

HENSEL: STRING QUARTET IN E FLAT

The String Quartet in E flat major (1834) by Fanny Hensel, née Mendelssohn, is one of the most important works by a female composer written in the nineteenth century. Composed at a turning point in her life (as Hensel was not only grappling with her own creative voice but also coming to terms with her identity as a married woman and the role her family expected of her), the quartet is significant in showing a woman composing in a genre that was then almost exclusively the domain of male artists. Benedict Taylor's illuminating book situates itself within developing scholarly discourse on the music of women composers, going beyond apologetics – or condemnation of those who hindered their development – to examine the strength and qualities of the music and how it responded to the most progressive works of the period.

BENEDICT TAYLOR is Reader at the Reid School of Music, University of Edinburgh. Publications include *Mendelssohn, Time and Memory: The Romantic Conception of Cyclic Form* (2011), *The Melody of Time: Music and Temporality in the Romantic Era* (2016), and *Music, Subjectivity, and Schumann* (2022).

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HENSEL: STRING QUARTET IN E FLAT

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CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i>	page vii
<i>List of Tables</i>	viii
<i>List of Musical Examples</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
1 Introduction	1
Hensel and Current Research	3
Genre, Gender, and the Question of Choice	4
2 Background	9
Hensel's Musical Upbringing	9
Fanny, Felix, and a Shared Mendelssohnian Style?	10
Intimate Correspondences within the Family Circle	13
Receiving Beethoven	19
The 'Easter' Sonata (1828)	23
3 Genesis and Private Reception	33
The Unfinished Piano Sonata in E flat (1829)	33
The String Quartet: Motivations and Sources	35
Fraternal Reception: The Critical Exchange of 1835	37
4 First Movement: <i>Adagio ma non troppo</i>	45
The Opening Paradigm	46
Formal Outline	50
'Innere Nothwendigkeit' and 'Schematic Fantasies'	56
Musical Correspondences and Meaning	60
5 Second Movement: <i>Allegretto</i>	66
Larger Design, Difficulties with Sources, and the Two Versions	66
Opening Scherzo	70
Trio	72
Dissolving Reprise	74
6 Third Movement: <i>Romanza</i>	79
Opening Section	80
Development	83
Reprise	84
	v

Contents

7	Finale: <i>Allegro molto vivace</i>	90
	Formal Dynamism	90
	The Central C Minor Episode and Intermovement Elements across the Quartet	93
	Coming to a Close	97
8	Responding to the Quartet	101
	Aftermath	101
	A Creative Response: The Piano Trio in D minor, Op. 11 (1847)	104
	Rediscovery and Reception from the 1980s	109
	<i>Select Bibliography</i>	116
	<i>Index</i>	119

FIGURES

- | | | |
|------|--|---------|
| 2.1 | Fanny Hensel, <i>Liederkreis</i> , 1829, first page,
with vignettes by Wilhelm Hensel, including
motive from Felix Mendelssohn's 'Frage',
Op. 9 No. 1 (top centre-right). Bodleian Library,
University of Oxford, GB-Ob, MS.
M. D. Mendelssohn c. 22, fol. 22 r | page 17 |
| 2.2 | Wilhelm Hensel, 'Das Rad' ('The Wheel'), 1829.
Drawing, watercolour, pencil, gold, bronze.
Mendelssohn-Archiv, Staatsbibliothek, Berlin | 20 |
| 4.1a | Rodgers's 'Submediant Schema' for Hensel's songs | 59 |
| 4.1b | Elaboration of the 'Submediant Schema' at the
opening of Hensel's Quartet | 59 |
| 5.1 | Hensel, String Quartet (1834), ii, page from first
version (A), showing passages of the trio
subsequently pasted over with snippets of scherzo
material. Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer
Kulturbesitz, Berlin, MA Ms. 43, 16 [11] | 67 |

TABLES

4.1	Formal design of Hensel's String Quartet, i	<i>page 51</i>
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MUSICAL EXAMPLES

