

# Fanny Mendelssohn's cantata *Hiob*: a transpersonal commentary on divine darkness<sup>1</sup>

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On the 29<sup>th</sup> of August 1831 a boatman died in Charlottenburg; the next day another boatman died in Berlin. On that very day Berlin reported the Asiatic cholera pandemic outbreak. In spite of health defense committees that were formed in advance, the capital was not prepared properly to deal with the disease. There was no hospital for the sick, and when eventually the smallpox hospital opened for cholera victims, it had only thirteen beds.<sup>2</sup> As a result, fear of the infectious disease and the knowledge that there is no effective treatment turned the life of Berlin's population into a network of anxieties.

This situation lasted for almost two years, from the end of August 1831 to May 1833, and although the newspapers reported that it was less virulent than expected, it affected 2271 people, of which 1426 died. Among the dead were close friends and family of the Hensel-Mendelssohn; Aunt Jette and the family friend Georg Wilhelm Hegel, Eduard Rietz, Felix's violin teacher (and the concertmaster for Mendelssohn's first revival performance of the St. Matthew Passion in 1829); dead were Peters Ulrike (a student of Hensel and a close friend of Fanny and Wilhelm), Friedrich Zelter (Fanny's and Felix's teacher), the playwright Ludwig Robert, his wife Friederike and Ludwig's older sister, the celebrated Jewish writer and salonnière Rahel Varnhagen.<sup>3</sup>

The epidemic caught the Hensels in a time of tranquil routine. Fanny and Wilhelm enjoyed Sebastian, a healthy and happy baby, who just celebrated his first birthday. His parents were occupied with their creative work; Wilhelm in his new position as appointed professor at the Berlin Academy of the Arts and instructing students in his own atelier – formerly the Mendelssohn's Gartenhaus in 3 Leipzigstrasse. Fanny was busy teaching and reorganizing the biweekly Sunday musicales in the family residence.

"My Sunday Musicales prosper much, and give me great joy," she wrote in her diary.<sup>4</sup> Except for becoming a well known institution in Berlin of the 1830s it is clear that these Matinées served Fanny's development as a composer and as a showcase of her choral, piano and chamber music.<sup>5</sup> During eight months, between June 1831 and January 1832, she produced three cantatas: *Lobgesang* ('Hymn of Praise'), *Hiob* ('Job'), and *Oratorium nach den Bildern der Bibel* ('Oratorio after images from the Bible'). *Lobgesang* was completed on June 14, 1831, the first birthday of Sebastian. It is written in the style of Bach Christmas cantatas, including a pastoral introduction for instruments alone, a three-section imitative chorus on text from Psalm 62, an accompanied recitative for female voice based on John's Gospel and the Song of Songs, a free-composed aria on text from a hymn by Johann Mentzer and a closing chorus in the style of a chorale fantasia (though not citing an actual chorale tune) on another Mentzer text.<sup>6</sup> It was premiered "before a selected audience" at 3 Leipzigstrasse on July 6, 1831, on Wilhelm's 37<sup>th</sup> birthday.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Published as Chapter in Esti Sheinberg (ed.) *Music Semiotics: A Network of Significations, in Honour and Memory of Raymond Monelle*. 2012, Farnham, Ashgate. pp. 105-114.

<sup>2</sup> Habel, Norman C. *The Book of Job: A Commentary*. 1985, Westminster, The Old Testament Library. p. 135

<sup>3</sup> Klein, Hans-Günter and Rudolph Elvers (eds.) (2002) *Hensel, Fanny Mendelssohn Tagebücher*. 2002, Wiesbaden, Breitkopf & Härtel. p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 34

<sup>5</sup> Todd, Larry. *Fanny Hensel: The other Mendelssohn*. 2010, New York, Oxford University Press. p. 151

<sup>6</sup> Zack, Edith. "Theorising music history: intertextuality as a tool for reclaiming the past in Fanny Mendelssohn's cantata *Lobgesang*." In Mark Llewelly and Ann Heilmann (eds.) *Women's Writing*. 2005, Vol.12/1: 59 – 72. p. 63.

