Felix Mendelssohn and Fanny Hensel: Comparing the Works of These Sibling Composers

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Comparing the works of these sibling composers

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The Mendelssohn family was one of the most prominent Jewish families in Europe throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The family's success began with the birth of Moses Mendelssohn in Dessau in 1729. Although born a pauper, Moses was able to educate himself through hard work and the instruction of educated men whom he befriended. He managed to learn German, which was unheard of at the time for Jews spoke only dialects of Hebrew. He also taught himself philosophy and history and was taught science and Latin in fifteen-minute lessons from a friend who was a doctor. By the end of his life, Moses had established himself as a champion of Judaism and one of the foremost philosophers of the period.

Through his marriage to Fromet Gugenheim, Moses had six children: Dorothea, Joseph, Abraham, Henrietta, Recha, and Nathan. Although he was never a wealthy man, Moses made certain that his daughters, as well as his sons, were well educated. The education of these women may have been a bit of a social detriment to them in the misogynous eighteenth century world, for they all suffered unhappy marriages with conservative, closed-minded men.

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2 Hensel vol. 1, 6.

Nathan, known as "Nathan the Wise" because of a nickname he bestowed upon himself in childhood, grew-up to hold various minor governmental positions in Berlin⁴. Joseph and Abraham eventually became bankers and owned Brothers Mendelssohn and Company in Hamburg and a bank on Spandauer Strasse in Berlin⁵.

Abraham Mendelssohn married Lea Salomon on 28 December 1804, and the pair settled in Hamburg⁶. Lea was a member of a wealthy German-turned-French family, and had built a strong friendship with Abraham's sister, Henrietta, when Henrietta spent some years working as a governess in Paris⁷. Abraham and Lea proved to be a happy pair, and they had four children.

Fanny Cacilia was born on 14 November 1805 at the house in Hamburg, and, as if fate had decreed that Fanny would be a pianist, Lea declared that her daughter had Bach'sche Fugenfinger (Bach-fugue fingers)⁸. Felix was born four years later on 3 February 1809, and Rebekka was born on 11 April 1811.

Napoleon's blockade of Hamburg from 1806 to 1813 proved to be quite profitable for the Mendelssohn family as the Brothers Mendelssohn and Company bank was involved in the smuggling of various commodities from southern Europe into the city. When the French governor discovered the family's clandestine activities in 1812, the Mendelssohns were forced to flee by night in disguise

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⁴ Hensel vol. 1, 33.
⁵ Tillard 34.
⁶ Tillard 34.
⁷ Hensel vol. 1, 71.
to Berlin where Paul was born on 30 October 1812. So it was that the Mendelssohn children matured and were educated in Berlin.

Fanny and Felix soon proved to be prodigies. Lea, a pianist, taught her children to play piano in five-minute lessons begun as soon as each child could talk, and she extended the length of these lessons when the children seemed willing. Because Fanny was older, and so had had an educational head-start on her brother, she felt it necessary to be an instructor to him. This teacher-student relationship remained between Fanny and Felix for the rest of their lives.

The Mendelssohns spent 1816 in Paris, living at the home of Pastor Stägemann, and, on 21 March of that year, he baptized the four children in the Lutheran faith. Their parents converted in 1822. These conversions took place with the utmost secrecy to avoid offending devout Jewish relatives, and the name Bartholdy was added to Mendelssohn only after the death of Lea’s mother as a sign of the family’s conversion.

While in Paris, Fanny and Felix received their first piano instruction outside of their home from Marie Bigot, a famous Viennese pianist. Upon returning to Berlin in 1817, they began lessons with pianist Ludwig Berger. Repertory centered on the

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9 Tillard 35.
10 Tillard 49.
11 Tillard 46.
12 Hensel 75.
13 Tillard 49.
works of Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Clementi, and Cramer. This solid classical background greatly influenced the compositions of Fanny and Felix later in life.

Both brother and sister were still largely educated at home. The musician Carl Friederich Zelter taught them composition, and the philosopher Carl Heyse taught them science. The violinist Henning taught Felix violin, and Professor Rösel taught the children to draw. They also studied Greek, Latin, French, Italian, and English, and they rose at five o’clock each morning to begin their studies.

