

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Of 'Bumps' and Biography: A Response to Marcia Citron

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My article, 'The Suppression of Fanny Mendelssohn: Rethinking Feminist Biography'¹ has been a topic in two articles by Marcia J. Citron: 'Feminist Waves and Classical Music: Pedagogy, Performance, Research', published in *Women and Music* in 2004, and her keynote address to the Fanny Hensel Conference at Oxford in 2005, recently published in this journal.² My article treats a story about Fanny Hensel that has been central to biographical representations of her:

Fanny, equally talented as her brother Felix, was denied the professional career in music to which she aspired by her patriarchal father and not allowed to publish her music by her repressive brother. Her music was allowed to appear only under her brother's name. Her 'voice' was effectively silenced by men, and her early death tragically ended her attempts to publish, so that she and her music were lost to history.³

Citron regards my critique of this story as 'a bump in the road' of Hensel scholarship. However, she has misunderstood both the content and the purpose of my article and has misrepresented it in her publications.

Citron has read my article as an 'attack' on all of feminism. But this it is not. My focus was strictly on the problematic intersection of feminism with the conventional practices of biography; the latter topic is the primary focus of the article, rather than feminism *per se*. Nowhere does Citron acknowledge the idea of biography as a discipline that is central to my approach, nor does she engage with the body of literature on feminist biography that I cite. In fact, Citron never mentions the main idea of my article, that constructions of the lives of women composers are often influenced by the model common to biographies of the 'Great Man', that of Romantic, suffering genius.

In her first critique, Citron would have it that the story about Hensel is all mine, that I have set up a 'straw man' to knock down: 'If Kimber [*sic*] had accurately represented the field, she would not have any basis for her attack'.⁴ Why then,

¹ Marian Wilson Kimber, 'The Suppression of Fanny Mendelssohn: Rethinking Feminist Biography', *19th-Century Music* 26 (2002): 113–29.

² Marcia J. Citron, 'Feminist Waves and Classical Music: Pedagogy, Performance, Research', *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 8 (2004): 47–60; 'A Bi-centennial Reflection: Twenty-Five Years with Fanny Hensel', *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 4/2 (2007): 7–20.

³ Wilson Kimber, 'The Suppression of Fanny Mendelssohn', 113.

⁴ Citron, 'Feminist Waves', 57.

if scholars do not tell the story I am critiquing, is my work, in Citron's terms, 'revisionist'?⁵ To call it such is, in fact, to acknowledge the very existence of the ideas Citron would like to suggest are not in circulation. To lobby additional support for the notion that I have exaggerated the predominance of the tale, Citron's second article draws on a review by Rebecca Grotjahn.⁶ Grotjahn, in turn, defends Françoise Tillard's 1992 biography, *Fanny Mendelssohn*, which I cite in my article, against any 'demonization' of Felix.⁷ Even if Grotjahn is correct that I have presented quotations 'torn from their contexts' (Citron's translation), I cannot imagine what sort of context could vindicate Felix in light of Tillard's question, 'Did he really need to crush her so completely, in order to fulfill his own artistic potential?'⁸ Regardless, Felix is consistently blamed for his sister's decision not to publish her music.⁹ Citron herself has written, 'Felix's discouragement clearly played a decisive role in Fanny's publishing history ... Felix's approval and support, therefore, would probably have resulted in the publication of a much greater percentage of the two hundred lieder Fanny composed.'¹⁰ In addition, my point is not only that the story is inaccurate, but that even in versions of it that account for larger cultural factors, Felix's opinion on Fanny publishing holds far too much weight in our interpretations of Hensel's life.¹¹

In her Oxford address, Citron focuses on three main criticisms: 1) that my complaint that scholars use Fanny's maiden name is not accurate, as her 'tally' shows that 'Hensel is used more often'; 2) that I ignore the interpretive nuance of feminist work; and 3) that I have lumped all 'feminist work into one monolithic category'. Of these three, the first was not a main point of my article, but

⁵ Citron, 'A Bi-centennial Reflection', 17.

⁶ Rebecca Grotjahn, 'Die "story" der unterdrückten Komponistin – ein feministischer Mythos? Anmerkungen zu einigen neuen Publikationen über Fanny Hensel', *Frankfurter Zeitschrift für Musikwissenschaft* 7 (2004): 27–31, www.fzwmw.de/2004/2004_3.pdf (accessed on 30 June 2008).

