

**THE “SUPPRESSION” OF FANNY MENDELSSOHN:
RETHINKING FEMINIST BIOGRAPHY**

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This paper seeks to explore, evaluate, and critique a recent article published in the Fall 2002 issue of the 19th Century Music Journal entitled: The “Suppression” of Fanny Mendelssohn: Rethinking Feminist Biography, by Marian Wilson Kimber. The article sets out to cast ground-breaking insight into the fascinating life narrative of Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, one of the Romantic period’s most notorious personalities. Its discourse revolves around what Gloria Kamen calls “the distillation of a story that has become central to biographical representations of Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel.”¹ Kimber’s arguments can be narrowed down to the following three points: “the story is neither accurate, new, nor feminist in its origins or construction”²

The article begins by paraphrasing the suppression story:

“Fanny, equally talented as her brother Felix, was denied by her patriarchal father the professional career in music to which she aspired and was not allowed to publish her music by her repressive brother. Her voice was effectively silenced by men, and her early death tragically ended her attempts to publish, so that she and her music were lost to history”³.

Kimber attributes the prevalence of the suppression story to three recent literary sources. The first is a book by Françoise Tillard: *Fanny Mendelssohn* (1992). Here the suppression story serves as the primary theme behind Fanny’s life narrative. The second source is found within a new edition of previously edited and published correspondence between Fanny and her brother Felix - *Exchange of letters from 1821 to 1846* edited by Eva Weissweiler. Weissweiler alludes to Françoise Tillard’s book by asserting, “Feminist musicologists have discovered a female composer who was prevented by publishing her work by her brother Felix.”⁴ The third and perhaps most glaring source of the story lies within the pages of the second edition *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (2000), under the entry “Hensel” . Marcia J. Citron, the author of the *New Grove* article, hypothesises that Felix was motivated to repress his sister by “jealousy, fear of competition, protectiveness or paternalism.”⁵

Kimber asserts that these three collective sources have largely based their conclusions on two nineteenth-century publications by male members of the Mendelssohn family. The first

¹ Gloria Kamen, *Hidden Music: The Life of Fanny Mendelssohn* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 41.

² Marian Wilson Kimber, “ The “Suppression” of Fanny Mendelssohn: Rethinking Feminist Biography” *19th Century Music* 26/2 (2002): 128.

³ Kimber. “Rethinking Feminist Biography,” p. 113.

⁴ Eva Weissweiler, “Introduction” in *Exchange of Letters from 1821 to 1846*, ed. Eva Weissweiler (Berlin, Germany: Propyläen, 1997), p. 7.

⁵ Citron, J. Marcia “Mendelssohn (-Bartholdy) [Hensel], Fanny (Cäcilie),” *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley and John Tyrell. London: Macmillan, 2000. Vol. 16: 388.

original source is a letter Felix Mendelssohn wrote in reply to his mother's request that he encourage his sister to publish her music (1837). (See Appendix A) Excerpts of this letter were subsequently published by Felix's brother Paul and his son Carl in a volume of family letters entitled *Letters from the Years 1833 to 1847*, published in 1863. The second original source, *Die Familie Mendelssohn* (1879), contains the story of Fanny's publishing as told by her son, Sebastian Hensel. This concludes Kimber's introduction, setting the stage for her discourse.

Kimber's first argument emerges: The story is not accurate in its origins or construction. Paul Mendelssohn and Sebastian Hensel's goals were not to provide accurate documentation for twentieth-century biographers, but to create a socially acceptable image of the lives of their famous relatives.⁶ To combat Sebastian's worry about the materialization of a negative public image of his liberal mother, he writes: "it is the chronicle of a good middleclass family in Germany".⁷ Paul envisioned his brother's published letters as a source of moral instruction; "alone, the work could become a guiding star for many people".⁸ Both Sebastian and Paul were successful in their aims. *The Atlantic Monthly* called for religious societies to circulate his letters, praising Felix as "the perfect Victorian gentleman."⁹ Kimber's research suggests that the original sources of the story were misunderstood, owing to the fact that modern feminist biographers have uncritically accepted a story told from the perspective of nineteenth-century men with a professed agenda. The combined evidence put forth by the sources in question only shows Felix's appropriate male behaviour for the period.

Kimber attacks the validity of the research done by feminist biographers by enquiring why they have chosen to base their conclusions – vilifying Felix – on heavily distorted literature. This is peculiar, considering that the complete uncensored letters of the Mendelssohn family are relatively easy to find in the Mendelssohn archive (Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulterbesitz, Berlin.) It is common practice for researchers to seek out original sources from which to base their hypothesis. Considering that these conclusions have the power to assassinate the good character of one of nineteenth century's most important composers, they should be scrutinised thoroughly. Yet publishers have been quick to publish this sensational story without question, as it most likely brings debate, and ultimately more subscriptions that keep academic journals afloat. Nevertheless, a close reading of the uncensored letter reveals

⁶ Kimber, "Rethinking Feminist Biography," p. 115.

