

The Lost and Found Quintets



Painting of Louise Farrenc

By Caitlyn Kamminga

Several summers ago, I had the great pleasure of attending the ISB convention in Bloomington, Indiana. While there, I presented two quintets by Louise Farrenc, a nineteenth century French woman composer. The quintets, Op. 30 and 31, were first published in Paris by Colombier (in 1842 and 1844 respectively), and later in Leipzig by Hofmeister and again in Paris by Leduc (in 1882 and 1895). At the time of my presentation in 1995, the quintets had been out of print for over a hundred years. But since then, the quintets have been reissued in a new edition by the Hildegard Publishing Company in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, edited by Susan Pickett.

I first discovered Louise Farrenc's quintets by accident while pursuing my master's degree at the University of Southern California where I was studying with Paul Ellison. At that time, I had begun to notice that no women composers were discussed in my music history classes. (The one

woman I recall appearing on any of my survey lists, Joan Tower, was ultimately skipped over in order to have time for some imminently more important male composer, whose name completely eludes me now.) The institution that I attended was typical of most universities in that respect. While there has certainly been a lot of progress in the documentation of women artists, a large body of women's compositions were never published prior to the 20th century, due to the fact that it was not considered proper or feminine for women to become professional musicians, unless as a means to help support a poor family. And historians tend to document works that have been "legitimized" through their publication. Furthermore, historians tend to view larger works as more important ones. Since women wrote mainly for the medium that was most available to them, i.e. the domestic, the body of work that most women produced was chamber music intended to be performed at home. These works, then, were until recently, often overlooked.

While researching a paper for my 30th century class (or rather, procrastinating researching my paper), I got off on a tangent in the library, looking for chamber music written by women, prior to the 20th century, that included the double bass. I stumbled across Louise Farrenc's music and basically got so excited about her that I stopped looking. So I don't know if there are other women who composed chamber music before the 20th century. There must be, but that will have to wait for another day. [Editor's note: see the list by Andrew Kohn (on p.23 of this issue)]

Louise Farrenc was born in Paris in 1804 and died in 1875. She came from an artistic

family, which early on recognized her talent in music. During her formative years, she studied piano and theory with Ignatz Moscheles and Johann Hummel. In particular, the latter remained an important influence on her own teaching and composing in the decades to come. It was, however, Antonin Reicha, professor of counterpoint and fugue at the Paris Conservatory whom this young woman sought out at age 15 and who was to become her most influential mentor.

A large percentage of Farrenc's compositions are piano works written and published in the 1830s. It was this repertory of music for piano which secured her reputation in professional circles and prepared the way for the modest public successes and official recognition she enjoyed in subsequent years. Fifteen of the works that were published at this time were still in publication seventy-five years later. But during the forties and fifties, Farrenc's compositional style began to mature. It was at this time that she composed several large orchestral works, including three symphonies, all of which received at least one Paris performance, despite the formidable difficulty in getting a hearing for new symphonic works. Her symphonies, however, pale in comparison to her chamber works.

Farrenc's first chamber compositions were the piano quintets, Op. 30 and 31. Earlier works (for instance Schubert's Trout and the Hummel Op. 87 quintets) had of course included the double bass. But Farrenc's choice of instrumentation is probably most attributable to the availability in Paris of the virtuoso bass player, Achille-Victor Gouffé (1804-1874), principal bassist at the Paris Opera for 35 years and whose renown in France was comparable to the famed Domenico Dragonetti in London. The customary showcase for ensemble music in Paris was the privately organized soirée or *matinée*, held in wealthy homes in small concert rooms. Periodically, *La Revue et Gazette Musicale* and *La France Musicale* also sponsored recitals of solo and ensemble music for their subscribers. The Quintet Op. 30, No. 1, was heard by an audience for the first time at a musical gathering at Louise Farrenc's home in the spring of 1840. Evidently, the quintet charmed the



Achille Gouffé, by Edgar Degas

audience, all of whom shared "a deep feeling for pure and good music," according to Henri Blanchard of *La Gazette Musicale*. Blanchard went on to say, "the first venture of Madame Farrenc, the Piano Quintet No. 1 has caught the attention of specialists in the field." Her second quintet, composed in the same year, was received with equal enthusiasm. Blanchard reports, "This second quintet places its creator among the most distinguished composers of the genre. [It] is remarkable...for its taste, elegance of style, but above all for its melodic ideas which are abundant and which are all of a delicious freshness."

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The forties and fifties are considered to be Farrenc's most productive years. However, they were not devoted entirely to composition and performance. In 1842, Farrenc was appointed professor of piano at the Paris Conservatory. No precedent existed at the conservatory for the appointment of a woman to full professorship. In fact, no other woman in the nineteenth century held a position of such prestige, until after Farrenc retired thirty years later in 1872. Consequently, it was falsely reported in *La Gazette Musicale* that she had been hired as an adjunct professor. A week later the paper apologized for its mistake and announced that "Mme Farrenc will be a fully-titled professor, with two equally ranked faculty members." As for her salary, Farrenc's starting income was 200 francs lower than Henri Hen, who was appointed at the same time, despite the fact that she was more qualified for the position. Following the triumphant premiere of her Nonet, Op. 38 (which is also scored for double bass), Farrenc wrote the Director of the conservatory respectfully requesting a raise to bring her salary in line with other professors in the instrumental division, concluding: "I dare hope Mr Director, that you will agree to fix my fees at the same level as these gentlemen, because, setting aside questions of self interest, if I don't receive the same incentive they do, one might think I have not invested all the zeal and diligence necessary to fulfill the task which has been entrusted to me." To its credit, the administration of the conservatory responded favorably and gave Farrenc her much deserved raise. Three years after she retired from the Paris Conservatory, Louise Farrenc died. Her remarkable works are considered to be the forerunners of the French musical renaissance of the 1870s.

For being the first woman in the nineteenth century to hold such an important position at the Paris Conservatory, for being

courageous enough to demand equal pay for equal work (a battle that continues to this day) and for writing three lovely chamber works that include the double bass, this exceptional woman has definitely become one of my heroes. It is my sincere hope that the publication of these quintets will mark the beginning of a revival of Louise Farrenc's music, not because she was such an amazing woman, but because her music is absolutely deserving of our attention.

The Louise Farrenc Quintet No. 1, Op. 30 and Quintet No. 2, Op. 31 can be purchased from the Hildegard Publishing Company, Box 332, Bryn Mawr, PA 19010, Telephone: (610) 649-8649, Fax (610) 648-8677.

A recording of the two quintets by the Hong Kong Chamber Players (Caitlyn Kamminga, double bass) can be purchased through Lemur catalogue or online at: www.lemur-music.com.

Caitlyn Kamminga is currently Assistant Principal Bass of the BBC NOW in Cardiff, Wales. Before moving to the UK, she lived in Hong Kong where she was a member of the Hong Kong Philharmonic, as well as the Hong Kong Chamber Players. Her first job was in the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra (formerly the New Orleans Symphony), where she held the position of Principal Bass, as well as being active in the Louisiana Philharmonic Chamber Players. Ms. Kamminga holds both bachelor and master of music degrees from the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, where she studied with Paul Ellison. Other main teachers include James Clute, Warren Benfield and Curtis Burris. She has performed with several renowned music festivals, including the Aspen Music Festival and the Grand Teton Orchestral Seminar. Currently, she spends her summers in New York at the Chautauqua Institute, where she is a member of the Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra.



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