"I WRITE MUSIC THAT SINGS TO ME": THE VOCAL IDEAL IN SOLO PIANO WORKS BY FRANCIS POULENC

by

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I. INTRODUCTION

The scholarly research concerning Francis Poulenc's musical legacy is extensive and exhaustive. There are documents focusing on his musical style, his evolution as a composer, his literary connections, his relationship with the visual arts, his personality and psychology, and numerous studies of individual works. However, there are still many opinions about the interpretation of his piano music, especially because of his particular language and unusual indications found in his scores. These unconventional indications, combined with the many different interpretations suggested by Poulenc's contemporaries, make his piano music difficult to approach. Although Poulenc himself recorded some piano pieces and many *mélodies*, there are still significant issues for the interpreter.

We know that art song or *mélodie* was one of the Poulenc's preferred genres – he produced over 150 *mélodies* throughout his lifetime. Solo vocal literature and opera were very close to his heart and expressed virtually all the emotions it is possible to express through music. Contemporary French poetry was a major source of inspiration for the composer and influenced almost all of his output. Poulenc was also a gifted writer. In light of the undeniable importance that *mélodie*, voice, and poetry had in Poulenc's life, my document will study the interconnections between the vocal and pianistic styles in his music and will offer new insights to the interpretation of his piano works, particularly *Les Soirées de Nazelles* and *Nocturnes*.

The document is organized as follows:

- Chapter I consists of a brief introduction.
- Chapter II includes a biographical sketch of the composer, a discussion of his style, his artistic tendencies, important poets, the historical setting and its effect on Poulenc's musical production. In addition, I discuss the importance of vocal writing in his total oeuvre.
- Chapter III is a discussion of Poulenc's *Nocturnes*, a review of the relevant literature, and a discussion of the performance of these pieces, including the *Sixth Nocturne* as a possible eulogy for Raymonde Linossier.
- Chapter IV focuses on *Soirées de Nazelles*.
- Chapter V discusses the most common problems of interpretation in these works, such as Poulenc's use of the comma and questions of phrasing, particularly in terms of musical direction. I also study the issues of rubato, tempo and metronome markings, Poulenc's unusual expressive indications, and his demands for the right combination of sound, texture and pedal. I compare the recordings of piano and vocal music made by Poulenc in order to illuminate the interpretation of his piano works.
- Chapter VI summarizes these findings, proposing, in light of the knowledge of Poulenc's own performance and his vocal scores, a performance style of his piano works. This style reflects Poulenc's own words "I write music that sings to me," words that without doubt can be applied to his compositional process and the vocal ideal always present in his piano works.

II. FRANCIS POULENC

A Brief Biography

Francis Poulenc was born in 1899. His father, Emile Poulenc, owned a chemical industry, which later was to become the pharmaceutical giant Rhône-Poulenc; his mother Jenny Royer was from a well-educated bourgeois Parisian family[1].

Poulenc's musical instruction started at the piano: from the age of five, he studied under the guidance of his mother, who was a good pianist and enjoyed making music at home. The music that Poulenc heard as a little child influenced his own musical taste. Later in life, he often expressed his love for the music of Mozart, Chopin, Schumann and Schubert, whose works he often heard performed by his mother. [2] However, his mother's instruction soon proved insufficient, and at the age of eight, Poulenc's piano studies were entrusted to Cesar Franck's niece, Mademoiselle Boutet de Monvel.[3]

At sixteen, Poulenc became a student of the great Ricardo Viñes. The teaching of the Spanish piano virtuoso and pioneer of new French music determined the way Poulenc would feel about the piano for the rest of his life. He said, "Everything I know about piano I owe to this genius teacher, and he is the one who decided my vocation."[4]

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1 Henri Hell. *Francis Poulenc: musicien français* (Paris: Plon, 1958), 1.

2 Ibid., 2.

3 Ibid., 2.

4 "Tout ce que je sais de piano, je le dois à ce maitre génial, et c'est lui qui décida ma vocation." [Here and later all translations from French to English are mine – S.K.]. Francis Poulenc and Nicolas Southon. *J'écris ce qui me chante* (Paris: Fayard, 2011), 464.

Through his association with Viñes, Poulenc was introduced to Eric Satie and Georges Auric. Auric and Poulenc became lifelong friends, and along with Francis' childhood friend Raymonde Linossier, all three would spend a big part of their time exploring art and literature. Around the same time, Poulenc met Darius Milhaud, though their friendship did not flourish until years later. Poulenc's enchantment with Eric Satie's musical style influenced the course of his musical education: he was rejected at the entrance exams of the Paris Conservatoire for placing a dedication to Satie on the score of his *Rapsodie nègre*. Paul Vidal, conductor at the Opéra-Comique, who was to determine if Poulenc was ready for the *Conservatoire National de la Musique*, expressed himself in following words:

> Your work is infected, inept; it is an infamous stupidity. You mock me: fifths all over the place, and what the heck [*sic*] is this Honoloulou? Ah! I see that you go with the band of Stravinsky, Satie and C°; well, good-bye.[5]

The *première* of Satie's *Parade* in 1917, Poulenc's encounter with poet Guillaume Apollinaire, and Poulenc's collaboration with poet Jean Cocteau stand out as the most important events of the next three years, during which Poulenc also spent time in mandatory military service. Poulenc's letters from this period often start with "I am in jail,"[6] "It is prison that I am writing you from."[7] However, Poulenc's letters of the period

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5 "Votre œuvre est infecte; inepte; c'est une *couillonnerie* infâme. Vous vous foutes de moi ; des quintes partout ; et cela est-ce cul cet Honoloulou ? Ah! Je vois que vous marchez avec la bande Stravinsky, Satie et Cie; eh bien bonsoir." Letter to Ricardo Viñes, September 26, 1917. Francis Poulenc and Myriam Chimènes, *Correspondance, 1915-1963* (Paris: Fayard, 1994), 55.

6 "*Je suis en prison.*" Letter to Valentine Gross, Jeudi [May 30, 1918]. Poulenc and Chimènes, *Correspondance*, 60.

7 "*C'est de prison que je vous écris.*" Letter to Ricardo Viñes, Mardi [September 3, 1918]. Ibid., 64.

show only a mild disappointment with his situation and a great enthusiasm for his new musical projects.

The 1920s saw the birth and the decline of the group of composers known as *"Les Six"* - Georges Auric, Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, Germaine Tailleferre, Francis Poulenc, and Louis Durey. The production of the ballet *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*, which brought together Cocteau and five of the members of "*Les Six*" for the first time, took place in 1921. Poulenc took formal composition lessons with Charles Koechlin, and established new friendships with great composers such as Sergei Prokofiev, Béla Bartók, Alban Berg and Arnold Schoenberg. During this time Poulenc distanced himself personally from Satie, although he always revered Satie as a musician. By 1927, Poulenc acquired the Touraine house - *Le Grand Coteau* - where he would retreat during the summers to escape the "noise" of Paris in order to focus on composition.

The 1930s brought not only financial difficulties and periods of personal loss, but also new and very important artistic associations. During the 1930s, Poulenc met baritone Pierre Bernac, who became his recital partner, confidant, and companion for many years to come. This is the period of time when Poulenc created many unforgettable *mélodies*, as well as a wealth of piano music. Poulenc secured sponsorship from influential patrons, such as Princess Edmond de Polignac (who commissioned *Concerto for two pianos*), Marie-Laure and Charles de Noailles (sponsors of *Bal Masqué*), and others. However, the menace of Hitler in Europe, Franco's regime in Spain and the tragic death of two of Poulenc's friends, the great poet Garcia Lorca and composer Pierre-Octave Ferroud,

contributed to a drastic spiritual transformation, leading Poulenc to embrace the Catholic faith he inherited from his parents with a new fervor.

During the 1940s Poulenc spent much time performing, since it offered a more secure income compared with the publishing of new works. Nonetheless, these years see the birth of the *Violin Sonata* (after four failed attempts of writing a sonata for this instrument), the incidental music to the play *Les Animaux Modèles*, *Sinfonietta*, *L'Histoire de Babar, Piano Concerto, La Figure Humaine, Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, and many songs. By the end of the decade concert tours with Bernac brought Poulenc to United States, beginning the long years of mutual admiration between the composer and the American audience.

During the 1950s, Poulenc composed the operas *Dialogues des Carmelites* and *La Voix Humaine*, considered by many his masterpiece in this genre. Other important works included *Stabat Mater* and the *Sonata for Two Pianos.* Poulenc also undertook new American tours and gave concerts in Europe and Egypt. His composition of *Dialogues des Carmelites* took four years of Poulenc's life and became his obsession. Poulenc also received new commissions from the Elizabeth Coolidge Foundation, the Koussevitzky Foundation, and the New York Philharmonic, which resulted in the *Flute Sonata, Gloria* and *Sept Répons des Ténèbres.*

During his last three years, Poulenc produced the *Sonata for Clarinet and Piano* and the *Sonata for Bassoon and Piano*, finished the New York Philharmonic commission, and traveled for the last time to US, where he performed with Evelyn Crochet his *Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra*. Poulenc died on January 30, 1963.

Several studies describe the multiple sides of Poulenc's character, his interests, social circles, attachments, and, of course his music. His longtime friend and fellow composer Ned Rorem offers one of the best descriptions of Poulenc's enigmatic personality:

> Like his name he was both dapper and ungainly. His clothes came from Lanvin but were unpressed; his hands were scrubbed, but the fingernails were bitten to the bone. His physiognomy showed a cross between weasel and trumpet, and featured a large nose through which he wittily spoke. His sun-swept apartment on the Luxembourg was elegantly toned in orange plush, but the floors squeaked annoyingly. His social predilections were for duchesses and policemen, though he was born and lived as a wealthy bourgeois. His villa in Noizay was austere and immaculate, but surrounded by densely careless arbors. There he wrote the greatest vocal music of our century, all of it technically impeccable-and truly vulgar. He was deeply devout and uncontrollably sensual. In short, his aspect and personality, taste and music, each contained contrasts which were not alternating but simultaneous.[8]

Let us explore this contrasting duality reflected in Poulenc's unique musical style.

Style

Poulenc's musical taste was cultivated through music lessons with his mother and his childhood love for the music of Mozart, Debussy, Schumann and Chopin exerted a powerful influence on the development of his own style. Nevertheless, there was also a strong influence of Parisian street music, music of the music halls, *café-chantant*[9] and

8 Ned Rorem. "A memoir," in *Tempo, New Series*, No.64, American Music (Spring, 1963), 28-29, Cambridge University Press: 28, accessed November 06, 2012, http://www.jstor.org/stable/943868.

9 A type of musical entertainment associated with the *Belle Epoque* in France. Usually, an outdoor café that featured popular music of the non-political sort, as opposed to *vaudeville*.

cabaret[10]. Poulenc himself noted, "I need a certain musical vulgarity, like a plant that searches for the soil."[11]

During his lessons in composition with Charles Koechlin, Poulenc studied the rules of counterpoint as well as the harmonization of Bach's chorales. Even though choral writing ultimately became important for the composer, counterpoint never formed a significant aspect of his style. Poulenc says:

> I do not believe that counterpoint is well suited to the French temperament, more sensitive to colors, harmonic subtleties, and free monody. Every nation has its own particular character. While I dedicated some time to this very necessary discipline, I never attempted to go beyond of my natural abilities that are primarily melodic.[12]

This statement reflects the concept that some French composers have about the nature of French music and how it differs, for instance, from German music. Pianist and composer Paul Collaer considered the foremost characteristic of French music to be "lightness" (*légèreté*). He defines this lightness in his book *La Musique Moderne*:

> We, French, understand the meaning of this lightness, while foreigners misinterpret it, confusing it with lack of seriousness. Anything can be said with lightness, even the most serious thoughts; lightness is the quality that opposes congestion and redundancy, makes us avoid repetition and insistence, demands simplicity and clarity.[13]

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10 A nightclub type establishment, where the public dine while enjoying variety of music, dance, humor, circus numbers etc.

11 "J'ai besoin d'une certaine vulgarité musicale comme une plante recherche le terreau." Poulenc and Southon, *J'écris,* 472.

12 "Je ne crois pas que le contrepoint soit bien dans le tempérament français, plus sensible aux couleurs, aux subtilités harmoniques ainsi qu'à la libre monodie. Chaque race a son génie particulier. Tout en m'astreignant pendant quelque temps à cette discipline nécessaire je n'ai pas essayé d'aller en dehors de mes aptitudes naturelles qui sont avant tout mélodiques." Ibid., 537.

13 "Le Français sait ce qu'il entend par cette légèreté ; l'Étranger s'y méprend, la confondant avec la futilité. On peut tout dire avec légèreté ; même les pensées les plus graves, la légèreté est cette qualité

According to Collaer, French music is for those who know, care, and can understand:

> [...] music has to please [...] the most demanding, most refined, most intelligent. French art, even when it has a popular appearance, is aristocratic.[14]

Poulenc agreed with the idea of the music that has to "please," gratify the ear. However, this pleasing quality sometimes is produced by a combination of otherwise "unpleasant" ingredients:

> Watch out - you do not know how one can alchemically mix acrid odors to produce the scent of a rose.[15]

Collaer also notes the importance of melodic skill as an essential part of the French musical language. He calls it "free flow," or "fluidity" (*fluidité*):

> Above all, free flow: it is because of the existence of a melodic gift without equivalent in other nations. From the beginning, say circa 800, until today, French music has been invariably based on the invention of perfect melodies, melodies that contain in themselves a complete musical sense: rhythmic, harmonic, architectural.[16]

To me, these words by Collaer describe the essence of Poulenc's music.

