

Louise Farrenc (1804-1875) - MusicWeb

Symphony No 1 in C minor, Op 32 (1841)

Symphony No 3 in G minor, Op 36 (1849)

Symphony No 2 in D Op 35 (1845)

Ouverture No 1 in E minor, Op 23 (1834)

Ouverture No 2 in E flat Op 24 (1834)

Insula orchestra/Laurence Equilbey

rec. 2021/22, Auditorium Patrick Devedjian, La Seine Musicale, Boulogne-Billancourt, France

Erato 5419752210 [2 CDs: 114]

In 2021 I [reviewed](#) very positively an Erato CD on which Laurence Equilbey and the Insula orchestra presented the First and Third symphonies of Louise Farrenc. I hoped they might go on to record Farrenc's remaining symphony and in September 2022 they did precisely that. Warner Classics have very sensibly repackaged the previous release and now generously offer us a pair of discs for the price of one.

Louise Farrenc was a highly talented pianist who, despite the male dominance of cultural circles in nineteenth-century France, was appointed a professor of piano at the Paris Conservatoire in 1842. She was the first woman ever to attain such a post and she retained the position until 1873. It was rather more challenging to make her way as a composer but even so she received some private composition lessons from Anton Reicha and some additional tuition from Moscheles and Hummel. She was clearly as determined a person as she was talented but, in achieving recognition she had one other great advantage: her husband, Aristide Farrenc (1794-1865), whom she married in 1821, was not only a gifted flautist (and a musicologist and music publisher) but was also sufficiently enlightened that he fully supported his wife's career ambitions.

I think it's worth considering the five works in this set in chronological order of composition. The two Ouvertures were composed in 1834. In her useful booklet essay, Christin Heltmann comments that these two pieces "mark a turning point" in Farrenc's compositional career; with them she "left the sphere of chamber music in which she had begun her career and also liberated herself from the sense of compulsion with the Parisian musical life that surrounded her". I was interested to learn that in the two Ouvertures Farrenc used a larger orchestra than she would do in any of her three symphonies, incorporating parts for four horns, two trumpets and three trombones. These fuller forces are immediately apparent in the very short but grand slow introduction to Overture No 1 in E minor. This introduction is followed by an *allegro* which forms the main body of the piece. An identical structure is adopted for the Overture No 2 in E flat. Here, the introduction, though again brief, is darkly dramatic; indeed, I was put in mind of *Don Giovanni*. The spirit of Mozart hovers over the bustling *allegro* as well. Both of

these pieces are very accomplished and it's noticeable how assured Farrenc is in her handling of the orchestra.

The first of Louise Farrenc's symphonies followed seven years later, in 1841. All three of her symphonies follow a similar pattern with the slow movement placed second, followed by a Scherzo – or, in the case of the First Symphony, a Minuetto.

My views of the music and performances of the First and Third symphonies haven't changed since I first reviewed Laurence Equilbey's recordings so I will summarise what I previously said. In the slow introduction to the First symphony's opening movement, the piquant woodwind and horns as well as the grainy timbre of the strings caught my ear. When the main *Allegro* is reached there's fine energy in both music and performance – the timpani and the observance of accents by all the musicians really impel the music forward. The slow movement is marked *Adagio cantabile* and there's an abundance of *cantabile* writing for both the strings and the woodwinds. As in the previous movement, the hues of the period instruments, the lower strings in particular, enhance the performance significantly. The music is spacious and well argued. In the Minuetto, both music and performance are spirited and the Trio is charming. The finale, marked *Allegro assai*, is vigorous and driving in character; Equilbey and her excellent orchestra deliver this music with brio in abundance. Not everything is vigorous, though; here as elsewhere, Farrenc provides plenty of contrast and in the more relaxed episodes in this movement the woodwind writing is delightful, as is the performance of it. It's a cheerful, energetic finale and this performance makes the best possible case for it and, indeed, for the symphony as a whole.

