Theorizing Music History: Intertextuality as a tool for reclaiming the past in Fanny Mendelssohn's cantata 'Lobgesang"[1]

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One could hardly argue that women composers (or, for that matter male composers) are preoccupied with the past in the same way that women novelists are. The reason is rooted first and foremost in the short memory of musical audiences; at a time when 18th-century librettists were drawing on the writings of Suetonius and Ariosto, Burney[2] was transcribing the music of Dunstable[3] in a way that betrayed his complete misunderstanding of the music. Music, in a sense, has always been modern. Nevertheless it would be wrong to assume that past and future are not present in musical works, in the same way that it would be incorrect to think that any text evolves in vacuum; without being affected by the contexts of life around, personal, psychological, cultural, or political. For this reason, earlier music may be heard in the context of later, as though influence worked backwards; a powerful new work in an old style, like Bach's organ Canzone in D minor, sheds intriguing new lights on the music it echoes.

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[1] In *Women's Writing.* Mark Llewellyn & Ann Heilmann (Eds.) Cambridge: Triangle Journals, **12 / 1,** 2005, 59-72.

[2] Charles Burney, music historian and a composer, born April 7, 1726, Shrewsbury, England; died April 12, 1814, Chelsea, England.

[3] John Dunstable (c.1385-1453); leading composer in the first half of 15th century, through whom the characteristic features of English musical style of the period became known.

In this article I will present Fanny Mendelssohn's cantata 'Lobgesang' ('Song of Praise') as a model for such influence.

I will show that this specific cantata that is usually referred to as an autobiographical cantata, is a typical model of intertextuality; thus, 'Lobegesang' is not defined merely by the events in Fanny's life but by similarities, and dissimilarities, to other texts that form the universe of texts and to which it belongs.[4] Consequently, 'Lobgesang' is constructed on a Bach-format cantata, rather than on a central voice that signifies the subjectivity of the composer. As such it is the subjectivity of the text that we, listeners, (score readers and non-readers), encounter. From it we draw the meaning of the piece.

A musical text occupies a greater space than the score. Thus, in order to get a full understanding of such a text we must enquire about the composer's social position, her history, and her psychology, and we must listen for the many contexts, musical, social, anthropological, and historical. But a musical work embodies more than just the composer's vocation; it contains speaking subjects, authorial voices that are distinguished from the human author "because the text, before it becomes a text, is part of a network of texts, the whole body of thought, which determines its nature and development and furnishes its lexicon".[5] Edward Cone coins such musical subjectivities as 'musical personas.' [6]

The term 'persona' used by Cone derives from the Latin term 'mask' that refers to the masks that were worn by Greek and Roman actors in the classical drama. Each

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[4] Monelle 2000: 150-151.
[5] Ibid: 166.
[6] Cone 1974: 18.

persona, then, was a role, and each composition contained personas that were created uniquely for it. Cone speaks of a three-fold persona figure that contains the vocal persona, the instrumental persona, and the 'complete musical persona.' The vocal personas are impersonated by the different singers, and by the choir, and are literary parallel of projected voices of mythical speakers, poetic characters, and narrators. In comparison, the different musical instruments that are set in different, and unique, forms in each and every work, impersonate 'instrumental personas.' These convey the symbolic utterance of a virtual persona. When the two personas, vocal, and instrumental, coincide, a 'complete, [and composite], musical persona is revealed which is *not* identical with the composer; it is "a projection of his musical intelligence, constituting the mind, so to speak, of the composition in question." [7]

The complete musical persona forms a text that is located in the center of a network of texts from which we draw an understanding of a world that is not meant, not said, "not in the text". It is this intertextual web with its multi-cultural codes that becomes a tool for decoding the tension created by the gaps between different subjectivities on the one hand and musical narratives in the historical context on the other. In this decoding process, we create a new understanding of the musical text that turns these gaps into legitimate material for re-writing musical history.

