

“Now I’m engaged in another small work that’s giving me much fun, namely a series of 12 piano pieces meant to depict the months.” - *Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, letter to August Elsasser (painter)*. In 1841 Fanny presented this cycle to her husband, artist Wilhelm Hensel, as a Christmas gift. Together they created a second autograph copy of the pieces with illustrated vignettes by Wilhelm, and with added verses from Fanny’s favorite poets engraved into pages between. In 1842 this was bound in leather with an engraved title page, making her intention to publish very clear.

In calling this a “small work” Fanny’s modesty shines through. It is no such thing and it is hugely significant in the body of her work: At the age of 36 she produced her major piano composition

“- nearly an hour in length, it dwarfed Felix’s efforts for the instrument - (and) dramatically expanded the scope of the small-scale piano pieces she had hitherto composed”

- R. Larry Todd *The Other Mendelssohn*

Perhaps she was inspired by Robert Schumann’s great piano cycles of the 1830’s, but her construction of a large work made up of 12 related works was obviously clear and very intentional: the sequence of keys is coordinated, beginning with B major, and going from mostly sharp keys in the first half to mostly flat keys in the second, but each related to the preceding key, and ending in C major, with the postlude, “Nachspiel” in A, the relative minor. In three pieces Fanny quotes what would have been to her in Berlin familiar Protestant* chorales “Christ ist erstanden” (Christ is arisen) for March (Easter), “Vom Himmel Hoch” (From Heaven High) in December (Christmas), and “Das Alte Jahr Vergangen ist” (The Old Year is Passed) in Nachspiel, the postlude. Her quotations of and variations on these chorales is an indication of her deep knowledge and respect for a composer she and Felix helped to resurrect with their research: Johann Sebastian Bach (after whom she named her son, Sebastian). Bach’s music was mostly forgotten until Felix and Fanny, deeply influenced by their mother and aunt who knew Bach’s music well and always enjoined the musical twins to practice it despite it’s being out of style – revived it. In March of 1829 in Berlin Felix conducted the first performance of the St Matthew Passion in over 100 years. Thus a revival of Bach’s works began.

Das Jahr has been called by some music historians a work of remembrance of the year in Italy which Fanny and Wilhelm and little Sebastian spent in 1839-40. I disagree with the idea that this is just a travelogue: it seems to me to be much more an impressionistic work, describing each month as having its own climate and aspect. Beginning with the brand new year in a low bass opening, one can hear the bristling blue night sky and single stars of midnight on January 1st. Then the rising bass octaves in February are like the unrelenting wind, punctuated by repeated bass octaves. Or listen for the rising and swiftly moving lines in March that are like the onset of warmer spring and rains, or the crushing and crashing heat and storms of August and July. This is truly a year in her climate.

Additionally, she had been ruminating for some time about writing a song cycle, influenced by Josephine Lang, a professional singer and songwriter from Munich whom she and Felix both admired. Clearly the idea of an extended and interconnected work was on her internal agenda before Italy ever happened. Most of all, to me, this is a piece that shows Fanny’s virtuosic ability – the so called 3-hand work, in which the right or left thumb is given the melody while the other fingers play all sort of ornamentation above and below and even crossing. It’s a remarkable piece of music, written by someone who was forced to stop studying music at the age of 13 so that, as her father enjoined her, she could concentrate on becoming a wife and mother.

Incredible as it is, the bound volume was lost until 1989. Fanny made no mention of this work in her diaries, so it wasn’t being hunted for as so many of her other pieces have been. However, many of her works were discovered, unearthed in only the final two decades of the last century, and have been published almost as quickly as they’re being discovered. Lucky for us!

I have had the great good fortune to be able to place our intermezzi vocal pieces according to Fanny’s plan, with the key of the vocal work being the same as the piano piece either preceding or following. And in being faithful to her plan, I have not disturbed the two breaks between January and

February, and between April and May which Fanny marked *attacca*, or without pause. You will note that we have one moment where we move in *attacca* fashion between *Schone Fremde* and *Feldblumen* -in E minor and E major which flow to April in E major. It has been a fun exercise to find and place these pieces for Cappella Clausura's singers in between the months, as performed by my brilliant friend and colleague, Lois Shapiro.

* Addendum: Bach Protestant Chorales in a Jewish household

When Lea Mendelssohn (née Salomon) gave birth to her first child Fanny on November 14th, 1805 she immediately observed her daughter's "Bach fugal fingers". Lea's aunt Sarah Itzig Levy had maintained and passed on a fascination with the "cerebral" music of the Bachs. Sarah studied with W.F. Bach and became a patroness of C.P.E. Bach, frequently appearing as piano soloist for Bach concerti, including J.S. Bach's Brandenburg concerti. She collected and preserved much of the music of Bach. Lea for her turn played the Well Tempered Clavier once a day and enjoined her children to do so as well. We owe Sarah Levy and Lea Salomon both a huge debt of gratitude because they introduced the Mendelssohn children to Bach, which led Fanny and Felix to resurrect the St Matthew Passion. There is no question that Bach was well studied and central to both Felix and Fanny as a model of musical perfection which they both attempted to emulate in their work. Fanny quotes 3 chorales in *Das Jahr*, and her cantata, the utterly remarkable work in memory of all those lost in the cholera epidemic of 1831, the *Oratorium von Bildung der Bibel*, includes her own composed chorale in the style of Bach (Cappella Clausura premiered this work in 2019, along with her other 2 cantatas written in 1831 the same year she gave birth).

Abraham Mendelssohn was the son of Moses Mendelssohn, eminent Jewish philosopher, recognized as a Talmudic scholar and polyglot. Moses was a religiously liberal spokesman for German Enlightenment. Lea and Abraham had their children baptised as Protestants, perhaps coincidentally on Bach's birthday, March 21st, 1816, when Fanny was 11. They also added the second surname Bartholdy (the name of the baronial mansion Lea's grandfather purchased long before) thus - they hoped - becoming acceptable in all society. This was following the Emancipation Edict of 1812 in Prussia directing Jewish subjects to adopt existing (Christian) family names. The Mendelssohns chose not to publicize this event to their families - Lea's mother, who was orthodox, would not have approved. At this time, conversion was almost "popular" in Berlin for middle and upper middle class Jews pursuing assimilation (and acceptance). It solved the ongoing dilemma of whether to raise one's children in the dominant culture or risk the whims of whichever government was in power, led by whichever royal or regent. The laws for Jews in all of Europe were constantly changing, and constantly challenging, and always meant to keep people of the Jewish faith either quarantined, or ghettoed, or simply out. The Mendelssohns were among the fortunate few in their day.