

PIANO  
CLASSICS

*Fanny  
Mendelssohn*

PIANO SONATAS

Gaia Sokoli



## FANNY MENDELSSOHN 1805-1847

### PIANO SONATAS

Sonata in G minor H-U 395 (1843)	9. Sonatensatz in E H-U 44 (1822)
1. I. Allegro molto agitato 3'37	- Allegro molto moderato 5'53
2. II. Scherzo 2'56	
3. III. Adagio 4'02	Sonata in C minor H-U 128 (1824)
4. IV. Finale: Presto 6'22	10. I. Allegro moderato e con espressione 4'56
Ostersonate (1828)	11. II. Andante con moto 3'28
5. I. Allegro assai moderato 5'04	12. III. Finale: Presto 3'16
6. II. Largo e molto espressivo 4'30	
7. III. Scherzo: Allegretto 4'20	
8. IV. Allegro con strepito 7'46	

Gaia Sokoli *piano*

### Fanny Mendelssohn's Piano Sonatas

The figure of Fanny Mendelssohn (1805-1847) is still awaiting an adequate reevaluation. The elder sister of Felix Mendelssohn, four years younger than her, Fanny was born in Hamburg in 1805 into a very wealthy family. Their father Abraham was a banker and took particular care in the education of his children, who had the privilege of a very high profile cultural (not just musical) education in Berlin, where the family moved in 1812. Fanny and Felix studied composition with Karl Zelter, who gave them an excellent foundation in contrapuntal technique, and piano with Ludwig Berger, a pupil of Hummel. Fanny was also a piano virtuoso and often performed in Sunday domestic concerts in their Berlin home, also in duo with her brother Felix. Only in 1845 did Fanny decide to publish her first composition under her own name, since she had always been discouraged (not to say opposed) in her public activity as a composer, by her brother and the rest of her family. So her father wrote to her in a letter dated July 16, 1820: *Music will perhaps become his [Felix's] profession, while for you it can and must be only an ornament.* Her first compositions were actually published with the name of her brother: they are the Lieder Op.8 Nos. 2, 3, 12 and Op.9 Nos.7, 10 and 12 of "Felix Mendelssohn". Felix himself, however, was not inclined to the fact that his sister should make her activity as a composer public: *From my knowledge of Fanny I should say that she has neither inclination nor vocation for authorship. She is too much all that a woman ought to be for this. She regulates her house, and neither thinks of the public nor of the musical world, nor even of music at all, until her first duties are fulfilled. Publishing would only disturb her in these, and I cannot say that I approve of it* (Felix Mendelssohn to his mother, June

24, 1837). In 1829 she married the painter Wilhelm Hensel and a year later gave birth to her only child, Sebastian. The popularity of Fanny's music was limited by the little promotion she herself could make: she led a life focused on raising her son and on the housekeeping duties of an upper class woman. She considered her compositional activity, though constantly cultivated, as a personal fact, an intimate diary not designed for public diffusion: *I have been composing a good deal lately, and have called my piano pieces after the names of my favourite haunts, partly because they really came into my mind at these spots, partly because our pleasant excursions were in my mind while I was writing them. They will form a delightful souvenir, a kind of second diary. But do not imagine that I give these names when playing them in society, they are for home use entirely* (Letter to her sister Rebecca from Rome, April 23, 1840). The publication of Fanny's piano works is not yet complete, so much so that of the approximately 450 compositions she wrote (mainly Lieder, compositions for piano or small chamber groups) only a small part is published today, especially by the German publisher "Furore Verlag". The complete catalog, with the initials H-U, was drawn up by Renate Hellwig-Unruh in 2000.

This album collects for the first time the three Piano Sonatas composed by Fanny, as well as the Sonata movement "*Sonatensatz*" in E major. Comparative listening to these different outcomes achieved by Fanny allows us to realize her stylistic evolution, and how her approach to sonata form has changed, in an era (1820-1843) of profound evolution for the genre. The album presents the three Sonatas in reverse chronological order. The early compositions are compatible with the generic definition of "Mendelssohnian",