1831 was a happy, and fruitful, year for Fanny Hensel-Mendelssohn.[8] Sebastian, the delicate boy who was born two months before his time, and who was an only child, grew stronger. As a result Fanny and her husband, Wilhelm Hensel, were starting to

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[7] Ibid: 57

[8] Fanny (Cäcilie) Mendelssohn-Bartholdy-Hensel. Born in Hamburg on November 14th 1805 died in Berlin on May 14th, 1847.

experience a blessed routine that enabled both of them to work in a most tranquil manner. Wilhelm moved into Abraham Mendelssohn's (Fanny's father's) studio adjoining the garden-saloon. In January 1831 the family decided to renew the studio and turn it into a comfortable and well equipped, painting room. Contiguous to it another room was built; this one turned into a studio for pupils who became part of the artistic and musical life that was led in the Hensel home.

With her husband working at home, and devoting every free moment he had to her and to their baby, Fanny allowed herself to sit often in her studio and work without losing sight of the baby and of what was happening around. The style of life, with their routine breakfasts, and then, with each of them moving into their studios, proved itself to be rewarding, personally and professionally. During the 1830s Fanny revived the Mendelssohn family musical salon, which became to be known as 'Fanny's salon', one of the most prestigious institutions in Berlin. The Sunday musicales, says Sebastian Hensel in his book on the Mendelssohn family, "were to Fanny what the albums were to her husband [Sebastian's father]. From small beginnings, a holiday, or the meeting of a few intimate friends on a Sunday morning, by and-by arose regular concerts, with choral and solo-singing, trios and quartets, of the best Berlin musicians, and before an audience that filled all the rooms. For many years it was the correct thing in the musical circles of Berlin……..to have access to these *matinées*."[9] Sebastian description of Fanny's salon conveys the joyful, and fruitful, time that his mother, and his father, experienced in this institution. "Fanny", he writes, "took the greatest pleasure in rehearsing her splendidly schooled little choir, which she generally did on the Friday afternoons. On a beautiful summer morning nothing

[9] Sebastian Hensel: 251-253.

prettier could be seen than the Gartensaal, opening on to the beautiful shrubs and trees of the garden, dilled with a crowd of gay, elegantly dressed people, and Fanny at her piano, surrounded by her choir, and performing some ancient or modern masterpieces [and her own works – nearly 500 compositions - which she wrote mostly for these gatherings]. And Wilhelm? What was his role in the party? “Under such happy and favorable circumstances”, writes the son about his father, “Hensel’s painting could not but prosper…….. When Hensel had a picture [one of many which illustrate the extensive social relations and hospitality of the family] nearly finished, the doors of the studio stood open, and a grave Christ might look down on the merry crowd, or Miriam leading her own people would symbolically express on the canvas what was in living truth passing in the music-room.”[10]

Indeed, Fanny’s writing prospered. During 8 months between June 1831 and January 1832 Fanny produced three cantatas, ('Lobgesang', ‘Hiob’ and 'Oratorium nach den Bildern der Bibel'). It must be noted here that the cantata was a genre that was considered 'masculine'. Women composers tended to write character pieces (fantasies, lieder, songs without words, potpourris, impromptus, bagatelles, etudes, nocturnes, scherzos, variations, ballads, mazurkas, boleros, and polonaise). These small forms could be played on the piano, which was an integral part of the bourgeois home, and thus, always at hand. This, of course, is not to say that nineteenth century women did not produce larger works like sonatas in three and four movements, song cycles, chamber music, and choral music, as will be further exemplified. Yet it was a fact that compared to male composers of the period women composers had less experience in dealing with large musical groups, and in performing in public. Consequently, a

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[10] Ibid.

vicious circle was created; they (women) were judged by society, and by the male composer's milieu, as not skillful enough for such musical missions. Yet Fanny overcame this sort of prejudice and kept writing, rehearsing, and performing in her salon.

'Lobgesang' ('Song of Praise') was completed on June 14th, 1831, the first birthday of Sebastian. The overarching presence of the musical past dominates this piece, for it is quite clearly a piece of pastiche Bach; its form is that of a Bach Christmas cantata, with a pastoral introduction for instruments alone, a three-section imitative chorus on a text from Psalm 62, an accompanied recitative for female voice based on John's Gospel and the Song of Songs, a freely-composed aria on a text from a hymn by Johann Mentzer, and a closing chorus, in the style of a chorale fantasia (though not actually citing a chorale tune) on another Mentzer text.

