

# THE IMPORTANCE OF PRIVATE PATRONAGE IN THE CAREER OF FRANCIS POULENC

The majority of the material used below is taken from Myriam Chimènes' work: *Mécènes et musiciens - Du salon au concert à Paris sous la IIIe République*<sup>1</sup>.

Any additional material and further detail which might be required can be easily found there<sup>2</sup>. The private institutions have been dealt with only in relation to the career of one composer, Francis Poulenc.

## POULENC'S USE OF PATRONAGE

At just the right time, Francis Poulenc found himself at the meeting point of two closely related worlds in the period between the 1920s and the end of the Second World War. He had neither Debussy's mistrust nor Maurice Ravel's caution regarding the salons: in fact, his family background and the type of education which he had received allowed him to slip easily into the whirl of salon life.

His background on his father's side was typically that of the industrial, entrepreneurial middle classes: enterprising, active and relatively well-off. His grandfather Poulenc, from the Aveyron, was one of the founders of the industrial giant known today as Rhône-Poulenc. But Francis' father was less interested in the company than his brothers and gave relatively little of himself to the business, either personally or financially, so that his family, although comfortably off, would not have been considered extremely wealthy. It might be said, then, that Francis Poulenc gained less materially from his family, but had exceptionally rich opportunities to mix, from an early age, with notable people and groups who could be described as privileged.

Between the ages of fifteen and twenty, despite losing both parents, he found himself quite naturally among all sorts of people who, as they say, would "count" in his personal life and in the career which he would soon be starting, and more precisely in helping him develop his creative gifts. It would not be an exaggeration to say that, by the end of the Great War he had met *all* the artists of the older generation, musicians of course, but also painters and, especially, poets. This was the best *investment* his family could have made, notably through his mother's Parisian background, the Royer side, and her huge and diverse network of contacts in the capital. This good start in life was not in any way threatened by the early death of his mother and then his father: in fact he was taken care of by her sister Jeanne, twelve years her elder, who through her marriage to André Manceaux, a notary, expanded further the range of contacts which were possible...with all sorts of people who had enough wealth to be able to be interested in things other than money, and so had the freedom to indulge their curiosity in the practical and even the creative aspects of the arts.

### *A clarification of Francis Poulenc's financial situation*

For all that, Francis Poulenc could never have considered himself a wealthy man. Admittedly, he never had to seek a profession. Certainly, he could enjoy a leisurely life. And of course, he could spend as the

<sup>1</sup> Paris, Fayard, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> We should also mention the article by Myriam Chimènes « Poulenc and his Patrons – Social Convergences » in the work *Francis Poulenc : Music, Art & Literature*, edited by Sidney Buckland and Myriam Chimènes, Ashgate, 1999, 409 p.

fancy took him without having to think too much. But when, in 1927, he decided to buy himself a property at Noizay, near Amboise, a large wine-grower's mansion – not a château – he immediately found himself in real financial difficulties. The place needed to be done up; Poulenc wanted a certain level of comfort so that he could live there without worries, since he had chosen this place not only to work quietly and leave behind the temptations of the capital, but also to welcome and enjoy himself with his friends.

All the renovations turned out to be more costly than he had anticipated. Besides, as he heartily detested the country, he wanted to give this house, originally surrounded by vines, a metropolitan appearance, refined enough that he would not feel too cut off from the Parisian milieu and such that, from his first-floor window, he might look out on the equivalent of what he would have seen from the upper floors on the Rue de Médicis, his Parisian home which overlooked the Jardin du Luxembourg. And so he transformed the terrace into a French garden with borders, obelisks and fountains.

Had he been as well to do as his detractors would have had him be, he might have coped with this expense without any bother. The opposite was true, as Poulenc's financial situation was so precarious that he could quite easily have had to pull out, and he was immediately obliged to find an income to take care of the early debts and to cope with the cost of the upkeep. He hated like the plague the idea of spending hours giving private lessons. He even thought at one point of making use of his skills as a public speaker. A lucky chance led to him meeting a baritone who was looking for an accompanist for a recital in Salzburg, a duo which worked famously and which from that evening became a team which worked together for twenty five years and provided the means to maintain and improve *le Grand Coteau*, his house in Noizay. So, Poulenc was lucky enough not to have been distracted by financial constraints from his gifts and his vocation to be a composer, although his talent may have been channelled by social privilege towards song writing. We shall see later that this lack of personal wealth led him to work closely with society circles and that the distinctive clientele of the salons led him to develop, even specialise in song writing as a part of his output. This little historical digression serves to demonstrate that it was not merely a question of drawing a distinction between presumed financial wealth and the wider riches deriving from his two parents (the industrial middle class of the Poulencs and the traditional bourgeois roots of the Royers in the liberal professions), but also the ability to feel at ease in any circle which devoted itself to the arts.

His personal circumstances at the outset of his career and the connections which linked Francis Poulenc to the world of patronage were not unusual for French musicians: his fellow countrymen Gabriel Fauré, Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel had known it too, as well as the Russians working in France during the same period, Serge Prokofiev and Igor Stravinsky, thanks mainly to the forceful and resourceful intervention of Diaghilev who ran the Ballets Russes. What they all had in common were the great salons of Parisian high society. Professional musicians who could rely on a family fortune were rare: Ernest Chausson was a notable exception.

One should not consider Francis Poulenc's case as typical, but his was a particularly good illustration of the way in which artistic circles worked in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In fact, Poulenc was never restricted by the circles, almost ideally suited to his personality, in which he found himself; a situation which was ultimately quite free of constraints and sufficiently open that he did not feel burdened by too demanding a milieu. The salons were only one of his habitats, just as were the *grands boulevards* of Paris, Montmartre or the suburbs of the Marne Valley.

Besides, his temperament inclined naturally towards loyalty and unsurprisingly the patrons who helped him in his early efforts became friends and, very often, confidants.

Poulenc's passage through the salons of these great artistic patrons permits an unbiased understanding of the very special workings of musical patronage in its different forms.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE UNIQUE INFLUENCE OF MUSICAL PATRONAGE IN FRANCE

In the form which Poulenc knew from 1920 to 1960, it encapsulates the historical situation of the musical arts from Louis XIV's time until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Private patronage grew up as a substitute or at least a supplement for insufficient, or in some cases totally non-existent, public support.

