Louise Farrenc, Portrait von Luigi Rubio (1835)

Louise Farrenc
Birth name: Jeanne-Louise Dumont

* 31 May 1804 in Paris, Frankreich
† 15 September 1875 in Paris, Frankreich

Composer, pianist, piano teacher, piano professor, researcher.

"L’apparition d’une œuvre sérieuse excite certainement toujours un intérêt puissant; mais lorsque son auteur se trouve être une femme qui, dédaignant les succès faciles prodigués à des compositions frivoles, regarde comme une sainte mission de demeurer l’apôtre de la vraie croyance du bon goût, et marche le pied ferme et la tête haute dans le sentier difficile que peu d’hommes savent parcourir aujourd’hui, nous admirons autant la sévérité d’études, l’austérité de principes que l’intelligence d’élite qui a pu la conduire jusque là."

"A new serious work surely always attracts a great deal of attention; but when its author proves to be a woman who spurns the easy successes of superficial compositions and who regards it as a sacred mission to act as an apostle of true faith and good taste, walking, with firm steps and head held high, the difficult path that few men today are able to tread, then we admire all the more the strict studies, objective principles and choice sagacity that have been able to lead her there."


Profile

Louise Farrenc is notable for her versatility, on the one hand, and also for a high degree of independence. In almost all of her various areas of activity, especially as a composer and researcher, she followed paths that were independent from the general current of Parisian musical life in the context of which she worked.

Cities an countries

Louise Farrenc lived and worked in Paris, France. In 1832, she embarked on a concert tour to England; several of her works were also published in England and Germany. Beyond these, no activities outside of Paris are known.

Biography

Jeanne-Louise Dumont was born on 31 May 1804 in Paris. She received her first instruction in piano and solfège beginning in 1810; from 1819 she took lessons in harmony from Anton Reicha, most likely privately. In 1821 she married the flutist and music publisher Aristide Farrenc; after an interruption, Louise Farrenc resumed her studies with Reicha and extended her subjects to include harmony, counterpoint and fugue as well as orchestration. The first numbered works of Louise Farrenc were printed by her husband’s publishing house in 1822 and 1825. She occasionally took lessons from Hummel and Moscheles. Victorine Farrenc was born in 1826; she received musical instruction from her mother and became a pianist. In 1842 Louise Farrenc became professor of piano at the Paris Conservatoire; she held this position for 30 years. In 1861 and 1869 she was awarded the "Prix Chartier", the chamber music prize awarded by the Académie des Beaux-Arts. During the years 1861-1872 the edition "Trésor des pianistes" was published; this was a 23-volume anthology containing piano music ranging from Frescobaldi to Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy. When Aristide Farrenc died in 1865, Louise Farrenc continued working on the edition alone. She died on 15 August 1875 in Paris.

More on Biography
Jeanne-Louise Dumont was born on 31 May 1804 as the second of three children in Paris. Her parents were Marie Louise Elisabeth Curton and Jacques-Edme Dumont, sculptor and winner of the Rome Prize. The family, which had brought forth prominent painters and sculptors for generations, lived in the artists' housing estate at the Sorbonne, where approximately 30 artists working for the government lived with their families. Louise Dumont grew up in a liberal environment there, enjoying already in her childhood a vital cultural life with wide-ranging educational offerings and possibilities for development. At the age of six she received lessons in piano and solfège from the Clementi pupil Anne Elisabeth Cécile Soria. At the age of fifteen she received instruction in harmony from Anton Reicha, professor of the subjects of counterpoint and fugue at the Paris Conservatoire. Her marriage to the flutist and music publisher Aristide Farrenc (1794-1865) in 1821 at the age of 17 in no way signified the end of her education. Following an interruption due to a journey undertaken by the couple within France together, she resumed her lessons with Reicha, extending them to include the subjects of counterpoint, fugue and instrumentation. It is not unequivocally clear from the sources, but Louise Farrenc was apparently a private pupil of Reicha: there is no proof that she studied at the Conservatoire and, according to the study regulations in the nineteenth century, women were only permitted to take courses in harmony ("harmonie et accompagnement pratique"), not the subjects belonging to an actual study programme in composition. Farrenc's education, however, did correspond to the structure and level of requirements of the institutional study programme in composition at the Conservatoire. Moreover, Louise Farrenc also took piano lessons from Johann Nepomuk Hummel and Ignaz Moscheles, two virtuoso composers who were very popular in Paris. Nothing is known, however, of the precise extent and period of this instruction. Hummel was well acquainted with the Farrencs, and Aristide Farrenc accepted several of his compositions in his publisher's catalogue from 1825 onwards. The Farrencs' only daughter, Victorine Farrenc, was born in 1826; instructed by her mother, she became an outstanding pianist and also composed. She fell ill in 1849, however, and died already in 1859.