This was the time when Romantic composers were experiencing the revival of Bach's music. In 1802 Johann Nickolaus Forkel, professor of music history at Göttingen, published a biography of Bach. The biography caused a stir among groups of enthusiasts in Germany, in Britain and in France where a search for Bach's autographs, authenticated Copies, rare first prints and variants led to a need for a new kind of critical musicology.

Fanny observed the influence of the Bach revival on concert life, performance practice, musical instruction and aesthetic taste. On the personal level she was an active partner in Felix's involvement with Bach's vocal music, especially in his preparations for the first performance of the St. Matthew Passion in Berlin in Holy

Week, 1829; a full century since this huge work was last performed at St. Thomas's Church in Leipzig on Good Friday 1729.

Naturally, admiration for Bach as supreme master of musical art and the special interest in his vocal music that resulted in new publications, were not lost on Fanny. Among her three cantatas were composed between June 1831 and January 1832 'Lobgesang', more than the other two cantatas, is written in a Bach format.

The libretto of this particular cantata, like so many of Bach's, recalls the traditional two-fold structure of a Lutheran sermon: explicatio and applicatio, biblical text and theological instruction followed by practical and moral advice. The orchestration resembles Bach's, with an expressive grouping of instruments; strings, flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, and horns in G.

However, ‘Lobgesang’ was not written for Christmas; its justification is personal, not ritual. Fanny dedicated it to her infant son, and the recitative (see Appendix 1) makes it clear that the child in the text is Sebastian, and that this is Fanny's thanksgiving for her child. 'A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world.'

To this the compiler - presumably Fanny herself - adds a surprisingly grim text from the Song of Songs:

For love is strong as Death,

Jealousy relentless as Sheol.

Its flash is fiery and a flame of the Lord.

The composer breaks out of her plain unaccompanied recitative to illustrate the word 'flame' with a melismatic passage. Apparently, there are two speakers and two historical periods at play in this work. Bach could never have written a cantata as a personal testament; above all, he could certainly not have presented a cantata as an expression of motherly love! Nor could the entire baroque era have produced such a piece; ‘Lobgesang’'s motivation is entirely romantic.

Who speaks in the baroque cantata? It is, almost invariably, the voice of the Christian church, mingled with the voices of scripture and traditional chorale. But Fanny, the woman composer, disconnected the metaphor of the woman in labor from the biblical chapter's context and turned it into a narrative in its own right. Consequently the original narrative that carries the message of resurrection turns into a story of childbirth from the standpoint of a woman. Fanny chose an intimate and personal theme for her cantata, a Christmas piece which really celebrates, not the Lord's nativity, but the birth of her own precious son. Using these techniques, says Naama Dolinski, she managed to turn the godly and universal into something intimate, feminine and personal.

These arguments seem quite convincing; indeed, 1831 seemed as fruitful and content as ever. As mentioned avobe, Fanny and Wilhelm Hensel shared a supportive and happy relationship as a married couple; Sebastian, their only child who just turned a year old, was a healthy and happy baby, and Fanny was getting busier with her

Sontagmusik salon, which attracted poets, writers, composers, painters, and philosophers.

But 'Lobgesang' is much more than merely a witness to Fanny's experiences in her private life. Dolinski's well-intentioned comment is a travesty of the work; Lobgesang comes over as a tough, professional piece, amply worthy of its great model. It speaks for a 'complete musical persona' rather than merely for the loving mother who composed it. It contains multi-subjectivities, including those of the melodic structure, the contrapuntal techniques, and indeed the many voices of the text, none of them specifically female, though there is a woman soloist.

Like many a Christmas piece of the baroque period, the work begins with an idyllic introduction in G major, characteristically pastoral. The 6/8 meter, and bass drones moving from tonic to dominant, have their origin in the Christmas music of the zampognari in Rome and Naples, peasants who descended from the mountains to play bagpipes and reed pipes in front of churches and shrines (Jung 151 -152); this was a standard signifier of the pastoral topic. Along with this, there is a tender flowing melody moving from the violins to the flutes,. The connection with Christmas derives from the fact that the nativity was first revealed to shepherds, 'abiding in the fields'.

