

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Coda: A Reply to Marian Wilson Kimber

Marcia J. Citron
Rice University

In the December 2008 issue of this journal, Marian Wilson Kimber wrote a lengthy Letter to the Editor – an essay in everything but name – in response to my article ‘A Bicentennial Reflection: Twenty-Five Years with Fanny Hensel’, which appeared here the previous year.¹ This is the written version of my keynote address at the bicentenary Hensel conference at Oxford University in 2005, ‘Fanny Hensel and Her Circle’, organized by Susan Wollenberg. The paper was published alongside other presentations from the conference, and together they comprise the entire issue. Kimber’s letter-essay also addresses an earlier article of mine, ‘Feminist Waves and Classical Music: Pedagogy, Performance, Research’, in the journal *Women and Music* in 2004.² Both of my pieces take issue with key points in Kimber’s postfeminist essay of 2002, ‘The “Suppression” of Fanny Mendelssohn: Rethinking Feminist Biography’, published in *19th-Century Music*.³ Hence our conversations on Hensel have been going on for some seven years. Each of us has had the opportunity to air our views at length, and at this point it is probably time to close the book and move on. So, heeding the dictum that brevity is the soul of wit, my remarks will be few and to the point.

The main comment is that I stand by my work. The evidence and arguments in both articles speak for themselves, and there is no need to revisit them here. Ultimately it is up to the reader to judge their merit. This also applies to my earlier body of work on Hensel, which Kimber ignored or distorted in 2002 by omitting context and applying quotations to far-flung conclusions.⁴ My second

¹ Marcia J. Citron, ‘A Bicentennial Reflection: Twenty-Five Years with Fanny Hensel’, *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 4/2 (2007): 7–20. Wilson Kimber’s letter essay is ‘Of “Bumps” and Biography: A Response to Marcia Citron’, *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 5/2 (2008): 175–80.

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.

³ Marian Wilson Kimber, ‘The “Suppression” of Fanny Mendelssohn: Rethinking Feminist Biography’, *19th-Century Music* 26 (2002): 113–29. It is interesting that the quotes around ‘Suppression’ as it appears in the title of the actual published article are removed when cited in the letter essay’s body (first sentence) and footnotes. Might this be a rhetorical move to strengthen the argument that suppression is indeed the practice of feminist authors, and that suppression is a straightforward and accurate description? Of course, it is always possible that it is a typo. But given that this is Kimber’s own work, that it appears repeatedly, and that the 32 notes (!) revel in sources and details, one can only assume that the omission of the quotes is intentional.

⁴ Highlights of my work on Hensel include the volume *Letters of Fanny Hensel to Felix Mendelssohn* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1987), which won an award from *Choice Magazine* as an ‘Outstanding Academic Book’; ‘The Lieder of Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel’, *The Musical Quarterly* 69 (1983): 570–94; ‘Felix Mendelssohn’s Influence on Fanny

point is more specific. In her letter essay, Kimber claims that I misunderstand a key idea of the 2002 essay in thinking that feminism is under attack, rather than the intersection of feminism and biography. That distinction does not reflect what appears in her article, however. At its most dramatic, 'The "Suppression" of Fanny Mendelssohn' charges feminist scholars with making up history rather than relying on evidence, and constructing biography that reflects their own lives rather than those of their historical subjects.⁵ In the larger scheme, Kimber either misjudges the extent to which feminist methods, and hence feminism *per se*, are central to feminist biography, the target of her critique; or, more likely, she is mounting a rhetorical defence by emphasizing biography as the real focus so as to minimize her negativity towards feminism. But try as she might, feminism is inseparable from biography in her critique of feminist biography. To assert them as separate entities is at best naive, at worst deceptive.

In theory, the study of biography and its intersection with feminism has great potential to advance our understanding of past lives and their construction through time. Unfortunately, Kimber's article lacks an understanding of the subtleties of feminism, the richness of its ideas and the appropriate relative weight to be accorded scholarly work and popular accounts to bring off a successful study. Perhaps her initial goal was worthy – it is hard to judge original intentions when one's work has been seriously distorted. What is certain is that 'The "Suppression" of Fanny Mendelssohn' represents a missed opportunity to assess biographical approaches to Hensel.

Future work on Hensel and other historical female musicians will doubtless go in interesting directions. Differences in approach are to be expected, and this is a healthy sign of a maturing scholarly area. Foundational feminist work, such as my publications on Hensel, will inevitably be reinterpreted. But reappraisal must be fair, considered and informed. As in recent Hensel work by other musicologists – among them Felix Mendelssohn expert R. Larry Todd, authorship scholar Matthew Head, and women's-music specialists Beatrix Borchard and Cornelia Bartsch – such reappraisal can be immensely helpful and advance the field.⁶ I hope that Hensel scholarship travels this productive road in the future.

Hensel as a Professional Composer', *Current Musicology* 37–38 (1984): 9–17; the article on Hensel for *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 2001), and *The New Grove Dictionary of Women Composers* (London: Grove Publications, 1994); and substantial discussions in my book *Gender and the Musical Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), and the article '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), 224–48.

⁵ Kimber, 'The "Suppression" of Fanny Mendelssohn', 126. Although much of the argument is by innuendo, the lead sentence of the second paragraph is telling: '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.'

⁶ See, for instance, the following contributions to the Oxford Conference in *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 4/2 (2007): R. Larry Todd, 'Fanny Hensel's Op. 6 #1 and The Art of Musical Reminiscence', 89–100; Matthew Head, 'Genre, Romanticism, and Female Authorship: Fanny Hensel's "Scottish" Sonata in g minor (1843)', 67–88; and the joint paper of Beatrix Borchard and Cornelia Bartsch, 'Leipziger Straße Drei: Sites for Music', 119–38. In addition, Todd has a blockbuster life-and-works monograph on Hensel in press (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [2009]).