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qui s'oppose à l'encombrement et à la redondance ; qui fait éviter les redites et l'insistance, exige la simplicité et la clarté." Paul Collaer, *La musique moderne* (Paris-Bruxelles: Editions Meddens, 1963), 106.

14 "[...] la musique doit faire plaisir [...] aux plus exigeants, aux plus raffinés, aux plus intelligents. L'art français, même lorsqu'il affecte une allure populaire, est aristocratique." Ibid., 106.

15 "Qu'ils fassent attention, on ne sait pas avec quelles odeurs âcres, chimiquement combinées, on obtient le parfum de la rose." Poulenc refers to Belgian critics, who called his music "nice and charming." Letter to Paul Collaer, Lundi [February 7, 1921]. Poulenc and Chimènes, *Correspondance*, 119.

16 "La fluidité d'abord : elle est due à l'existence d'un don mélodique sans équivalent chez d'autres peuples. Depuis le début de son existence, c'est-à-dire vers l'an 800, jusqu'à présent, la musique française a invariablement été basée sur l'invention et l'emploi de mélodies parfaites, mélodies qui contiennent en elles-mêmes un sens musical complet : rythmique, harmonique, architectural." Collaer, *Musique Moderne*, 106.

Much has been written about Poulenc's borrowing from a number of composers and from himself, thus creating a completely new musical language of "adopted" and reworked musical gestures. This is how Ned Rorem describes this particular writing style:

> Thus stolen harmonies – lost chords - like *objects trouvés* become a personal brand by dint of the tune that binds them. Thus an assemblage of simple counterpoints conspires to form chords that vertically sound like someone else's, but whose moving top voice chants pure Poulenc. Thus his rhythms (which like his tunes are quintessentially French in their foursquareness), although humdrum in themselves, present solid planks on which to build his special tunes. Those tunes, like Ives's, all sprang from the town-band dance-hall memories of youth, seen through a glass darkly.[17]

No matter how much he borrowed from other sources, Poulenc's music is always his own; his music is honest, true, unpretentious and openhearted. We can say this not only about his musical work, but also about every aspect of his life. It is not a surprise to find among the letters the following words from the great Nadia Boulanger:

> Your letter, so simple, sounds "true" like you and your music, and I love you precisely for that. You always have something to give, something happy, something profound, something gentle, always something true. How can we thank God for such a gift? We thank you, Francis, since your presence, your friendship, your work, all this changes life.[18]

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17 Ned Rorem, *A Ned Rorem Reader* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 147.

18 "Votre carte, si simple, sonne "vrai" comme vous et votre musique et je vous aime précisément pour cela. Avoir toujours à donner, du gai, du profond, du gentil, toujours de vrai. Comment remercier Dieu d'un tel don? Nous le remercions, Francis, car votre présence, votre amitié, votre œuvre, cela change la vie." Nadia Boulanger to Poulenc, December 31st, 1936. Poulenc and Chimènes, *Correspondance*, 439.

The Musical and Literary Context

By the second half of nineteenth century, France had been "invaded" by German music, especially after the great success of Wagner's operas. This inspired the more nationalistically disposed composers to start a campaign against Wagner. The creation of the *Societé Nationale de la Musique* in 1871 aimed to promote and support French music. French artists began to refer to their works as *Ars Gallica*[19], and many of the important composers joined the movement – Gounod, Saint-Saëns, Faure and others. As an indication of the importance of the music for French nationalism, Barbara Kelly cites in her book *French Music, Culture, and National Identity* the three state funerals of the above-mentioned composers, concluding that "in public speeches [...] music was projected as an element in defining France as a nation."[20] The fight for the music that was less German and more French set the frame for musical nationalism, and continued well into the 20th century.

Being Parisian at the turn of the century was a tremendous privilege. Paris was a melting pot of artistic tendencies. The Universal Exposition of 1889 brought to Europe the exoticism of the oriental cultures, leaving a profound impression on the musical language of Debussy and the following generations of French composers. When Poulenc was an eager teenager, there was an influx of artistic forces due to World War I and the

19 Barbara L. Kelly, *French Music, Culture, and National Identity, 1870-1939* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2008), 4.

20 Kelly, *French Music*, 5.

revolution in Russia. Dozens of poets, painters, musicians, dancers, writers from around the world lived in Paris. Poulenc's infatuation with Erik Satie, Igor Stravinsky, Sergei Prokofiev, *Les Ballets Russes*, Julien Green, Guillaume Apollinaire, Christian Tzara, Paul Éluard, Pablo Picasso, Mark Chagall and so many other brilliant exponents of culture of that time comes from being exposed to those diverse and experimental geniuses as a child.

Poulenc often expressed his fascination with the music of his contemporaries, such as Stravinsky, Ravel and Debussy. Debussy occupied a particularly important place for the young composer, and he often sought the latest works of Debussy as soon as they appeared in press:

> Debussy indeed has fascinated me since my childhood. When I, a bad student at the *Condorcet* school, would return home (on Saint Honore) via *Caumartin* Street and *Madeleine* Square, I would rush straight to Durand to see if there was something new by Debussy.[21]

While Poulenc's mother exercised a strong influence on the young composer's taste, his father's musical taste for Jules Massenet and Cesar Franck touched his heart too, however in a slightly different manner. Poulenc dedicated an entire lecture to the "exquisite bad music," where he included among others Jules Massenet, Cécile Chaminade, Piotr Tchaikovsky and Edward Grieg.[22]

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21 "Debussy, en effet, me fascine depuis mon enfance. Quand, mauvais élève du lycée Condorcet, je rentrais par la rue Caumartin et la place de la Madeleine jusque chez mes parents (faubourg Saint-Honoré), je me précipitais à la devanture de Durand pour voir s'il y avait une nouveauté de Debussy." Poulenc ans Southon, *J'écris*, 463.

22 See "L'exquise Mauvaise Musique", in Poulenc and Kayas, *A bâtons rompus : écrits radiophoniques ; précédé de Journal de vacances ; et suivi de Feuilles américaines* (Arles : Actes Sud, 1999), 62.

In addition to the serious and experimental aspects of classical music, Poulenc was under the strong creative influence of what he called "folklore of 20th century." Lucy Kayas defines it as

> ...a city folklore that includes all those songs produced in music-halls, café-concert and operetta, brought to life by Maurice Chevalier, Dramen, Mayol, Polin, - all those on the performer's side, and by Yvain or Christiné on the composer's side.[23]

Poulenc adored the theater and the music halls. He not only admired the popular singers of the cabaret tradition, he imitated their style in many works, for example, the famous *Improvisation "Hommage à Edit Piaf,"* or the Valse-Musette "*Les chemins de l'amour,*" dedicated to cabaret singer Yvonne Printemps. Poulenc began one of the lectures on Radio France with the following shocking statement:

> Today I will tell you whom I would like to be if I could have chosen my destiny at the cradle....Don't try to find in this confession any paradox, any desire to impress the bourgeois. I will simply admit, because it is the exact truth, that I would like to have been Maurice Chevalier.[24]

Not only classical and popular musicians exerted an undeniable influence on Poulenc's style. His friendship and collaboration with the major exponents of the contemporary French literature were of no less importance. Poulenc says:

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23 "Il s'agit d'un folklore citadin comportant toutes ces chansons issues du music-hall; du café-concert et de l'opérette; incarnées par Maurice Chevalier, Dranem, Mayol, Polin - pour ce qui est des interprètes, - et par Yvain et Christiné du côté des compositeurs." Poulenc and Kayas, *A bâtons*, 38.

24 "Aujourd'hui, je viens vous dire qui j'aurais voulu être si j'avais pu choisir mon destin au berceau. Ne voyez dans cette confidence aucun paradoxe, aucun désir d'épater le bourgeois, je vous avouerai très simplement, parce que c'est l'exacte vérité, que j'aurais voulu être Maurice Chevalier." Poulenc and Kayas, *A bâtons*, 43.

> I always loved poetry with passion, and that is the reason why art-song are so numerous in my production.[25]

Among poets, three names must be mentioned: Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918), Paul Éluard (1895-1952) and Max Jacob (1876-1944). The vast majority of Poulenc's melodies are set to the words of these three poets. Jean Cocteau (1889-1963) too became very important at the beginning of Poulenc's career, especially as the center of gravity of "Les Six." Along with the visual artists of the time, the poets were identified by their "aesthetic." Apollinaire and Max Jacob were considered "cubists," Éluard – "surrealist," and Cocteau – "Dadaist." Poulenc describes his extraordinary affinity with the poetry of Apollinaire in the following words:

> Most importantly: I heard the sound of his voice. I think that this is an essential point for a musician who does not want to betray a poet. Apollinaire's tone, like his works, was at the same time melancholy and joyful.[26]

> I found in his poetry a rhythm that corresponds exactly to the rhythm of my music.[27]

The influence of "Dada" Jean Cocteau and Erik Satie also formed part of Poulenc's aesthetic. The founder of "Dada," Christian Tzara, gave this recipe for making a Dadaist Poem:

> To make a Dadaist poem:
> Take a newspaper.

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25 "J'ai toujours aimé passionnément la poésie; et c'est pourquoi les mélodies sont si nombreuses dans ma production musicale." Poulenc and Southon, *J'écris*, 475.

26 "Chose capitale : j'ai entendu le son de sa voix. Je pense que c'est là un point essentiel pour un musicien que ne veut pas trahir un poète. Le timbre d'Apollinaire, comme toute sa œuvre, c'était à la fois mélancolique et joyeux. " Poulenc and Southon, *J'écris*, 478.

27 "J'ai trouvé dans sa poésie un rythme correspondant exactement au rythme de ma musique." Ibid., 646.

> Take a pair of scissors.
> Choose an article in the newspaper of the length you wish to give to your poem.
> Cut out the article.
> Then cut out carefully all of the words that make up the article
> and put them in a bag.
> Shake gently.
> Then remove each cutting one after another in the order in which they emerge from the bag.
> Copy conscientiously.
> The poem will be like you.
> You have now become "an infinitely original writer with a charming sensitivity, although still misunderstood by the common people."[28]

We sense this "Dadaist" element of construction in many of Poulenc's piano works where the structure is a seemingly spontaneous, random kaleidoscope of interchangeable periods, motives, melodies, sudden modulations and mood swings.

Poulenc was extremely careful when setting poetry to music. He took time reciting the poem, studied the disposition of the text on the page, and took notes of the breathing points and the internal rhythm, searching for a correct prosody. In Poulenc's words,

> For me, the song is not at all a trifling diversion, but hard work to which I consecrate my whole being. I research the perfect adherence to the poem and I strive to be perfectly faithful. [29]

Poulenc's process of composing songs was long and very arduous, and he did not leave anything to chance. He used specific expressive means to convey specific words, emotions, images and ambience. If pianists pay attention to those very important

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28 AA the antiphilosopher and Tristan Tzara, *Chronicle,* no.15, July/August 1920. Cited from Dawn Ades, *The Dada Reader: A Critical Anthology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 199.

29 "La mélodie n'est point une forme de délassement ; mais un grand travail auquel je me consacre tout entier : Je recherche l'adhérence parfaite au poème, la façon de m'exprimer la plus précise ..." Poulenc and Southon, *J'écris*, 552.

elements, they will be able to discover a completely new musical meaning in Poulenc's music for piano.

Historical Background of the Solo Piano works: the *Nocturnes* and *Les Soirées de Nazelles.*

Poulenc began the composition of his *Nocturnes* for solo piano in 1929 and completed the cycle 1938. *Les Soirées de Nazelles* were composed between 1930 and 1936, with subsequent revisions.

One reason why Poulenc turned to the composition of solo piano music during the 1930's was that, although the composer was born into a wealthy family, Poulenc felt the effects of the great recession. In the book *La musique pour piano de Françis Poulenc ou le temps de l'ambivalence* Franck Ferraty[30]especially notes the harsh times that Poulenc had to endure due to the economic crisis that came to France by 1929: the big depression touched everyone in Europe. The rise of Hitler's Germany added to the political crisis in France, making the situation very difficult for all Frenchmen regardless of social status. Poulenc lost a large amount of money when his bank went bankrupt. He wrote to Marie-Blanche de Polignac:

30 Franck Ferraty and Jésus Aguila. *La musique pour piano de Francis Poulenc ou le temps de l'ambivalence* (Toulouse: sn, 1998), 173.

> This spring I lost a lot of money in a collapsed bank of my friends, and for six weeks I have been trying to refloat my terribly sunken boat.[31]

Three years before the crisis Poulenc had acquired a big estate in Tour, in Noizay, "Le Grand Coteau." The purchase affected Poulenc's economic stability, since the family money was not enough for such a big investment. The composer found himself in a position where he had to collect money from friends in order to survive. He wrote to Charles Koechlin:

> I am incurring a lot of debt at this time because of the installation of my new house in Touraine, and I would accept gladly if you could pay me back the little amount I lent to you in the past out of my generosity. You could send me the balance by check, but at *no price* do I want to hear you speak about interests – that would give me *horrible* pain.[32]

Since money became an issue, Poulenc had to find new sources of income. This came by the way of shorter pieces for piano, which were in great demand and paid more or less steadily. Piano was always a favorite instrument for the composer but the conditions under which he created some of these pieces were unpleasant for him. He complained to the Marie Blanche de Polignac:

> Imagine that now nobody wants this summer's *Concerto,* despite the good reviews and success. I know well that I must work for the love of art, but there are still moments when I must think about charcoal and meat patties too.

