THE PIANO MUSIC OF FRANCIS FOULENCE

A Thesis

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by

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INTRODUCTION

In 1961, two years before his death, Francis Poulenc made his last tour to the United States in the company of his protégée, Mlle. Denise Duval. The occasion was a series of joint recitals by the two collaborators, devoted principally to performances of Poulenc's art songs. John Cruen of Musical America asked M. Poulenc during the course of this visit what the composer felt was his least successful body of music. Poulenc replied:

"My compositions for piano solo are, alas, my weakest. To make matters worse, there are quite a lot of them—my Mouvements Perpétuels, Impromptus, Miroirs, Improvisations, etc. I would say that the piano solo is a musical form which really does not interest me. I have always loved and played the piano, but my piano compositions are, perhaps, too facile; they are, to be sure, well-written for the instrument, which is one reason a number of great pianists have performed them. But they do not represent my truest feelings. I know only too well that I will never write a 'Gaspard de la Nuit' by Ravel or a Seventh Sonata by Prokofiev."

Poulenc's assessment of his piano music must first be qualified by referring briefly to his other categories of

compositions. Such close associates of M. Poulenc as the French music scholar (and Poulenc's biographer) Henri Hell have long maintained that his reputation as a composer will be principally based on his large number of art songs and his chef d'oeuvre, the opera, The Dialogues of the Carmelites. These works, together with a large body of liturgical music, constitute one side of Poulenc's dual nature as a composer. On the other hand, Poulenc wrote a large amount of music that he referred to as his "mauvaise musique"—charming, eclectic and slightly meretricious works, ostensibly superficial in nature, redolent with quotations from the music hall and any composer he saw fit to borrow from. Poulenc himself has described the dual nature of his art:

"It all has to do with an artist's view of life, and, also, to a great extent, with his upbringing. You see, my father was a devout Catholic and it was from him that I inherited my religious inspiration. In fact, I had a great-uncle, the Abbé Joseph Poulenc, who was the cure of Ivry-sur-Seine, so that a strong religious motive is firmly tied to my work."
It was from my mother on the other hand that I inherited my great love for music; she was a delightful pianist with excellent musical taste. I remember being completely enthralled when she played Schubert, Mozart, Chopin and Schumann. I was also much inspired by some of the lesser composers in my mother's repertoire such as Massenet, Grieg and Anton Rubinstein. I am certain that it is my mother who inspired me to write my "mauvaise musique".  

All of Poulenc's piano music is in this so-called "mauvaise musique" tradition, but one must look closely at the influences upon the young composer to see why this is so.

When Poulenc was fifteen, he became a pupil of Ricardo Viñes, the renowned interpreter of Ravel and Debussy. In Edward Lockspeiser's phrase, "pupil and teacher fell for each other at once" and the resulting influence on Poulenc was enormous. He himself has said: "...it is, in sum, Viñes who wrote all my first works for piano." Of particular influence on Poulenc was Viñes' attitude toward pedalling. "No one could

2Ibid., pp. 6-7.
4Ibid., pp. 3-4.
teach the art of using the pedals better than Vines. He somehow managed to extract clarity precisely from the ambiguities of the pedals." More than forty years after his discipleship with Vines had ended Poulenc was to say:

I do have fairly definite ideas on how my piano compositions should be performed. For one thing, if one does not play my music in an even tempo— that is, if one uses too much rubato— then all is lost. If one does not use a great deal of pedal— again, all is lost. I insist; if one avoids using the pedal, there is no use— it will be another composer he is playing. I count on the pedal as a cook counts on cream to bind his sauce.

Vines introduced the young Poulenc to Erik Satie, who was to be "godfather" to the group of "Les Six" and to Georges Auric. Auric, in addition to being associated with Poulenc as one of "Les Six" was to remain a lifelong friend and associate. Satie was, of course, experimenting in the first decades of this

century with the introduction of jazz and music hall songs into serious music; this was to become a major characteristic of Poulenc's "mauvaise musique".

