecka had made plans for a journey to Italy with the entire family about 10 years previously. However, only Felix went on an educational journey to Italy in 1831, that took him via Switzerland, France and England back to Berlin in 1833. Fanny Hensel realised a long-held dream with the Italy journey in 1839/40, which she shared with her husband and their nine-year-old son as well as with the cook Jette. Like many 19th century travellers to Italy she followed in the footsteps of Weimar's poetry prince: "Goethe hat mich auf dieser Reise nicht verlassen" ("Goethe never left me during this journey") she concluded upon her return (unpublished letter dated 3rd November 1840 to Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy belonging to the Bodleian Library, Oxford, Maurer, Thematisches Verzeichnis, p. 110). Letters and advice from her brother Felix also accompanied her. Yet, the Italy journey was also a step towards inner independence of her brother. A main reason for this was the recognition she received from professional musicians in Rome. Young students of the Académie française that she associated with - including Charles Gounod (1818–1893) – were not only thrilled with her piano skills but also praised her compositions. Through Fanny Hensel they were introduced to the musical work of Bach and Beethoven who were both relatively unknown in France at the time. Fanny Hensel's letters and diary records of that time speak of the liberation that the opportunity to perform and compose music in social exchange with like-minded people free of family obligations meant to her.

Later years in Berlin
As fulfilling as her time in Italy and especially the months in Rome had been for Fanny Hensel, as disillusioning was her return to Berlin in September 1840. Berlin’s music life was antiquated and offered few stimuli. Still enthused by her experiences in Italy, Fanny Hensel revived the Sunday concerts in January 1841 but these were no substitute for the lively exchange with young composers in Rome. Two large memory books that Fanny Hensel created together with her husband are reverberations of the Italian journey: “Das Jahr” (“The Year”), a cycle of twelve character pieces, and the “Italienische Reise-Album” (“Italian Journey Album”) with songs and piano pieces that Fanny Hensel composed partly in Italy, partly after the journey, and that loosely follow their itinerary. Drawings by Wilhelm Hensel were added for each composition. “Das Jahr” contains an aphorism of dramas and poems mostly by Goethe, but also by Schiller, Uhland, Tieck and Eichendorff, in addition to each individual composition. Yet, Fanny Hensel could not preserve the Italian joy for life in her every day Berlin life. In March 1843 she even feared that all her music will soon “ein Mährlein gewesen” (“have [been] a fairy tale”.Fanny Hensel, Tagebücher, p. 222). A visit to her brother in Leipzig and a visit of Charles Gounod in Berlin gave her fresh impetus. Inspired by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’s cantata “Die erste Walpurgisnacht” (“The first Walpurgisnight”) she composed an “Elfenmusik” (“Elfin Music”), her “Faustszene” (“Faust scene”). In contrast to the very pessimistic view of her future recorded in her diary in summer 1843, she directed a particularly brilliant season of Sunday concerts in winter 1843/44. Her brother Felix was present for this season, as he was in negotiation with the Berlin ministries regarding his future as general director of music in his hometown. However, when her brother’s plans to settle in Berlin finally fell through she lapsed into resignation again.

The last year: A musical Indian Summer

Towards the end of her life Fanny Hensel was to experience a golden, musical “Altweibersommer” (“Indian summer”, quoting Fanny Hensel from an unpublished letter to her brother dated late January 1846, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Green Books XXIII, Nr. 188), during which the self-confidence she’d gained in Rome blossomed. Upon returning from her second journey to Italy, which Fanny undertook to assist her sister who had fallen ill in Florence, she met the young and musically educated junior lawyer Robert von Keudell (1824–1903) in summer 1846. She discussed her compositions with him on a daily basis and he showed her appreciation that reminded her of the young composers Charles Gounod and George Ange Bousquet (1818–1854) in Rome (see Fanny Hensel, Tagebücher, p. 264).

