Louise Farrenc (1804–1875)



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Louise Farrenc occupies a special position omong the women composers of the first half of the nineteenth century in a number of different respects. In contrast to Clara Schumann, for example, who only occasionally composed on the side while pursuing her career as a pianist, Farrenc wrote fifty-one works with opus numbers attesting to her thorough training, a creative and maturation process, and her dialoguing with changing styles, genres, and instrumentations. Unlike Fanny Mendelssohn, Josephine Lang, and Johanna Kinkel, who were able to develop their compositional talent only within the family circle and the narrow limits set by the middle-class understanding of female and male roles, Farrenc enjoyed relatively free access to professional institutions and to the public in the French music capital of Paris.

Louise Farrenc (Jeanne-Louise Dumont) was born on May 31, 1804, in Paris. She was the second of the three children of Marie Elisabeth Louise Curton and Jacques-Edme Dumont, a sculptor and recipient of the Rome Prize. The family had produced famous painters of both sexes and sculptors for generations, and Louise's older brother Auguste also became a famous sculptor. The Dumonts were one of the some thirty families residing in the artists' colony at the Sorbonne. Louise grew up in liberal surroundings and enjoyed a full cultural life with a whole wide range of educational and developmental opportunities already as a child.

At six she began receiving instruction in piano and solfège from the Clementi pupil Anne-Elisabeth Cécile Soria, and at fifteen she began her study of harmony under Antonín Reicha, professor

for counterpoint and fugue at the Paris Conservatoire. Her marriage to the flautist and music publisher Aristide Farrenc (1794–1865) two years later, in 1821, did not at all spell the end of her education. After a interval during which the couple traveled together in France, she continued her instruction with Reicha and expanded her fields of study to include counterpoint, fugue, and instrumentation. She must have been a private pupil of Reicha, since the Conservatoire did not allow women to study composition comprehensively. In content and level however, her lessons matched what she might have encountered at the Conservatoire. Louise Farrenc also studied the piano with Johann Nepomuk Hummel and Ignaz Moscheles. Hummel was on friendly terms with the Farrencs, and in 1825 Aristide Farrenc's firm began to feature works of his in its catalogue.

A daughter, Victorine Farrenc, was born in 1826. Taught by her mother, she became an outstanding pianist who also composed. She contracted tuberculosis in 1849 and died in 1859.

Louise Farrenc composed numerous piano pieces while still receiving her musical training; most of them were salon pieces and variation cycles in keeping with the taste of the times. From today's perspective, her three collections of études stand out, and here we would have to name in particular the first collection from 1837/38, the *Trentes études dans tous les tons majeurs et mineurs* (op. 26). This instructional work had as its aim not only the perfection of playing technique but also schooling in a feeling for style with a historical dimension. During the 1840s her op. 26 formed part of the official curriculum at the Paris and Brussels conservatories.

While other women composers of the times mostly limited themselves to shorter genres such as the piano song, choral music, and piano pieces appropriate for salon performance, Farrenc soon came to focus her work on orchestral compositions and chamber music for larger ensembles (two quintets, a sextet, a nonet). She composed her two concert overtures at age thirty, and seven years later she wrote the first of her total of three symphonies. She gained wider fame as a pianist, composer, and teacher with her increasing performances, some of them in public, during the course of the 1830s and was appointed professor of piano at the Paris Conservatory in 1842.

Performances of her symphonies also followed during these years, works which required the cooperation of orchestras and conductors for their presentation to the public. The premiere of her Symphony No. 3 op. 36 by the esteemed Société des Concerts du Conservatoire in 1849 and the premiere of the Nonet op. 38 in 1850, in which the violinist Joseph Joachim took part; though only nineteen years of age at the time, he was already something of a legend. The *Académie des Beaux-Arts* twice awarded Louise Farrenc the *Prix Chartier* for her contributions to chamber music, in 1861 and in 1869.

She had however already stopped composing in the late 1850s, presumably in response to her doughter Victorine's illness and death. In 1861 Louise Farrenc (together with her husband until his death) began publishing the *Trésor des Pianistes*, a 23-volume anthology of keyboard music from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries which pointed the way ahead for the revival of early music and research into its performance. Louise Farrenc finally resigned her position at the Conservatory in 1872 and died in Paris on September 15, 1875.

