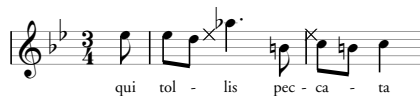


Beethoven's marvelous sense of humor. "Often he would mention only a single key word pertaining to an anecdote, believing that it was sufficient to convey his meaning. Those who were unfamiliar with the anecdote, or who did not immediately catch the allusion, would be puzzled, but those who caught on would quickly burst into laughter."

For example: Beethoven might be sitting in the audience at a concert, listening to a singer who is performing poorly on stage, and would nudge the person seated beside him, saying the single phrase, "Da capo!" [Encore!] This traced back to the following story: "In Paris, a mediocre singer, with a weak voice, slight chest, and so forth, performed an interminable bravura aria. Everyone longed for it to end. It finally did, and the singer was roundly booed. Only one person in the audience called out 'Da capo.' The singer, listening only to that one voice, bowed humbly, and gratefully repeated the entire aria, though he could hardly hear himself because of the ensuing uproar in the house. When he ended, the hissing and booing was worse than before, but as it died down, the same low male voice shouted very loudly again, 'Da capo!'"

Indeed, the singer bowed once more and launched into the aria for the third time. The other listeners were about to turn against the man who had caused all the trouble, when he exclaimed, 'Je voulais faire cr ver cette can[aille]!' [I was hoping the wretch would sing himself to death!]."

Schlusser's biography also publishes a private letter by Beethoven, whose content is useful for clearing up yet another popular myth, that Beethoven was insensitive to "proper" *bel canto* singing, and to "proper" setting of musical texts. It is a letter dated Feb. 6, 1826, addressed to his friend Abb  Stadler, who had just published an in-depth defense of the authenticity of Mozart's *Requiem*, which had been called into question by the composer Gottfried Weber (not the famous opera composer). After thanking the Abb  profusely for his paper, Beethoven adds, with irony, that it is hardly surprising that Weber's "extraordinary knowledge of harmony and melody" also resulted in the following clumsy passage in one of Weber's own works:



Just what Beethoven is objecting to in those places he has marked with an "x," only becomes clear when we compare Beethoven's own setting of this same passage in his two Masses: first, in the "Gloria" of his *Mass in C Major*, Op. 86:



and in the "Agnus Dei" of his *Missa Solemnis*, Op. 123:



If you sing these three musical examples in succession, it becomes clear that in the Weber settings, Beethoven has placed an "x" near the two eighth-notes on the syllables "tol-" and "ca-," in order to indicate that these syllables must be sung over a *single* note, and not tied over two or more notes. Weber's phrasing destroys the unity of the phrase as a whole: "Qui tollis peccata mundi" [Thou who takest away the sins of the world], not to mention the rising notes on the syllable "lis" of "tollis," which completely throw off the poetic stresses in the phrase.

—John Sigerson

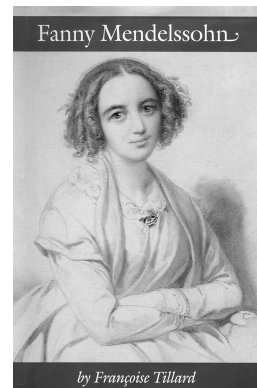
## Product of a World of Genius

Lea Salomon Mendelssohn started her daughter Fanny on piano, five minutes at a sitting, extending it as interest grew. At thirteen, Fanny memorized the whole of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, while studying science, languages, geography, history, poetry, and reading Schiller and Lessing. At fourteen, she sang alto in the famous (adult) Singakademie. At fifteen, Goethe responded to *lieder* she had composed, with "To the Distant Girl." Fanny and her three siblings played games by composing poems, riddles, *lieder*, and plays.

Her mother Lea read Homer in the original Greek. She raised her children on Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. Lea's aunt, Sara Levy, a

student of W.F. Bach, played J.S. Bach concerti for the Berlin Singakademie concerts. One Christmas Eve, Sara left a present for Fanny's fourteen-year-old brother Felix—a copy of Bach's long-forgotten *St. Matthew Passion*. Another of Lea's aunts, Fanny Arnstein, provided Mozart with his copy of Moses Mendelssohn's work, *Phaedon*, which contained a reprise of Plato's arguments in his *Phaedo* dialogue. Of course, Lea had married into the illustrious Mendelssohn family. Her poor husband Abraham, son of Moses and father of Felix, would later lament: "Until now I was known as father's son; henceforth, I shall be known as my son's father."

Fran oise Tillard, a pianist who has



Fanny Mendelssohn

by Fran oise Tillard

translated by Camille Naish  
Amadeus Press, Portland, 1996  
339 pages, hardbound, \$39.95

recorded Fanny Mendelssohn's works, published this biography in French in 1992. There is no lack of rich material for the author to develop, to make this

first-ever biography of Fanny accomplish its sincerely desired goal: to make people “love” Fanny, so they will “approach Fanny’s music and rescue it, at last, from the anonymity of her private life.”

