

Unheard Melodies: The Songs and Sorrows of German Female Composers, 1700-1900

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Out of all the rich musical centers in Europe, Germany, and specifically Leipzig, might be the most rich. Leipzig's rich cultural heritage, fed in part by its prestigious university, led to a generous musical life which gave rise to numerous famous works. Several well-known composers either were born in, lived in, or worked in Leipzig, such as J.S. Bach, Felix Mendelssohn, Robert Schumann, and Richard Wagner. Leipzig's beautiful churches premiered some of the best-known works in the canon: for example, St. Thomas' Church was the home of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, which was later revived by Felix Mendelssohn.¹ Leipzig's musical prowess fed into its many musical groups, such as the St. Thomas Choir, Gewandhaus Orchestra, and Leipzig Opera, each of which contributed to the abundant musical life in the city.² These groups played and sang many different genres such as church music, opera, orchestra music, and choral music; as well as gave the gift of music to the general citizenry through public concerts and music education.³ But among all these famed composers and beautiful music in the city, and in the country in general, one must remember the female musicians who do not get recognized. The women who worked alongside their fathers, husbands, and brothers to create music but were not allowed the opportunity to become as famous as their male counterparts and struggled to balance the expectations of life in the home with their passion for performance and composition. A few of these women, however, have stood out in the historical canon as making significant contributions to the classical music world of the 18th and 19th centuries, such as Clara

1. George B Stauffer, "Leipzig," *Grove Music Online*, last modified 2001, <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.lib.pepperdine.edu/grovemusic/display/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000016353?rskey=5nA6W7&result=1>.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

Schumann, Fanny Mendelssohn, Anna Magdalena Bach, and Sara Levy. Although these women had equal or even greater musical talent and potential than their male counterparts, they were tragically stifled by the gender limitations of 18th-19th century German society.

Clara Wieck, who would later become Clara Schumann upon marrying Robert, lived from 1819-1896 in Germany and was a noted pianist, pedagogue, and composer.⁴ She grew up in a musical household with a soprano/pianist mother and a music businessman father, who gave her a rich musical education.⁵ She became a child prodigy on the piano, touring around Germany and eventually all of Europe.⁶ Her earliest recorded composition dates back to 1832, when she was around thirteen years old.⁷ Clara's demonstrated musical prowess at an early age would continue throughout her life as she grew to more and more acclaim as a performer.

Robert Schumann came into Clara's life as he lived with the Wieck family for a time. The two fell in love and, after her father's refusal and a drawn-out court battle, Robert and Clara finally married in 1840.⁸ When they married, Clara was much more well-known as a musician than her husband and would support the family through her performer's income.⁹ To have the wife support the family was extremely unusual for the time and went beyond the gender limitations of 19th-century German society. However, although Robert was encouraging of her

4. Nancy B Reich, "Clara Schumann," *Grove Music Online*, last modified March 29, 2021, <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.lib.pepperdine.edu/grovemusic/display/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-90000380188?rskey=ps4rcF&result=2>.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

compositional endeavors, he made it clear that he took priority. Clara could only compose and practice when her husband wouldn't be disturbed in his own compositional work.¹⁰ She was also frustrated by his refusal to travel, as she had loved touring Europe when she was a young prodigy; however, the two did eventually embark on a concert tour of Russia.¹¹ Unfortunately Robert was both mentally and physically ill, which caused strain on Clara's career as she was both caretaker to Robert and mother to a family.¹² Eventually, Robert was sent to an asylum in 1854 after a suicide attempt, where he remained until his death.¹³

Clara Schumann's compositional collection was made up of mostly piano music in her teenage years, including a piano concerto, but moved to mainly *Lieder* after her marriage to Robert. Later in life though, she returned to piano music composition, including her Piano Sonata in G minor.¹⁴

The gender limitations imposed on Clara were prominent throughout her life, especially as it related to her relationship to Robert. As a woman at that time, she was expected to raise the children and take care of the family as her first priority, with her music coming second. She was limited in her musical efforts due to her need to take care of her family and her husband, especially as Robert's condition worsened. Although her financial support of the family and successful concert career was unusual for a woman of the time, her compositions were still met

