



# POULENC OUR CONTEMPORARY



UNIVERSAL MUSIC  
PUBLISHING CLASSICAL





Mère,  
une de nos  
roses,

Tendrement  
Francis  
Voizay - 61





On January 30, 1963, Poulenc passed away in his apartment on the rue de Medicis, just opposite the *Jardins du Luxembourg* in the 6<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*. The man whom certain commentators had complacently classified as a “small master” was not to be consigned to purgatory. Fifty years after his death, his work continues to be programmed and abundantly recorded. He is recognised as one of the last, if not the last, of the masters of French melodies; *Dialogues des Carmélites* is one of the rare lyric works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to have entered into the great repertoire of international opera houses; his sonatas for flute, clarinet and oboe are henceforth part of the classical pieces written for those instruments; his *a cappella* mass, motets, and secular pieces based on the poems of Éluard and Apollinaire are performed by the best choirs and comprise a body of work that is among the most personal and original examples of choral music of our time. Debates on the avant-garde, on language, and indispensable



Francis Poulenc, Régine Crespin, Georges Prêtre

innovation have all been somewhat diluted by post-modernism. Out of all the incredible musical diversity that has come into being in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Poulenc continues to strike a unique note. He remains one of our contemporaries.

Artists such as Georges Prêtre carry on tradition while new generations appropriate Poulenc's scores for themselves. During his lifetime, Poulenc, who treasured friendship as much as he did music, maintained close ties with those in the musical milieu – theatre directors, publishers, musicians and singers... An excellent pianist and an exceptional

accompanist, he often performed his own work on stage, in particular at the sides of Pierre Bernac and Denise Duval. Even from beyond the grave, an astonishing connection continues to be woven between the performers and Poulenc's rich and contrasted personality. Perhaps this is because a form of humanism and a very personal relationship to emotion

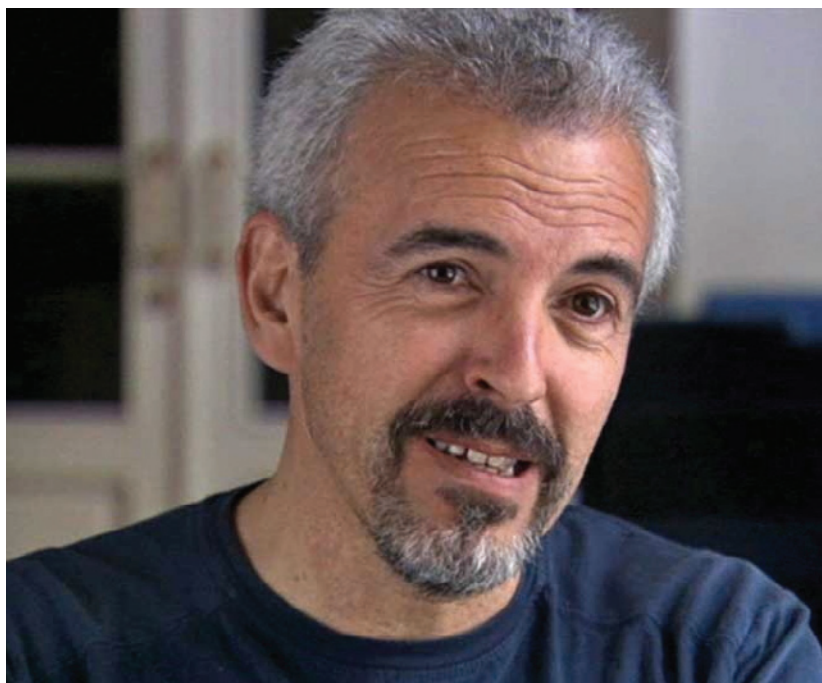
to Debussy, Monteverdi, Verdi, Moussorgski... all the composers that he cites are profoundly human, and they left that humanity behind in their music. He continues in that tradition, in opposition to those who conceive of something rhetorical or scholarly that is quite disconnected from their lives. This is probably what currently gives his music

## Being oneself

All those who have performed his pieces have the same experience: Poulenc speaks through his music. "My first contact was with his melodies." Stéphane Denève recalls, "I am a pianist and when I was an adolescent I had the opportunity of working with a baritone and we did



Georges Prêtre



François Le Roux

were expressed through his art. François Le Roux puts it very well: "On a personal level, as a friend, he was someone who was extremely generous; he made an impact on everyone who was close to him. You should hear Denise Duval talk about Poulenc; even today, tears come to her eyes when she mentions him. At the beginning of the *Dialogues*, where he writes that his opera is dedicated

such strength, because today we need embodiment as opposed to disembodiment. The iconic view of people who are unattainable and who are put up on a pedestal, that's all over. We need people who are close to us. Speaking for myself, as a performer, Poulenc is certainly close. His is a humanity that is not only painful, but also happy and funny... an all-encompassing humanity."

a lot of the melodies: *Les Banalités*, which I love, *Les Chansons gail-lardes*, etc. I immediately found the music to be distinctive, enjoyable to play, very melodic. Curiously, I had the impression that I was making the composer's acquaintance. Even though I never knew him, this is clearly what happens when one plays Poulenc's music: one feels as though one is getting to know him. The music is so sincere and

seems to resemble him so closely that one really has the feeling of being in direct contact with the man. And in fact, he has a lot to say. Yes, I really have the impression that he is a friend. His music is so rich and contains so many different emotions, that I am sure it will accompany me throughout my life.” Pascal Rogé uses more or less the same words to define this un-

themes from one score to the next. “He is perhaps the composer who quotes himself the most often... no one else springs to mind in that regard. He always does it so well, and each time he repeats himself, it’s as though he is reminding us that he is an old friend. We recognise our old friend, and that is something that pleases me enormously.”



Stéphane Denève

sual tie, “Unfortunately I never met Poulenc, but I’ve known many who were very close to him, and who have described him to me. When I play his music, I get the impression that he was someone I knew. He is completely and continually contained in his music.” For Marc-André Hamelin, the familiarity that grows between Poulenc and the artists who perform him stems from his habit of carrying the same

Poulenc establishes a sort of presence and strengthens his authenticity in the face of tempting and fashionable modernism. “His era has passed,” Eric Le Sage tells us, “a form of musical modernisation has passed this way. Today Poulenc’s Paris is almost as distant as the Paris in Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast*! He would certainly tell us that being ‘modern’ serves no purpose unless one is oneself. Over the course of the



open-minded. “He is a true classical composer; however, he uses unusual harmonies, unusual expressions and humour... a lot of humour, in his music – I think that’s the beautiful thing about Poulenc. He is also very profound. He combines many different things and that’s very important for young composers to realise: you’re not locked up in a small box. Let your imagination go in all sorts of directions and see what you come up with...”

His musical expression is structured by the poets, by culture and by personal experience, which is all transformed into aesthetic material. For Poulenc, it is the reflection of his personal tastes and interests.

“Everything is in his music”, explains Dame Felicity Lott, “Poulenc was great friends with his poets; he greatly admired them and read a lot of poetry. I recently read some texts that he published. He talks about what he likes, the music he loves and defends. I love it! He was obviously someone who was very cultured, and who brought that culture to life. I get the feeling that I would have enjoyed spending time with him. He was very funny and was interested in a great many things besides his art. He was open to all styles of music, even that which he called ‘adorably bad music’. He loved Messiaen, Maurice Yvain and Chabrier, Satie, of course... lots of things...” The diversity of his taste was to become a mark of his style. Light-heartedness and sadness are gracefully combined, as are the other extraordinarily diverse and contrasting influences that make him impossible to classify. He was greatly inspired by the work of Stravinsky and Chabrier.



