



FRANCIS POULENC AND LENNOX BERKELEY

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The article, written in the form of an 'Open letter to Tony Scotland', is a response to Scotland's biography *Lennox & Freda* (Michael Russell Publishing, 2010). See www.lennoxandfreda.com

OPEN LETTER TO TONY SCOTLAND from Sidney Buckland

Each time I read and re-read your book *Lennox & Freda* I do so with increasing awe at what you have achieved: scrupulous scholarship combined with profound understanding, endearing humour, and a touch so light that the pages turn almost of themselves.

Hearing you speak about the book one morning on the radio programme 'Music Matters', intriguing echoes were resounding between what I knew of Francis Poulenc and what you were telling your listeners of Lennox Berkeley. Once again, I dipped into your now very familiar volume, approaching the information from a new standpoint: I began to look consciously for the resonances between Berkeley and Poulenc.

Uppermost in my mind was an image in your Epilogue, an image of such haunting poignancy that I find it constantly recurring. Describing the onset of Lennox Berkeley's declining years from 1983 until his death in 1989, you wrote that throughout this time, though all his other senses were fading, he was still responding to music:

He became obsessed with a piece of Poulenc's, the *Nocturne No. 4 in C Minor*, sub-titled 'Le bal fantôme', which he played over and over again till his fingers could no longer follow his mind's instructions.¹

As touched as I was by your description, imagine how overwhelmingly moving it was to discover your video recording of the elderly Berkeley actually playing the Nocturne in 1984 and talking to you about it in one of your 'research interviews' now published on the Internet: www.lennoxandfreda.com/interviews

Henri Hell, French critic and first biographer of Poulenc, has described the Nocturne as 'a kind of dreamy, weary mazurka, romantic in inspiration, exuding a melancholy poetry full of nostalgia and charm.'² I think of Alain-Fournier's novel *Le grand Meaulnes* and the ballet based on it, *La fête étrange*, for which Berkeley arranged for two pianos a selection of nine short pieces by Gabriel Fauré (and later for orchestra). Both the novel and the ballet look back on a lost world of love and youth. Watching your video of Berkeley in his eighties playing Poulenc's Nocturne, it seemed to me that he was expressing not only the nostalgia and weariness of the piece but also a tenderness and sorrow for the loss of its composer.

Poulenc and Berkeley had known each other since the mid-twenties, having met, as you say in your book, in Paris at 36 rue Ballu, where Nadia Boulanger resided and held her legendary 'Wednesdays'. Though never a pupil of Boulanger, Poulenc held her in high esteem and would often seek her counsel. In September 1933 he wrote to Igor Markevitch: 'I know that you are expecting a visit from Nadia. I envy you, because I have for her a *limitless* admiration'.³ Boulanger in turn had a great fondness for Poulenc. Writing to thank him for sending her some of his piano compositions to fill the dark days of solitude after the death of her mother, she said: 'I barely knew your piano music – I did not realise it was so extensive – and all of you is in it, so *truly* a musician. ... I wanted to thank you, and I do so with emotion, for I find your *joie de vivre* moving because it is so pure – I mean so natural. What a gift. To be oneself.'⁴

Poulenc and Berkeley certainly shared that gift. In a letter to Henri Sauguet in March 1931, Poulenc stressed the need to be always true to oneself:

It is more courageous to grow just as one is than to force-feed one's flowers with the fertilizer of fashion.⁵

That Poulenc never strayed from this dictum is confirmed by Pierre Bernac in his book *Francis Poulenc: The Man and His Songs*:

In my opinion there are few composers whose music so faithfully reflects their personality. His music is the true expression of his being. The reason is that Poulenc never forced himself away from his natural bent, and this applies as much to his life as to his work.⁶

These remarks are rich in Berkeley resonances. I think particularly of a wonderful moment in 'Music Matters' when an extract was played of a 1959 interview with Bernard Palmer in conversation with Lennox Berkeley. At one point Palmer suggests that Berkeley's music is perhaps viewed as 'light in character'. In response, the composer utterly disarmingly replies that that is what comes naturally to him:

I tend to express myself in unportentous manner, I think, and therefore the lighter type of thing is natural to me.⁷

Perhaps this is what first drew Poulenc and Berkeley together, that particular purity of always being themselves. Theirs was never an intimate relationship but it was a thoroughly good relationship, warm with friendship and shared values. To me, the essence of their interchange is touchingly summed up by Freda Berkeley in two letters which she sent to me in July and August 1992. She was responding to my request for correspondence between Berkeley and Poulenc:

I am afraid I have not come across any letters from Francis to Lennox, and the fact is that they always telephoned to each other, and Francis always came to see us when he was in England.

