

A Study on the Dual Influences of Fanny Mendelssohn's Creative Environment and Felix Mendelssohn

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Abstract. This study examines the complex intersection of gender, family dynamics, and artistic identity in the compositional life of Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel (1805–1847). Against the backdrop of nineteenth-century bourgeois patriarchy, where women were confined to the private sphere, Fanny's creative career was profoundly shaped—and constrained—by her brother Felix Mendelssohn's aesthetic influence and social authority. Using comparative and textual analysis of Fanny's unpublished raw evidence of letter text, alongside their extensive correspondence, this research investigates how mentorship, affection, and patriarchal values coexisted within their sibling relationship. The findings reveal that Felix's guidance simultaneously nurtured Fanny's technical mastery and reinforced her dependence, generating a form of “stolen autonomy” that defined her artistic self-conception. Her hyper reliance on his approval functioned as both inspiration and inhibition, illustrating the emotional mechanisms of gendered control in nineteenth-century musical culture. Ultimately, this paper argues that Hensel's later works constitute acts of subtle resistance, reclaiming creative autonomy within a restrictive domestic order.

Keywords: Fanny Mendelssohn, Felix Mendelssohn, Female Composers, Music Education

1. Introduction

Nineteenth-century musical composition was not merely an aesthetic pursuit, but a social act shaped by gender expectations, domestic circumstances, and professional structures. The nineteenth century witnessed numerous celebrated male composers, yet scant attention was paid to female composers possessing equally remarkable talent and mastery of composition and performance. Against this backdrop, Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel (1805–1847) stands as a truly exceptional case. This gifted composer flourished within an environment that was both supportive and constraining. While her brother Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847) was celebrated as a musical prodigy and public figure, much of Fanny's outstanding creative output remained confined to the private sphere due to the social conventions of the time. Existing research has predominantly focused on analysing Fanny's works and examining her creative environment, yet little attention has been paid to how her compositional career was influenced by Felix. This study explores how Fanny's creative trajectory was shaped by dual influences: the familial and domestic musical environment, and the aesthetic and professional model embodied by Felix. Through comparative analysis of Fanny's Piano Trio in D minor, Op. 11 and Felix's Violin Concerto in E minor, Op. 64, this paper examines differences in

technical approach, stylistic evolution, and expressive intent, revealing the dialogic relationship between similarities and distinctions in the artistic creations of the Mendelssohn siblings.

2. The Mendelssohn family and cultural context

2.1. Family constraints in patriarchal society

The 19th century in Europe was defined by a deeply entrenched patriarchal order that shaped every aspect of social, cultural, and intellectual life to an extent that it seems counterintuitive to one's benefit or excellence in contemporary views. In between the transition period for the German-speaking world, a major shift in political power has invented a brand-new form of conventional and social norms. A self-confident bourgeois middle class (the *Bildungsbürgertum*) emerged, valuing education, culture, and respectability as markers of moral worth [1]. Yet this class was also deeply patriarchal: while men defined themselves through public careers and civic virtue, women were idealized as moral guardians of the private sphere. This ideology of "separate spheres" was central to early-19th-century domestic life. Women's education was promoted only to enhance refinement and motherhood, not for intellectual or professional independence.

This patriarchal ideology profoundly influenced the cultural and artistic sphere of nineteenth-century Europe, including the world of music. While men such as Felix Mendelssohn, Franz Liszt, and Robert Schumann were celebrated as professional composers and performers, women of equal talent were largely excluded from formal institutions, denied access to orchestras, and discouraged from public performance. As Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall argue, the rise of the middle class during the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution consolidated a gendered division of labor that was both economic and symbolic [2]. Within this context, education for women was encouraged only insofar as it refined their manners and prepared them for an adequate intellectual individual who was appropriate and "good enough" to match for same-class marriage, not for intellectual or artistic independence [3].

For Fanny Mendelssohn, this patriarchal framework created an inescapable tension between her musical genius and her prescribed social identity. Her education mirrored that of her brother Felix, yet its purpose diverged sharply: while his training prepared him for a public career, hers was redirected toward private refinement. At the age of 15, Fanny's father forbade her to pursue music as a career, instead directing her to step into marriage and conform to the conventional familial role. Fanny, gentle and accommodating by nature, sought to navigate these constraints with as much grace as possible. Deeply devoted to her family, she avoided actions that might displease them. Yet her profound drive to compose serious music inevitably produced an inner tension between obedience and artistic ambition, eventually pushing her to an unhealthy and intense reliance on her brother, who symbolized her familial approval to critique and approve her, despite being extremely talented.

