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21M.410 – Vocal Repertoire and Performance

Midterm Paper – *The Life of Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel*

The life of Fanny Cäcilie Mendelssohn Hensel was a short one, spanning just forty-two years. But they were forty-two years steeped in passionate, vibrant and awe-inspiring musical creativity that manifested itself in her performances and compositions, which number among the hundreds. She was born just after the turn of the nineteenth century and during the evolution of the romantic era in music, to a wealthy family of the Jewish intelligentsia in Hamburg, Germany, on November 14th, 1805. Granddaughter of the eminent philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn and daughter of successful, educated and accomplished parents, Abraham and Lea Mendelssohn, Hensel was born into a family of intellectuals whose focus on learning brought about an early beginning to her musical education. She was first taught piano by her mother and as her incredible talent was discovered, she was sent to study under the tutelage of some of the most reputed instructors of the time, including Marie Bigot de Morogues, Ludwig Berger and Carl Friedrich Zelter. At the age of thirteen, she memorized and performed twenty-four Bach preludes from the “Well-Tempered Clavier”, and at nineteen, had composed thirty-two fugues. Her fellow musical scholar and prodigy was none other than her younger brother, the revered romantic composer, Felix Mendelssohn, with whom she shared a strong bond. The two studied under the same teachers, both displaying unmistakable musical genius which was nurtured carefully and responsibly by their parents.

Through their insight and efforts, the family’s circle of friends became quite familiar and enamored with the music produced by Hensel and her brother through the well-known “Sonntagmusiken” events, which were private weekly concerts held at the family mansion. During her teenage years, Hensel had the opportunity every Sunday to showcase her talent for the piano and for composition, before an audience of Hamburg’s elite. Amongst her repertoire were a great number of pieces by J. S.

Bach and Beethoven as well as those of her Felix her brother, although the majority was her own. Abraham Mendelssohn certainly recognized the value of the family salons and enlisted several prominent vocalists and instrumentalists from the Hofkapelle to perform in them alongside his children. It is important to note, however, that these salons represented the vast majority of performance opportunities for Fanny Hensel, for whom they must have been bittersweet. The only public performance she ever gave was at a charity event in 1838, for which she played her brother's Piano Concerto No. 1.

The reason for this was rooted in the prevailing expectations of a woman in her circumstances. Even before her father had instituted "Sonntagmusiken", he had revealed his sentiments regarding her future. She was never intended to have a career in music. Rather, she was to be a loyal wife and mother, whose artistic and intellectual ambitions would come a distant second to her husband and family. Abraham Mendelssohn frowned upon the notion of having his daughter's works published although he never ignored her undeniable musical genius. There exists a quote from a piece of correspondence in which he conveyed to her this view. In it he says, "Music will perhaps become his (Felix's) profession, but for you, it can and must only be an ornament."

Fanny Hensel's response to this was admirable to say the least. Rather than being deterred by the wishes of her parents, but without flouting her father's authority, she continued to compose, to study and to perform, even though her scope was limited to the few concert-goers and family friends who attended the Mendelssohn salons. Her brother was her intimate companion, and provided support and inspiration during their studies. However, she had to contend with an extended period of separation from him during his trip to England with his father, during which he began to showcase his talents to prominent figures in music in Europe. Due to the absence of the two, the family salons were discontinued. At this time however, Fanny Hensel also embarked on a different course in life, and married the reputable painter, Wilhelm Hensel. She maintained an avid correspondence with her brother,

whom she missed dearly during his travels, but also cultivated a notably happy marriage with her husband. Their union came at the end of a nine-year long courtship and was seemingly a perfect match, since Wilhelm proved to be a great supporter of his wife's musical abilities and later pushed for her to begin actively publishing her works. Between 1840 and 1846, only six of her songs had been published, but under Felix Mendelssohn's name, in a collection of twenty-four songs. According to one particular anecdote, one of these songs was the favourite of Queen Victoria of England, who in a private audience with Felix proclaimed it to be so, and after which he informed her that it was not his composition, but his sister's.

This song was entitled "Italien" and is assumed to be the product of a year-long and very inspirational trip for Fanny which she spent with the family in Italy in 1839/1840. It was during this time that she began to perform for wider circles of people and became acquainted with the young Charles Gounod who remarked that she played with "the grace and simplicity of those who make music because they love it". Over the following years she also began a friendship with Clara Schumann, who eventually performed in one of the Mendelssohn salons which Fanny Hensel had reinstated with increased fervour in 1831, two years after her marriage. From then on, the Sunday concerts were graced with the presence and performances of Berlin's best vocalists and instrumentalists, as well as Fanny's own choir of twenty singers, whom she conducted in works of Bach, Beethoven, Weber and Felix Mendelssohn as well as her own works. These included lieder, works for piano solo, chorus and orchestra.

Some examples of her compositions include the setting of Hero and Leander for soprano and piano or orchestra, her piano trio, her orchestral overture which was written in 1830, and larger works for soloists, chorus and orchestra such as the Hiob cantatas, Lobgesang, and Musik für die Toten der Cholera-Epidemie (Oratorium Nach Bildern Der Bibel). One of the most significant characteristics of a large portion of her work would be that of great number of piano pieces which she wrote in the style of the Lied. She entitled several of these "Song without words" which truly display her engaging melodic genius. This feature is witnessed also in various

settings of poetic texts, and demonstrates the beautiful romantic qualities of her music.

During her last year, Fanny Hensel began actively publishing some of her works with the solid support and encouragement of her husband. It is unknown whether her brother endorsed this decision, and there are conflicting accounts of his sentiments. Some report that he was merely concerned that she may not be able to maintain a continuous flow of new compositions, and might be viewed as a failure by the public, but that she eventually received his blessing. Others state he opposed it until the end. During that year, she published Opus 1-7, which included lieder, a cappella, songs and piano pieces. Before any more of her extensive collection could be published, on May 14th, 1847, she passed away from a stroke during a rehearsal for one of the “Sonntagsmusiken” concerts she had continued for sixteen years and which had given her an outlet for her immense talent.

Many persons are of the opinion that her death was premature, but this can certainly be said of many other widely admired and talented composers of the last few centuries. However, it is my belief that Hensel produced music fraught with beauty and intimacy, and quite a large amount thereof, but passed away only after she had achieved a great deal, and carried out her purpose in life. It might be said that she produced the same quantity and quality of any other composer of comparable ability who lived twice as long. Not only do her works place her amongst the most revered female composers in history, but also rank among those of the greatest composers of both genders in the entire history of classical music. It is fortunate that, in the face of society's expectations of women, her parents educated her and gave her the tools to produce the art that she did. It is admirable that she proceeded to defy the social norm thereafter, and a blessing that at least some of her brilliant work remained for the world to appreciate and to revere as that of a great woman composer.

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