Looking at the historical perspective, musical patronage under the Third Republic can be considered as the inevitable resurgence of the various forms of support which were accorded to the musical professions by royalty under the *ancien régime*.

### *The position of music in the arts under the Ancien Régime*

In fact, to observe musical activity in France between the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century and the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century is to see the effect of three characteristics of French monarchy: the principle of absolute monarchy extended to all aspects of life, Colbertian centralisation and the pre-eminence of Catholicism, the established church.

Everything came from Versailles or Paris; everything which originated elsewhere in France was either absorbed by Paris or condemned to vegetate in provincial silence and often to perish there. It was actually at the Court that good taste was defined and the Court always either followed or anticipated the King's taste. As it was not possible to be a musician without a royal appointment or official post, it was the central authority which directed the profession in every detail; it was impossible to survive otherwise through music, unless one accepted starvation whilst making music for the love of it.

Another characteristic was that every musical form, whether for chamber, stage or church, was directed by the absolute dominance of the spectacular: at Court, music was usually the ally and often the servant of dance, in the context of a spectacle where the visual elements dictated the aural aspects. The most fertile models of musical composition, from Lully to Rameau, were opera and opera-ballet. The cost of these performances meant that the audiences for these spectacles, when they transferred from the Court to the city, could only be for a wealthy audience, whose models of taste had inevitably been shaped by those of the Court. Chamber music also had to conform to models whose rules had been determined by the King's entourage and it required considerable funds, too, to employ instrumentalists and composers of quality in this field.

In the church, the situation was not significantly different, since Catholicism, as it developed after the counter-reformation, leaned heavily towards the uplifting effect of spectacle: here the music, especially in its baroque forms was again reliant on visual impact. That is not to say, of course, that the great French composers were prevented from giving the best of themselves.

### *Revolution and change*

The stranglehold which a Court, too preoccupied with spectacle as entertainment (even in the Pascalian sense), held over musical creativity goes some way towards explaining the fragility of the whole system. It was predictable that the Revolution would lead to the disappearance of the Versailles model of artistic creation with the collapse of the Ancien Régime. There is a resounding silence in French music between the death of Jean-Philippe Rameau and the arrival of Hector Berlioz. Vienna became the vital hub of European music. The musical forms of the Ancien Régime would retain the somewhat infamous image of powdered wigs for the French public for another two centuries. It was difficult to see the musical arts as anything other than another aspect of an obsolete aristocracy. This prejudice still persists: it is often in the United Kingdom or the United States that the great specialists have revived the masterpieces of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century French music.

### *Reaction to the shortcomings of the Third Republic*

The Third Republic whilst wishing to firmly establish its new regime through education, enshrined these same anti-aristocratic principles. Out of respect for the *Encyclopédistes*, especially Condorcet, the law only permitted those elements which related to musical education, for fear that they might be seen to covertly encourage a dangerous resurgence of an elitism going back to the Ancien Régime. At the same time, the

enlightened middle-classes who were making these laws all took part privately in this cultural heritage. Lacking an adequate foundation of practical music, itself entirely the consequence of the effects of the Revolution, state schools reached a dead end in musical education. Music was suspected of restoring inegalitarian values by perpetuating acknowledged elitist practices.

This policy was based in a prudent mistrust of anything which could not be verified rationally in that body of knowledge prescribed to lead every citizen towards liberty and full control over his own destiny. From this point of view, it could be said that the gamble taken by Jules Ferry and his republican supporters succeeded far beyond their own expectations. France became, consciously, a musically deaf nation. Music was regarded as an art for wasting time with no benefits for Reason and Progress. This bias lives on, especially at university. The huge gap between the best results achievable in an hour per week of music at secondary school and the frenzy of the programmes of study set up to train the most highly qualified teachers of the subject is a cause for wonder.

Nevertheless, this restriction sought only to protect the good people against the poisons of aristocratic culture. The same governments preserve and fund the Opéra and the Conservatoire. Little surprise, then, that these two institutions should be so conservative: it is the mission they have been given. The level of income which is needed to go the opera, for example, rules out any possibility that this art form might have harmful effects for ordinary people. It is not so in Italy, or Russia, or Germany, or...

Thus it is that one can go to the opera to save oneself from music!

Happily, local schools of music continue to train young people, admittedly with very meagre resources. But training musical professionals is not enough for the development of a musically educated public. It is a measure of how different France is, if a comparison is made with everyday practice in Germanic or Slavic cultures. There, music making, which is not held responsible for ancient wrongs, is a part of daily life at every level of society. Local choirs, amateur instrumental groups spontaneously develop an audience for the regional orchestras or the opera houses in the larger centres. The opposite is true in France where we have no audience, neither of ordinary people, nor of a cross-section of society, nor even any good will, since, beyond secondary school, music is still reduced to the bare minimum due to that fine principle which dictates that musical training requires a long apprenticeship, and it is thus the job of the conservatoires (and of the highest importance) to distinguish between what everybody is obliged to learn at school and the rarefied demands of specialist teaching. In allowing this void to open up, we leave any appetite for music to grow haphazardly here and there, and so we abandon it, consciously or by institutional negligence, to those who might have had a smattering of it, or who may have retained a few strong impressions from their childhood...In the main, we have managed to recreate the very audience we had wanted to change.

#### *The mistrust by officialdom confirmed the place of private patronage.*

The most important result of this policy has been to create an institutional vacuum around music making. In spite of all this, France has still produced great composers and performers of exceptional quality, but the need remained. It was the patrons who, while cultivating the plastic arts and poetry, saw that France could not maintain its outstanding position in the arts generally, which had been gained by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whilst neglecting music or pretending that it was only a lesser art, suitable for the idle daughters of the middle classes and which perpetuated the pointless entertainments of the royal court. So, the enterprise of private patrons simply answered a need by creating a parallel establishment so that France should not suffer a final, stifling loss of its composers. It can be seen that, where music was concerned, the prime concern for a patron was not to simply have performances for a privileged few of works that he liked, but above all to provide opportunities for young composers to be heard whilst sparing them to some extent from the inconvenience of poverty.

