
Serena Li
Dr. Luongo
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Research Paper on *Allegretto in C-sharp minor* by Fanny Hensel Mendelssohn

Fanny Hensel Mendelssohn (1805-1847), a German pianist and composer, is known as one of the most prolific female composers of the 19th century. However, as Felix Mendelssohn's elder sister, she was profoundly overshadowed by her brother, and composed most of her works for private performance.¹ Hensel's music style was initially shaped by the Romantic current in the 19th century and her musical conversations with her brother Felix. As a musician with an expressive and romantic nature, she used music as a way to express personal emotions; in particular her frustration as a female composer, which gradually led to a more independent music style during her later years. This paper aims to explore Hensel's piano piece *Allegretto in C-sharp minor* (op.4, no.2)² composed during the year 1846, which falls into the genre of *Lied ohne Worte* (Song Without Words), in relation to her experience and overall musical features in the 19th century.

Although the genre *Lied ohne Worte* is inseparably linked to her brother's name in history, most scholars today believe that Hensel first proposed this idea, and the siblings worked together to develop the genre. In December 1828, in her letter to Klingemann (German writer), Hensel mentioned about "song without words": "Felix has given me three presents, a 'song without words' for my album (he has lately written several beautiful ones) ...,"³ which is the first documented appearance of the name. In 1838, in her letter to

¹ Angela Mace Christian, "Hensel [née Mendelssohn (-Bartholdy)], Fanny Cäcilie," in Grove Music Online. 28 Nov. 2018.

² Hensel, Fanny. *Six Mélodies pour le Piano*, Livre I. Edited by Robert Lienau. Darmstadt. Schlesinger'sche Buch- und Musikhandlung, 1982. 11-12

³ Hensel, S. (Sebastian), Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, and Karl Klingemann. *The*

Felix, Hensel compared Felix's piano works with Liszt and other composers' technique of removing text from sung *Lieder* and refers it as "contrary to the experiment of adding a text to your (Felix's) instrumental *Lieder*;" she then wrote: "But shouldn't a person think a lot of himself...when he sees how the jokes that we, as mere children, contrived to pass the time have now been adopted by the great talents and used as fodder for the public?"⁴ From the quote, we may come to the conclusion that the genre *Lied obne Worte* was initially derived from a music-literary game that the siblings played together during the 1820s.⁵

Hensel and Felix seem to have shared an exceptionally intimate relationship, which could be seen as a reflection of their romantic nature and has also led to similarities between their music styles. In Hensel's early letters to her brother, she never intended to conceal her romantic feelings toward him. In fact, Hensel seemed to be viewing herself as "some Romantic heroine yearning for the unattainable..., spiritual union with her brother, whom she verily adores."⁶ Music was obviously an important way for them to build spiritual connections; the two siblings exchanged musical ideas and topics frequently and *Lied obne Worte* was one of the most significant outcomes. Their musical conversations even influenced each other's approach to forms. In *Allegretto in C-sharp minor*, Hensel adapted the ternary form (ABA), which have been well-established by Felix between 1832-1845. The piece opens with the first theme; subsequently introduces a second theme that presents a contrary idea in the middle, and finally returns to the first theme by the end.

Mendelssohn Family (1729-1847) from Letters and Journals. Translated by Karl Klingemann. 2d rev. ed. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1882. 163

⁴ Hensel, Fanny Mendelssohn, Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, and Marcia J. Citron. *The letters of Fanny Hensel to Felix Mendelssohn*. Stuyvesant, N.Y: Pendragon Press, 1987. 261

⁵ Todd, R. Larry. *Fanny Hensel: the Other Mendelssohn*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 123

⁶ Citron 1987, xxxii

The romantic current pioneered by Ludwig van Beethoven at the beginning of the 19th century is worth mentioning in the formation of Hensel and Felix's musical style. Particularly, in piano music, a short, one-movement piece that expresses a particular character (*character piece*) was favored by the Romanticism musicians⁷; two of them were the Mendelssohn siblings. The genre *Lied ohne Worte* falls into a type of character piece that imitates vocal music. As it is reflected through *Allegretto in C-sharp minor*, the melody in the soprano line is rather songlike—most of the notes are reached by step with occasional leaps, which gives it a flowing motion and makes it capable of inserting poetic lines. Similarly, the majority of piano pieces by Felix (some known as “gondola song”) also demonstrate a lyrical sense, with gentle arpeggiations on the soprano line.