<sup>7</sup> Todd, *Fanny Hensel: The other Mendelssohn*. 2010, New York, Oxford University Press. p. 153.

By then Fanny was occupied with *Hiob*, a chamber cantata for solo, choir and orchestra that she completed on October 1, the day of her second wedding anniversary. *Hiob*, like the *Cantata Nach Aufhorn der Cholera in Berlin* was written in the time of the epidemic; yet, while the latter is explicitly connected to the disaster and coined as 'Cholera-musik,' *Hiob* is more of a personal piece that is constructed on a central voice, signifying the subjectivity of the composer.

Using the book of Job seems natural for a person of Fanny's upbringing. It was a source that was cherished as a classic throughout the ages; it inspired writings of authors from Gregory the Great, Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin, to William Blake, Karl Jung, Frantz Kafka, Robert Frost, William Safire and many others. In addition, Psalms, like Proverbs, was considered a book for private reading (as opposed to the Pentateuch and the Prophets, for example, which were designated for public reading in the synagogues). Being detached from public ritual associations, it was valued, beyond its sheer literary value, as an intimate spiritual resource.

The libretto of this particular cantata departs significantly from the biblical source, both in terms of structure and in emphasis. From the original story, which centers around the poetic debate between Job and his friends, Fanny chose six verses from three different chapters and set them into three movements. All six verses are from Job's responses to his friends after seven days of silence.

First movement: Chorus (Hiob 7: 17-18)

Was ist ein Mensch, dass du ihn gross achtest?

Was Bekümmerst du dich mit ihm?

Du suchest ihn täglich heim

Und versuchest ihn alle Stunde?

What is a human being that you should make so much of him?<sup>8</sup>

Subjecting him to your scrutiny,

That morning after morning you should examine him

And at every instant test him?<sup>9</sup>

Second movement: Arioso (Hiob 13: 24-25)

Warum vergrigest du dein Antlitz?

Willst du wider ein fliegend Blatt so eifrig sein

Und einen dünnen Halm verflogen?

Why do you hide your face?

Will you intimidate a wind-blown leaf,

Will you chase the dried-up chaff; <sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In this text 'Him' refers to masculine and feminine, thus Him and Her.

<sup>9</sup> The Jerusalem Bible, p. 637

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 643.

Third Movement: Chorus (Hiob 10: 12-13)

Leben und Wohltat hast du mir getan

Und dein Aufsehen bewahrt meinen Odem

Und wiewhol du solches in deinem Herzen verbirgest

So weiss ich doch, dass du es gedenkest.

And then you endowed me with life,

Watched each breath of mine with tender care,

Yet, after all, you were dissembling:

Biding your time, I know.

The I-You reference, and the choice of verses in which no names appear, neither Job's (except for the title of the cantata), nor any of his three friends' (Eliphaz the Yemenite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite), creates a rather intimate narrative that questions cosmic order from a personal perspective. In terms of time and place the original narrative, which takes place in the Biblical 'land of Uz,' can be read as 'Berlin, 1831,' or as 'any place, any time.'

The opening verse presents a rhetoric question in a direct speech manner: "Was ist ein Mensch dass du ihn gross achtest? Was bekümmerst du dich mit ihm?" ("What is a human being that you – God - make so much of him/her?")<sup>11</sup> The German term 'Ein Mensch' is central in this movement. In its simple form it refers to 'a human being'; however, the word Mensch carries multiple linguistic connotations. In Yiddish, (the traditional language of European Jewry), for example, 'mentsh' means 'a person of integrity and honor.' Its immediate connotation is moral and social decency. These social and moral dimensions of the Yiddish 'mentsh' are not echoed in the German noun Mensch. For in German Ein Mensch means an ordinary person rather than an exceptional one. When one says of someone, "Er ist auch nur ein Mensch," ("He is only human"), One is not praising the other person for his virtue, but rather pointing out that he is imperfect and as capable of lapses of behavior as is anyone else,