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31 "J'ai perdu ce printemps beaucoup d'argent dans une maison de banque amie qui a sauté et depuis six semaines je suis occupé à renflouer ma barque terriblement enlisée." Letter to Marie-Blanche de Polignac, Wednesday evening [July 1931]. Poulenc and Chimènes, *Correspondance*, 341.

32 "Faisant de gros frais en ce moment pour l'installation de ma nouvelle maison de Touraine j'accepte volontiers que vous e rendiez la petite somme que je vous ai prêtée jadis de grand cœur. Vous pouvez m'en envoyer le montant ici par chèque ; mais *à aucun prix* je ne veux vous entendre parler d'intérêts – cela me peinerait *horriblement.*" Letter to Charles Koechlin, Tuesday [March 1929]. Ibid., 300.

> In the solitude of a winter with no orders, I have to "write for the piano" things that all those "gentlemen publishers" want.[33]

Poulenc acquired the house with the secret purpose of sharing it with his intended wife, historian and orientologist Raymonde Linossier, who had been part of Poulenc's life for thirty years. Poulenc trusted her taste in literature, art, history, and it was Linossier who had introduced the composer to the literary meetings at *Le maison des amis des livres*, where he formed lifelong relationship with the work of the great writers of his time. Poulenc had long been in love with Linossier and he proposed to her through her sister, Alice Ardoin. We do not know why Raymonde refused to marry Poulenc, but the fact is that she tragically passed away on January 30 of 1930. The deep pain Poulenc felt because of this loss is reflected in letters, in dedications of his works, and in the fact that he kept her portrait on his worktable until the day he died and took it with him on every tour. After Raymonde's sudden passing, Poulenc wrote to her sister:

> I am horribly wretched, awfully wretched.[...] Rather than burning the manuscript of *Les Biches* that is at her place, put it in her hands, I beg you, because it is all my youth that departs with her, the part of my life that *belongs solely to her.*[34]

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33 "Songez donc qu'actuellement personne ne veut du *Concerto* de cet été malgré la presse et le succès. Je sais bien qu'il faut travailler par amour de l'art mais il y a tout de même des moments où il faut également penser au charbon et à la côtelette. Au seul d'un hiver sans commandes je dois donc "écrire pour piano" ce que tous ces "messieurs-éditeurs" veulent." Letter to Marie-Blanche de Polignac, [November 1932]. Ibid., 377.

34 "Je suis effroyablement malheureux, épouvantablement malheureux: [...] Plutôt que de brûler le manuscrit des B*iches* qui est chez elle mettez-lui dans les mains je vous en prie puisque c'est toute ma jeunesse qui part avec elle, toute cette époque de ma vie qui n'*appartient qu'à elle seule.*" Letter to Alice Ardoin, Friday noon [January 31 1930]. Ibid., 320.

This is how Ferraty describes the profound wound left by Raymonde, and how it affected the life of the composer:

> Lifelong friend (loved and adored in secret), the one that Poulenc kept so loftily in his heart, left an irreplaceable emptiness, an absence of the third degree, and the intensity of the wound appears to have precipitated the search for substitute affective experiences. With the death of Raymonde Linossier, Francis Poulenc saw his last barrier against homosexuality collapse.[35]

The years that we are focusing on in this study probably represent the hardest time for the composer in terms of his economic situation, the necessity to create music to survive, and the difficult decisions in his personal life. However, these years also brought to life works that display a deeper understanding of human emotions which finally led him to embrace the Catholic faith with new force.

The Vocal Connection

According to a complete catalog of composer's work published by Salabert, Poulenc wrote 274 musical works. The Table 1 illustrates the choice of instrumentation in his œuvre.

35 "L'amie de toujours (aimée et adorée dans le secret), celle que Poulenc portait très haut dans le cœur, laissa derrière elle vide irremplaçable, une absence au 3e degré, dont l'intensité de la brûlure semble avoir précipité le musicien dans la recherche d'expériences affectives de substitution. Avec la mort de Raymonde Linossier, Francis Poulenc vit aussi son dernier rempart contre l'homosexualité s'effondrer." Ferraty, *Ambivalence*, 238.

Table 1. Proportion of compositions for piano, voice and winds in Poulenc's œuvre.

Total works written	274
Works for piano solo	45
Works for chamber ensemble, total	15
Chamber works that include piano	12
Concertos for keyboard	5
Works for Choir	20
Songs and *Mélodies*	155
Voice and Chamber Ensemble	3
Large Choral Works	5
Operas	3
Scenes for voice and orchestra	3
Ballets	4
Incidental music for stage and film	16

Out of 274 works, 51 are for keyboard in a solo role, while 218 involve piano. However, 189 involve voice, including songs, choral and stage works. Of chamber music settings 9 are for wind instruments of any sort, and there are only five total works for strings. This shows us the importance of piano, voice and wind instruments for Poulenc. In fact, he struggled with string instruments: the *Violin Sonata* appeared after he discarded four other attempts and the *String Quartet* was destroyed after the first reading:

> This quartet is the shame of my life. [...] The embarrassment still reddens my cheeks when I think of it. From the first measures, I was telling myself:

> "This would be in any case better on an oboe, here we'd need a horn, there a clarinet." Wasn't it to condemn, at once, this work? I had one thought only: to flee. With what joy, leaving Calvet's place, I threw my manuscript in a trashcan on Pereire square![36]

This proportion of works in favor of the media that "breathe," along with the apparent struggle with writing for strings, suggests that there is something inherent in Poulenc's language that involves the breath as a natural means of phrasing.

It is clear that the ideal of the human voice determines Poulenc's choice of instruments, as well as the form and the texture of the majority of his works. He chooses winds because they breathe and phrase like the human voice. This particularity of his musical language is crucial for the understanding of the piano music.

When it comes to the form of a piece of music, Poulenc also follows the instincts of a song composer. A video recording of a concert given at the Salle Gaveau in 1959, which includes a session of questions and answers from the audience, provides an important insight to this issue. The second movement of the *Sonata for Flute and Piano*, titled "*Cantilena*," is the topic of this conversation:

> A woman from the audience asks, "Is *cantilena* a definitive form, or is it a simple variation of andante?"
>
> Poulenc answers, "No, *cantilena* is not a fixed form, like for instance a *passacaglia*. It is a free form, and I could have called it [...] *interlude* or *romance*. But I find that it has the spirit of a Bellini aria, for it is a true melodic line. Because it sings."[37]

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36 "Ce quatuor est la honte de ma vie. [...]Le rouge me monte encore aux joues lorsque j'y repense. Dès les premières mesures, je me disais : "Ce serait en tout cas mieux à un hautbois, ici il faudrait un cor, là une clarinette." N'était-ce pas condamner, du coup, cette œuvre ? Je n'avais qu'une idée : fuir. Avec quelle joie, en sortant de chez Calvet, j'ai jeté, dans un égout de la place Pereire, mon manuscrit." Poulenc and Southon, *J'écris*, 798.

37 - Une dame, "La cantilène est-il une forme définitive, ou est-elle une simple variante de l'andante?"

This is how Poulenc's own words provide us with the most valuable piece of information about his ideal – a Bellini aria. The vocal image and the singing quality of the music determine the form and the title of the movement.

When Poulenc referred to his vocal music, he demanded from the performer a complete immersion in the poetic text, a freedom of musical instinct, and a lively imagination. He despised singers who tried to analyze his music too much, sacrificing the freshness of the spontaneity. He wanted singers to focus only on beautiful singing:

> Above all, I ask my performers to sing, to sing always, to sing truly, as if it is a Schumann's lied or a Gounod's *mélodie*.[38]

On another occasion, responding to a question about how it was possible that he, who composed everything at the piano and had such an intimate relationship with the instrument, composed most of his music for voice, he said:

> I always asked myself this question without being able to answer it. I can only declare that my best discoveries of piano writing came to me when writing accompaniments to my songs.[39]

Could this mean that if Poulenc believes that his best piano music belongs to the songs, we must refer to his vocal music to find clues that can help us interpret his piano

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- Poulenc, "Non, la cantilène n'est pas une forme fixe, comme par exemple une passacaille. C'est une forme libre, et si comme...si j'avais intitule, [...] intermède ou romance, mais je trouve que c'est dans un esprit un peu comme un air de Bellini, enfin est véritable ligne mélodique...Par ce que cela chante." Transcribed and cited from DVD : Poulenc, Francis, et al. *Francis Poulenc & friends* (NY: EMI Classics, 2005).

38 "Avant tout, je demande à mes interprètes de chanter, de chanter toujours, de chanter vraiment, comme s'il s'agissait d'un lied de Schumann ou une mélodie de Gounod." Poulenc and Southon, *J'écris*, 481.

39 "Je me la suis souvent posée à moi-même sans jamais pouvoir la résoudre. Je constate seulement que mes meilleures trouvailles d'écriture pianistique me sont venues en écrivant l'accompagnement de mes mélodies." Ibid., 579.

music? I am sure we do. There is also the question of the imagery present in the songs, which is hard to find in the abstract piano "text." I believe that this is one of the reasons we still hesitate to play his piano music while the songs have been present in the voice repertoire for decades. The poetic text helps us create the necessary imagery for the proper interpretation of the music. Poulenc did say that he saw these two media differently:

> If in my piano works I am abstract, in my melodies, in the contrary, I am irremediably visual. It is necessary for a poem to create an image in order to tempt me. If there are no specific characters, I need at least an atmosphere.[40]

However, he also said:

> I am visual, contrary to abstraction. I am horrified by philosophy; I never read two lines of Sartre. The three things I prefer are music, painting, poetry.[41]

The three arts had the same importance in his life, while there is no place for "analysis." To interpret Poulenc we must also have the visual element, naturally present in poetic texts and Poulenc's songs, which is so necessary for the proper performance of his piano music.

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40 "Si, pour mes œuvres de piano, je suis abstrait, pour les mélodies je suis, au contraire, irrémédiablement visuel. Il faut qu'une poésie fasse image pour me tenter. S'il n'y a pas des sujets précis, j'ai besoin tout au moins d'une atmosphère." Ibid., 472.

41 "Moi, je suis un visuel, le contraire de l'abstraction. J'ai horreur de la philosophie, je n'ai jamais lu deux lignes de Sartre. Les trois choses que je préfère sont : la musique, la peinture, la poésie." Ibid., 602.

III. THE *NOCTURNES.*

The set of eight nocturnes as we know it today is a result of long years of work. The *First Nocturne* was finished in 1929 (although the manuscript gives, probably erroneously, 1930 as the year of completion).The *Nocturne No.2* was composed in 1933, *Nocturnes* from *No. 3* to *No.6* were finished by 1934, *No.7* in 1935, and the concluding piece was added in 1938. Poulenc recorded *Nocturnes Nos. 1, 2* and *4* for Columbia in 1934. There is also another, very different version of the *First Nocturne*, with an unknown date of recording. Poulenc was excited about the *Nocturnes*, and sent copies to Walter Gieseking, who promptly replied:

> Finally, I want to tell you what a joy I felt when I received and played your *Nocturnes*.[42]

The *Nocturnes* were not intended to form a cycle until 1938, when Poulenc decided to include them in one collection. The entire set was published in 1939.

Among those to whom Poulenc dedicated individual *Nocturnes,* there are his friends, colleagues, and other lesser-known individuals who probably commissioned the pieces. The *First Nocturne* is dedicated to Suzette Chanlaire, the sister of Richard Chanlaire, and who passed into history as Poulenc's painter, friend, partner, and lover during the time Poulenc was working on *Aubade*. Besides the *First Nocturne*,

42 "Je veux enfin vous dire quelle joie j'ai ressentie en recevant et jouant votre Nocturnes." Poulenc and Chimènes, *Correspondance*, 405.

Table 2. Nocturnes

Nocturne	Key	Year	Dedicated to	Title	Form	Place
no.1	C	1929 (1930)	Suzette (Chanlaire)	none	Rondo-like with Coda	Noizay
no.2	A	1933	Janine Salles	Bal de Jeunes Filles	ABA with Coda	Paris
no.3	F	1934	Paul Collaer	Les Cloches de Malines	ABA	Malines, Belgium
no.4	c	1934	Julien Green	Bal Fantôme	Large Period	Rome
no.5	d	1934	Jean Michel Frank	Phalènes	Free rondo-like	unknown
no.6	G	1934	Waldemar Strenger	none	ABA'B'A"	Noizay
no.7	Eb	1935	Fred Timar	none	Free ABA	unknown
no.8	G with coda in C	1938	none	(pour servir de Coda au Cycle)	Strophic with Coda	Noizay

Poulenc also dedicated to Suzette the final sketch of *Aubade*, with a lengthy inscription that shows his trust and confidence in her as a moral supporter. She also received a dedication in the final song from *Banalités, "Sanglots."*[43] According to Bernac,

43 See Carl B. Schmidt, *The Music of Francis Poulenc (1899-1963): A Catalogue* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 161.

"Sanglots" is "one of the most beautiful and most inspired among the lyrical songs of Poulenc."[44]

The *Second Nocturne* was dedicated to Janine Salles, probably the daughter of writer Georges Salles, the director of the Louvre. Poulenc enjoyed close friendship with the Salles family and would stay in their house on Montmartre in Paris before he acquired his own apartment. Although this is the only piece dedicated to Janine, George Salles was the dedicatée of the *Sextet* and *Exultate Deo* – two of Poulenc's major works.

Paul Collaer, the Belgian composer pianist and musicologist, is the dedicatée of the *Third Nocturne, Les Cloches de Malines*. He was an active promoter of the avant-garde and author of books on music history, one of which I cite in this study.

Julien Green, whose words from the *Visionnaire* precede the *Fourth Nocturne*, was a close friend of Poulenc and a renowned writer.

