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*Musique comme Embellissement, Musique comme Métier :  
En revisitant Fanny Mendelssohn et Clara Schumann*

*Music as Ornament, Music as Profession: Fanny  
Mendelssohn Hensel and Clara Schumann Revisited*

### **I: Clara Schumann's Visit to the Mendelssohns in May of 1847**

On September 13, 1819, Clara Schumann came into the world, and now, just two centuries later, her musical legacy remains inspiring and also perplexing. Celebrating her musical career is altogether fitting in Paris, where she first performed in Paris in 1832, when she was 12. Her father, who accompanied her on the visit, complained that “in Paris everything was done for superficial reasons, for the sake of appearances. Clara had to be dressed entirely in white and had to wear a new dress at each appearance - but the Parisians didn't care about cleanliness.” In his words, “one small napkin is used for the whole week, and one glass of water is provided for washing.”<sup>7</sup> Paris was also an important city for Abraham and Lea Mendelssohn family, parents of Clara's peer Fanny Hensel. Frustrated with the treatment of Jews in their hometown of Berlin, Fanny's parents once dreamed of fleeing discrimination by moving to Paris. Ultimately, they chose to remain in Berlin, where they devoted their financial bounty in support of their talented children. We shall see that Fanny both profited from their solicitude and chafed from their refusal to allow her a fully public career.

We begin our visitation with both of these talented women on May 4, 1847, when Clara paid a visit to the Mendelssohn mansion for a house concert. At that moment in time Clara was 28 and Fanny was 41.

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<sup>7</sup> The first quote is in the words of Nancy Reich, in *Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), at 53. The second quote is from Clara's father Friedrich Wieck, note 23 in Reich, *Schumann*, at 31.

They did not know each other well at all, but their fates, their intimate relationships, and their passions overlapped in so many ways. Fanny's younger brother Felix had been hired as the *Kapellmeister* of the Leipzig Gewandhaus orchestra in 1834. Leipzig was Clara's birthplace and indeed her first performance at the Gewandhaus was in 1828, when she was nine. The important men in the two women's lives, Clara's husband Robert Schumann and Fanny's celebrated brother Felix admired each other's music.

One of Clara Schumann's many biographers was convinced that Clara was jealous of Fanny Hensel's circumstances when she visited the Mendelssohn mansion that day.<sup>8</sup> Looking back on their encounter from our vantage point in time, knowing their eventual fates, we may well ponder whether Fanny might have also been jealous of Clara. Before we can grasp what was at stake here, we must note how much the two women did have in common. Jealousy is, after all, often the most acute among those who have much in common, what we call "the narcissism of small differences."

Without a doubt, in their time they were the two most outstanding female musicians in the Germanic lands, if not across Europe altogether. This in itself was a significant achievement, since the German-speaking cities, states and empires had long been the home to outstanding music. Both Fanny and Clara had struggled against their fathers to marry for love, and both ultimately married that man and remained in love. Moreover, both husbands, Wilhelm Hensel and Robert Schumann, admired the talents of their musical wives and encouraged them to compose and perform. Both were mothers, Fanny the mother of one child, and Clara eventually the mother of eight. And Fanny and Clara were both composers, whose work survives and is still performed.

But their social origins and their public profiles as musicians differed greatly. Whereas money was always tight for the Schumanns, Fanny had been born to great wealth and high culture. Since her marriage in 1829, she and her husband lived in their own apartment inside her parents' Berlin villa at Leipzigerstrasse 3. The mansion's outdoor garden was large enough for an audience of 300 to attend their regular Sunday

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<sup>8</sup> See Eva Weissweiler, *Clara Schumann: Eine Biographie* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1991), 202-208.

concerts. Aside from these semi-public home recitals, Fanny almost never performed in public, and only at the end of her life did she publish any of her compositions. The contrast to Clara Schumann was dramatic, for even in her childbearing years she “concertized” on a strenuous schedule. After her break with her father over the match with Robert when she was 20, she also rented the halls and managed the publicity and financing of the concerts. Both she and Robert supplemented their income by offering private lessons and later, teaching positions at various music schools.

Thus, in spite of the superficial ease of her life, as a creative artist and a woman, Fanny might well have been jealous of Clara. Whereas Clara’s father Friedrich Wieck initiated and supervised her career since she was nine, Fanny’s father Abraham explicitly forbid her to perform in commercial concerts. At one point he wrote to her that “music will perhaps become a profession for him [Felix], while for you it will and should always be an ornament, never the foundation of your being and doing.”<sup>9</sup> In his view, shared by many at the time and since, a wife working outside the home was a telling marker of the border between the good bourgeois family and a lower class family. And when it came to motherhood, whereas Fanny suffered several miscarriages after the birth of her son Sebastian when she was 25, Clara was already mother to four children when they met in 1847. Then there was the issue of physical health. We who live in posterity know that Fanny would die of a stroke only 10 days after Clara’s visit, whereas Clara would continue performing until she was 72, and died at the ripe age of 74.