Lennox was devoted to Francis and I always remember him playing his little opera [sic] *L'Histoire de Babar* to us on the piano in the flat of a friend which he had borrowed. He was such fun!

The warmth of the friendship between Poulenc and Berkeley shines through Freda Berkeley's words, the uncomplicated simplicity of their affection for each other. I feel it too, in Poulenc's inscription on the copy of his ballet *Les animaux modèles* which

he gave to Berkeley in 1945 and which you quote in your book. Poulenc wrote quite simply: 'Pour mon cher Lennox avec vingt ans d'amitié'.⁸

And what greater confirmation of the respect each felt for the other's music than Henri Hell's comment on Berkeley's 'felicitous' orchestration of the piano part of Poulenc's Sonata for Flute and Piano: 'The orchestration is such that one would think it was penned by Poulenc himself.'⁹

There is a further touching resonance between Poulenc and Berkeley: their shared love of dogs. In your book you recount the appalling death of Berkeley's beloved Labrador, Black Prince, who was run over by two vehicles in succession, which Berkeley witnessed.¹⁰ It is an image that is hard to bear. Reading your account, I was reminded of a far less shocking but equally sad ending to one of Poulenc's dogs. Writing to the Comtesse Marie-Blanche de Polignac from Caracas where he and Pierre Bernac were on a recital tour, he closed the letter on a sudden sober note:

I had a great sadness before I left: I had to have my little dog put down. He couldn't go on any longer. I cried my eyes out when I kissed him for the last time, just before the end. I know you will understand.¹¹

In *Diary of my Songs*, describing the composition of 'Souric et Mouric', the last of the *Cinq poèmes de Max Jacob*, Poulenc wrote: 'I cannot play this song without thinking of my dog Mickey, lying under the piano.'¹² Poulenc favoured wire-haired fox-terriers and while he never had more than one at a time, he never seemed to be without one at his side.

Twice in your book you have used the adjective 'fruity' to describe Poulenc's harmonies. In both instances the image is relevant to a point you wish to make about Lennox Berkeley. I was delighted by this image. Remembering Berkeley's sense of humour, you say:

He rarely laughed out loud, but giggled quietly to himself. It might only be something silly, like a funny-sounding-word, or a rude noise, or a fruity chord of the kind that Poulenc liked.¹³

Earlier, you describe the way Berkeley had coined the term 'very, very naughty' which he liked to use 'whenever he came across a chord or a phrase that was *un peu risqué*: delicious but a bit fruity, like a Poulenc harmony'.¹⁴

I think immediately of Poulenc's fondness for what he termed *la délicieuse mauvaise musique*. He expounded this theme in a series of radio broadcasts which he presented on Saturday evenings on the *Chaîne nationale* from September 1947 to May 1948 and from January to March 1949, under the title *A bâtons rompus*. In these programmes Poulenc discussed his favourite composers and the kinds of music he particularly enjoyed, illustrating his talks with relevant recordings. Some of the programmes were devoted to the 'folklore of his youth', the 'bad boy' side of his musical predilections, the popular songs of Henri Christiné and Vincent Scotto and the great music-hall singers, Polin, Mayol, Dranem, and of course Maurice Chevalier. Poulenc began by confessing to his listeners that he would actually like to have *been* Maurice Chevalier.¹⁵

In one of the programmes, which he called *L'exquise mauvaise musique*, Poulenc played for his listeners Massenet's *Méditation de Thaïs*, an extract from Massenet's

Les Erynnies, Cécile Chaminade's *Le Pas des écharpes*, and Grieg's *Au matin*. Elaborating on the notion of *L'exquise mauvaise musique*, he began by saying:

I have chosen a pleasant, easy subject for you tonight. I am going to talk about *la délicieuse mauvaise musique*. What exactly is this delectable bad music? For me it has the charm of certain women whom one desires but will never love. Some of you will be shocked that I have included the *Méditation de Thaïs* in the category of bad music. Others will condemn outright the entire broadcast. Too bad, let them switch off their radios immediately.¹⁶

Poulenc then proceeded to describe an encounter he had had, at the age of ten, with a hopelessly sentimental widow who had kept an undying memory of her honeymoon in Luxor. In a Moorish-style room, decked out in a voluminous djellaba, reclining on a sofa with at her feet a hookah turned into a vase from which emerged four peacock feathers, 'the lady, with voluptuously closed eyes, was listening to the *Méditation de Thaïs* booming out of an enormous convolvulus of a gramophone. "Ah! Egypt!" she sighed, "the palm trees!" and forgetting that a ten-year-old was present, "Ah! Alfred! ...l'amour....l'amour'." This 'erotico-bourgeoise vision' had forever remained with Poulenc inextricably bound up with the *Méditation de Thaïs*.