Jean Michel Frank was a costume designer and decorator. He designed the interior for the Vicomte Charles de Noailles and the sets and costumes for *Aubade.*

Waldemar Strenger and Fred Timar do not figure in any of the specialized publications on Poulenc, and the final *Nocturne* does not have a dedication.

Unfortunately, the English-language literature on Poulenc has been very critical of the quality of Poulenc's piano works, and the authors of those publications influenced in part the general opinion about Poulenc's place in music history. An example of this

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44 Pierre Bernac, *Francis Poulenc, the Man and His Songs* (NY: Norton, 1977), 75.

kind of literature is the book by Keith Daniel, published in 1982.[45] He dismisses Poulenc's *Nocturnes* as a cycle as "uneven, and not often performed today,[46] and the period of time during which they were written, as a "period of Poulenc's greatest pianistic failures and some of his least personal, most superficial works."[47]

Although Wilfrid Mellers in her monograph uses the term "modest," she is more positive in her appreciation of the *Nocturnes*. She sees them as "night-scenes, sound-images for both public and private events."[48] She concludes that:

> ...this delectable suite displays the loving care with which Poulenc defined, and protected, his vulnerabilities.[49]

The authors of these publications tried to analyze Poulenc's music from the standpoint of a traditional theoretician. Given the kaleidoscopic nature of Poulenc's writing, his piano pieces do not obey the conventional laws of musical structure. Their interest lies in the superposition of the layers of sound, in the extraordinary experiments with piano resonance, intimate sensitivity, and subtle, witty, and fine humor.

Nocturne No.6 is the one least understood by those who write about Poulenc's piano music. We find descriptions like "outdoors" (Mellers), or of "little interest"

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45 Keith W. Daniel, *Francis Poulenc, His Artistic Development and Musical Style* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1982). Daniel refers to *Nocturnes* with terms like "too long", "weakness", "deceptively simple", "banality", "facile melodic phrases", "phrase lacking melodic contour", etc.

46 Ibid., 179.

47 Keith, *Francis Poulenc*, 170.

48 Wilfrid Mellers, *Francis Poulenc* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 40.

49 Ibid., 44.

(Daniel). Henri Hell in his first official monograph, approved by Poulenc himself, fails to mention this piece at all, only stating that the set is of "uneven interest."[50] Ferraty dedicates several passages to this nocturne to suggest associations with the style of 17th and 18th centuries, "sewing machine" music, the pathos of Rachmaninoff, and Ravelian sensuality.[51] All of these descriptions prove useless for the performer and interpreter of this special piece.

There seems to be an exotic flavor to the harmonies and scales. The ostinato "5th" in the bass suggests the sustained sounds of the Indian sitar, and the scales are very similar to traditional Indian modes. The melody above the ostinato and the three-octave unison suggest an Indian raga. This *Nocturne* has an enormous emotional range. Poulenc directs the energy towards a huge culmination that is suddenly interrupted by a sepulchral silence followed by an extremely painful and dissonant succession of "2nds," and the even more painful deformation of a beautiful melody until a point of no return. A more serene version of the raga returns, interrupted by a nod to Wagner's "question" leitmotiv. Poulenc adds a little coda, with harmonies reminiscent of Chopin's funeral march. This *Nocturne* is clearly Poulenc's homage to the late Raymonde Linossier, who before her tragic death had organized an exposition of Indian and Tibetan art at The Guimet Museum[52]. Thirty years after Raymonde's passing, in 1960, Poulenc wrote to her sister:

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50 "*Intérêt inégal.*" Hell, *Francis Poulenc*, 72.

51 Franck Ferraty, *Francis Poulenc à son piano, un clavier bien fantasmé* (Paris: Harmattan, 2011), 20.

52 The Guimet Museum (Musée national des Arts asiatiques-Guimet), founded in 1879 in Lyon, and transfered to Paris in 1885.

There are, you know, persons that you cannot replace. Emotionally, I would falter my entire life because of this emptiness.[53]

In the dedicatory pages of the catalog of The Guimet Museum, published in 1930, shortly after Raymonde's death, we find the following dedication:

Ending these lines we intend to express our recognition to Miss Raymonde Linossier, from The Guimet Museum, who collaborated in the choice of the plates, and, later, in the proofreading. It is her memory we painfully evoke today. The premature death of this young expert, especially tied to our Indian and Tibetan collections, has been a cruel loss for our museum. We take the liberty to dedicate this work to her remembrance.[54]

Poulenc seems to have transformed these lines into a touching and emotional gesture to the woman he almost married.

53 "Il y a vous le savez, des êtres qu'on ne remplace pas. Toute ma vie j'aurai oscillé à cause de ce vide." Poulenc and Chimènes, *Correspondance*, 940.

54 "En terminant ces lignes nous avions l'intention d'exprimer aussi notre reconnaissance a Mademoiselle Raymonde Linossier, attachée au Musée Guimet, qui avait collaborée au choix de nos planches, comme, plus tard, à la révision des épreuves. C'est à sa mémoire que nous évoquons douloureusement aujourd'hui. La mort prématurée de cette jeune érudite, spécialement attachée à nos collections indiennes et tibétaines, a été pour notre musée une perte cruelle: qu'il nous soit permis de dédier cette ouvrage a son souvenir." J. Hackin. *La sculpture indienne et tibétaine au Musée Guimet*, (Librairie Ernest Leroux, Paris, 1931), 3, accessed January 15, 2013, http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k64352148/.

IV. LES SOIRÉES DE NAZELLES

Poulenc begun writing his piano suite *Les Soirées de Nazelles* in 1930, during summer gatherings at a country house in Touraine he visited quite often. Myriam Chimènes describes in her commentary to Poulenc's letters:

> Starting in 1922 Poulenc occupied part of *La Lezardiere*, a house in Nazelles (Touraine), which he considered his own, and which belonged to Virginie Lienard.[55]

Chimènes describes Virginie Lienard, whom Poulenc called tenderly "Aunt Lienard,"[56] as a widow and enthusiastic *mélomane* who had heard Wagner and Liszt, and at 89 was a passionate advocate of Stravinsky. The work is dedicated to the memory of "Aunt Lienard," and she is portrayed in one of the variations.

As it was with the great majority of his works, *Les Soirées* took Poulenc several years to finish and the piece underwent many transformations along the way. The final version was finished in 1936 and even after publication Poulenc kept revising the piece, offering an abridged version as a possibility for performance. Poulenc was excited about his new work. He wrote to Marie-Laure de Noailles, describing his plan for the suite.[57] In the table 3 (next page) I show the first design and the final version of the suite.

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55 Poulenc and Chimènes, *Correspondance*, 173.

56 *"Tante Lienard"*

57 Poulenc and Chimènes, *Correspondance*, 327.

Table 3. First sketch and final version of Les Soirées de Nazelles compared.

1930	1936
Ouverture	Préambule
Le Contentement de Soi	Cadence
La Joie de vivre	Le Comble de la Distinction
L'Instinct	Le Cœur sur la Main
La Suite dans les Idées	La Désinvolture et la Discrétion
Le Comble de la Distinction	La Suite dans les Idées
Le Charme voulu	Le Charme Enjôleur
Les Points de Suspension	Le Contentement de Soi
Romance	Le Goût de Malheur
Frissons	L'Alerte Vieillesse
Nerfs	Cadence
Soupirs	Final
L'Alerte Vieillesse	
Final	

Although later in life Poulenc changed his opinion about this cycle, at the time of composition he was very happy with the piece. These are extracts from letters written before finishing the project and before the first performance:

> What a joy to know that *Les Soirées de Nazelles* are finished![58]

> *Les Soirées* are up to their *Final*, which means ten days from completion. Dazzling piano.[59]

58 "Quelle joie de savoir terminées les Soirées de Nazelles." Letter to H. Sauget, August 10, 1936. Poulenc and Chimènes, *Correspondance*, 418.

59 "Les Soirées en sont au Finale c'est à dire à dix jours de la fin. Piano éblouissant." Letter to G. Auric, August 25th, 1936. Ibid., 425.

> In anticipation of the first hearing of a grand suite for piano that I am about to finish, I will tell you about *Les Soirées de Nazelles*, a work that embodies better than any other an all-encompassing quality, well suited to confound the critic.[60]

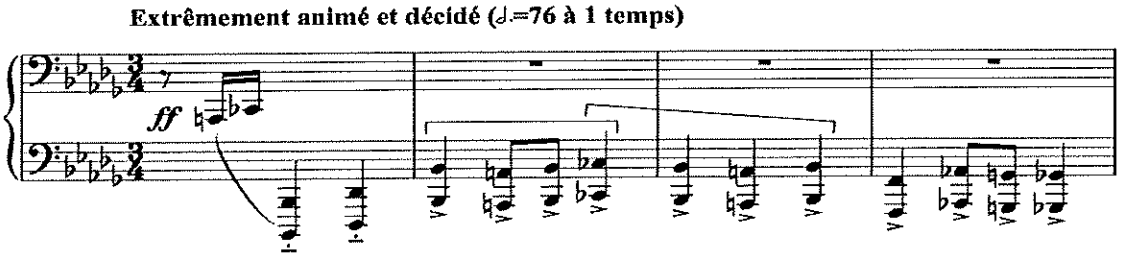
As this letter suggests it, Nadia Boulanger proofread and probably edited the piece:

> By your return to London, I will submit to you the proofs of *Nazelles*, before I give them to publish. I *count* on you to give me some annoying [difficult] fingerings.[61]

Poulenc noted that he had in mind *Les Folies Françaises* by Couperin when he embarked on the writing of these portraits of friends and neighbors. He also suggested the title *Le Carnaval de Nazelles,* clearly suggesting the work's affinity with Schumann's *Carnaval* and his *Carnival of Vienna* (*Faschingsschwank aus Wien),* with which it shares key, meter and the overall exciting mood.

Poulenc called his suite *Variations*; however, the work does not feature a theme and there is no motivic element that can be identified as the subject of variation technique. There is a little melodic turn that comes back in some of the pieces, but it is not enough to be considered a serious structural element (Figures 1 – 5).

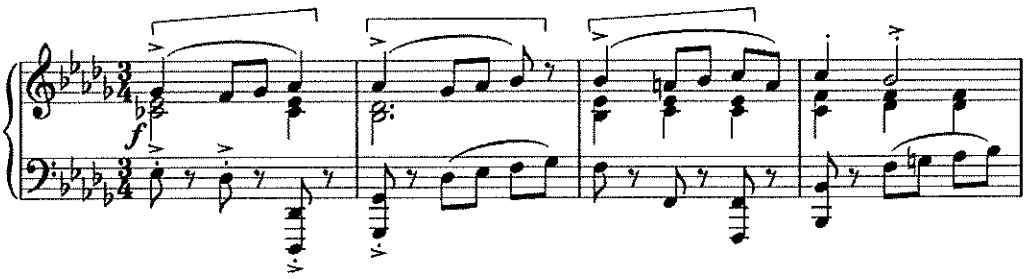
Example 1: Les Soirées de Nazelles, Préambule, measures 1-4.



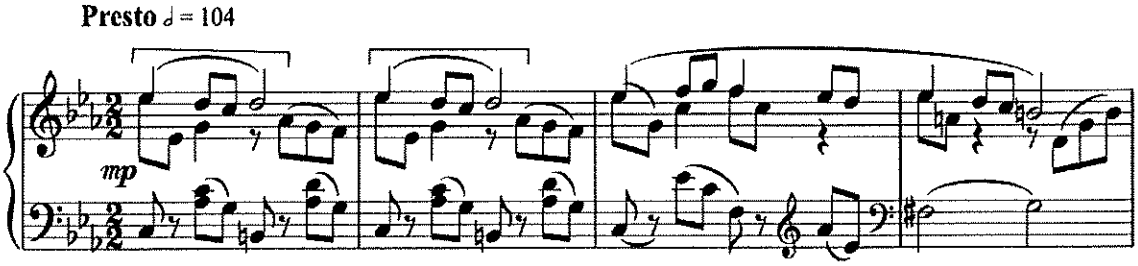
60 "Anticipant sur la première audition d'une grande suite de piano que je termine, je vous parlerai des Soirées de Nazelles, œuvre qui résume mieux que toute autre une ubiquité spirituelle et sentimentale, propre à égarer bien des critiques." Poulenc and Southon, *J'écris*, 471.

61 "A votre retour à Londres je vous soumettrai les épreuves des Nazelles avant de les donner à tirer. Je *compte* sur vous pur me tirer quelques épines des doigts." Letter to N. Boulanger, Nov. 1936. Poulenc and Chimènes, *Correspondance*, 434.

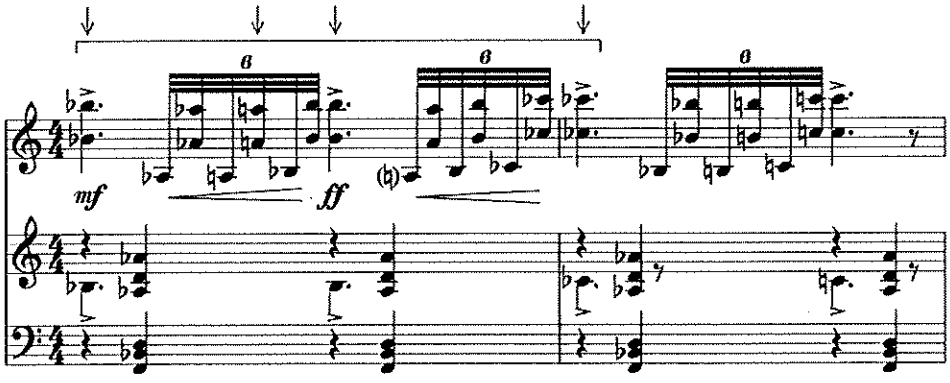
Example 2: Les Soirées de Nazelles, Préambule, measures 26-29.