Pascal Rogé

years, Poulenc has never gone out of style because he found his own language. And too bad if it isn’t revolutionary; after all, there was nothing revolutionary about Mozart’s language either. In his magnificent letter to Honegger, he expressed it very well, ‘you see, what matters is authenticity, whether it is that of a Puccini or a Webern. Let us be indulgent toward the young composers who burn as we ourselves once burned, and give them our trust.’” It is in this respect, notes Yoel Levi, that Poulenc can help young composers to be more

The latter was particularly important, remarks Pascal Rogé, “That humour, that frivolity without superficiality... one is constantly faced with ambiguity. Poulenc was sufficiently reproached for being superficial, which is entirely false, but he wasn’t deep either. He was someone who, without ever taking himself seriously, nonetheless wrote serious music. That bothers people. It bothers musicologists... to not be able to classify him. He wrote cabaret music, he wrote the *Litanies à la Vierge noire*. What category should they be in? Cabaret or sacred music? No, he is everything at once, and I think it disturbs people. He was interested in everything. He knew Boulez’s music very well, but did not try to write like Boulez. He remained himself. For me, that is one of a composer’s greatest talents: to know about everything that is happening and to continue to say what he has to say. He’s like Richard Strauss, he’s a part of those people who lived during a period where everything was happening, everything was changing and who said to themselves, ‘yes, that’s great, but I still have something to say!’ I think that someone who lets himself be influenced by every movement, every school of thought, every change in fashion, ends up being nobody at all.”

Poulenc’s originality stems from the way he expresses himself through an ancient language that he manages to personalise. “He has found a highly personal language,” explains Marc-André Hamelin. “In fact, I was thinking about it recently, there’s a mix of both light music and tragic music. When one looks at someone like

Jean Françaix, for example, who only wrote light music, one sees that Poulenc truly succeeded in creating an amalgam between light music and the solemnity of lyrical or sacred music. This is what gives his music a certain savour that one truly finds nowhere else.” In Poulenc’s music there is a constant give and take between the two opposing facets of his character. François Le Roux recalls, “From

for me to say what is due to his training and what is pure Poulenc, because for me it is all such a part of him. He is not modern in the sense of invention – there isn’t much of that in the world of music – but he is inventive in the sense that he is a part of a great family tree on which he is a brand new branch.” This is an opinion that is shared by Kent Nagano. “As a 20<sup>th</sup> century composer, Poulenc developed his own

## HIS MUSICAL EXPRESSION IS STRUCTURED BY THE POETS, BY CULTURE AND BY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE, WHICH IS ALL TRANSFORMED INTO AESTHETIC MATERIAL

my very first contact, I noticed a sort of nostalgia, a melancholy that is easily explained when one reads his biography. But there is also a sort of continual back and forth between the past and the present. In other words, on the one hand there are the great polyphonic forms, the great madrillesque forms that he knew how to mix with what he had already learned and had totally personalised, and on the other hand, Stravinsky and everything he learned during his studies with Koëchlin. Today, it is very difficult

language and a very personal and highly influential style. Classical models undoubtedly play a role in his music, but he uses them so intelligently and with such freedom that he creates something new. In his way, he is almost neo-classical. Poulenc’s music clearly distances itself from the evolution of the avant-garde musical scene. Poulenc always remains himself and that is what proves his importance at the heart of the conflicts and developments of arts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.” Jos van Immerseel adds, “Poulenc,

is from start to finish, and at all times, a mix of everything. I think this is a very strong aspect of his music. But others consider it to be a weakness in his style.”

### A certain idea of French art

“The lesson in humanity contained in Poulenc’s music”, observes Pascal Rogé, “is his light-heartedness, his capacity to be whimsical without being superficial, to transmit emotions without being pretentious and pedan-

an emotion – not with very little means, for the means are enormous, but they are concentrated without any need for development. This is all the difference between French music and German or Russian music. The French are not heavy-handed in the way they say things. They suggest. The music is elegant and discreet; it is filled with ‘*pudeur*’. This is a word I always have difficulty translating into English... A sense of ‘*pudeur*’ quickly becomes sexual, quickly becomes something restrictive. No! ‘*Pudeur*’ is not at all restrictive; it is simply a way of saying, ‘use your imagination, everything is here, but it is up to you to understand, it is not up to me to explain everything to you.’ I like this aspect of French music where one can say much without weighing everything down.” Poulenc’s music has an archetypal quality; for each and everyone, it calls to mind France, the French and French art. “It is always greatly appreciated”, remarks Eric Le Sage. “For foreign audiences it is a representation of the French composer as he is often imagined to be: light, elegant with a certain melancholy *je ne sais quoi*! Poulenc is one of those composers who can be somewhat condescendingly judged by a certain intelligentsia, but who is well-loved by musicians and audiences alike.” Dame Felicity Lott confides, “For a singer, it is a little bit like embracing French culture. Everything I love about France, about Paris is contained in it... a nostalgia in the music, the love of the language.”

“Poulenc has a resemblance to Françoise Sagan”, adds Karen Vourc’h, “I really like Françoise

## THE VOICE, THE VOCAL LINE, IS BOTH MODERN AND TRADITIONAL; IT HAS A POPULAR QUALITY, SOMETHING LINKED TO EDITH PIAF AND MAURICE CHEVALIER

tic, and ability to declare that everything can be done within ten measures. One doesn’t need six movements to say things, which is also very French, because all French music is made up of short pieces... In Debussy’s works for piano, the longest piece lasts six minutes. These great composers are men who are capable of writing masterpieces – a landscape, an atmosphere,



Sagan. There's that same feeling of liberation... the Paris one leaves in order to head south; there is all the flavour of Parisian culture, the Paris of the 'chanson', the Paris of 1945-1950... I find that there's a mixture of all that... In Satie too, of course – and none of that takes away from the music. It's true that being French or knowing that period well, loving the art of that era – the poetry, the painting – is important. It all forms a picture, a background to everything that Poulenc wrote, his manner of singing." Graham Johnson's

because he seems to represent certain aspects of France. He is accessible; many of his pieces, such as *La Voix humaine*, are related to the typically French *film noir* that the English adore." For Kent Nagano, Poulenc provokes his audience and that is what many people enjoy. "In my opinion, the principle aspects of Poulenc's music are his mastery of composition, the absence of effort, the joy and wit apparent in his style, as well as his global passion for musical composition as a practice through which he can treat frivolity with seriousness."



Kent Nagano

Stéphane Denève tells us, "For me, he is one of the rare, great composers to have a melodic approach that is absolutely wonderful. He can always borrow chords from others and yet remains himself. It has been said of Poulenc (and I love this phrase), 'he uses other's chords to make no one's music'. You can always write beautiful harmonies, it's possible to find that, to work at that. Rhythm too is something that can be learnt, worked on, perfected. But melody is the Holy Grail. It is truly mysterious – on every level, in fact, whether it's a great melody from a song by the Beatles or by Michael Jackson, or a great melody by Ravel, whom I consider possibly the greatest French melodist. It's something mysterious, the veritable essence of genius. Poulenc had that quality in permanence. In fact, what I love about him is his melodic dimension. When I perform Poulenc, I can't stop singing, my brain just keeps on singing." In his pieces for voice and piano, the melody springs from the prosody. Denève adds, "Poulenc has a great natural quality; he never makes a single mistake when it comes to prosody. His prosody is adapted to his style, with melodic turns that are sometimes unusual, with



Eric Le Sage

head-over-heels love affair with Poulenc's music is partially due to this musical echo of the Parisian world. "The voice, the vocal line, is both modern and traditional; it has a popular quality, something linked to Edith Piaf and Maurice Chevalier, the sort of France that the English love if they are Francophiles. Poulenc is very popular with foreign audiences

## A master of melody

**T**hroughout his career, Poulenc furthered the melody genre, based on a close relationship between the voice, the piano and a poem. But the evolution of the line and the voice is not limited just to vocal art. His music is nourished and carried by an exceptional melodic sense.

effects that are sometimes linked to his era, certain things that are sometimes a bit precious; one must succeed in finding the right tone in order to remain contemporary. When it comes to melodies, for example, I am a great admirer of Pierre Bernac. It's true that Pierre Bernac's vocal style and way of speaking are a little old-fashioned. The style is a bit stiff, the diction a bit too refined... one must try to retain the essence, without making certain aspects too caricatural

for our times. Poulenc's prosody is certainly natural. In fact, it makes memorisation very easy. I am astonished to see to what extent, when I sing *Dialogues des Carmélites* or *La Voix humaine*, the melody flows naturally and allows me to retain the phrases with great ease."