The pianist Louise Farrenc began her compositional development with works for her own instrument, the piano: primarily variation cycles, rondos and character pieces. Alongside these, four collections of études were written. The first of these, composed in 1838 and entitled "Trente Etudes dans tous les tons majeurs et mineurs" (Op. 26) is remarkable. Whereas contemporary women composers composed mostly songs with piano accompaniment, choral music and piano works suitable for the salon, Louise Farrenc soon placed orchestral compositions and chamber works for larger ensembles (two quintets, a sextet, a nonet) at the central focus of her work. At the age of 30, she composed her two concert overtures; seven years later, she composed the first of a total of three symphonies.

Having become better known through the growing number of public performances during the course of the 1830s as pianist, composer and pedagogue, she became professor of piano at the Paris Conservatoire in 1842, teaching in this capacity for 30 years. A number of her female pupils later made names for themselves as pianists and piano teachers. During the 1840s there followed performances of her symphonies, for which she was dependent on the cooperation of orchestras and conductors. Twice, in 1861 and 1869, Louise Farrenc was awarded the "Prix Chartier" by the Académie des Beaux-Arts for her chamber music oeuvre. She had ended her compositional activity towards the end of the 1850s, however, possibly after the death of her daughter Victorine. From 1861 until 1872, Louise Farrenc published (with her husband until his death) the "Trésor des pianistes", a 23-volume comprehensive anthology of piano music of the 16th to 19th centuries that proved groundbreaking for the revival and performance practice of Early Music. Louise Farrenc taught at the Conservatoire until 1872 and died on 15 September 1875 in Paris.

Appreciation

Louise Farrenc was compositionally productive and versatile, continuously nurtured her technique and style, and had a decidedly professional self-conception as a composer. She is one of the few women composers who composed chamber music for large ensembles and orchestral works, and this not merely contrary to the female understanding of one's role, but also against the dominating preferences of Parisian musical life.

More on Appreciation

Louise Farrenc was compositionally productive and versatile, continuously nurtured her technique and style, and had - unlike other women musicians of her time - a decidedly professional self-conception as a composer. As a contemporary of the Mendelssohn siblings and of Clara and Robert Schumann, Chopin and Liszt, Louise Farrenc...
represented, together with few other composers in France (e.g. Félicien David, Henri Reber, Charles Dancla and Adolphe Blanc) a classical-romantic musical direction connected with the German compositional tradition; in Paris, orientated as it was on opera and salon music, she moved in a direction apart from that of the mainstream of musical life with her instrumental works. Unlike in Germany, where instrumental music had earned considerably greater respect compared with vocal music since Viennese classicism and the symphonies of Beethoven, and had set new standards for the following generation of composers, in Paris it was still opera that was the sole medium in which a composer could achieve fame and in which a composer had to prove himself. The genre tradition of symphony, sonata, string quartet, etc. had been interrupted here since the French Revolution, leaving a lack of models for composers in their own country. The numerous, mostly privately organised orchestral and chamber music societies allowed unlimited precedence to German-Austrian composers. The Conservatoire orchestra, too, the famous Société des concerts du Conservatoire, had expressly dedicated itself to the cultivation of the Beethoven symphonies. Georges Onslow, Louise Farrenc and a few other composers ensured that so-called "musique sérieuse" continued to exist at all in France before Camille Saint-Saëns founded the Société nationale de musique in 1871. Going hand in hand with the need for demarcation resulting from the Franco-Prussian War, the efforts towards the formation of national music styles and the equation of mentality and musical aesthetics, a specific French instrumental music was encouraged and propagated by the composers who joined forces here. This kind of thinking was still foreign to Louise Farrenc. As a composition pupil of Anton Reicha, who hailed from Bohemia and was trained in Bonn and Vienna, and as an outstanding expert on Beethoven, Mozart and Haydn, she stood entirely in the spirit of a universal European musical language. Thus Farrenc's style is indebted to Viennese classicism on the one hand, and reveals itself to be completely independent of the currents and fashions of Pariscian musical life, of her immediate environment (at least in the orchestral and chamber music) on the other hand. Also, it should be taken into consideration that important works of the German classical reception must have been unknown to the composer: the symphonies of Felix Mendelssohn were played in Paris from 1842 onwards, but Franz Schubert's and Robert Schumann's orchestral and chamber music was unknown in Paris until the 1850s.