In July 1846 Fanny Hensel decided to publish her music regardless the expected rejection by her brother Felix. Up to spring 1847 six opus numbers were published: songs for one singing voice and piano, songs for pianoforte and “Gartenlieder” (“garden songs”) for mixed choir. Fanny Hensel probably prepared another issue for publication. She could profit only briefly from the impetus she gained from publishing her musical work. On 14th May 1847 during a rehearsal of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’s cantata “Die erste Walpurgisnacht” (“The first Walpurgisnight”) she suffered “Anfall ihres Nasenblutens” (“sudden onset of nose bleed”), probably caused by a stroke. She died during the following night. Respecting Wilhelm Hensel’s wishes Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy had further editions of his sister’s compositions published: two issues of songs, one with songs for pianoforte and finally the piano trio op. 11 that Fanny Hensel had performed at the Sunday concert on 11th April 1847, her sister Rebecka’s birthday. Wilhelm Hensel did not paint another significant painting after his wife’s death. Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy was initially unable to compose following his sister’s death. His string quartet op. 80 was created as his final work. Its diction was reminiscent of his early quartets of the years 1827 and 1829 and it followed methods of musical communication with his sister.

He died half a year after his sister Fanny.

Appreciation

Fanny Hensel’s work - her performing and composing as well as the work as concert organiser - was linked to a personal network of friendships and family relations and her activities contributed to its preservation. Her composing, musical and organisational work has to be valued within the frame of this network. One of the achievements of this work was the creation of a “space of music”, surpassing the walls of the garden hall, that did not differentiate between performers and audience and included all participants in the musical event at high level. Despite having been allocated the genre of songs due to her sex, Fanny Hensel was nonetheless able to find her own musical language that was especially groundbreaking in her piano music. For her, songs and lyrical piano pieces became an experimental ground and base point for the development of larger contexts as well as for compositional methods of musical communication with his sister.
ons in sonata form. Together with her brother Felix, Fanny Hensel was the originator of the type of lyrical piano piece that became closely associated with the name Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy under the name “song without words”. Due to its inert address Fanny Hensel’s music questioned the mainstream listening habits, so that even established 19th-century-works had to be viewed in a new light.

By organising her Sunday concerts Fanny Hensel made a significant contribution to the developing public concert scene. Her matinees gave guest performers the opportunity to win subscribers, which was vital to financing their public concerts. At the same time Fanny Hensel and her Sunday concerts were repertoire building.

**More on Appreciation**

Although Fanny Hensel composed almost 500 pieces she did not leave an oeuvre in the traditional sense. Appreciating her work also means questioning categories such as authorship, closure and written form that are linked to the concept of work. The dissemination forms of her music within the scope of “private public” in the 19th century are written into Fanny Hensel’s music, even across the borders of those genres that already include the characteristic of personal address. Her chamber music works, that - being genres in sonata form - have different standards than for example songs, must also be viewed as addressed music. Even her string quartet - a composition in the supreme discipline of music history written by master after master - has to be understood as a personal “response” to her brother’s string quartet op. 12. Especially the musical dialogues she had with her brother about the music of Beethoven demonstrate that her musical references did not differentiate between “friends” and “masters”. At the same time, contemplating Fanny Hensel’s music within the scope of private-public networks highlights the personal address included in the kind of music that today is closely linked with the concept of oeuvre in the emphatic sense, such as the music of Ludwig van Beethoven. The kind of reception suitable for Fanny Hensel’s music thus leads to the deconstruction of just that image of music history that excluded her during the 19th century.

Fanny Hensel made a significant contribution to the developing public music life by building up networks between houses, where music was performed, between guest performing musicians and between musicians and their audiences. Her Sunday matinees were linked to other forms of social life in the house, such as sister Rebecka Dirichlet’s “Tuesday’s” or mother Lea’s societies during which music was also performed. They were also linked to musical societies in other houses. Noteworthy are the Thursday opera soirees of singer Pauline Decker, who Fanny Hensel had started collaborating with in winter 1833/34. Publicly performing musicians could introduce themselves to the Berlin audience at her matinees. In arranging the programme with the right mix of lyrical and instrumental music for her Sunday concerts Fanny Hensel orientated herself on contemporary concert habits. At the same time she kept introducing her audiences to up to then unknown works of Beethoven and to “old music”, preferably by Johann Sebastian Bach, but also by Händel and Pergolesi.