as they present stylistic elements common to Felix's language, but Fanny's language, with the progressive liberation from her family of origin, gradually conquers an originality that takes on the most convincing tones precisely in the *Sonata in G minor* H-U 395, written in 1843. The manuscript of the Sonata (which was only published in 1991 by Furore Verlag) is kept at the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin (collocation number: MA Ms.34, MA Ms.48). In the first movement, *Allegro molto agitato*, the key of G minor is constantly "challenged" by dissonant harmonies and contradicted by continuous modulations, which give the piece a quivering and changing inflection. From the whirlwind beginning, based on a magmatic tremolo in the bass on a tonic pedal, the energy that runs through this composition is evident. The sense of an incessant search is never satisfied by stable landings, not even at the end of the movement, unexpectedly on a tonic pedal of G major, in which, however, the presence of A flat makes the conclusion illusory and bitter. An equally unreal *Scherzo* in B minor follows, also based on long harmonic pedals. The dreamlike central part in B major unfolds against delicate tremolos in the high register. Harmonic stability is finally achieved in the third movement, an inspired *Adagio* in D major, which closely resembles the *Andante* of Felix Mendelssohn's Sonata Op.106 MWV U 64 (1827). The *Finale, Presto*, in G major, is also similar to the *Finale* of the Sonata op. 106 by Felix, with whom it shares a lyrical character, in which the magmatic energy of the first movement seems to have quietly subsided.

The *Ostersonate* (*Easter Sonata*) is one of the most interesting recent discoveries, and its attribution to Fanny Mendelssohn occurred only in 2010. The only disc recording that appears to exist before the present one is that of the French pianist Eric Heidsieck (LP Cassiopée, 1972, n. 369182), in which it appears as *Sonate de Pâques* by “F. Mendelssohn”, suggesting that it is a piece by Felix. Moreover, the complete signature of Fanny is also missing in the manuscript of the Sonata, as the author is indicated only by the name of “F. Mendelssohn”. I personally learned of the existence of this Sonata from Aldo Bernardini, a dear friend who was one of the most passionate Mendelssohn experts in Italy, and whom I was lucky enough to frequent during my years of Mendelssohnian research. It was Aldo who in 2005 gave me a copy of Eric Heidsieck’s LP. This was an opportunity to discover, in addition to a pianist of extreme interest and exquisite inspiration, also a piece that certainly sounded “strange” for being by Felix Mendelssohn, but which, thanks also to the inspired interpretation of Heidsieck, showed great charm. I informed the authoritative Mendelssohn scholar Larry Todd of the existence of this recording, sending him a copy of the LP, and thanks to the work of his student at Duke University, Angela Mace, today we know with certainty that the *Ostersonate* can be attributed to Fanny Mendelssohn. Angela Mace, with the help of Eric Heidsieck, was able to see the manuscript (whose ownership in the meantime had passed again into other private hands) in person in 2010 and verify that it is the handwriting of Fanny Mendelssohn, and not Felix. Furthermore, as the musicologist reports on her website (<https://www.angelamacechristian.com/easter-sonata>), the manuscript presents the missing page numbers (pages 89-110) of the file kept at the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin, with the collocation number MA MS. M. Lohs 4, pp. 89-110. The first news we have of the existence of the *Ostersonate* is in an entry by Fanny in

her diary, from which we know that she played it on April 10, 1829. From a subsequent letter written by Fanny to Felix on August 26, 1829, we learn that Felix performed the *Ostersonate* in Liverpool, as reported by Karl Klingemann. Today we can also know the exact date when Fanny completed the first movement: on Easter Sunday, April 7, 1828, as specified in the manuscript: “*Ostermontag. den 7ten April 1828*”

The *Ostersonate* consists of four movements, like the Sonata in G minor, but has a very different character from the latter. The title may refer not only to the aforementioned completion date of the first movement, but above all to the narrative setting, which, as we will see, could be a musical transposition of the *Passion of Christ*. Indeed, in 1828, Felix was preparing the execution of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, which would take place in Berlin on March 11, 1829, marking the first performance of Bach’s masterpiece after over 100 years. The first movement, *Allegro molto moderato*, is the only one in A major of the four. We do not find here the contrast in the character of the first and second theme, which, on the contrary, share some melodic elements. The expressive atmosphere is close to that of the first movement of the Sonata Op.6 in E major BWV U 54 by Felix, written two years earlier, which also features similar piano writing. The second movement is a very expressive *Largo* in E minor, reminiscent of Bach and of the absorbed lyricism of the *Charakterstück* Op.7 No.1 and No.6 in E minor by Felix Mendelssohn. It is divided into an ABA form, with a highly transparent polyphony, especially in the central section, consisting of a severe Fugue, full of dissonances, easily attributable to the poetic setting of the *St. Matthew Passion*. The third movement is a lighter *Scherzo* with an exquisitely Mendelssohnian character, also for the darting and spritely writing, in the same key, E major / minor, in which Mendelssohn wrote,