A further important early influence on Poulenc was the composer's relationship with Emmanuel Chabrier. Poulenc published a biography of Chabrier in 1961 and has said of him: "He is my true grandfather." In an article on Poulenc and Chabrier Edward Lockspieser commented:

"Ever since the vivacious Chabrier...burst onto the musical scene...some kind of deliberate vulgarity crept into music and was conscientiously cultivated in an ironic spirit of defiance. It looks as if the treatment of over-blown music hall tunes in Chabrier was a musical equivalent of what Verlaine called "La nostalgie de la boue".

Then, in speaking collectively of Satie, Chabrier and Poulenc, Lockspieser adds:

7 Hell, pp. x-xi.
8 Ibid., p. xi.
And so it came about that these butterflies, these children of music were condemned to a tireless search for an identification that would fit. Who were they, what were they? None could ever fit. And they thus resigned themselves to making a note of beauty where it was to be found and sadly, infinitely sadly, making a joke of it... I am sure that the race of these Chabriers, Saties and Poulencs, so simple at heart, so sensitive to sham, saw their vocation as Anatole France, in The Garden of Epicurus, inspired by an irony that was 'gentle and kindly disposed, mocking neither love nor beauty, disarming anger, teaching us to laugh at rogues and fools whom we might otherwise be so weak as to hate.'  

An examination of Poulenc's output in all forms shows an astonishing correlation between the nature of the work and the style in which it is composed. The religious works, for example, are written in a far more austere fashion than the secular; the songs likewise are for the most part free from the eclecticism manifested in the piano music. Poulenc has said:

Where I really feel there is originality is in the piano accompaniment to my songs. This is because of the challenge that is present when I must express in musical terms the feeling and meaning of the poem.  

9Ibid., p. xi.
It may be contended, however, that Poulenc's piano music occupies a secure if minor place in the contemporary repertoire; partially because the very consistency of Poulenc's approach to the piano has resulted in a body of what might be described as salon music of the highest order. A close look at the more important works in Poulenc's solo piano output follows, together with a few suggestions as to why the works constitute a unique treasure-trove for the performer.
CHAPTER I

THE EARLY PIANO MUSIC AND THE SHORT WORKS

The majority of Poulenc's output for piano solo consists of sets of piano miniatures. These may be further divided into those composed at one time as a cycle—e.g., the Impromptus and the Nocturnes, and those composed over a period of some years but usually performed as a set—e.g., the Improvisations. There are, in addition, a large number of short pieces such as the Humoresques which were composed independently. A complete list of Poulenc's works involving the piano will be found in Appendix I.

Poulenc has also written one solo piano concerto, one concerto for piano with choreographic accompaniment, a suite for piano and narrator based on Jean de Brunhoff's famous children's character, Babar the Elephant, a concerto for two pianos, and a large number of chamber ensemble works which include important material for solo piano. In this chapter will be considered the
early piano works together with certain of the later short pieces.

Poulenc's first solo piano work, the *Trois Mouvements Perpétuels*, is also his most widely known. The work was composed in 1918 with a dedication to Valentine Gross. Today the *Mouvements Perpétuels* are in their 45th edition, the latest being a revision by the composer in 1962, shortly before his death. The revision is imperceptible, and probably may be ascribed to a copyright problem. The work consists of three short movements marked *assez modéré*, *tres modéré* and *alèrie*. The title implies the musical concept that the composer is here investigating and commenting on—that is, the idea of *moto perpetuo*. The first movement is not only the most familiar to the general public but is also the clearest example in the work of a perpetual motion device, as a *basso ostinato* is employed throughout.
Example One: Mouvements Perpetuels, First

Movement, Measures 1-2

The form is one which, with variations, occurs often in Poulenc's smaller pieces, the Suite Francaise being a case in point. It is a kind of rondeau and may be diagrammed A B A C A' C A CODA. The principal theme
begins in a B-flat tonality (see example one) and is later stated in G-flat over the ostinato before returning to the original tonality. The subordinate idea is a Lydian melody stated over the ostinato.

Example Two: *Mouvements Perpétuels, First*

Movement, Measures 6-7
The second Mouvement Perpétuel is of more complex organization than the first. Rather than employing an ostinato throughout, Poulenc uses a series of consecutive melodies with an overall diagram for the movement of A B C A CODA. The accompaniment figure used in the bass part of A is also used for the first two measures of theme B.