2.2. Limitations in music education

The emergence of conservatoires in the early nineteenth century provided women with more systematic opportunities for professional musical training, nurturing numerous distinguished female performers and teachers. However, these institutions seldom permitted women to specialise in composition. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, women aspiring to compose still had to emulate their early predecessors—studying harmony, counterpoint, and orchestration privately—as conservatoire curricula generally excluded them from advanced theoretical training.

The Paris Conservatoire, founded in 1795, achieved formal equality in principle, yet gender segregation persisted in practice. For most of the nineteenth century, women were steered towards 'practical' courses such as piano, voice, or accompaniment, while harmony theory and composition remained closed to them [4]. It was not until 1879 that women gained admission to harmony composition classes, while the prestigious Prix de Rome in composition did not accept female candidates until 1903—Lili Brongniart ultimately becoming the first woman to win the award in 1913 [5].

A similar pattern appeared in German-speaking regions. Although the Leipzig Conservatory (founded 1843) accepted female students from its inception, a clear gender division persisted within its curriculum. Male students followed an extended and rigorous sequence in theory and composition, while women were generally assigned a reduced course of study designed to cultivate musical refinement and pedagogical skills rather than professional authorship [6]. Institutional structures and gendered expectations reinforced the idea that women were suited to become performers or teachers, not composers or conductors. These distinctions were visible in separate classes for men and women, differentiated course loads, and limitations on participation in orchestral and ensemble training. String instruments were less common among female students, and wind instruments were almost entirely off-limits. Many conservatories even prohibited women from joining orchestral rehearsals, depriving them of direct experience with large-scale forms such as symphonies or concertos. Consequently, the absence of orchestral training and public visibility made it far more difficult for women to establish themselves as professional composers.

Fanny Mendelssohn (1805–1847), the eldest of four children, was born in Hamburg nearly four years before her brother Felix. Both siblings received comparable musical educations, studying under distinguished teachers such as Johann Nepomuk Hummel—a pupil of Mozart—and Ignaz Moscheles. Like Felix, Fanny demonstrated exceptional musical talent from an early age, reportedly performing all twenty-four preludes from J. S. Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier* from memory by the age of fourteen. The two maintained a particularly close creative relationship, often shaping each other's compositional styles, and Fanny's works were occasionally featured alongside Felix's in the Mendelssohn family's concerts. Gender distinctions within this cultivated environment were sharply drawn. While Felix's talent was encouraged toward a professional career, Fanny's comparable gifts were directed inward, toward domestic music-making. Her father Abraham's letters made this boundary explicit: "Music will perhaps become Felix, s profession, but for you it can and must be only an ornament." [7]. According to a letter written by Abraham Mendelssohn Bartholdy, Fanny was born with "Bach fugue-playing fingers" [8]—a remarkably perceptive remark, as by the age of thirteen she was already recognized as an expert in the then-unfashionable music of J. S. Bach. When Fanny and her brother Felix began composition lessons with Carl Friedrich Zelter, the influential director of the Berlin Singakademie, he immediately remarked, "this child really is something special." His later comment— "she plays [the piano] as well as any man"—further revealed the gender biases of the period, where female accomplishment was often measured against male standards [9]. Although Fanny and Felix recieved comparable early instruction, her eduaction was redirected toward domestic musicianship rather than public performance. She was encouraged to refine her piano skills and compositional technique, only within a household context but denied opportunities for arranging orchestral practicie, public conducting or institutional recognition.

3. Fanny Mendelssohn's compositional environment

3.1. Expanding Fanny's musical vision

Fanny's compositional development was profoundly intertwined with Felix's, their correspondence revealing a sustained exchange of musical ideas that combined affection, critique, and control. Being in a close-knit sibling relationship, Fanny's reliance on Felix reaches a state where he is truly inseparable from her life as she admits her profound thoughts for her brother to equate to her husband:

"I love you both so very differently and yet so completely the same, that I believe it impossible to live happily without either of you".

Throughout their dialogue, Felix's praise, technical assessments, and moral judgments often operated as instruments of influence that shaped and at times constrained Fanny's creative agency and stole her compositional credit in times when they were good. The letters serve as evidence of how Felix's absence and mentorship could evolve into subtle manipulation, exposing recurring tensions between artistic collaboration and the violation of Fanny's authorship and independence.

When she sent him a set of piano pieces in 1836, he wrote:

"I'm again looking with the greatest pleasure at the piano pieces that Paul and Albertine brought me. There are some excellent ones among them ... It's seldom that a piece of new music is so thoroughly pleasing" .

Such moments of validation bolstered Fanny's confidence, sustaining her creative spirit in a context that denied her public artistic agency. She responded with gratitude:

"You can imagine how happy I am that you like my piano pieces, which leads me to believe that I haven't totally gone downhill in music" .