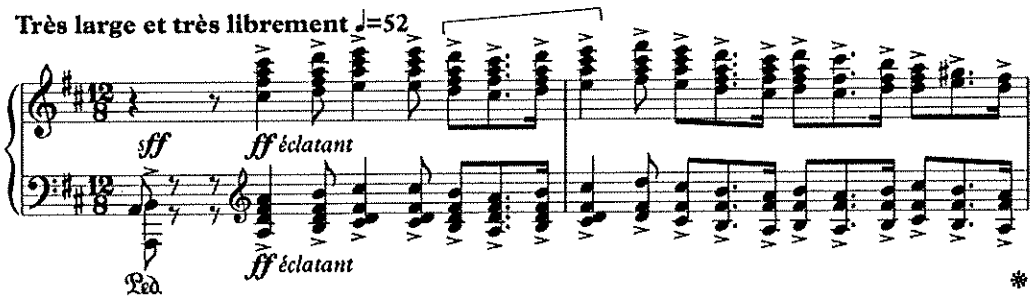
Example 3: Les Soirées de Nazelles, La désinvolture et la discrétion, measures 21-24.



Example 4: Les Soirées de Nazelles, La Suite des idées, measures 9-10.



Example 5: Les Soirées de Nazelles, Cadence (2), measures 2-3.



However, the question may in part be clarified by the idea Poulenc had of his cycles in general. When discussing with Collaer the structure of *Promenades* (1921), written for and dedicated to Arthur Rubinstein, Poulenc suggested that he thought of *Promenades* as **ten variations on ten different themes**. He said:

> A special technique employed in every number will trick the ear, since there will be one in "3rds", another in repeated "8ves", etc. This way I will create an impression of unity.[62]

It is quite possible that his view on *Variations* in this case is as a "unity" of different characters, each being a variation on a different theme and different character.

Modern musical criticism written in English has a rather harsh opinion of this cycle. Again, Daniel is especially negative, calling this composition "the epitome of inconsequential salon music."[63] He recognizes the composer's skill of writing for piano,

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62 "Le technique spéciale de chaque numéro achèvera de faire"trompe-l'oreille"vu qu'il y en aura un in tierces, un autre in octaves répétées, etc... Ainsi j'obtiendrai un semblant d 'unité." Letter to Collaer, July 12th, 1921. Poulenc and Chimènes, *Correspondance*, 127.

63 Daniel, *Francis Poulenc*, 186.

but at the same time criticizes the overly idiomatic language ("Poulenc's writing is too pianistic"[64]). Poulenc's own appreciation of *Les Soirées* decreased with years, and later he confessed that he would not mind destroying the piece. However, knowing how critical he was about his works, and how often he actually destroyed his music, the fact that *Soirées* remained in print suggests the opposite. The problem with the suite lies in the interpretive difficulty of the piece. When pianist John Ranck recorded *Soirées* for IPA in 1955, Poulenc sent him a following note on a postcard:

> Sir, I owe you a rather nice surprise. You rendered the *Soirées de Nazelles* listenable – and God knows I am harsh with them – since you play them marvelously. It isn't my habit, believe me, to make compliments I don't mean – Yvonne Martin can tell you I would have dreaded to listen to this disc, - you have earned *Bravo* and *Thanks.* A large part of *Soirées* was composed in my sister's house behind the windows marked by a cross. I hope to meet you soon. Very cordially, Poulenc.[65]

Ranck's recording is one of very few attempts to record the work commercially, and the only one so far that features the original, non-abridged version of the suite.

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64 Ibid., 187.

65 John Ranck, Francis Poulenc, Alexander Tcherepnin, Charles Tomlinson Griffes, and Frederick Werlé. *John Ranck plays Poulenc, Tcherepnin, Griffes, Werlé.* (NY: International Piano Archives, 1977). Liner notes by Donald Garvelmann.

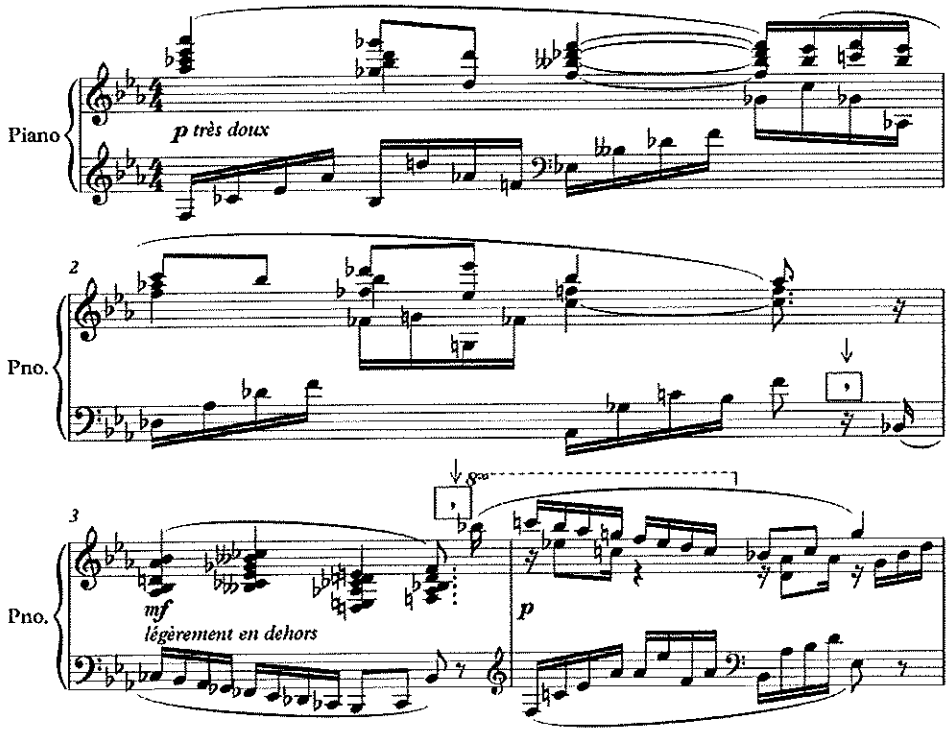
V. PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION: COMPARISON OF THE PUBLISHED SCORES WITH POULENC'S RECORDINGS.

Commas

Poulenc fills his piano scores with *commas*. In *Nocturne No.1* Poulenc adds a *comma* in places where there is no space for a rest and a break in sound is needed. *Commas* are found only twice in this piece, with the clear purpose of division of the form: they mark the end of the section and the beginning of the new one.

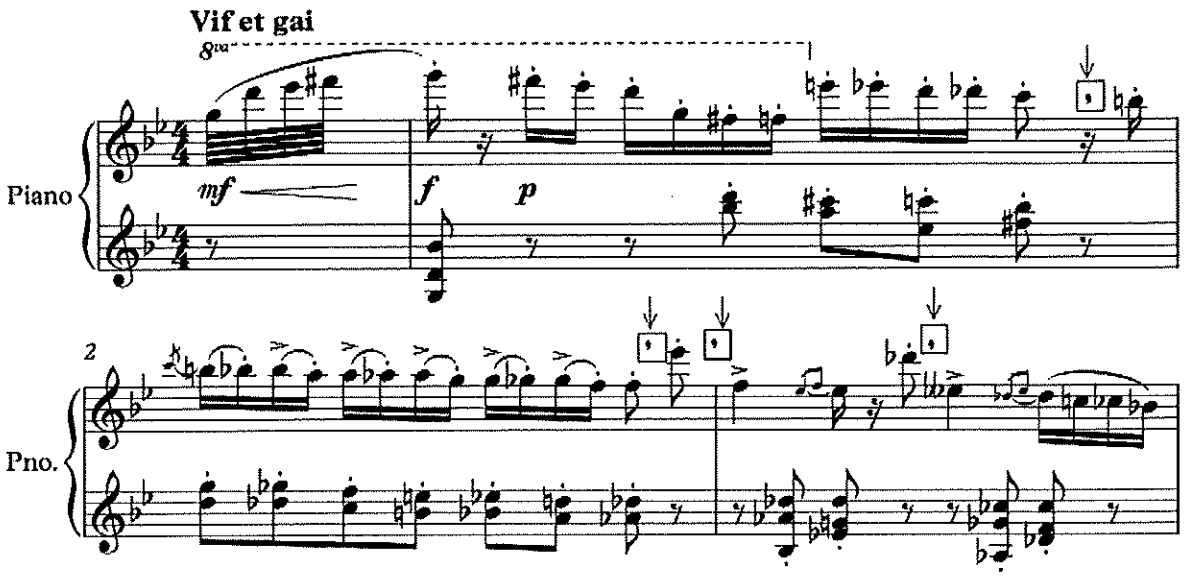
In *Nocturne No.7*, we find several *commas* in a breathless succession of short statements Example 6):

Example 6: Nocturne No.7, measures. 9-14.



In *Les Soirées de Nazelles* expressive markings abound to a much greater extent than in *Nocturnes*. Poulenc uses the *commas* in *Soirées* in order to separate phrases, gestures, sections, single notes, and to pinpoint the quirky character of some of the pieces. The composer creates a slight delay or hesitation before s note that teases our expectation of the arrival moment of the sound (Example 7):

Example 7: Les Soirées de Nazelles, Le comble de la distinction, measures 1-3.



Sometimes Poulenc's directions elucidate these markings: in m. 79 of the *Préambule* Poulenc indicates "*sans ralentir,*" allowing the half-cadence before the comma to have some flexibility. In many cases, the composer allows us to finish the thought with a slight *rallentando* and start over, with a new burst of energy.

Many of Poulenc's songs have *commas*: some of these are for the voice, which we expect in vocal music, and some *commas* are in the piano part. In the *Diary of My Songs*, Poulenc discusses the commas inserted in the song *Présent* from the *Three Poems of*

Louise Lalanne. The song is written in a steady 2/4 meter, with the exception of the first four measures:

> I could have written the whole song in 2/4, adjusting the rests in the first bars. However, it seemed to me smarter to write in 3/8 followed by a catch of the breath. It is for the singer to give an impression of intensity by slight breathlessness.[66]

Unfortunately, there are no recordings of Poulenc performing this set. However, from Poulenc's recordings of other songs we can conclude that the *comma* almost always implies a tiny rubato before the new phrase, not necessarily accompanied by a complete interruption of sound. The pianist should follow this nuance of timing, helping the singer to recover with a slight stretching of the tempo. We can hear Poulenc's own interpretation in such recordings as *Il Vole* (from *Fiançailles pour rire*) with Geneviève Touraine (1955), where she and Poulenc completely interrupt the sound for a fraction of a second to start the new phrase (mm.4, 17, 29, and especially m.37, where they take a big breath together). When performing *Vers le sud* (from *Calligrammes*) with Pierre Bernac, Poulenc is flexible with the timing, but there is no interruption of the sound, similar to an orchestral *colla parte* in an opera recitative (m. 12). In both Poulenc's recordings of his *Nocturne* No.1 he omits some of the commas (m.23), and treats some as a *rubato* (m.35).

It is evident that Poulenc wants the pianist to breathe like singers or wind players. In the slower pieces, we have to listen sensitively to the ends of phrases in order to start the new ones; in faster tempos, we should take a very short pause to clear the sound

66 Francis Poulenc, *Diary of My Songs = Journal De Mes Mélodies* (London: V. Gollancz, 1985), 27.

before the new idea begins. In all of these cases, the *comma* indicates a change in the timing that makes the musical declamation similar to words being spoken or sung.

Phrasing and Agogic Accents

The musical phrases in Poulenc's music are often very "square," and if interpreted literally sound like a technical exercise with little musical sense. There are many eighth-note passages, constant motion of sixteenth notes, and chordal *ostinatos* that are sustained for many pages without any rhythmic variety. To avoid a potentially monotonous performance we can study how the French language is used in a musical setting.