Louise Farrenc's music was broadly disseminated during her lifetime. Of her 49 known works with opus number, 41 were published (piano and chamber works), in many cases in England and Germany as well as in France. A number of compositions without opus number and arrangements of other composers' works were also published. Performances of her (unpublished) symphonies and overtures are known to have taken place in France, Denmark, Belgium and Switzerland. Louise Farrenc was a versatile and productive composer who continuously developed her technique and style and took professional composing quite for granted in a way many women of her time could not.

Yet, like nearly all of them, she was forgotten after her death. Unlike her notable German counterparts Clara Schumann and Fanny Hensel, Louise Farrenc was neither the wife nor the sister of a famous male composer, so that she failed to match the typically adjunctive role assigned to female composers. Another reason why her name did not live on lies in the situation prevailing on the French music scene at the time. Louise Farrenc had the distinction – as counterpart, so to speak, to Hector Berlioz – of being one of the very few French contemporaries of the Mendelssohns, Schumann, Chopin and Liszt who adopted the German Classical and Romantic traditions. In a Paris dominated by opera and salon music, her instrumental works could never be part of mainstream musical life. In this, Louise Farrenc represents a field of research which was long totally neglected by scholars and in which a good deal of work still remains to be done.

In contrast to Germany, where the Viennese Classical school and Beethoven's symphonies in particular had elevated the status of instrumental music above that of vocal music and set standards for the following generation of composers, in Paris, the opera continued to be the *sine qua non* for attaining fame as a composer. The Revolution had effectively interrupted the French tradition of the symphony, sonata, string quartet and similar forms.

On the other hand, numerous, mostly private orchestras and chamber-music societies gave unqualified precedence to German composers, while the famous *Société des concerts du Conservatoire* – the Conservatoire orchestra – had explicitly committed ifself to performing Beethoven's symphonies. But in respect of new compositions, if was left to George(s) Onslow, Louise Farrenc and a handful of others to ensure at least some continuity in *musique sérieuse* until Camille Saint-Saëns established the *Société nationale de musique* in 1871. The humiliation of the Franco-Prussian War had created the need for a sense of national identity in the arts, and the *Société nationale* was an attempt on the part of a group of composers to encourage and propagate native French musical styles, thinking and aesthetics, particularly in respect of instrumental music.

Such ideas were foreign to Louise Farrenc. Having studied composition with Antonín Reicha, a Bohemian trained in Bonn and Vienna, as a Parisian with an excellent knowledge of Beethoven, Mozart, and Haydn, she composed in the spirit of a universal European musical language and viewed it as her task to make classical works known in France and to continue to develop their stylistic elements in her own compositions.

Symphonies

Symphony No. 1 in C minor op. 32

1. Andante sostenuto – Allegro
2. Adagio cantabile
3. Minuetto. Moderato
4. Allegro assai

The composition of a first symphony often involves a long and difficult and sometimes confusing process. Robert Schumann broke off two symphonic compositions before finishing his first symphony, Brahms worked for about fifteen years on a symphonic work before he completed his first symphony at the age of forty-three, and Bruckner regarded his first symphony, his "zero symphony", as "invalid". In Louise Farrenc's case there are no extant personal papers and letters or compositional sketches that might tell us something about the history of the compositian of her first symphony or any other of her works, about any creative crises that she might have had, or about inspiring or paralyzing musical ideals that she might have espoused.

No work of art is produced *ex nihilo* without any relation at all to models and traditions, and even innovation and radical breaks with the post offer evidence of some sort of dependence on previous accomplishments. Farrenc's symphony is quite clearly situated in the tradition of Viennese classicism but also represents a new and original composition. Its four movements including a slow second movement, a minuet third movement, and a slow introduction to the first movement as well as the design and elaboration of the themes are all formal features that took shape in the symphonic œuvre of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. They continued to be maintained by and large and in their basic elements right up until the symphonies of Brahms and Bruckner without, however, standing in the way of new stylistic developments or individual invention and structuring. The sonata form selected by Farrenc for the outer movements also numbered among the developments of the classical period. In this form two or more themes are contrasted, elaborated in a middle section, and then return at the end in the initial opposition. The manner in which the different characters of the particular themes relate to each other in her first symphony does not follow the established norm. The two themes in the first movement of the symphony can hardly be described as contrasting or opposing; the first does not have the "*striking*" character or the second the "*songlike*" character that the theoreticians in many cases were intent on prescribing. Rather, the two themes exhibit a uniformly flowing rhythm and a sweeping melodic line also embracing larger intervals. They produce the same sort of cheerful effect and stand more in contrast to the theme of the slow introduction, which develops only hesitatingly over the dark basses and has its trace of melancholy.