We historians always hope that the passage of time will allow us the wisdom of hindsight. But we are also mindful that sometimes our contemporary perspective distorts the past reality which we seek to capture. Contemporary historians of women in music have tended to pity Fanny Hensel and to idealize Clara Schumann. In this article I ponder the ambitions and the creativity of both women. Although the two women were chronological contemporaries, their biographies seem to dwell in two very different eras in the history of music. Whatever

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<sup>9</sup> For discussion and primary source information on the quote, see Sarah Rothenberg, “Thus Far but No Further: Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel’s Unfinished Journey,” *The Musical Quarterly*, Volume 77 Number 4 (Winter 1993), at 689. For background see Emily Bilski and Emily Braun, *Jewish Women and their Salons: The Power of Conversation* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 2005).

her musical brilliance, in functional terms Fanny was a salon dilettante, although certainly not an amateur. As for Clara, she was emphatically a public professional. If they had lived in different centuries their fates would be much easier to compare.

## II: The Charmed Life of the Mendelssohns

We who study the history of Jewish emancipation in nineteenth-century Europe have long been fascinated by the “speeded-up” assimilation of the descendants of the Court Jews in late eighteenth-century Berlin. Study of the Mendelssohn clan, particularly in the era when Fanny and Felix came of age, has a wider importance than simply antiquarian attraction to a rich and talented lineage. Their decisions about religion and about high culture achievement were certainly not typical at the time, but those choices would be repeated by wealthy and talented Jews in nineteenth-century Europe for decades into the future.

Fanny’s mother Lea Salomon was heir to the Itzig fortune, and her father Abraham invested those funds wisely in the chaotic era of the Napoleonic Wars. Lea and Abraham doted on their four children, who were woken at 5 AM for days full of tutors and lessons. Friends of the family included the best and brightest of Berlin’s intelligentsia, whose treatises and novels and explorations and operas and speeches inspired the emergence of a passionate new German nationalism. Their wealth and the talent of their children simultaneously furthered emancipation but also exposed them and those who followed in their footsteps to jealousy and hatred.<sup>10</sup> Watching them in the shadows was the hungry and ambitious Richard Wagner, who viciously attacked Felix Mendelssohn and another notable Jewish *Wunderkind*, Giacomo Meyerbeer, in his notorious 1850 screed called *Das Judentum in der Musik*. Closer to home in Berlin, Karl Zelter, the founder of the choir society called the *Singakademie*, mocked Felix in his letters to the supremely powerful Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in Weimar. When

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<sup>10</sup> See Jeffrey Sposato, *The Price of Assimilation: Felix Mendelssohn and the Nineteenth-Century Anti-Semitic Tradition* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2005); Ruth HaCohen, *The Music Libel Against the Jews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), and Michael Haas, *Forbidden Music: Jewish Composers Banned by the Nazis* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013).

Zelter's correspondence was published, the entire family was shocked to read how nasty his attacks were behind their backs.<sup>11</sup>

Lea and Abraham were convinced that becoming Lutheran was necessary to social integration and cultural success. First they had the children converted in 1816, and then they themselves were baptized on a trip to Frankfurt in 1822. In these years the family was living in an apartment inside the mansion of Lea's mother Bella Itzig Salomon. This was definitely a touchy situation, because Bella had cut off contact with her son Jacob Salomon Bartholdy because she was outraged about his own conversion. Time will not allow us to explore the emotional, religious and musical complexities of this inner-family dispute. For it was Bella who gave Felix the original text of Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion*, which he and Zelter performed to great acclaim at the *Singakademie* in 1829. A generous way to interpret their conversion strategy is that becoming Protestant was a way to deepen their inner identity as modern nationalist Prussian Germans. A less sympathetic interpretation is that they were "locked in a tortured relationship with their own racialized selves."<sup>12</sup>

That the Mendelssohns enjoyed and displayed music rather than literature in their salon is highly significant. Indeed, some historians of salons are now claiming that musical salons were the dominant type of Jewish high culture sociability in the Biedermeier years.<sup>13</sup> This was a shift from the focus of the Jewish salons of the old regime decades, when literature had been the central passion. Music was a universal language where a bad accent was simply not possible. We are still learning about the ubiquity of musicians of Jewish descent in this past. Benjamin Disraeli noted in his 1844 novel *Coningsby* that "there is not a company of singers, not an orchestra in a single capital, that is not crowded with our children under the feigned names which they adopt to conciliate the dark aversion which your posterity will some day

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<sup>11</sup> In English, see Lorraine Byrne Bodley, *Goethe and Zelter: Musical Dialogues* (Surrey, England: Ashgate Press, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> This is the formulation of James Loeffler in his review of the Haas book noted in note 4 above in *The New Republic* (July 4, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> See the article by Barbara Hahn in the collection edited by Beatrix Borchardt and Monika Schwarz-Danuser, eds., *Fanny Hensel geb. Mendelssohn Barholdy: Komponieren zwischen Geselligkeitsideal und romantischer Musikaesthetik* (Kassel: Furore Press, 2002).

disclaim with shame and disgust.”<sup>14</sup> In this way Fanny was lucky to have the family music salon as her institutional space, even if she moved beyond this space only belatedly and in a very tentative fashion.