The problem is, that Tillard has chosen a subject which is richer than she knows how to explain. She herself has not learned from the study which Fanny’s grandfather conducted of Plato’s Socrates, and seems, therefore, to be unaware of what it is she does not know. As a consequence, she provides a lot of “Sociology 101”-type explanations for culture, history, and ideas, which fall far below the intellectual level of events within the Mendelssohn household.

### ‘Feminist’ Criticism

What’s more, there is the equivalent of an unpleasant nervous tic lying beneath the narrative, which surfaces at irregular intervals. For example, when Fanny wishes to meet her brother Felix’s fiancée, we are told that this is “again the archaic notion that a woman changes when she is no longer a virgin.” Possibly; but the naive assumption, that the person who most shared Felix’s upbringing, mind and soul, might wish to meet his fiancée sooner rather than later, is not necessarily the wrong one. Or again, when Felix does not push Fanny out into the world of publishing, to be left to conquer the prejudice against women composers, Tillard lashes out: “Did he really need to crush her so completely, in order to fulfill his own artistic potential?”

It gets worse. The book’s most telling fault comes with Tillard’s willingness to defend her woman composer, by attacking the concept of “genius” as a masculine imposition: “Above all, however, the notion of genius belongs to a world of masculine concepts that do not include female creativity.”

Tillard’s client doesn’t need this defense. The author knows, after all, that the Mendelssohns could overcome odds, specifically citing the case of Moses, who, as a poor, hunchbacked Jew, had to overcome prejudice just to

pursue his education. She also knows that whatever the sisters Fanny and Rebecka accomplished, was “judged on its own merits, without being subject to ‘feminine’ criteria.” However, she chooses not to apply the Mendelssohns’ own standards when writing Fanny’s biography.

In reality, Fanny Mendelssohn was very insightful on what was for her, not a cause, but a very real problem. When Felix tries to be sympathetic, suggesting Fanny’s slower progress in composition is caused by the new demands of running her home, she corrects him: “I’ve been wondering how I came to compose [as I have]. . . . I think it comes from the fact that we were young during Beethoven’s last period and . . . had assimilated his art and style. But that style is very emotional and wrenching. . . . I’ve remained stuck in it, but without the strength through which that sensitivity can and must endure. That’s why I think you didn’t hit the right mark in me or address the issue. It is not so much the compositional skill that is lacking, as a certain approach to life, and because of this deficiency my longer pieces are already dying of old age in their infancy: I lack sufficient strength to sustain my ideas and give the necessary consistency. That’s why I’m best at writing *lieder*, where an appealing idea may suffice, without much strength to develop it.”

Fanny wrote *lieder* as naturally as breathing: “[T]his morning [her husband Wilhelm, an artist and expert on Raphael] came and without saying anything, put a piece of paper [with verse] on the piano; five minutes later I called him back and sang him the music, which was set down on the paper in another quarter of an hour.” *Lieder* were the bulk of her four hundred works.

### The Humboldt System

Lea’s children were trained to look behind the ostensible subject, and to address the underlying process—in a poem, in politics, drama, science, and, yes, music. They received the epitome of the “Humboldt” education. Fanny attended Alexander von Humboldt’s

physical geography lectures (calling them “infinitely interesting,” she pursued another “lecture series . . . on experimental physics”). Their childhood tutor, philologist Karl Heyse, taught at Wilhelm von Humboldt’s university. (In fact, the two Humboldt brothers had themselves studied Leibniz at the feet of Fanny’s grandfather Moses.) Abraham Mendelssohn built a special observatory in his garden for Alexander to measure magnetic fields. He brought his protégé, Dirichlet, from Lafayette’s republican networks in France, to help. They would work, listening to Felix and Fanny rehearsing, four-hand, for the now-famous revival of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*. It makes perfect sense that Dirichlet fell in love with the younger sister, Rebecka, and married into the Mendelssohn clan. Of course, he had to compete with suitors Eduard Gans (who had read Plato with Rebecka) and Heinrich Heine (whose unique style of courting included sending his greetings to “chubby Rebecka . . . so charming and kind, and every pound of her an angel”).

Fanny is intelligent, passionate, honest, witty, blunt, and usually right. Her phrase for dealing with artists when setting up her Sunday salon concerts, was: “There are so many cows with tails that need untying.” She follows world politics insightfully, trashes Napoleon, confronts pianists who have magic fingers but no brains, notes who is pushing up the pitch, confronts family illnesses and miscarriages. And, yes, she does, at the age of forty, become confident enough to publish. At forty-two, she composes a glorious D minor Piano Trio. But, within weeks, she suddenly dies. Felix was crushed; less than six months later, he himself was dead at thirty-eight.

A reader of German should go straight to Fanny’s *Tagebuch*, and her son’s family history, for another thousand precious anecdotes. But, for the English-bound, its few hundred anecdotes by themselves make this book worth reading. Just look the other way when the facial tic appears.

—David M. Shavin



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