There were traditionally two kinds of pastoral, according to Hermann Jung:

"The pastoral topic was polarized by its association with the heavenly paradise on one hand, and its evocation of the brute peasantry on the other. The heavenly pastoral is typified by the rhythm of the siciliana, which was first used in pastoral music about

1604, and the celestial tone of the flute, which imitated the ancient syrinx. The Earthly pastoral [in comparison] introduced modern rustic instruments; the bagpipe, originally a military instrument, cow horns, cowbells, as well as the cries of real shepherds and cowherds." (Monelle 2001: 191, based on Jung 1980, esp. 144 - 151).

Fanny's Pastoral Introduction seems to evoke both; the heavenly pastoral manifested at the opening bars by a symmetrical, tender flowing melody moving from the violins to the flutes over a stable rhythmic pattern that moves from tonic to dominant. The last part of the introduction though is characterized by a suspended octave on G in the horns which brings along a rustic sonority alongside a wide range of two octaves between the horns and the flutes; a somewhat ghostly color. Here, then, is Fanny's evocation of the earthly

pastoral, the rougher music of the Zampognari. Apparently Felix criticized his sister for using the second oboe and the horns in a way that according to his perception destroyed the pastoral feeling. The second oboe sounded to Felix so low that it reminded him of music for witches, or music that expressed deep grief. Towards the end of the introduction the horns (in Felix's opinion) destroy the pastoral flow.

“My conscience pricked me”, Felix writes to his older sister Fanny, “when I read about your new music, which you conducted with discretion on father’s birthday, and when I had to reproach myself, for still not having said a single word about your previous [music]; for without that, in my opinion, you do not pass [your examination]

colleague! How the devil can you presume to set your G horns so high?" [11]

To us, Fanny's echoing of the rough men of the Abruzzi playing in the streets of Rome, who could still be heard in 1831, seems appropriate and original. Of course, we do not know whether Fanny used this sort of instrumentation on purpose and with an authentic intention to create a new sonority, or whether it was a mistreatment of orchestration. Fanny's critics may have been controlled by considerations of gender, the reflection that women did not usually receive the same musical education as men.

But Fanny had a professional and thorough musical education. Like Joseph Haydn at Esterhaza her isolation made her original, rather than incompetent. Her bilingual pastoral speaks more eloquently to us - since we have learnt to accept the crude and rustic - than it did to her own age. Oddly, in writing for the past she was also writing for the future.

This, of course, did not make it easier for her to confront various challenges associated with the Romantic view of the past. For it must have been hard for early nineteenth-century musicians, men and women, to fully understand the different conception, the skills, and the particular imagination of the Baroque style in general and of a composer of Bach's caliber in particular. Whatever the professionalism of the composer's technique, it is inescapable that the central motivation of the cantata is personal; it refers, not to the birth of Christ but to the birth of Sebastian. It is at this point of juncture that Fanny's work confronts the past and future.

[11] Felix Mendelssohn's letter to Fanny, dating from December 28, 1831, presented, and translated into English, in Sirota 1981: 64.

For her techniques are astonishingly secure. The first Chorus, immediately after the instrumental introduction, is in three sections, the first with a throbbing accompaniment, normally indicative of a beating heart but here merely underlining the eager faith of the believer. The vocal theme is a ceremoniously rising triad, part of the world of the military topic and common as an expression of confidence: male confidence, one must say, since the military topic is exclusively male. The second section returns to the pastoral 6/8 of the introduction; its fugal texture is strongly reminiscent of the opening chorus of the St Matthew Passion, and the cries of 'mein Hort', 'mein Schutz', recall Bach's cries of 'Wohin?' More significantly, the theme that enters imitatively is an elaboration of the triadic figure from the opening, an architectural feature at which Bach was expert (there is a very similar case in the Cantata, 'Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme', No 140, in which the opening of the chorale tune is a fanfare-like triad and Bach elaborates this in the imitative orchestral entries).

Finally, the chorus declaims 'dass mich kein Fall stürzen wird, wie gross er ist', in a towering homophonic march, amply indicative of the 'Hort' (stronghold) in the previous line. Luther's habit of comparing God to a strong castle or fortified town (most famously in his hymn, Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott) is underlined by Fanny Mendelssohn's defiant, military music.

