

The Musical Narrative and Emotional Expression in Fanny Mendelssohn's Piano Suite 'Das Jahr'

Peng Zhang

School of Arts, Zhejiang Normal University, 688 Yingbin Avenue, Jinhua, Zhejiang 321004, China

Abstract: Fanny Mendelssohn's piano suite **Das Jahr** (The Year) employs the twelve months as its structural framework, presenting a distinct temporal logic and holistic conception. Building upon an examination of the work's compositional background, this article focuses on analysing how it constructs a continuous temporal narrative through tonal organisation, shifts in form and the interplay of musical motifs. It further explores how the work embodies the unique aesthetic orientation and expressive style of a female composer, thereby deepening our understanding of the piece.

Keywords: Fanny Mendelssohn; **The Year**; Musical narrative; Cross-media expression; Temporal structure.

1. Introduction

The history of 19th-century Western music has long been centred on male composers, with the creative practices and artistic value of female composers remaining obscured for a considerable period. With the shift in musicological research paradigms since the 20th century, the works of Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel (1805–1847) have gradually come into the academic spotlight, and her compositions are continually being rediscovered and re-evaluated in contemporary musicological studies. Among these, the piano suite **Das Jahr** (The Year, 1841) uses the twelve months as structural units, transforming personal life experiences and perceptions of time into a continuous musical expression, presenting a unique narrative and emotional dimension. Unlike the juxtaposition typical of traditional piano pieces, this work constructs a cohesive musical progression through internal structural connections and emotional progression.

2. Fanny Mendelssohn's Piano Compositions

Fanny Mendelssohn was a significant female composer and pianist of the German Romantic period in the 19th century. Born into a highly cultured family in Hamburg, she received a systematic musical education from an early age. She was initially taught the piano by her mother, and later studied composition alongside her brother, Felix Mendelssohn, under Carl Friedrich Zelter. Despite her exceptional talent, Fanny's compositional and performance activities were long constrained by 19th-century gender norms. Her father explicitly stated that music for her 'should be merely a pastime', rather than a career choice—a view that was prevalent in high society at the time. Consequently, her musical practice unfolded primarily within the confines of family salons, lacking the support of public performance venues and publishing channels. This background directly influenced Fanny's musical composition. Her works were predominantly concentrated in genres of a more intimate nature, such as art songs and piano pieces. According to records, Fanny composed over 460 works during her lifetime, including some 300 art songs and more than 120 piano pieces; however, very few were published during her lifetime. Most works were preserved in manuscript form, and some were

even published under Felix's name. It was not until 1846 that she began publishing works under her own name, yet she passed away suddenly the following year, aged just 41[1].

Fanny Mendelssohn's piano music is often composed in the form of 'songs without words' or 'character pieces', characterised by brevity, clarity of structure and beautiful melodies. It reflects a lyrical tradition similar to that of Felix Mendelssohn, yet is more restrained and subtle in its emotional expression. On the one hand, she inherited the polyphonic tradition of Bach and the rigorous formal concepts of the Classical period, demonstrating a high degree of logic in her polyphonic texture, tonal organisation and structural arrangement; on the other hand, through the expansion of harmonic colour, motivic variation and the flexible handling of rhythmic patterns, she imbued her music with a distinct lyricism and emotional depth.

Furthermore, Fanny's musical compositions are often closely linked to her personal life experiences, exhibiting distinct subjectivity and an introspective quality. She tended to transform memories of travel, natural scenes and everyday emotions into musical material, giving her works the expressive character of a 'musical diary'. **Das Jahr** (The Year) is a representative work formed under this creative approach: the suite comprises thirteen pieces (the twelve months and an epilogue), using time as its structural framework whilst integrating religious hymns, festive imagery and personal memories, thereby achieving a unity of temporal experience and emotional expression. This work holds integrative significance within her piano output and provides a crucial example for understanding the narrative and emotional expression within her musical language.

