Farrenc, Overture No. 1

The nineteenth-century French composer Louise Farrenc had a career that was remarkable in and of itself, but even more so given the constraints that professional women were often subject to. She was born in 1804, a slightly older contemporary of Schumann and Menelssohn, and her music belongs firmly in the Romantic tradition. A talented pianist from a young age, she became well known on the concert stage and performed frequently in the 1820s and 1830s. In 1842 she was appointed as Professor of Piano at the Paris Conservatory where she remained for thirty years, becoming the first women to hold that position – and in fact she was the only woman to do so for the whole of the century. She was, reportedly, an excellent teacher with many of her pupils becoming successful musicians (all of them female, as she was not permitted to teach male students) yet she was paid considerably less than her male counterparts. In 1850, after a highly successful premiere of her Nonet, she successfully campaigned for pay parity. Alongside, she was also busily composing – initially exclusively for the piano but later for chamber ensemble and for orchestra, including three symphonies. As regards the latter, she may well have struggled to get her works performed given that the taste in Paris at the time leant towards chamber, and predominantly to opera – a genre Farrenc did not tackle.

Her Overture no. 1 was composed in 1834 for a large ensemble, including timpani and three trombones. It opens with great drama: timpani rolls and a stately, solemn theme. A chamber-like sequence for woodwind follows, with a contrastingly sweet and lyrical melody. The dramatic opening theme returns, followed by urgent, scurrying strings. These three elements combine, interweave, and sometimes struggle with each other throughout this compelling, confident work. The powerful closing passage is a cleverly sustained build-up, lasting some two minutes, before a dissonant clash in the brass and a driving upward theme in the strings brings the overture to a highly satisfying close.

Poulenc, *Sinfonietta*

An orchestral work is a rare creature in Poulenc's catalogue, and *Sinfonietta* is the closest he ever came to writing a symphony. His other orchestral works comprise two ballet scores, and four concertos, all for keyboard (piano, organ and harpsichord). The *Sinfonietta,* a commission from the BBC, was composed in1947 not long after the successful premiere of his first opera *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* – a light-hearted, if surreal, tale of gender-swapping featuring a chorus of babies. Some of the café-concert style of that opera found its way into *Sinfonietta*, and it also recycles material from a string quartet which Poulenc began in 1947 but discarded, throwing the draft somewhat theatrically into a Paris sewer.

Poulenc's works, as some of his biographers have commented, tend to be on the short side. He composed only one full-length opera (*Dialogues des Carmélites*), the experience which made him seriously ill. His chamber works and orchestral pieces rarely top twenty minutes (the *Sinfonietta* is his longest), and his tendency when composing is to play with short, contrasting passages – piling them up next to each other, rather than subjecting them to extensive development. The same is largely true of the *Sinfonietta* which comprises a series of contrasting movements and moments, handled with a beguilingly light touch.

The opening theme of the first movement is, perhaps unusually, developed to some extent, or rather its defining semiquaver figure travels through a series of different musical environments: solemn and disconcerting, followed by breezy and sensual. One of Poulenc's

characteristically gorgeous melodies is up next, introduced by a jazzy muted trumpet and enjoying itself thoroughly across the whole orchestra before – again – the mood abruptly shifts. A brief brass chorale is followed by another hummable melody, ornamented by bubbling harp and woodwind. The movement continues in a similar vein with its restless assemblage of motifs and moods, although there is an extraordinarily atmospheric passage dominating the middle section, in which the semiquavers from the start find themselves in an eerie landscape of shifting orchestral textures. This passage segues into a song-like theme borrowed almost wholesale from *Mamelles de Tirèsias*, before a brisker mood returns. The movement – the longest of the four – closes peacefully.

The second movement is for the most part a brisk gallop, structured in a loose A-B-A format. The outer 'A' sections comprise a dance-like romp, light as a feather, but with strenuous workouts for the woodwind section. The central section sees a return of the semiquaver figure from the first movement, flitting across the orchestral texture and periodically ushering in a more sombre or dramatic mood. The dance-like 'A' returns in the final minute, concluding with a playful final bar.

A more stately temperament imbues the third movement, yet its seemingly serene character is undercut by irregular phrase lengths, or by the incongruous return of the muted trumpet. (Poulenc in this mood is partly paying homage to the era of Haydn and Mozart, but at the same time reminding us we are firmly in the twentieth century.) Overall, however, this movement luxuriates in a series of lengthy melodies rising from the violins or the woodwind, often in exquisite counterpoint with another beautiful tune. The subtle shift to the major key in the final chord is a heart-stopping moment.

The finale begins raucously, then heads to the circus, or perhaps the seaside, in a catchy, dancing passage full of swoops up and down the instruments. The endlessly shifting style of the whole work is to the fore in an extraordinary central passage: the grandeur of the first movement returns, sounding like Hollywood film music, followed by a series of gentle woodwind solos, amplified by the strings. The music is loudly interrupted by the timpani, leading to a wind and brass chorale, then a slinky slide up the strings. In the last few seconds we are treated to a brand new series of sounds. It is a final, surprising sequence to this endlessly inventive work.