The second movement also gets off to a tentative start with something of a preview. In unison, the low strings anticipate the descending sixth interval and the subsequent descending line with which the theme begins two measures later in the first violins but extend the initial tone to the length of a whole measure. The two scores in the composer's own hand indicate that the movement originally began immediately with the violin cantilena and that the two introductory measures were later additions.

The third movement is one of the lew minuet movements in Farrenc's œuvre; elsewhere she prefers the scherzo as the third movement. The minuet's character makes it the clearest movement of the symphony, this also with respect to the formation of the contrast between the minuet and trio section.

The fourth movement concludes the symphony in a raging tempo. The finale is repeatedly punctuated by a number of ritardando passages and shifts of tempo as it races on to its goal and, remembering, so to speak, the hesitant beginning of the composition, it seems once again to call into question the clarity of the third movement. At the end the hesitant beginning and goal-oriented tempo combine to form a synthesis: the tone material of the first measures of the concluding stretta (after one last rallentando the tempo accelerates here even more) is identical to the first measures of the slow introduction to the first movement. This completes the motivic circle with a reference back to the beginning of the symphony.

The background and time of the premiere of the first symphony clearly point to the difficulties faced by French composers of both sexes in the first half of the nineteenth century when they wanted to have their instrumental works performed. Farrenc completed the symphony in 1841, and her efforts to get it performed evidently met with failure in 1843. By the time the conservatory orchestra performed the symphony at a benefit concert in April 1845, its premiere had already taken place a few weeks earlier in Brussels. François-Joseph Fétis, the director of the Brussels Conservatory and the conductor at the premiere, wrote in the French press after this performance, "*This symphony is a highly remarkable work, and it is only right and fitting to direct the public attention to its composer, whose merits seem to me neither to be sufficiently known nor sufficiently promoted.*"

Symphony No. 2 in D major op. 35

1. Andante – Allegro
2. Andante
3. Scherzo. Vivace
4. Andante – Allegro

"The day when in France one has been able to gather ten persons around four wind instrumentalists performing music without words, then one will have witnessed a miracle of civilization. The Gallic people – proud, intrepid, laughing, and noisy – [...] was not made for the simple comprehension of a symphony by Beethoven." It was with these blunt words that Pierre Scudo, a French music critic and contemporary of Louise Farrenc, characterized nineteenth-century French musical taste at the end of the 1850s. The French were crazy about music theater, and the symphony, both in Germany and France, was called a "German genre". Nevertheless, since 1828 Paris had had in the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire a musical body that was famous throughout Europe especially for its Beethoven interpretations. Apart from compositions by Beethoven, Mozart, and Haydn, however, hardly any other works were performed. Symphonies by Schubert and Schumann were as good as unknown in Paris before 1850, and Mendelssohn appeared only here and there in the Société's concert programs. Since French symphonies, whether older ones or recently composed works, were also almost never performed, it is remarkable that Louise Farrenc's second symphony was premiered already a few months after its completion in a special concert in May 1846. Farrenc was by then so recognized among knowledgeable music-lovers in the French metropolis that she was able to assemble the performers for an orchestral concert featuring primarily her own works.

Louise Farrenc's second symphony clearly alludes in citation manner to classical models, in particular to Beethoven and Bach. First, the key of D major reminds us of Beethoven, whose second symphony is also in this key. Second, the loud beginning with a unison chord of the whole orchestra followed by an abrupt shift from fortissimo to piano is also like that of Beethoven's second symphony. Third, the themes at the beginning of the allegro section of both works exhibit a certain similarity. If we look and listen more closely, however, then clear differences between the two works become apparent, and because of these differences the agreements prove to be intentional citations rather than coincidental similarities. While Beethoven purposive aspires to his trademark symphonic monumentality in his slow introduction, Farrenc allows herself a lot of time in order to present sounds and motifs in the exchanges of the individual voices and to combine them in various ways. After what is actually a hollow unison chord at the beginning, the first complete tutti chord heard only after a few measures darkens the D major tonic to minor and, in turn, is immediately interrupted by the oboe. It is as if symphonic monumentality were being subverted in this introduction, as if it were only the outer covering of the actual process.