**Reception**

Although Fanny Hensel’s music was mostly not printed or publicly performed during her life time, it was known within the scope of private-public due to its dissemination in letters, memory books and dedication copies. Many of her contemporaries also knew about Fanny Hensel’s contribution to her brother Felix’ first song collection. In very singular cases Fanny Hensel’s music even found its way to public stages in the 19th century. The family biography “Die Familie Mendelssohn” (“The Mendelssohn Family”) that her son Sebastian published in 1879 had great influence on the future reception of Fanny Hensel’s life and work. Sebastian Hensel’s attempt to describe a woman’s work in the Mendelssohn’s family history was connected, however, to gender-role conforming expectations of an idealised Fanny Hensel image of the 19th century strengthened by the reception of this extremely popular book.

During the 19th century the image of Fanny as a self-sufficient composer of “beautiful songs” asserted itself. It was only after the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin acquired the Mendelssohn Society’s collection in 1964, which included a large part of Fanny Hensel’s music autographs, it was re-discovered that Fanny Hensel had composed in virtually every genre. The entire collection contains estates of numerous members of the Mendelssohn family, including the descendants of Sebastian Hensel. The discovery of several other sources up to recent times have further led to correcting the research. Apart from some individual contributions, the performance-practical and scientific debate about Fanny Hensel’s composing work started in the early 1980s. The discrepancy between Fanny Hensel’s seemingly high profile and a problematic source situation, regardless of its volume, was a particular issue.
from the start. The problem can be traced back to the crossing of “private” and “public” areas, that were deliberately kept separated in her own time, in Fanny Hensel’s work. This applies both to the handing down of sources and their character and even includes the musical scores. The compulsory methodological discussion made necessary by this situation did not start until the late 1990s. Although Fanny Hensel is now the scientifically most discussed female composer, significantly more research is still required. Alongside the scientific debate, there has also been a journalistic and performance-practical reception of Fanny Hensel’s life and work, even including works of fiction, in modern times. Her music was recorded, children’s literature, novels and film documentaries created.

More on Reception

Repertoire

The repertoire Fanny Hensel acquired as pianist, music organiser and choir-mistress is extraordinarily extensive and varied. Johann Sebastian Bach’s works were part of her repertoire from the start. At the age of fourteen, at her mother Lea’s suggestion, she played all 24 preludes from the first volume of the “Wohltemperierte Klavier” (“Well-tempered Piano”) by heart for her father’s birthday. Marie Bigot and Ludwig Berger added the works of Beethoven. There is also proof in the early years of works by Johann Nepomuk Hummer and, of course, from the start the works of her brother Felix: his early piano concerts were presented to his sister Fanny who performed them at her Sunday concerts. Music by Beethoven, Fanny Hensel and her brother Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy remained integrated in her Sunday concerts’ repertoire later with all its genres: piano concerts, chamber music, piano music, cantatas and operas were performed in part or in their entirety for various occasions. A performance of her own overture by members of the Königstädtischen Orchester conducted by Fanny Hensel is documented. However, in most cases, she probably performed orchestral works as a piano version that, depending on guests present, was performed by string instruments accompanied by piano. The same applied to Bach’s cantatas included in the programme. The cantatas BWV 8 (“Liebster Gott, wann werd’ ich sterben” - “Dearest God, when will I die”), 105 (“Herr, gehe nicht ins Gericht” - “Lord, do not judge”) and 106 (“Actus tragicus”) were performed often at the Sunday concerts, either in part or in their entirety.

Additionally, performances of cantatas BWV 103 and 104 have been proven. One of Fanny Hensel’s favourite pieces was the cantata “Die erste Walpurgisnacht” (“The first Walpurgisnight”) by her brother Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, which she performed often. Moreover, the Berlin premiere of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’s first oratorio “Paulus” took place at Leipziger Straße 3, directed by Fanny Hensel. During the first years of her Sunday matinees, Fanny Hensel performed entire operas several times, including Gluck’s “Iphigenie in Aulis” and “Orpheus und Eurydike”, probably Beethoven’s “Fidelio” and Mozart’s “La Clemenza die Tito”. With very few exceptions these works were performed concertante and with piano accompaniment, supported by individual string instruments. Opera music continued to be integrated into her concerts but Fanny Hensel later limited this to performing parts of an opera. In addition to the composers already mentioned, she favoured arias from Carl Maria von Weber’s operas.