Precisely because high culture converted families were re-socializing themselves to be distinctly less Jewish, yet elite Christian families still were reluctant to marry them, such families were often dependent on the family itself for sociability. The isolation of the nuclear family unit was only magnified when they chose to hire tutors to educate their children at home. Siblings in these emotionally claustrophobic families often doubled as best friends. And this hothouse emotional atmosphere definitely pertained to Fanny’s special relationship with Felix. She was four years his elder, but they both thought of themselves as twins, and shared musical tutors from a young age. After Felix left Berlin in 1834, they corresponded very frequently indeed. Some historians claim that their relationship was emotionally incestuous.<sup>15</sup> Felix very much admired her talents and her compositions but was ambivalent at best about her performing in public settings and publishing her own compositions. At one point he performed her compositions claiming they were his. Some contemporary and subsequent observers claim as evidence of their deep intimacy that Felix’s death from a stroke on November 4<sup>th</sup> in 1847 was precipitated by Fanny’s death six months previous.

The intimacy of Fanny and Felix can also be viewed as characteristic of the romantic epoch. Historians are convinced that sibling intimacy became so valued after the French Revolution because that political event represented the successful “dethronement of the fathers.”<sup>16</sup> Historians of women are alert to a special version of the sibling intimacy, namely the repressed talent of a sister of a creative accomplished man. Think of Nannerl Mozart and Dorothy Wordsworth or Virginia Woolf’s imagined Judith Shakespeare described in *A Room*

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<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Disraeli, *Coningsby, Or the New Generation* (First publication 1844; rpnt. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> See David Sabeau, “Fanny and Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy and the Question of Incest,” *Musical Quarterly* Volume 77 (1993), 709-717.

<sup>16</sup> These quotes are from Prophecy Coles, ed., *Sibling Relationships* (Abington, England: Routledge Press, 2006), 26-27.

of *One's Own*.<sup>17</sup>

### III: Music as Ornament

Fanny and Felix came of age when the performance of music was evolving rapidly. If we go back to the time of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, his goal, achieved on occasion, was to obtain a permanent position at a court. Indeed an important explanation for why music was a favored art in the Germanic lands is that there was no unified nation, and little principalities competed by way of music. A half century after Mozart's time, court positions for composers and performers were no longer the only way for musicians to support themselves. Increasingly, performers could make a living, although not a very large one, from public commercial concerts. Women faced particular challenges in this complex transition. Clara Schumann's successes as a self-supporting commercial composer and performer are thus all the more notable considering how new it was for music to thrive without court sponsorship. We must also remember that publishing musical scores in the name of the composer, scores which could be purchased or stolen or loaned, was not assumed to be necessary, even for the most significant composers.

Fanny's family began hosting a regular Sunday afternoon musical salon after they moved to their lavish mansion on the Leipzigstrasse in 1825. Hosting salons was definitely a family tradition. Her aunt Sara Levy, also born to the Itzig clan, had long sponsored musical evenings where she herself performed, mainly the instrumental music of Johann Sebastian Bach.<sup>18</sup> In addition to Lea and Abraham's ease with hosting salons they had a pragmatic reason to open their musical salon in the early 1820s. For as Felix's musical career was taken increasingly seriously by the family, Abraham and Lea were convinced that home

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<sup>17</sup> See Marion Wilson Kimble, "The 'Suppression' of Fanny Mendelssohn: Rethinking Feminist Biography," *Nineteenth-Century Music* Volume 36/2 (2002), 113-29.