Poulenc's melodies are particularly remarkable on three levels: he establishes a prosody that is incredibly accurate, he captures, thanks to his keen visual sense, the images that drive the poem and at the same time he manages to transmit a photograph of his own highly contrasted personality. In his hands, the poems, sometimes quite difficult, seem to become obvious. "I think that it is the contrast that immediately attracted me to his music," explains Dame Felicity Lott. "It appears so simple, and his music conveys a form of simplicity. The melodic quality is extraordinary, with wonderful themes. And at the same time, there is that contrast that drives it... the hooligan, the monk... I loved that right away; I found it incredibly moving, and also it often made me laugh, well, not always... I liked the poetry he set to music. It's very difficult to try to translate his melodies. When one tries to translate the poetry of Apollinaire or Éluard, one is very quickly overwhelmed: the images are hard to convey in a language other than French. But when I sing, Poulenc makes me believe that I understand a little of the poetry." This is exactly what Graham Johnson has noticed, "Just as with Schubert, Schumann, Debussy, Wolf...

Dame Felicity Lott





it is the poetry that motivates him and drove his thinking. Poulenc had a literary instinct and a true love of poetry. He had the genius to know that his melody and his immediacy were offset by the demands of the poetry. He understood that the rigour and difficulties presented by the poetry of Apollinaire, by Éluard in particular, by Max Jacob, would be overcome once set to music, almost as though the music opened the poems and made them more comprehensible. It's the contact between difficult words and more accessible music."

According to Poulenc, in order to achieve a natural quality in recitation, to safeguard the emotion and the sensuality of the poem, it was necessary to first have an emotional approach to the text rather than an intellectual one. Only then could one begin working on the detail of the text to ingeniously link all of the poetic moments, all the images, all the sensations. "In fact, the wonderful thing about Poulenc," Karen Vourc'h points out, "is that, a bit like Debussy, he is in love with the text and the poetry; for someone who loves poetry and words, it is a joy to sing because you can really feel that each word, each inflection, each change in note is made in consideration of the text. In other words, it's as though there was a true collaboration with Éluard... In the melody *Tu vois le feu du soir*, it's simply a moment of pure bliss. And in fact, when one reads his correspondence, one can see to what extent he studied the difficulty of the poem, which was a poem that used enumeration – you see the evening fire, you see... you see... you

POULENC  
HAD A  
LITERARY  
INSTINCT  
AND A TRUE  
LOVE OF  
POETRY. HE  
HAD THE  
GENIUS TO  
KNOW THAT  
HIS MELODY  
AND HIS  
IMMEDIACY  
WERE OFF-  
SET BY THE  
DEMANDS  
OF THE  
POETRY

see... It's remarkable to observe to what extent he succeeded in extricating himself from this repetitive quality in order to make the poetic and melodic curve culminate at a certain point and to bring to the poem, which is already an end in itself, an additional dimension. It really is something that transcends us. One has only to see his friendship with Bernac and with Denise Duval to understand how much he was in love with voices, with song. I think that is something you really feel right away."

François Le Roux adds, "I believe that one of Poulenc's greatest quality, and one that he is the only person of his generation to possess to that extent, is an exceptional knowledge of poetry, a knowledge that is almost physical. One can hear it in his melodies: he adapts himself to the poet and as a result, his music changes. One can always say that the musical spelling and grammar doesn't change, but the Poulenc who set Max Jacob to music and the Poulenc who set Paul Éluard to music are not at all the same. And that is not to mention Apollinaire or Cocteau... Poulenc puts himself completely at the service of the poetry. In that respect, one can say that he is a debussyist since the author of *Pelléas* was his greatest model. But when it comes to form, he is more respectful of the verses – when there is verse, even free verse. Éluard... it's hardly ever verse, but there are strophes. Poulenc respects that. But he adds material... that's why I say it's physical. He adds greatly important material. When he sets Apollinaire to music, there is a folk quality that is close to popular song,

with exceptions such as *La Carpe*, for example, which is an unusual piece. The *Bestiaire* has been set to music many times, but *La Carpe* by Poulenc is a thirty second masterpiece. It's mind-boggling. Max Jacob is another story all together, with his brand of spitefulness, that bitter, almost aggressive quality that is nonetheless filled with humour. When I perform the Éluard cycles, I always get the feeling that it is mineral. In other words, that Éluard's language becomes mineral, as sharp and cutting as a dia-

Éluard's poetry the way it should be heard, that is to say, inseparable from his era. Let's not discuss Éluard anymore, but rather let's take the example of *C* by Aragon. I don't think it is possible to make a stronger musical statement about the boundary line during World War II and what a wrench it was to leave the occupied zone for the free zone. That is indeed all in Apollinaire's poem. But Poulenc, who lived near the banks of the Loire River where the boundary lay, sets it to music in a truly remark-

## “IF WE HAD TO REMEMBER POULENC FOR ONLY ONE THING, IT WOULD BE FOR HIS MELODIES... THEY ARE ALL MASTERPIECES.”

mond or granite. From one piece to the next, Poulenc searches for what he calls the key to the poem, which is not necessarily the beginning of the text, but which is a key that can be heard if one is paying attention. I'm used to it. I could almost say, 'he started there'.

Even as he follows the rhythms of the verse, the images, the words, Poulenc subtly paints a picture. François Le Roux continues, "It's almost as though he's constructing a landscape or an atmosphere. I think that Poulenc is an incredible musical contextualist. He was so cultured that he could concentrate completely on his era and on the details. In fact, that was his great strength. If one knows how to follow and read him, one can hear

able fashion. It breaks my heart every time I hear it. The difficulty today is in helping young singers understand, to explain what it was like for someone to say to themselves that France was split in two. And Poulenc wrote in such a way... I always say that, at the end, when he does '*Ô ma France, ô ma délaissée*' (Oh, my France, Oh my abandoned one) and he writes '*portando molto*', which is just incredible in a French melody, I say that this is because it all goes beyond the song. It's not a question of doing a pretty *portamento*, you have to do a heart-breaking *portamento* because right afterwards he says '*j'ai traversé les Ponts de Cé*' (I crossed the Cé Bridge) with a sort of nakedness that is simply overwhelming.



Nakedness in the sense that everything is empty on the inside.” It was in fact with this melody, one of Poulenc’s most famous, that Graham Johnson remembers being first introduced to the composer’s music. “The first time I encountered his music... was in a recording by the French singer, Régine Crespin, accompanied by the American pianist, John Rosemond; she sang with such simplicity, *J’ai traversé les ponts de Cé*, Aragon’s song... it was a combination of *legato* in the vocal line, with the charm of the melody, the harmony, the nostalgia... I immediately fell in love and began to work with a young singer from the London Academy of Music who was just starting out and who is known today as Dame Felicity Lott, one of the greatest performers of Poulenc’s music.”

In many ways, Poulenc outdid himself by relying on the first-rate poets that he set to music. “He was inspired by the texts,” Pascal Rogé justifiably points out. The text is somehow elevated. He chose the most beautiful poets in the French language and I think that inspired him. When I played all his melodies, I discovered many texts thanks to his music: one understands the text because one is playing the music. He doesn’t just put himself at the service of the words, he lifts them up. I think it was Apollinaire’s wife who said that music had never had such a presence in poetry. That was Poulenc’s particular genius. He said something like, ‘If I were only remembered for my melodies, I would be very proud.’... and that is true. If we had to remember Poulenc for only one thing, it would be for his melodies. I have recorded all of

his melodies and I don’t think that there are more than two that could be considered minor. They are all masterpieces.”

