

## Fanny Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1805-1847) and Wilhelm Hensel (1794-1861), married 1829



Fanny Mendelssohn Bartholdy and Wilhelm Hensel in 1829. Sketches by Hensel.

Fanny Mendelssohn Bartholdy<sup>1</sup> was an important composer in the first half of the nineteenth century. She was the older sister of the composer Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) (the two siblings were very close); and during her lifetime and for more than a century after her death, was very much overshadowed by him. Her family discouraged her from pursuing a career or publishing her compositions, and some of her works were attributed to Felix. However, in recent years, her own oeuvre has been increasingly appreciated, studied, and performed.

Her grandfather was Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), a philosopher and theologian, and the founder of Reform Judaism. Her father Abraham Mendelssohn (1776-1835), sometimes known as “Middle” Mendelssohn, is chiefly remembered for the rueful quip, “Once I was the son of a famous father, now I am the father of a famous son.” However, he was a successful banker, and he and his wife Lea had a salon in Berlin that attracted many of the musical, literary, artistic, and scientific leading figures of the time. Fanny’s extraordinary musical talents

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<sup>1</sup>It has become somewhat common practice recently to name her as “Fanny Hensel” or “Fanny Hensel geb. Mendelssohn Bartholdy” so as to bring her out from under her brother Felix’s shadow and, in particular, to counteract a widespread misimpression that she was Felix’s wife rather than his sister. However, since my subject is her marriage proposal, I will use the maiden name, as I have done with the other women in this collection.

were apparent from a very young age, and she studied musical performance and composition with some of the leading teachers of the time.

Wilhelm Hensel was a painter and a celebrity portraitist.

Fanny and Wilhelm first met in 1821. Around Christmas 1822, they came close to an “understanding”. However, Fanny’s parents, especially her mother, strongly opposed it; Wilhelm’s professional and financial situation were precarious and, at the time, he was considering converting to Catholicism. Wilhelm then spent five years in Italy 1823-1828. During that time he and Fanny were forbidden from corresponding directly; he did, however, send letters to her parents. When he returned to Berlin in late 1828, he rapidly got on more secure professional footing, and he was still a Protestant, so then he became more acceptable to the Mendelssohn parents.

Fanny and Wilhelm became engaged on January 22, 1829, as described in the excerpt from her diary below. They were married on October 3. Their son Sebastian (1830-1898) was born June 16, 1830. Fanny dies suddenly of a stroke on May 14, 1847. (Her brother Felix, already in poor health, never recovered from the shock; he died after a series of strokes on November 4, 1847). Wilhelm continued his career in Berlin; he died November 26, 1861.

I am extremely grateful to Dr. Laura Stokes, who supplied the diary text and its translation, and the information about the courtship.

From Fanny Mendelssohn’s *Tagebücher*, (ed. Hans-Günter Klein and Rudolf Elvers. Breitkopf & Härtel, 2002.)

den 30sten Januar 29.

Nur 8 Tage, aber allerdings von einiger Wichtigkeit. Ich konnte immer nicht zum Schreiben kommen, jetzt, Nachmittags, wo ich Hensel erwarte, bin ich gestimmt dazu. Donnerst., gestern vor 8 T. [Jan. 22] war der Anfang. Es war ein curiöser Abend. Ich hatte mich eben hingesetzt, Clavier spielen, als Dirichlet kam, gleich nachher Hensel auf kurze Zeit, da er zur Robert herübermusste. Mutter war etwas unfreundlich gegen ihn, und ich mehr als gewöhnlich davon affizirt, so dass ich in die übelste Laune gerieth, und Reb ein Paarmal mit mir hinausging, mich zu beruhigen. Dann kam Gans, der uns eben laut perorirend eine Stelle aus einem Stägemannschen Gedicht vorlas, als er, etwa um 10 durch Humboldts Eintritt unterbrochen ward, welcher sogleich mit der Nachricht v. Hensels Anstellung heraus fuhr. Reb. gratulirte mir leise, und wir waren den Rest des Abends etwas preoccupirt. Felix war auf einem Ball bei Heyd und kam erst den andern Morgen um 2, als schon Alles fertig war. Als wir zu Bett waren, besprachen wir noch den ganzen folgenden Tag, und richteten ihn so ein, wie er nachher wirklich kam.