<sup>18</sup> See Nancy Sinkhoff and Rebecca Cypess, *Sara Levy's World: Gender, Judaism and the Bach Tradition in Enlightenment Berlin* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2018). For a fictional account of Sara Levy and Fanny Hensel, see the excellent novel by Lauren Belfer, *And After the Fire: A Novel* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2017).

concerts would give Felix a chance to have his compositions performed by and for the city's musical elite. Indeed, the family paid great sums to hire the musicians. Admission was by invitation, and because of the paucity of public performance spaces at the time, the concerts attracted great attention and interest. Ultimately, as Felix's concert tours provided him with more than enough audience attention, the musical salons became a very important half-public musical space for Fanny's musical and organizational energies. Historians of music have considered her to have been "the first woman" to "assume the role of impresario."<sup>19</sup>

#### IV: Conclusions

In 1971, the historian of art Linda Nochlin published a pathbreaking article called "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?"<sup>20</sup> Her challenge has definitely been taken up over the past half century, and the history of women in music is a thriving field.<sup>21</sup> We might usefully separate the research tasks involved in this huge and ongoing project into two separate inquiries. On the one hand, we need to do the spadework of simply recovering the lost women composers and performers and those who aided or thwarted them. Then, on the basis of that work, we need to interpret the significance of the lost women and their lost artistic accomplishments, balancing out our new questions and our mastery of what was possible at the time. This second endeavor involves the tricky work of redefining what it means to have been a "great artist" and expanding the binary between obscurity and fame.

For the era of Hensel and Schumann, the spadework involves situating our two famous protagonists in the larger collective biography of their peers. Research is urgently needed to deepen our knowledge of

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<sup>19</sup> See Bilski and Braun, *Jewish Women*, at 46.

<sup>20</sup> The original publication of the article was in Vivian Gornick and Barbara Moran, eds., *Women in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness* (New York: Basic Books, 1971).

<sup>21</sup> See for instance Barbara Garvey Jackson, "Say You Can Deny Me:" *A Guide to Surviving Music by Women from the Sixteenth through the Eighteenth Centuries* (Fayetteville, Arkansas: University of Arkansas Press, 1994).



Marie Frederike Amalie, Princess of Saxony, who wrote 14 operas under the name of Anna Serena; Sophie Lebrun, whose sonatas and concertos were never published and are now believed to be lost; Helene Riese Liebmann, who performed a concert in Berlin when she was ten, in 1806; Emilie Zumsteeg; Delphine von Schauroth, an early romantic interest of Felix Mendelssohn; Josephine Koestlin Lang, whom Felix encouraged to compose; Amalia Joachim, wife of the famous violinist Joseph Joachim; Pauline Garcia-Viardot, actress, singer, pianist and painter, and Louise Reichardt, whose parents were both composers. Another important research task is to situate the lost women composers into a comparative history of women in the arts in modern times. We need to assemble large collective biographies of all of the women who worked in private or in public as composers, pianists, singers, actresses, and authors.

When it comes to the question of interpreting the significance of the extreme difference between the musical fates of our lead protagonists in this article, we see two major camps among those who try to explain Fanny's dilemma. Most observers today blame Abraham and or Felix as the cause of the repression. Others concentrate on "the times" as a way to explain her relegation to the semi-private sphere of the family salon. Those in this camp interpret Abraham and Felix as speaking a kind of contemporary truth which was essentially not specific to them as individuals. Were they correct that it was absolutely out of the question for a well-bred wealthy young woman to perform her own compositions in a commercial setting in that era?

In the process of deciding who was at fault for the limits on her musical career, we should never forget to attend to Fanny's own feelings and wants. The new editions of previously unpublished diaries and letters should aid in this work.<sup>22</sup> In her mind the glass may always have been half full rather than half empty. To have a talented and famous brother who provided elaborate and useful critiques *and* to have "a room of one's own" and to have a supportive husband *and* to have a musical salon with performers paid for by one's father may well have seemed quite a lot by the standards of her setting.

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<sup>22</sup> For a start, see Marcia Citron, *The Letters of Fanny Hensel to Felix Mendelssohn* (Hillsdale, New York: Pendragon Press, 1987).

Certainly, if we compare her life circumstances with that of the salon women of her mother's generation, we see huge improvements in her life. Although her parents humiliated her greatly by refusing to allow Wilhelm Hensel to write to Fanny directly from Rome during his five years there, ultimately Fanny played quite the powerful role in choosing her own mate, against her parents' continuing disapproval. Moreover, her integration of the private and the semi-public was much more serene because her parents had chosen the conversion for her, as opposed to the *sturm-und-drang* conversion of someone such as her father Abraham's sister Dorothea. If we measure her achievements in the frame of the salon rather than in the frame of the commercial musical arena of the Biedermeier epoch, we may be simultaneously more historical and more sympathetic to her very real plight.

Quite a few scholars have noted that the conversion may well have been involved in the ban on Fanny performing for hire. The notion is that to be a Christian Mendelssohn, or rather to try to be one, was itself quite impossible, as Abraham himself noted in his famous letter to Felix urging him to keep the Bartholdy in his family name. We can argue that the deviance of Jewishness would be the *only* deviance they could handle. To have a Catholic son-in-law was out of the question, as Wilhelm Hensel found out the hard way. To have a daughter receiving an income from purchased tickets may similarly have been out of the question. In other words, the conversion strategy may well have harmed Fanny's chances of a public career even as it enhanced her own marriage choices and the esteemed audience at her salons.