

# Carducci Quartet: Felix and Fanny

**Start time:** 7.30pm

**Approximate end time:** 9.20pm, including a 20-minute interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change.

## Programme

**Fanny Mendelssohn** String Quartet

1. Adagio ma non troppo

**Fanny Mendelssohn** 'June' from *Das Jahr*

(arr Emma Denton)

**Felix Mendelssohn** String Quartet No 1

2. Canzonetta

**Fanny Mendelssohn** String Quartet

2. Allegretto

**Fanny Mendelssohn** 'October' from *Das Jahr* (arr Denton)

**Fanny Mendelssohn String Quartet**

3. Romanze

**Felix Mendelssohn** String Quartet No 2

3. Intermezzo

4. Presto

**Fanny Mendelssohn** 'Postlude' from *Das Jahr* (arr Denton)

**Fanny Mendelssohn** String Quartet

4. Allegro molto vivace

**Felix Mendelssohn** String Quartet No 6

3. Adagio

**A tale of two siblings, equally gifted, one allowed to flourish, the other restricted by the expectations of her time and class...**

*'I am convinced that most human beings realise only a small portion of their real potential. Even though a woman is still not permitted to enter into the male-dominated world, there is no reason why she cannot develop her faculties so that when she is given equal chance, she will be ready! Signed, your engaged, hopeful, future-gazing, Fanny.'*

If we come across a piece in a performance or broadcast by 'Mendelssohn', it's all too easy to assume that the author must be a brilliant young man named Felix: a child prodigy, introduced to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe aged 12, responsible for a seminal performance of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* in 1829, and composer of numerous symphonies, string quartets, songs, piano pieces and choral works. And yet Felix was most decidedly not the only musically capable Mendelssohn – nor was he the first. That honour goes to his elder sister, a virtuoso pianist and prolific composer (with 450 works to her name): Fanny Mendelssohn.

The Mendelssohn family were extremely wealthy and, once settled in Berlin in 1811, they rapidly became leading cultural figures in the city. Fanny and Felix's parents established fortnightly 'Sunday musicales' at their home, in which famous visiting professionals would take part – as well as their children. The siblings received an unusually thorough education, including multiple languages, art, and musical tuition from the best teachers in the city. At 13, Fanny performed the first 24 Preludes from Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* from memory on her father's birthday. The following year, she began her first original compositions.

And yet the siblings were to follow very different paths, despite their shared musical brilliance. Felix would go on to conduct at the Leipzig Gewandhaus, found a conservatoire and travel Europe as a distinguished performer and composer. By contrast, their father wrote a letter to Fanny in 1820 stressing that, while her brother would probably become a professional musician, 'for you it can and must only be an ornament, never the root of your being and doing.'

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The scope of the music that Fanny might write, the fate of those scores (which could never be published under her own name), and even the piano repertoire that she might reasonably play in the family salon, were all to be limited by her gender.

Tonight's performance explores that relationship between the two brilliant young Mendelssohn siblings in Myla Lichtman-Fields's play *Felix and Fanny*. Crucially, and despite the different expectations put upon them by their family, these two composers enjoyed a very loving and supportive relationship. Fanny was frequently recruited to read over Felix's new works and made many suggestions that were subsequently incorporated into finished pieces. Felix attempted to help Fanny by publishing some of her music under his name – although this caused tensions between them. Eventually Fanny was encouraged by her husband, the painter Wilhelm Hensel, to publish music herself. The impact this had on the family bond is revealed to us in our protagonists' conversations, complemented by performances from the Carducci Quartet.

So how does one go about bringing such a story to life? 'My first draft was just letters,' Myla Lichtman-Fields explains. From these, she constructed a timeline of which sibling was doing what when, and then filled in the gaps. 'I wasn't in the room when they were talking to each other: that's where I have to take some dramatic licence.' *Felix and Fanny* began as a play in 1994 and has been performed across the USA. Myla is particularly thrilled that working with the Carduccis has allowed for the incorporation of live music into the show.

The collaboration was born of the Covid lockdowns. Having enjoyed such success with its *Shostakovich: Life, Letters & Friendship* project, the quartet was keen to put together another evening of words and music. While researching Fanny Mendelssohn's music, the Carducci's cellist Emma Denton came across Myla's play. 'I guess it was pandemic bravado!', Emma laughs. She wrote to Myla to see if she would be willing to collaborate. The play was then adjusted to fit the format of the evening and Emma began selecting repertoire. 'I remember a mad weekend when I just shut myself in a room with the play and listened. I wanted Fanny's Quartet to be heard in its entirety, to put her music centre stage.' Myla also recommended Fanny's piano diary, *Das Jahr*, from which Emma selected and arranged several movements. These are set alongside excerpts from several of Felix's quartets, including his last in F minor, written in the aftermath of his sister's death – and just a few months before his own.

What, then, would Myla and Emma have us take away from this glimpse into the lives of the Mendelssohn siblings? 'Tolerance,' Myla muses, 'this embraces not only the gender politics played out between Felix and Fanny, but also the anti-Semitism directed towards them despite their status as assimilated Protestants. 'And even though their relationship wasn't perfect,' adds Emma, 'they had an incredible bond ... I think there's such love there.'

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## Performers

### Carducci Quartet

**Matthew Denton** violin  
**Michelle Fleming** violin  
**Eoin Schmidt-Martin** viola  
**Emma Denton** cello

**Luke Thallon** Felix Mendelssohn  
**Lucy Phelps** Fanny Mendelssohn

Casting by Martin Poile for RSC

Produced by the Barbican



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