Den andern Morgen. Freitag, früh schrieb ich an der Instrumentierung einer Händelschen Arie. Um 12 etwa kam Hensel, ich war gerade unten, und ging hinten

herum in meine Stube, wo ich mit Reb. bleib, während H mit den Eltern in der grauen Stube sprach. Nachdem ich mich angezogen hatte, las ich mit Beckchen Geographie. Etwa nach einer halben St. kam H. herein und in weniger Minuten waren wir einig. Wir gingen hinein und fanden Mutter überrascht, erschreckt von der Schnelligkeit der Entscheidung, und ausser Stande, ihre Einwilligung zu wiederholen. Vater war gleich sehr froh und zufrieden, Mutter brachten wir, tant bien que mal in Ordnung, die Geschwister waren glücklich, nach 2 kam Felix zu Haus. Auch er war anfangs überrascht, aber nachdem H fort war, nach Tisch, hatte ich ein Gespräch mit ihm, das mich äusserst glücklich machte.

Friday, the 30th of January 1829

Only 8 days, but, however, of singular importance. I couldn't always get to writing, now, in the afternoon, when I am waiting for Hensel, I'm in the mood for it [i.e. writing]. Thursday, 8 days ago [January 22] was the beginning. It was a strange evening. I had just sat down to play the piano when Dirichlet came, followed a short time later by Hensel, who needed to go to the Roberts. Mother was somewhat unfriendly to him, and I was more affected by it than usual, so that I got into the worst mood, and Rebecka had to go out with me a couple of times to calm me down. Then came Gans, who read out loud to us at length from a poem by Stägemann. This was broken off, around 10, by Humboldt's entrance; he immediately told us the news of Hensel's [new] position. Rebecca quietly congratulated me, and we were somewhat preoccupied for the rest of the evening. Felix was at a ball at the Heyd[emanns]', and didn't come until 2 in the morning, when everything was finished. After we [Fanny and Rebecka] went to bed, we talked about the whole next day, and arranged it, as it actually came out afterwards.

The next morning. Friday, the 23rd of January, early I worked on the instrumentation of a Handelian aria. Around noon, Hensel came, I was already downstairs, and went around back to my room, where I stayed with Rebecka, while Hensel talked with our parents in the gray room. After I got dressed, I read geography with Becky. After about half an hour, Hensel came in, and in a few minutes we were united. We went in and found Mother surprised, appalled at the speed of the decision, and unable to reiterate her consent to the engagement. Father was at the same time quite happy and contented, we got Mother back to rights as best we could, the siblings were happy, after 2 Felix came home. He was also surprised at first, but after Hensel left, after the meal, I had a talk with him [Felix], that made me extremely happy.

People referred to: Rebecka Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1811-1858): sister to Fanny. Peter Lejeune Dirichlet (1805-1859): mathematician, married Rebecka in 1832. Eduard Gans (1797-1839): Jewish German jurist. Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859): scientist, explorer, philosopher. Roberts and Heidemanns: family friends of the Mendelssohns.

In case the use of Hensel's last name (or last initial) in the diary seems cold, I include

also a letter that Fanny wrote to Wilhelm on Feb. 5. From *Fanny Hensel geb. Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Werk* ed. Martina Helmig, p. 143.

Wilhelm! Wilhelm! Wird Dich denn meine herzliche Liebe, meine treue Zuneigung nicht, nie befriedigen, darf ich das nicht hoffen? Fühlst du denn nicht von Herzen zu Herzen was Du mir bist? Ich klage mich bitter an, muss mein alter Launendämon immer daswischen treten und uns Tag um Tag die Freude storen.

Ich bin so wütend auf mich, ich knnte mich schlagen. Brich meinen Eigensinn und bis zu ihn gebrochen sieh mein Herz dass Dich liebt duch meine Launen.

Komm so früh wie gestern, es hlt mich ja nach Tisch nichts ab, oder komm jetzt einen Augenblick, wenn Du kannst.

Wilhelm! Wilhelm! Will my heartfelt love, my loyal affection, never satisfy you, may I not hope that? Don't you feel from heart to heart what you are to me? I complain bitterly, my old moody demon always has to interfere and day after day we are deprived of joy.

I am so angry with myself, I could beat myself. Break my stubbornness, and until it is broken, see my heart that loves you through my whims.

Come as early as yesterday, there is nothing to keep me away after lunch, or come now for a moment, if you can.