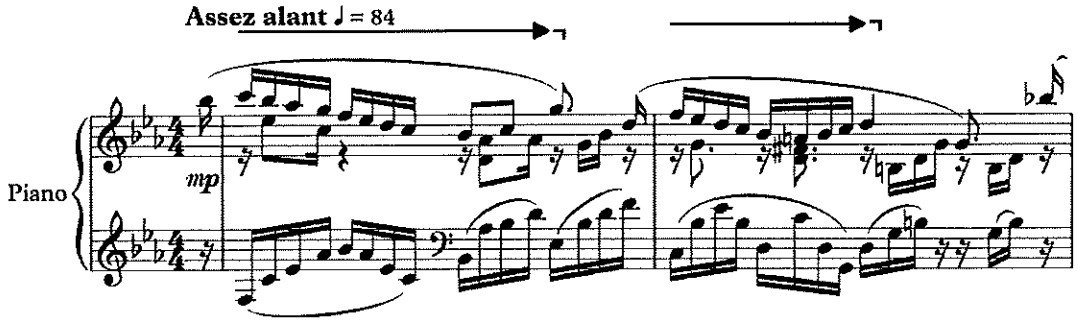
In his dissertation on Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Stephen Barr touches on the very essence of the natural French speaking, the way French composers set words to music, and how the setting affects the phrasing in general. He argues that Debussy, in his case,

> ...set text sensitively according to a specific ideal, that being the approximation of the inflection and rhythm of the spoken French language. [...] In spoken French, slight stresses of accent and duration do not impede the overall flow toward the final syllable of a phrase, and most often the final syllable of a phrase receives the strongest and longest emphasis. When an exception occurs, it is the penultimate syllable that receives the stress. [...] Furthermore, the rhythm of spoken French tends to become quicker as the speaker approaches the final syllable of a phrase or sentence. Debussy's solution to this problem was to coordinate musical rhythm with the rhythm of the natural inflection of the French language. To accomplish this, he wrote vocal lines that are primarily syllabic, with frequent repeated notes and a narrow range. Each phrase often ends with a note that is stressed by being given a longer duration. Triplets and other figures that create polyrhythms

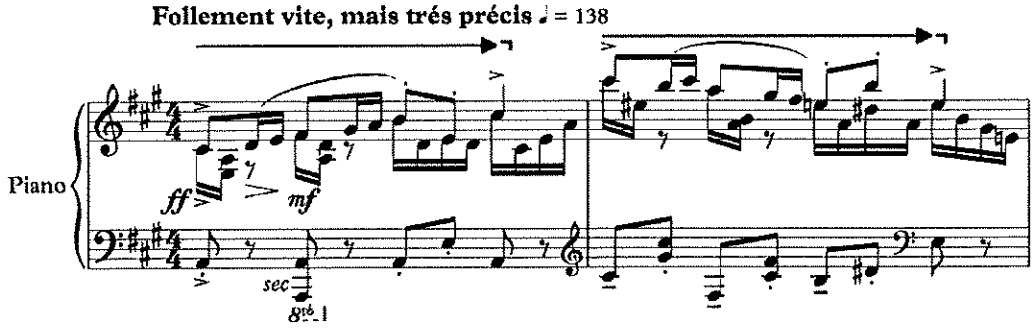
with the accompaniment are frequently used in order to accommodate speech rhythms more sensitively.[67]

We can apply this statement about Debussy in its entirety to Poulenc's vocal music, and, by analogy, we should apply it to his piano music as well. If we perform his otherwise square phrases with an intentional direction towards the accented syllable – usually the last (or the penultimate) one, the longest one – the music magically starts to sing, and acquires the energy to become "airborne" (Examples 8-10):

Example 8: Nocturne No.7, measures 1-2.

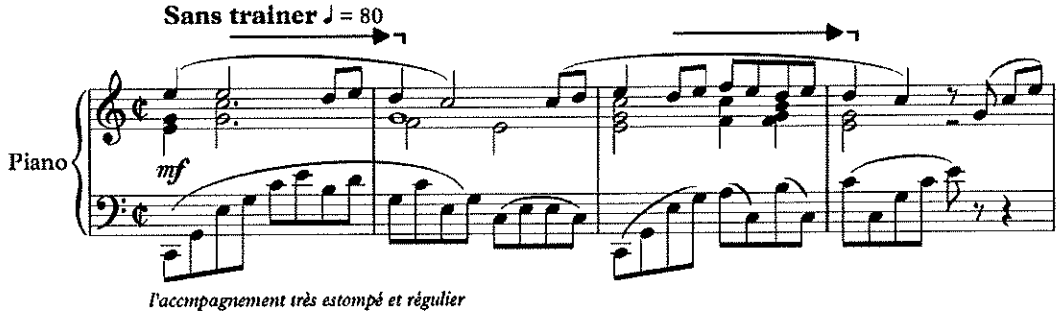


Example 9: Les Soirées de Nazelles, Final, measures 1-2.



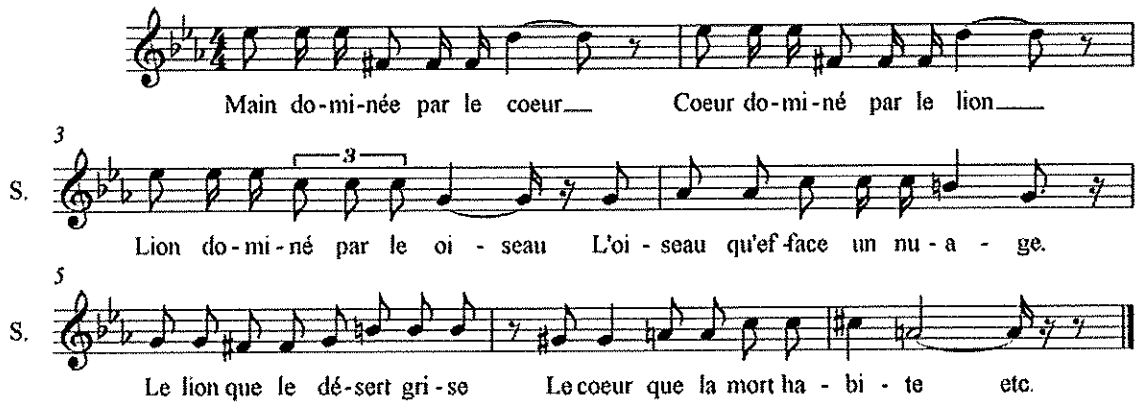
67 Stephen Anthony Barr, *"Pleasure is the Law": Pelléas et Mélisande as Debussy's Decisive Shift Away from Wagnerism* (DMA diss., West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV, 2007), 169-170.

Example 10: Nocturne No.1, measures 1-4.

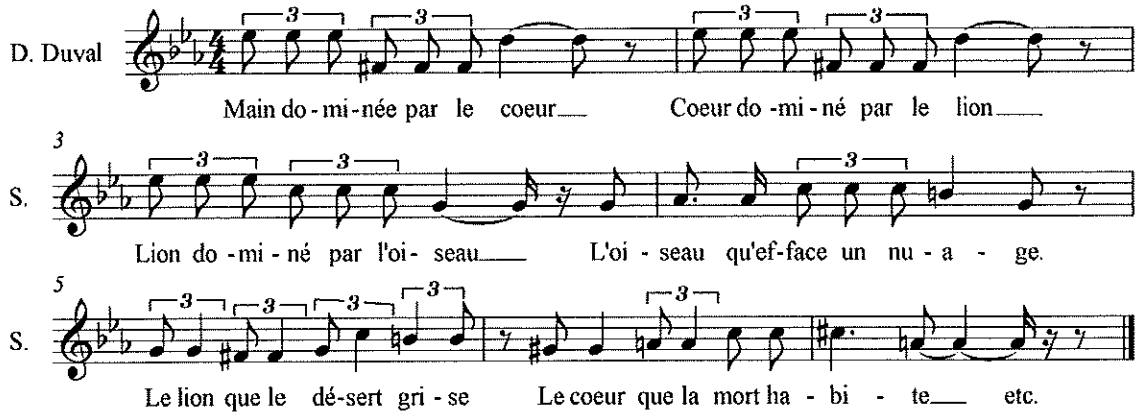


This directional quality of French prosody implies also that the equal syllables must adjust in length and emphasis within the phase, following the micro and macro gestures. In the recording of the recital Denise Duval and Poulenc gave in Bordeaux in 1958, we hear Duval taking great liberties with Poulenc's "square" music. Here is an example of Duval performing the *Main Dominée par le Cœur,* compared to the original text of the first page (Figure 11):

Example 11 : Main dominée par le cœur, measures 1-7, original text.



Example 12 : Main dominée par le cœur, measures 1-7, as performed by D. Duval and F. Poulenc, Bordeaux, 1958.

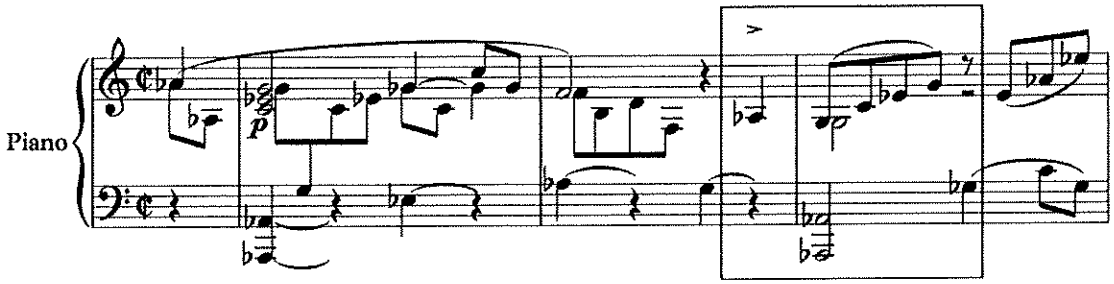


After comparing the two versions it becomes clear that the melodic line as it appears on the page does not always reflect the nuances of the spoken French language. Duval adjusts the length of the syllables according to the expressive demands of each word. We should assume that this is definitive, since Poulenc is the composer/pianist in this recording and he considered Duval his *interprète favorite*.

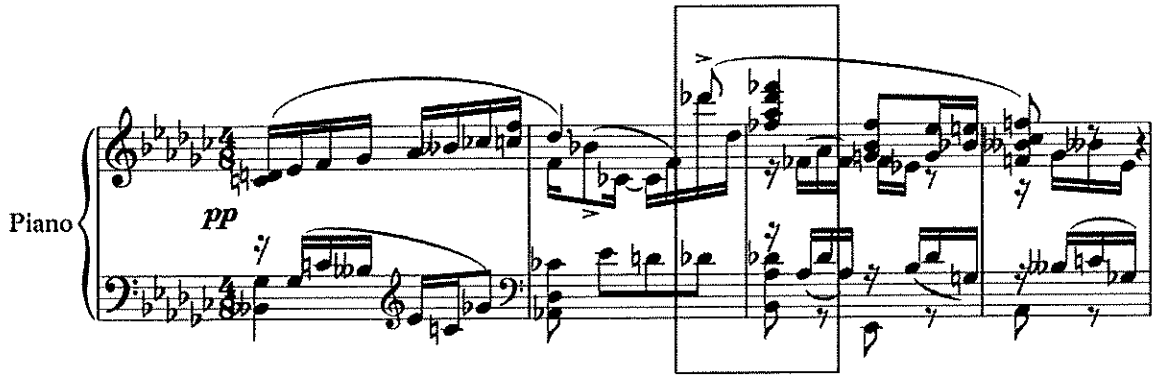
Another important nuance of the French language has to do with occasional emphasis on the initial syllables. French language naturally accentuates the ends of the words, but when special emphasis is needed, the initial syllable of a multi-syllabic word can carry an accent, which also alters the natural rhythm of the phrase. For instance, if we need to give importance to the verb "*venez!*" (come!), we will need to switch the accentuation of the word to "*venez!*" In Poulenc's musical settings without text we find

examples of the same shift in accentuation, which probably indicates a variation in the rhythmical flow. Examples 13-14 demonstrate such accents:

Example 13: Nocturne No.1, measures 60-64.



Example 14: Les Soirées de Nazelles, Le goût de malheur, measures 25-28.



It is important to remember how much Poulenc admired the art of *chansoniers*[68], particularly Yvonne Printemps and Maurice Chevalier. If we listen to the recordings of Chevalier, we discover him taking great liberty with the rhythm, which adjusts freely to the stresses of the language to produce a half-sung, half-spoken effect.

68 French popular singers who performed in the genre of *chanson*.

The modern piano aesthetic has shifted toward "*Urtext*" playing with more attention to the written page than to the expressive purpose of the music. The pianism of today seems to have evolved toward the percussive rather than the lyrical. In his book on the performing traditions of the past, Peres da Costa calls this melodic flexibility *Metrical Rubato*:

> Metrical rubato is a term I have coined to describe the old *bel canto* type of tempo rubato commonly described as the rhythmic alteration of melody notes while essentially preserving the metrical regularity of the accompaniment. This expressive device and other forms of rhythmic alteration continued to be used in piano playing around the turn of the twentieth century. Early recordings reveal that many pianists, in some cases entirely contrary to twenty-first-century conventions, displace single melody notes or multiple adjacent melody notes within a bar by lengthening or shortening them.[69]

"*Metrical Rubato*" generally characterized performances at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Poulenc was formed as a musician and composer, and it is possible that he intended his music to have at least some degree of rhythmic-melodic flexibility. Ned Rorem confirms this in a statement about Poulenc's:

> His tunes – usually they are true tunes not recitations – stem from speech; he never squeezed verse into prewritten musical phrases. His concern for correct stress made even his lushest songs talky. Since most of those songs are composed on strict rhythmed meter, and since the composer's instinctive language is diatonic, a formal squareness results that extends even to his opera recitatives on free prose. By further extension his instrumental pieces become, at heart, word settings from which the words are removed.[70]

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69 Neal Peres Da Costa, *Off the Record: Performing Practices in Romantic Piano Playing* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 189.

70 Rorem, *Rorem Reader*, 145.

In conclusion, the "squareness" of Poulenc's piano music will disappear if the pianist imagines the score as a poetic text and "stylizes" the playing accordingly.

Rubato

This brings us to the closely related question about general *rubato* in Poulenc's music. In his letters, lectures, and interviews Poulenc insists that his music has to be performed without a hint of *rubato*. Here is one example:

> Let me explain: I hate rubato (as it is understood). Once a tempo is adopted, it cannot be changed at any price, until I say so.[71]

We find similar statements in the writings of Bernac, Debussy, Faure, and other French musicians of post-Romanticism. However, when we listen to Poulenc perform, we notice how flexible his tempo is, how many times he uses very refined *rubatos*, and how the general tempo could evolve without having any indication on the page. In his recording of the *First Nocturne* we find several tempo changes not marked in the score: Poulenc starts at ♩= 69, by the beginning of the second page he is at ♩=72 (after a big stretch in the previous measure), in the middle of that page he is at ♩=76. On the page three, four measures before the *pressez un peu*, he is already at ♩=92, at the top of the page four at ♩=70, at the bottom of the same page at ♩=63. The *Le Double Plus Lent* is performed at ♩= 48, far from the specified proportion.