The two most important themes of the first movement, a string theme and a wind theme, may be very different but also share one structural similarity: they from a double structure, i.e., they consist of two interlocking motifs constituting the theme only in their joint effect. The string theme consists of two contrary, mutually responding phrases in the basses and first violins (cf. Score Example l, p. 18). The wind theme entering after the modulation to the dominant and after a certain calming of the course of events combines two identical voices in canon (cf. Score Example 2, p. 18). Although both thematic complexes are of rather modest instrumentation, their double structure means that they span a wide tone range and produce an orchestral effect together with a transparent texture. Such symphonic double themes have previausly been ascribed above all ta Johannes Brahms, who composed his symphonies thirty to forty years after Louise Farrenc wrote her symphonies.

The fourth movement certainly qualifies as the most unusual finale movement in Louise Farrenc's orchestral and chamber music. Special features include the focusing of a theme dominating the whole movement as well as the form of the movement. The finale consists of two parts of parallel construction, with the second part containing an insert in the form of an fugato of one hundred measures and a short andante section. Moreover, the archaizing tone stamping the movement especially at the beginning and in the fugato is striking. The finale movement may possibly be an homage to Johann Sebastian Bach. The main idea heard already in the basses in the slow introduction and contributing to the archaizing impression of the movement from the very beginning with its fifth interval ascending in weighty note values suddenly shifts from D major to D minor in the middle of the movement, and the fugato also develops just as suddenly. Through the modulation to minor the theme (cf. Score Example 3, p. 19) turns out to be clearly audible as a citation of the basic idea from Bach's *The Art of Fugue* (cf. Score Example 4, p. 19). In Farrenc the Bach theme is initially heard in a form true to the original and then in encoded form.

Symphony No. 3 in G minor op. 36

1. Adagio – Allegro
2. Adagio cantabile
3. Scherzo. Vivace
4. Finale. Allegro

The premiere of Louise Farrenc's third symphony on April 22, 1849, marked a great success for her in that it took place not in a special concert but as part of the regular subscription concerts of the renowned Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, a series known throughout Europe for its Beethoven performances. The critic Blanchard termed the concert program an "*exception to the hallowed standard fare*" in the music press, and over three years later the critics still had vivid memories of this symphony. Giacomelli wrote in *France musicale* at the end of 1852, "*There is no musician who does not remember the symphony that Madame Farrenc had performed at the Conservatory, a strong and spirited work in which the brilliance of the melodies contends with the variety of the harmony.*" Moreover, the third symphony went on to be performed more frequently than her other orchestral works. Further Paris performances in 1853 and a separate performance of the slow movement in 1875, the year of her death, as well as performances in Geneva in 1850 and Brussels in 1863 are known to us.

The G minor symphony of 1847 was Farrenc's last orchestral work. (The fragment of a piano concerto in her unpublished papers was erroneously ascribed to her; it is actually from J. N. Hummel's Piano Concerto op. 89.) The instrumentation of op. 36, with its mere two horns in the brass section, is unusually small when compared to her earlier orchestral works. The design of the outer movements of the third symphony differs from that of the first symphony in that it bears more of the stamp of the contrast of themes of different character. The different methods employed in the first and last movements also stand out. Alter a short slow introduction the first movement proceeds to the first theme by way of a transition in the form of a sort of fully elaborated accelerando. The striking rhythm and intervals and the unison treatment of all the strings contribute to the work's firmly decisive, powerful tone. The second theme, an oboe melody in thirds, contrasts to this tone. The numerous contributions from other parts lend the melody a looser construction and greater openness. As is to be expected, the motifs of the two themes are taken up in the development section and submitted to modulation and modification before they return in their original form in the recapitulation.

In the finale, however, the contrasts are initially confined to a very narrow space and occupy the place that would usually be assigned to the primary theme alone. The energetic and striking opening, again in a string unison, is followed by the secondary theme without a transition, and this theme goes

on to draw a descending line amid quiet syncopation. The further course of the movement shows that the unison theme has a completely different function than that of the corresponding passage in the first movement; in the development section it provides almost all the material for the thematic work, but it is lacking in the recapitulation, which begins immediately with the syncopation theme. The unison theme is not taken up again until the coda, where it represents more of a continuation of the development section than a belated filling in of the recapitulation.

