

A SPOHR CONTEMPORARY: LOUISE FARRENC (1804-75)

by Philip L.Scowcroft

WOMEN musicians who were also composers became almost commonplace during the twentieth century. In the previous century there were many fewer of them, even in Britain, particularly if we discount female composers of ballads, although a few had major works performed at Bournemouth and elsewhere in the 1890s and subsequently. Dame Ethel Smyth straddled 1900 neatly.

But during the first two decades of the nineteenth century three noted women composers were born: Clara Wieck Schumann (1819-96), Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel (1805-47) and Louise Farrenc (1804-75). The activities of the first two, partly because of their closeness to major male composers, are comparatively well documented, more so than Farrenc. This short essay aims to summarise her achievement and one or two recent revivals.

She was born Louise Dumont in Paris on May 31, 1804, into a family of musicians. She was to excel as pianist, teacher, musical scholar and composer. Her earliest pieces were for solo piano, dated 1825-39. The *Air Russe Varié* was received with approval by Robert Schumann in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*; and her *Etudes* were adopted by the Paris Conservatoire, where she was to be Professor of Piano from 1842 until her retirement in 1873 just two years before her death in Paris on September 15, 1875. She was indeed to be the only woman musician to hold a permanent professorship at the Paris Conservatoire during the nineteenth century. She married in 1831; unsurprisingly her daughter, who sadly predeceased both her parents, was a fine pianist.

Farrenc composed only a handful of vocal pieces but was otherwise an all-rounder in her compositional portfolio. She composed for orchestra: two overtures in 1839, three symphonies in the 1840s and a Piano Concerto. None was ever published, but all were performed and not only in France. Later in life she compiled *Le Trésor des Pianistes*, an anthology of important piano music.

But it was in the field of chamber music that Farrenc particularly excelled — as far as chamber music was concerned perhaps the most notable in France before Fauré (1845-1924) and Debussy (1862-1918) if we disregard the prolific George(s) Onslow (1784-1853), whose father was English though he had a French mother.

Farrenc composed two piano quintets (1839-40, published 1842) which pre-dated Schumann's, generally reckoned the earliest great work for the forces of piano and string quartet (1842)¹, two piano trios (1844) and, either side of 1850, two violin sonatas, a Cello Sonata, a String Quartet, two other trios, a Sextet for piano and wind, and a Nonet in E flat, Op.38 (1849)

for the same forces as Spohr's (violin, viola, cello, double-bass, flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon and horn). Understandably she earned several prizes for this part of her output.

With such an important corpus of chamber music one would expect Farrenc to have achieved at least modest survival in performance but relatively few people know of it and with the exception of *The New Grove* most musical reference works know her not. However there have been recent signs of revival and within the last year or so (2011-12) these have for example manifested themselves in South Yorkshire. In Sheffield's 'Music in the Round' Festival in May 2012 there were revived the first of the piano quintets and the Nonet. Nonets are not that thick on the ground, especially if we limit ourselves to the 'Spohr instrumentation'.

Spohr's Nonet (1813) was the first, Farrenc's arguably second, though it is a close-run thing between her and Onslow's Nonet in A minor (later examples include those by Rheinberger and Martinů, though there are others for different nonet forces like those by Stanford, Bax, Copland and Alois Haba who wrote no fewer than four).

Farrenc's Nonet is a magical work, bursting with glorious melody, beautifully scored, even the double-bass having a most agreeable part. Not the least striking feature is the virtuoso part for the violin which includes a cadenza in its first movement. The violinist at the 1850 premiere at the Salle Erard in Paris was none other than the young Joseph Joachim² (this was a year or two before he famously took up with Brahms and the Schumanns during 1853).

It is a touch longer than Spohr's Nonet, partly because both outer movements have fairly substantial slow introductions. The second, variation movement, *Andante*, begins with a 'walkabout' theme reminiscent of Schubert, though arguably the Scherzo is most appealing of all with its plucked strings and spiky interjections which lead to a memorable main theme. It is clearly a work in a line which starts with Beethoven's Septet and continues with Schubert's Octet and Spohr's Nonet, Octet and Septet.

I was not able to hear Farrenc's first Piano Quintet but understood that Ensemble 360's pianist Tim Horton was very taken with it; I hope to catch up with it in the future.

Even before MITR's 2012 festival, Farrenc's music had made its appearance in two lunch-hour concerts at Doncaster Museum and Art Gallery. The debut concert (September 28, 2011) by the mainly Sheffield-based Craig Laszkowicz Trio (piano, clarinet and cello) included just the first movement of Farrenc's Trio, Op.44, as there was not time to hear the rest, but a complete performance of it was managed on February 29, 2012.

In her earlier years Farrenc was a pupil of Hummel, though I felt this Trio showed at least as much the example of Weber and Mendelssohn and, given its gift for melody, perhaps Schubert. The excellent instrumental writing, presumably a hallmark of all Farrenc, was noticeable. Her music is clearly well worth revival and I look forward to making the acquaintance of more of it in the future.

Notes

1. I ignore Schubert's 'Trout' Quintet, which is for piano, violin, viola, cello and double-bass, as was Hummel's Quintet which inspired the 'Trout'.
2. Joachim had his connections with Spohr's violin music, being particularly associated with performances of the Seventh Concerto and the double quartets.