MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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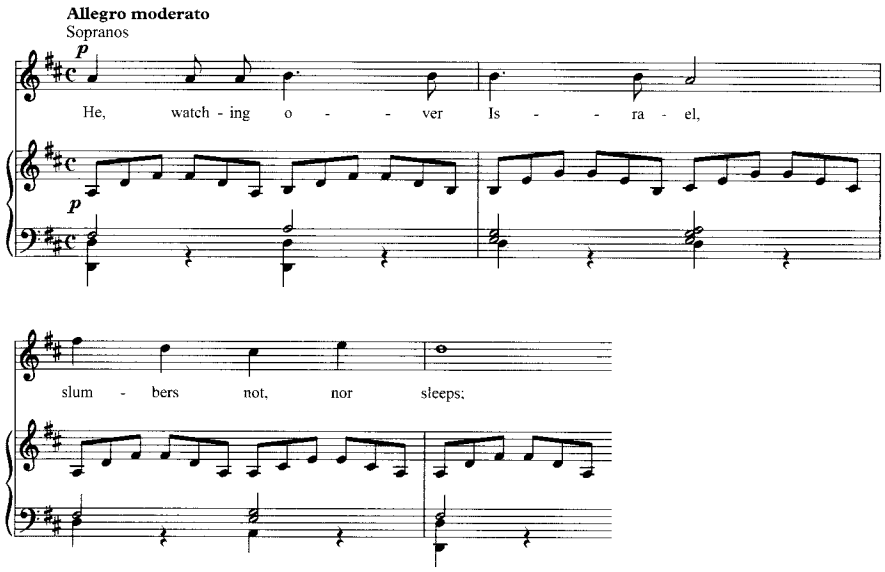
Example 5.2: *Mendelssohn,* Elijah, *No. 29, mm. 2–5*



an ostinato throughout the movement, even when the chorus rises to a powerful and more chromatic climax in the middle, singing of "grief" that God can console.

Paul and Elijah are sympathetic rather than heroic figures; they care deeply for their "flock." Mendelssohn was himself such a person, tending to and seeking to widen his audience of music lovers. Indeed, it may be that in his final years, with all his administrative duties, performing, as well as composing, he literally worked himself to death. He died just over a year after the premiere of *Elijah*, in November 1847, at the age of 38.

FANNY MENDELSSOHN HENSEL AND THE MUSICAL SALON

Felix Mendelssohn's older sister Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel (1805–1847) was one of the most accomplished female musicians of the nineteenth century. She received virtually the same musical education as her brother, including composition and theory lessons with Carl Friedrich Zelter, and was recognized by many as his equal in talent. She played piano and composed excellent solo pieces, chamber works, and lieder. But in adolescence the paths of Felix and Fanny diverged in ways that reflect the cultural and social patterns of the period, and also point up the challenges faced by women in pursuing professional careers at the time. Mendelssohn went on, as we have seen, to a busy and highly visible public life as a musician. That avenue was not open to—or even necessarily desired

by—Hensel and other women. She was restricted by her social status as part of the upper middle class, which rarely produced professional female musicians. (Clara Wieck Schumann, to whom we turn below, was from the working class and pursued her career largely out of financial need.)

In 1829 she married Wilhelm Hensel, a prominent painter, with whom she had a son. For the rest of her relatively short life—she died of a stroke just six months before Felix—she remained a devoted daughter, sister, wife, and mother. Yet Hensel had no less a desire than Mendelssohn to make music matter. Although surely frustrated in some respects by the limitations placed on her by her social situation, she remained very active in the musical life of Berlin. Hensel thrived in what has been called the "semiprivate life" characteristic of accomplished and cultivated upper-middle-class women of the era. As we saw earlier in this book, in the first decades of the nineteenth century the boundaries between "public" and "private" in the arts were not as clear as they are today, and it is in the context of this still little-understood world that we should view Hensel's achievements.

This semiprivate world of culture was one to which Hensel was in many ways destined. On her mother's side she was descended from one of the wealthiest Jewish families in Berlin, the Itzigs. Her great-grandfather Isaac Daniel Itzig had been banker to the royal court in the eighteenth century and had a palace opposite the king's. He was one of the first of a small number of Jews who were granted citizenship and whose descendants were allowed to inherit land and houses in the city. Most women of the Itzig family were involved with Berlin's cultural life as leaders of salons, and as patrons of libraries and the arts.