In 1818, Zelter, director of the Berlin Singakademie, enrolled Felix and Fanny in this institution. This famous and respected choir gave concerts which were frequented by royalty and other fashionable persons, and, as its repertory was almost exclusively classical, their classical foundation was strengthened.

Fanny’s first composition was a song, "Ihr Töne schwingt euch fröhlich," written for her father’s birthday in 1819, and composition soon became a passion for the fourteen-year-old girl. Abraham was worried by his daughter’s unladylike enthusiasm for composition. Later that year, he wrote to her, encouraging her to pursue more feminine activities. He wrote, "Perhaps music will be [Felix’s] profession, whereas for you it

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14 Tillard 51.
15 Tillard 54.
16 Tillard 58.
17 Tillard 67.
can and must be but an ornament, and never the fundamental bass-
line of your existence..."¹⁸. Fanny was devastated, but she
continued composing for an audience of family and close friends.

The following year, Felix made his compositional debut with
a piano piece entitled Recitativo. This newfound passion for
composition became a means of further bonding between brother and
sister. A game of one composer beginning a piece and the other
finishing it was soon shared by the siblings, and these musical
conversations inspired the Lieder ohne Worte (songs without
words) which each composer later wrote¹⁹.

Felix’s debut met with great encouragement, and, later in
1821, he travelled with Zelter to Weimar to visit the poet
Goethe. Goethe adored the young Felix, and the poet became a
mentor to him, offering guidance and encouragement to Felix until
Goethe’s death in 1832. Felix’s trip to Weimar marks the end of
equality in education between him and Fanny.

1821 was an eventful year for Fanny, as well. The
Mendelssohn-Bartholdys sojourned in St. Petersburg, where the
young painter Wilhelm Hensel was exhibiting his art. Fanny and
Wilhelm met at this exhibition, and the two were quite taken with
one another. Wilhelm had not yet established himself in the
world of art, however, and this lack of social and financial
security made him an unsuitable mate for Fanny in the eyes of her
parents. After a stormy courtship involving many disputes
between the couple and Abraham and Lea, Wilhelm travelled to

¹⁸ Tillard 68.

¹⁹ Tillard 130.
Italy in order to rectify the situation by studying art and furthering his career. He remained in Italy for six years, during which he and Fanny were forbidden any contact. During these years, the pair knew of each other only through a correspondence kept between Lea and Wilhelm. He returned to Germany in 1828, and Fanny and Wilhelm were married in 1829. A year later, their only son, Sebastian, was born.

In 1829, Felix's role in the revival of Johann Sebastian Bach's music began when he conducted Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* at the Berlin Singakademie. Later that year, he composed his only two operas, *Die Hochzeit des Camacho* (The Marriage of Camacho) and *Die Heimkehr aus der Fremde* (The Home-coming from a Foreign Land)\(^{20}\). These operas never gained popularity, and this upset Felix very much. In order to raise his spirits, Goethe suggested that Felix travel the continent, which he then did. In 1830, he began a three-year trip which took him through England, Scotland, Italy, and France. In 1833, Felix accepted a post as a conductor in Düsseldorf and was again instrumental in the revival of classical music as he concentrated on the performance of Handel's oratorios. Two years later, he left Düsseldorf to become director of the Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig.

In 1835, Abraham died suddenly of a stroke\(^{21}\). His death came as a shock to the whole family, and the relationship between Felix and Fanny became closer than ever before as they comforted one another. Because Abraham was the main force discouraging

\(^{20}\) Gorrell 210.

\(^{21}\) Hensel vol. 1, 337.
Fanny from composing openly, she became much more prolific in her composition after his death, and Felix acted as her mentor. He advised her in her composition, and arranged the publishing of her works under his name and, later, her own.

At this time, I would like to discuss the differences and similarities between the writing styles of these siblings. I will focus on the lieder of the two as this form was important to both of them. Felix wrote over 110 songs for solo voice, and Fanny wrote over 250 lieder. Because the compositional styles of each composer developed very early in their careers, it is not inappropriate to compare lieder written in different years. True to his classical background, Felix wrote his songs for the sake of their melodies and gave little heed to the lyrics, while his sister wrote to give more meaning to the lyrics. This difference in styles becomes apparent in contrasting Felix’s 1836 Auf Flügeln des Gesanges (On Wings of Song) and Fanny’s 1823 Der Abendstern (The Evening Star). Felix repeats the lyrics of his song until he has exhausted his melody, while Fanny’s melody is made to fit the poetry it embellishes. [EXCERPTS FROM EACH SONG WILL BE SUNG AS EXAMPLES.]