Fanny Hensel has been proven as pianist of several piano concerts during her Sunday concerts as well as during her few public performances at so-called amateur concerts; having performed such works as Beethoven’s piano concerto Nr. 4, op. 58, Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’s piano concerto Nr. 1, op. 25, and Mozart’s piano concerto D minor, KV 466. Johann Sebastian Bach’s concerto in D minor, BWV 1052, was one of Fanny Hensel’s favourites and she played it often (see Klein, “mit obligater Nachtigallen- und Fliederblüthenbegleitung”, p. 33). There is additional proof of the concerto D minor for three pianos by Johann Sebastian Bach, BWV 1063, and of Beethoven’s triple concerto op. 56. Piano chamber music is a constant part of the Sunday matinees’ repertoire, among others, piano quartets by Carl Maria von Weber (op. 5 and/or op. 11) and Mozart (KV 478) as well as piano trios by Beethoven (op. 70 Nr. 2 and op. 70 Nr. 1, or op. 1 Nr. 1), Moscheles (op. 84) and Mozart (KV 496 oder KV 546). Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’s piano trio op. 49 is on record for one of the so-called amateur concerts where Fanny Hensel performed in public. A chronicle of the Sunday concerts including the attempt to reconstruct their programmes can be found in Klein, “mit obligater Nachtigallen- und Fliederblüthenbegleitung”, p. 33 ff., see also Bartsch, Fanny Hensel, Musik als Korrespondenz, p. 147 ff. A complete reconstruction of the programmes, however, remains difficult. Letters of family members and Fanny Hensel’s diaries are the most important sources for this. Yet, these record the works’ titles very vaguely or in a shortened version, that can not always be
deciphered.

Research

General

Of the 19th century female composers probably most is known about Fanny Hensel’s work. A wealth of sources has been preserved and made accessible in archives on account of the connection to the brother’s famous name and because the Mendelssohn family has collected autobiographic material of its members from the beginning for several generations. Not only Fanny Hensel’s compositions but also numerous autobiographic sources, such as her letters and diaries, have been published by now, albeit in differing levels of editorial quality. There are individual analysis, sometimes even monographs, of the various aspects of her work, her Sunday concerts, her piano play, individual works or groups of works (Huber 2007, Wolitz 2008). The discovery of an illustrated clean copy of Fanny Hensel’s piano cycle “Das Jahr” (“The Year”), amongst others, demonstrates that important sources, correcting previous research results, keep being found even in recent times (see Borchard, “Ich glaub’ ich hab das.” 2000). Thus, the research challenge, in contrast to other artistic women of the 19th century, is not a lack of sources. It is rather to appropriately reflect the traditions and reading traces already contained in the sources in a setting of cultural and gender history, and also to approach the sources methodically. This challenge has not always been met, even in more recent publications. It is therefore particularly fitting to call the source and research analysis situation in Fanny Hensel’s case “umfangreich und lückenhaft zugleich” (“comprehensive and yet full of gaps”) (Borchard, “Mit Schere und Klebstoff”. Montage als biographisches Verfahren, in Musik mit Methode, hg. v. Corinna Herr und Monika Woitas, Köln, Weimar Wien 2006, p. 47–62, hier p. 57).

Origins and Source Analysis

In this setting the research history of various aspects of Fanny Hensel’s life and work can be summarised as follows: the first dissertations were written in the early 1980s in the USA and are only preserved in their typewritten form (Sirota Ressmeyer 1981 and Quin 1981). They analyse Fanny Hensel’s life and work mainly based on the compositions published during her life time and the family biography by Sebastian Hensel. Sirota-Ressmeyer includes some unpublished sources in summary. Both works, as well as the first shorter work analytical and biographic works (Citron 1983 and 1984, Schröder 1987, Eberle 1987), were only able to access the rudimentary catalogues of the Berlin Mendelssohn Archive of the 1970s for source analysis. A more comprehensive catalogue of the sources contained in the Mendelssohn Archive were only prepared in the early 1990s (Klein 1990, 1993 and 1995). Catalogues of her compositions that take the special tradition of Fanny Hensel’s music into account by including both published and unpublished sources as well as lost works and works only mentioned have become available with the works of Annette Maurer and Renate Hellwig-Unruh in 1997 (Maurer, Liedverzeichnis) and 2000 (Hellwig-Unruh, Werkverzeichnis, see sources and catalogue) respectively.