3. The Temporal Sequence and Narrative Development of **Das Jahr**

The piano suite **Das Jahr** was completed in 1841. The collection comprises twelve highly distinctive pieces composed during Fanny's travels in Italy between 1839 and 1840. Each movement corresponds to a month and is accompanied by a painting created by her husband, forming a magnificent musical memoir. Together, they depict the distinct atmospheres and emotions of the twelve months of the year. The score is written on coloured paper and

accompanied by her husband's illustrations and short poems, showcasing the characteristic fusion of music, literature and art during the Romantic period. Structured around the twelve months and concluding with a 'Postlude', the work constructs a complete temporal cycle in its form. Unlike the loose structure of traditional piano pieces, this work organises the pieces in a temporal sequence, creating an internal connection between them through their vertical arrangement and thereby generating a continuous musical narrative. Thus, the narrative quality of this work does not stem from a specific plot, but is achieved through structural arrangement, the continuity of musical material, and the progression of temporal imagery [2].

3.1. A Concept of Time Organised by 'Months'

The Year unfolds from January, successively passing through the changing seasons, and ultimately completes a return to the beginning in the Postlude. This structure not only reflects a linear presentation of natural time but also embodies a dual concept of time characterised by both periodicity and cyclicity. On the one hand, the sequence of the twelve months constitutes an irreversible flow of time, causing the music to unfold in a process of 'beginning—development—conclusion'; on the other hand, the introduction of the religious theme 'the old year has passed' in the epilogue directs time towards a new starting point, implying the possibility of rebirth within the work's conclusion.

Within this structure, organised around the core of time, the twelve miniatures possess their own independence whilst deriving meaning from their relationship with preceding and following movements, becoming links in an overall narrative chain. This compositional approach ensures that the work's structure is not a simple juxtaposition, but rather a holistic construction grounded in the experience of time.

3.2. The Narrative Logic of Structural Logic Constructed through Modal Arrangement

Modal arrangement forms a crucial foundation of the internal structure of **The Year**. Through the connections and transitions between different modes, Fanny creates a sense of continuity between the movements on the harmonic level, thereby reinforcing the sense of temporal progression. Viewed as a whole, the work's modal arrangement exhibits a trajectory shifting from brightness to gloom and then towards stability, mirroring the natural changes of the four seasons [3].

For instance, the opening sections predominantly employ bright, clear tonalities to depict the initial state of time. For example, **January** (Januar) unfolds in a psalmodic harmonic language, with stable tonality and a solemn texture, evoking a sense of ritual akin to the commencement of time. As the work progresses, the tonality gradually becomes more complex, presenting diverse tonal variations across the different months. 'February' (Februar), meanwhile, employs continuously flowing motifs and relatively unstable harmonic progressions to convey a light-hearted and slightly cheerful mood; whereas 'September' (September) adopts a more sombre tone in both tonality and texture, with shifts in register and harmonic density lending the music a more introspective quality, thus reflecting the emotional shifts within the passage of time. By the end of the year, the tonal relationships gradually converge. **December** (Dezember) introduces the Christmas hymn "Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her", creating a distinct sense of resolution through a relatively stable tonal centre and harmonic resolution; whilst in the **Epilogue** (Nachspiel), the composer further employs the

New Year's hymn "Das alte Jahr vergangen ist", enabling the music to achieve a sense of summary and return on both thematic and tonal levels. This process—from the establishment of the opening, through transformations in the development, to the integration of the conclusion—creates an intrinsic resonance between tonal movement and temporal structure, presenting the music with a clear narrative logic of 'development—turn—resolution' to the listener.

Furthermore, the tonal relationships between adjacent movements (such as related keys and parallel keys) enhance the overall coherence, creating implicit transitional links between the pieces representing different months. This organisational approach at the tonal level endows the suite with a clear structural logic, serving as a vital vehicle for musical narration.

3.3. The Continuity of Narrative Achieved Through the Integration of Musical Material

It is worth noting that **The Year** achieves the continuity of its musical narrative through the integration of motifs and material. Fanny employs similar rhythmic patterns, melodic motifs or textural approaches across different pieces, ensuring that the music maintains a certain internal consistency amidst its variations, thereby creating a memory-like auditory experience. The recurrence and transformation of musical material enable the listener to establish connections between the various pieces, reinforcing the unity of the overall structure [4].

For instance, fluid melodic motifs recur across multiple movements, yet undergo changes in tempo, rhythm or harmonic context, thereby presenting new emotional significance whilst retaining recognisability. The introduction of melodies from religious chants—such as the Easter hymn in **March**, the Christmas hymn in **December**, and the New Year's hymn in the **Epilogue**—not only carries symbolic significance but also creates a thematic thread throughout the music, serving as structural markers at key junctures. These musical materials fulfil the function of emotional expression whilst also acting as connectors and cues within the overall structure.

