

ST PAUL'S CHURCH, COVENT GARDEN

THURSDAY 29 MARCH, 1984

FRANCIS POULENC

1899 - 1963

Francis Poulenc was born in Paris in 1899 of a father who was from Aveyron in south-central France and extremely devout, and a Parisian mother who was a cultured urban socialite. A personality formed by two such contrasting influences could be expected to show contradictions, indeed a friend Claude Rostand, once described Poulenc as 'half monk, half guttersnipe'.

These two opposing sides to his nature emerged very strongly in his music.

Poulenc did not express his deepest feelings in his instrumental music, which is generally lighthearted and tuneful, witty and reminiscent of the café-concert and the music-hall. We have to look to the vocal music, the songs, choral works and operas, to find the serious man.

In spite of his allegiance to Les Six, the group of composers who eschewed Wagnerian Romanticism and Debussyan Impressionism, Debussy was one of the first and strongest influences on Poulenc's composition, the next was Stravinsky. He has often been criticised for his habit of borrowing from other composers and for writing pastiche music, but yet his music has a very individual style which is very much his own.

SONATA FOR PIANO - 4 Hands (1918)

- 1. Prelude**
- 2. Rustique**
- 3. Finale**

Tony McIntee and Malcolm Cottle

This early sonata shows strongly the influences of Satie and Stravinsky, but in it Poulenc's personal mannerisms are beginning to emerge.

From Satie one can hear the simplicity of thematic material with a great deal of repetition, while Stravinsky's influence is found in the driving rhythms of the outer movements, the strong use of ostinati and the diatonic, folk-like melodies. This sonata shows some characteristics of the chamber music, such as three short movements in simple forms, and recall of themes from the first two movements in the Finale. Each movement ends with a brief "tail", a flippant melodic gesture he employed in many of his early works, and indeed, in some of the late ones.

The first song is folk-like in character while No 2 is described by Bernac as "without doubt the 'laziest' song ever written! But make no mistake, there must be no hint of sadness. On the contrary it is a happy laziness!"

No 3 describes the Fagnes de Wallonie, a high plateau in the Belgian Ardennes, a country of heath and peat-bogs, of gnarled trees twisted by the wind. In the fourth song, Poulenc has set 'these deliciously stupid lines of doggerel' to the rhythm of the valse-musette. The words of the last song "Sobs" is described by Poulenc's biographer, Henri Hell, as "one of the most poignant, the most unpretentiously heart-rending of Apollinaire's poems, evoking the whole human race that each one of us has borne within himself since the beginning of time". The poem is not easy to understand, but Poulenc had such feeling for it that his music clarifies the text.

BLEUËT (1939) Apollinaire.

This is a wartime poem, written in 1917 when the poet had returned to Paris after receiving a head wound from a shell splinter. The title (which actually means 'cornflower') plays on the word 'bleu' which is a colloquialism for a young soldier. Poulenc wrote the song in October 1939, at the beginning of the Second World War so it is easy to understand his being inspired by these words.

BANALITÉS (1940) Words by Apollinaire

1. **Chanson d'Orkenise**
2. **Hôtel**
3. **Fagnes de Wallonie**
4. **Voyages à Paris**
5. **Sanglots**

Jane Ginsborg - soprano
Malcolm Cottle - piano

Poulenc first accompanied the singer Pierre Bernac in 1926 but it was not until 1934 that the musical partnership began seriously, a partnership which was to last for 25 years, during which time Poulenc wrote many of his finest songs for Bernac.

Poulenc's first use of the poetry of Apollinaire was in a cycle called *Le Bestiaire*. Marie Laurencin, Apollinaire's companion, wrote to the composer in 1921 about *Le Bestiaire* "what really moves me is that one hears in your music the voice of Guillaume Apollinaire reciting these poems". Poulenc himself said: "From *Le Bestiaire* on, I sensed a sure but mysterious link with Apollinaire's poetry".