10. Reich, "Clara Schumann."

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

with “heavily gendered reviews”.¹⁵ Unfortunately as well due to gender limitations, her compositional works were largely forgotten after her death and were only considered important in relation to Robert.¹⁶ A revival of interest in her life and works occurred in the 1960s-70s, which brought her more to the forefront of the public musical mind.¹⁷ In her time, she had a “powerful hold” on the public and was praised as a pianist in her own right, apart from the accomplishments of her husband. In fact, through her concert tours and promotion of her husband’s compositions, she made him known in the world of classical music.¹⁸

Fanny Mendelssohn also dealt with similar, albeit much more restrictive, limitations. She lived from 1805-1847 and was musically educated alongside her brother Felix.¹⁹ She became a proponent of composers such as Bach, Beethoven, and even her own brother Felix Mendelssohn.²⁰ Her upbringing was hued with a religious conflict between Judaism and Christianity, as her parents had converted and attempted to assimilate the family into German Protestant society, although they still dealt with anti-Semitic prejudice.²¹ Fanny was descended

15. Ibid.

16. Christopher Pidgeon, “The Forgotten Art of Clara Schumann: German Society's Influence on a Female Composer,” *Surrey Undergraduate Research Journal* 2, no. 1 (2016).

17. Reich, “Clara Schumann.”

18. Ibid.

19. Angela Mace Christian, “Fanny Cäcilie Hensel,” *Grove Music Online*, last modified November 28, 2018, <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.lib.pepperdine.edu/grovemusic/display/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-3000000159?rskey=dZTxQn&result=1>.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

from a long tradition of educated, artistic women including her mother Lea Mendelssohn, her great aunt Sara Levy, and her grandmother Bella Salomon.²²

Sara Levy deserves a research project of her own, as she is a fascinating figure in the musical society of 18th-19th century Berlin. Her promotion of classical music, particularly the works of J.S. Bach, in her musical salon, is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is worth noting her adherence to her Jewish faith and her collection and patronage of Bach's works, which were passed down for generations to come including ours today.^{23,24}

Sara's grandniece Fanny Mendelssohn would eventually marry the painter Wilhelm Hensel in 1829, who was 11 years older than her, and had only one child, Sebastian Ludwig Felix Hensel.²⁵ She had a very close relationship with her brother, but sadly the two became increasingly alienated due to their respective marriages, time, and distance, which made her incredibly sad.²⁶ She would organize public performances of her brother's work, including his *St. Paul*.²⁷

22. Ibid.

23. David Brown, "Sara Levy's World: Music, Gender, and Judaism in Enlightenment Berlin," *Leo Baeck Institute*, last modified 2015, <https://www.lbi.org/news/sara-levys-world-music-gender-and-judaism-in-enlightenment-berlin/>.

24. Peter Wollny, "Sara Levy and the Making of Musical Taste in Berlin," *The Musical Quarterly* 77, no. 4 (n.d.): 651-688.

25. Mace, "Fanny Cäcilie Hensel."

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

Fanny's piano performances were mainly limited to the Mendelssohn's Sunday musical gatherings starting in 1823, where Felix would also conduct.²⁸ Her performance limitations will be explored more later. Her compositional endeavors, however, were more developed despite the restrictions placed on her early on. Like Clara Schumann, she also started by composing piano works but truly found her style in *Lieder*, of which she composed about 255.²⁹ Her most prolific year was 1823, when Wilhelm Hensel was in Italy and her mother forbade any correspondence with him.³⁰ After 1829, she composed larger works such as concert arias, cantatas, choral works, string quartets, and an orchestral overture.³¹ She even wrote her own wedding processional, as Felix was unable to due to an injured leg.³²

However, as with many women of the time, Fanny's gender and high-class status limited her musical endeavors greatly. Her prolific output of compositions was largely unseen by the public, as she only published it one year before she died due to these restrictions.³³ Her career was also overshadowed by her brother, Felix, and she was mostly restrained to a "private" career.³⁴ Her father not only accepted these gender limitations, but encouraged them. In fact, he told Fanny at a young age that her music would never be anything more than an "ornament" and