4.1	Fanny Hensel, String Quartet (1834), i, opening model	<i>page 47</i>
4.2	Thematic similarities between (a) Hensel, String Quartet, i, bb. 1–5, (b) Mendelssohn, String Quartet Op. 12, i, bb. 18–25, (c) Mendelssohn, String Quartet Op. 12, iv, bb. 241–4, and (d) Mendelssohn, Overture <i>Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage</i> , Op. 27, bb. 1–2	49
4.3	Schematic overview of thematic ideas in Hensel, String Quartet, i, and their elaboration	52
5.1	Hensel, String Quartet, ii, retransition and elided reprise, original version	69
5.2	Hensel, String Quartet, ii, opening idea	71
5.3	Hensel, String Quartet, ii, fugal trio theme	73
6.1	Hensel, String Quartet, iii, opening, a and b phrases	80
6.2a	Hensel, String Quartet, iii, reprise (original version)	86
6.2b	Hensel, String Quartet, iii, reprise (revised version)	87
7.1	(a) Hensel, String Quartet, iv, opening theme; (b) Mendelssohn, Fantasy in F sharp minor, Op. 28, iii, opening theme	92
7.2	Hensel, String Quartet, iv, new C minor theme in central section	94

PREFACE

I must first thank Nicole Grimes, the ever-supportive series editor for the New Cambridge Music Handbooks, for originally asking me to contribute a volume to the relaunched series, and for her patience while I slipped first from discussing Clara Schumann to Fanny Hensel and then vacillated as to the extent of my coverage of her chamber music. Angela Mace has similarly been a constant and generous source of encouragement in all matters Henselian, while conversations with Thomas Schmidt also contributed valuable ideas. To Julian Horton and Steven Vande Moortele I owe a stimulating discussion of the outer movements of the ‘Easter’ Sonata, which has helped inform and clarify my thoughts on that work. Andrew Jennings, Norman Fischer, and Vicki Sirota all graciously helped clear up details of the 1982 premiere in New York and the events leading up to this. The book was written while on sabbatical in the autumn of 2021, part of which was spent at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater Hamburg, and I would like to thank the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung for a renewal of my research stay as a Humboldtian, as well as Jan Philipp Sprick for acting as host. My ideas on the quartet were presented in a seminar in November 2021, and I likewise extend my thanks to Jan Philipp, Oliver Mathes, and Lujia Sun for their insightful contributions and thoughts on the piece. One thing that became clear from our discussion was the richness of Hensel’s music, and how there is still so much to explore, even in this particular piece. Parts of this book were also presented at a colloquium at the Faculty of Music at Oxford in March 2022, and I would similarly like to thank the attentive audience for their helpful questions and comments.

Musical examples in this volume have been prepared from the autograph of Hensel’s quartet found in the Staatsbibliothek Berlin and available online (<https://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/wer>

Preface

kansicht/?PPN=PPN1724626299). Only a handful of Hensel's works were published in her lifetime and the immediately following years, and for designation purposes scholars typically use the numbers provided by the thematic catalogue made by Renate Hellwig-Unruh (H-U) instead of opus numbers (Renate Hellwig-Unruh, *Fanny Hensel geb. Mendelssohn Bartholdy: Thematisches Verzeichnis der Kompositionen* (Adliswil: Edition Kunzelmann, 2000)). In cases where no opus number (or a highly misleading posthumous one) for her brother Felix Mendelssohn's music is available, I similarly use MWV numbers from the recent thematic catalogue by Ralf Wehner (*Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy: Thematisch-systematisches Verzeichnis der musikalischen Werke* (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf und Härtel, 2009)).

A word on naming conventions may also be useful. Although born Fanny Cäcilia Mendelssohn, and adopting the additional family name Bartholdy on baptism in 1816, from her marriage in 1829 until her death in 1847 the composer went under the name of Fanny Hensel ('F. Hensel' is written on the autograph title page of the quartet, and in publications she named herself 'Fanny Hensel, b. Mendelssohn-Bartholdy'). In order to distinguish between her and her famous younger brother Felix Mendelssohn, I generally adopt the surnames Hensel and Mendelssohn respectively, even if occasionally referring back to the time before marriage. Still, when referring to the child or teenager, I am often happy to call her simply Fanny, which avoids the mild anachronism (as well as the potential confusion in places with her future husband, Wilhelm Hensel) and emphasises the close-knit family environment with her brother Felix. After 1829, however, I try to minimise familiar first-name reference to both, a practice which, while not uncommon in recent literature, may appear condescending to both figures.