Poulenc's expansive, highly-coloured outpouring and Berkeley's quiet, meaningful understatement 'very, very naughty' are, to my mind, fascinating and revealing variations on the same fruity theme.

It has often been said that Poulenc was at his best when setting poetry to music. Berkeley, too, loved setting words, as you tell us in your book, particularly Auden's words, but 'he concentrated less on the meaning of the words than on the atmosphere they created'.¹⁷ You then quote Berkeley himself explaining in an interview in 1974 that when a composer sets a poem to music he has 'in a way to destroy one side of that poem in order to re-create it in another form ... in another language, translated, re-made.'¹⁸

I was disturbed by Berkeley's use of the word 'destroy' in this instance. For Poulenc the words were paramount. He did not perceive the act of setting words to music as a destruction of the poem in order to re-create it in another form. He chose poems that would tolerate the presence of music, poems that leave margins round the words, like the poems of Apollinaire, Eluard, Aragon, Louise de Vilmorin.

Yet, there is an element in Berkeley's view that reminds me of Paul Eluard's striking dedication to Poulenc in his 1951 collection of poetry, *Le Phénix*:

A Francis Poulenc, écho et source. Paul Eluard

Echo of the poems he set and source of something new, the music. I like to think that what Lennox Berkeley meant was not the destruction of the poem in order to re-create it in music, but rather the echo of the poem made sonorous in a new form.

During the 1950s both Poulenc and Berkeley were commissioned to write a song cycle for the Swedish-American soprano, Alice Swanson Esty (1904 – 2000). After her husband's death in 1954, Alice Esty decided to use his considerable fortune to commission original musical works that she could perform in recital. She gave fifteen such concerts in the Carnegie Recital Hall, performing new works by, among others, Darius Milhaud, Ned Rorem, Virgil Thomson, Poulenc and Berkeley.

Esty imposed three conditions on these commissions: (1) she must approve of the poems, (2) she would give the world première and (3) she would own the manuscript.

Poulenc's commission resulted in his last great song cycle, *Le travail du peintre*, settings of seven poems by Paul Eluard from his collection *Voir*, all written to the glory of painters. Berkeley's commission resulted in *Five Poems by W. H. Auden*. There is a complex story behind Poulenc's commission which I will recount here because I wondered if there were not perhaps a similar story that led to Berkeley's settings of the five Auden poems.

Poulenc had wanted to 'paint musically' for several years, writing to Bernac as early as 1953:

More than ever am I determined to write *Le travail du peintre*. I shall dedicate the whole cycle to you in letters of gold and I would like to give the first performance of it in a concert celebrating the twentieth anniversary of our association. I myself will underwrite the financial risk.¹⁹

But these plans did not materialize. Poulenc did not complete the cycle until August 1956, eighteen months after the twentieth anniversary concert. He had somehow become blocked and had needed something quite exceptional to whet his appetite for composing songs again.²⁰ Poulenc's friends, Pierre Bernac, with whom Esty had been studying singing, and the American duo pianists Gold and Fizdale who knew Esty well, suggested to her that she commission the work, which would give Poulenc the impetus to complete the cycle. Esty graciously and generously obliged.

In terms of the commission, the work was dedicated to her, she duly received the manuscript, and she gave the first performance, at the Ecole Normale de Musique in Paris, on 1st April 1957. Poulenc accompanied her in this cycle.

Curiously, six months later, at the Edinburgh Festival, Bernac and Poulenc performed the same song cycle, citing it then and thereafter as the First Performance.

Alice Esty sang *Le travail du peintre* again at Carnegie Recital Hall in 1958 and in the following year. In a letter to me dated 'March 25, 89' she enclosed a number of flyers and programmes, including the programme for her March 1959 concert, in which she also gave the First Performance of Berkeley's *Five Poems by W. H. Auden*.