The Second symphony opens with a dramatic slow introduction in which Equilbey and her orchestra make the most of the dynamic contrasts. This gives way to a deft, fleet *Allegro*. The music, which demonstrates a debt to Beethoven, I think, is played with great vitality and precision. If Beethoven's influence can be discerned in the first movement, then, surely, the *Andante* is Haydnesque. The music is modest in tone, yet graceful. In the louder passages, where trumpets and timpani have their say, much is made of dotted rhythms; elsewhere, legato is very much the order of the day. The vivacious Scherzo receives a performance that is full of energy while the Trio is more relaxed. There's a short but grand slow introduction to the finale, after which the main *allegro* is inventive and – as played here – exciting. There's a brief slower episode, partway through the movement; here, the woodwind are to the fore and the section provides an interesting contrast to the surrounding lively music. It's an opportunity to catch one's breath before the resumption of the sparkling *allegro*. The Second symphony is a very well written and highly engaging work which here receives a very fine performance.

The Third symphony opens with a very original, compressed introduction which gives way to an *Allegro* which is full of energy and purpose. The slow movement is marked *Adagio cantabile*; the music is graceful and elegant, though there are one or two brief episodes that are made of stronger stuff. The Insula orchestra gives this movement a lovely performance. The Scherzo has a Mendelssohnian lightness while the Trio is charming. The performance of this movement is delightful. The

finale is decisive and well-constructed: Farrenc develops her ideas most convincingly. Equilbey and the musicians of the Insula orchestra bring the music to life.

As I've indicated, Louise Farrenc's music shows plenty of German influence. This should be no surprise, given that her teachers were all from that tradition. However, the influences have been properly absorbed and do not prevent Farrenc from speaking with her own distinctive musical voice. All the music on these CDs is expertly crafted, melodious, imaginative and most enjoyable to listen to. From what I know of her biography, it seems that Louise Farrenc was not prevented from reaching her potential to the extent that many female musicians were; that was due to her own talent and determination plus the invaluable support of her enlightened husband. After her death her music suffered neglect but in recent years it has been rediscovered, thanks to several musicians, including Laurence Equilbey. We can now hear it and judge it for ourselves. In evaluating it, we can be gender-blind. As far as I'm concerned, this is simply good music which deserves to be performed and appreciated. In Laurence Equilbey and the Insula orchestra Louise Farrenc has the very best of advocates.

I first became acquainted with these works through the Naxos discs made by Christoph König and Solistes Européens, Luxembourg (8.573706, [8.574094](#)). They differ from the Equilbey performances in that they are played on modern instruments. Also, the Naxos sound, though good, is the product of a more resonant acoustic and lacks something of the impact of the Warner sound. König's performances have much to commend them, but now that Laurence Equilbey's cycle of all three symphonies is complete – and so conveniently packaged by Warner – I think her accounts of these excellent symphonies now becomes the primary recommendation.

John Quinn

Farrenc: Symphonies Nos 1-3; Overtures

Insula Orchestra/Laurence Equilbey (Erato)

Our rating: 4*/5* BBC Magazine - Jessica Duchen

Symphonies Nos 1-3; Overtures Nos 1 & 2

Insula Orchestra/Laurence Equilbey

Erato 5419752210 113:29 mins (2 discs)

Laurence Equilbey and her Insula Orchestra, based at La Seine Musicale in Paris, have been at the forefront of the revival of interest in Louise Farrenc, a musician whose achievements were remarkable on many fronts.

Born in 1804 and active as a pianist, teacher, composer of fiendish etudes for her instrument and a plethora of chamber music, she also wrote three excellent and startlingly Germanic symphonies in mid-19th century Paris; such works were

anything but trendy there at the time. She spent her later years researching early music and I suspect she would have approved of Equilbey and Insula's devotion to performing her music on historically appropriate instruments.

The first of these two discs is the ensemble's previously released account of the Symphonies Nos 1 and 3; the second, of No. 2 and the overtures, is new. The Overture No. 2, incidentally, bears a startling resemblance to Mozart's for *Don Giovanni*, with its sombre fanfares, extreme dynamic contrasts and heart-beat rhythm segueing into a headlong *allegro*.