Hensel became involved in music through the establishment of a weekly musical gathering or salon in her home in the 1830s and 1840s. The salon, in which a private home was opened to musical events attended by both aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, was an important element of Berlin musical life. As a *salonière* Hensel was far more than a mere hostess. She planned the programs, and she conducted and performed many compositions, including her own and those of her brother. As with some of Mendelssohn's concerts, the performers were often a mix of amateurs and professionals. Like him—and like other members of the generation of the 1830s we discussed earlier—Hensel sought to introduce audiences to composers still largely unfamiliar, including Bach and Gluck. At the salon she also programmed portions of Handel's oratorios, Mozart's *La clemenza di Tito* (The Clemency of Titus), and Beethoven's *Fidelio*. Hensel's dynamic style of conducting was described by a contemporary:

> She seized upon the spirit of the composition and its innermost fibers, which then radiated out most forcefully into the souls of the singers and audience. A *sforzando* from her small finger affected us like an electric shock, transporting us much further than the wooden tapping of a baton on a music stand.

Felix Mendelssohn and their father Abraham encouraged Hensel in musical composition—Mendelssohn in fact had enormous admiration for her creative talent—but strongly advised against publication of her works. Early on, Hensel herself was decidedly ambivalent. In 1837 Mendelssohn wrote to his mother that he would be willing to step in and help only if his sister decided to pursue publication actively:

> But *persuade* her to publish something I cannot, for it is against my view and conviction. . . . I consider publication to be something serious . . . and believe that one should only do it if one wants to present oneself and continue one's whole life as an author. For this a series of works is required, one after the other; one or two alone is only an annoyance to the public, or it becomes a so-called vanity publication.

As paradoxical as it may seem, the stances of both siblings reveal their firm belief in the overall theme of this chapter, making music matter. For Mendelssohn, and at least initially for Hensel, the only purpose in publishing one's music should be to make a long-term and "serious" impact on musical life. Anything less would be a superficial and dilettantish gesture that could lower rather than elevate the status of music in society. Social status was also a factor in Hensel's case. It was considered by many unseemly or immodest for a woman of the high bourgeoisie to appear in print. (Many female novelists, like Chopin's mistress George Sand and the British writer George Eliot, published under male pseudonyms.)

Toward the end of her life Hensel began to shake off these taboos. Her husband encouraged her to publish her works, as did a young German musician and critic, Robert von Keudell. Yet during Hensel's lifetime only a small amount of her music appeared in print, comprising eleven opus numbers and some additional pieces. Hensel's qualities as a composer are evident in *Das Jahr* (The Year) of 1841, an ambitious cycle of twelve piano pieces (plus a postlude), each representing a month of the calendar. The manuscript was illustrated by her husband, and each piece is accompanied by a poem. The work did not appear in print until 1989. *Das Jahr* encompasses a wide range of pianistic styles and is tightly organized by a broad key plan and by recurring thematic elements, including chorale melodies. It can stand without apology alongside other great piano cycles of the period such as those of Schumann and Liszt (to be examined in the next chapter).

CLARA WIECK SCHUMANN AND THE KEYBOARD

A very different picture is presented by the life and career of the other most prominent female musician of the nineteenth century, Clara Wieck Schumann

Figure 5.3: *Clara Wieck Schumann at the piano in her later years*

(1819–1896; Fig. 5.3). She had none of the privileges or opportunities provided to the wealthy upper middle class. Her father, Friedrich Wieck, was a Leipzig piano teacher who was also in the business of selling, lending, and repairing pianos. Her mother was a pianist who taught and helped out with the family business. The couple divorced in 1824 and Friedrich retained custody of the five children.

Instead of the extended and highly educated family of Hensel, Wieck Schumann had her tyrannically efficient father, who taught her piano and supervised her musical training, which included instruction in violin, theory, orchestration, counterpoint, fugue, and composition. She was a child prodigy, pushed by her father as Mozart had been by his. She first played at the Leipzig Gewandhaus at age nine and went on to impress audiences over much of Europe. At about the same time, she got to know a young law student in Leipzig named Robert Schumann, nine years her senior, who began to study piano with her father in 1828. By 1830 he was living in Wieck's home. Thus began one of the most famous musical love affairs of all time. Despite Wieck's legal battle to prevent it, the marriage of Clara and Robert took place in 1840.

We have already seen that during the 1830s Schumann's crusade to make music matter took the form of a new kind of music criticism, which advocated the highest standards of performance and composition, and sought to bring to the public's attention neglected composers old and new. As she matured, Wieck Schumann came to share that sense of mission, which she would carry out through her concerts and later through her teaching.