## A composer-pianist

**T**he role of the piano in Poulenc’s melodies is of utmost importance and goes beyond that of simple accompaniment. “It is often very present”, notes François Le Roux. “It is very rich, except possibly in cases like *Priez pour paix* (Pray for peace) or other



Graham Johnson

similarly simple pieces, where the slow movements, as he said, resemble those of Mozart, and where he has fun creating beautiful melodic phrases over a very simple accompaniment. But when it comes to the melodies, especially those that are frequently performed by sopranos, such as the ‘il vole’ in *Fiançailles pour rire*, we find a piano line that is incredibly voluble. This means

that pianists who don’t know the music will get it wrong, and the singers will not understand how the verse is constructed... One must not mistake what I call a sight-reading for a true reading of the material. Sight-reading is what you hear the first time you run through the piece, but the reality is in fact quite different. One must look carefully, for Poulenc is extremely precise. The vocal line may be linked to the piano, but he rarely puts the ties in the same place in the piano part as in the vocal part. On the other hand, he often puts in accents. It’s difficult to discuss without having a score before our eyes, but his manner of writing is only comprehensible after you have studied his work for quite some time. He has his own vocabulary, his own language, and that language appears to be much simpler than it actually is. He demands a lot from the singer and the pianist because in fact nothing is every fully established, there’s always an element of interaction, from the very first piece he ever wrote. When you say, ‘we’re going to do *Les Gaillardes*’ the majority of pianists will immediately reply, ‘I’d better get to work!’ Yes, it takes a lot of work, that’s for sure!”

Finger work, certainly... but also work to understand the style so as not to fall into pathos. Although Poulenc loved to often use the pedal to create atmosphere and resonance, he detested any vagueness in tempo and rhythm. Graham Johnson is unyielding, “I hate what happens when certain Americans perform his music... They say to themselves, ‘oh, this is wonderful, let’s do lots of *rubato*.’ [He sings *Les Chemins de l’Amour*]. And yet,

if you listen to Yvonne Printemps sing it, it's perfectly clear. Poulenc is linked to the same tradition as Debussy, Ravel or Fauré, which is all about clarity... In addition, an entire section of French music, at least since Lully, is tied to dance. So if you sing '*ma chambre a la forme d'une cage*' it is, in fact, a slow waltz. It has nothing to do with the bad habit that some people have of turning the music into chewing gum just because that's how they feel it, because they say to themselves, 'it's so French'... They think it's very sentimental, sexy, very external... but when you really get inside the music, it's something else. I tell my students, 'you are dealing with the motherland of Voltaire and the Enlightenment... You also need to study solfège. Out of all the musicians in the world, only the French turn their musicians into mathematicians!'

A large part of Poulenc's catalogue calls on the piano, whether as a solo instrument or as accompaniment, for his concertos or chamber music. From one genre to the next, the instrument changes in function, and his writing follows the great traditions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century or is inspired by new trends. Eric Le Sage took the measure of this effulgence from an early age. "When I was young I did a lot of chamber music and I first knew Poulenc through his sonatas for wind instruments, the *Sextuor*. Then a young Catalan composer and pianist, Alberto Guinovart, played me the piece called *Mélancolie* with such avid jubilation that I wanted to know more; a little later, I discovered *L'Histoire de Babar* and the string sonatas,

which are a brilliant success. One discovery led to the next, and very quickly I began to want to record his complete works for piano. The 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth in 1999 allowed me to make the project a reality with BMG." Poulenc's works written specifically for the piano are numerous and yet can be very inconsistent. Eric Le Sage admits it readily, "It's really pretty divided between the 'audacity' of some of the 'modern' pieces such as the *Promenades*, which really haven't aged well, and the highly inspired cycles like the *Nocturnes* or the *Improvisations*. Poulenc himself wasn't very kind when it came to judging his own work for piano – he was really too critical of himself in my opinion. He must have been crushed by the pianistic tradition that he knew so well and he rejected, quite unfairly, a large portion of his own work. Especially the *Soirées de Nazelles*, which remains nonetheless very 'Poulenc' with its mixture of sophistication, humour and profound lyricism. His scores were well written for the instrument. Poulenc himself was an excellent pianist, he knew all the little 'tricks' (that he often reproached himself for using). His pianistic writing was sensual, tactile, with influences taken from Mozart, Schumann, Prokofiev and Stravinsky, rather than from the French Debussy, Ravel or Fauré."

**M**arc-André Hamelin confirms this assessment of Poulenc's piano. "Since he was a very good pianist himself, his music is always a pleasure to play. His writing is

unique, even though I can't really cite any technical or pianistic innovations. It's just a sort of logic that fits perfectly to one's fingers, and that is something that every pianist appreciates. There are a few difficulties from time to time, but I think the major difficulty is to render the spirit rather than the pianistic style. It's always extremely vocal, even when the music seems almost circus-like, because his most rapid *tempi* can often sound like they're from a musical. But even in his wildest rhythms, there is always a line; the vocal line is always there and it's always possible to make the music sing."

This pianistic balance between two different worlds can bring contrasting colours to a recital. Pascal Rogé has often experienced it, "Practically all of my recital programs include Poulenc. How much depends a little on the program, but I never do a recital of French music without including Poulenc. But from there to doing a program of only Poulenc... I did it once in Japan, but it is not to the composer's advantage. The charm of his music, the tone, the originality, loses its edge; I can't say that he repeats himself, but the piano repertoire is difficult to vary. One always finds oneself playing short pieces that have the same characteristics. I therefore gave up on the idea of 'all Poulenc', I really don't think it works well. But Poulenc, Ravel, Fauré, that's something I often do. I know that Poulenc didn't like his own repertoire for piano, he said so often enough. Obviously, I don't agree, but when I compare the melodies that I have recorded and played, I



can understand. There is not that total genius, that aspect of perpetual inspiration that can be found in his melodies, in his chamber music or in his vocal pieces. Nonetheless, he has a distinctly different personality that is interesting to include

in his incredibly sensitive nature that he constantly tried to hide – at the most emotional point in his music he always wrote ‘absolutely no *rubato*’ because he sensed that Rachmaninov was about to be played and he was adamant that



Marc-André Hamelin

in a recital. In my opinion, he is the one French musician who stands out from all the others thanks to his personality; you only have to hear two notes by Poulenc to recognise that it is Poulenc! His personality is to be found in that perpetual duality between ‘the monk and the hooligan’, in the phrase coined by Claude Rostand; it’s in that nostalgia that two measures later turns into humour, in his self-derision,

it should not become sentimental. Humour in music is rare; *joie de vivre*, even in French music, is rare... and he brings all that. There is a lot of improvisation in the *Intermezzi*, one can really feel his *joie de vivre*. His music puts you in a good mood. I therefore often end the first half of a recital with some Poulenc, to leave the audience with that touch of humour and *joie de vivre*. I think that is also one of the

reasons that he wasn't always taken seriously, because he had arrived at that state of auto-derision. He was never forgiven for it, especially given that at the time, everyone wanted to be so serious and so cerebral. I think that in terms of piano, his greatest success is the *Concerto pour deux pianos*. Even though the concerto borrows from Mozart and Stravinsky, it is nonetheless 100% pure Poulenc. That was his genius. It was often said that he copied from Prokofiev, Stravinsky, Satie, Chabrier. He said it himself, he was

that the students who play his music for me often have trouble grasping this concept. It's true that some of the phrases, the harmonies make you want to stretch them out because they are so beautiful, but you mustn't. You have to slide over it, you have to feel the emotion but you must absolutely not spread it out in front of you. On the other hand, if they play the pieces coldly and mechanically, it doesn't work at all. It's very subtle, in fact. One has to slip into his world, read the poets, learn about Jean Cocteau.

in the discreet *Ave verum corpus* for female *a cappella* choir or in *Figure humaine*, the imposing cantata for double choir, whether in the imploring *Litanies à la Vierge noire*, or the almost noisy *Gloria* where angels wink their eyes and stick out their tongues. Laurence Equilbey remembers her first professional encounter with Poulenc's music, singing his *Messe* in Vienna during her studies, "Both the Scandinavians, with whom I sang and whom I directed, and the Austrians, they all truly loved the piece,



inspired by all those composers, he didn't deny it. But he turned it all into Poulenc! I think that is the sign of a great composer, of someone who really has something personal and pertinent to say. I think that technically speaking, for a modern pianist, nothing is insurmountable, far from it. But stylistically, it is very difficult, because Poulenc had so many facets – and none of those facets must be over-exaggerated in any way. To be too sentimental isn't good. To be too dry isn't good. To hide the emotion isn't good. To want to stretch the emotion across all the measures isn't good. I know

It's such a mix of melancholy, religious faith too, joie de vivre, and then there is the earthy side, the Gallic side."