⁷ Sebastian Hensel, *Die Familie Mendelssohn 1729-1847* (Frankfort am Main: Insel, 1995), p. 877.

⁸ Letter from Paul Mendelssohn to Karl Klingemann, December 10, 1847, in Ingeborg Stolzenberg, *Mendelssohn Studien 8 (Berlin)*: Duncker & Humblot, 1993), p. 184.

⁹ W. L. Gage, "Mendelssohn - Bartholdy's Letters." *The Atlantic Monthly* 15/87 (1865): 126.

Felix did not forbid Fanny to do anything (see Appendix A); nor does the letter indicate Felix's belief in women's inferiority as composers to which feminist biographers allude. It only shows Felix's concern over his sister's poor health. This prompted him to try to convince Fanny to eliminate some stress that may aggravate her condition. Fanny died of a stroke at the early age of 41, which would substantiate this claim. The letter also shows that Felix felt it was not his place to give advice regarding her decision to publish, telling his mother not to mention his opinion to Fanny. The censored part of the letter reads that Felix loved Fanny's compositions and regarded them as "... *beautiful and excellent*."¹⁰ Felix adds that he will provide the opportunity for her to publish if she decides to do so, but with reservations. This statement was what was effectively published out of context, both by the Mendelssohn family, and by many modern biographers.

Kimber continues by raising an interesting point which regards the over-simplification of Fanny's publishing history, which intimately underestimates the degree to which she was known during her lifetime. Fanny did in fact publish both under her own name and under the anonymity of Felix's name. The anonymous songs were published in Felix's Opp. 8 and 9, in 1827-1830. This detail is often taken by feminist biographers as the primary evidence to prove Felix's repression of Fanny's musical voice. Kimber states that many feminists assume that this was done without Fanny's permission, calling it "a dishonourable act."¹¹ They suggest that Felix not only silenced his sister's voice, but usurped a fame that should have been hers. Kimber's research alludes that in actuality, it was just the opposite: the wider public knew about Fanny's authorship of the songs in question. Sebastian Hensel wrote more people believed Felix Mendelssohn's published compositions were by Fanny than actually were.¹² As Kimber points out, it was common practice for female composers to use pseudonyms and to publish anonymously. To substantiate this fact, one only needs to look at the famous writer and notorious Chopin romancer Aurore Dudevant who wrote under the pen-name George Sand. Kimber's first argument concludes by proposing that the emphasis on Felix as a villain in Fanny's life narrative is at the expense of understanding the larger social context surrounding the issue.¹³

¹⁰ Letter from Felix Mendelssohn to His mother Lea Mendelssohn, June 24, 1837, in Peter Jones, *The Mendelssohns on Honeymoon: The 1837 Diary of Felix and Cécile Mendelssohn Bartholdy Together with Letters to Their Families*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), p. 165.

¹¹ Françoise Tillard, *Fanny Mendelssohn*, trans. Camille Naish. (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus, 1996), p.130.

¹² Hensel, *Die Familie Mendelssohn*, p. 480.

¹³ Kimber. "Rethinking Feminist Biography," p. 118.

Midway through the article, Kimber argues her second point: The story is not new in its origins and construction. Kimber begins this section by raising an interesting query: Why, given that the evidence proves the contrary, does the story of the suppression of Fanny persist?¹⁴ Her life, for who is a model for the life of the “great composer,” models based in romantic ideology about male artists. Kimber writes, “To be great, is to resemble the male hero.”¹⁵ But how do historians devise a “plot” for a woman who was married, had a son, hosted salons in her home, composed music, and died at forty-one? Lacking the material for a typical male narrative, Kimber believes feminist biographers have ignored her apparent happiness amidst her auspiciously affluent lifestyle. They have projected Fanny’s likeness onto a stereotypical nineteenth-century narrative of a suffering genius. Beethoven’s deafness, Schubert’s poverty, and Schumann’s madness all qualify for this “romantic” model.

Kimber alludes that this supposed suppression is a rescue plot in which modern feminist women rediscover Hensel and somehow “save” her from historical obscurity.¹⁶ If so, this rediscovery would rely on the assumption that she was forgotten after her death. Kimber offers some evidence that suggests otherwise. Fanny’s work was frequently performed throughout Europe and the Americas during her lifetime, by Clara Schumann and Otto Dressel, and in the modern day, by Liana Serbescu and Sarah Rothenburg. These performances not only keep her music alive by means of having them physically played, but by the discussions and reviews they incite. After attending a concert in 1892, a reviewer from *The Boston Globe* refuted a quote from Antonín Dvořák stating “women have no creative power.” He intervened, “There is a case for Mendelssohn’s sister, who wrote as good a trio as Mendelssohn ever produced.”¹⁷ A review from *The Musical Times* stated “these songs by Mendelssohn’s sister are already known to most music lovers of part music.”¹⁸ To close her second argument, Kimber reminds the reader that the recovery of Fanny’s work depends on them being lost in the first place.