Felix’s allegiance to melody and Fanny’s love of poetry are further exemplified when brother and sister each set Goethe’s poem Suleika to music. Felix again repeats the lyrics, while Fanny’s music is made to fit the poetry. Similarities between these two songs outweigh differences, however, possibly because Fanny was familiar with Felix’s 1836 Suleika before she wrote her

\[22\] Tillard 237.
own in 1843. The piano accompaniments of each song are decidedly similar, and are arpeggiated throughout the pieces. Also, the two chose to support some words with the same notes, as in the use of G to support the words West (West Wind) and kühl (cool). [EXAMPLES WILL BE SUNG.]

The styles in which each composer supports his or her lyrics with melody are very different, as well. Felix’s Neue Liebe (New Love) of 1834, is very syllabic in style, while Fanny sometimes embellishes lyrics with elaborate melismas, as in her 1824 Mailied (May Song). [EXAMPLES WILL BE SUNG.]

Felix wrote his successful oratorio Paulus in 1836. The following year was more eventful for him, however, as he met Cécile Jeanrenaud while travelling through the Rhine provinces. The two were married before the year was out, and their first child, Carl, was born in 1838. A daughter, Marie, was born the following year.

1839 was significant for Fanny, as well, for this was the year in which she, Wilhelm, and their son spent several weeks with Felix and his family in Leipzig before touring Italy\textsuperscript{23}. When the Hensels returned to Berlin in 1840, Fanny began to host the Sunday musicales for which her family became famous\textsuperscript{24}.

Another son, Paul, was born to Felix and Cécile in 1841, and Felix was born in 1842. Sadly, however, little Felix did not survive past infancy, and Lea died in the same year\textsuperscript{25}. 1843

\textsuperscript{23} Tillard 265.

\textsuperscript{24} Tillard 300.

\textsuperscript{25} Hensel vol. 2, 178.
proved to be a more pleasant year as the University of Leipzig conferred upon the composer an honorary doctorate degree in music, and the Leipzig Conservatory opened under Felix's direction. Two years later, his last child, Lili, was born, and, in 1846, Felix composed his oratorio *Elijah*.

On 14 May 1847, while rehearsing for a Sunday musicale at her house in Berlin, Fanny Hensel suffered a stroke and died a few hours later\(^\text{26}\). Grief-stricken, Felix began to compose his *String Quartet in F Minor* (op.80) as a requiem for Fanny. It was to be his last work\(^\text{27}\). On 3 November of the same year, he, too, died of a stroke. The two were buried near one another in Trinity Cemetery in Berlin. In 1848, the Mendelssohn Foundation, which distributed scholarships to young musicians, was established in Germany. The Mendelssohns were discredited as Jews during the Nazi regime, and the Foundation was disbanded in 1934. It was reestablished in 1963, however, and provides music scholarships to this day in the name of this musically gifted family\(^\text{28}\).

\(^{26}\) Hensel vol. 2, 334.


\(^{28}\) Stolba 498.
Works Cited


A portrait of Fanny Mendelssohn by her husband, Wilhelm Hensel, inscribed Berlin 1836. Private collection.
4. Lea Mendelssohn Bartholdy. Drawing by Wilhelm Hensel, also probably done in 1823. (Kupferstichkabinett)

3. Abraham Mendelssohn Bartholdy. Drawing by Wilhelm Hensel, 1823. (Kupferstichkabinett)
Auf Flügeln des Gesanges
On Wings of Song
by
Heinrich Heine

On wings of song, beloved, I carry you away,
Away toward the banks of the Ganges,
There I know the most beautiful place.
There lies a red-flowered garden in silent moonlight;
The lotus flowers await their dear little sister.

The violets bend and bow, and look excitedly at the stars,
The roses whisper scented fairytales to one another.
The fortunate, clever gazelle bounds and listens near-by;
And in the distance sound the waves of the holy river.

There will we lay down under the palm trees,
And drink love and rest and dream blessed dreams.

