

## Fanny Mendelssohn (1805-1847): Overture in C Major (1832)

Fanny Mendelssohn wrote nearly 500 compositions, including songs, cantatas, piano works, and chamber music. The vast majority remained unpublished in her lifetime, and a few were published under Felix's name. There's a telling story involving his introduction to Queen Victoria, who praised him for writing her favorite song. He had to confess that it was actually Fanny who had written it. In fact, Felix depended quite a lot on Fanny's expert opinion in his own compositions. In their letters to one another he often seeks her approval in a way that shows his own vulnerability. From today's perspective (and certainly from Fanny's at the time), it's frustrating that she didn't receive equal support in return. In a letter to Felix, their mother tried to intervene on Fanny's behalf. Felix responded "You write to me about Fanny's new compositions and say that I ought to persuade her to publish them... if she does resolve to publish anything, I will do all in my power to obtain every facility for her, and to relieve her, so far as I can, from all trouble which can possibly be spared her. But to *persuade* her to publish anything I cannot, because this is contrary to my views and to my convictions... She is too much all that a woman ought to be for this. She regulates her house, and neither thinks of the public nor of the musical world, nor even of music at all, until her first duties are fulfilled. Publishing would only disturb her in these, and I cannot say that I approve of it." Their father, Abraham, was even less supportive, and it was only after she married her husband, William Hensel, that she found a true advocate for the publication of her works.

It's sad to think that the work we hear today, Overture in C, languished "undiscovered" in a library for over a hundred years after Fanny's death. As far as we know, it's the only purely instrumental work for full orchestra that she composed. Its obvious charms have made it a popular addition to the symphonic repertoire, and it stands as one of the very few examples of orchestral works by female composers of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While we typically think of overtures as preceding a larger work like an opera or a ballet, this one is a concert overture, which is a stand-alone work. Many concert overtures of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were programmatic, telling a story, often from a novel or a play. This one, however, is purely musical. We can imagine (or not) our own narrative. It starts with a slow introduction. Beginning with a beautifully pastoral slow introduction, melodic motives in the strings and winds create a sunrise in sound as they yawn and stretch. Shards of light in sound increasingly brighten the day, and a solo flute stretches us to a high point of the introduction just as the sound of timpani and a scurry of strings interrupt, foreshadowing the galloping section to come. Following the slow introduction, the form of the work is sonata-allegro; listen for the musical themes first presented in the exposition section; listen for the musical themes presented in the *exposition* section. These themes are then selectively varied and explored in a *development* section before the composer brings back the original themes of the exposition in a final section called a *recapitulation*. The themes are almost as we heard them originally but reimagined in more glorious fashion that crescendos to a climactic finish.