The integration of the Romantic values and Hensel's own expressive nature evokes a high degree of individualism and subjective meaning in her music. Specifically, she used music as a way to express her personal feelings and stories. One could hear in her works, her frustration and struggle as a woman composer and her attempt to resist social values. Despite her talent and comprehensive music education, Hensel always knew that she cannot become a professional musician because she is a woman. This message was inculcated by her father in 1820: “Music will perhaps become his [Felix's] profession, while for you it can and must be an ornament, never the root of your being and doing...”⁸ Having to witness the success of her brother, Hensel described herself as having lack of self-confidence, especially when facing her father and brothers. She did not publish any of her works under her own name until 1846,

⁷ Seaton, Douglass. *Ideas and Styles in the Western Musical Tradition*. Fourth edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 354

⁸ Citron 1987, 40

one year before her death, which was the same year she composed *Allegretto in C-sharp minor*. During that year, Hensel seemed to have gained the strength to strive for freedom, as she wrote in her diary in May 1846: “I feel as if newly born.”⁹ We can contribute her rebellion to the education she has received as a child, which “had been liberal and far-reaching, awakening ambitions and curiosities that could then not be satisfied within traditional.”¹⁰ Eventually in July, in her letter to Felix, she directly states that she has decided to publish, despite his (and their father’s) unwillingness to support.¹¹ The *Allegretto in C-sharp minor* reflects Hensel’s attempt to fight against the expectations from the society. The tonal transition from minor to major at the beginning of the second theme (13th bar) presents a contrary idea; one could perceive it as Hensel’s attempt to strive for autonomy and freedom. As it returns to the first theme, the dynamic is marked as *forte*, which is contrary to the *piano* sign at the beginning of the piece. One could perceive this contrary as an implication of her internal conflict between her responsibilities as a woman and her ambition as a musician.

During her final years, Hensel became a more mature composer and developed an independent style that differentiates her from her brother; specifically, as what Dr. R. Larry Todd describes as the application of “dark harmonic colorations and multifarious key relationships”.¹² In *Allegretto in C-sharp minor*, the first transition occurs as early as in the fourth chord: Hensel applies an A-sharp and an F-double sharp note, which are clearly out of key. Unlike Felix, who preferred to keep the A section centered on the tonic,¹³ Hensel applied

⁹ Todd 2010, 334

¹⁰ Rothenberg, Sarah. “‘Thus Far, but No Farther’: Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel’s Unfinished Journey.” *The Musical Quarterly* 77, no. 4 (1993): 689–708. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/742353>. 691

¹¹ Citron 1987, 349-50

¹² Todd 2010, 317

¹³ Todd 2010, 328

a more progressive and expressive style; she included more frequent exchanges between major and minor to create tonal tensions, which could be seen as Hensel's intention to express her strong emotions.

Like Fanny Hensel, female composers throughout history suffer from conflict within their identities. Indeed, their journey toward self-definition and their attempt to break social norms and strive for independence is something that inspires them and makes their works unique. Through their music, one could always perceive a sense of power that they felt they lacked, and the emotions that were too abundant to put into words.

Recording Choice: <https://forum.pianoworld.com/ubbthreads.php/topics/2742927/fanny-mendelssohn-hensel-melody-in-c-minor-op-4-no-2.html>

Overall, this recording presents a song-like quality. The two hands harmoniously correspond with each other with a little emphasis on the soprano line, which makes it stand out more and gives it a vocal quality. The crescendos within the B section reflect her struggles to fight against society, and the dynamic contrast between the beginning and the end demonstrates her internal conflict as a female composer.

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