

Francis Poulenc, by Renaud Machart

Francis Poulenc said, half-jokingly, that he was 'from the other century'. His birth, in 1899, authorised him to claim to take his inspiration from another era when his own accused him, as he got older, of being reactionary or backward-looking. But in fact, Poulenc did not often need to take refuge behind this witticism for his real attachment to the avant-garde as a necessary intellectual and aesthetic movement earned him, if not the support, at least the respect of his young 'modern' colleagues. Thus, when Pierre Boulez founded his *Domaine Musical*, in 1953, Poulenc was immediately a fervent defender of this research movement and one of the privileged subscribers to the series of Parisian avant-garde concerts (where, it goes without saying, he was not performed and, it would seem, never complained about that), paying out of his own pocket a handsome sum far in excess of the usual subscription price.

Poulenc regretted that Stravinsky wore 'hats too young for his age' when the composer of *The Rite of Spring* later turned to serial technique, joining a movement that he had long fought, but in Pierre Boulez he saw an authentic musician whose polemical insolence reminded him of his own youth. At that time, around Erik Satie and Jean Cocteau, it was considered good form to mock Maurice Ravel or Claude Debussy as old fogies; Poulenc, now considered a 'classic' and almost all of whose works are firmly anchored in the 'great' repertoire, was first of all an avant-garde musician.

When, in 1917, he produced a *Rapsodie nègre* on zany imaginary African poems, the young man of 18 immediately attracted the attention of the Paris intelligentsia that he would subsequently never stop frequenting and with which he would continue to be associated. This made him, in the words of one critic who never bothered to look 'behind the looking-glass', a 'minor master', a superficial 'court priest' who only fleetingly counterbalanced his worldly habits with a few acts of musical contrition. Granted, Francis Poulenc is one of the musicians who best embody the 'Paris spirit' and wit: born in Paris of a Parisian mother, he loved nothing as much as his Paris—her boulevards, her poetry of the asphalt and of the fun fair—, a source of nostalgia as soon as he was deprived of her and this, even in his Touraine home where he went to work, not because he preferred the country but because this countryside, which he found boring, did not distract him from his composing...

For all that, Poulenc equally laid claim to his paternal roots in Aveyron, a region in southern France and the basis of his most serious and most profound works. Thus, in his catalogue, one may see, inspired by his Parisian (or Nogentais, for his grandparents owned a house in Nogent-sur-Marne, a key-location in Poulenc's imaginative universe) ancestry, pieces like the *Mouvements perpétuels*, *Cocardes*, *Le Bal masqué*, *Le Concert champêtre*, Piano Concerto, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* or *L'Embarquement pour Cythère*; the Aveyron source would irrigate rather the *Litanies à la Vierge noire*, the song cycle *Tel jour, telle nuit*, the Mass, the opera *Dialogues des Carmélites* after Bernanos, the Organ Concerto, *Figure humaine*...

The avant-garde—which he joined unwillingly (this truly the best way of being modern)—was quite soon the least of Francis Poulenc's concerns. As an independent, he developed a language whose highly paradoxical particularity was to be immediately recognisable, the author's identity immediately obvious, and yet composed with inspiration sometimes resulting from plundering. 'One can write good music with the chords of others,' said Poulenc. Thus he borrowed a good deal from Stravinsky, Prokofiev and... himself.

It is fascinating to see and hear the thematic, melodic or harmonic roots travel from work to work, bringing out the features of his language strongly and giving it a certain coherence, even if it is paradoxical to hear a future module from *Dialogues des Carmélites* in the delightfully insolent Piano Concerto or a very gripping foreshadowing of the 'march to the scaffold' from the same *Dialogues* in the third part of the *Deux marches et un Intermède*, a sort of *Tafelmusik* written for the 1937 World's Fair...

It is this insouciance and indifference to the 'What-will-they-say?' that, it seems today, ensure Poulenc's being firmly rooted in the commonly-played repertoire: *Dialogues des Carmélites* is, with Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes*, one of the extremely rare operas written since the Second World War to appear on opera programmes all over the world; the sonatas for oboe or clarinet and piano, the *Gloria*, the *Mouvements perpétuels*, or the sung waltz *Les Chemins de l'amour* are international successes, well-loved by performers, concert-goers and discophiles alike.

More than a century after the birth of Francis Poulenc, it is instructive to see the music of a man who wondered whether it would 'hold up' make it without opposition over the hurdle of a turn of the century that one might have believed would be more severe. It is the sincerity and, above all, the quality of craftsmanship of this music that doubtless ensure its enduring and comforting value.

Renaud Machart

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