28. Mace, "Fanny Cäcilie Hensel."

29. Mace, "Fanny Cäcilie Hensel."

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

“never the root of [her] being and doing”, whereas for Felix it could become his profession.³⁵ In their musical education and beyond, Felix took priority while Fanny was limited in furthering her musical abilities from a very early age, which frustrated her greatly.³⁶ Although her career was limited to the private sector, the guests at the Mendelssohns’ Sunday Musicales appreciated her performances equally with her brother, with some even saying that she was a better, more mature performer than he was.³⁷ Her *Lieder*-writing was encouraged as well, as it was seen as more appropriate for high-class women.³⁸ She was also not allowed to compose or play piano while in “confinement” before the birth of her son and the “lying-in” period afterwards.³⁹ This is a prime example of gender limitations at the time, showing that women were seen as weaker or more fragile, especially surrounding childbirth.

Fanny found ways to work against these limitations, however. She wrote her own cadenza to Beethoven’s Concerto in C Major Op. 15, even though it was unseemly for women to write their own cadenzas at the time—it was considered the “purview of a male genius”, especially when writing a cadenza for a masterwork.⁴⁰ She also published two *Lieder* in 1826, although they were under Felix’s name. In fact, when Felix visited Queen Victoria, the monarch chose one of Fanny’s *Lieder* to sing from his book, afterwards which Felix admitted it was not

35. Mace, “Fanny Cäcilie Hensel.”

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

his own.⁴¹ She was also one of the first women to compose a string quartet, and participated in Felix's public performances.⁴²

Less information exists about Anna Magdalena Bach than any of the others, which is perhaps a consequence of gender limitations in its own right. Nevertheless, we do know enough about J.S. Bach's second wife to outline her life and show how she, too, experienced societal limitations that restricted her potential. Anna Magdalena lived from 1701-1760 and, like Clara Schumann and Fanny Mendelssohn, was also born into a musical family with her father being a court trumpeter.⁴³ She married Johann Sebastian Bach in 1721 and was married to him for 29 years, raising 17 children.⁴⁴ The couple moved to Leipzig in 1722 and remained there for the rest of their lives.⁴⁵ Anna Magdalena served as both scribe and copyist for her husband, with some scholars even claiming she was the true composer of some of her husband's works, for example the Cello Suites.⁴⁶

Anna Magdalena was an accomplished soprano who, at nineteen years old, was paid a generous sum by the court of Johann August of Anhalt-Zerbst for "singing a few times with the

41. Mace, "Fanny Cäcilie Hensel."

42. Ibid.

43 Andrew Talle, "Who Was Anna Magdalena Bach?," *Bach* 51, no. 1 (2020): 139-171, <https://lib.pepperdine.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,url,uid,cookie&db=a9h&AN=143293142&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

Hofkapelle”, an unusual occurrence for anyone but the most accomplished musicians.⁴⁷ She performed with the family at home and was also a keyboardist.⁴⁸ Her life, however, was largely limited to the home, especially after her marriage to J.S. Bach and upon the birth of her children. Perhaps her career would have been more fully fleshed out had she not been restricted by the expectations of her gender. Much of her life is unknown, overlooked, and overshadowed, again likely due to the fact that women were not as well-documented in general. She was left impoverished when Johann Sebastian died and did not receive an equal amount of share in his estate, which is also partially due to the neglect of women at the time. Despite these limitations, she did exercise a considerable amount of influence over her husband, as shown when Johann Sebastian “falsif[ied] an audition” and admitted a lesser-skilled musician to St. Thomas School on “full scholarship” just because the musician in question happened to be Anna Magdalena’s nephew. This would not have happened had she not swayed her husband and had the two not had a relationship of respect. Much more research should be done about this fascinating figure and her influence over her husband.

Overall, the female counterparts to some of the most famous composers in the classical music canon have long been overlooked and overshadowed. The gender barriers they experienced were great, but they still managed to make significant contributions to the musical world. Their work deserves to come to the forefront of classical musical society more and more as we continue into the twenty-first century, and they deserve to share the spotlight with their husbands and brothers. These three women are just a small percentage of the prolific female

47. Talle, “Who Was Anna Magdalena Bach?”

48. Ibid.

composers who have graced century after century with their powerful, though largely unknown, works. More research should be done about them and their lives, allowing them to gain equality and even separation from their male counterparts so that they can stand up in their own right as some of the finest musicians and composers that have ever graced the world of Western classical music.

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