## THE STATUS AND RESOURCES OF MUSICAL PATRONAGE IN PARIS FROM 1910 TO 1950

These two dates are significant only in the context of the composing career of Francis Poulenc. Let us not forget that the work of the salons had begun after the collapse of the Second Empire; it was thanks to their good offices that Gabriel Fauré, Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel became well known.

• 1910 : aged 11 Poulenc did not go to the salons, but they were talked about endlessly in the family. Some of those who moved in these circles were also family friends. Thus, he was able to gain entry into them with ease from adolescence onwards.

• 1950 : Poulenc stayed in constant touch with the salons of the de Polignac and de Noailles families, but his creative activities had moved on and beyond a purely French and specifically Parisian context. The links which he kept up were more those of a friend than of a professional nature, strongly tinged with both gratitude and nostalgia.

When, soon after the Great War, Poulenc let himself be gently drawn into the Princesse Edmond de Polignac's salon, he was fortunate in benefiting from the exceptional mix of fortune, fame and flair which marked the end of the great period of French musical patronage. This circle, it could be said, was central to his creativity; it could not be said that he was deeply marked – still less, corrupted – by this environment, but at the same time, it cannot be denied that the predominance of certain forms, at least before the mid-1930s, was not unrelated to his meetings with other influential artists of the time. Nor was he unaffected by the success that these youthful works enjoyed in this setting, where it was quite natural to seek out the latest thing.

*Conjunction of wealth, fame, artistic activity, accomplishment and a culture which favoured all the arts*

### - *Wealth*

A vital ingredient: it allowed private performances to be directly funded, financial support for public performances and, at best, commissioned works from young artists, especially at a point in their careers when they could not expect substantial royalties.

It was generally inherited wealth, amassed by the ingenuity and business activities of previous generations. Molière's miser, Harpagon, might have taken the view that in such dynasties, the generation which offered patronage was squandering its wealth. Spending the fortune, though, was seen by the majority of the great patrons as a moral, almost civic, duty to put this wealth inherited from preceding generations at the disposal of contemporary arts. In this sense, it marked a return to the practices and values of the great Renaissance benefactors of the arts.

The first requirement of this duty was to be both accomplished and enlightened, and therefore to have begun from childhood to acquire a sophisticated artistic training, which might lead, if natural gifts were obvious early on to becoming a creative artist oneself, which then allowed a meeting of equals with the talents which had to be sought out and assisted. The greatest benefit of this approach was that the young protégé would see the interest being shown as an exchange between fellow artists rather than a polite invitation to dependency, albeit in the guise of unsolicited gratitude. The young artist thus has his hand held by a senior partner, but with greater detachment than a colleague might offer and without putting himself in a position of artistic rivalry.

Where musical patronage differs from the support which the same patrons offered to painters is that the investment is always made with no prospect of any return. To have premiered a musical masterpiece in one's salon only brings prestige retrospectively. Here there is no question of even the merest hint of speculation. After however many decades it takes for tastes to evolve, a fortune could be made by being fairy godmother to a painter.

A Manet appreciates in value. For book-lovers, manuscripts, signed first editions, sets of authors' proofs gain in value. A concerto is never an investment. It is an act of altruism.

### - *The name, the personal reputation, the fame of a great aristocratic family*

These are the attributes which make possible the activities of a prominent patron. Among others, they have access to preferential publicity and are welcomed by the broad establishment. The backing of a patron opens doors and can speed up a career which is just taking off. The patron of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century anticipates the role of a modern publicity manager. However naturally gifted she might be, her

own early apprenticeship will have given her enough depth, hindsight and perspective on the future to realise that she alone will not be able to take on every aspect of what she is supposed to be assisting with. So, she will turn naturally to professionals, specialists in their own chosen field. These would often be the great performer-teachers. So it was that those recognised by their young protégés as great masters did the rounds of the great salons of the period: the outstanding pianists Blanche Selva and Ricardo Viñes, Poulenc's own teacher, the international star of the modern harpsichord Wanda Landowska and the great scholar Nadia Boulanger, also a musicologist, rediscovering the old masters who, at the turn of the century were either unknown or, worse, little-known and misrepresented. These distinguished figures were not merely guarantors for the patrons; they were first and foremost strong personalities, with at least enough authority to respect the free development of the young protégés chosen by their benefactors. Knowing how to surround herself with prominent figures, the patron, however well versed she might be personally in whatever art form, shielded her pupils against servility: by sheltering behind the strong artistic personality of one of these brilliant and unimpeachable "councillors", she played down her own personal tastes and leanings; her protégés were given the freedom to conceive and develop their own voice.

- *Accomplishment*

All the great patrons were notable musicians. It was a matter of principle for them to be first-class performers themselves. Under the influence of Ricardo Viñes, for example, they developed their expertise to a point where they could meet composers on equal terms. Princesse Edmond de Polignac was a virtuoso on both piano and organ, and even without the assistance of Nadia Boulanger, she could discuss in detail with Poulenc the arrangement of a piece she was playing. Similarly, her niece Marie-Blanche de Polignac, could have had a career as a professional singer or pianist: she was moreover a member of the choral and instrumental group directed by Nadia Boulanger, which sought to make some of the madrigals of Claudio Monteverdi better known, recording them in 1937 for the pleasure of her husband Jean who wished to have a record of his wife singing the *Lamento della ninfa*. This seriousness, this desire for in-depth work, for a completeness worthy of an audience, albeit the usual limited audience of their salon, built up a professional respect between protector and protégé; they had in common the necessity of work well done and this need did away with any risk of condescension in the relationship.

- *Openness to all forms of artistic expression*

An effective patron owed it to herself to be a good all-rounder; those who gave most support to Francis Poulenc were equally interested in painting, theatre and contemporary poetry. They were well aware that it was this mix and the cross-fertilisation between works that were being created at much the same time, which was for each of them in its own field, the ferment of excellence. It is moreover quite likely that this broad cultural grounding may have confirmed in Poulenc his intense love of painting and the reverence in which he held all contemporary poets. In any case, it stimulated from the very beginning his gift for making bridges between words, sounds and the nuances of shading. Poulenc acquired this belief in the strength of artistic cross pollination from an early age by listening to his guardians. This was so when, whilst composing the *Sept répons des ténèbres*, unable to speak to the Polignacs who were both dead, he turned to Pierre Bernac witness to those early years, and confided in him how he was emerging from long months of creative agony: "I thought it would be more like Mantegna, but it turned out to be Zurburan."