It is thus evident that the narrative quality of **The Year** is realised through the organisation of temporal sequences and the intrinsic connections within the musical language. Time here is not merely an external arrangement, but becomes the core logic of musical generation. The work transforms the experience of time into a musical process characterised by directionality and a sense of wholeness, thereby forming a unique narrative form.

4. The Emotional Layers and Expressive Techniques in **The Year**

In the piano suite **The Year**, Fanny Mendelssohn does not maintain a single emotional tone throughout, but rather constructs a clearly layered and progressively developing emotional structure through the musical language of each month. This emotional expression is realised through specific musical means, such as changes in key, textural arrangements, and the use of rhythm and motifs, allowing the emotions to unfold through the music's variations.

4.1. Emotional Expression through Stylistic Shifts

Fanny employs diverse styles across the different months to create contrasts in emotional expression. For instance, **March** (März) centres on a religious theme, incorporating the Lutheran hymn melody 'Christ ist erstanden' and unfolding in a four-part choral texture to evoke a solemn, introspective atmosphere. In the prelude and the hymn section, the piece predominantly employs harmonic textures and a steady rhythm, lending the music a solemn and restrained character; whereas in the 'Resurrection' section, the shift from a minor to a major mode, coupled with a more lively rhythm, creates an emotional transition from oppression to light, embodying the religious process of 'suffering—redemption'.

In contrast, **April** adopts characteristics reminiscent of a fantasia, expressing shifting emotional states through frequent rhythmic changes and shifts in texture. The rapid shifts between E major and A minor, along with the alternation between 8/9 and 4/4 time signatures, lend the music a sense of instability and unpredictability. For instance, the concentrated use of rapid sixteenth-note clusters not only aurally mimics the dynamic shifts of a spring shower but also intensifies feelings of tension and unease through increased rhythmic density, thereby embodying the emotional contrast between 'brightness and turbulence'[5].

'May' (Mai), on the other hand, is predominantly lyrical, using the rondo form and song-like melodies to create a warm, flowing emotional atmosphere. Its main themes are largely constructed from arpeggios and syncopated rhythms, with melodic lines that are expansive and natural, complemented by flowing middle-voice figures, giving the music a bright and vibrant character. Compared to the religious solemnity of **March** and the dramatic conflict of **April**, **May** places greater emphasis on the continuity and inner flow of emotion.

4.2. Emotional Layers in Texture and Polyphonic Composition

Fanny placed particular importance on the role of textural structure in emotional expression. She frequently employed polyphonic melodies and clearly layered textures to allow different emotions to coexist within the same temporal dimension, thereby enhancing the music's sense of depth. For instance, in **March**, sustained notes in the middle voice (such as recurring pedal tones) contrast with the melody in the upper voice. The former mimics the sustained resonance of bells, creating a sense of spatial depth characteristic of religious rituals, whilst the melody in the upper voice possesses a distinct vocal quality, expressing inner emotion. This layered effect endows the music with both a ceremonial atmosphere and an inner emotional flow.

In **May**, the use of three-part texture is even more characteristic: the bass provides stable harmonic support for the whole, the middle voice forms a flowing background with clusters of sixteenth notes, whilst the upper voice carries the melodic line. The differences between the three in register, rhythm and timbre give the music a rich layered structure. The continuously flowing motifs in the middle voice not only enhance the music's continuity but also create an emotional metaphor for the passage of time.

4.3. Emotional Drive in Rhythmic Motifs

Rhythm and motif are the primary drivers of emotional momentum in **The Year**. Through techniques such as

rhythmic density, changes in metre and the repetition of motifs, Fanny creates a process of tension and release within the temporal dimension of the music.

For instance, in **February** (**Februar**), the frequent use of arpeggios and rapid motifs lends the melody a light yet sustained sense of flow; rhythmically, subtle fluctuations convey a state of slight unease and restlessness. In **September** (**September**), however, the rhythm and motifs shift towards a more introspective and profound expression. Compared to the fluid motifs of the earlier months, the rhythm in this piece tends towards a more leisurely pace, with motifs often presented in longer durations or a scattered texture. This creates a sense of temporal extension and stagnation, lending the music the characteristic tranquillity and sense of reflection associated with autumn.