⁷ In his review of Tillard's book in *Notes* 53 (Mar. 1997): 800–801, Jeffrey Sposato points out her 'reluctance to establish consistently the cultural norms for each of the periods she evaluates. People and events are often viewed from a modern day perspective'. He adds, 'In general, Tillard expects defiance of the dominant culture – a particularly unrealistic expectation for the Mendelssohns, who for generations did their best to comply with mainstream society – and then judges harshly when it does not occur'.

⁸ Françoise Tillard, *Fanny Mendelssohn*, trans. Camille Naish (Portland, OR: Amadeus, 1996): 315.

⁹ In just one recent example, the latest edition of the popular textbook *A History of Western Music* continues to blame Abraham and Felix Mendelssohn for Fanny's musical life in the domestic sphere, although it does take class into account: 'Few [pieces] were published during her lifetime, because her father and brother opposed publication on the grounds that a musical career was inappropriate for a woman of her class. Their objections minimized the influence she had outside her circle and confined her mostly to the small genres appropriate for home music-making.' J. Peter Burkholder, Donald J. Grout and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 7th edn (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005): 619.

¹⁰ Marcia J. Citron, 'Women and the Lied, 1775–1850', in *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150–1950*, ed. Jane Bowers and Judith Tick (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986): 231.

¹¹ The story seems to have taken a far stronger hold in English-language writings than in those in German, many of which are more occupied with the reception of the entire Mendelssohn family after National Socialism. Nonetheless, it persists in Sulamith Sparre's *Eine Frau jenseits des Schweigens: Die Komponistin Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel*, *Widerständige Frauen*, 1 (Lich, Hessen: Verlag Edition AV, 2006): 59–60.

was mentioned in a footnote. In spite of Citron's reassurance that my point is incorrect, it is her own article in the 2000 edition of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (and *Grove Music Online*) in which Hensel is listed under 'Mendelssohn'.¹² As for Citron's second complaint, my article does, in fact, cite the 'interpretive nuance' of both Nancy Reich and herself.¹³ The third point is a misreading of the article; as I am specifically treating feminist *biography*, not all feminist work, it is simply not possible for me to have accomplished such a sweeping dismissal.

Another of Citron's criticisms (which she shares with Grotjahn) is my use of a children's biography, Gloria Kamen's *Hidden Music: the Story of Fanny Mendelssohn*, as one of the sources for the Hensel myth.¹⁴ Children's books are not scholarship, and I have never suggested that they are. However, many other scholars of women's history have used children's literature to demonstrate the thinking about women in a given time period and culture; Citron herself used eighteenth- and nineteenth-century pedagogical sources, several of which are at least nominally aimed at younger readers, in her 1986 article on women's lieder.¹⁵ My use of Kamen's biography was to offer merely one instance of the way Hensel's 'suppression' has an active life in numerous 'scholarly and popular sources', such as articles in the popular press or CD liner notes.¹⁶ In one recent example, a DVD purporting to be an introduction to Felix Mendelssohn's life consists primarily of an extended ballet, three-quarters of which centres on his relationship with Fanny, inscribing, through dance, many of the myths I have described.¹⁷ We are naive as scholars if we do not recognize that such biographical portrayals of composers, both female and male, exist outside of the academy, and we are delinquent as feminists if we do not hope that our scholarship will, in some way, influence the stories outside the ivy-covered walls.¹⁸

Citron frequently misrepresents what I wrote. For example, I did not say that Hensel 'did not express any dissatisfaction with her life'; in fact, I wrote 'there

¹² Although Citron has carefully read my footnote about Fanny's last name, she has my last name wrong. It is 'Wilson Kimber' not 'Kimber'.

¹³ Wilson Kimber, 'The Suppression of Fanny Mendelssohn', 118 and 114, n. 4.

¹⁴ Gloria Kamen, *Hidden Music: the Story of Fanny Mendelssohn* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

¹⁵ Citron, 'Women and the Lied', 226–7.

¹⁶ Wilson Kimber, 'The Suppression of Fanny Mendelssohn': 113, emphasis added. See this mere handful of examples: Peter G. Davis, 'Music by Women Composers', *New York Times* (13 April 1980): D26; Notes for Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel, *Klavierwerk, Vol. 2*; trans. Jeremy Roth; Liana Serbescu, piano (Classic Produktion Osnabrück CPO 999015–2, 1987); Danielle Roster, Notes for Fanny Hensel-Mendelssohn [sic], *Das Jahr (1841)*; 4 *Klavierstücke (1836)*; trans. Claude Thill; Béatrice Rauchs, piano (Bayer Records BR 100 250 CD, 1995); Tobias Fischer, 'CD Feature/Lauma Skride: Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel – The Year', www.tokafi.com/newsitems/cd-feature-lauma-skride-fanny-mendelssohn-hensel-the-year (accessed 7 Jan. 2008).