Source Editions

A mile stone and important base for following research was the first edition of Fanny Hensel’s letters to her brother Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy that was published in English translation, with the German letters in appendices, in 1987 (Ed.: Citron 1987, see sources for bibliographic information; see Quellen, B II.,1 Quelleneditionen). Eva Weissweiler’s collection of letters (Ed.: Weissweiler 1997) adds only very few of Fanny Hensel’s letters to the ones edited by Citron. Other fundamental scientifically-critical source editions were published as late as the late 1990s and at the beginning of the 21st century, including Fanny Hensel’s diaries (Ed.: Klein, Elvers 2002), several editions of Fanny Hensel’s travel letters (Ed.: Klein, 2002, 2004, 2007), the letters exchanged during her engagement (Ed.: Helmig, Maurer 1997) and other editions of significance to Fanny Hensel’s artistic biography. The same holds true for Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’s letters that are of great importance for Fanny Hensel’s musical biography. Up until recently, research had to rely on letter editions the family edited in the 19th century and autographic sources. The first volume of the complete edition of Mendelssohn’s letters was published in 2008 (Ed. Appold, Back 2008). Lea Mendelssohn’s letters to Henriette von Pereira-Arnstein only became publicly available in 2007. They are important sources for the Mendelssohn siblings’ childhood and the private musical life in Lea and Abraham Mendelssohn’s house up to the mid-1820s and indeed the only source in addition to 19th century commemorative literature. An edition was published in 2010 (Ed. Dinglinger, Elvers 2010).
Biographic

With this background, the research contributions about Fanny Hensel always included biographic aspects. Comprehensive biographic studies were written from the early 1990s. A very important contribution, especially in view of the difficult source situation, was Nancy B. Reich’s study. In contrast to the usual patrilineal genealogy, it highlights the importance of women like Fanny von Arnstein, Henriette von Pereira-Arnstein and Sara Levy - her maternal female predecessors - to Fanny Hensel’s definition of herself as a musician (Reich 1991). The first comprehensive biography of Fanny Hensel was published in 1992 in France (Tillard 1992, German translation 1994). There are now two further biographic monographs about Fanny Hensel available that also include analyses of her music (Schleuning 2007 and Todd 2010).

Music Edition

Apart from some sporadic issues, the first editions of Fanny Hensel’s unpublished music were published during the second half of the 1980s. The songs accompanied by piano and "Lieder für das Pianoforte" ("Songs for pianoforte") that had been published during her lifetime became more easily accessible from 1982 onwards due to reprints of the original editions. The majority of Fanny Hensel’s compositions is now available in print. There is, however, a rather confusing situation regarding the published material due to the very individual selection of pieces by the respective editors and the numerous publishers worldwide that have published first editions. Many editions are suitable for practice only, not as a research base, due to their editorial quality. The first articles highlighting issues around Fanny Hensel’s music from an editorial and performance-practical view point were published towards the end of the 1990s (Huber 1997, Maurer 1999, de la Motte 1999, Gabler 1999). Significant editorial-scientific research contributions followed in the beginning of the 20th century (Huber, “Edieren und Analysieren”, 2006).

Analyses

During the 1980s the first work-analytical studies appeared, most of which attempted to include biographical and culture-historical contexts (Citron 1983 and 1984, Eberle 1987, Schröder 1987, Cai 1987). Analysis that considers culture- and gender-historical contexts as well as gender issues and draw methodological consequences from these considerations have only been published in recent years for Fanny Hensel’s "Lieder für das Pianoforte" ("Songs for pianoforte") (Huber 2006) and a few other compositions (Huber 1997 and 2001). This includes several papers published on the occasion of the symposium “Fanny Hensel (née Mendelssohn Bartholdy) and her Circle” directed by Susan Wollenberg to mark Fanny Hensel’s 200th birthday (Head 2007, Williams 2007, Wollenberg 2007, and others).