## Choral works

**R**eligious faith, melancholy, earthiness, a touch of French bawdiness... it is hard to better define the major expressive themes in Poulenc's choral music, which shows the same degree of commitment and truth whether in the *Quatre motets pour un temps de pénitence* or the *Chansons françaises*, whether

especially the *Sanctus*; they loved the virtuosity, the rhythms and the depth of the harmonies, which really spoke to them. Poulenc's harmonies really resonate with Germanic and Scandinavian cultures, it isn't at all foreign to them. In fact, I think that Poulenc is the link between English and German speakers; he is really the French composer who links the two, more than Ravel, for example, or at least that's how it feels from a singer's point of view. We're lucky to have Poulenc's choral works in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He's a magnificent French gold nugget. There is no equivalent

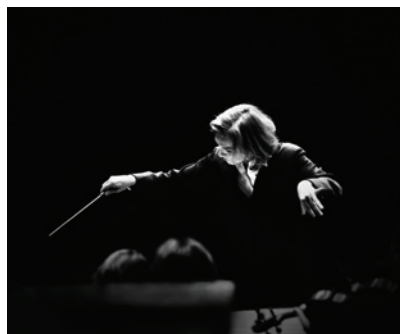


in any other country, well... perhaps Britten. There is such a level of quality throughout all of his work, where almost everything is terrific. In the history of choral music, you have to admit that it is unique to find a body of work that is so interesting, so beautiful, so fascinating for groups to work on, and which even makes them grow and advance.” For Daniel Reuss, there can be no doubt, “for a chamber choir, his music is the best one can imagine. Brahms was also really wonderful, but Poulenc

The octaves, which are prohibited in classical counterpoint, allow this magnificent sound; a very special quality is obtained, a strength that is almost like a hymn.”

The effect of this immediacy and the strong impact of the sound, however, must not conceal how difficult it is to achieve. “The writing is relatively dry and yet the melodic lines and the harmonies are very difficult”, explains Laurence Equilbey. “With Poulenc, it is the inner lines that are often the most difficult; primarily because he was

Orchestras have perhaps played more repertoire and their ears are more attuned to the harmonics. A singer is relatively monodic and has little vertical training.” Daniel Reuss confirms this. “Poulenc is very difficult. It’s very open and the chords aren’t too complicated but especially with the enharmonics, it can sometimes be tricky to obtain clear chords. It takes a lot of time to study the scores. Some things aren’t at all difficult to play on the piano, but to sing... And at the same time, it’s so beautiful



Laurence Equilbey

## HUMOUR IN MUSIC IS RARE; *JOIE DE VIVRE*, EVEN IN FRENCH MUSIC, IS RARE... AND HE BRINGS ALL THAT

has colours, harmonies that really ring when they are sung, with fifths and added sixths that combine for a brilliant and unique sound. This brilliance in choral sound is truly a distinctive characteristic that sets Poulenc apart. What is more, in *Figure humaine*, considerable vocal amplitude is achieved in certain passages. N°7, *La Menace sous le ciel rouge*, opens on a *fugato* with a series of twelve sounds, then with ‘*la terre utile, effaçà*’, a section begins that is written like an orchestral passage. The chorus achieves a broad sound, similar to the sound of a symphonic orchestra.

a pianist and he wrote with his piano. Horizontal counterpoint really wasn’t his concern and so sometimes the inner lines serve a little to fill things in. That’s hard. Then there is also the question of mastering the harmonic language. One has to have studied all the music of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, all the post-romanticism, in order to understand Poulenc and his harmonic language, to understand the function of the notes and why they are there. It can sometimes be complicated to make certain chords ring, simply because of a question of culture on the part of the singers.

that everyone wants to sing this music... well, maybe not everyone... Sometimes it’s hard for the sopranos who are straining way up in the high notes. If Poulenc were still alive, I’d like to work with him and ask him to exchange the first and second sopranos. He composed at the piano – one can feel it and hear it. In the last part of *Figure humaine*, *Liberté*, there are some sections that string together series of chromatic chords that are easy to play on the piano, but difficult to sing.”

*Figure humaine* is, in fact, typical of the influence Poulenc’s piano

playing on his writing, which breaks with traditional contrapuntal design and thus creates harmonic blocks and vocal shifts that give the chorus a truly unique sound. “It’s really hard to do”, states Laurence Equilbey, “but it sings continuously, because there is a magnificent *superius* that is solidly anchored, since Poulenc had incredible technique when it comes to the bass... This ‘written with the piano’ side of things allowed him to make a strong impact; it’s what gives his choral writing a frequently percussive quality. I also think that his personal life helped to shape his style. I’m thinking in particular of his experience with revelation, the shock of discovering his faith, which led him to develop his unique inspiration for an aesthetic that was a bit Romanesque and dry. But his Romanesque side is offset by his personality, which is what permits such generosity, and also by his melodic and harmonic language, which is unique and which he managed to synthesize into a very streamlined form. It creates something absolutely rich and dense and yet with that pure quality that he always sought. In terms of sacred music, he developed something really wonderful, which can be linked to the fact that he was very impressed by Mantegna and by Romanesque art. If he had been inspired by a more flamboyant Baroque style, things might have been different. I must say that his sacred music, which seems to be hewn out of solid rock and is relatively dry, without pathos, sometimes a bit Stravinskian, and yet which remains expansive with a little sentimentality here and there, it creates something that is really wonderful.”



## ALL CHOIR- MASTERS NOTICE THE METICULOUS NATURE OF HIS WRITING AND THE HIGH STAND- ARDS HE DEMANDED FOR PER- FORMANCE

**A**ll choirmasters notice the meticulous nature of his writing and the high standards he demanded for performance. “He was very precise”, remarks Daniel Reuss, “he wrote tiny notes to be sure that the text would be correctly separated between the words. If you do it, then you are expressing what he wanted. But sometimes it is so extreme, particularly in the *Quatre motets pour un temps de Noël*, that if you obey his instructions too exactly, every phrase ends up being cut in three. I think he just wanted to show how the phrase was constructed, and not actually stop the singing mid-phrase; you have to more or less find the right balance without interrupting the phrase for a breath.” Laurence Equilbey adds, “When you sing, you have to be very precise. The idea is that these rhythms and phrases are chiselled; it’s very precisely drawn and at the same time you have this rich material, that sounds wonderful... yet all the same, there isn’t too much *agogique* (change in tempo), not too much *rubato*. The music is very sensitive and at the same time highly organised. His choral writing is really quite unique. What could one compare it to? There aren’t many people who can be compared to Poulenc during his era. Even Britten... is something else. Poulenc has a melodic and harmonic language that is completely personal, can’t be imitated and is recognizable after only about ten seconds. With his genius for melody, his love of popular song... everything merges together... there’s a sort of syncretism of all sorts of

styles in his work. If one compares him to Strauss, one realises that there are a lot more foreign notes in Poulenc's music, and chords that should serve to modulate but in fact don't end up modulating – everything goes really quickly, like a string of colours. Harmonically, he goes much faster than Strauss. And once again, Strauss follows the technique of horizontal counterpoint more than Poulenc does; each line is carefully polished. When I do a program that includes Philippe Manoury and Poulenc, I feel a sort of – not a continuation – but their energy has something in common. Poulenc's music is very energetic in its verticality and also in its somewhat gravelly quality. The text is presented in quite a direct way. I find those same qualities in Manoury's music. The taste for certain sounds, the flatness of some colours, the very transparent or diaphanous elements: all the different aspects, those oppositions, can be found in Manoury. I recall it well... when I did the Manoury/Poulenc program, the two in fact reinforced each other."

Perfect intonation must be superimposed on precise diction. As Harry Christophers points out, "Poulenc is like Monteverdi: you sing as you would speak. And when you do that, you begin to really feel his music." Above and beyond requiring a highly demanding choral technique, Poulenc's music also demands a particular sensitivity to the poetry or the religious text, a sensitivity that permits access to the composer's imagination. It is his imagination, his inner thoughts, as well as his very personal brand of faith, that animates his music.

