

Poulenc's library, by Gérard Condé

It has been forty years since Francis Poulenc last returned to this lovely home in Touraine where his niece, Madame Rosine Seringe, welcomes her guests in the summer. The composer died in 1963, but the property's vineyards still produce a nice little wine that far surpasses most of the Vouvray, which is trumpeted about in the region; you can drink as much as you wish without its going to your head.

An old (16th century) nobiliary dwelling, tastefully enlarged in the 19th century, with troglodytic outbuildings in back, the house overlooks the Loire Valley, a branch of which can be made out through the foliage. The village of Noizay is quite proud of this discrete neighbour, and the Académie Francis Poulenc, which takes place every summer in Tours, comes to give its closing concert beneath the vaults of the little church. Then the Mayor gives his discourse, which, in another context, would earn him a good mark in a class on musical culture.

'We always say "Francis's room" and, for years, we never dared sleep there,' insists the mistress of the house who, in forty years, has naturally made some changes in this bachelor's country home but always with affectionate respect. Aside from a few souvenir photos hanging on the walls—one recognises Denise Duval, Marcelle Meyer, Pierre Bernac, Chabrier, Ravel, Auric, Radiguet...—, the music room has remained as it was, with its Pleyel baby grand to which could respond a rugged upright piano in the corner opposite a turntable combined with a monumental, 1940s-era Pathé-Marconi radio, a table for copying music, back to the window, and, naturally, three built-in cupboards full of books and scores.

There one finds the classics, of course: the works for piano and for orchestra, in pocket scores or reductions (sometimes both), of Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann and Weber; the songs of Gounod; Chabrier's operas; Saint-Saëns' concertos as well as the less-expected *Symphonie fantastique*, *La Damnation de Faust*, Liszt's symphonic poems and *Faust-Symphony*, *Die Walküre*, *Tristan*... A good bit of Stravinsky, often dedicated, and Prokofiev alongside Debussy, Ravel and Roussel, the great elders, and then, naturally, the brothers-in-arms: Milhaud, Honegger, Ibert, Sauguet, Ferroud and Falla.

Boulez's *Le Soleil des eaux* is also there but, visibly, less furiously leafed-through than *Peter Grimes*, *The Rape of Lucretia* or *Turn of the Screw*, the covers of which have suffered. Not far, the eye lingers over the orchestral scores of *Salome* and *Ariadne auf Naxos*, and *Wozzeck*. But there are also all the great Verdi and Puccini operas, *The Queen of Spades* and *Evgeny Onegin*, too, but only in reduction, for lack of anything better, which occupy more space on the shelf. Adding Monteverdi, Pergolesi, Brahms, Rimsky-Korsakov, Mendelssohn and many others (we have never seen or mentioned everything), one would come to the conclusion that Poulenc's musical library was that of any cultivated musician of his generation.

He is known to have been curious by nature and eclectic, but one might wonder what good all these readings served, he who seemed so impermeable to the Germanic tradition, too Parisian to appropriate the outbursts of the Italian school and not sufficiently attached to the notion of style to pass himself off as the successor to Rameau, Berlioz or Gounod.

It is perhaps not by chance that a few autograph lines signed by Auber—the date, 1869, and the somewhat trembling writing remind us that the composer of *Fra Diavolo* was 87 when he wrote them—are so prettily framed. Was the composer of *Les Biches* aware that this possible relation would doubtless not be to the taste of all his admirers? Might he fundamentally have had so little ambition?

That would be to cheapen the sole ambition that is worth anything for a creator: being oneself, regardless of the cost. For with the participations of the masters, those who filled his library, he could in fact have learnt to be 'high-brow' and respectable in order to rid himself of this status of 'minor master', which he is saddled with in the eyes of some who see only his mischievous or salon works... But he did nothing about it, either because he chose not to or, more surely, because a dark force, that stubborn personality, too profound to be changed, prevented him.

This obstinacy was not obvious, and if we are to believe the correspondence, the composition of *Dialogues des Carmélites* was marked more by creative euphoria than by the devastating doubt that never spared Poulenc. It is of little importance to say that the language of a work like that might seem outmoded at the time of its premiere at La Scala of Milan in 1956—at least so it seemed for those music critics who, at the time, were filled with enthusiasm by the Domaine Musical concerts. The work's dazzling success, which was renewed at the Paris Opera in June 1957, could have resembled an avant-garde. How to imagine that there would be a future?

It was necessary to believe, without proof, desperately. This is what is called faith, and it does not differ essentially from that which Poulenc had rediscovered deep inside him before the Black Virgin of Rocamadour. The silver medallion that he had embedded in the cover of the piano in Noizay, like a talisman, attests to this. Apparently visitors rush to the keyboard to hear how the instrument sounds; that may well be, but I would have had qualms about pressing a single key.

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