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71 "Je m'explique : je hais le rubato (en ce qui me concerne s'entend). Une fois un tempo est adopté, il ne faut changer à aucun prix jusqu'à ce que je l'indique." Poulenc and Southon, *J'écris,* 785.

In the score of the *Variation II* (*Le Coeur sur la main,* mm. 28 to the end) of *Les Soirées de Nazelles,* we see many indications of *rubato*: *comma, très rubato, animez un peu,* a *fermata, cédez à peine, molto rubato, cédez beaucoup,* and *au mouvement.*[72] All these changes take place in a less than one-minute time span. The rest of the suite shows similarly detailed written-in *rubato*. Poulenc demands that the performer respect the time nuances he writes in the text:

> I take the maximum amount of care with the indications in my scores, and I am always stupefied at how little the performers pay attention to those.[73]

Discussing the issue of loyalty to the page Hamilton writes:

> There are also a vast number of performance features, including rubatos, chordal balances, half-pedalings – the list goes on - that cannot be more than vaguely indicated by any type of notation at our disposal without ludicrously overloading the text and the performer. As for the composer's "intentions" themselves, Peter Stadlen's astonishing edition of Webern *Variations* – annotated by him after lessons on the piece from the composer – or Messiaen's performances of his own organ music, or Rachmaninoff's recordings of his concertos should make us realize how awkward this superficially simple issue can really be. Quite simply, they often don't play what they've written.[74]

Given the amount of tempo flexibility in Poulenc's own performance and the abundance of tempo fluctuations in some of his pieces, how can we explain his "hatred" of *rubato*? Poulenc did not approve of "affectation" in his works, but he did expect a nuanced tempo flexibility.

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72 Francis Poulenc, *Les soirées de Nazelles:* suite pour piano. (Paris: Durand u.a., 1997), 8. "*Le cœur sur la Main*".

73 "On a beau mettre le maximum d'indications dans une édition musicale, on est toujours stupéfait de constater combien les interprètes en tiennent peu compte." Poulenc, *A batón rompus*, 199.

74 Ibid., 25.

As performers we have to respect Poulenc's markings, but we must also allow the artistic, emotional side of performance to come through. Composer-performers are a valuable source of information on this matter. Poulenc agreed with this idea, emphatically declaring:

> Composers are often (forgive me) the best accompanists for their songs. [...] The secret is simple. We know what is there in the music and we feel the *aura* that no notation can express.[75]

Tempo

The question of *tempo* in Poulenc's music also deserves attention. He was categorical in his insistence on the right tempos. This is how Poulenc describes his experience in Boston while observing rehearsals of his *Gloria* with Charles Munch in 1961:

> All Munch's tempos were wrong (too fast, for sure). [...] I did not say a word, but explained everything to him during the break. Mr. Patterson, having heard me sing, said, "Then we have to sing like Chevalier." "Exactly!" When they picked up I went to the piano, the soloist did not sing anymore, Munch calmed down, and it was perfect. Ooff!!![76]

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75 "Les compositeurs sont souvent, je m'excuse, les meilleurs accompagnateurs pour leur mélodies. [...] Le secret me semble simple. Nous savons ce qu'il y a dans une musique et nous devinons l'aura que nulle notation ne peut rendre." Poulenc, *Journal*, 82.

76 "Tous les mouvements de Munch était faux (trop vite bien sûr). [...]Je n'ai rien dit avant l'entracte puis là j'ai tout explique. Mr. Patterson en m'entendant chanter m'a dit: "Mais alors il faut chanter comme Chevalier." "Exactement!" A la reprise j'ai pris le piano, soliste n'a plus chanté, Munch s'est calmé et cela a été *parfait*. Ouf!!!" Poulenc and Chimènes, *Correspondence*, 969.

Poulenc had to sit at the piano in order to demonstrate the tempo and the correct style. This was two years after the publication of the score with all the tempo marks. On another occasion, Poulenc admonished pianists:

> If pianists would just trust my very carefully determined metronome marks, a lot of misery would be avoided.[77]

Poulenc's tempo indications, accompanied by precise metronome marks, sometimes contradict the character implied in the piece. For example, *Nocturne No.3 Les Cloches de Malines* is marked at ♩=98, much too fast for *doux et mélancolique*[78]. *Nocturne No. 5 Phalênes*, is marked ♩=112, so fast that the variety of articulations is impossible to hear. On the other hand, *Nocturne No.7* is marked *Assez Allant*[79], but the metronome marking is a moderate ♩=84. In *Variation VII Le Goût du Malheur* from *Soirées de Nazelles*, the composer indicates the astonishing ♪=66, a tempo that is so slow that the melodic line becomes unsustainable.

When we hear Poulenc performing his works, his tempo seems to be flexible rather than metronomic. Poulenc's recording of the *First Nocturne* shows a number of different tempos, despite the steady metronome mark ♩= 80. The other two nocturnes he recorded also vary from the metronomic mark: *Nocturne No.2* is performed at brisk ♩=116 (marked 104), and *No.4* at a rather tranquil ♩=76-78 (marked 84).

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77 "Si les pianistes faisaient confiance à mes mouvements métronomiques, très soigneusement établis, bien des malheurs seraient évités." Poulenc and Southon, *J'écris*, 759.

78 Tender and melancholy.

79 Very flowing.

In Poulenc's recordings of his vocal repertoire we notice the same tendency. Usually the fast tempos are performed faster than indicated, and slower tempos are performed slower. The following table compares the written metronome markings in some songs with the performance tempos:

Table 4. Comparison of the tempo as notated in score and as performed.

Song	**Performer**	**Metronome**	**Performed**
Main dominée par le cœur	D.Duval	♩=100	♩=120
Main dominée par le cœur	P. Bernac	♩=100	♩=112
Le garçon de Liège	D. Duval	♩=176	♩=160
Au-delà	D. Duval	♩=136	♩=144
Aux officiers de la garde blanche	D. Duval	♩=69	♩=58
Toréador	D. Duval	♩.=92	♩.=66
Air romantique	S. Peignot	♩=152	♩=152
Air romantique	R. Dercourt	♩=152	♩=116
Air Champêtre	S. Peignot	♩=144	♩=152
Air Grave	S. Peignot	♩=66	♩=70
Air Vif	S. Peignot	♩=196	♩=168
Le Dromadaire	C. Croiza	♩=76	♩=88

La Chèvre du Tibet	C. Croiza	♩=72	♩=63
La Sauterelle	C. Croiza	♩=66	♩=60
Le Dauphin	C. Croiza	♩=136	♩=124
L'Écrevisse	C. Croiza	♩=96	♩=92
La Carpe	C. Croiza	♩=58	♩=54
Chanson d'Orkenise	P. Bernac	♩=126	♩=138
Hôtel	P. Bernac	♩=50	♩=46
Fagnes de Wallonie	P. Bernac	𝅗𝅥=88	𝅗𝅥=88
Voyage à Paris	P. Bernac	𝅗𝅥.=96	𝅗𝅥.=92
Sanglots	P. Bernac	♩=66	♩=70
Chanson du clair tamis	P. Bernac	𝅗𝅥=84	𝅗𝅥=86
Avant le Cinema	P. Bernac	♩=126	♩=126
Avant le Cinema	R. Dercourt	♩=126	♩=110
L'Enfant Muet	G. Touraine	♩=66	♩=60
Adelina a la promenade	G. Touraine	♩.=138	♩.=120
Chanson de l'oranger sec	G. Touraine	♩=69	♩=60

The songs performed with Bernac stay very close to the indicated metronome markings. In effect, those tempos were most probably established with Bernac and with his voice in mind, as Poulenc notes:

> All my metronomic movements, set with Bernac, are exact.[80]

The situation with the female singers, especially with Duval, is different. It seems that Poulenc was much more liberal with their interpretation. It is clear that Poulenc knew how to adapt his interpretation to different voices and temperaments. The recital with Denise Duval shows us a much freer Poulenc. He loved her voice, her expressive power, and he trusted her musical judgment. In their recording, the tempos are far from what is written, but they work beautifully for her voice.

Pedal and Sound

Poulenc's characteristic use of the damper pedal identifies the sound and the style of his piano music; he often stated that the performance of his piano music was not truly authentic unless there was a liberal and imaginative use of the pedal.

Poulenc's scores abound in colorful, poetic annotations regarding the use of pedal, such as *in a halo of pedal, use lots of pedal, washed in pedal, pedal on each beat, create a sort of halo with both pedals, respect strictly the of the pedals, very blurred by*

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80 Poulenc, *Journal*, 111.

the pedals[81], along with the traditional pedal marks and the "open ties" that indicate sound sustained beyond the notated value. In his writings, Poulenc often referred to the pedal as "butter" without which the French cuisine would not exist. He proudly commented on a performance in a piano duet with Marcelle Meyer:

> Marcelle gives me the technique, and I put the butter in the sauce.[82]

On another occasion, he was very upset with a pianist for not following the pedal indications:

> Likewise, a female pianist massacred my music in such a way that if I had had a revolver in my pocket, I would have fired it. Fortunately, I never carry it with me.
>
> You may think immediately that this lady played wrong notes (which has no importance), or that she changed my tempos (yet more serious, but would still pass). No, ladies and gentlemen, worse. Despite my reiterated observations, she was obstinate in playing my music without pedal. Now, to play my music with no pedal is the end of everything, and certainly the end of my music. As I don't conceive the cuisine without butter, I ask to use pedal crazily, fantastically, madly. It is the only way to get the real "noise" of my music.[83]

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81 *Dans un halo de pédale, mettre beaucoup de pédale, baigné de pédale, pédale sur chaque temps, créer un sorte de halo avec les deux pédales, respecter strictement le jeu des pédales, très estompé par les pédales.*

82 "Marcelle me donne de la technique et je le mets du beurre dans la sauce." Letter to Pierre Bernac, August 17, 1956, Poulenc ans Chimènes, *Correspondance*, 847.

83 "Ici même, une pianiste massacrait d'une telle façon ma musique que, si j'avais eu un revolver dans ma poche, j'aurais tire. Heureusement, je n'en porte jamais sur moi. ¶Vous pensez, tout de suite, que cette dame faisait des fausses notes (c'est sens importance), qu'elle changeait mes tempi (c'est déjà plus grave, mais passe encore). Non, mesdames, mesdemoiselles et messieurs, c'est pire. Malgré mes observations réitérées, elle s'obstinait à jouer ma musique sans pédale. Or; jouer ma musique sans pédale, c'est la fin du tout, et surtout la fin de la musique. De même que je ne conçois pas la cuisine sans beurre, je demande qu'on mette follement, fantastiquement, éperdument, de la pédale. C'est la seule façon d'obtenir le vrai bruit de ma musique." Poulenc and Southon, *J'écris*, 481.

Poulenc credited Ricardo Viñes for teaching him the true art of pedaling, which allowed him to play clearly *with* pedal and legato *without* it:

> Dear Viñes! He is the only one who knew and taught that it is possible to play drily with pedal, as it is necessary to be able to play legato without the pedal.[84]

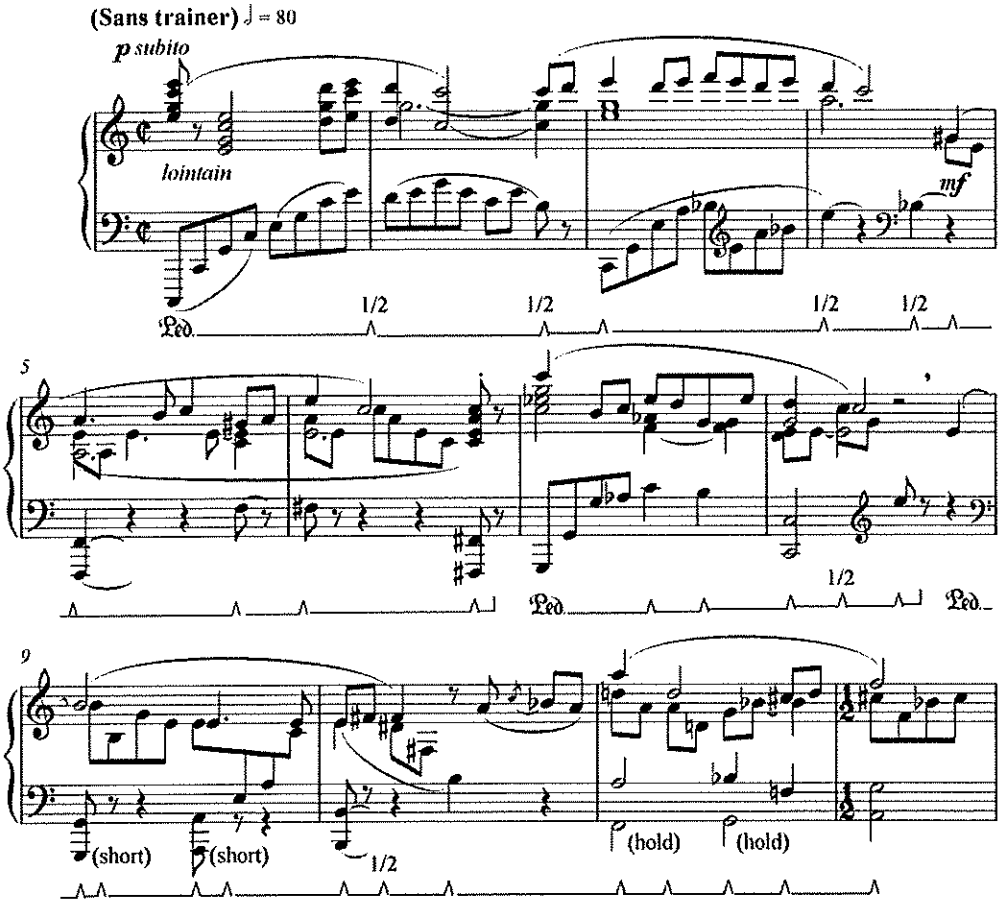
Poulenc flooded his music with pedal to produce beautiful, unusual, sensual sounds and harmonies that became his signature piano sonority. Not that it was his invention – for at least a century piano music had been developing towards the exploration of the acoustic expressive qualities of sustained sounds. Poulenc used the pedal to create the exotic sounds of the East (as in the gamelan effect in the *Concerto for Two Pianos*, or the sitar sounds of the *Sixth Nocturne*), the echoing reverberations of faraway church bells (*Les Cloches de Malines*, *Cadence et Final* in *Soirées de Nazelles*), or poignancy and nostalgia of the past and the unattainable (*Final* of *Soirées*, *Eighth Nocturne*). All these sound images require varying degrees of blurred sound that is only possible with the pedal.