Felix's comments, both positive and critical, acted as a barometer for her musical worth. In another letter, Fanny confessed that his judgment held almost absolute sway over her:

"If you thought that I was no longer any good at music, then I'd give it up tomorrow" [6].

This emotional dependency reveals how deeply Felix shaped Fanny's sense of authorship and her capability of creating music; matter of fact, his comment was a manipulative factor in how she perceived her skills, which then impacts the musical inactivity of Fanny. Fanny's reliance on Felix allowed her self-perception to be indicated by his presence:

"Your love has provided me with great inner worth, and I will never believe in myself as long as you love me" .

His encouragement served as both a creative stimulus and a moral compass. Even when apart—Felix traveling as a conductor and composer across Europe—their letters maintained a dynamic of artistic mentorship and connection as siblings. Fanny often sent him manuscripts for feedback, embodying the sibling dialogue that underpinned her stylistic growth.

Through these exchanges, Felix expanded Fanny's musical world, keeping her connected to contemporary performance culture and compositional trends. To an extent, Felix embodied Fanny and her works as a part of his artistic output. For instance, as he performed her songs voluntarily informally outside Berlin and shared his admiration with others, even with Queen Victoria, who unknowingly sang one of Fanny's lieder ("Italien"), believing it to be Felix's work—a moment that Felix later "was obliged to confess" to be Fanny's work with both pride and embarrassment. His action of exposing Fanny's artistic works but unwillingness to confess her credit in the anecdote underscores both the intimacy and the asymmetry of their creative partnership: Fanny's music circulated through Felix's agency, but without her own name attached to it, a phenomenon that is parallel to the patriarchal supremacy at the time.

Furthermore, the letters also show that Felix's engagement with her compositions honed her professional discipline. His detailed feedback on orchestration and text-setting, as in a letter of December 1831, encouraged technical refinement. At the same time, his aesthetic ideals of clarity, proportion, and formal unity are infused in her own works with classical poise. Fanny's Piano Trio in D minor, Op. 11 (1847), exemplifies this synthesis: while adopting Felix's architectural rigor, its songlike themes and inward lyricism articulate a more private, feminine sensibility. The work proves to stand as the culmination of a dialogue between shared technique and differentiated purpose.

3.2. Felix's implicit limitations on Fanny's musical expression

While Felix's mentorship enriched Fanny's compositional craft, it simultaneously constrained her artistic autonomy. His influence mirrored the patriarchal logic of their upbringing: women's creativity was welcomed within domestic boundaries but discouraged from public assertion. Their father, Abraham Mendelssohn's words, the world's favoritism and much else — all have become fragments of values that Felix inherited and internalized for his worldview. Despite his admiration for her talent, Felix consistently discouraged Fanny from publishing her works. When she broached the idea in her later, adult years of 1836—writing, “Lately I’ve become interested again in publishing something—should I do it?”—his reply was unequivocally negative. Even after their mother urged him to help Fanny find a publisher, Felix refused, explaining in a letter of June 1837: “I consider publishing something serious ... and believe that one should do it only if one wants to appear as an author one’s entire life and stick to it. But that necessitates a series of works ... Fanny, as I know her, possesses neither the inclination nor calling for authorship. She is too much a woman for that, as is proper, and looks after her house and thinks neither about the public nor the musical world ... Publishing would only disturb her in these duties” [6].

This letter encapsulates the paradox of Felix's patriarchal complex's “supportive restraint.” He viewed authorship as a lifelong vocation, something that was explicit and formal, incompatible with a woman's implicit and ambiguous domestic role. Even while praising her compositions as “splendid and lovely,” he justified withholding professional endorsement on the grounds of a gender propriety systematized in himself. Fanny, conditioned to leave the subordinate, evolves a habit of seeking his approval, thus internalizing this boundary. She admitted, “At age forty I’m afraid of my brother, as I was at fourteen of father—but afraid is really not the right word, but instead desirous of always pleasing you”.

Felix's influence thus extended beyond direct prohibition; it shaped Fanny's self-perception as a composer whose creativity should remain private. Her letters reveal how she rationalized this limitation and disrespect of chance; as she convinced herself that public recognition was unnecessary and that her artistic work could remain a personal, even spiritual, pursuit. She described her 1846 publication plans almost apologetically:

“I hope I won’t disgrace you through my publishing, as I’m no *femme libre* ... Hopefully you will in no way be bothered by it, as I’ve proceeded completely independently, in order to spare you any unpleasant moment” [6].

This delicate negotiation illustrates the psychological cost for Fanny of Felix's authority. Her need to assure him that her publishing “would not disgrace” the family is concrete evidence of the social stakes of female authorship in the 1840s. Yet even within these confines, Fanny cultivated a distinctive creative identity, one that found expressive space within the domestic salon, where *lieder*, piano cycles, and chamber pieces functioned as intimate acts of communication rather than public display.

