

FARRENC *Air russe varié. Les italiennes*, op. 14/1: *Cavatine de Norma. Souvenir des Huguenots*, op. 19. *Études*, op. 26: **Book I: Nos. 3, 5, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15; Book II: Nos. 17, 18, 21, 22, 24, 25, 29** • Joanne Polk (pn) • STEINWAY & SONS 30133 (Download: 70:15) Reviewed from a WAV download: 44.1 kHz/16-bit

Up until now, my entire exposure to the music of Louise Farrenc (1804–1875) has been to her symphonies, orchestral, and chamber works, leading me to rate her the greatest and most important female composer of the 19th century. *Pace* Clara Schumann and other women composers of the period, Farrenc donned a pair of Duluth Trading pants, rolled up her sleeves, and proved that a woman was equally capable of doing work considered the province of men.

This new release was my first encounter with any of Farrenc's music for solo piano, and my suspicion told me that these pieces were going to reveal the side of her output that was deemed appropriate for a woman composer, whose first duties were those of wife and mother. In other words, I was expecting album-leaf-like compositions suitable for the parlor.

Boy, was I wrong! The *Air russe varié* that kicks off Joanne Polk's program is not a piece for the parlor, it's a piece for Parisienne salons. Composed 1835, it puts its Russian theme through its paces in eight variations that are as brilliantly virtuosic as anything being written by the piano celebrities of the day and ices the cake with a final variation in fugal style. Farrenc wasn't writing for amateur pianists, nor did she demur from demonstrating to her audiences and fellow composers alike her prowess in compositional technique. Close piano celebrity contemporaries of Farrenc—Henselt, Hiller, and Taubert—eat your hearts out! Schumann, *plotz!* I guarantee you will be agape when you hear this piece.

The two opera paraphrases, *Les italiennes*, based on the Cavatina from Bellini's *Norma*, and the *Souvenir*, based on themes from Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*, follow the salon and concert hall rage of the day for dazzling virtuoso display pieces. Both of these Farrenc numbers require plenty of pianistic resourcefulness, but neither impresses quite like the *Air russe varié*, though all three works were written in the same year. Melodically and harmonically, the style of the two paraphrase pieces sounds earlier, reaching back, especially in the case of the *Souvenir* to Schubert, with some of Farrenc's keyboard figuration sounding like it's right out of Schubert's last sonatas. Still, the beauty of these pieces is striking and the technical thrills exciting.

No less riveting, and perhaps even more remarkable in revealing what a serious-minded and intellectually inclined composer Farrenc was, are the *Études*, of which Polk plays 15 of them, or half the number Farrenc wrote between 1835 and 1838.

Like those before her and those who came after her, Farrenc contributed to the canon of composers' études, preludes, and studies in all the major and minor keys. In Farrenc's case, she duplicated six of the keys, giving us 30 études instead of 24. Ignoring the duplications—the first two études, for example, are both in C Major—she follows the same game plan that Chopin adopted for his Preludes, op. 28, which coincidentally, or not, were written at exactly the same time—between 1835 and 1839. The cycle begins in C Major, proceeds to the relative minor, A Minor, then around the major side of the Circle of Fifths to G Major and next its relative minor, E Minor, and so on. Two pianist-composers, Farrenc and Chopin, both in Paris at the same time, both working on a set of studies in all the major and minor keys that proceed according to the same sequence, at exactly the same time. I mean, what are the odds of that? In any case, Farrenc completed her cycle a year before Chopin completed his.

You're apt to do a double-take when you hear the first of the études that Polk plays, the No. 3 in A Minor. It sounds like a steal from the central episode in the Rondo finale to Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 1. But Farrenc extends and develops it into something that sounds like a player piano roll in an amusement park arcade. It's an absolute hoot. A professor of piano at the Paris Conservatory, Farrenc may have written the Études with her students in mind, as the compositions were designed to build technique and the expressive abilities of the player. And when it comes to expressive, the Étude No. 10 may just take your breath away. Chopin, *plotz!*

With several strongly positive reviews, Joanne Polk is not new to *Fanfare*. She received her Bachelor of Music and Master of Music Degrees from the Juilliard School, and her Doctor of Musical Arts Degree from Manhattan School of Music. In 2014, Polk was named one of Musical America's Top 30 Professionals of the Year in an article titled, "Profiles in Courage." Polk's profile focused on her work promoting the music of women composers, an acknowledgment underscored by her recordings of music by Amy Beach, Chaminade, Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel, Clara Schumann, Judith Lang Zaimont, and now Louise Farrenc. Fantastic music, terrific playing, stunning recording. Buy it, listen to it, and be *verklemt*.

Twenty-twenty isn't half over yet, and considering that I'm writing this in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, I may not live to see the end of it, but if I do, look to see this on my 2020 Want List. I pray that everyone reading this is still here at year's end too. **Jerry Dubins**

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FARRENC Air russe varié, op. 17. Piano Etudes, op. 26/19, 7, 4, 10, 8, 30, 3, 12. Valse brillante, op. 48. Nocturne, op. 49. Variations brillantes, op. 15 • Konstanze Eickhorst, pf. • cpo 999 879-2 (60:00)

Paris-born Louise Farrenc (1804-1875)—her married name; she was born Jeanne-Louise Dumont—was a pianist and a teacher, so it's not surprising that the music here is idiomatically written for the instrument, and is very sympathetically played by Konstanze Eickhorst, who has been well recorded.

Put simply, Farrenc's music, certainly this choice from it, is pleasing without suggesting itself as particularly individual or memorable. One could cite Haydn, Mozart, Mendelssohn, and Chopin as all being in there somewhere; or one can borrow the booklet note's mention of Hummel, Moscheles, and Reicha—the latter was Farrenc's teacher—as another group of references.

I imagine that anyone with a very specific interest in the piano and the era in which Farrenc lived will find this an attractive release. Otherwise, this likeable, fluently written music will pass an hour pleasantly.

Colin Anderson

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