Poulenc's "open ties" are very precise. Open ties mean that the pianist must hold the pedal until the next open-tied note, creating a continuous but varied sonic resonance. When Poulenc uses long- note values, the pianist should physically sustain the tone while changing the pedal with the changes in melodic line or inner voices. When Poulenc writes *sans pédale* in a specific place, pianists should treat the absence of pedal as a specific sound. Here are the pedal suggestions for the excerpt from the *First Nocturne*:

---

84 "Cher Viñes! Lui seul savait et enseignait qu'on peut jouer sec en mettant la pédale, de même qu'on doit pouvoir jouer lié sans mettre la pédale." Poulenc and Southon, *J'écris*, 585.

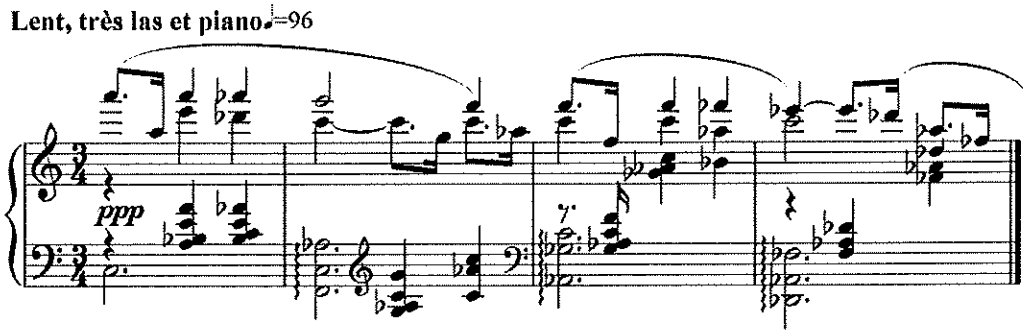
Example 15: Pedaling suggestions in Nocturne No.1, measures 16-28.



Parallels between Poulenc's music for piano and voice

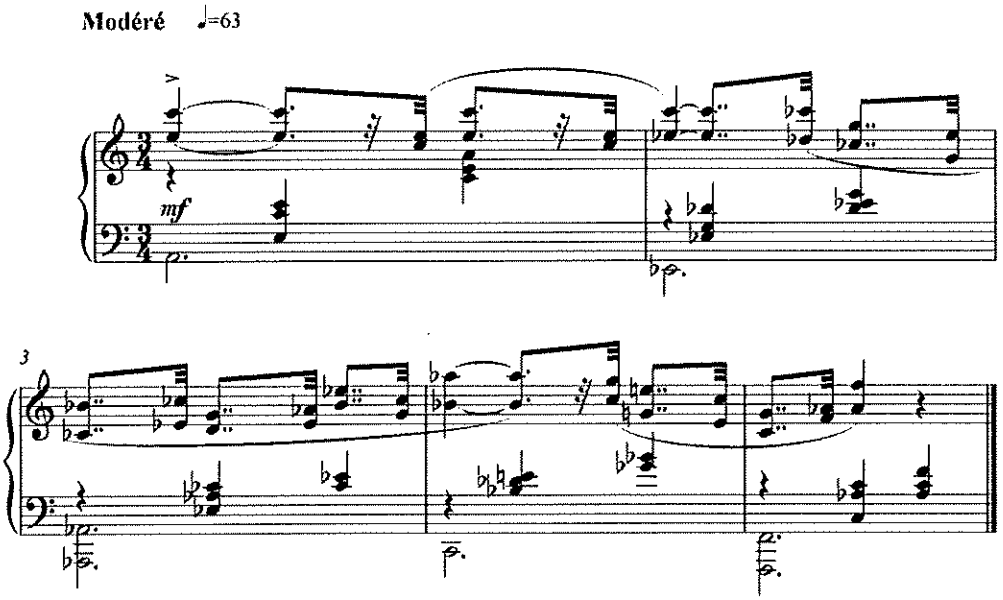
Besides the obvious parallels in notation between Poulenc's music for piano and voice, there is also a cross-pollination in musical material and expressive devices. Sometimes the composer uses the musical material in several different media. In *Nocturnes* we find this passage (Example 16):

Example 16: Nocturne No.4, measures 9-12.



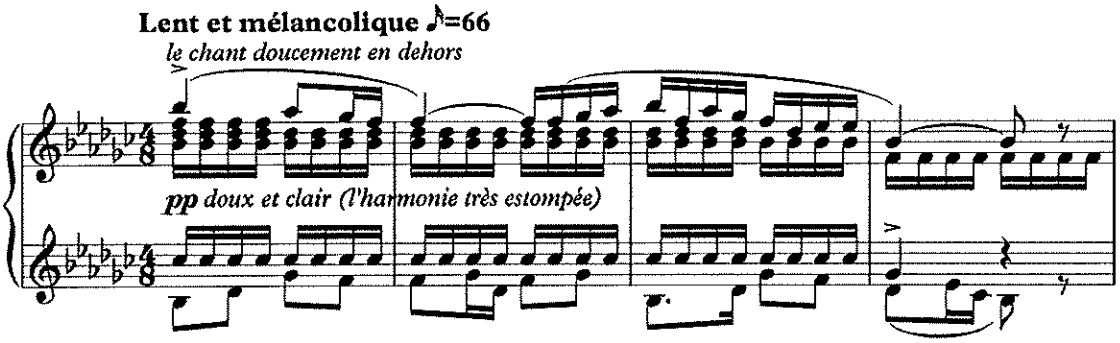
Similar harmonies, rhythmic pulse, meter, and the overall melancholy feeling of this fragment are present in the *mélodie* "*Violon*" from *Fiançailles pour rire* (Example 17):

Example 17: Fiançailles pour rire, Violon, measures 1-5.

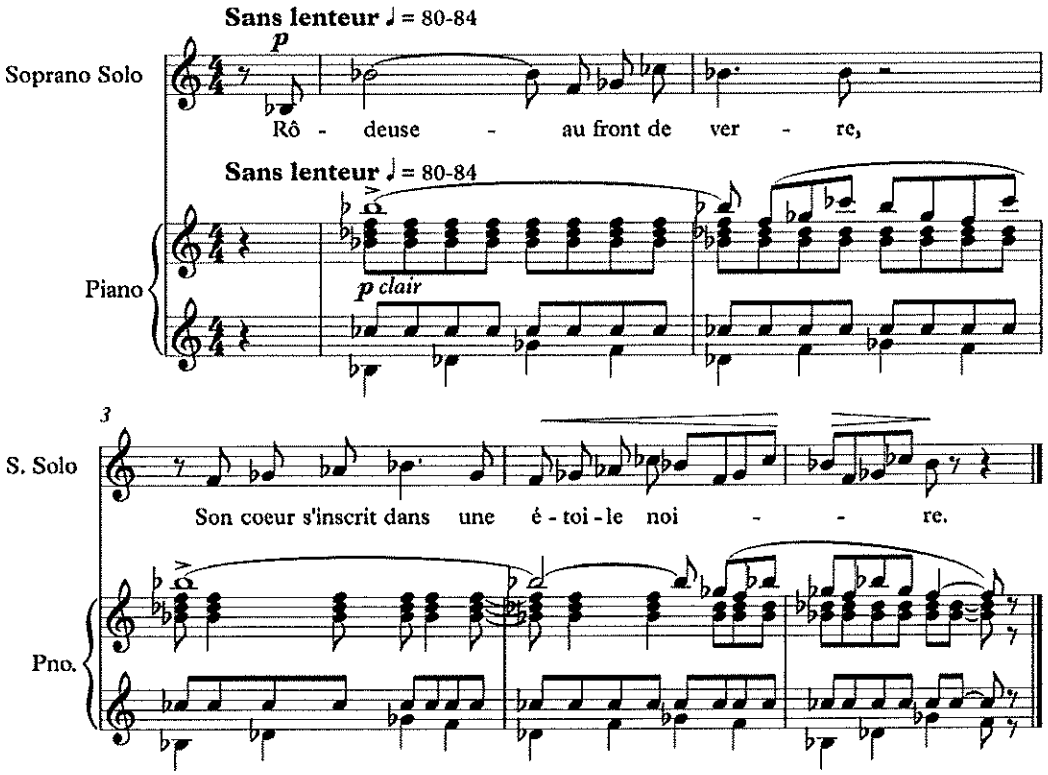


One of the variations from *Les Soirées de Nazelles* is quoted literally in the *mélodie "Rôdeuse au front de verre"* from *Cinq poems de Paul Éluard* (1939), (Example 18-19):

Example 18 : Les Soirées de Nazelles, Le goût de malheur, measures 2-5.



Example 19: "Rôdeuse au front verre", Cinq poèmes de Paul Éluard, measures 1-5.



We can more clearly understand the character of Poulenc's piano pieces through comparison to the similar markings in vocal scores. For example, the *Nocturne No.4* bears an unusual tempo indication that reads *Lent, très las et piano*, which can be translated as slow, *very relaxed and soft.* However, the character of the piece does not seem to be relaxed. The answer could be found in the *mélodie "La Grenouillère"* on a text by Apollinaire, which describes a static landscape of a silent little island with empty boats. Poulenc's entry in the *Diary of my Songs* reads:

> *La Grenouillère* evokes a beautiful, lost past of happy and effortless Sundays. I thought, certainly, of the meals of the boatmen, painted by Renoir,

> where the women's blouses and the vests of the men combined, and not only in color.[85]

Poulenc's description of the song is very close to the motto that precedes the *Nocturne*: "Not a single note of the waltzes or ecossaises was lost in the house, so the man in his sick bed could dream of the good days of his youth." Similar to the *Nocturne*, this song has the indication "*Très las et mélancolique.*" According to the composer's description of the song's character the term "*las*" reflects the dreamy, bittersweet melancholy of the past, rather than the relaxed mood or laziness of the everyday reality.

85 *"La Grenouillère évoque un beau passé perdu ; des dimanches faciles et heureux. J'ai pensé, bien entendu, à ces déjeuners de canotiers, peints par Renoir, où les corsages des femmes et les maillots des hommes ont d'autres accords que de couleurs."* Poulenc, *Journal*, 50.

VI. CONCLUSION

The human voice and wind instruments occupy a significant part of Poulenc's oeuvre. These works have proven to be effective and successful with musicians and audiences. Not only did Poulenc feel comfortable writing for winds and voice, he translated their expressive qualities into other genres. On the other hand, the piano was Poulenc's primary instrument; he composed on the piano, and the piano is the instrument that appears most frequently in his musical output. By transplanting the vocal expression into his piano music, Poulenc was able to create a musical identity between voice and piano. He treated piano as a **vocal instrument**.

Poulenc's piano music adopts vocal breath markings, directionality of the musical phrases, the imitation of the French prosody and the characteristic for the French language emphatic accents. Because Poulenc conceived musical expression in terms of breath, his piano music must also "breathe" according to Poulenc's indications. Poulenc had in his mind a very strong vocal ideal that must be reflected in his piano music. The rhythm, metric flexibility, and *rubatos* all work to make Poulenc's music "sing" at the piano.

There is a direct relationship between the poetic texts in the songs and the imagery required in order to create a convincing interpretation of Poulenc's piano music. Poulenc's poetic instructions, such as: *à l'aise (play easily), lancer le trait (throw an impulsive gesture), lointain (in the distance), très las (very lazy), mystérieux (mysterious),*

mélancolique (melancholy), éclatant (bursting forth) create a visual and emotional image that produces a unique blend of sound and fantasy.

Poulenc said that his piano music was abstract. However, I believe that his music is visual and sensory. He refers to his music with words normally associated with taste ("sauce," "butter," "delicious"), smell ("acrid odors," "perfume"), and sight ("sing this as if you are looking at a painting by Vuillard"). Even pieces with a generic title like *Nocturne* include titles or verbal instructions that erase all hint of abstraction.

We are lucky to be able to hear Poulenc perform on recordings. These recordings are of varying quality, and it is hard to compare a recital recorded with Bernac at the pinnacle of their career with a private house performance recorded with Rose Dercourt. Nevertheless, these recordings are a valuable source of information on the performing style of the composer and the general idea he had of his music. Moreover, hearing Poulenc perform the piano parts of his songs allows us to admire his technical skills, his finesse, and his respect and admiration for human voice.

Pianists who intend to perform Poulenc's piano music must become acquainted with his music for voice and with Poulenc's extensive writings about his *mélodies*. Without having in mind the vocal ideal that influenced Poulenc's musical language in great measure, the pianist will not achieve the ideal interpretation of Poulenc's fascinating and captivating piano music.

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