

I - Francis Poulenc & *Gloria*

Francis Poulenc was born in 1899 into a wealthy Parisian family and grew up in the middle of the city. He started piano studies at the age of five and later studied with the great Spanish pianist and friend of Debussy and Ravel, Ricardo Viñes. As a young man he began to meet the artistic celebrities of the day, including Erik Satie, Igor Stravinsky, and Pablo Picasso. In 1920, Poulenc and five of his rather irreverent composer friends, including Arthur Honegger and Darius Milhaud, were dubbed *Les Six* and were branded, somewhat unfairly, as brazen and frivolous in their approach to music.

While Poulenc did have an early enthusiasm for the radical and rebellious composers of Paris, he was essentially a traditionalist, although one with wit and a healthy streak of impertinence. He once said about himself, “I am not the kind of musician who makes harmonic innovations, like Igor (Stravinsky), Ravel, or Debussy. There is a place for *new* music that is content with using other people’s chords.” Poulenc exhibited a remarkable sensitivity to harmonic and orchestral sonorities, but in the second half of the twentieth century, serialism was in vogue and cheerful harmonies and catchy tunes were considered suspect. Poulenc’s style was often dismissed as quaint and phony, to which he would reply, “I’ve often been reproached about my ‘street music’ side. Its genuineness has been suspected, and yet there’s nothing more genuine in me.” It is in fact, the way Poulenc joined serious musical ideals with the wit and style of Parisian café society that is the essence of his unique language.

Time Magazine had this to say about Poulenc shortly after his death in 1963 – “Nothing was so amusing to French Composer Francis Poulenc as hearing his friends marvel at the quilt of contradictions that masked his music and his life. “I am half-monk, half-bounder,” he would say, and his friends would add that he was also a cultured vulgarian, a moody wit, a seedy dandy—a puzzle. He wrote flippant music and sacred music, funny, jazzy profane music, and he also wrote some of the century’s greatest songs.”

Written in 1959 and 1960, just years before his death in 1963, *Gloria* is considered today to be one of his finest works. It utilizes the text from the joyous second part of the Ordinary of the Mass, the most solemn rite of the Roman Catholic Church. Poulenc, however, treats this section as an independent work, complete in itself. His style strikes a balance between the traditional solemnity of church music, the exultant message of the *Gloria* text, and the high spirits that appear in almost all his music. His comments on *Gloria* give an insight into the approach he favored. He said, “I like the spirit of religion to be expressed clearly in the sun.” On another occasion he wrote that he tried to make *Gloria* “a joyous hymn to the glory of God.” He also described the tone colors of the *Gloria* as “very clear, primary colors – rude and violent like the Provence chapel of Matisse.”

Some critics have remarked that perhaps the exuberant, jazzy elements overpower the underlying religious and devotional aspects of *Gloria*. To these criticisms Poulenc responded, “The second movement caused an uproar. I wonder why? In writing it, I simply thought of those frescoes of Gozzoli (a fifteenth-century Italian painter) in which the angels are sticking out their tongues and also of those serious Benedictine monks I spotted one day playing soccer.”

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It was sometimes said that the music of Francis Poulenc came directly from his heart, and he was certainly one of the outstanding melodic writers of the 20th century. Poulenc's gift for melody was possibly derived from his natural aptitude for the inflections of the human voice, and it is notable that his early compositional life included a large number of French art songs.

Poulenc returned to his boyhood Catholic faith following the accidental death of a close friend in 1935. In his grief he visited the Chapelle Notre-Dame of Rocamadour in south-central France, where a black wooden carving of Saint Mary inspired him to write his *Litanies to the Black Virgin*. Sacred works that followed included his Christmas and Lenten motets, an *a cappella* Mass, the stunning *Stabat Mater*, and the equally moving *Gloria*.

The music Poulenc wrote for his *Gloria* is not what one would normally expect to find in a devotional composition, for it includes a variety of style contrasts: chaste and bawdy, somber and joyous, elevated and zany. A true Parisian, he came naturally to his music's light-hearted reflection of that city's special qualities. However, his compositional aim was sincere and entirely serious. As he stated, "I am religious by deepest instinct and heredity. I feel myself incapable of ardent political conviction, but for me it seems quite natural to believe and practice religion. I am a Catholic. It is my greatest freedom."

The *Gloria* is in six major sections. The first, "*Gloria*," is a strong declaration of praise. The "*Laudamus te*" that follows received the harshest statements from critics of the day due to its lively, rhythmic, joyful, and exultant affirmation of faith. The third section, "*Domine Deus*," utilizes the soprano soloist for the first time and is a serene, spiritual prayer of supplication. "*Domine fili unigenite*" is similar to the second movement in its gleeful approach to a serious text. In the "*Domine Deus, Agnus Dei*" Poulenc uses a particular melodic shape for each phrase of the text. The final section, "*Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris*," begins with a dramatic introduction by unaccompanied chorus and leads to the faster body of the movement performed by both chorus and orchestra. The work concludes with a quiet and reverent Amen from the chorus, echoed by the soprano soloist.

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