

Louise Farrenc (1804-1875), Symphony No. 3 in G Minor, op. 36 (1847)

Louise Farrenc was descended from several generations of court artists and craftsmen on both sides of her family, but she was the first musician and composer. Among the women in her family there were several notable painters, and their very existence surely provided a model for Farrenc's professional creative life. Farrenc's musical study began early, with piano and theory lessons at age six. Her teachers included some of the most famous musicians of their time, including Ignaz Moscheles, and Johan Nepomuk Hummel, both virtuoso pianist and composers. At age 15 she entered the Paris Conservatory. While women were prevented from pursuing diplomas in composition (until 1870!), she still managed to study with Anton Reicha, who was a close friend of Beethoven and a teacher of Liszt and Berlioz. In pursuing a career in composition, however, Farrenc faced a glass ceiling—an opaque one. For that reason, her professional earnings during her lifetime derived from work as a pianist and teacher. And she was spectacularly successful. She won a tenured professorship in piano at the Paris Conservatory, a position she held for over 30 years and launched a generation of successful concert pianists, including her daughter Victorine. She was, in fact, the only female faculty member of this rank for the entire 19th century and was even successful in demanding the same pay as her male colleagues. Compared to Fanny Mendelssohn, she also found more support from her family. Her husband, Aristide Farrenc, had dodged his family's wishes that he become a businessman so that he could pursue music. A flutist and eventually a teacher at the Conservatory, he was also a music editor and publisher, and he published her first works for piano. Together, like the Mendelssohns, they were passionate advocates for early music, its research and revival. Their life work together was the compilation of a monumental collection of historic French keyboard music—23 volumes spanning three centuries. They only finished eight of these together, and Louise completed the remaining fifteen after his death.

Farrenc's piano compositions were her first to achieve acclaim. The composer Robert Schumann Schumann remarked in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, "Were a young composer to submit to me variations such as these by L. Farrenc, I would praise *him* [emphasis mine] highly for the auspicious talent and fine training everywhere reflected in them. I soon learned the identity of the author—rather authoress—the wife of the renowned music publisher in Paris, and I am distressed because it is hardly likely that she will ever hear of these encouraging lines." While we can't be sure that Farrenc read these words (or understand why Schumann assumed she wouldn't), she nevertheless persisted and thrived. Women composers, to the extent they were encouraged at all, were usually channeled toward so-called domestic or salon works—short piano and vocal pieces. Farrenc, however, ventured into the territory of serious chamber music. Her Nonet in E-flat Major was recognized as a masterpiece even in the 19th century, winning the Chartier Prize for chamber music, an award she won twice. While as a woman she was barred from competing in the most prestigious competition of the day, the Prix de Rome, she nonetheless sought to prove herself as well in the testosterone-laden world of orchestral music.

Farrenc's works for full orchestra include concert overtures, an unfinished piano concerto, and three symphonies. Her Third Symphony in G Minor was programmed as part of the regular subscription series hosted by the Société des Concerts in Paris. The organization was known well

known for championing the works of Beethoven, and in what was certainly a recognition of the reputation she'd already achieved, they programmed Farrenc's Third Symphony alongside Beethoven's Fifth. It was a nineteenth-century battle of the sexes, as audiences were treated to two symphonies, both in minor mode and with similar structure, side-by-side for all to compare. A reviewer of the concert questioned the placing of any symphony against Beethoven's classic (few composers would relish that...), but he still managed some back-handed praise for Farrenc, writing that she "...reveals—alone among her sex—throughout musical Europe—genuine learning united with grace and taste." Hmm...how very gracious! It was also typical. Even glowing reception of Farrenc's works communicates the prevailing bias. After hearing her first symphony, a critic wrote: "A remarkable thing! The dominant quality in this work, composed by a woman, is precisely what one would least expect to find: there is more power than delicacy in Mme. Farrenc's symphony..." By comparison, I don't know of any reviews expressing surprise at a male composer's ability to compose works of gentleness and sensitivity. Hearing the work today we can admire Farrenc's expression of the complete range of human emotions. Why should it be otherwise?

Movement 1: Allegro

After a short slow introduction marked *adagio*, Farrenc launches into a quick *allegro*. Like most first movements of symphonies, this one is in *sonata-allegro* form, following a plan similar in structure to Fanny Mendelssohn's Overture in C Major described above.

Movement 2: Adagio Cantabile

The Italian word *cantabile* means "in a smooth, singing style," which is precisely what we hear in this movement. A solo clarinet introduces the aria-like theme in a major mode, which is developed slowly and deliberately in a truly regal fashion. It's among the most beautiful slow movements I know. Poignantly, it was the last of her works that she heard performed publicly just shortly before her death in 1875.

Movement 3: Vivace

Great symphonies are full of dramatic, meaningful contrasts. The third movement, a scherzo, enters like a firestorm following the nostalgic, blissful sighs at the end of the previous movement. We're back in minor mode, and Farrenc features strings and winds trading rapid, fluttering passages in the opening A section. The contrasting B section, in major mode, offers a brief chorale-like respite from the incessant speed of the piece before the fury of the A section returns.

Movement 4: Finale-Allegro

It's no holds barred for the final movement, in which Farrenc exploits the full expressive range of the orchestra—lyricism, power, and virtuosity. Enjoy!