

INTRODUCTION

The String Quartet in E flat major (H-U277, 1834) is a pivotal work in the musical output of Fanny Hensel, née Mendelssohn (1805–47). One of her most ambitious and individual compositions, the quartet was written at a turning point in Hensel's life, in which she was not only grappling with her own creative voice and future musical direction but coming to terms with her identity as a married woman and the role society and her family expected of her. The quartet's origins go back to an unfinished piano sonata written in the autumn of 1829, a momentous year for Hensel, in which the then-twenty-three-year-old's idolised younger brother and closest musical confidant, Felix Mendelssohn (1809–47), had left the family home in Berlin for several years of travel, and she married her long-standing fiancé Wilhelm Hensel, with whom she would live for the remaining eighteen years of her life. 'This year will mark an important chapter in our family life', she writes dramatically in the first entry of a new diary, started on 4 January that year: 'Felix, our soul, is leaving; the beginning of the second part of my life stands before me . . . everything stirs and moves around us.'¹ Just as 1829 formed a crossroads in her private life, so too the quartet marks a crossroads in her creative endeavours. Already an experienced composer, Hensel's *métier* had nevertheless been in the small-scale genres of the lied and piano piece. Composing a string quartet was a major statement of ambition at this time, and in refashioning material into a quartet in 1834, Hensel was staking out a path in an elite genre associated with the highest and most exacting compositional standards. It was also one that – unlike the piano miniature or song – was almost exclusively the domain of male composers. As commentators have noted, this is one of the first string quartets ever written by a woman, and in taking this step Hensel was venturing into more or less unprecedented territory.²

Alongside her later D minor Piano Trio (1847) and the two mature piano sonatas – the ‘Easter’ Sonata (H-U235, 1828) and G minor Sonata (H-U395, 1843) – the E flat Quartet is the most significant composition Hensel would complete in a canonic classical instrumental genre. Unlike the piano trio, which was published posthumously in 1850 as Hensel’s Op. 11, the quartet did not see the light of day until the 1980s. Its own reception history is thus short and confined to the modern age. Yet rather than presenting an awkward challenge to scholarly inquiry, this dearth of critical reception offers the present-day scholar and listener the freedom to concentrate on the actual qualities of the music, unencumbered by long-standing issues of reception that have accompanied many women composers from an earlier period. And equally, the quartet itself provides an intriguing and virtually unparalleled instance of practical reception history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*, to give the useful German term). The quartet documents Hensel’s interaction with the music of her brother – music for both of them formed an intimate means of correspondence – and the two siblings’ mutual creative responses to the recent late works of Beethoven, at this time barely known outside small circles of enthusiasts.³ Rather than showing a composer awed by the ‘shadow of Beethoven’ (as later, post-1850 polemics would suggest), the quartet instead reveals a highly assured technique and an unselfconscious creative engagement with the most modern compositional developments of the time, which Hensel takes up and transforms into something quite her own. The quartet allows us a glimpse into a private realm of compositional reception that has remained hidden for over a century and a half.

Finally, this quartet was also the subject of an important critical exchange with her younger brother carried out by correspondence over the winter of 1834–5 that is not only highly revealing as to their respective musical and aesthetic proclivities, but arguably affected – for better or for worse – the direction of Hensel’s subsequent compositional development. Felix Mendelssohn’s criticism of his elder sister’s work constitutes one of the most extensive testimonies on matters of form and aesthetics from this usually reticent musical commentator and highlights important

features of Hensel's music just as it reveals the strong differences that were emerging between the two siblings. Regrettably, Mendelssohn may have been partly responsible for putting his sister off from pursuing further essays in large-scale instrumental forms in the following years and discouraging the experimental paths opened up by the quartet. Yet Hensel ultimately came to terms with the criticism, and her later development as a composer negotiated these conflicting tendencies in a way that still remains very much her own.