In the Hebrew Bible, 'ein Mensch' appears as 'Enosh.' Thus, "Was ist ein Mensch, dass du ihn gross achtest? / Was Bekümmerst du dich mit ihm?" reads: '*Ma Enosh ki tegadlenu ve ki tashit elav libcha?*' Literally meaning: What is a human being that you – God – should raise him/her and pay attention to him/her? The Biblical Enosh was the grandson of Adam and Eve, son of Seth, and father of Keinan. After Abel's murder, Enosh became the only successor of Adam and Eve (as the dynasty of Cain and his son Hanoah did not have continuation). Like his ancestors, Enosh was destined to rule the world and conquer the unknown (however, he surpassed his progenitors by being the first living soul who was allowed to invoke the name of Yahweh.)<sup>12</sup>

The name Enosh thus became a metonymy for 'a human being.' As a noun, Enosh is associated in the Hebrew Bible with worthlessness and self disparagement. Psalm 103:15 states: "Enosh ka'hatzir yamav," ("A human being's life lasts no longer than the dry grass's"). Psalm 8:15 asks: "*Ma Enosh ki tizkerenu u-ven Adam ki tifkedenu?*" ("What is a human being that you – God – should spare a thought for him?

<sup>11</sup> The Biblical text regards the grammatical masculine as the unmarked default. Thus the 'him' in this text is interpreted as referring to both masculine and feminine.

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 4:26.

What is man that you should care for him [and inspect him so closely?]).” In the book of Job, Eliphaz the Yemenite asks: “*Ma Enosh ki yizke?*” (Job,15:14). (“What makes the human being so important that he/she should gain credit [from God]?”).

The opening verse of the cantata bears a great similarity to Psalm 8:15. It posits a rhetorical question that seems to contain the recognition of the human being’s worthlessness when confronting the cosmic power. Apparently in the speaker's unmediated, almost natural language, lays a theocentric Jewish worldview of the transcendental God; even when involved in human daily activities it has nothing to do with a naturalistic cause-and-effect approach. In fact, the Jewish medieval philosopher Moses Maimonides, who developed the apophatic theology approach in Judaism, sees God as far more uninvolved than the divine persona that the Hebrew Bible depicts when read at face value.<sup>13</sup> It is a distant God, whom we cannot know. Therefore, the question of how God acts is as mysterious as his nature. In other words, if we do not know what God is, we cannot know by what means God conferred existence on things. Consequently, the purpose of serving God is not designed to achieve personal perfection or to improve society.

God's absolute freedom and sovereignty, then, is an essential expression of His divinity. Hence, while all creatures are limited, God is infinite and unlimited. This notion was explicitly formulated by Luther: “God is He whose will no cause or ground may be laid down as its rule and standard; for nothing is on a level with it or above it, but is itself the rule for all things. If any rule or standard, or cause or ground, existed for it, it could no longer be the will of God.”<sup>14</sup>

There is, nevertheless, a significant difference between Jewish theocentrism and Lutheran theocentrism. Luther immediately applies his thesis to the dependence of morality: “What God wills,” he states, “is not right because He ought, or was bound, so to will; on the contrary, what takes place must be right because He so wills it.” In comparison, the theocentric view in Jewish philosophy separates between religion and morality. Thus, religion is not a means toward any specific end; it is an asymmetrical relation in which acts are obligatory because God commanded them and not vice versa. Thus there is no human autonomy in religion, as Jews have the obligation to take upon themselves the bondage of Torah and perform all their duties accordingly. Only when one performs a religious act because it is a divine commandment does it possess a religious value.

The theocentric idea appears as a series of rhetorical questions, some of which unfold as metaphors for questions already asked. In the first movement: “Was ist ein Mensch, dass du ihn gross achtest? / Was bekümmerst du dich mit ihm? / Du suchest ihn täglich heim / Und versuchest ihn alle Stunde?” In the second movement: “Warum verbirgest du dein Antlitz? / Willst du wider ein fliegend Blatt so eifrig sein / Und einen dünnen Halm verfolgen?”