## FROM SUPPORT FOR THE REFUSÉS TO SNOBISME \*

\* Translator's Note: *Snobisme*, *snob* in French do not here have quite the same pejorative connotation as in English. Perhaps the contrast is between *dismissive* snobbery in English and *discerning* snobisme in France.

Salons were not content simply to occupy the fallow land of the official establishment. As it was obvious to them that these institutions only sought to favour the worst kind of conservatism at a time when a powerful need for renewal was beginning to pick up speed, especially in the wake of the 1914-18 war, their vital role - their mission, it could be said – was to go beyond mere competition between official art and contemporary art. Their acute sense of historical progress convinced them at an early stage that they had to promote activities which were at least as prominent as those of the official institutions (Official Salons, opera seasons, the big Sunday concert series, etc). It was necessary to get rid of all this inertia. The support given by the generation of patrons from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the First World War had shown them that, if music was to have worthy successors to Fauré, Debussy, Ravel, Roussel etc, it was going to be necessary to make waves with a rising generation who wanted to become better known. The process was more delicate for music than for painting. The patrons had no recourse to a permanent system which was the equivalent of the *Salon des Refusés* in the art world. Their support had to be more dispersed, more fragmented.

So it was that, in the field of music and partly also in literature, it was necessary that, alongside the large, high profile events such as the *Ballets Russes* seasons, a continuous sequence of smaller events should be taking place.

This realisation redirected the activities of the salons at the beginning of the 1920s. The frequency of these performances ruled out any over-costly investment. Most often, new works were given before a very select audience. This situation gradually led to the formation of little cliques. There was thus a move from curiosity about new ideas towards a kind of *snobisme*. But this form of elitism was not defined by the exclusion of a wider public; it was simply the result of the role of patron as enlightener. Indeed, attracting a larger audience from those who were only comfortable with old favourites was inconceivable; it was thus inevitable that to begin with, the audience had to be selective and comprise genuine lovers of the new and of contemporary composition.

A good metaphor for the patron is that of a locomotive. It has the task of pulling those who are still uncertain towards an acceptance of innovation at face value, at a time when nobody can decide if it is a way forward or a blind alley. A real *snob* always takes risks. The cultivated patron who relies on them to broaden the scope of her research gambles constantly. Real courage lies in not being discouraged by an error of judgment. In any case, it is not in the immediate weeks or months which follow, that true originality will reveal itself. The strength of the conscientious and organised patron is to always extend her work over a period of time, as it is only in this way that the path of the locomotive can be guided through the network of tracks which can be seen far ahead. The value of the *snobs* went beyond the jeers of those who followed later, and even more so, those music lovers who restricted themselves to well-trodden musical paths.

It can be seen that there is no clear difference between a concern to offer opportunities to young talents and the most blatant kinds of elitism. How many re-hearings does it take for a serious music lover to be sure that he has moved from simple curiosity, via public repetition, to pure pleasure, free of any of the demands of fashion?

It is not that there is a succession of fads which sometimes swing from one extreme of clamorous worship to the other of outraged abhorrence. It is only necessary to note the changing loyalties of great composers, to take only Fauré and Debussy as examples, who for long years were fervent supporters of Wagner, before doing something completely different in order to escape from the spell which they had been under.

On this subject, Proust gives us some literary clues which still hold true. The more we read of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, the less and less Madame Verdurin seems worthy of the ridicule which she attracted in *Du côté de chez Swann*.

Before getting into the detail of the character of each of the four salons of which Poulenc was most regularly a member, we should take account now, in order not to give a false impression, of the musical environment; young musicians in the post-war period were heard in places where other artists could be

found and where they met together, admittedly with limited finances but with efficient organisation. In Paris, at the time, there were, besides the large concert halls such as the Pleyel and Gaveau, quite a few smaller recital rooms, (La Salle des Agriculteurs, the one in the Rue Huyghens, etc) which were often uncomfortable and unsuitable for their needs. Early on, the members of the salons and the patrons themselves would go along, some to seek out the new material which they were so keen on. They took on the role of traffickers.

## PRINCESS EDMOND DE POLIGNAC'S SALON

Of all the great salons which Poulenc attended in the course of his career, this was the oldest established. It was a genuine institution for making reputations, almost always with very good taste and an astute farsightedness for what a real artist might offer from the very beginning and which could then guide his development, concentrating on the fundamentals without wasting time on irrelevancies. When, just after his demobilisation in 1919, Poulenc joined for the first time, the princess was 54 years old. He must have been terror-stricken to be joining this temple of the arts. It defined his relationship with the Princess Edmond de Polignac: he felt a deep and well-bred respect and admiration for this great lady. His youthful shyness and composure would certainly not have helped him on meeting the haughty princess.

She was born Winaretta Singer in 1865, of a French mother Isabelle Boyer, and the well-known industrialist whose invention of the sewing machine has almost become eponymous. Soon after her mother returned to France following the early death of her husband, she held a salon at 25, Rue Kléber, where she showed herself to be a passionate enthusiast for the great classical repertoire, including late Beethoven works usually regarded as being impenetrable. For her fourteenth birthday, the young Winaretta, usually called Winnie, was given a surprise present of Beethoven's Fourteenth Quartet, Op131 in C# minor, the same one that Proust often had played for him in the apartment where he lived the life of a recluse.

She turned first to acquiring skills in painting. She quickly became acquainted with the great names such as Édouard Manet, Berthe Morisot, Edgar Degas and Claude Monet. So skilled did she become that some years later, a dealer wanted to buy one of her works which he had confidently attributed to Manet. Then, with the same vigour, she set herself to master all the workings of music. She was a very skilled player of both piano and organ. She had learned the latter with the outstanding 19<sup>th</sup> century organists, Guilmant and Gigou, then from 1925, she continued her studies with Nadia Boulanger. She may have met Fauré by chance on holiday, but it was no accident that all the great artists of the time gathered at her salons. She was caught up in the craze for Wagner and went for the first time to Bayreuth with Gabriel Fauré and André Messager in 1882 and then with her mother and Emmanuel Chabrier the following year. These pilgrimages formed part of what she thought of as a necessary deepening of her knowledge in pursuit of a complete understanding of music, indeed quite the opposite of a dilettante approach.