Kimber’s third hypothesis transpires: The Suppression story is not feminist in its origins and construction. The author indicates that feminist biographers often use the “what if” question when critically looking at the life narrative of its subjects. What if Felix behaved differently, if he had encouraged Fanny to publish, if she had published numerous compositions, what then?¹⁹ To envision an alternative to Hensel’s life is to create historical

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

¹⁷ “Antonín Dvořák: Symphony No. 9, From the New World. New York: Voyager, 1994, CD-ROM.

¹⁸ Unsigned review “Six Four-Part Songs”, *The Musical Times* 20/3 (1879): 159.

¹⁹ Kimber. “Rethinking Feminist Biography,” p. 123.

impossibilities. Kimber believes that despite her talent, Fanny's gender would have always been an issue. She points to the fact that most reviews of her work mention something to the effect that, "it's pretty good for a woman."

Kimber refers to the frequently documented feminist discourse that attempts to confirm Fanny's supposed deep sense of frustration when she writes, "the tragic frustration... (is) largely of their own construction."²⁰ The objective of feminist biography has become the creation of a discourse based on what women might have said. The true purpose of the feminist biography is less about its subject than about the need to provide role models for living women.

To conclude this summary, Kimber collects the following thoughts: It is wrong when biographical narratives attempt to make Fanny Hensel's life conform to models used for male composers or to promote her as a suppressed feminist hero. Fanny is hijacked when she simply functions as a symbol of the suppression of women within the dominant patriarchy, which finds personification in her oppressive brother. The article closes with this rather ominous statement: "the danger of telling only the story of repression is that feminist biography will not serve as a force for the recovery of women into history, but rather a continual documentation of their failures."²¹

To evaluate Kimber's article, one could describe it as very clearly written and extraordinarily dense. It is organized into linear and tightly knit arguments, which utilize a persuasive style. Each of her points are carefully substantiated, resulting in a fairly convincing argument. In addition, her writing style is compendiously fluid, allowing for a relatively effortless read, even for someone new to historical musicology. Kimber's methodology applies substantiated facts, which are cited in the form of footnotes throughout the article. Readers are also provided with an interesting appendix, from which they may study for themselves the famous early letter that apparently damns Felix as oppressor. Kimber has successfully installed a genuine curiosity into Fanny Hensel's life narrative in the reader. One can't help but notice the possibilities that unveil themselves for further study. One such example lies within Kimber's citation of a book by Peter Ward Jones, which attests that Fanny was on her honeymoon at the time Felix wrote "the" letter to his mother Lea in 1837.²² If this were the case, her son Sebastian would have been seven years old at that time. This would mean Fanny gave birth to Sebastian out of wedlock, which is a serious social "faux pas" not only in

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 127-128.

²² Peter Ward Jones, *The Mendelssohn's on Honeymoon: The 1837 Diary of Felix and Cécile Mendelssohn Bartholdy Together with Letters to Their Families*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), p. 54

nineteenth-century Germanic culture, but even today. This could explain why Sebastian's name was censored from the public in the nineteenth-century editions of the published family correspondence. (See Appendix A: unedited letter censored/shaded portion: second paragraph, line two)

To critique this article, one must ultimately consider what Kimber has set out to accomplish, and determine if she has met her objective. While considering this objective, one is restricted to the evidence at hand. At best, the evidence seems ambiguous in that it can be construed in a number of ways, from Felix as villain, to Felix as saviour. One alarming aspect found in both [sic] camps, is the lack of acknowledgement to evidence that could have questioned the validity of their respective arguments. For example, when looking at the evidence biographers such as Marcia Citron and Françoise Tillard have used, one finds the frequent appearance of a letter written by Fanny to Felix on May 28th, 1829. (See Appendix B) This letter discloses Fanny's clear frustration, bitterness and even fear towards her brother in regards to her publishing. Yet, Kimber does not mention this letter in her analysis. Just as Kimber has ignored important evidence, so has the research of feminist biographers by way of their disturbing refusal to consider uncensored versions of the Mendelssohn family correspondence in their research. Yet, all considered, the article's most positive attribute is the fact that until now, there have been no sources of contention disputing Fanny's suppression story. Kimber has provided the world of historical musicology with a much-needed alternative that may spark a new-found momentum into solving the enigma of Hensel's life. Whether the reader believes in the validity of a feminist conclusion of Fanny's narrative, or in Kimber's ultimate conclusion discussed above, it is wise to remember the old adage: "truth usually lies somewhere in the middle of two opposing extremes."