Reception

Louise Farrenc's printed works were not only issued in France, but also in Germany and England in many cases. Her symphonies and overtures remained unpublished. Nonetheless, in some cases, several contemporary performances of the orchestral compositions can be verified, also in European countries outside France. In Paris, Louise Farrenc was highly esteemed by the critics both as a pianist and as a composer. In the Parisian specialist press, one regularly finds several concert reviews per year during the 1840s and 1850s. Louise Farrenc was almost completely forgotten for about 100 years after her death. Her rediscovery during the 1980s was primarily initiated by the dissertation of Bea Friedland, and encouraged through two new areas of research: musicological research on gender and women's issues and the scholarly confrontation with French orchestral and chamber music between 1800 and 1870. Today, the compositional production of Louise Farrenc is accessible to a large extent, in printed editions and CD recordings.

More on Reception

The distribution of the works of Louise Farrenc was considerable during her lifetime. Of the 49 known works with opus numbers, 41 were printed (piano and chamber works); in many cases, a parallel edition in England or Germany was also published alongside the original French edition. In addition, several works without opus numbers and adaptations of works by other composers appeared in print. Numerous works were reprinted shortly after Farrenc's death, in 1876, by Leduc in Paris. Performances of the (unprinted) symphonies and overtures are verifiable in France, and also sporadically in Denmark, Belgium and Switzerland. Contemporary reviewers continually recognised and appreciated the compositions of Louise Farrenc. Her piano works were praised as individual and substantial alongside the mass production of variation cycles and music for virtuosos. Robert Schumann wrote about the "Air russe varié" Op. 17 as follows:

"These are small, neat, sharp studies, perhaps still completed under her teacher's watchful eye, but so certain in their outline, so judicious in their realisation, so finished, in a word, that one must become fond of them - all the more so because a very gentle romantic fragrance wafts over them." (In: Neue Zeitschrift für Musik, Vol. 5, No.
The Etudes, Op. 26, most interesting from today's perspective, were extensively discussed in the specialist press and elevated to the status of official teaching material in the conservatories of Paris, Brussels and Bologna. The orchestral and chamber music of Louise Farrenc was greeted and highly esteemed as "musique sérieuse" by many critics. Her particular successes included the world premiere of the Symphony No. 3, Op. 36 in 1849 in one of the subscription concerts of the legendary Société des concerts du Conservatoire and, in 1850, the world premiere of the Nonet, Op. 38 with the participation of the then nineteen-year-old "miracle" violinist Joseph Joachim. Together with the Flute Trio, Op. 45, these were amongst the most frequently performed works of Farrenc during her lifetime. The special status of Louise Farrenc as a composer of orchestral works and chamber music not merely in 19th-century France, but also as a woman, was constantly perceived in the press and repeatedly mentioned explicitly (see below, "Zeitgenössische Literatur"). In France, too, it was by no means self-evident that women composed orchestral works, but it was thoroughly respected and apparently regarded with a certain pride, as the correspondent of the "Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung" reported from Paris:

"Madame Farrenc, about whose ingenious compositions I have already often had the opportunity to report, completed a second large symphony some time ago, which she had performed at a concert on 3 May. There was a very substantial success once again, and the French like very much to imagine that they have, alongside their famous Sand, a woman composer as well whose artistic value is in no way inferior to that of the authoress." (Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung, Vol. 48, 12 August 1846, column 547).

