

## PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

### Francis Poulenc

Born January 7, 1899, Paris, France.

Died January 30, 1963, Paris, France.

### *Gloria*

Poulenc composed the *Gloria* in 1959 and 1960. The first performance was given on January 20, 1961, by the Boston Symphony Orchestra conducted by Charles Munch. The score calls for soprano solo, mixed chorus, and an orchestra consisting of two flutes and two piccolos, two oboes and english horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, harp, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-five minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra first performances of Poulenc's *Gloria* were given at the Ravinia Festival on June 18, 1964, with Barbara Garrison as soloist; the Harvard Glee Club and Radcliffe Choral Society (Elliot Forbes, conductor); and Seiji Ozawa conducting.

In August 1936, while Francis Poulenc, the lighthearted bad boy of French music, was vacationing in Uzerches in southwestern France, he learned that an acquaintance, fellow composer Pierre-Octave Ferroud, had been beheaded in a car crash. The violence of Ferroud's death haunted Poulenc for years, prompting a new seriousness and depth of expression in his music—and eventually finding its grotesque echo in the celebrated guillotine finale of his opera *Dialogues of the Carmelites*. Immediately after hearing the news about Ferroud, Poulenc went to nearby Notre Dame de Rocamadour, with its revered statue of the Virgin sculpted in black wood, a common pilgrimage destination. That night he began his first religious work, the *Litanies of the Black Madonna*, based on pilgrims' prayers.

At the same time, Poulenc began to examine his own religious beliefs: "If I had some kind of faith," he told the composer Georges Auric, "even a contrary one, that would be something, but I absolutely don't." But in a number of sacred works written over the next twenty-five years, Poulenc developed a unique religious musical style, one that confirms and in turn questions the significance of faith. In a mass, composed the year after the *Litanies*, followed by several unaccompanied motets and two large works for chorus and orchestra, the *Stabat mater* of 1950 and the *Gloria* performed this week, Poulenc returned to the Roman Catholicism of his childhood.

Poulenc was born into a wealthy Parisian family and grew up in the city center, near the Élysée palace. His father ran the huge Rhône-Poulenc pharmaceutical firm and his mother came from a long line of native Parisians. He started studying the piano with his mother at the age of five, and he later took lessons from Ricardo Viñes, the great pianist and friend of Debussy and Ravel. He soon began to meet the artistic celebrities of the day, including Satie, Cocteau, and Stravinsky. He missed the scandalous premiere of *The Rite of Spring* in 1913 (he was just fourteen at the time), but he caught up with it the following year and was intoxicated by Stravinsky's music. In 1917, he attended the historic opening of Satie's *Parade*, with sets and costumes by Picasso, and quickly fell under Satie's spell—Poulenc's op. 1, a *Rapsodie nègre*, unveiled that same year, is dedicated to Satie. In 1920, Poulenc and five of his composer friends were dubbed Les Six, earning him a handy label in all the music history books, but also unfairly branding him forever as a frivolous, cheeky sophisticate inspired by the antics of Jean Cocteau.

Despite his early enthusiasm for the radical, rebellious composers of Paris—and even though he went to Vienna in 1921 to meet Schoenberg—Poulenc himself was essentially a traditionalist, although one with wit and a healthy streak of irreverence. "I am not the kind of musician who makes harmonic innovations, like Igor, Ravel, or Debussy," he later said, insisting that "there is a place for *new* music that is content with using other people's chords." Even a strict modernist such as the young Elliott Carter, writing in *Modern Music* in 1938, found Poulenc's two-piano concerto convincing, despite what he called its

pastiche of styles, “because of its great verve, which with Poulenc’s remarkable sensitivity to harmonic and orchestral sonorities, ends by captivating the most stubborn listener.” But in the second half of the twentieth century, when serialism was enjoying its vogue, genial harmonies and big tunes were considered suspect, and Poulenc was regularly overlooked or misunderstood, and his impertinent cabaret style was dismissed as quaint and phony. “I’ve often been reproached about my ‘street music’ side,” he once admitted. “Its genuineness has been suspected, and yet there’s nothing more genuine in me.” In fact, the way Poulenc marries serious musical ideals with the wit and style of Parisian café society is the essence of his unique language. His music becomes truly powerful—not just merely delectable—when it encompasses both majesty and insouciance, gravity and charm, sobriety and high spirits.

In a tribute written after Poulenc’s death in 1963, the American composer Ned Rorem called Poulenc “a whole man always interlocking soul and flesh, sacred and profane.” That duality is the heart of the radiant and moving *Gloria* he composed for the Boston Symphony shortly before he died. “I think I put the best and most authentic side of myself into my choral music,” the composer once said, and this *Gloria* is one of Poulenc’s finest works. In six movements, alternately introspective and breezy, Poulenc’s *Gloria* resembles no other work of sacred music. The fanfare-like opening confirms how brilliantly Poulenc was able to make something fresh and effective of a style Stravinsky had worn out long ago. The lovely third and fifth movements, with their ethereal soprano solos written with the voice of Leontyne Price in mind (she had to withdraw from the Boston performances because of scheduling conflicts), find Poulenc at his most reflective and touching. The jauntier sections, such as the saucy *Laudamus te*, with its dance-hall rhythms and off-kilter text settings, have always surprised those listeners who expect a more devout kind of joy. Poulenc said they simply reminded him of a favorite fifteenth-century fresco by Benozzo Bozzoli in Florence’s Palazzo Ricardi, in which the angels stick their tongues out at one another.

Poulenc went to Boston to sit in on rehearsals in January 1961. Although he seemed pleased with the way conductor Charles Munch was preparing the piece, and he often genially conducted along, the open score in his lap, privately he muttered about “the dear, the adorable, the exquisite Charlie who understood nothing” of his piece. The performance, on one of Boston’s snowiest days, was a great success nonetheless, and Poulenc was showered with cheers, although the high point for him apparently was the appearance of Marlene Dietrich, who posed for photographs kissing the composer.

The next morning the critic for the *Boston Globe* did not hesitate to call the *Gloria* “one of the French composer’s major scores and an exceedingly fine work.” Likewise, the reviewer for the *Boston Herald* called it a “major work, prominent in the career of a contemporary master and a significant addition to the repertory of twentieth-century music.” When the *Gloria* was performed in New York four months later, legendary *New York Times* critic Harold C. Schonberg found much to praise, but sounded a cautionary note: “How much staying power the score has remains to be seen.” In fact, in the years after Poulenc’s death, when the composer’s reputation was at a low, the *Gloria* was programmed surprisingly little by America’s big orchestras and choruses. The Boston Symphony has only given the work in Symphony Hall twice since the premiere, and the Chicago Symphony didn’t present the work in Orchestra Hall until 1984 (having first done it at Ravinia two decades earlier). But fashions are changing. After some fifteen seasons without a piece by Poulenc on our orchestra’s subscription concerts, two of Poulenc’s major works, the organ concerto and the two-piano concerto, were played here recently. And this week’s *Gloria* performances bring one of the classics of twentieth-century choral music back to our stage. Perhaps Poulenc’s star is on the rise again.

*Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.*

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