From a broader cultural standpoint, this “domestication” of women’s composition was not unique. Across the early nineteenth century, leading women composers in German-speaking regions concentrated their published output in private, small-scale genres. While Fanny Hensel wrote over 300 songs out of roughly 460 compositions, Clara Schumann composed about 29 songs alongside mainly piano works, and Josephine Lang produced around 150 *Lieder*. Large orchestral genres were exceptional, with Emilie Mayer’s eight symphonies after 1847 a notable outlier.

Felix’s tacit approval of Fanny’s “family-scale” compositions reinforced these norms. He was happy to perform her songs at gatherings and offer a detailed critique, but withheld active promotion of her as a brand. His selective encouragement channeled her creativity toward genres consistent with the “feminine amateur ideal,” and things he, as a male perspective, favored. In doing so, he perpetuated the belief—shared by their father—that women’s art should be embellishment to not challenge the seemingly righteous social order.

Nevertheless, Felix’s restrictions also provoked subtle resistance. Fanny’s decision in 1846 to publish her *Lieder* and piano collections—eventually leading to seven opus numbers in two years—represented a quiet assertion of professional identity. Felix, though ambivalent, relented with a characteristic mix of irony and tenderness:

“I send you my professional blessing on becoming a member of the craft ... May you taste only the sweets and none of the bitterness of authorship; may the public pelt you with roses, and never with sand” [10].

Fanny’s diary records her reaction: “At last Felix has written and given me his professional blessing in the kindest manner. I know that he is not quite satisfied in his heart of hearts, but I’m glad he has said a kind word” . These words capture both the nature of warmth in a sibling relationship and the quiet assertion of her autonomy within it.

Her final works—especially the Piano Trio in D minor, Op. 11—transcend the boundaries Felix sought to preserve. The trio’s expansive architecture and emotional depth demonstrate that her so-called “domestic” voice could command the scale and gravitas of high Romantic chamber music. In it, Fanny transforms the intimacy of the salon into a vehicle for universal expression, achieving a balance between lyric inwardness and structural ambition.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, by examining Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel’s compositional life, contemporary scholars can see the repercussion of gender injustice on one of the immense creative brilliance of the 19th century. By constantly negotiating the boundaries of patriarchal expectation and familial authority, her experience encapsulates the broader struggle of nineteenth-century women composers, whose intellectual and artistic autonomy was frequently overshadowed by the social obligation to defer to male approval. Mendelssohn reveals the profound psychological and artistic cost of living within a system that defined female creativity as secondary, derivative, or decorative. Fanny’s “stolen autonomy” was not only a product of social norms but also the emotional mechanism of familial affection that made resistance nearly impossible, as she, on some occasions, did not even recognize the suppression. Her hyperreliance on Felix’s validation, while sustaining her emotionally and artistically, simultaneously became the instrument of her self-censorship, which is a pattern emblematic of how patriarchal values permeated, especially in the most intimate bonds.

This dynamic produced consequences that extended beyond her personal life into her compositional identity. Fanny’s deference to Felix’s judgment constrained her self-perception as a composer capable of independent authority. Each moment of encouragement carried within it the possibility of erasure, and every act of mentorship risked reinforcing dependence. Her letters

disclose the contradictory emotions of affection, admiration, and resignation: she could only believe in her artistic worth through his recognition. This contradiction is central to letting modern-day audiences understand how historical gender ideology operated—not through overt prohibition alone, but through the subtle internalization of inferiority, which educates how the world nowadays can improve from it. Fanny's obedience thus becomes a unique form of silent resistance that is entranced by her incapability to speak out, as she continued to compose prolifically, finding in domestic music-making an alternative arena for self-expression, even when denied the public authorship that her works deserved.

Yet the significance of Fanny's story lies not only in the tragedy of repression but in the enduring strength of her creative voice. Her later works, culminating in the Piano Trio in D minor, Op. 11, transcend the boundaries imposed upon her. In that work, Fanny transforms the intimacy of domestic art into a language of profound structural sophistication and emotional force, asserting her legitimacy within the male-dominated canon of Romantic music. Her belated decision to publish confesses an act of self-authorization in defiance of fraternal restraint, which marks a reclamation of the autonomy long denied to her. Ultimately, overseeing her confined agency allows us to see Fanny Mendelssohn not merely as Felix's shadow but as an artist who exposed the contradictions of her time: that creativity cannot flourish where dependence masquerades as devotion, and that true artistic freedom requires not only genius but the courage to exist beyond permission.

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