Example Three: Mouvement Perpétuels, Second Movement, Measures 6-7

The various sections consist of series of one-measure
melodic ideas repeated with slight variations in each repetition. A measure by measure diagram will demonstrate this as well as the overlapping accompaniment figure mentioned above.

Right Hand: A A' A' ' A' ' A' ' A' ' A' ' A' ' A' ' A' ' CC A CODA
Left Hand: AA'A' A' AA' BB B B CC A CODA

The third movement of the *Mouvements Perpetuels* is the longest and most formally complex of the three. The meter changes frequently, anticipating Poulenc's complex treatment of meter in such works as the 1929 *Aubade*. It is again an approximation of rondo from: A B C A D D CODA. As is the case with the second movement, there is no ostinato extending throughout the piece, but, rather, similar bass figures in each of the sections. The sections are punctuated by the changes of meter with the exception of the first section, which is in 4/4 for two measures and 7/4 for the third.
The piece was first performed in 1919 by Poulenc's teacher, Ricardo Viñes, and has since become a staple of the concert repertory.

Poulenc's *Valse pour Piano* was originally published as a part of a collection titled *L'Album des Six*. Poulenc completed the piece in 1919 and it was published the following year. As is the case with the *Mouvements Perpétuels*, the *Valse* has enjoyed considerable popularity. The form of the piece is A B A E' CODA. The second melody in the piece serves to illustrate one of Poulenc's most typical stylistic characteristics—the use of a melody in octaves surrounding an accompaniment in the inner voices.

Example Four: *Valse pour Piano*,

Measures 46-49
An analogous Passage is one from one of Poulenc's later keyboard works, *L'Histoire de Babar*, specifically, from the tea-house waltz section of that piece.

Example Five: *L'Histoire de Babar*,

Waltz movement, Measures 37-40

The principal theme of the Valse is reminiscent of Satie's *Gymnopédie*; a sprightly melody using the Lydian mode.
The Valse concludes with a 32-measure coda section which is a further comment on the music-hall "vamp" idea, using a witty, chromatic alteration of the harmony.

Example Six: Valse pour Piano

Measures 120-121

In 1920 Poulenc completed the Cinq Impromptus and the Suite en ut. There followed a three year period during which the composer turned to other forms, most notably his ballet in collaboration with Diaghilev, Les Biches. In 1924 Poulenc completed his Promenades, a programmatic description of journeying by various methods—e.g., "On Foot", "In an Auto"—which is a kind of precursor to the more extensive program he was to follow in L'Histoire de Babar.
The suite for the piano *Napoli* was the souvenir of a visit to Italy in 1923 by Poulenc and Darius Milhaud. It was completed at Poulenc's country house at Navelles in 1925. Henri Hél and other critics do not consider the piece to be one of Poulenc's more successful attempts in the genre, but it has attracted the attention of and been performed by such major artists as Artur Rubinstein.

*Napoli* is in three movements; a *Barcarole*, a *Nocturne* and a *Caprice Italien*. The *Barcarole*, like the first of the *Trois Mouvements Perpétuels* has a consistent accompaniment figure in the left hand, but, in this case, the figure is a reiterated triplet.

**Example Seven: *Napoli*, First Movement**, Measures 1-2
The form of the Barcarole is another version of the rondo—A A' B A C A C C D A. The second movement, the Nocturne is, on the other hand, an A B A song form. Poulenc employs an ostinato in this movement (see Example Eight). The ostinato figure introduces the A section; at measure four the principal melody is introduced above the ostinato. At measure 16 a second melody is stated in the bass part below the ostinato. The B section of the Nocturne is a short, conjunct passage in 3/4 time marked "brusque". The return of the A section omits the introductory three measures.

Example Eight: Napoli, Second Movement, Measures 1-2

\[ \text{me.} \quad \text{la grande pedale scale} \]
The final movement of *Napoli*, the "Caprice Italien", is the longest and most difficult pianistically of the three. It begins with a tarantella, presto. An example of the texture of the section is given below:

**Example Nine: Napoli, Third Movement,**

**Measures 20-21**

The movement is episodic in nature. There are, following the tarantella, four sections in duple rhythm with one short recall of the tarantella. These various sections suggest Neapolitan popular rhythms and are not otherwise related.

