

Elizabeth Grimpo, piano  
October 30, 2016  
3:00

*Das Jahr* .....Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel (1799-1847)

January  
February  
March  
April  
May  
June  
July  
August  
September  
October  
November  
December  
Chorale

#### Program Notes:

Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel's *Das Jahr* (*The Year*) is a full-length Romantic piano cycle and can easily stand next to the music of other composers from this era. This large-scale work features an individual movement for each month of the year and is intended to be performed without interruption.

Hensel began composing the cycle in August of 1841, and according to some scholars, is a musical journal of the year she and her family spent in Rome. Fanny herself had no intention of publishing the entire work. Rather, she presented it to her husband for a Christmas gift. Subsequently, her artist husband created paintings to place before the music of each month. Surely the result was a tender collaboration of music and visual art.

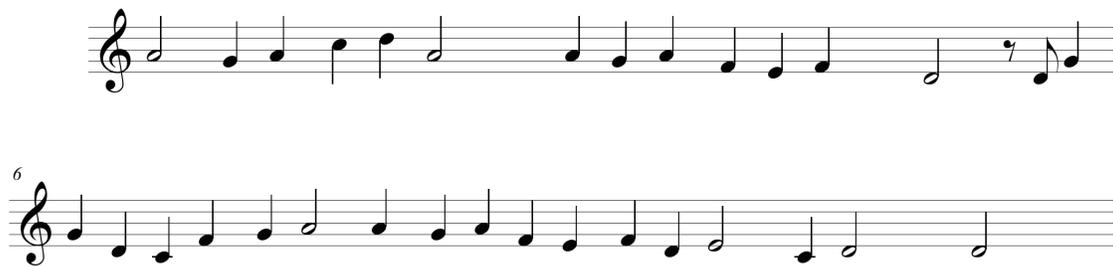
Although the cycle was written so long ago, it has only been published since 1989. Since the work underwent changes and revisions in Fanny's own hand, there are different versions of the music, each containing slight variations. Therefore, each modern performance of the cycle may be slightly different, depending on the score being used.

An important aspect to this cycle is Fanny's faith. It is well known that she and her brother, Felix, were born into a Protestant family of Jewish heritage and remained practicing Lutherans throughout their lives. Fanny's depth of faith can be heard as *Das Jahr* unfolds, specifically in the months of March and December, which contain musical references to Easter and Christmas, respectively. All twelve months are very different in terms of musical material and likely reflect the various moods and seasons of Fanny's own life. However, though the musical moods of each month change, Fanny knew that Jesus Christ never changes. And by the end of the cycle, the listener can hear that though her life had its ups and downs, her faith was never shaken.

January opens with stark octaves in the lower register of the piano. It resembles a small-scale fantasy in that it is free of a specific formal design and sounds slightly improvised. In fact, in this opening movement, Hensel briefly hints at one of the themes that she will use in May, almost as if she is sketching out her musical thoughts for later in the year.

February is quick and lively, perhaps representing, in a generic way, the excitement of the Carnival, the festive season occurring right before Lent on the Christian calendar. Carnival celebrations were often marked with masks, lights, vibrant colors, rich foods, and the like. The music bursts with excited energy and adventure.

March is an intense movement, and begins in F-sharp minor. Halfway through, the Lutheran Easter chorale, *Christ ist erstanden*, is beautifully and simply stated in C-sharp minor. This chorale melody continues to the end of the movement, as the piano figurations increase in speed and intensity. Finally, the exuberance of Easter victory breaks through the minor mode as the chorale tune is triumphantly stated in the parallel major.



Stanza 1: *Christ is arisen from the grave's dark prison.  
So let our joy rise full and free; Christ our comfort sure will be.  
Alleluia!*

Text: German, 12<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> cent.; translation Martin L. Seltz, 1909-67, alt.

Tune: Latin, c. 1100; *Geistliche Lieder auff's new gebessert*, Wittenberg, 1533, ed. Joseph Klug

April opens with a beautiful and delicate theme in E major, only to transition to a passage of harmonically suspenseful material characterized by a consistent rhythmic drive forward. These contrasting themes alternate throughout the movement, almost as if they are interrupting each other. And though the delicate material began the movement, the more suspenseful material ends it.

May's opening theme may be slightly recognizable, as it was briefly heard in January. The music sounds carefree and light, and though there are moments when it intensifies, the movement concludes in the same carefree manner in which it began.