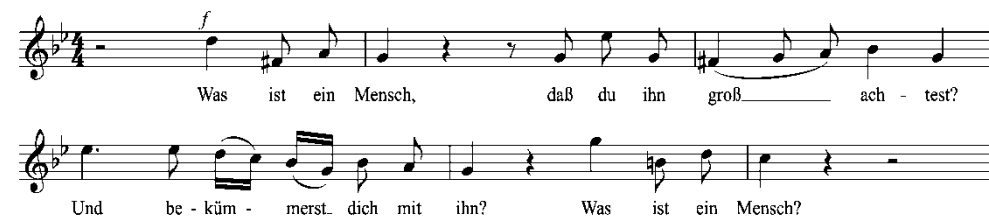
While in the chain of questions obviousness of the answers are conveyed the short orchestral introduction carries us with it into tonal regions that descend in fifths, from G minor to C minor, to F major, to B<sup>b</sup> major and then back to the G minor tonic, all before the choir’s entry. Although semantically rather weak, the abrupt harmonic digression at the very beginning of the piece demonstrates in embryo a progressive, goal oriented movement in time, like an imaginary quick flight through changing landscapes that leads back to the home key, welcoming the chorale.

<sup>13</sup> Moses Maimonides (1138-1204) also known as the ‘Rambam.’ See in particular his *Guide to the Perplexed*, part 1, chapter 58.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Luther "Of the hardening of Pharaoh" in *The Bondage of the Will*. Translated by J.I.Packer and O.R. Johnston. 1990, Ada, Revell. p. 209. Quoted in Sagi, Abraham and Daniel Statman. *Religion and Morality*. 1995, Amsterdam: Rodopi. p. 13.

The central theme in the first chorale (henceforth 'the *Mensch* theme') is constructed on the "yearning interval" of a minor sixth (both rising and falling);<sup>15</sup> the first motive (D<sup>2</sup>-F<sup>#1</sup>-A<sup>1</sup>-G<sup>1</sup>) starts with a skip down from the dominant to the leading tone, while the second (G<sup>1</sup>-E@<sup>2</sup>-G<sup>1</sup>-F<sup>#1</sup>-G<sup>1</sup>-A<sup>1</sup>-B@<sup>1</sup>-G<sup>1</sup>) skips up from the tonic to the submediant. For a moment, when introduced by the sopranos and then imitated, in turn, by the tenors, altos, and basses, it seems that an old baroque prototype fugue is developing. But our expectations are immediately disrupted, as the theme digresses harmonically to explore different tonal regions, moving from the tonic G minor to D major, F# major and A major before it reaches the goal of G major.<sup>16</sup>

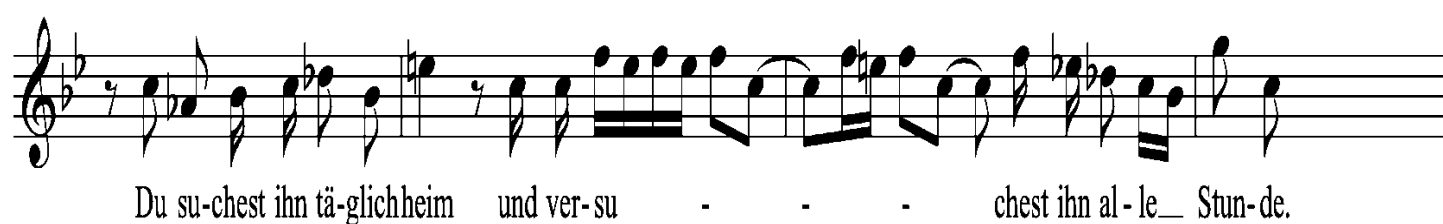
**Example 1: The 'Mensch' motive (mm. 7-11)**



When weaved into a chorale, the direct speech theme turns into a collective manifestation of a discursive and restless web of individualized calls. By sharing the *Mensch* motive they create an authorial voice of a community in a realm where there is no logical explanation for sin and punishment.