Banalités can not be described as a cycle of songs, as there is no connecting link either poetic or musical. If Poulenc united these songs under a single title, it is because they form a well-constructed group.

SONATA FOR CLARINET AND PIANO (1962)

1. **Allegro Tristamente**
2. **Romanza**
3. **Allegro con fuoco**

Mark Tromans - clarinet
Tony McIntee - piano

Poulenc wrote three sonatas for wind instruments late in his life, those for flute, clarinet and oboe, but they all follow the same pattern he had established in his Trio for Oboe, Bassoon and Piano, composed some thirty-five years earlier. Indeed, they are very similar in form to the Piano Duet Sonata of 1918. He continues to discard thematic development in favour of numerous short themes and motives with much repetition and free modulation.

INTERVAL

FIGURE HUMAINE (1943) Words by Paul Eluard

1. **De tous les printemps du monde . . .**
2. **En chantant les servantes s'élançent . . .**
3. **Aussi bas que le silence . . .**
4. **Toi ma patiente . . .**
5. **Riant du ciel et des planètes . . .**
6. **'le jour m'étonne et la nuit me fait peur . . .**
7. **La menace sous le ciel rouge . . .**
8. **Liberté**

LONDON CONCORD SINGERS
Malcolm Cottle - conductor

Poulenc said "I wrote *Figure Humaine* in a semi-religious mood. In 1943 so many people had just been imprisoned, then deported or even shot, and you can imagine what it meant to me to see those grey-green uniforms marching through Paris. Finding in Paul Eluard's poems the exact equivalent of what I felt, I set to work with complete faith, not without having commended my labours to Our Lady of Rocamadour".

The eight poems come from a collection published by the underground press which was one of the first poetic manifestations of the spirit of resistance. *Liberty*, which is the first poem in the book, came to have a similar significance to that of the *Marseillaise* during the French Revolution.

Figure Humaine is the high point in Poulenc's choral writing. It is for two six-part choirs unaccompanied, and in it he used all his knowledge of choral writing and echoes from all his previous choral works can be found in it. Poulenc wrote of the piece: "Happily, there is a work, perhaps only one, that convinces me that I did well in writing music".

The first poem tells of the feelings of the French people in 1940 and of their unconquerable hope, while No 2 praises the courage of the women who kept their sweetness and charm in spite of the horrors of war. The third mourns a victim of the firing squad, but in No 4, hope increases and the poet speaks of cultivating a stubborn patience and an unquenchable feeling of revenge. No 5 mocks the old people who only think of their sons and grandsons and not of their country. In No 6 the invader is compared to a wolf whose footprints stain the winter snow. No 7 begins in a mood of complete horror, but suddenly breaks free and tells of peace found again and men once more united. There is a long pause before the final hymn to Liberty.

SEXTET

- 1. Allegro vivace**
- 2. Divertissement**
- 3. Finale**

Members of the Canonbury Wind Ensemble

Paul Thompson - flute; Judith Roads - oboe;

John Cooke - clarinet; Mark Andrews - horn;

Sam Wiggs - bassoon; John Rippin - piano

The sextet was written in 1932 but, after the first performance in 1933, Poulenc extensively rewrote it and it was not finally published until 1939. It again follows the structure established in the Trio. Poulenc wrote of the sextet "this is chamber music of the most straightforward kind, a homage to the wind instruments which I have loved from the moment I began composing". While it has its more sombre moments, this is not music of great depth but is written simply to please or to charm, which, since it is one of the composer's most popular works, it most surely does.

NEXT CONCERT - St John Passion - J S Bach with soloists and the Haydn Chamber Orchestra at St Mary's Church, Upper St, Islington, London N1 on Saturday 14 April at 7pm.

On Sunday 10 June at 7.30pm in St Mary's Church, Cadogan St, SW3 London Concord Singers will give a performance in Russian of the 'Vespers' by Sergei Rachmaninov.