In addition to the early works, Poulenc's output for solo piano includes a large number of short pieces, mostly
designed as encore pieces or pièces d'occasion. These include the *Pastourelle* of 1927, the *Toccata* and *Hymne* of 1928, the *Hommage à Albert Roussel* of 1929, the *Intermède* of 1932, the 1933 *C-Major Intermezzo* and the *Presto, Badinage* and *Humoresque* of 1934. Of these works, the *Toccata* is the most often performed in concert. The *Hommage à Albert Roussel* was written for a 1929 special issue of *Revue Musicale* honoring Roussel. There are also in Foulenc's work some short pieces of particular interest due to their use of Neo-Classic techniques. These will be dealt with in the following chapter.
CHAPTER TWO

POULENC AND NEO-CLASSICISM

Within Poulenc's work is a substantial body of keyboard music that has been called by some critics "Neo Classical". The term itself is an elusive one; for the purposes of evaluating Poulenc as a "Neo-Classicist", the term may be construed to principally refer to the habit of such 20th century composers as Hindemith, Stravinsky and Busoni of adapting the styles and forms of earlier composers, particularly those of the Baroque and Classic eras.

Poulenc indeed wrote several works more or less consistently in the style of earlier composers, but they are, for the most part, the result of specific circumstances surrounding the commissioning of these works. A case in point is Poulenc's Concert Champêtre, a concerto for harpsichord and orchestra. Although the work is outside the confines of this study, the story of its commission and an examination of some of
its techniques are of great importance in evaluating Poulenc's "Neo-Classicism".

Poulenc met Landowska while she was rehearsing the harpsichord part for the first production of Falla's El Retablo de Maese Pedro in the home of the Princess Edmond de Polignac. One day Landowska said to Poulenc, "Write me a concerto!" The composer began at once, still intimidated by the great artist and not yet really familiar with the harpsichord. He soon perceived the unique qualities, the immense resources of the instrument, which was even more neglected then than now. Although he later authorized a piano version of the score, he insists that this is strictly a compromise, for it quite alters the instrument's character. 1

The work itself is a skillful fusion of the older harpsichord music with the "modernity" of French music in the late 1920's. It is in three movements; Allegro molto; Andante, Tempo de Sicilienne and Finale, Presto.

The Allegro is a long movement in sonata form with new material added before the recapitulation. The principal theme is stated and recapitulated by the harpsichord.

It is a balanced antecedent-consequent melody in diatonic harmony. The Andante, Tempo de Sicilienne is based on a theme in dotted rhythm in the winds which is embroidered by the harpsichord. The middle section is a dialogue between the soloist and the orchestra; here Poulenc makes use of the registration potential of the harpsichord most effectively, alternating, for example, between open and "lute" stopping with the same motive. The Finale begins with a gigue for the harpsichord and thence to a fast 6/4 theme with an Alberti base for the harpsichord. The last part of the movement is "modern"; thematic material is stated bitonally in the winds. The movement ends quietly after a declamatory cadenza for the harpsichord.

In the Concert Champêtre Poulenc makes extensive use of both Baroque and Mozartean elements, unquestionably due to the use of the harpsichord as solo instrument. Landowska's commission was unquestionably of great
influence in dictating the Baroque and Classic stylistic devices that occur in this work, but the overall result in style is still unmistakably 20th century.

A work considered "Neo-Classic" by many critics which does not particularly match the definition of the term used in this paper is the Aubade—a choreographic concerto for piano, solo dancer and chamber orchestra. It was composed in 1929 as the result of a commission given Poulenc by the Vicomte and Vicomtesse de Noailles for a ballet to be performed at a fete in their Paris home. In lieu of a purely orchestral work, Poulenc scored the ballet with a solo part of considerable complexity for the pianist.

The scenario for the ballet was written by M. Poulenc himself and concerns the goddess, Diana.