The patronising (if not suspicion or even malice) towards women composers or concertising women instrumentalists often fostered in German music journals cannot be found in the French press. Nonetheless, upon closer observation of many reviews, a gender-specific consideration of Louise Farrenc becomes visible, for example in the timidity of the authors to utter objective criticism without gallant mitigation and beating about the bush. The distinction of the "Prix Chartier" on two occasions (1861 and 1869), the chamber music prize of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, is to be regarded as a special success in two regards. On the one hand, women had a difficult time of things in regard to institutions in France as well: for example, women in the 19th century were not allowed to participate in the competition for the "Prix de Rome", the most important French composition competition (Lili Boulanger was the first woman to win the prize in 1913). The decision to award Louise Farrenc the "Prix Chartier", however, was twice to the detriment of several male competitors. On the other hand, Louise Farrenc had composed no more chamber music since 1857; the last compositions (Opp. 44, 45 and 46) had appeared in print in 1861 and 1863. Nonetheless, her works were still so visible to the jury in 1869 that she received the "Prix Chartier" a second time. From her final years, only sporadic performances of Farrenc's works are known; after her death, the Trio, Op. 45 was played once again in Paris, and the music publisher Alphonse Leduc issued reprints of a number of original editions around 1876, especially chamber music and the piano etudes. Farrenc was almost completely forgotten, however: she had no descendents who cultivated her memory, and her name was not linked to that of any other famous musician. The main reason for the disappearance of Farrenc from public consciousness, however, must have been that French orchestral and chamber music of the first half of the 19th century attracted little interest in musical life and in scholarship. It was only the publication of the dissertation on Farrenc by Bea Friedland in 1980, as well as two monographs on Parisian concert life and chamber music between 1820 and 1870 (by Jeffrey Cooper in 1983 and Joël-Marie Fauquet in 1986, see "Literatur") that set in motion a new reception of the works of Louise Farrenc. Numerous printed editions have appeared since then, including a scholarly edition in several volumes of the orchestral and chamber music as well as selected piano works. Some of the most important compositions have been recorded on CD several times. Despite numerous performances of the chamber music and also of the orchestral works of Louise Farrenc in Germany, Switzerland and sporadically in France, it cannot yet be said that the composer occupies a permanent place in the concert repertoire.

**Repertoire**

As a pianist, Louise Farrenc primarily performed her own chamber works in public. Her piano works, on the other hand, are found less frequently in concert programmes. During the course of her work on the piano antholo-
gy "Le Trésor des pianistes", she occupied herself intensively with the ornamentation practice of composers for the harpsichord and organised concert programmes at the so-called "Séances historiques" with piano music ranging from Frescobaldi to Mendelssohn Bartholdy.

More on Repertoire

Concert reviews in the contemporary press show that Louise Farrenc performed works of Beethoven, Hummel, Dussek (Piano Concerto) and Hieronymus Payer (the teacher of Leopoldine Blahetka, with whom Louise Farrenc performed) in concerts alongside her own works. In 1855 she played figured bass at a concert with arias of Georg Friedrich Händel and Leonardo Leo.

No more comprehensive repertoire is verifiable beyond that, but it is highly probable. Not only the catalogue of the private library of Aristide Farrenc, but also his publisher's catalogue accounts for extensive collections of scores (see "Quellen" and "Literatur"), and we know from letters that Louise Farrenc played a major role in her husband's publishing transactions by playing the works to be edited, for example. Finally, she was involved in the editorial work of the extensive piano anthology "Le Trésor des pianistes", and after the death of her husband, she was the sole editor of the still missing volumes from 1865 until 1872. In the so-called "Séances historiques", which were organised from 1861 onwards to accompany the appearance of the "Trésor" volumes, Louise Farrenc no longer participated as pianist but had her pupils perform. The piano literature from Frescobaldi, Bach, the Bach sons and Domenico Scarlatti, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven to Mendelssohn Bartholdy is contained in both the edition and in the accompanying concerts.

Research

The current status of research on Louise Farrenc is represented in the dissertation (2004) and the catalogue of works (2005) by Christin Heitmann.

Need for Research

Regarded in light of their time and place of composition, the compositions of Louise Farrenc reveal an astonishing mixture of orientation on classical models and creative vitality and independence, together with an independence, no less astonishing, from her immediate musical environment. The few existing biographical sources unfortunately provide little information about Farrenc's self-conception as a composer or about her creative compositional processes, and it is highly improbable that further sources will be found on a larger scale. All the more desirable, therefore, would be further analyses of her works, also compared to other compositions that may have served as models or which were composed under similar conditions. The role of Louise Farrenc in Parisian musical life and the classification of her compositional oeuvre in the context of the history of composition would thus be more precisely recorded.

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mugi.hfmt-hamburg.de
Forschungsprojekt an der
Hochschule für Musik und Theater Hamburg
Projektleitung: Prof. Dr. Beatrix Borchard
Harvestehuder Weg 12
D – 20148 Hamburg