Cultural Studies’ Context and Methodology

1993 the US-american magazine “The Musical Quarterly” published some studies analysing Fanny Hensel’s and her brother Felix’ work from various points of view in culture-historical context under the subject “Music, Gender and Culture in Early Nineteenth Century Germany” (Rothenberg 1993, Sabbean 1993, Toews 1993 and others). A milestone for research was the 150th anniversary of the siblings’ death, which many institutions marked with exhibitions, publications and conferences, often focussing on the siblings’ musical relationship (Klein, Das verborgene Band, 1997, Klein 2002 and others). Urgent methodological questions caused by the particular source situation and forms of traditioning became the focus of Beatrix Borchard and Monika Schwarz-Danuser’s symposium “Fanny Hensel. Komponieren zwischen Geselligkeitsideal und romantischer Musikästhetik” (“Fanny Hensel. Composing between Social Ideal and romantic Music Aesthetic”), which also took place during the 150th anniversary of Fanny Hensel’s death (Symposionsbericht: Borchard, Schwarz-Danuser 1999, zum Symposium erschienener Sammelband: Helmig 1997 - Symposium report: Borchard, Schwarz-Danuser 1999, Symposium omnibus: Helmig 1999). Many of the papers discussed and published in this context address issues that arise from the specific culture-historical context of Fanny Hensel’s work from an analytical, editorial, historical traditioning and cultural scientific point of view. The relationship of the siblings Fanny Hensel and Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy in biographical and musical respect has been addressed in many research papers from the start. From 1994 onwards, many studies focussed on similarities between Fanny Hensel’s compositions and those by her brother (Cai 1994, Todd 2002). These were mainly analysed under the aspect of mutual influence or a common family style. The aspect of Fanny Hensel’s musical correspondences as an effect of the private-public forms of traditio-
ning of her music became a base of consideration in recent times (Bartsch 1999, 2004 and 2007 see also multimedia site “Fanny Hensel – Korrespondenzen in Musik” - “Fanny Hensel - Correspondence in Music”: http://mugi.hfmt-hamburg.de/A_multimedia/hensel_korr.php).

Need for Research

Although both Fanny Hensel’s compositions and her letters are now available in print, it is often still necessary to access the original sources because the editorial quality doesn’t always take the complicated starting position into account. Fanny Hensel’s music confronts the editors with challenges that inevitably require methodological reflection and oppose both the pragmatic wish of performance orientated “practical editions” and the premise of oeuvre orientated scientific editions. Work on a scientifically critical complete edition, making use of new forms of edition technology such as digital edition instruments, is urgently required. However, this task faces almost insurmountable legal obstacles due to the individual editions being scattered worldwide. Although the accessible editions of Fanny Hensel’s letters are a helpful work-base, they meet neither current standards of letter science nor the demands of a scientifically critical edition. Unfortunately, the Leipzig edition of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’s letters also missed the opportunity to edit both Fanny Hensel’s and Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’s letters in accordance to the current level of knowledge of the letter as an unfinished, dialogical form of text. It became an edition that shows letters under their assumed “author’s name” instead of a text-critical edition showing each letter with its corresponding response letter. On the one hand, this means that letters by Lea Mendelssohn and Rebecka Dirichlet that are an important source, especially regarding Fanny Hensel’s music, appear at a much later stage. On the other hand, it makes the letters incredibly hard to read. This applies even more to the common practice of writing family letters within the Mendelssohn family: letters were not only read out to family and friends, they were also composed together. This makes attributing an individual author to each letter an artificial construct that fragments and destroys the circular form of writing and reception. With digital technology it is possible to develop forms of edition for letters that take its special unfinished writing and reception form into account. It would be desirable that the legal situation didn’t make the development of such methods impossible. Fanny Hensel’s compositions received much attention in recent years. However, her music was only rarely placed in the context of musical communication that it was created in. Reconstruction of a form of reception appropriate for her music remains a challenge faced by those discussing her music and her musical work today. The correspondence between drawings and music in sheet music albums and memory books created by Fanny Hensel and her husband Wilhelm is an area that has hardly been examined. The methodological reflection necessary in dealing with Fanny Hensel’s music far exceeds her work. It leads to fundamental questions regarding common forms of reception and traditioning of music.

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Projektleitung: Prof. Dr. Beatrice Borchard
Harvestehuder Weg 12
D – 20148 Hamburg

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