

# Francis Poulenc, by Pascal Rogé

My first encounter with the music of Francis Poulenc dates from before my birth...In fact, at the time my mother was an organist and she was preparing his *Concerto for Organ and Timpani* while she was pregnant.

In the '50s, no-one talked much about the effect of music on the unborn child, but it is surely no coincidence that, some years later – I must have been 6 years old – I was aware of my first musical emotions on hearing my mother play that same concerto.

At that age, I was already able to turn the pages for her and to help her with the organ registration, and I can remember perfectly the magnificent passage in the penultimate movement – *Très calme Lent* – which I never tired of asking her to play again and again, as every time I felt a reaction, still unknown to me at that time, but which would guide my musical choices for the rest of my life: the emotion created by musical sounds and harmonies. Today, even, when I hear that musical phrase, tears come to my eyes.

Thereafter, there was sadly a long break in my connections with the music of Poulenc, as during my student years at the Paris Conservatoire, his music was not in the syllabus.

It was only several years later – when I had already recorded Ravel, Debussy, Fauré and Satie for Decca – that I thought: “And why not Poulenc?” The Marketing Department had a few reservations: “Will it sell?” they said to me. But I insisted, and so it was that I recorded my first CD of Poulenc's piano works in 1982. After the success which this recording brought and the plaudits from the press (Best Instrumental Recording in the Gramophone Awards 1988, among others), I could, at last, record not only the complete works for piano solo, but also the chamber music, the songs and the concertos...including the *Concert Champêtre*, of which I am especially proud as it was recorded on the original harpsichord which belonged to Wanda Landowska, for whom the concerto had been written!

In my whole recording career, this “Complete Works” is perhaps the one of which I am most proud, and I am happy to have completed it for the centenary of the birth of the composer in 1999.

I've played and continue to play Poulenc's works all over the world, always with the same pleasure and for audiences who are always enthusiastic, whatever the country or continent. The reason is simple. It is “popular” music in the best sense of the word. The writing is sophisticated, but the language is simple, accessible to all. It is music from the heart which speaks to the heart. Whatever the emotion which Poulenc wishes to share with us – cheerfulness, sadness, melancholy, irony- he always does it with elegance and discretion, never overdoing it, as he possesses the unique gift of being light without being superficial, profound without being boring.

Poulenc is neither revolutionary nor academic. He is Poulenc and that's all. He has his own language and he stays faithful to it from his first to his last works. Like all great composers, he will have been influenced by a range of composers from Mozart to Stravinsky, via Edith Piaf and the Bal Musette. But he stays true to himself, genuine and honest. Has it not been said, “Poulenc borrows everybody's harmonies and makes of them his own ...”

It is impossible to hear one bar of Poulenc without recognising Poulenc. What greater compliment can we pay a composer? But he knew how to surprise us, to confuse us by his ambivalence and his ceaseless duality summarised wonderfully by Claude Rostand: “In Poulenc, there is the monk and the rascal”. And it is because of that that he is unclassifiable as a composer, he belongs to the Church and to the Café-concert. In the space of one bar, he passes from melancholy to elation, he can be mystic or cheeky in a flash, as if by magic (see the *Laudamus Te* of his Gloria!)

I did not have the pleasure of meeting Poulenc in person (I was 11 when he died) but I had the good fortune to hear precious and moving memories from my teachers, Lucette Descaves, Nadia Boulanger, and from some of his friends and from performers, Doda Conrad, Jacques Février, Georges

Prêtre, without forgetting, of course, Rosine Seringe. But it is above all through his music and playing it regularly over more than 20 years that has been for me the best way of knowing him.

One cannot interpret his music without feeling a deep closeness to the man behind every note, as his humour, his sensitivity, his *joie de vivre*, his cheekiness, his sadness, his faith, his hopes and despair, and all the emotions which can run through the life of an artist, all these he wanted and knew how to share all this through his music.

I will end this brief tribute by quoting two personal stories, a bit unusual, part dream, part reality, but directly inspired by Poulenc.

One evening in August 1999, we were having dinner in Tours with François Le Roux and Rosine Seringe; it was the evening before a Poulenc recital which we were giving as part of the "Festival de la Mélodie Française", and we were bemoaning with François the lack of time we had to rehearse the programme, regretting that we could not do a little more even though it was late. Hearing this, Rosine replied: "So why don't you come back with us to *Le Grand Coteau* to rehearse? You won't be disturbing anyone..."

So, there we were, arriving at midnight at Poulenc's house, in his sitting-room where nothing had changed since his time, surrounded by his familiar objects, a window open to the Loire, and on his piano...I played the first notes of *Tel Jour, Tel Nuit*. I had great difficulty concentrating on the score so strong was the feeling. I sensed Francis there, sitting in his armchair listening to us.

One night that same year, 1999, I dreamed...one of my dreams: I was going at last to meet Francis Poulenc. I had an appointment with him and I was climbing a very long staircase in a rather modest [!] apartment block. When at last I reached the top floor, a single door opened, even before I knocked, and it was he who appeared; exactly as in his photos, tall, a check jacket, a cheery smile lighting his face, mischief and affection in his look. He said nothing but embraced me very affectionately. I was moved, as I was aware of a kind of gratitude between artist and performer, but I was also very much in awe and did not know quite what to say to him. So, I thought of the phrase which crosses my mind each time I play or hear his music: "Thank you Monsieur Poulenc for all the happiness you have brought me through your music..." Alas, I woke up before I had time to utter it....

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Translation: Adrian Hugues