Notice, however, that the Lutheran tradition expresses the words of the church in a speech for one believer: 'Er ist meine Hoffnung, mein Hort', says the believer-as-church, and not 'Er ist unsere Hoffnung, unser Hort'. There is already an individualization of the collective in this tradition, and indeed in the words of the

Psalm. But Fanny does not write a piece of individual emotion. Her chorus is as universal, as emotionally detached as any by Bach.

Here occurs the central division of the cantata, marked by the recitative based on John's Gospel and the Song of Songs. This, apparently, is the point where Fanny's own state of mind and soul intrude; this is about her delight in the birth of her son. But notice that the subjectivities remain male, the 'beloved disciple' and the voice of the bridegroom in the Song of Songs, traditionally supposed to have been written by King Solomon.

The following aria, 'O dass ich tausend Zungen hätte', based on Mentzer's hymn, at last show the composer giving herself a little licence. This charming, florid piece presents many references to the body (blood, veins, pulse, breath) and finally there comes a scene of nature:

Ye green leaves in the woodland
Move and arise with me,
Ye tender flowers in the fields
Glorify God in your splendor.

It is, perhaps, an echo of the pastoral literary topic of the 'pleasance' or locus amoenus.[12] But for Fanny it recalls the radiant scenes of nature in Haydn's last oratorios, Creation and Seasons. The Romantic preoccupation with nature begins, musically, in these two works of Haydn; for a moment Fanny steps out of her

[12] Curtius 1990: 195.

detached and masculine role as a tributary of Bach, and goes for a seductive charm that matches the individualized text and the picturesque evocation. There is, perhaps, a suggestion of the pastoral in the celestial tones of high flute and solo violin, and in any case Haydn's oratorios are full of the echos of folksong, a style which became a bearer of the pastoral reference in the Romantic period. We are reminded of the central justification of this piece, the association of the nativity with the pastoral topic.

If this beautiful piece is the composer's moment of self-indulgence, she atones for it richly. The closing chorus is in the form of a big chorale fantasia (though not, apparently, based on a real chorale), the dense contrapuntal texture turning the individualized text ('Ich will von Gottes Güte singen') into a stately ritual. 'I will bring to him my offering of joy (Freudenopfer)', sings the chorus, and high trumpets respond with the rhythm called 'Freudenmotiv' by Albert Schweitzer, but which is in any case the basic rhythm of the military fanfare.[13]

This piece, finally, is Romantic in its attempts to leave its own age and settle in an older period; it is much less Romantic in surrendering to individual emotion, in spite of the fact that its motivation is entirely modern, the expression of the composer's motherly love and joy. There is comparatively little individual emotion in this piece, and at no time is there a feminine subjectivity expressed, although, of course, the cantata hinges on a reference to a woman in childbirth. This brings us to a paradox: music is full of feminine subjectivities, but the composers are men. Notoriously, Robert Schumann and Adalbert von Chamisso produced the song-cycle Frauenliebe und -Leben in 1840, constructing a feminine subjectivity that was firmly centered on

[13] The 'military fanfare' is one of the musical topics, which appear in 18th, and 19th century music in the form of a triadic figure that evokes military fanfares for the contemporary listener.

its day, but seems as unacceptable to later ages as it would have been to earlier. [14] Bach himself often figured a female speaker, as in the duet of soprano and bass, 'Wann kommst du, mein Heil', from Cantata no. 140, 'Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme'. 'When comest thou, my Savior?' exclaims the woman (a young boy, of course, in Bach's performance) and the bass, as Christ, replies 'I come, thy rightful share'. The piece is full of warm emotion. Admittedly, the female voice is conventionally the 'Bride of Christ', that is, the Church, but the feeling is manifest.

Compared to Schumann's songs, Fanny's cantata is detached and rigorous in its sentiment. She loyally reproduces the pastoral associations of nativity; she composes scuptural choruses on generalized texts; she invokes the confidence and defiance of the military topic with its strongly male character. You could say that her piece is more universal, less sentimentally centered in its age, than many works of her brother. Yet it is the testament of a happy mother. There is a paradox here, revealing a complexity in the situation of the woman composer that contradicts the image of the female amateur, busy with the cares of home life and child-rearing and throwing off a piece of pastiche Bach to express her own
intimate sentiments.

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[14] See Ruth Solie's review (1992) on Karin Pendle (1991) *Women & Music: A History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

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