¹⁷ *The Great Composers: Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy*, Quatuor Claudel ([Leeuwarden, The Netherlands]: Brilliant Classics, 2007). For example, Fanny is introduced in a confined domestic space, longing for Felix's return, but after a joyous reunion, Felix becomes furious and disdainful when he finds Fanny's scores on the piano.

¹⁸ In contrast to Kamen's biography is the wonderful way in which Nancy Reich's scholarly work on Clara Schumann has been incorporated into her daughter Susanna Reich's children's biography: *Clara Schumann: Piano Virtuoso* (New York: Clarion Books, 1999).

are indications she was sometimes frustrated'.¹⁹ Citron writes that I 'assert that feminist scholars are creating fiction and satisfying personal frustrations in their own lives when they propose certain narratives about Hensel's life and career'.²⁰ What I wrote was, 'it is *their* frustration with *Hensel's life*, rather than hers, that they are actually documenting'.²¹ In her earlier article, Citron writes 'Kimber [*sic*] appears to be unaware of a basic tenet of historiography: that a topic treated in different eras will be different each time – different cultural conditions, different audiences, different "horizons of expectations"'.²² However, my point was not that Hensel's life is being re-examined – that is to be expected – but that the topic is not different in its current incarnation and that 'current biographical treatment of her life has so little new to offer'.²³

Finally, Citron says the article 'virtually accuses feminist scholars of Hensel of making up stories'.²⁴ Here she has taken what I said out of its context, which is a discussion of writings about postmodern scholarship. The passage reads:

Postmodern scholarship goes a step further in challenging the idea that 'the past is real and that the truth of it of it can be recovered through storytelling'.²⁵ Some scholars readily admit they do not intend to attempt to deliver the 'real' biographical subject to their reader, as deconstruction works well for a feminist story. 'Quite simply,' writes O'Brien, 'we make everything up'.²⁶ Fay Weldon writes: 'Better, if the biographer has a glimmer of the single thin consistent thread that runs through a life, to give up fact and take up fiction.'²⁷

¹⁹ Citron, 'A Bi-centennial Reflection', 18; Wilson Kimber, 'The Suppression of Fanny Mendelssohn', 120.

²⁰ Citron, 'A Bi-centennial Reflection', 17.

²¹ Wilson Kimber, 'The Suppression of Fanny Mendelssohn', 125, second italics added.

²² Citron, 'Feminist Waves', 58.

²³ Wilson Kimber, 'The Suppression of Fanny Mendelssohn': 123. Since my article was published, this situation is beginning to change, due to the important work of Hans-Günter Klein, who has produced scholarly editions of Fanny's diaries and letters, providing reliable material for additional interpretations: Fanny Hensel, *Tagebücher*, ed. Hans-Günter Klein (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 2002); Fanny Hensel, *Briefe aus Rom an ihre Familie in Berlin 1839/40*, ed. Hans-Günter Klein (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2002); and Fanny Hensel, *Briefe aus Venedig und Neapel an ihre Familie in Berlin 1839/40*, ed. Hans-Günter Klein (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2004). See Nancy B. Reich's interpretation of Fanny's diaries in 'The Diaries of Clara Schumann and Fanny Hensel: a Study in Contrasts', *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 4/2 (2007): 21–36. Reich notes, 'Music, however, does not dominate her diary. Rather, family seems to be of the greatest importance' (p. 32). See also Harald Krebs's 'The "Power of Class" in a New Perspective: A Comparison of the Compositional Careers of Fanny Hensel and Josephine Lang', *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 4/2 (2007): 37–48, in which Fanny's supposed 'imprisonment' in the domestic sphere is more accurately depicted as the privileged life of a woman of her class.

²⁴ Citron, 'Feminist Waves', 58.

²⁵ Gordon S. Wood, 'Star Spangled History', *The New York Review of Books* (12 August 1982): 8, quoted in Sharon O'Brien, 'Feminist Theory and Literary Biography', in *Contesting the Subject: Essays in the Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism*, ed. William H. Epstein (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1991): 123.

²⁶ O'Brien, 'Feminist Theory and Literary Biography', 131.

²⁷ Fay Weldon, *Rebecca West* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), quoted by Teresa Iles, Conclusion to *All Sides of the Subject: Women and Biography*, ed. Teresa Iles, The Athene Series (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992): 162.

