



Poulenc, Francis (1899-1963)

by Mario Champagne

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Francis Poulenc with harpsichordist Wanda Landowska.

One of the first openly gay composers, Francis Poulenc wrote concerti, chamber music, choral and vocal works, and operas. His diverse compositions are characterized by bright colors, strong rhythms, and novel harmonies. Although his early music is light, he ultimately became one of the most thoughtful composers of serious music in the twentieth century.

Poulenc was born on January 7, 1899 into a well-off Parisian family. His father, a devout Roman Catholic, directed the pharmaceutical company that became Rhône-Poulenc; his mother, a free-thinker, was a talented amateur pianist. He began studying the piano at five and was following a promising path leading to admission to the Conservatoire that was cut short by the untimely death of his parents. Although he did not attend the Conservatoire he did study music and composition privately.

At the death of his parents, Poulenc inherited Noizay, a country estate near his grandparents' home, which would be an important retreat for him as he gained fame. It was also the source of several men in his life, including his second lover, the bisexual Raymond Destouches, a chauffeur who was the dedicatee of the surrealistic opera *Les mamelles de Tirésias* (1944) and the World War II Resistance cantata *La figure humaine* (1943).

From 1914 to 1917, Poulenc studied with the Spanish pianist Ricardo Viñes, through whom he met other musicians, especially Georges Auric, Erik Satie, and Manuel de Falla. It was also during this period that, through his friend Raymonde Linossier, he met a number of leading writers and poets, including Guillaume Apollinaire, André Gide, Paul Valéry, and Paul Claudel.

Conscripted into the military in 1918, he continued to compose and, in 1920, became a member of a group of young composers dubbed "Les Six"; the others were Darius Milhaud, Arthur Honegger, Auric, Germaine Tailleferre, and Louis Durey.

In 1921, Poulenc approached Charles KSchlin, the noted teacher, for composition lessons; in the same year he received a commission from dance impresario Sergei Diaghilev for music for his Ballets Russes, for which he wrote *Les biches* (1924).

His first great popular success, *Les biches* opened many doors for Poulenc in the circles of Parisian society; for example, Princesse Edmond de Polignac (the lesbian American expatriate Winnaretta Singer) commissioned his *Concerto for Two Pianos* (1932) and the *Organ Concerto* (1938).

During the late 1920s Poulenc came to realize his homosexuality and met his first lover, the painter Richard Chanlaire. This realization resulted in his first serious period of depression, heightened in 1930 by the death of Raymonde Linossier, the only woman Poulenc seriously considered marrying. (He would later have a brief affair with a woman known only as Frédérique and have a daughter, Marie-Ange, by her in 1946.) Linossier's death affected Poulenc deeply and may have led him to return to Roman Catholicism for solace.

The death in 1936 of a rival composer, Pierre-Octave Ferroud, prompted Poulenc to undertake a religious pilgrimage to Notre Dame de Rocamadour near Noizay. This pilgrimage in particular seems to have confirmed the revival of his Roman Catholicism, for he began to compose sacred works thereafter, beginning with *Litanies à la Vierge noire* (1936) and continuing with some of his most popular works: the *Stabat Mater* (1950) and the *Gloria* (1959).

Poulenc never entirely abandoned the light gracefulness of his earlier music, but many of the later compositions are notably deeper and more serious.

Poulenc was a very productive composer. During the period from 1934 to 1959, he composed some 90 songs for the recitals that he gave with noted singer Pierre Bernac, many of them based on texts by Apollinaire.

Poulenc's particular melodic gift seems to have been strongest in setting French writers, especially Apollinaire or Paul Eluard. His *Trois Chansons de García Lorca* (1944), which, given Federico García Lorca's homosexuality, would have appeared congenial, are disappointing and were not well received.

Poulenc toured widely, mostly as a means of raising money, but did not enjoy traveling beyond the confines of the comfortable and familiar parts of Europe. He made one tour of the United States, where he met a friendly gay couple, Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale, the accomplished duo pianists who commissioned the *Sonata for Two Pianos* (1953).

Poulenc found the tours difficult, for they separated him from his lover of the time, Lucien Roubert, who died of pleurisy in 1955, just after Poulenc completed one of his masterpieces, the opera *Les dialogues des Carmélites*.

After the *Dialogues*, Poulenc found it difficult to compose, but in 1957 he met his last significant lover, Louis Gautier, who helped to revive his spirits. In that year, Poulenc produced his *Flute Sonata*.

La voix humaine, a one-act lyric tragedy based on a libretto by Jean Cocteau, one of the icons of French homosexuality and a friend of Poulenc's for more than 50 years, followed in 1958. This was also the time that he renewed his acquaintance with Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears.

Two more important works were to be written before Poulenc's death: *Gloria* and, at the commission of Leonard Bernstein for the opening of the Philharmonic Hall of Lincoln Center, the *Sept répons des ténèbres* (1961).

Poulenc died suddenly of a heart attack in his home on January 30, 1963. One of the most honored composers of his time, he left an enduring legacy.

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