In 1887 she married the Prince of Scley-Montbéliard. This union was the key to her entry into high society, now that she had acquired the means to play a decisive role in it. She moved to the corner of the Avenue Henri Martin and the Rue Cortambert (now the Avenue Georges Mandel and the Rue du Pasteur Boegner) and created a studio and a recital room. It was here, at the turn of the century, that the most important musicians came: Vincent d'Indy, Emmanuel Chabrier, Ernest Chausson, Gabriel Fauré then Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel. With them you might have seen all the great Impressionist painters and the most famous men of letters. In 1891, the couple divorced and the marriage was annulled by Rome, due to the non-consummation of the marriage.

She then married Prince Edmond de Polignac, 30 years older than her and one of the sons of the Prince de Polignac, former ultra-royalist minister under Charles X. He was already a professional musician who had trained at the Conservatoire and was soon to be Vice-President of the Schola Cantorum alongside Vincent d'Indy. This marriage of convenience (Paris high society knew that these were two notorious homosexuals) was the start of the second period of joint patronage.

Their concept of patronage was based on very solid principles: they considered that the great classical tradition was well served by the four principal Parisian Sunday concert series. It fell to them therefore to promote the two outer extremes of this well established tradition: the revival of early music and the advancement of contemporary music. They had seen that their true role as patrons lay in using their reputation as real connoisseurs to give those who chose to follow their example a taste for trying harder;

their devotion to seeking whatever was not already worn out would be a model and would take with it anyone who trusted their judgment. Firstly, they made their friends aware that anything which might appear disturbing at first and require some initial effort was certain ultimately to broaden everybody's understanding and tastes.

In this sort of artistic evangelisation, they countered the expected charges of pretentiousness with the routines of method: just as entering into the logic of the form and harmonic language of a Monteverdi madrigal, or one of J.S. Bach's triple fugues is not obvious, so it is that one should approach the first hearing of a very recent new work without preconceptions. It was in this spirit of open-mindedness towards both extremes that the couple surrounded themselves with exceptional specialists; alongside the dazzling Gabriel Astruc and Serge de Diaghilev was the profound wisdom and passion for revelation of the two *grandes dames*, Wanda Landowska and Nadia Boulanger. Moreover, these outstanding artists, respected by every composer, formed an excellent interface between patron and creator.

The Prince's death in 1901 brought an end to their close collaboration in all the arts. After his death, Winaretta at first spent a great deal of time on having her late husband's compositions performed. Soon after, she had the mansion on the Avenue Henri Martin demolished to be replaced with the building we know today which houses the *Fondation Singer-Polignac*.

By force of circumstance, Poulenc knew nothing of this generation of patronage which had begun around 1905 with she met Diaghilev at the home of Grand Duke Paul of Russia, followed by Igor Stravinsky, who would always be the great "favourite" of the woman who became henceforth Aunt Winnie. When the recently demobilised Poulenc joined this salon in 1919 to put on his *Cocardes*, a group of three "tricolour" pieces in which he had set words by Jean Cocteau, Aunt Winnie was 54 years old. She was no longer the charming and original young American woman of the 1880s. She was already showing both her benevolent authority and her remarkable profile which many of her faithful referred to using the same epithet – *Dantesque*. Her infallible good taste was always acknowledged and nobody would have dreamed of questioning her talent for discovery or her generosity in launching careers.

It was through her that Poulenc met Manuel de Falla, who would become a respected elder for him, and on this occasion, drawn into what the princess called her studio, heard a rehearsal of *El Retablo (Master Peter's Puppet Show)*. Wanda Landowska was accompanying at the harpsichord, and she engendered an instant and headlong admiration in the young Poulenc: this spontaneous appreciation did not pass unnoticed by the artist, who called out to him on the off chance, "Why don't you write me a concerto then?" Poulenc seized the opportunity; this was the genesis of the *Concert Champêtre*.

In 1930, the princess commissioned a *Concerto for Two Pianos*, for which she paid Poulenc 20,000 francs, its first performance being given at her *palazzo* in Venice. While the salon's Cavaillé-Coll organ was being renovated, Poulenc showed so much interest in the possibilities of this instrument, hitherto looked down upon, that the princess suggested that he might write a piece for the instrument. And this was the *Concerto for Organ, Strings and Timpani in G minor*, performed by its dedicatee on December 16<sup>th</sup> 1938.

These two significant events in Poulenc's career should not overshadow the many other visits which he made to the salon, for the pleasure of feeling welcome there and being feted, and to meet other artists whom he admired.

The princess died in 1940.

## MISIA'S SALON

This woman and her very romantic lifestyle, fascinated everyone she met so much that all the great painters of her time made portraits of her: Renoir, Toulouse-Lautrec, Valotton, Marie Laurencin, Jean Hugo, Jean Cocteau, Vuillard, while two American pianists, Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale, also faithful interpreters of Poulenc's music for two pianos or piano duet, devoted a 400 page biography to her.

Born Marie Sophie Godebska, in Saint-Pétersbourg in 1872, into a cosmopolitan Polish family, she was among other things the half sister of Cipa Godebski, who was part of Ravel's circle. When she emigrated to Paris, she lived at first with no other resources than giving piano lessons. She married into money through her first two husbands, first Thadée Nathanson, co-founder of *La Revue Blanche* in 1893, then in 1905 with the press baron, Alfred Edwards, who was both director of *Le Matin* and the extremely wealthy proprietor of the Théâtre de Paris and the adjoining casino.

Her first encounter with the world of artistic creation was at the home of Pierre Louÿs on 31<sup>st</sup> May 1894; that day she heard Claude Debussy sing almost all the parts of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, even some still unfinished sections, whilst accompanying himself at the piano. This stunning event determined the course of all Misia's subsequent activities until her death in 1950; she would put all her husbands' fortunes at the disposal of new talents. Moreover, her forceful personality, her Slavic beauty, her presence, a certain charm (which comes across magically in all the paintings of her) led to the creation of a Slav enclave in Paris; it was, then, almost inevitable that she should be behind the establishment of the *Ballets Russes*. She bailed out Diaghilev in the first season; for example, she secretly bought (to spare Diaghilev the pain of gratitude) all the unsold seats for *Boris Godunov*. She persuaded the shadowy Erik Satie to join forces with Jean Cocteau and Pablo Picasso to put on, for the *Ballets Russes*, a show finely contrived to cause a surefire scandal, *Parade*. It was also in this Russian setting that she came into contact with Igor Stravinsky and the younger generation who were pirouetting impatiently around the great mastermind, Jean Cocteau. It was into this atmosphere of youthful enthusiasm that Francis Poulenc came when he joined the salon in the shadow of the composer he would always call the Great Igor.