Hensel and Current Research

Since the original series of Cambridge Music Handbooks (1991–2001), the study of the music of women composers has advanced dramatically. None of the first thirty-eight volumes was devoted to a work by a female composer. Now two decades on, with the relaunch of the series, there is welcome opportunity to redress this situation by examining a major work from a figure who not only counts as one of the most important women composers of the nineteenth century but indeed as one of the most talented composers of any era. In doing so, I would contend, we have also reached a stage within the developing scholarly discourse on the music of women composers that goes well beyond either apologetics or condemnation of those who hindered their development, in which we are free to examine the qualities of the music in detail and how it responded to and stands side by-side with the most original works of the time.⁴

Detailed study of Hensel's music is still comparatively thin on the ground, though it has unquestionably picked up in recent years. In a pioneering article on Hensel's songs from 2011, Stephen Rodgers observed that 'the bulk of research on Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel to date has focused primarily on either the historical or editorial; analysis of her music, however, is rare'.⁵ To be fair, there had been a modest number of analytical accounts of Hensel's music appearing in German scholarship since the late 1990s, but the observation was undoubtedly true of English-language writing at the time.⁶ In the decade since then, substantial strides have been made towards deepening our understanding of

Hensel's music, most notably by Rodgers himself in several important articles and a 2021 edited volume on her songs.⁷ However, these accounts are almost entirely confined to Hensel's songs and piano music, which, while central to her musical activities, are nevertheless only part of her remarkable output. More still has to be done in order to appreciate, in Rodgers's words, 'the full scope of Hensel's achievement as a composer'.⁸

Why the String Quartet then? There are, naturally, other pieces that might equally have been chosen for a first Cambridge Music Handbook on Hensel's music. The D minor Piano Trio is the quartet's main rival in the realm of chamber music, and, having been published soon after Hensel's death, has received more extensive exposure; to this day it is probably programmed more regularly. Yet the earlier quartet is in many ways an even more individual work, fascinating for what it shows us about Hensel's own compositional development at a crucial formative period in her life. Her piano cycle *Das Jahr* (1841), meanwhile, would also have a strong claim to constituting Hensel's masterpiece and has plenty of advocates: Hensel's biographer, R. Larry Todd, for instance, holds it to be 'arguably her most impressive accomplishment'.⁹ On the other hand, *Das Jahr* has already received ample attention in a number of articles, whereas the quartet has hardly been considered in English-language scholarship.¹⁰ Moreover, the quartet is also noteworthy in showing a woman composing in a genre then held to be the preserve of male artists; the more intimate, 'feminine' sphere of short piano pieces and song was considered suitable for women composers, rather than chamber music for strings. Indeed, this highlights one of the dilemmas encountered making any selection from Hensel's compositional oeuvre, one that is worth briefly addressing here before embarking upon the remainder of the study.

Genre, Gender, and the Question of Choice

Recent decades have seen keen interest in the relationship between musical genres and gender, so much so that it is more or less a truism today that certain genres are marked with

respect to gender: large-scale, public works or those in learned genres such as the symphony or string quartet are strongly associated with the masculine sphere, in contrast to the feminine connotations of domestic genres such as the lied or piano miniature.¹¹ A series of handbooks dedicated to major works or ‘masterpieces’, however, almost invariably gravitates towards large-scale, monumental works at the expense of smaller pieces, even if the latter make up a more significant part of a given composer’s oeuvre. A string quartet, concerto, or symphony makes a more obvious focal point for a study than a set of songs or small-scale piano pieces (at a stretch, a song cycle might be included). There is, in other words, a likely predisposition to privilege genres perceived as ‘masculine’ over ‘feminine’ ones in selecting a suitable magnum opus. This tension is merely exacerbated when it comes to the output of a female composer such as Hensel, most of whose output, published and unpublished, consists of songs and piano pieces. The implication here is that if one selects a large-scale instrumental work by a woman, one is liable to reinscribe the (purportedly masculinist) ‘great works’ model that implicitly devalues smaller creations as insignificant; yet in focussing on small-scale works in intimate genres often typecast as feminine, one nevertheless restricts a female composer to gendered expectations.