Berkeley was again commissioned by Esty in 1963. To commemorate the first anniversary of Poulenc's death, she organised a concert to take place on 13 January 1964, again at Carnegie Recital Hall. For this concert she commissioned 12 composers to write songs for a *Hommage à Francis Poulenc* which would form the centrepiece of the concert. As his tribute to Francis Poulenc, Berkeley set the beautiful poem by Apollinaire, *Automne*.²¹

Lennox Berkeley paid tribute to Poulenc in many other ways. You cite among them his Obituary in *The Musical Times* of March 1963 and in May of the same year his Address at a Memorial Concert for Poulenc organised by the Arts Council.²² He also spoke at several events on Poulenc or related subjects at the British Institute of Recorded Sound (now the British Library Sound Archive). On 20 January 1971, for instance, he chaired a talk given by Pierre Bernac on Francis Poulenc. He began by saying:

As this evening is dedicated to Poulenc, to his memory and his music, it is an occasion that touches me very deeply.²³

On 9 May 1978, Berkeley again chaired an event at the BIRS, this time a talk on Pierre Bernac who was sadly unable to attend due to illness. The talk was given by the singer Winifred Radford, former pupil and devoted friend of Pierre Bernac. Berkeley, introducing Radford to the audience, spoke about her 'brilliantly done' translations of the song texts in Bernac's *The Interpretation of French Song*, as well as the entire translation of his book *Francis Poulenc – the Man and his Songs*. Berkeley had in fact provided the Foreword to this book.

Pierre Bernac died on 17 October 1979. Winifred Radford and Patrick Saul, founder of the BIRS, worked tirelessly to form a society, 'The Friends of Pierre Bernac', dedicated to promoting the singer's recordings, writings and teachings. Lennox Berkeley was appointed President of the Society. He was also a Trustee, together with Winifred Radford, Felix Aprahamian, Patrick Saul and Graham Johnson.

The inaugural meeting of 'The Friends of Pierre Bernac' took place at the BIRS on 29 January 1980. I was present at that meeting. The trustees all contributed their personal memories of Bernac, interspersed with extracts from Bernac's recordings. To illustrate the particular qualities of Bernac's voice, Lennox Berkeley chose, among others, three songs from Poulenc's *Chansons villageoises*, settings of poems by Maurice Fombeure. Berkeley explained that they were written 'in the spirit of folk song or popular song'. Of the three he chose, it was the third, 'C'est le joli printemps', 'It is pretty springtime', that he favoured most. Berkeley said that he found it 'one of the most beautiful songs that Poulenc ever wrote.' He went on to say that what he loved most in this song was the 'atmosphere of nostalgia combined with a great tenderness'.

With that phrase and with that choice of song, Berkeley surely confirmed the essence of what drew him to Poulenc's music and to Poulenc the man. In my search for resonances between the two composers, I seem to have come full circle. My starting point was the image you painted so touchingly of the elderly Berkeley playing over and over again Poulenc's Nocturne in C Minor. I am ending my letter to you with my own memory of Lennox Berkeley clearly moved by the bittersweet tenderness of Poulenc's setting of a poem that closed with this verse:

For pretty springtime
Is but a point in time
For pretty springtime
Lasts so short a time.

¹ *Lennox & Freda*, Tony Scotland, Michael Russell Publishing 2010, p. 43. Hereafter, TS.

² *Francis Poulenc*, Henri Hell, Fayard 1978, p. 109

³ *Francis Poulenc, Correspondance 1910-1963*, edited by Myriam Chimènes, Fayard 1994, p. 389

⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 413-414

⁵ *Francis Poulenc, 'Echo and Source', Selected Correspondence 1915-1963*, translated and edited by Sidney Buckland, Victor Gollancz 1991, p. 93. Hereafter, SB.

⁶ *Francis Poulenc. The Man and his Songs*, Pierre Bernac, Kahn & Averill 2001, p. 36

⁷ BBC Radio 3 'Music Matters' 5 February 2011

⁸ TS p.35

⁹ *Francis Poulenc*, Henri Hell, Fayard 1978, p. 273, note 1

¹⁰ TS p. 61

¹¹ SB p. 198

¹² *Diary of my Songs*, Francis Poulenc, transl. Winifred Radford, Kahn & Averill 2006, p. 31

¹³ TS p. 337

¹⁴ TS p. 61

¹⁵ *A bâtons rompus: écrits radiophoniques*. Francis Poulenc, edit. Lucie Kayas, Actes Sud 1999, p. 43. See also 'Francis Poulenc – disc jockey' by Lucie Kayas in *Francis Poulenc – Music, Art and Literature*, edit. Buckland and Chimènes, Ashgate 1999.

¹⁶ Ibid p. 62

¹⁷ TS p. 230

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ SB p. 394

²⁰ SB p. 229.

²¹ Most of the manuscripts commissioned by Alice Esty are housed in the Special Collections department of the Library at Bates College, Lewiston, Maine 04240, USA.

²² TS pp. 149-150

²³ British Library Sound Archive collection of lectures at the BIRS involving Lennox Berkeley.

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