Furthermore, the rhythmic treatment in **November** further reflects a tendency towards emotional restraint. The frequent use of disjointed motifs and irregular rhythmic combinations creates a sense of instability and suspension. The combination of brief motifs and intermittent pauses heightens the emotional uncertainty. This rhythmic discontinuity serves as a key means of emotional expression, lending the music an inner sense of repression as it approaches its conclusion.

5. The Aesthetic Significance and Artistic Value of **Das Jahr**

Fanny Mendelssohn's piano suite **Das Jahr** (The Year) is an artistic work centred on the passage of time. The structure comprising the twelve months and an 'Epilogue' presents a complete temporal cycle in formal terms, whilst within the music itself, this temporal framework is continually imbued with emotion and memory. It can be said that **Das Jahr** depicts not only the flow of time, but also the gradual emergence and crystallisation of the composer's emotions within that temporal framework.

This is inextricably linked to Fanny's own life experiences. Within the cultural context of the 19th century, Italy remained a significant object of literary and artistic imagination. In 1839, Fanny embarked on a journey to Italy. Before her departure, she had thoroughly studied works such as Goethe's **Italian Journey** and Heine's **Travel Sketches**. During her time in Rome, she experienced recognition and a response within a broader cultural milieu for the first time; this sense of being understood and appreciated brought about a marked spiritual transformation. She wrote in her diary: 'Leaving Rome was a heavy burden for us; I never imagined it would leave such a profound impression on me. I must admit that the atmosphere of admiration and respect surrounding me contributed to this to some extent. Looking back on my younger years, I have never been so sought after as I am now; who can say that this is not a source of immense satisfaction and supreme joy? Having endured so many trials and tribulations, I do not feel that I have grown old; on the contrary, I feel rejuvenated. On such a journey, one acquires eternal riches.' This inner transformation forms the very emotional foundation of **The Seasons**.

If we situate **The Year** within the developmental trajectory of Western music, the significance of this work becomes readily apparent. As early as the Baroque period, Vivaldi's **The Four Seasons** depicted natural scenes through music, transforming time and the seasons into audible imagery. In **The Year**, however, time no longer points to

changes in the objective world, but shifts more towards subjective experience, becoming a foundation for emotion. By the late 19th century, Tchaikovsky's **The Seasons** similarly unfolded through a structure of twelve months, its music possessing a more public, communicative quality. In contrast, Fanny's **The Year** bears distinct autobiographical traits, its expression being more restrained and nuanced.

This style of expression stems from Fanny's long immersion in domestic and salon settings; her compositions did not aim for grand narratives, but rather focused on the expression of individual feelings and inner experiences. In **The Year**, this is manifested in a sensitive capture of subtle emotional shifts and a delicate portrayal of the layers of emotion as time passes, a style entirely distinct from that of her male contemporaries. It is in this sense that **The Year** is not merely a piano suite, but a successful work grounded in a female subject's experience.

In summary, Fanny Mendelssohn's **The Year** achieves an organic unity of time, emotion and memory in its aesthetic substance, whilst in terms of artistic value, it embodies a historical shift from external depiction towards internal expression. Within a broader historical context, this work not only expands the expressive possibilities of the piano suite but also serves as a crucial case study for understanding the creative output of 19th-century female composers.

6. Conclusion

Fanny Mendelssohn's piano suite **Das Jahr** (The Year) is structured around the months of the year; through the interplay of tonal structure, thematic continuity and textural organisation, it forms a coherent musical narrative. The work's emotional expression is not presented in isolation, but

unfolds gradually as time progresses, constructing an emotional trajectory that moves from introspection through turbulence to release through shifts in form, rhythmic motifs and harmonic colour. Fanny's composition is deeply rooted in her personal life experiences, particularly the spiritual transformation brought about by her stay in Italy, which lends the suite **Das Jahr** distinct autobiographical characteristics. From a music-historical perspective, this work holds significant continuity within the tradition of time-themed musical composition; moving from the depiction of natural landscapes towards a more inward emotional experience, it expands the expressive dimensions of the piano suite. As such, **The Year** embodies Fanny Mendelssohn's unique artistic personality and offers a vital perspective for understanding the creative output of 19th-century female composers.

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