

## Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

Poulenc was a French pianist and composer of solo piano works, art songs, chamber music, choral pieces, operas, ballets, and orchestral concert music. Two of his best-known compositions are: *Gloria* (1959) being performed at our Winter 2024 concert, and *Dialogues des Carmelites* (1957) in the repertoire of most opera houses today.

After his family inheritance in 1917, he became financially independent and began composing seriously. His style is difficult to pin down but critics admit once you hear one of his pieces you know it is pure Poulenc. He identified his music with the art of Dufy, Picasso, and Matisse seeing in them a parallel between their simple line drawings and his melodic musical lines. He was influenced by many and varied sources from 18<sup>th</sup> century Monteverdi madrigals to circus bands. He was intrigued with rhythms and tunes of all sorts that he made his own.

1920-21 saw him as part of “Les Six” along with two of the better-known members Darius Milhaud and Arthur Honneger. Their connection was mainly six friends who appeared on programs together under the loose mentorship of Eric Satie. There was no common style or movement.

In 1936 after hearing about the violent death of a fellow composer and soon after visiting the nearby Notre Dame de Rocamadour, he wrote his first religious work.

*Gloria* was commissioned by the Koussevitzky Foundation. Originally, they asked for a symphony to which he replied it “was not my thing”; then they asked for an organ concerto to which he replied he had already written one. The Foundation then freed him to write whatever he wanted. *Gloria* was premiered in 1961 by the Boston Symphony Orchestra conducted by Charles Munch. The RCS Victor recording by the Robert Shaw Chorale in 1965 won a Grammy Award for “Best Choral Performance.”

*Gloria* is a six-movement work with the lengthy amen as an implied 7<sup>th</sup> movement. The second movement (Laudamus te) Poulenc tells us was inspired by the sight of Benedictine monks playing soccer. The emotional message is of joy throughout the continuously interrelated structure. He says he wrote the soprano solos with Leontyne Price in mind. She accepted to sing at the premiere but scheduling conflicts made it impossible. Adele Addison sang the solos to Poulenc’s approval.

He concertized at the piano in Europe and the United States his own piano works and songs. In 1949 he was the soloist in the world premiere of his Piano Concerto commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

He was among the first composers to realize the potential of the gramophone and over his lifetime worked with more than 1300 conductors, soloists, and ensembles including the most celebrated conductors of his day including Bernstein, Dutoit, Munch, Ormandy, Previn, Stokowski.

At his funeral, Poulenc had requested that the only music be Bach played by Marcel Dupre on the Saint-Sulpice organ, Paris.

Poulenc's style is so individual that he had no school or followers of his lyrical, melodic, emotionally expressive tonal music. He insisted that his music must be loved, not analyzed. His biographer Ivry concludes that "he is the most French of composers in the generation after Ravel".

Roger Nichols writes in The New Grove Dictionary at the very end of his Poulenc article a quote from a 1942 letter written by Poulenc:

I know perfectly well that I'm not one of those composers who has made harmonic innovations like Igor [Stravinsky], Ravel or Debussy, but I know there's room for *new* music which doesn't mind using other people's chords. Wasn't that the case with Mozart-Schubert?"

Pat Kilburn

Sources: *Francis Poulenc* by Benjamin Ivry, The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Wikipedia

**NOTE: Serge Koussevitzky (1874-1951)**

Koussevitzky was a Russian-born conductor, composer and double-bassist, known for his long tenure as music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1924 to 1949. He was a champion of modern music who commissioned many works for the BSO including the premier of Gershwin's Second Rhapsody.