As a complete experience the assembled works prove both illuminating and rewarding. While tremendously fresh and vigorous, the Symphony No. 2's performance feels somewhat mellower, arguably less overstated in expression than its forerunner disc. There are moments when the woodwind are slightly engulfed by the strings and the resonant acoustic. In general, however, the gut-and-wood soundworld of Insula is sympathetically at one with Farrenc's spirited aesthetic.

Jessica Duchen

Farrenc: Symphonies 1-3; Overtures review **The Guardian - Andrew Clements Rating: 4*/5***

Insula Orchestra/Equilbey (Erato, two CDs)

Laurence Equilbey and her orchestra champion compatriot Louise Farrenc's orchestral works, revealing energy and verve to rival her 19th-century peers

Louise Farrenc was born in 1804, just a few years before Schumann and Mendelssohn, and her music inhabits the same early Romantic world as theirs, with its roots particularly in Beethoven and sometimes indebted also to Weber. Farrenc lived and studied in Paris, where her piano teachers included Hummel and Moscheles; she went on to have a successful career as a pianist, and became a professor of piano at the Paris Conservatoire – the institution's only female professor in the whole of the 19th century – but at that time women were unable to study composition there, and so from the age of 15 she took lessons privately with Anton Reicha.

Musical life in Paris in the 1830s and 40s was dominated by opera. Symphonic concerts were rare, not only because the symphony itself was still viewed very much as a German genre, but also because orchestras were few and far between in the capital. So Farrenc composed mostly piano and chamber pieces – the 1849 Nonet, for wind quintet and string quartet, is probably her best known work. Apart

from two sets of variations for piano and orchestra and an unfinished piano concerto, all of her orchestral music, three symphonies composed between 1842 and 1847, and two overtures from 1834, is brought together on these discs from **Laurence Equilbey** and her period-instrument orchestra, Insula.

Those five works are more than enough to fix Farrenc's position as a distinctive and significant voice in 19th-century French music. Her orchestral writing may not be as quirky and wildly imaginative as that of her contemporary **Berlioz**, who was a great admirer of her music, but at its best in the symphonies it easily stands comparison with the equivalent works by Schumann and Mendelssohn. **The Third Symphony**, first performed at a Conservatoire concert in 1849, is unquestionably the finest work here; as Equilbey shows, it's a work of tremendous energy and verve, with stylistic links to Farrenc's German counterparts certainly, but also with a flavour that's distinctly its own. Despite a few rough edges, the Insula performances of all the pieces here demonstrate vividly how much they believe in the quality of this music too.

Louise Farrenc: Symphonies 1-3; Overtures in E minor-E flat Review by James Manheim AllMusic Review Rating: 4/5*

Arguably the greatest success in the ongoing rediscovery of neglected music by women has been **Louise Farrenc**, who, at the last turn of the century, was all but unknown. She managed to become a professor of piano at the Conservatoire de Paris, even though women students were not admitted, and much of her piano music is bold and entirely distinctive. Her chamber music, including a Nonet that was celebrated even in its own time, is also very strong. **Farrenc's** orchestral music, all of which is gathered on the present release except for that involving piano, dates from later in her career and is not quite on the same level, but any audience of the 1840s, when all three symphonies were composed, would have considered them state-of-the-art. The two minor-key works are Beethovenian in spirit and in concision; there is nothing of the diffuse structures of a **Hummel** or a **Czerny** here. Surely **Farrenc** knew the orchestral music of **Mendelssohn**, clearly audible in the sprightly Symphony No. 2 in D major, in D major, Op. 35. Another model is **Mozart**; compare the Overture No. 2 in E flat major, Op. 24, with the mature opera overtures of **Mozart**, especially that of Don Giovanni. **Farrenc's** orchestration is lively throughout. The historical-instrument performances of the Insula Orchestra and conductor Laurence Equilbey are not as smooth as other work by this ensemble but probably do a good job of conveying what this music sounded like at its first performances. Essential for collections of music by women, this release is highly listenable for anyone.