The two middle movements bear the typical Farrenc stamp. The second movement, an adagio in the three-part song form, is of a purely melodic orientation; it has extended cantilenas in the clarinet and first violins and is punctuated only by one short more dramatic interlude. The scherzo third movement is distinguished by sudden motivic shifts and brief interruption s of the triple meter, all in a swift tempo, and has a character combining ebullience and elegance. For the rest, we should also mention Farrenc's remarkable treatment of the wind instruments, a frequent phenomenon in her orchestral music. The third symphony offers particularly fine examples of this, in particular in parts of the development section in the first movement and in the trio section of the third movement. Along with the colla parte leading, which functions merely as a coloring factor, and the solo passages assigned to particular wind instruments, there are always passages of compact instrumentation of a chamber-musical format. Some of them are pure wind ensembles that not only lend the wind parts a greater degree of independence but also endow the orchestral part as a whole with an unusual amount of variability and with a great many different facets.

Overture

Overture No. 1 in E minor op. 23

Adagio – Allegro agitato

Overture No. 2 in E flat major op. 24

Andante maestoso – Allegro

The two concert overtures composed by Louise Farrenc in 1834 mark an important turning point in her compositional development. With these works she not only left the field of piano music with which she had begun her compositional career but also freed herself from adaptation to the music life forming her surroundings in the metropolis of Paris. While her piano compositions were still clearly oriented to the needs of the market for printed music and to fashions such as the predilection for variations of popular opera melodies or national themes, in her first orchestral works Farrenc ventured onto uncertain terrain. The Société des Concerts founded in 1828 was after a pause of more than ten years the first symphony orchestra to present concerts on a regular basis and for a long time the only one. In addition, it was known for only very rarely including instrumental works by French composers in its programs. Nevertheless, in 1840 the Société performed Farrenc's second overture.

Moreover, the genre of the independent overture (i.e., the overture not belonging to a stage work) was still young and came from Germony. Its "inventor" was Felix Mendelssohn with his *A Midsummer Nights Dream* (1826), *The Hebrides* (1830/32), and other works. It was not until the beginning of the 1840s, however, that his music found its way into the concerts of the Société, which during its best years had a preference for the performance of opera overtures. If was not until around 1834–35 that concert overtures appeared here and there in the Société programs, and it can only be assumed that Louise Farrenc had learned of the new genre from the French and German music press. The current state of research does not permit us to determine for certain whether or not she had access to scores or another opportunity to hear orchestral works. She never made a trip to Germany.

Furthermore, the concert overture was a subject of musico-aesthetical discussion that Louise Farrenc also could have followed in the music press. The reference to extramusical matters forming a principle of the opera overture and occasioned by its content connection to a dramatic action was continued by the concert overture. By for most of the overtures composed during the nineteenth century are therefore connected to a nonmusical subject, which is usually formulated in the title of the work. In particular in view of France, where pure instrumental music was not suited for making a composer famous overnight, it is astonishing – and points ahead to her later œuvre – that Louise Farrenc did not connect her works to a program or specific subject but wrote so-called absolute music. Seemingly unimpressed by the aesthetic trouble of her colleagues to compose symphonic works "after Beethoven" and in spite of the absolute primacy of the opera in Parisian music life, Farrenc elaborated her ideal of pure instrumental music in her study of counterpoint (Fugues op. 22, composed around 1833) and of Viennese classicism.

Both overtures are not only of similar design but also with their four horns, two trumpets, and three trombones assume a larger instrumental scope than the later symphonies. A pompous, slow introduction opens the one-movement works. The ensuing allegro section corresponds in form to many symphonic first movements. Like the second symphony, the first overture begins with unison chords and then has individual voices enter into diologue. The two most important themes of the first overtures are a simple chain of doublings in the strings and a broadly spanned clarinet cantilena which in all the formal parts is always accompanied by the doublings of the strings. The E flat overture has a gloomier and more dramatic effect than the E minor composition. Here not so much individual voices as orchestral blocks are placed in opposition, but in the second overture too the eighth figure of the first theme serves as the accompaniment in other formal parts. The second theme of op. 24 is distinguished from the second theme of op. 23 in that it does not range over a melody line but, like the first themes of the two overtures, is put together more in the manner of a set piece.

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(Translated by Susan Marie Praeder)