

String Quartet in E-Flat Major by Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel (1805-1847)

When Felix Mendelssohn arrived in Frankfurt in May, 1847, he was met by the news that his beloved sister Fanny had collapsed during a rehearsal with a ruptured aneurism and had died of a stroke. He fainted upon hearing the news. Theirs had been a special relationship. They encouraged each other, comforted each other, shared their most intimate thoughts and feelings; they were not only siblings, they were best friends.

Like her contemporaries in 19th century Europe, Fanny's artistic gifts were considered an inappropriate way for a woman to make a living. Moses Mendelssohn wrote, "Music will perhaps become [Felix's] profession, while for you it can and must be only an ornament." Felix was more tolerant but agreed with his father that her lot would be wrapped up in her duties as wife and mother. These duties she embraced but she also continued composing throughout her life. She wrote more than 400 works without the fanfare the music deserved. Her position as hostess, arranger, musician and composer at the Mendelssohn family's legendary musical soirees partly absorbed the sting of her artistic rejection.

Felix recognized her enormous talent and had some of her songs published under his own name simply to get what he thought were brilliant works into print. In 1846, his integrity was thoroughly put to the test, though, when Queen Victoria expressed admiration for his song *Italian*. Felix, this most celebrated composer, famous the world over, perhaps at that moment red-faced, humbly told the queen that the song was actually by his sister.

Fanny's only string quartet was written in 1834 and is a passionate and beautiful work. It opens, unusually for a large-scale composition, with a lovely but fervent *Adagio ma non troppo*. This short introductory movement is followed by a spirited follow-up which makes one realize that the gift for writing spritely and magical scherzos obviously ran in the Mendelssohn family. The third movement, *Romanze*, though desperately sorrowful, is also stunningly gorgeous and the restless and irresistible finale ends the piece with a joyful flourish.