Misia had already heard word of Poulenc's first efforts which were given as part of concerts in Paris recital rooms with his friends – soon to be known as *Les Six* – led by Jean Cocteau, hoping to gain the support of lovers of the new music. There was no question that the young Poulenc would not show up with his colleagues and friends in Misia's salons, even before she commissioned a new ballet from him for the *Ballets Russes* which she was still supporting. This was to be *Les Biches*, performed in 1924 in Monte Carlo by the *Ballets Russes*, with choreography by Nijinska and sets by Marie Laurencin. Misia did not commission anything else officially from Poulenc.

A collaboration between Francis Poulenc and Jean Cocteau for a mixed presentation, based on an idea of the poet about circus acts, to be called *Les Jongleurs*, was discussed in 1919. Poulenc often mentions this project in his letters as something which intrigued him at the time because of the problems of musical technique which it was causing him. We do not know if sketches from it might have been heard at Misia's while Poulenc was working on Cocteau's outline. *Les Jongleurs* was never completed; his letters say nothing about the withdrawal of the project and it remains one of his works, successfully finished or not, of which no trace remains.

Nonetheless, Poulenc was always welcome at this salon where his spontaneity, his wit, his talents as a gifted pianist and his sense of friendship meant that his presence was always appreciated and looked forward to.

The two outstanding characteristics of Misia's work were her unquenchable spirit and alongside this, an overpowering dilettantism.

So, when this woman, filled with enthusiasm and passion, had decided to do justice to a composer or a work which was too innovative to immediately fit the tastes of her salon, she fell back on amazing skill, even guile, to press her case. She was at the head of those who in 1905 protested passionately against Maurice Ravel's final rejection in the *Prix de Rome*. In this sort of situation, attack remains the best form of defence. Misia put all her energy into a battle which she could never consider losing.

Nevertheless, it sometimes happened that this form of positive discrimination used the Slavic charm and sometimes dubious methods of a well-known society lady. But it was always in the cause of winning over the listener, as with every other patron of the period. The best way of justifying this type of discrimination is to turn to the greatest specialist in the field, Marcel Proust. He wrote to Misia in early 1913: “ I've felt such regret; such affinity – *Ballets Russes*, dinner with you – brings to mind wonderful memories and makes me think I'm a sort of serial pleasure-seeker. It was only because of that phrase “*Etes-vous snob?*” which seemed so silly the first time, but which I think I came to like, because I had heard you say it. In itself, it is meaningless. But in the end, I liked “*Etes-vous snob?*” as I might like a slightly dated dress which made you look pretty. I can assure you, though, that the only person whose company might suggest that I am a snob is you. And it wouldn't be true. And you are the only person to think that I like your company because of vanity rather than respect. Don't be so modest.”

In 1920, Misia married for the third time; her latest beloved was the painter José María Sert, whom she had met in Diaghilev's entourage. Poulenc, an enthusiastic and knowledgeable lover of good painting, never breathed a word of what he thought about Misia's husband's pictures.

## COUNT ETIENNE DE BEAUMONT'S SALON

Count Etienne de Beaumont, born in 1883, inherited both an ancient and noble name and also a fortune amassed by his forbears in mining. As soon as he acquired this wealth, he transformed it completely. He sold the fine family collection of old masters to buy works by contemporary painters. With this symbolic gesture, he joined the brotherhood of the great patrons. At the same time, he devoted himself to great humanitarian causes, (he financed a fleet of ambulances and donated them to the Red Cross, which employed the numerous female volunteers during the Great War. Jean Cocteau made use of his memories of taking part in this work in *Thomas l'Imposteur*), a taste for partying and a sharp sense of disguise in the fancy-dress balls which drew Paris society to his home in the Rue Duroc. At one of these, Darius Milhaud, Georges Auric and Francis Poulenc turned up in striped football kit à la Douanier Rousseau. The other guests were even more crazily attired.

Poulenc wrote hardly any works to commissions from the Comte de Beaumont. He gave a performance of his first work which he had not discarded, the *Rhapsodie Nègre*. He apparently composed an organ work for the Count's wife, who felt that she did not want to show off her technique in public. As nobody heard it and Poulenc did not keep a copy, it was assumed to have been lost. But we know of it from a letter of 14<sup>th</sup> April 1923 from Poulenc to the Count.

It had been requested for the Louis XIV ball, but Poulenc had been taken ill and it was therefore not ready in time:

*Don't count on my piece for your party. Anyway, I won't be in Paris at the time as the doctor is sending me to Vichy at the end of May. I can't tell you how annoyed I am that I won't be able to write this dance which I was so keen on (organ registrations) for you, and for which you would have been my ideal performer, who would have been very lovely to watch, I'm sure. Happily, I hope that there will be another chance soon to make music for one of your parties. Besides, I mean to write an organ sonata for your wife this summer. I hope I will be more lucky this time.*

This story is interesting, even if we do not know how far the organ sonata went, because here we see Poulenc interested in an instrument which was quite out of fashion in the 1920s. It has to be said that the poor quality and standards of upkeep of most instruments at this time would discourage composers from writing for it unless they happened to be organists themselves. Cocteau sometimes even expressed an apparent aversion to this heavy, woolly sound mostly played without contrast or subtlety. The Comte de Beaumont was particularly eclectic in his musical tastes; Wanda Landowska had introduced him to the finer points of Early Music at a time when most music lovers had no appetite for the great German tradition any more than the Italian madrigalists or the French keyboard players of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Like his mentor, Landowska, he was as equally interested in rediscovering the great masters as in fostering new talent. If indeed Poulenc did begin an organ sonata in the early '20s, he was already demonstrating how important an appreciation of the great masters was in forging new directions in music. The thought which he had given to this early foray into writing for the organ was ready to be put to use, and the outlines were to come back to him when, fifteen years later, he had to write an organ accompaniment for the *Litanies* and then take on the *Organ Concerto* in response to Princess Edmond de Polignac's commission. The Comte de Beaumont's town house was a place more for merrymaking than work for Poulenc. There he met many artists who were not short of good ideas. He also met Etienne de Beaumont at the other salons which he attended and in a variety of concert halls.