In the Robert Schumann archives in Zwickau, Germany, are almost 1,300 programs of concerts in which Wieck Schumann participated during her

career. The 1830s was an era of the piano virtuoso, as we have seen, and of concerts given by composer-performers, many of whom tended to feature splashy works by themselves or others. Early in her career, before 1835, she followed this fashion, playing the virtuoso music of the day, including some of her own compositions. But as time went on—and as her association with Schumann deepened—that kind of music receded behind works of the Baroque, Classical, and Romantic masters, including J. S. Bach, Domenico Scarlatti, Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn, and, of course, Schumann. Between 1840 and 1850, her recital repertory included three works by Mozart, eight sonatas by Beethoven, seven works by Mendelssohn, and over a dozen pieces by Schumann. With this kind of programming, unusual for the period, Wieck Schumann pioneered changes in the piano recital. Like her husband, she was seeking to elevate the taste of her listeners, to wean them away from contemporary works of superficial appeal.

Wieck Schumann was to have a great impact on the shape and structure of piano recitals. Like Liszt, she used her prestige as a performer to change the habits and tastes of the public. Her goal was to focus solely on the music, with as few distractions as possible. As a young woman she became one of the first pianists to give solo piano concerts without any assisting artists, thus departing from the tradition of mixed programs with a variety of performers. She made her concerts shorter, and offered fewer compositions. She paid close attention to the composer's written text, and avoided any additions or embellishments.

Wieck Schumann's life and career, like Hensel's, point up the burdens that having a family could place on female musicians in the nineteenth century. At the time of her marriage, Clara Wieck was the better-known member of the couple: Robert Schumann was a relatively obscure composer, while she already had a wide reputation as a piano virtuoso. Between 1841 and 1854, the Schumanns had eight children. The family moved several times, essentially following the husband's career opportunities. Throughout, Wieck Schumann carried on performing, composing, and teaching, although the pressures of family limited her ability to tour widely. As a composer, she was not prolific, issuing just 23 opuses between 1831 and 1856. Schumann encouraged her in composition and made contacts with publishers on her behalf, but his composing took priority over her musical activities: she could only practice and compose during hours when he was not working. Wieck Schumann's earlier compositions for solo piano tended to be either virtuoso showpieces or shorter lyrical character pieces (like the *Soirées musicales*, or Musical Evenings, Opp. 5 and 6). After her marriage, she turned to larger-scale instrumental genres, the same ones in which she encouraged Schumann to compose. She wrote a Piano Sonata in G Minor, some preludes and fugues, and perhaps her greatest work, the Piano Trio in G Minor, Op. 17 (1846). After Schumann's death, she published no more works, but resumed

an active concert career, in part to support herself and her family, but also to continue her reform of concert life.

In 1878 Wieck Schumann began another phase in her quest to make music matter: she became professor of piano in Frankfurt and would go on to teach many important pianists. It is clear that her values as a teacher were the same as those she held as a performer. One of her pupils, Adelina de Lara, recalled:

> She taught us to play with truth, sincerity and love, to choose music we could love and reverence, not just music which merely displayed our technique in fast passages and allowed us to sentimentalize the slow ones. We were exhorted to be truthful to the composer's meaning, to emphasize every beauty in the composition and to see pictures as we played—"a real artist *must* have vision," she would say. If the music were to mean anything to our listeners, she told us, it must mean even more to us, and in giving pleasure to our hearers we had a great purpose to fulfil.

In 1884 a reviewer of a recital in London summarized Wieck Schumann's status and her impact as a performer upon the musical life of the nineteenth century:

> We think we are correct in saying that no pianist ever before retained so powerful a hold upon the public mind for so long a period. . . . Madame Schumann's character, intellect and training saved her from becoming a mere partisan: though for years she has been acknowledged unequal as an exponent of Schumann's music, yet one always hears of her wonderful interpretations of Bach, Mozart and Beethoven. By her modesty, prudence and talents she has gradually achieved a veritable triumph.

Here, near the end of the nineteenth century, in the figure of this diminutive, elderly woman at the keyboard, critics could still perceive the passion that inflamed her and other members of the generation of the 1830s many decades earlier. Through their many activities—including performance, criticism, teaching, concert organization, salons, and the composition of large-scale oratorios—these musicians worked tirelessly to share with the broader public their tastes, their standards, their values, and their aspirations. They wanted to make music matter.