This is why Harry Christophers wishes he could have a conversation with the composer. "I'd like to ask him what was going through his mind when he set his *motets* to music. Why did he write that '*vos fugam*' should be 'lively and worried'? The passage is aggressive. Did he feel that Christ was being aggressive toward his disciples? Was he annoyed or was he just

Daniel Reuss





reprimanding them? ‘You shall flee, and I will go to be sacrificed for you’. I’d like to know the answers. What did he feel? They are very personal thoughts. In his *Litanies à la Vierge Noire*, his first religious piece... there are so many concepts and ideas in that particular poem, all the imagery that is in that poem, I’d love to know what inspired him. Why write just for high voices?”

Christophers also uses his secular music as an example, “When I did *Figure humaine* with the Sixteen and conducted it, I realized it was one of the most difficult *a cappella* pieces ever written. I would put it as difficult as Henze’s *Orpheus behind the Wire*, which in terms of notes, is more difficult. But Poulenc is not just about getting the notes right, it’s the language, it’s the poems. The poems are amazing. And to get behind the meaning of the poems is fantastic. For me, as a British conductor, it’s also the history, the fact that Poulenc wrote his music in secret, during the war and sent bits to Belgium. But then, the first performance was in England, by the BBC Singers. The poems are amazing. There is something that comes from his faith, his very personal Catholic faith, just as is the case in his religious pieces. In his choral music, there is a return to the Renaissance, and you can see the influence of composers like Vittoria. Poulenc changed his personality, his very hedonistic personality, when he returned to the Catholic faith. One can feel his personality through the biblical texts. It’s the same thing with *Figure humaine*, with his total faith in Éluard’s poetry. What he

managed to do there, in his choral music, is the best part of his work.” Christophers concludes, “When you sing his music, you get the impression that you are inside the composer’s thoughts. You really feel the ideas that drove him while he was writing the pieces... there are so many things in each measure... One must start by working hard... once one has managed to execute it perfectly, then one can add expression and access the piece itself. I think



Harry Christophers

that often the people who don’t like Poulenc’s choral music don’t understand Poulenc... that lasts until they hear a good performance.”

Poulenc’s choral writing is not limited to *a cappella* pieces. It also includes several great works in combination with an orchestra. The *Gloria* and the *Stabat Mater* are very well known; on the other hand, *Sécheresses* and the *Sept Répons des Ténèbres* are rarely performed.

“I always wanted to record the *Sept Répons des Ténèbres*”, confides Harry Christophers. “In the Sixteen we have an exceptional section of women’s voices. Of course, Poulenc wrote this score for the Lincoln Center and it was meant to be performed by children. But I still need to record this piece because its choral writing is as striking as that of the *motets* and is just as difficult. The orchestra is a large one but he uses it sparingly. In a sense, it isn’t far off from what Stravinsky might have done. For a chorus like the Sixteen, it’s the perfect piece to perform; we don’t need a big choir; it’s very subtle, truly unique, with moments when the chorus is *a cappella*, passages for the wind section, but not all together... He orchestrates by using timbres that are appropriate for accompanying a chorus, to create a specific colour, a touch here and a touch there. For example, his use of the harp is incredible, as are the high notes in the wind section. Starting with his interpretation of the text, which is in itself very expressive, very suggestive, he dares *ppp* and *ff*, accents that produce an ensemble, a global colour that is incredible. The conductor has to go back and forth between that and allowing the music to breathe, and then it becomes very powerful.

## Poulenc and the stage

**L**ove of the voice, the meaning of the text, a sensitive and emotional approach to music... all of this predisposed Poulenc to write for the opera. His three lyric works were three challenges in three different

styles that he managed to bring up to date and make his own: *opera bouffe* with *Les Mamelles de Tiré-sias*, lyric drama with *Dialogues des Carmélites*, and one-act drama with *La Voix humaine*. These pieces work so well as lyric theatre, they are so greatly appreciated by singers, because Poulenc understood that true opera, in no matter what language, must be based on the sung voice and that the singer must be at the heart of the work. The case of *La Voix humaine* is a perfect example. As François Le Roux remarks, “All you have to do is listen to *La Voix humaine*, to discover how Denise Duval interpreted it, it’s mind-boggling. I’ve heard it performed many times by other singers, but Denise Duval was there at the start. Yes, it’s true, no one sings that way anymore, but it doesn’t matter, it’s truly astonishing.” The singer’s involvement must be total; that is the strength and the difficulty of this opera for one voice. Dame Felicity Lott, who has always very much enjoyed singing the piece, readily admits it, “It made me ill every day, every time I had to perform it, because it was so terrible to have to live through that heart-breaking story. It was also very difficult to learn. The telephone rings... and it’s never quite the same; the ‘hello, hello’ is never exactly alike. And nobody ever answers you; you’re always alone on stage. You have to imagine what is being said on the other end of the line and include it in your acting, in the emotion that you’re transmitting. But you can’t completely put all that emotion in your voice, you have to hold some back, because that’s the whole idea

behind lying. It’s incredible to act and very hard to balance with the orchestra, which is essential. If the conductor waits too long, while the man is on the other end of the line, then the pressure can’t be maintained. And if it’s not long enough, then there’s not enough time to change ideas. I remember... it was a lot of work the first time I put

## IT IS HIS IMAGINATION, HIS INNER THOUGHTS, AS WELL AS HIS VERY PERSONAL BRAND OF FAITH, THAT ANIMATES HIS MUSIC

it together. We spent hours and hours. The conductor thought it was as difficult as *Tristan!*”

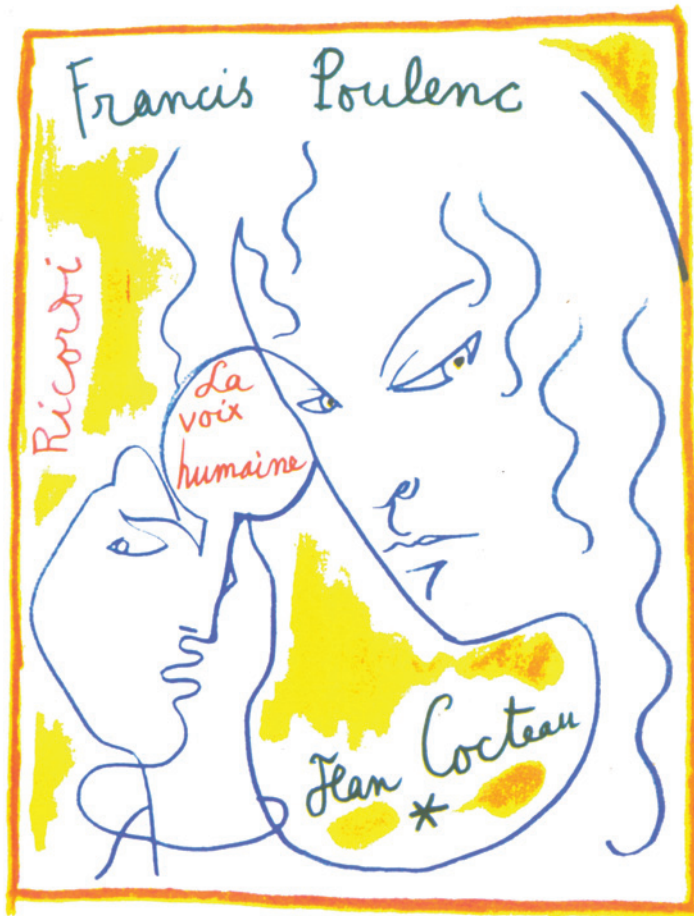
Before becoming operas, Poulenc’s works were powerful theatrical texts, characterised and marked by specific language and by an author’s world. His talent was to be able to slip into the worlds of Apollinaire, Bernanos or Cocteau. Ludovic Lagarde recalls his experience with *La Voix humaine*, “I am not an opera director, I am a theatrical director who occasionally stages opera, which is not quite the same thing. I approach

this repertoire as if it were a contemporary repertoire; that is what is so interesting. Working on *La Voix humaine*, I came to realise how daring it is for its time and to what extent it contains the spirit of its era, a desire to be modern,

The opera respects the dramatic line and I find that very interesting because it is a highly stimulating exercise in style. There is a small resemblance to Hitchcock as well; there's something of the suspense and the underlying humour

explore..." Solitude, love coming to an end, a character who is lost, lies to help believe that everything will be all right... *La Voix humaine* resonates in each and every one of us. Karen Vourc'h remembers, "After singing it, I have to say that a great many people came to see me, as many men as women. I even received a lot of e-mails on my site; all of a sudden it seemed to ring a bell on a personal level for the members of the audience; nearly everyone at one time or another had found themselves on the phone with someone who... I think that effect is also due to the music. The text alone wouldn't be enough to create such an effect. People are also really affected by the music at the end, '*je t'aime, je t'aime*', which is really powerful. Poulenc was someone who was really sensitive. And it's true, he had a tendency to let himself go completely... In order to strike the right tone, I think you can't fall into pathos; you have to retain dignity through out."

