FANNY MENDELSSSOHN

Ostersonate

Performing Edition

Edited by Angela Mace Christian

2013, rev. 2018
This edition is making history. Here, for the first time ever, the Ostersonate is printed together with the name of the correct composer. Not even the original autograph source bears the name “Fanny Mendelssohn” – which is partly to blame for the misattribution of this sonata to Fanny’s brother, Felix, in the 20th century. Although lacking a composer’s signature, the music bears the musical stylistic signature of Fanny Mendelssohn, and the autograph displays without a doubt her musical hand writing style and compositional process. At some point, the work was even believed to have been written by Felix Mendelssohn. The autograph was unavailable for research, so scholars were unable to confirm Fanny’s authorship; before the 1980s, the state of Fanny Hensel research was such that a conclusion may have been difficult in any case.

All of this changed when I heard, for the first time in 2008, the beautiful recording of the Ostersonate by Eric Heidsieck (Paris, Cassiopée, 1972). My research led me to Paris, in May 2010, to visit Heidsieck, discuss his experience recording and performing the sonata, and to view the autograph of the piece in private possession—reportedly the first time a Mendelssohn or Hensel scholar had viewed the score in at least 40 years, if ever. All traceable documentary and archival sources support the conclusion that the Ostersonate is by Fanny, and this was confirmed when I saw the autograph manuscript.

The Ostersonate, as suggested by its title, was begun around Easter 1828, in Berlin, and completed about six weeks later in June. Not every movement is overtly programmatic—the title is more atmospheric and chronological than it is prescriptive—but the sonata does exhibit several telling musical topoi of the Passion story. Already by 1828, the Mendelssohns were deep in rehearsals and preparations for the 1829 revival performances of Bach’s St. Matthew Passion, and it is clear that Bach’s Passion influenced Fanny’s Ostersonate in especially the pungent prelude and fugue in E minor (the second movement), as well as the evocation of the “earthquake” topos in the fourth movement—rumbling tremolos in the bass. Beethoven, another particularly important compositional model for Fanny, is evident in the first movement; the lyrical turns and motivic development call to mind Beethoven’s late piano sonatas, here just a year after his death in 1827. The third movement is an effervescent but darkly tinged Scherzo—quintessentially “Mendelssohnian”—perhaps evoking the emergence of spring in April, May, and June, as well as the ideas of spiritual and physical rebirth in the Passion story. The stormy fourth movement, most likely a depiction of the crucifixion, gives way to a radiant fantasy on the Easter chorale, “Christe, du Lamm Gottes” (“Christ, thou Lamb of God”).

The full details of my research and discovery are presented in my article “Authorship, Attribution, and the Historical Record: Solving the Mystery of the Easter Sonata by Fanny Hensel geb. Mendelssohn Bartholdy,” forthcoming in the journal Musical Quarterly.

- Angela Mace Christian
Largo e molto espressivo

ben cantato

- 10 -
Allegretto - Scherzo
con molto espressione
Allegro

Tempo I
Allegro con strepito