When the tempo accelerates to a *poco più vivace*, a new theme is introduced (henceforth "the *suchest* theme"). "Du suchest ihn täglich heim/Und versuchest ihn alle Stunde?" ("You look for him in his home, and you examine him at every instant"). The verb "suchest" appears in Hebrew as 'tifkedenu' (from the root PKD), that its literal meanings are both 'remember' and 'visit'), that is: "you remember and visit him." In Biblical Hebrew the verb 'Pakad' has an optimistic connotation associated with conceiving. For example after God *pakad* – 'remembered and visited' – Sarah she conceived, and bore Issac (Genesis 21:1-3). Another example describes, in Samuel I:2:21, how God *pakad* – 'remembered and visited' – Hannah, who after years of agony and distress conceived and bore Samuel, one of Israel's outstanding prophets. The translation to German, into *suchest* (search for) and *versuchest* (inquire) adds to the traditional meaning of 'remembering and visiting' a significantly poignant tinge.

**Example 2: The "Suchest" motive (mm. 34-37)**



Set within the middle section of the chorale (part B of ABA<sup>1</sup>) the *suchest* theme with its persevering rhythm intertwines with rising chromatic harmonies and with an insistent rhythmic pattern urging its addressee, as if 'real' time is running out. When it reaches the beginning of the final chorale (A<sup>1</sup>) a climactic point is asserted (bars 61-68). The *Mensch* theme in the alto ends with two successive *pianto* figures of descending semi-tones (bars 63-64), signifying distress alongside disappointment, anger, and fear.<sup>17</sup> Like Bach, who, according

<sup>15</sup> Monelle, Raymond. *The Sense of Music*. 2000, Princeton, Princeton University Press. p. 122.

<sup>16</sup> Todd, Fanny Hensel: *The other Mendelssohn*. 2010, New York, Oxford University Press. p. 154.

<sup>17</sup> Monelle, Raymond. *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military and Pastoral*. 2006, Indiana University Press. pp. 4-5.

to Raymond Monelle, used the *pianto* on “the words ‘Seufzer, Tränen, Kummer, Not’ (sighs, tears, sorrow, distress) in the cantata *Ich hatte viel bekümmernis*,”<sup>18</sup> Fanny uses the *pianto* here on the text ‘*ihn gross achtest*’ (make so much of him [of the human being]). Sorrow and distress are re-emphasized when Fanny, like Purcell and Bach, associates the *pianto* with what Christoph Bernhard coined as ‘*passus duriusculus*’; a formula characteristic of lamentation, which consists of a series of consecutive falling semi-tones (mm. 64-68).<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, the emotional purport of the first movement’s closing section is intensified by combining the *pianto* with the *passus duriusculus*. But Fanny stretches the tension even further by the use of polyphony and intervallic transformations of the two main motives. Within four bars the *Mensch* and the *suchest* motives interrelate in a polyphonic, somewhat sinister game, where the ‘*diabolus in musica*,’ the tritone, plays a major part, maybe as an allusion hinting to the devilish bet that initiated Job’s sufferings. Horizontally, the *Mensch* motive appears with a falling octave (in the soprano), and a falling tritone (in the basses). Vertically a tritone appears between the voices on the words ‘*suchest*’ and ‘*achtest*’ (“search” and “pay attention,” respectively). From this point onward, two levels of imitation alternate in the choir, where *Mensch* and *suchest* are imitated in turn, each by two voices. A tone of alarm seems to arise when, simultaneously with the commotion in the upper voices, the bass crawls in with a dark and threatening mostly chromatic descending tetrachord from F# to C#. Here the chromatic fourth signifies the dysphoric, mystery and threat as part of the more general evocation of distress (Example 3).<sup>20</sup> The secret (Was ist ein Mensch?) echoes in the air as the chorale ends with a dramatic half cadence on G major, preparing the C minor of the next movement and leaving the question unanswered.