While it is necessary to acknowledge this concern, we should nevertheless not overstate the issue: the problem is not insurmountable, in that both smaller and larger genres can and ideally should be examined. In this sense, the present account of the String Quartet is intended to complement the already quite extensive recent analytical coverage given to Hensel’s songs and piano music. Neither should such binaries be exaggerated: even if genres such as the symphony or string quartet were less accessible for a woman composing at this historical juncture, one need not perpetuate the reductive assumption that there is something inherently or necessarily masculine about them. While Hensel may have taken on some of this ideology, the social constraints she experienced as a woman at that time should not be conflated with essential traits of either gender or genre. And chamber music,

above all, constitutes a particularly fertile repertory for negotiating these questions.

As recent work has shown, the neat separation between a male public sphere and female private sphere in the nineteenth century breaks down when it comes to chamber music, which, as Marie Sumner Lott argues, ‘complicates the convenient binaries used by modern scholars to understand the Romantic era’. Though largely private or semi-private, in this period ‘string chamber music was largely a male-exclusive activity’, she holds.¹² Where Hensel is especially interesting in this respect is in how she engaged with this ‘masculine’ discursive practice of the string quartet from within her ‘feminine’, domestic sphere of music-making. In this context, it is worth recalling a point made earlier by Michael Steinberg, who has argued that the musical activities of the Mendelssohn household formed an intriguing conjunction between male and female worlds. Speaking of Hensel’s celebrated brother, he claims:

Within his professional circles and his family, Felix was a fairly typical male . . . Yet the musical culture he absorbed from his family was transmitted through the work and talent of important women, especially his great-aunt, Sara Levy, as well as his sister [Fanny Hensel]. [Thus] when Felix exercised his male priority to take his music into the public sphere – an option denied Fanny – he translated a domestic, and in a specific sense a female, discourse into a public and male one.

Fanny, on the other hand, remained within the intimate family sphere; but in works like the String Quartet we might conversely witness her translating a male discourse into her female environment. All this lends support to Steinberg’s assertion that ‘music in the [Mendelssohn] family sphere meant the promise of cultural dialogue’ – a dialogue that is also, by implication, between gendered spheres of activity, musical genre, and social mores.¹³

These questions of gender and genre will run throughout the following account; but we should also remember that both art and history are rarely simple enough to be reduced to binary oppositions, and have an ability to confound, complicate, and renegotiate typecasting. Of few other figures is this more true than of Fanny Hensel.

Notes

1. Fanny Hensel, diary entry for 4 January 1829, in *Fanny Hensel: Tagebücher*, ed. Hans-Günter Klein and Rudolf Elvers (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 2002), p. 1.
2. Maddelena Laura Lombardini Sirmen, a Venetian pupil of Tartini, had published six quartets back in 1769; it seems unlikely Hensel would have known of them, however.
3. This idea of music as private correspondence is developed by Cornelia Bartsch in *Fanny Hensel, geb. Mendelssohn: Musik als Korrespondenz* (Kassel: Furore 2007).
4. An early impulse in this direction within Hensel studies was given by Marian Wilson Kimber, 'The "Suppression" of Fanny Mendelssohn: Rethinking Feminist Biography', *19th-Century Music*, 26/2 (2002), 113–29.
5. Stephen Rodgers, 'Fanny Hensel's Lied Aesthetic', *Journal of Musicological Research*, 30 (2011), 175–201 at p. 175. Honourable exceptions to this include earlier accounts of Hensel's piano music by Camilla Cai, Susan Wollenberg, and Marian Wilson Kimber.
6. See, for instance, chapters in Martina Helmig (ed.), *Fanny Hensel, geb. Mendelssohn Bartholdy: Das Werk* (Munich: edition text+kritik, 1997) and Beatrix Borchard and Monika Schwarz-Danuser (eds.), *Fanny Hensel geb. Mendelssohn Bartholdy: Komponieren zwischen Gesellschaftsideal und romantischer Musikästhetik* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1999).
7. Stephen Rodgers (ed.), *The Songs of Fanny Hensel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021). See also Yonatan Malin, 'Hensel: Lyrical Expansions, Elisions, and Rhythmic Flow', in *Songs in Motion: Rhythm and Meter in the German Lied* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 69–94; Samuel Ng, 'Rotation as Metaphor: Fanny Hensel's Formal and Tonal Logic Reconsidered', *Indiana Theory Review*, 29/2 (2011), 31–70; Rodgers, 'Thinking (and Singing) in Threes: Triple Hypermeter and the Songs of Fanny Hensel', *Music Theory Online*, 17/1 (2011), and 'Fanny Hensel's Schematic Fantasies: or, The Art of Beginning', in Laurel Parsons and Brenda Ravenscroft (eds.), *Analytical Essays on Music by Women Composers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 151–74; and Stephen Rodgers and Tyler Osborne, 'Prolongational Closure in the Lieder of Fanny Hensel', *Music Theory Online*, 26/3 (2020).
8. Stephen Rodgers, 'Introduction', *The Songs of Fanny Hensel*, p. 2.
9. R. Larry Todd, *Fanny Hensel: The Other Mendelssohn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 275.
10. On *Das Jahr*, see especially the fine account by Marian Wilson Kimber, 'Fanny Hensel's Seasons of Life: Poetic Epigrams, Vignettes, and