At daybreak, Diana, surrounded by her suite, rebels against the divine law that condemns her to eternal chastity. Her friends offer consolation in presenting her with the bow that is the symbol
of her divine mission. Reluctantly she accepts it and leaps off into the forest to sublimate her amorous torments in the traditional hunt. 2

While the Aubade (which means "morning-song") was originally performed as a ballet, the work has in recent years been most often performed as a piano concerto. Poulenc made a reduction of the Aubade for solo piano, but there is no record of its ever having been performed as a concert piece.

The Aubade is in seven uninterrupted movements following the story of the dance scenario. With the exception of the opening "Toccata" which is for solo piano, the movements are titled with relation to the scenario.

The orchestration is principally for winds. The complement of eighteen instruments includes two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, one trumpet, three tympani, two violas, two 'cellos and two contrabasses. The strings in the Aubade are used. 2

2Hell, p. 37.
sparingly; the dialogue in the piece is almost completely between the piano and winds; indeed, there are only two places in the entire work where the strings state a thematic idea. Poulenc has diagrammed the disposition of the players on the stage; this diagram is included in the score.

The work opens with a brief fanfare for brass, answered by the piano at measure five. At measure twelve the solo piano toccata begins, molto animato.

Example 10: Aubade, First Movement,

Measures 12-13

Poulenc has marked the piano's opening theme emporte et violent. The Toccata follows the rondo-like formal organization employed in Poulenc's earlier pieces.
The second movement is titled "Recitatif- Les Compagnons de Diane" and functions as an introduction to the third movement. The piano is not independent of the orchestra in this section. The designation "recitatif" identifies the nature of the musical techniques employed here, which have much in common with an operatic recitative—rhythmic freedom, a declamatory quality to the melodic ideas and exaggerated cadences. Foulds has used this type of organization in several other keyboard works—most notably in the Cadence movements in the suite Les Soirées de Nazelles. The movement is but twenty-five measures long. The third movement begins with no cadential punctuation.

The third movement is marked "Rondeau- Diane et Compagnes". It is a three-sectional movement, the first section being an A B A C A rondo. The principal theme is apparently an entrance and exit motive for Diana.
Example 11: Aubade, Third Movement,

Measures 1-2

The second section marked piu mosso is entitled "Entrée de Diane" and it itself is an A B A form. The movement begins with a series of heavily-accented chords for the piano. The oboe introduces the A theme at the end of the third measure. In this section, the pianist's role is accompanimental; the principal melodic interest is in the
clarinets and oboes. The contrasting idea begins in the solo piano at the 25th measure of the section. At measure 52 of the section, the final large section of the movement begins with a restatement of the introductory rondo theme. There is again a ballet direction printed in the score—"Sortie de Diane". The thematic restatement is for piano and horns.

Example 12: Aubade, Third Movement,

Measures 71-72
The last section is in the nature of a coda. After the rondo statement a rhythmic figure is repeated for the duration of the movement.

Example 13: Rhythmic figure from Third Movement of the Aubade

\[ \text{sequence} \]

Above this figure, maintained principally by the piano, the winds repeat motives from the rondo theme in a long decrescendo.

The next movement is entitled "La Toilette de Diane". It is marked presto and is staccato and highly rhythmic-a kind of can-can melody. Formally the movement is a rondo of a less conventional sort than that employed in the preceding movement. The overall form is A B C A B C D A.
The principal theme is stated first in the piano.

Example 14: Aubade, Fourth Movement,

Measures 1-3

Another recitative follows, titled "Introduction à la Variation de Diane". It is here that the strings are heard for the first time in the statement of a major idea. A mocking figure in the 'cellos is introduced at measure five after a series of staccato chords by the entire ensemble. It is answered by the viola.

Example 15: Aubade, Fifth Movement,

Measures 5-7
At the twelfth measure of the movement a dotted rhythm is introduced; the movement is completed by a fortissimo cadenza for the piano.

The following movement, titled "Variation de Diane" introduces a lyrical melody in dialogue between the oboe and the clarinet.
Example 16: Aubade, Sixth Movement,

Measures 1-4

The piano accompanies the winds with a soft series of chords. Again one finds a modification of a rondo form; the A idea is reiterated several times, finally by the piano itself.

The next movement is marked Allegro Feroce and titled "Dépêch'rez de Diane". Stravinsky's influence on Poulenc is much in evidence here. One notices bi-tonal passages for
the winds à la Petrouchka (Example 17); the meter alternates between 3/4 and 2/2; there is an apparent reference to the Rite of Spring in the piano part (Example 18).