According to Macha Makeïff, before even entering into the sphere of lyric theatre, Poulenc's music already contains a very distinctive internal life. "His music has kept me company. I've often used it during readings; I've used *Les Biches*, things like that. I have a deep love for his music, like that of Milhaud. I don't even ask myself why; it's a whole universe, it's very inspiring, extremely inspiring. In my opinion – and this is very reductive, it will shock you – it's theatrical music, it's music that you would love to stage... my dream would be to stage the music, before even considering



to break rules. To put that story on stage at the time was a powerful act of modernity; I start with that and then I try to translate the work into our times, into our contemporary world. The play in fact has become very fashionable, outside of the opera. I think it contains a very modern solitude, and that is what brings it back to the stage.

in the writing, which is very interesting for the stage. Working on it, I noticed a sort of sadomasochism in the work; I don't know if we can call it that, but the entire work is built that way. In the end, the temporality, the play's canvas, it's all a way to make love last. There are a thousand ways to make love last... and just as many motifs to



the lyric. Putting on the music, staging the music without the singers, seems perfectly natural to me.” Poulenc’s music would then anticipate this approach. “It’s extremely structured and it is, I would almost go as far as to say, heterogeneous. Poulenc... I feel that his music works like a collage, like a surrealist collage and then, depending on how you look at it, you tell yourself a story. If you look at it in a different way, you discover a different story. There are a great many stories, a great many paths to follow. It’s extremely modern in that regard. You’re not in a story, a narration; you’re far from all that. There are lots of ways in and what is really wonderful – and this is why it’s so inspiring – is that you can move certain elements, like in a fantastic collage; you, with your images, can follow it. At the same time, there isn’t as much leeway as you might think.” For François Le Roux, the diversity to be found in Poulenc’s music stems from the oppositions that were such a part of his personality. “I think that there is always a ‘bad boy’ quality that permeates Poulenc. Without any warning he goes from a sublime waltz to the Husband’s song, ‘Ah, how crazy are the joys of fatherhood!’. Where did he get that? It’s exactly like Apollinaire who enjoyed doing neo-cabaret by mixing ‘Ubu’ with other ideas. Poulenc does the same thing in *Les Mamelles*, combining beautiful choral pieces that are extremely pure with fantasy; he describes things that are superb, side by side with characterisations that are purely physical. In *Les Mamelles*, I sang the role of the Director in the Prologue – it’s



Ludovic Lagarde

POULENC  
WAS SOME-  
ONE WHO  
WAS REALLY  
SENSITIVE.  
AND IT’S  
TRUE, HE HAD  
A TENDENCY  
TO LET  
HIMSELF GO  
COMPLETELY

Karen Vourc'h



a perfectly classical aria, with an arioso section, followed by a cabal-etta, then again by an arioso. But I am incapable of saying what should be expressed, since it is supposed to be declaimed.”

When it comes to staging, this freedom of tone is both a luxury and a trap. As Macha Makeïff notes, “In *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, you can’t do just anything because then it will turn into farce, it immediately loses its lustre and you’ll miss out on the brilliant quality of the music. If you make the narration flat, it’s unbearable. It is full of flashes of brilliance; therefore, when it is staged, one must respond with flashes as well. As for lyricism, you must be careful not to crush it with anecdotes, objects, speeches, intentions... I feel that one mustn’t constantly have intentions towards this music; there’s no point in continually pointing everything out; since it is like a collage, it already has its own meaning. And even if one removed the text, if one only listened to the orchestra rehearsals without the singers, one would still hear the entire show. Everything should really start with that, start with an orchestral reading, for that, I can assure you, puts you firmly in your place. In this music there is already such range, such lyrical moments... all we have to do is not be redundant, not flatten a lyric moment, not spoil it, but let it live. At heart, the greater part of staging involves listening – and this is not the part that is the most unpleasant. And often, when I have too many ideas, and this is can be one of my failings, I tell myself that I haven’t listened enough. But what I like about Poulenc – this might

make you scream – is that you get the impression that the guy isn’t using the same tools as the others. He’s not as good as Debussy or Ravel; he doesn’t know how to hold all the reins; and that gives him creativity, jubilation. When it comes right down to it, these are the kinds of artists I prefer; they don’t have a total mastery, so they cobble things together and it turns into genius! It’s like us in the theatre, when we’re even a little good... even though we’re filled with doubt, we throw things together... and then, all at once, you get a shiver. I’ve always felt that with Poulenc.”

Poulenc’s *opera bouffe* is not only interesting in terms of its mosaic-like construction, but also in terms of its topic, which raises questions about the current state of the genre. “In *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*”, Macha Makeïff continues, “it comes down to this: where is the feminine, where is the masculine? What genre is it? There is a displacement of the genres, similar to the Music-hall number called *La Danse apache*: it starts with a man hitting a woman, the woman becomes increasingly violent and ends up fighting the man; and at the same time it’s an incredible game of love. That’s what *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* is; people are displaced, forces are displaced, but in the end, you realise that it was nothing but a game. We’re in the presence of Dadas, of surrealists, it’s all a part of the show; everything is offered up in the course of the performance, whether it’s a dream, the most intimate details, or automatic writing. It’s a game that has been fed by cataclysms, by terrifying catastrophes – the war

of 1914-1918 when Apollinaire first wrote the play, and the Second World War when Poulenc turned it into an opera. In the *Prologue*, the poet asks a riddle: I therefore decided to bring Apollinaire on stage, as a sort of circus-master. He's the guy who comes back from war and goes back to his job, except that he's been hit on the head and he starts to combine art with war.

at the same time they represent the explosions of bombs and therefore the deaths of all those poets who won't have enough time to express their words. It's very powerful and extremely iconoclastic, in the true sense of the term – those subjects are not spoken of. Only poets can speak of them. Try to justify it. Try to justify that war is beautiful and that there is a riddle behind it all...



Macha Makeïeff

At one point he says that a body exploding... is as beautiful as a soul exploding and that's what creates the cosmos, it creates the stars... It's an image that is constantly with us, not only with cineastes but also in the theatrical world we inhabit, when you see the images of the towers collapsing on September 11. In the *Prologue*, the constellations represent all of the art that will bring light to the world, and

It's the riddle of creation: destruction is necessary so that new generations of poets can arrive."

**I**n direct opposition to the burlesque world of *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, Poulenc threw himself heart and soul into the internal drama of the Carmelites in Compiègne as they faced the Revolution. Stéphane Denève recalls his first experience



with the piece, “The Paris Opera and the Saito Kinen Festival asked me to be Ozawa’s assistant and to conduct several performances after he left. That’s how it happened. I remember very clearly what preceded this first collaboration. I played the score on the piano, singing all of the parts all the time, and it truly overwhelmed me. You can’t escape unscathed by this piece.” Poulenc manages to intimately link the requirements of Bernano’s text with the expressive capacities of the sung voice. Karen Vourc’h adds, “I think that in order to enhance a strong emotion, almost an abyss of emotion, appropriately enough, he creates an abyss in the notes. In other words, on the phrase’s key word used to express doubt, or great sadness, or on the contrary, great will power, he demonstrates that emotion by making a great interval leap in the notes that precede it. Blanche has that, Lidoine too, in a very legato line, which is really difficult: you have to keep the notes equal, maintain the long legato and not show how difficult it is vocally, not show the effort...” Simultaneously, while requiring a high standard in beautiful singing, Poulenc thought theatrically. “He has a really concrete idea of what he wants and knows how to adapt it completely to the performer, to the singer’s voice and to each performer’s sensibility. One can feel that in the words he said to Denise Duval or Pierre Bernac. It’s magnificent because it brings the melody and the lyric completely to life. In *La Voix humaine*, the first thing I did was to learn my part very, very carefully, using solfège. Then, at certain moments, I allowed myself a few liberties. It’s perhaps a

little pretentious of me to think that he would have liked them, but that’s what I did because my interpretation felt right. I think that Poulenc was someone who was so close to the text, to theatre, that as long as the interpretation fits, he would have been happy with it... at least that’s what I would like to think.”

