Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel: Her Contributions to Nineteenth-Century Musical Life
(1981)

Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel (1805-1847) was a composer, performer, and conductor of unusual talents in nineteenth-century Prussia. Her contributions to musical history have been largely ignored. The reasons have to do with restrictions placed on her by her family and with the complications of the musico-political repression of the Jewish family’s papers, to which access is still restricted.

This paper documents Fanny Hensel’s contributions to nineteenth-century musical life primarily as a composer. In assessing her compositional skills, the emphasis is on her published Lieder for solo voice and piano. This paper analyzes additionally her Four Songs for piano, Op. 2, and the piano Trio, Op. 11. Although these works are a small proportion of the five hundred compositions she left in manuscript, they do show consistent stylistic traits.

Since Fanny Hensel was denied a professional career as a composer because she was a woman, this paper describes: (1) nineteenth-century attitudes toward women, (2) female relatives who served as models for Hensel, and (3) the musical heritage passed down through her mother’s family. This study examines Hensel’s choice of poetry and treatment of the poems in her songs. The relationship between the voice and piano is examined with reference to contemporary developments in Lieder composition. A primary focus of the discussion is her use of harmony to capture the mood of the poetry and to illustrate the text. In the discussion of the Trio and piano pieces, the focus is on form.

The paper traces the influence Fanny Hensel had as a pianist and conductor through her Sonntagsmusiken and private performances. The published letters and diaries are reexamined for facts about her influence on Gounod, the importance of her performances of Bach, Beethoven, and Mendelssohn to the nineteenth-century popularity of these composers, and her feelings on the restrictions placed on her as a woman.

The appendixes provide a chronology of her life and two arrangements of the sources for her works based on Rudolph Elvers’ articles; one follows a chronological sequence, and the other, limited to vocal compositions, is arranged by poet.