again in 1828, the *Rondo Capriccioso* Op.14. The fourth movement is a tormented *Finale* in A minor, the most original of the four, which anticipates the incessant restlessness that characterises the Sonata in G minor. The conclusion is surprising, in which torment gives way to serenity, with the appearance of the Lutheran Chorale *Christe, du Lamm Gottes* (Christ, Lamb of God), already used by Felix in the Chorale Cantata BWV A 5 of 1827, dedicated precisely to Fanny.

The *Sonatasatz in E major* H-U 44, *Allegro moderato molto*, was composed in January-February 1822, when Fanny was only sixteen, and demonstrates her precocious artistic maturity, almost equal to that of her brother. The care of the melodic profiles of the themes is evident already starting from the incipit, which takes shape through a fine contrapuntal texture. The general tone of the movement is lyrical, more Schumannian than Mendelssohnian, and this suggests Fanny's tendency towards a less linear, but perhaps more visionary, approach to sonata form than that which Felix would adopt. Even in the limited extension of the movement, we find a notable dramatic contrast in the short development, animated by a writing in octaves, which thickens the timbral play between the parts. The writing in octaves also reappears in the short *Coda*, which also maintains the graceful tone in which the entire movement is set. The fact that Fanny did not complete the Sonata with the other movements can be put down to the contemporary composition of the Piano Quartet in A flat major H-U 55, written in the following months of 1822.

The *Sonata in C minor* H-U 128 was composed in 1824 and maintains a traditional three-movement structure. The first, *Allegro moderato e con espressione*, shows an unusual predominance of the relative key of E flat major, compared to C minor, abandoned after only 10 measures from the beginning of the piece. The continuous modulations make the musical conduct always varied and full of surprises. An *Andante con moto* follows, also in 3/4 like the first movement, based on an ostinato rhythm in the bass, which unfolds through harmonic pedals. The result is a fatalistic atmosphere, in which the pace of the rhythmic pulsation marks the inexorable flow of time, in a constant emotional shift. The *Finale, Presto*, re-proposes the element of constant rhythmic pulsation, with an incessant motion first of triplets and then of quadruplets, which we also find in the *Vivace* in C minor BWV U 52 by Felix Mendelssohn, composed two years later, testifying to how much the relationship of mutual artistic influence between the two prodigious siblings was prolific and two-way.

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## GAIA SOKOLI

Gaia Sokoli was born in Erba in 1998 and began studying the piano with Claudia Boz, graduating under her guidance with full marks at the age of 16. She continued her studies with Leonid Margarius at the "Incontri col Maestro" Piano Academy in Imola and is currently specializing with Roberto Prosseda and Alessandra Ammara at the Accademia MusicaFelix.

Ms Sokoli has won over 50 first prizes in national and international competitions, including the Concours International "Nice - Cote d'Azur", the TIM - Torneo Internazionale di Musica, the Concours "Simone Delbert-Février" of Nice for piano and orchestra, and the Pianolink Master Contest. She also won second prize at the "M. Bramanti" Competition and at the "Il Pozzolino" International Competition in Seregno.

Her concert performances include appearances with the Cannes Symphony Orchestra, the "M. Jora" Philharmonic Orchestra in Bacau, the Pozzoli Philharmonic, and the Pianolink Philharmonic Orchestra.

She regularly gives piano recitals in Italy and has recently performed for Amici della Musica di Pistoia, the OperaBarga Festival, Pietrasanta in Concerto, Cremona Musica, and the Mozart Italia Association of Rovereto. Her concert activity has also led her to perform in France (Concerts de Jeunes Talents "in Nice), Switzerland ("New Year Music Festival "in Gstaad), Romania (Sala Ateneu in Bacau), Albania ("Pianodrom Festival" in Tirana), and Russia (International House of Music in Moscow). After winning first prize at the "Bradshaw and Buono" International Piano Competition, she made her debut at Carnegie Hall in New York.



Her first album, featuring the three piano sonatas by Fanny Mendelssohn, is being released in 2021 by the Dutch label Piano Classics.

Ms Sokoli is continuing her interpretative research on Fanny Mendelssohn's piano works and is preparing a second album, which will include "Das Jahr" and various other pieces, never previously recorded.