Appendix A

Edited letter by Paul and Carl Mendelssohn, in order to show the 19th century public a socially acceptable image of the lives of their famous relatives:

I cannot persuade her to publish anything, because it is against my views and convictions. We have previously spoken a great deal about it, and I still hold the same opinion. I consider publishing something serious (it should at least be that) 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, one after the other....Fanny, as I know her, possesses neither the inclination nor the calling for authorship. She is too much a woman, as is proper, for that, and looks after her house and thinks neither about the public nor the musical world, nor even about music, unless that primary occupation is accomplished. Publishing would only disturb her in these duties, and I cannot reconcile myself to it. Therefore I will not persuade her – forgive me. If she decides to publish out of self-motivation, or to please Hensel, I am, as I said, ready to be helpful as much as I can, but to encourage her toward something I don't consider right is what I cannot do²³.

The true unedited letter containing all the information needed to understand the context around Felix's view of Fanny's publishing: (shaded area were censored from public)

You write to me about Fanny's new pieces and tell me I ought to persuade her and provide her the opportunity to publish them. You praise her new compositions to me, and that is really not necessary, in that I look forward to them very much, and regard them as beautiful and excellent; for I do from whom they come. Also I hope I need not say a word [about the fact] that, as soon as she herself decides to publish something, I will, as much as I can, provide the opportunity for this and take all the trouble from her, thereby sparing her from it. But persuade her to publish something I cannot, for it is against my view and conviction. We have spoken much about this earlier, and I am still of the same opinion – I consider publication to be something serious (at least it ought to be that) and believe that one should only do it if one wants to present oneself and continue one's whole life as an author. For this a series of works is required, one after the other; one or two alone is only an annoyance to the public, or it becomes a so-called vanity publication [literally, "a manuscript for friends"], which I also do not like.

And Fanny, as I know her, has neither desire nor vocation for authorship; in addition, she is too much a wife, as is right, brings up her Sebastian and takes care of her house, and

²³ Letter from Felix Mendelssohn to His mother Lea Mendelssohn, June 24, 1837, in Marcia, Citron *Musical Quarterly LXIX/4: The Lieder of Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel* (England: Oxford University Press 1983), p. 572.

thinks neither of the public nor of the musical world, nor even of music, except when this first vocation is fulfilled. Having [something] printed would only intrude into this, and I just cannot reconcile myself to that. I will not persuade her to do this, forgive me. But don't show these words either to Fanny or to Hensel, who would take it very badly from me or surely misunderstand – better that nothing at all be said of this. If Fanny, on her own initiative, or for Hensel's sake, decides on it, I am, as I said, ready to be as helpful to her as I am able, but to urge [her] on to something that I do not consider right, this I cannot do.

Please write to me again whether these big social gatherings that Fanny gives and the music-making in them do not take their toll on her. I have always become very exhausted by this, and since Fanny, too, often suffers from weak nerves, as I do, I really think she must be very careful of herself in this regard. And will it not do at all for her to go to the seaside resort? It is such a splendid cure, so decisively invigorating, that I would like it very much if she did it; and if I could part so soon after marriage, be apart from her husband for a short time. – You write that it is not necessary, but if it did her good and really invigorated and

refreshed her, it would indeed be worth the sacrifice. Oh, please advise her to do it, dear mother, and I will write a few lines to her myself and pester her about it.²⁴

²⁴ Letter from Felix Mendelssohn to his mother Lea Mendelssohn, June 24, 1837, in *The Mendelssohn's on Honeymoon: The 1837 Diary of Felix and Cécile Mendelssohn Bartholdy Together with Letters to Their Families*, ed by Jones Peter (Oxford: Claredon, 1997), pp. 165-68.

Appendix B

For forty years I've been afraid of my brother, as I was at fourteen of father, or rather afraid is not the right word, but rather desirous during my entire life to please you and everyone whom I love, and if I know in advance that it will not be the case, I therefore feel rather uncomfortable. In a word, I am beginning to publish. I have Herr Bock's esteemed offer for my Lieder, I've finally turned a receptive ear to his favourable terms....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 have proceeded, as you see, completely independently, in order to spare you any unpleasant moment. If the venture succeeds, that is if the compositions please [people], then I know that it will be a great stimulus to me, something I always required in order to publish anything.²⁵

²⁵ Letter from Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel to Felix Mendelssohn, July 9, 1846, in *Green Books Collection XXIV/3*, (Oxford: Bodleian Library), p. 154.