

Francis Poulenc, by Jean Roy

For Francis Poulenc his music was like a self-portrait. Whether witty or greedy, melancholic or dreamy, it reflects perfectly the nature of a man who delighted in the paintings of Raoul Dufy as well as in the popular dance halls of the Marne banks, while admiring Mantegna, Zurbaran and the sobriety of Romanesque architecture. About an amateur one speaks of taste, but about a creator the word instinct alone applies. Poulenc admitted that it was instinct that guided him. His was unerring. He could rely on it.

One wonders how this musician who achieved fame at an early age with his *Mouvements perpétuels* and his *Bestiaire*, written when he was nineteen and twenty years old, managed, with Charles Koechlin as his sole teacher, to produce such perfect works as his *Stabat Mater*, his *Dialogues des Carmélites*, his *Gloria* and his *Répons des ténèbres* ? How was he capable of composing a cappella works which fertilized a long forgotten field of music, and melodies for voice and piano that brought new blood to a genre weakened by futile subtleties? My answer is: in the simplest manner possible –which is also the most difficult. For sincerity was his greatest quality. His music expresses the way he looked at things, his intelligence, his manner of understanding poetry, of remembering, of being gay or melancholy, his own way of hoping, of praying, of showing confidence.

Francis Poulenc improvised, invented, disregarded conventions, was impervious to criticism. He was daring in his music and this was not one of his least qualities. He was daring, but not provocative. He tried to please, though here again, he did it in his own manner: he showed himself for what he was, with a frankness which is rare, expressed what he felt, what he understood, drawing from a tremendous fund of knowledge that included the fine arts, literature and the music of his predecessors. He admitted what he owed to Debussy, Moussorgski and Verdi, and used to say he wouldn't like to be thought "born of an unknown father".

Because of this sincerity, this good taste, this honesty, this absence of pomposity (the worst of lies) Poulenc has a place next to François Couperin and Maurice Ravel, for he is, along with them, the most French of French musicians. And that is also why his work is appreciated and played all over the world.

Jean Roy