If feminist biography and women's history as a whole are to have any validity, they must not abandon a historical method that believes in evidence and replace it with fiction.²⁸

Citron quotes only the final sentence above; however, it is clear that I am responding both to specific writers who have made specific statements and to the recognition, discussed in the scholarship on biography, that this 'taking up fiction' is in fact an issue.²⁹

What I object to more than Citron's disagreements with my article – she is certainly entitled to disagree with me – are the various rhetorical strategies in which she engages. Rather than providing evidence from Hensel scholarship or primary sources, she speculates about my personal politics. In her 2004 article she wonders if perhaps I am a 'power feminist', though nowhere in my article do I draw on the writers she cites: Naomi Wolff, René Denfeld or Camille Paglia. By 2007 I'm 'post-feminist' and perhaps, to my amazement, even part of the 'backlash movement against feminism in society that arose in the US in the early 1990s'.³⁰ One wonders how such a 'backlash' position accounts for my having taught courses on women and music for over a decade, lectured and written programme notes on women's music, mentored graduate students' research on women composers and published on both Hensel and Clara Schumann.³¹

Citron writes that it is positive that Hensel scholarship has matured enough for controversy and a range of methodologies, but refers to my article as a 'bump in the road' – clearly for Citron there is only one road, with room only for travellers with opinions similar to her own. She writes that now 'we all "own" Fanny Hensel', yet her most recent article works very hard to make sure that my article on Hensel is understood to exist outside of a mainstream – here she is perhaps correct, however, such a minority status in no way invalidates my ideas. Contrary to Citron's assertions, my intention was neither to be 'political' nor 'polemical'. I merely evaluated the stories I have consistently found in Hensel reception, drawing on ideas about the problems of writing women's biographies that have been discussed in other disciplines for at least two decades. My article about how stories of the lives of women composers can be co-opted by the traditional biographical models for men is surely not as polemical as Citron's

²⁸ Wilson Kimber, 'The Suppression of Fanny Mendelssohn', 126.

²⁹ It is perhaps worth repeating that Ruth A. Solie has made a similar point: '... postmodernism's positing of an unstable and fragmented subjectivity seems to put into question the category "women" in a way that would disable feminist work, and to make inaccessible the notions of authority and intention that are central to the historical interpretation of women's productivity'. 'Feminism', in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edn, ed. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell (London: Macmillan, 2000): vol. 8, 665.

³⁰ Citron, 'A Bicentennial Reflection', 19.

³¹ For example, 'Zur frühen Wirkungsgeschichte Fanny Hensels', in *Fanny Hensel geb. Mendelssohn: Komponieren zwischen Geselligkeitsideal und romantischer Musikästhetik*, ed. Beatrix Borchard and Monika Schwarz-Danuser (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1999; 2nd edn, Kassel: Furore, 2002): 248–62; 'From the Concert Hall to the Salon: the Piano Music of Clara Wieck Schumann and Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel', in *Nineteenth-Century Piano Music*, 2nd edn, ed. R. Larry Todd (New York: Routledge, 2003): 316–55; 'Fanny in Italy: the Female Composer as Travel Writer', in *Musical Biography: Towards New Paradigms*, ed. Jolanta T. Pekacz (London: Ashgate, 2006): 111–33; 'Fanny Hensel Meets the Boys in the Band: the Brass Transcriptions of the *Gartenlieder*, op. 3', *Historic Brass Society Journal* 18 (2006): 17–36; and 'Fanny Hensel's Seasons of Life: Poetic Epigrams, Vignettes and Meaning in *Das Jahr*', *Journal of Musicological Research* 27 (2008): 359–95.

two critiques. Professor Citron concludes that my work is marginal, and perhaps time will prove her correct.³² However, it will not be up to Marcia Citron to make such a judgement; it will be up to the wider musicological community.

³² For other reactions to my article see Jolanta Pekacz, in 'Memory, History and Meaning: Musical Biography and its Discontents', *Journal of Musicological Research* 23 (Jan.–Mar. 2004): 41n., and Hilary Poriss, 'She Came, She Sang ... She Conquered? Adelina Patti in New York', in *European Music and Musicians in New York City, 1840–1900*, ed. Johan Graziano, Eastman Studies in Music (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester, 2006): 219–20. Poriss writes, 'By reevaluating a dazzling array of primary and secondary sources, however, Kimber [*sic*] demonstrates that the men in Fanny's life did *not* directly impede her compositional pursuits'.