June is the month of the cycle that Hensel revised the most. In fact, she wrote two completely different Junes. The one that will be performed today is the first version she composed. It is a serenade in D minor and contains a hauntingly beautiful melody. The melody returns in varied fashion several times throughout the movement, with the accompaniment figurations becoming more complex upon every return.

July is dark and slow. Its straightforward rhythm and falling melodic line seem to represent personal introspection, either contemplating a difficult time or being wistful of what might have been.

August is perhaps the brightest movement of the entire cycle. The first section is very energetic and march-like. The second section, in compound meter, is continually moving forward and seems to beam with the heat and sunlight of summer.

September seems to resemble a Venetian boat song, similar in style to those written by her brother, Felix, and contained in his *Songs Without Words*. This heavy-hearted movement is written in B minor, and the simple, yet rich, melody is imbedded in the middle register while the accompanying figurations suggest the continual movement and flow of water.

October is a complete shift in mood from the previous month. It resembles a hunting song in that the main melodic motive is a strident ascending arpeggio, representing the sound of a horn calling for the start of the hunt. The entire movement is full of energy, adrenaline, and victory.

November seems to mark the onset of winter weather. Although the introductory material is cold, it is not without beauty. As the main material makes its entrance a little later, it seems to suggest the blustery movement of the cold winter wind.

December, like March, opens with rather intense material in the minor mode – in this instance, C minor. And again, like March, the Lutheran chorale *Vom himmel hoch*, a beloved hymn at Christmas time, is stated in the parallel major halfway through the movement. Interestingly, Hensel composed two endings for this particular month: one quiet and reflective, the other full and bombastic. Today's performance will feature the former, as the passing of time from one year to the next is rarely marked by grand spectacle, but instead tends to be seamless and gentle.



Stanza 1: *“From heav’n above to earth I come to bear good news to ev’ry home;  
Glad tidings of great joy I bring, whereof I now will say and sing.”*

Stanza 15: *Glory to God in highest heav’n, who unto us His Son has giv’n!  
While angels sing with pious mirth a glad new year to all the earth.*

Text: Martin Luther, 1483-1546; tr. Catherine Winkworth, 1827-78, alt.  
Tune: *Geistliche lieder*, Leipzig, 1539, ed. Valtin Schumann

After the twelve months are completed, the cycle concludes with a setting of the Lutheran chorale, *Das alte Jahr vergangen ist*.



- Stanza 1: *The old year now hath passed away; we thank Thee, O our God, today  
That Thou hast kept us through the year when danger and distress were near.  
That Thou hast kept us through the year when danger and distress were near.*
- Stanza 2: *We pray Thee, O eternal Son, who with the Father reign'st as One,  
To guard and rule Thy Christendom through all the ages yet to come. (repeat)*
- Stanza 3: *Take not Thy saving Word away, Our souls' true comfort, staff, and stay.  
Abide with us and keep us free from errors, following only Thee. (repeat)*
- Stanza 4: *Oh, help us to forsake all sin, a new and holier course begin!  
Mark not what once was done amiss; a happier, better year be this, (repeat)*
- Stanza 5: *Wherein as Christians we may live or die in peace that Thou canst give,  
To rise again when Thou shalt come and enter Thine eternal home. (repeat)*
- Stanza 6: *There shall we thank Thee and adore with all the angels evermore.  
Lord Jesus Christ, increase our faith to praise Thy name in life and death.  
(repeat)*

Text: Johann Steurlein, 1546-1613; translation Catherine Winkworth  
Tune: Wolfgang Carl Briegel, 1626-1712

In this particular setting, Hensel intersperses the phrases of this hymn with phrases of original material. She indicates that every phrase of the hymn is to be played quietly and every phrase of her new material is to be played loudly. Perhaps this is her way of musically expressing Psalm 46.

*"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the  
heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their  
surging.  
'Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted in the earth.'  
The LORD Almighty is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress." (v. 1-2, 10-11 NIV)*

The text of the five stanzas thanks God for his presence and protection throughout the past year, looks ahead to the new year, and anticipates the joy of heaven. Surely, this was on Hensel's mind as she composed the entire cycle, as she lived each day, and as she passed through every situation. It is a beautiful conclusion, not only to this work, but to each year we are privileged to live.