

Women in Music: Fanny Mendelssohn

Fanny Mendelssohn was a music composer and pianist from the Romantic period, born in 1805 in Hamburg, Germany into a wealthy middle-upper class family. She had one brother, Felix, who was also a composer, pianist, organist, and conductor. Fanny had one son with her husband, Wilhelm Hensel, called Sebastian Ludwig Felix Hensel named after her three favorite composers: Bach, Beethoven, and her brother!



What was life like for women in the 19th century?

In the 19th century, women were considered inferior to men. The impact of this mainly affected the middle class, as women were forced to be housewives.

Women had very few rights of their

own, especially when they married, as they became the property of their husbands and would lose things such as their inheritance.

Fanny and her brother Felix relied on each other to shape their musical careers as they were quite different. Although Felix was younger, Felix's career soared whilst Fanny was neglected and struggled to publish her music.

Fanny's music and her audience's response

Fanny wrote over 460 pieces of music, including a piano trio and quartet, and sometimes wrote for orchestras but some of her songs were originally published under her brother's name. In fact, when Felix visited Queen Victoria, he had an awkward encounter with her, as the Queen praised one of his pieces, and Felix was forced to admit that Fanny had written it!

Audiences and critics often disapproved of Fanny for her work. Her work was not appreciated, people did not buy her music, it was not performed at the time and she

was very often overlooked. When Fanny died, Felix was distraught and worked tirelessly to get her music published with the help of her widowed husband.

Some of Fanny's best pieces include: String Quartet in E flat major, Overture in C, Notturmo in G minor, Das Jahr and Bergeslust. She was so talented that she wrote her own wedding music the evening before her wedding! To experience the beauty of her music, listen to the 'Overture in C minor:'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OvZdsZLuS6Q&t=69s>.

Although we would likely not know of Fanny's music had it not been for her brother's support and help, Fanny Mendelssohn's legacy is astounding. She has been the subject of many recent academic studies. In 2018 the 'Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn museum' opened in Hamburg, Germany, reflecting *both* of their lives and musical careers. Had Fanny been a composer in the 21st century, I think she would have been extraordinarily successful. Fanny's recognition today, despite her struggles during her lifetime, illustrates the power of women and the importance of celebrating our achievements.

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“It must be a sign of talent that I do not give up, though I can get nobody to take an interest in my efforts”.