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Meaning in *Das Jahr*', *Journal of Musicological Research*, 27 (2008), 359–95, as well as John E. Toews, 'Memory and Gender in the Remaking of Fanny Mendelssohn's Musical Identity: The Chorale in *Das Jahr*', *Musical Quarterly*, 77 (1993), 727–48, Sarah Rothenberg, "'Thus Far, but No Farther": Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel's Unfinished Journey', *Musical Quarterly*, 77 (1993), 689–708, and R. Larry Todd, 'Issues of Stylistic Identity in Fanny Hensel's *Das Jahr* (1841)', in *Mendelssohn Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 249–60, as well as accounts in German by Annette Nubbemeyer, 'Italienerinnerungen im Klavieroeuvre Fanny Hensels: Das verschwiegene Programm im Klavierzyklus "Das Jahr"', in Helmig (ed.), *Fanny Hensel*, pp. 68–80, and Christian Thorau, 'Das spielende Bild des Jahres: Fanny Hensels Klavierzyklus *Das Jahr*', in Borchard and Schwarz-Danuser (eds.), *Fanny Hensel*, pp. 73–89.

The two most useful English-language accounts of the String Quartet are found in larger surveys of Hensel's life and work: Todd's *Fanny Hensel*, pp. 179–86, and Angela R. Mace, 'Fanny Hensel, Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, and the Formation of the Mendelssohnian Style', PhD diss., Duke University, 2013, pp. 193–213. A brief but perceptive outline is given in Victoria Sirota's pioneering doctoral thesis 'The Life and Works of Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel', DMA diss., Boston University, 1981, pp. 239–44. Analyses of the quartet's finale and first movements are also offered by Frances Shi Hui Lee, 'Unconventional: Sonata-Form Manipulations in the Multi-Movement Works of Fanny Hensel', DMA diss., Rice University, 2020, pp. 71–90, and Catrina S. Kim, 'Formal Excess in the Opening Movement of Fanny Hensel's String Quartet in E flat Major (1834)', forthcoming in *Music Theory Spectrum*.

11. See for instance Marcia J. Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), Jeffrey Kallberg, *Chopin at the Boundaries: Sex, History, and Musical Genre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), and with specific reference to Hensel, Matthew Head, 'Genre, Romanticism and Female Authorship: Fanny Hensel's "Scottish" Sonata in G Minor (1843)', *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*, 4/2 (2007), 67–88.
12. Marie Sumner Lott, *The Social Worlds of Nineteenth-Century Chamber Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), pp. 18, 7.
13. Michael P. Steinberg, 'Introduction: Culture, Gender, and Music: A Forum on the Mendelssohn Family', *Musical Quarterly*, 77 (1993), 648–50 at 649.