## JEAN AND MARIE-BLANCHE DE POLIGNAC'S SALON

At Jean and Marie-Blanche de Polignac's salon yet another type of patronage was practised. This rich artistic couple was more promoter of new music than patron in the financial sense. The most characteristic aspects of Poulenc's private and professional life are those which need least explanation. For them, patronage was a form of total confidence.

Even if it was alien to their own personal approach, the elitism typical of these circles was not entirely absent, for the members of the small circle who gathered at the Rue Barbet de Jouy could not leave behind their normal habits at the door when they visited. But the keen musicianship of the couple, especially Marie-Blanche, tended to cancel out any show of the usual society snobbishness. Every time

that Poulenc went to the “Jean de Polignacs” he did not feel that he was ‘going out into the world,’ rather, that he was responding to the call of close friends who were always ready to give something, but more especially to receive with obvious pleasure everything new that he himself brought to them.

The young woman who made famous the name Marie-Blanche was little older than Poulenc; daughter of the famous dressmaker Jeanne Lanvin, she was born Marguerite di Pietro in 1897. In 1917, she married René Jacquemaire, one of Clemenceau’s grandsons. She was a born artist and, under the name of Madame Jacquemaire began singing in the salons. Her divorce was settled in 1922.

Marguerite made the most of her freedom by meeting some of the great pianists of the time, Arthur Rubinstein, Youra Guller, Marcelle Meyer. This was how she met Princesse Edmond de Polignac’s nephew who was also a music-lover. They had many shared interests and decided to marry. So it was that in 1924, Madame Jacquemaire changed her first name Marguerite, along with her nickname Ririte which irked her, to her middle names and became, once and for all, Marie-Blanche de Polignac. Early on, Marie-Blanche had attended her Aunt Winnie’s salon where she had appeared both as singer and pianist, often playing in duet with a famous professional such as Ricardo Viñes, Marcelle Meyer, Jacques Février or with composers themselves. She maintained this practice throughout her life. Until the death of the princess in 1940, there was no rivalry between the two de Polignac salons. Marie-Blanche struck up a friendship with Nadia Boulanger with whom she began to develop her natural gift for singing to a professional level. It is thanks to this encounter and her unrelenting hard work that we can hear her soprano voice in the 1937 recordings. If she had not met Jean de Polignac, this gifted artist could easily have made a career as a singer, even more so probably, as a pianist.

The style of patronage at the Rue Barbet de Jouy, was less concerned with seeking commissions, but rather encouraging meetings between artists of the same generation. Poulenc never saw the couple as guardians but rather as friends whose desire was always to make life easier, to help overcome self-doubt, to communicate on equal terms as professionals, to patiently listen to often painful confidences, to give help in fending off the effects of discouragement or moments of depression. The atmosphere of the salon was elegantly relaxed, as befitting a place of welcome. All this presumed a level of organisational skill to the point of becoming invisible.

It seems that a basic essential in all their activities was the delicate and generous management of spontaneity. In some of the *soirées* there might be compositions or meetings of performers who were in Paris at the same time, but often unplanned revivals or improvisations might follow each other. Everything appeared to unfold like a discovery or an invention to be followed up, making not only every contributor happy, but also happy to make his companions happy.

The couple did not only host gatherings in Paris. Thus many of Poulenc’s letters recall his stays in their summer home in Kerbastic in Brittany! It was there, notably, that he met Louise de Vilmorin and asked the beautiful novelist to write poetry for him. She accepted the request, not easily according to her, but to the greater glory of French art-song, since three song-cycles bring out Louise’s impulsive and deeply nostalgic originality.

## CHARLES AND MARIE-LAURE DE NOAILLES’ SALON

With the Noailles, patronage changed in form and function. Their taste for innovation was so strong that they sometimes allowed themselves to be carried away. It seems that this development was because of the risks that, as good patrons, they quite naturally took. *Risk* should be understood in the widest sense; taking risks can result in losing your wager. Because they did not weigh up the consequences of some of their gambles, they found themselves distanced from their peers in society circles who were probably not too worried about being rid of the rivalry that the Noailles offered where innovation was concerned.

Nevertheless, it is difficult in hindsight to understand how society could have condemned so harshly the small lapse which separates a scandal which amuses without offending, from one which offends without amusing, and particularly the way in which judgment was passed. The affair began with the backing they gave, heavily promoting avant-garde cinema; it was in 1929 that they commissioned *L’Age d’Or* from Luis Buñuel at the same time as Jean Cocteau’s *Le Sang d’un Poète*. Buñuel cheerfully broke all the taboos of society circles. Surprised to have been challenged by something which went beyond the bounds of daring originality, supporters of the “snobbery of good taste” took their revenge by ostracising the young couple. They could not rehabilitate themselves without recanting, which of course would have been unthinkable

for the well-bred and courageous patron. They were forced to carry on their activities at the extreme edge, where the most important ingredient was provocation. This situation did no harm either to the Noailles or to the artists from whom they continued to commission work.

Charles de Noailles, born in 1891, was nephew to the poet Anna de Noailles. Marie-Laure, born in 1902, was a Bischoffsheim, from the great German-Jewish banking family, while her maternal grandmother, the Comtesse de Chevigné, a direct descendant of the Marquis de Sade was one of Marcel Proust's models for the Duchesse de Guermantes.

Marie-Laure drew and painted and Poulenc described her salon as a permanent exhibition of contemporary art. She had been friendly with Jean Cocteau from childhood. After her marriage in 1923, the couple made their home at 11 Place des Etats-Unis. Poulenc was a frequent visitor; he knew he would be able to meet contemporary painters whom he admired and he appreciated the exchanges which seemed to help him in his own work as a composer. The de Noailles held a prominent place in both Poulenc's professional and private lives; in his career through the two works which they commissioned and which made a splash; in his private life with the copious correspondence between composer and the couple. Away from the scandals and the tides of gossip, one senses between them a real affection, a tacit complicity, even a quiet collusion.