## Orchestra and ballet

Poulenc wrote several ballets: *Les Biches*, *Aubade*, *Les Animaux modèles*. They are rarely performed as ballets but are often given in concert version. And yet the choreographer Thierry Malandain has noticed the impact that they can have on today’s audience when the ballets are reinterpreted. “I choreographed *Les Biches* in 2002 at the request of Jean-Louis Pichon who was then the director of the Opera Theatre in Saint-Etienne. The ballet was a double bill with *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*. A few years earlier, in 1995 to be precise, I had put together a show on Francis of Assisi using the scores from the *Quatre Petites Prières*, the *Concerto pour piano et orchestre*, the *Concerto pour orgue, orchestre à cordes et timbales* and the *Gloria*. Francis Poulenc therefore wasn’t a complete stranger to me. In fact, as a dancer with the French Ballet in Nancy, I had the opportunity to work on the Bronislava Nijinska version of *Les Biches*. I had also been several times to see the *Voluntaries* that Glen Tetley had put together with the *Concerto pour orgue*. I think there is a question of culture and generation; at the age of fifty, as a Frenchman, I am still among those who were able

to dance, or who were able simply to see ballets choreographed to this style of score. In my choreography, I was able to pick up certain numbers from the choreography by Bronislava Nijinska, almost as though they had come surging out of the past – primarily the beautiful stranger, the hostess and the

I often favour asexual choreography. In addition, my intention was not to reproduce the *Fêtes galantes* aspect of the original, but rather to propose an abstract piece.”

Whether it is for a ballet, a concerto, an opera, or for more specifically symphonic pieces like *Sinfonietta*, Poulenc’s orchestra



Thierry Malandain

two young girls celebrating the sweetness of May. The framework of the ballet therefore associated the angular neo-classicism of Nijinska with my style, which is perhaps more carnal, more sensual. The costumes given to both the male and female dancers were identical, simple green leotards, for

retains a highly individual colour. “The priority always went to the wind instruments”, Pascal Rogé notes, “because they were his favourites. In general, the strings didn’t inspire him much. Doubtless he preferred the precise quality, clear and dry, of the oboe, the clarinet, the flute. If he wrote three

sonatas that were masterpieces and one sonata for violin that was much less successful, it is no accident. He said so himself. I think that even in his orchestration, it is always the wind section that gives the colour, that plays the theme, and the strings are just there for

opinion, his orchestration style is very similar to Stravinsky's, "the colours, the sometimes angular quality and especially the use of wind instruments. It's strange, because Poulenc was a pianist; yet he was very interested in wind instruments, especially in wood-

## HE'S A BRILLIANT ORCHESTRATOR, AN ABSOLUTELY BRILLIANT ORCHESTRATOR. THE WAY HE USES THE INSTRUMENTS IS SO CLEAR, SO UNIQUE, SO IMAGINATIVE

decoration." Yoel Levi doesn't hesitate to describe Poulenc as a brilliant orchestrator. "It's far from amateur! I would never describe him as amateur! He's a brilliant orchestrator, an absolutely brilliant orchestrator. The way he uses the instruments is so clear, so unique, so imaginative. I mean, he uses a large orchestra, almost all the instruments, some of the unusual instruments for percussions, or to get a special effect... And whatever he uses, he's absolutely right. He gets the right effects, the right colours, the right dramatic expressions." In Jos van Immersel's

winds. As far as I know, he never directed, but he knew the possibilities of those instruments. My musicians were very surprised when we put together the Poulenc project with Anima Eterna. Most of my colleagues had practically never played any Poulenc and they did it with woodwinds made in France during the period between the two wars. They all told me how incredibly well-written it was for those instruments!" Georges Prêtre adds, "A lot is transmitted through Francis Poulenc's music, but one must never forget the emotion that is in the phrasing. That is very



important. Even when it's a very small, insignificant phrase, something is still being expressed. Sometimes one says, 'the sound has to ring!' But not necessarily! It mustn't ring out too much. If one holds back, it's much more powerful. If you do a pianissimo that is



Yoel Levi

really very piano with Poulenc, but using the right sound, and especially using the necessary phrasing, in that case the sensuality will emerge much more strongly than if you play a fortissimo, which wipes out the sensuality. What pleased me immediately upon discovering it, is the distinctive atmosphere that emanates from his work, it's the spirit of Francis Poulenc. The spirit of his writing, the spirit of his sensibility. And also the spirit of his phrasing. That matters a lot. Every great artist has his own phrasing. Poulenc has his. Take for example the final phrase from the



Jos van Immerseel



Denise Duval

*Gloria...* That's a phrase that rises toward heaven. So if you can't find the exact phrasing, then you will only be a conductor. You have to know how to interpret it and how to sing it with the correct phrasing along with your orchestra."

## Poulenc, our contemporary?

Stéphane Denève answers, "We live in a time that goes by very quickly, where everything changes rapidly, and Poulenc's music is unique in that regard; it can change atmospheres or emotions in a fraction of a second. He uses a slightly neo-classical quality, little formulas that can sometimes be very short, small cells, and then he juxtaposes them, one by one; logically this should culminate in a piece of work

that is neither here nor there. And yet, there is something very organic about it that drives it forward and allows you to follow a line, even though it is so varied. I love that. It really speaks to people, in fact, it speaks a lot to children. My little girl is three and a half. When I play her Poulenc's music, it goes over very well; there is something that is so joyful, so varied... she loves that. I think that is the really distinctive thing about Poulenc, the fact that he could construct pieces with such breath, such organisation, and yet made up of emotions that can be so varied, going from the blackest melancholy to the most light-hearted gaiety in next to no time. That's one of the things that makes his music so universal, in my opinion. There are always multiple degrees and a certain ambiguity so that sometimes, a bit like Mozart, he has a sad smile. He writes music that seems frivolous and yet which sounds very nostalgic, very melancholy. In the same fashion, he composes pieces that are deeply religious and serious, and yet at the same time are filled with hope, are ecstatic and even at times, highly sensual. It is this method of mixing emotions that, in my opinion, causes his music to speak across the ages."

— **Hervé Lacombe**

## Credits

Interviews with Georges Prêtre, François Le Roux, Pascal Rogé, Dame Felicity Lott, Laurence Equilbey, Harry Christophers, Macha Makeïeff carried out by Hervé Lacombe et Eric Denut in 2011 and 2012

Interviews with Stéphane Denève, Marc-André Hamelin, Yoel Levi, Jos van Immerseel, Karen Vourc'h, Graham Johnson, Daniel Reuss, Ludovic Lagarde carried out by Eric Denut in 2011 and 2012

Correspondence with Eric Le Sage, Kent Nagano, Thierry Malandain from 2011 et 2012

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

promotion.umpc@umusic.com  
www.durand-salabert-eschig.com  
16, rue des Fossés Saint Jacques  
75005 Paris, France

## TRANSLATION

Alyssa Landry

## DESIGN

Anna Tunick  
(www.atunick.com)

## PHOTOS

Collection Rosine Seringe (covers), Jean-Baptiste Millot, B. Ealovega, Trevor Leighton, Alex Vanhee, Decca-Terry Linke, Malcolm Crowthers, Sim Canetty Clarke, Agnäs Mellon, Jana Jocif, Marco Borggreve, Drew Farrell, M. Logvinov, Michel Chassat, C. Doutre, Guillaume Gellert, Julien Mignot

© 2013 Editions Durand-Salabert-Eschig (Universal Music Publishing Classical)  
Printed in France by Prodmachine/ Galaxy Imprimeurs (Imprim'vert) in February 2013 on Chromomat, an FSC certified paper.





  
**UNIVERSAL**  
UNIVERSAL MUSIC  
PUBLISHING CLASSICAL

    
DURAND SALABERT ESCHIG