### Example 3: intensified emotional purport (mm.61-66)

The musical score for Example 3 shows four vocal parts and a basso continuo line. The Soprano part begins with a melisma on 'Was ist ein Mensch?' marked *mf*, followed by 'Du suchest ihn heim, du suchest ihn heim.' The Alto part sings 'Daß du ihn groß achtest? Was ist ein Mensch? Was ist ein Mensch?' The Tenor part sings 'Du suchest ihn heim. Was ist ein Mensch?' The Bass part sings 'Was ist ein Mensch? Du suchest ihn heim.' The basso continuo line features a chromatic descending tetrachord from F# to C#.

The second movement follows with an *attacca*, without a break; an alto *arioso*, accompanied by restrained tremolo chords in the strings presents the next question in direct speech: “Warum verbirgest du dein Antlitz?” (“Why do you – God – hide your face?”). The I-You reference, the soft orchestration (flutes and strings only) and the fact that Fanny herself was an alto who often sang in her premieres, emphasize the private character of this section. Two new motives are here introduced: the “dürren Halm” (dried-up chaff) motive, and the “fliegend Blatt” (wind-blown leaf) motive, hinting at the rigidity and evasiveness of the cosmic power (Examples 4a and 4b).

### Example 4a: The “Dürren Halm” motive

The musical score for Example 4a shows a single melodic line for the 'Dürren Halm' motive. The tempo is marked 'L'istesso tempo'. The melody is in 4/4 time and features a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, ending with a half note. The lyrics are 'Willst du wider ein fliegend Blatt so eifrig sein.'

### Example 4b: "fliegend Blatt" motive

<sup>18</sup> Monelle, *The Sense of Music*. p. 69

<sup>19</sup> Monelle, Raymond “BWV 886 As Allegory of Listening,” in *Contemporary Music Review*, 1997, Vol. 16/4: 79-88. p. 80.

<sup>20</sup> Monelle, *The Sense of Music*. pp. 74-5.

SOPRANO  
sein, und ei-nen dür-ren\_ Halm\_ ver-fol-gen, ver-fol-gen,

ALTO

TENOR  
sein, und ei-nen dür-ren\_ Halm\_ ver-fol-gen, ver-fol-gen

BASS  
sein, und ei-nem dür-ren\_ Halm, und ei-nem dür-ren\_

Cello

Yet, as if avoiding a straightforward connotation of rebellion, the composer omits half a verse of the original text in the Hebrew Bible ("And regard me as your enemy?"). This is emphasized by a doubling of the first motive, once leading to a questioning half cadence (mm. 33-34) and then leading to a full cadence (in C major!), the first significant structural break that consists of an audible pause. The C major clears the way for the third and last movement, (*vivace*), which is different in mood and in content. The wondering and questioning of the previous two movements change here into a joyous and thankful individualized text, as the speaker reminds herself of her faith in God: "Leben und Wohltat hast du mir getan, und dein Aufsehen bewahrt meinen Odem" ("You have endowed me with life and care, and you watched upon my very breath"). For the first time the orchestration resembles Bach, with an expressive grouping of instruments: strings, flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns, trumpets in G and kettledrums.<sup>21</sup> When grace is called, the question marks of the two previous movements turn, as it were, into exclamation marks. While G major is established, fanfare calls in the horns rise from the contrapuntal texture, evoking divine majesty. Still, although different in mood and content, this movement does not stand apart from the previous two. For it is here that the composer combines all four motives displayed before – "mensch," "suchest," "fliegend Blatt" and "Dürren Halm" – into the present text. For example, "Leben und Wohltat hast du mir getan" (mm. 18-20) consists musically of the "Was ist ein Mensch" of the first movement (mm. 1-6). With summing up all past motives and thanking God for endowing her with life, Fanny Hensel bridges experience and knowledge, the private and the collective, subjectivity and objectivity, wisdom and perception. When this is accomplished, the chordal style dissolves into four bars of a majestic Lento that concludes the work with a first full authentic cadence in G major.

<sup>21</sup> Bach uses kettledrums in all his oratorios, in his High Mass, in 36 of his church cantatas and seven of his secular cantatas. See Sanford, Terry (1931) "Bach's Kettledrums" in *The Musical Times* 1931, Vol. 72/1056: 119-121.