### ***The two commissions: Aubade and Le Bal Masqué***

Unlike the Jean de Polignacs who rarely offered commissions, the de Noailles readily requested work from all the artists with whom they associated. As with Comte Etienne de Beaumont, many of these commissions related to large celebrations, masked balls, themed parties etc. Keeping in mind Jean Cocteau's famous principle, they sought to surprise rather than to simply entertain or charm.

Besides, they had to keep happy an audience which was clearly more at home with matters of society than with artistic expertise; it was far from certain that the two commissions which Poulenc fulfilled were fully appreciated by this company. Most important was to acknowledge one another – eccentrics, lovers of The New and enthusiasts of the scandals which were never far away. But the prestige available pleased everyone and is that not the point of such gatherings? The first commission came in 1928: a "Materials Ball" in which the designers could only use "everyday" materials – cardboard, paper, cellophane etc. For 25,000 Francs, Poulenc had to compose the finale: patrons and composer agreed fairly swiftly on the form of a "Choreographic Concerto" for piano and 18 instruments to be called *Aubade*. Letters give us in great detail the progress of this long distance collaboration, premiered on 18<sup>th</sup> June 1929 in the mansion on the Place des Etats-Unis. Among the ups and downs of this creation, the letters reveal the very distressing progress of a terrible bout of depression which obliged Poulenc to return the advance which he had already been paid. However, all ended well; Poulenc was brilliant at the piano and the choreographer Nijinska directed the dancers marvellously.

The second commission was a cantata setting texts by Max Jacob, who was both one of Poulenc's favourite poets and a regular with the de Noailles. Meanwhile, the de Noailles had had a ground-breaking new villa built by the architect Mallet-Stevens at Hyères. They wanted to host a celebration there in 1932. Different contributions were sought from Buñuel, Giacometti and Bérard for the visual aspects, and from Poulenc, Auric, Sauguet and Markevitch for the musical elements. This *Bal Masqué* was first performed privately to a smart and diverse audience which included Cocteau, Dali and Huxley on 20<sup>th</sup> April 1932, at the theatre at Hyères, then publicly in Paris on 13<sup>th</sup> June the same year in the Salle Chopin-Pleyel.

The Noailles were the only patrons to have outlived Poulenc. Marie-Laure died in 1970 and Jacques in 1981.

## CONCLUSION : THE HALLMARKS OF THE SALONS IN THE WORKS

It only remains to assess whether Poulenc was strongly influenced by qualities which would have been shaped by the reactions in society circles to his works, or, if the bulk of his creative output remained independent of the milieu in which he immersed himself. In this, extreme, partisan critics are of little use, as they start from a position of bias, not based on serious analysis but developing in lofty fashion, according to mood, studies in academic style which devote themselves to judgments derived from the musical background which these very critics flaunt.

We have nothing to learn from those people who cheerfully dismiss Poulenc as a “minor master,” nor those who protest loudly when the composer, after a work of deep spirituality turns, almost relapses, to light-hearted style or returns to the manner of the old “rascal.”

High society was a natural milieu for him in which he had been brought up. He never felt cramped or, still less, disoriented there. Everywhere, he felt unaffectedly at home. Nevertheless, he was acute enough to recognise beneath the surface gloss of a socialite, their affectations and snobbish reflexes, a very honest taste for beauty based on a study of the music, whether it was from the mainstream classical repertoire, or early music which was being revived by the more enlightened members of these circles or equally, making known the latest trends. He understood, too, that acquired culture apart, these great patrons were especially sensitive people who were rarely mistaken in their choices. A simple compliment from Princess Edmond de Polignac warmed Poulenc’s heart just as much as one of his friends, Darius Milhaud for example, voicing his enthusiasm.

One cannot, then, claim without proper consideration that the tastes of the salons might have rubbed off on his composing. Remember, first, that Poulenc only took notice of the comments of the *real* patrons. He was under no illusion about the possible reception and judgments which might be meted out by the many guests he happened to meet at the soirées to which he was invited. Remember, too, that he sometimes felt that he was wasting his time or at least squandering too much of his free time in gestures, however courteous they might have been, without any real gain. It was to escape this very danger that he spent long months in isolated places (Anost in the Morvan was one of the most precious of these) and that he bought his house in Noizay in Touraine in 1927 to spend long periods of study there in concentration and silence. Nothing which originated during these periods of quasi-monastic life carries any sign of society influence. But the works which were specifically conceived for this milieu, even those not commissioned by a patron, were packaged to suit the reaction which Poulenc hoped to receive there. All composers follow this rule in certain works, starting with Beethoven. When Poulenc admitted, in an interview with Claude Rostand, that the great majority of his piano pieces were not amongst his best-written, he attributed this relative weakness to the juvenile pleasure which he took from abandoning himself to his too great facility at the keyboard. One could add to this confession that it was also the same gift which made him so instantly attractive in the more relaxed society gatherings.

Finally, one can recognise, in listening, the atmosphere of one or another salon, the hovering presence behind the young composer of this or that admired teacher, in works expressly conceived to be played there. The cheekiness of *Le Bal Masqué* is redolent of the Noailles, musky, with a whiff of suburban beer and sweat, which cannot be confused with the other Noailles perfume, more vanilla with just a hint of misplaced sophistication, which bursts forth from *Les Biches* and *Aubade*. The *Concert Champêtre* allows us to share the simple joy with which Wanda Landowska set about sight-reading it whilst looking out on her gardens in Saint Leu la Forêt.

The ways of the salons can partly explain why song occupies such an important place in Poulenc’s output. Only partially though, since the first creative stirrings come from a profound response to a poem which has been selected for setting to music. It must not be forgotten either that this genre was a particular favourite in the salons: the composer performing brilliantly at the piano, the singers, sometimes society ladies themselves, perhaps outstandingly talented. One can even see Poulenc struggling against being taken over permanently by the socialite life of a singer whom he considered without equal in some of his early songs; this was his dear friend Suzanne Peignot. He suggested she might take Marie-Blanche de Polignac as a role model of professionalism. This was too difficult a prescription for the lovely Suzanne, who was quite happy to remain a salon singer.

Finally the combination of singer and pianist is an area of music which does not require huge resources. It would be risky, however, to attribute to any of the song-cycles, the distinctive character of the salon at which Poulenc had intended to have it performed.