Translated by Kristen Nation

Neue Liebe
New Love
by
Heinrich Heine

In the moonlit forest I saw the young elf riders,
I heard their horns ring,
I heard their bells sound.

Their white horses wore golden antlers
And galloped quickly away;
Like wild swans they came through the lingering air.

Their Queen smiled at me, nodding as she rode by.
Is this my new love?
Or does it foretell death?

Translated by Kristen Nation
Suleika
by
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Oh, how much I envy you your wings, West Wind:
Because you can bring news to him
Which I miss in the separation!
The movement of your wings
Awakens silent longing in the breast,
Flowers, meadows, woods and hills
Stay his tears with your breath.

Yes, your gentle, soft blowing
Cools the wounded eye-lids;
Oh, I have come so far in sorrow,
I hope not to see it again!
Hurry, then, to my love,
Speak softly to his heart;
Yes, alone in its distress,
And spare him my pain.

Tell him, but tell him discreetly:
His love is my life.
His nearness to me gives us both joy.

Translated by Kristen Nation

Mailied
May Song
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

How gloriously nature shines on me!
How the sun gleams, how the fields laugh!
Blossoms burst from every twig,
A thousand voices from the branches,
And joy from every bosom.
O earth, sun, happiness, pleasure!

O love, love, as golden and beautiful
As morning clouds over the heights!
You bless the fresh field gloriously,
In a haze of blossom the whole world!
O how I love you, how your eyes gleam, how you love me!

Just as the lark loves singing and flying,
And morning flowers love the fragrant sky,
So I love you with warm heart,
You who give me youth and joy and courage
For new songs and dances.
May you be eternally happy, just as eternally you love me!

Translated by John Glenn Paton
Der Abendstern
The Evening Star
Janos Mailáth

I said goodbye to her.
In the deep blue sky love’s star shone golden.
She said: "Pure as the star that now appears
Is my love, which is yours forever.

When this star appears to you far from here,
Its light will bring my greeting of love.
Its rays will bring your kiss to me,
And we shall be together in love.

We are separated now by earth’s dark powers,
But in heaven there will be a place for our love.
It will, when this life’s dream has ended,
Blissfully unfold on that star."

Translated by John Glenn Paton

Abschiedslied der Zugvögel
Departure Song of the Birds
Hoffmann von Fallersleben

How beautiful were the woods and meadow!
How sad is the world now!
Gone is the beautiful summertime,
And after Joy comes Sorrow.

We wanted no discomfort,
We played under the leaves, glad and happy in the sunshine,
And we sang to the world from there.

We poor birds are very sad;
We no longer have a home,
We must now flee from here and move to a foreign land.

Translated by Kristen Nation
Herbstlied
Autumn Song
Carl Klingemann

Oh, how soon sounds the rain,
Spring changes into wintertime!
Oh, how soon grieving changes happiness into silence!
Soon are the last belltones tolled!
Soon are the last songs sung!
Soon is the last green gone!
Everything longs to move homeward.

Oh, how soon sounds the rain,
Joy changes into the longing of sorrow.
Do you await a dream, your true love?
Sweet as the spring and as quickly gone?
Some, only some, will never waiver.
It is the longing which is never forgotten.

Oh, how soon sounds the rain!
Oh, how soon grief changes happiness into silence!
Oh, how soon!

Translated by Kristen Nation

Gruß
Greeting
Joseph Freiherr von Eichendorff

Where I go and see field and woods and valley,
From hills to meadows, from where the mountain waits in the blue,
I greet you a thousand times!

In my garden, I find many beautiful and fine flowers
Many garlands do I wind, and I give thanks
And I greet you therein!

I can offer nothing to you;
You are too great and beautiful.
My gifts must soon pale,
Love without equal remains always in my heart.

Translated by Kristen Nation
Die Hochzeit des Camacho
The Marriage of Camacho
Carl Klingemann

Lucinda: So have you turned true to me again, beloved?
Vivaldo: My love, like my songs, is always true to you.
L: Students, soldiers are careless in nature.
V: Poets, soldiers are only loving.
    They sing; they wander; they struggle in their hearts
    When all the others only shop around and flirt.
L: And once they have married their lovers,
    They find in their small rooms the whole, wide world.
    So are you true to me again?
V: My love, like my songs, is always true to you!
L: Always true to me!

Translated by Kristen Nation