**Example 17: Aubade, Seventh Movement,**

*Measure 7*

**Example 18: Aubade, Seventh Movement,**

*Measure 3*
The conclusion of the Aubade is entitled "Adieux et départ de Diane". The movement is in two sections; the first is marked adagio and is monothematic in nature. The theme is stated first by the piano in soft chords with a gradual crescendo.

Example 19: Aubade, Conclusion,
Measure 1-3

The second section of the movement is marked più mosso.
It is a long and gradual crescendo using the theme of the adagio section of the movement, but with a rhythmic underscore that is reminiscent of a marche-funèbre. The thematic material is restated again and again to the end of the movement. The rhythm underlying the theme becomes gradually more predominant. The section is, in effect, the coda of the entire work.

A more compatible example of a "Neo-Classic" piece is Poulenc's Suite Française, which is based in part on melodies of the 16th century French instrumental composer, Claude Gervaise. Gustave Reese has described Gervaise's principal work - a collection titled Danceries (which is available in the series Les Maîtres Musiciens de la Renaissance Française in an edition by M. Henry Expert, (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1907).

The danceries in these books (ten volumes of dances, composed or edited by Claude Gervaise, Etienne du Tertre and anonymous) include examples of the same types (branles, basses danses, pavans and gaillardes).
The tunes are simple, the treatment chordal. The music is suitable for dancing...

It is from these dances that Poulenc drew his inspiration, and, in at least one case, his specific model. The Suite Française was originally composed for chamber orchestra as incidental music to Roger Bourdet's play, La Reine Margot. The play was based on the life of Margaret of Navarre with whom Gervaise was contemporary. The work consists of seven short pieces of which three share titles with Gervaise dances—The "Bransle de Bourgogne", "Bransle de Champagne" and "Pavane". The other movements are entitled "Petite Marche Militaire", "Complainte", "Sicilienne" and "Carillon". The pieces are organized on an antecedent-consequent basis; generally an AA BB CC type of organization of which the following excerpt from the "Petite Marche Militaire" is typical:
Example 20: Suite Francaise, "Petite Marche Militaire", Measures 1-8

The "Sicilienne" employs a rather florid ornamentation
of a type not unlike that of the early French Clavecinists:

Example 21: Suite Francaise, "Sicilienne"

Measures 1-2

There is a similar treatment of ornamentation in the Bourée
d'Auvergne, a piano piece that Poulenc composed some three years after the piano version of the Suite Francaise.

Throughout the suite, the symmetrical balance of phrases and larger melodic units is maintained. The harmony is diatonic for the most part with an occasional gratuitous dissonance added in the spirit of the 1919 Valse. An example of this is found in the "Pavane".

Example 22: Suite Francaise, "Pavane"

Measures 17-20
It is in the "Pavane" that Poulenc has actually incorporated a substantial part of an original Gervaise dancerie. The original is the Pavane d'Angleterre of Gervaise which may be found on page eighteen of Les Maîtres Musiciens de la Renaissance Française, Volume XXIII. Poulenc's version of the "Pavane" is in A B A form; the two A sections are copied with only the most minor modifications directly from the first sixteen measures of the Gervaise version. The B section contains the harmonic variations indicated in the previous example.

Poulenc's Villageoises were completed in February, 1933 and were published in the same year. They are subtitled "Petites Pièces Enfantine", a misnomer, since the piano writing is difficult and the musical organization of the pieces is extremely sophisticated. The Villageoises are included at this point since they are among the works cited as "Neo-Classical" by many of Poulenc's critics. They are, however, not admissible
under the definition of Neo-Classic in this paper, although it is unquestionably their great formal sophistication that caused the original labelling.

There are six movements in Villageoisés: "Valse Tyrolienne", "Staccato", "Rustique", "Polka", "Petite Ronde" and "Coda". The "Valse Tyrolienne" is a short A B A form; the A theme is an echo of the 1919 Valse. The "Staccato" is also an A B A form; the A idea is, like the third Mouvement Perpétuel based on an ostinato that is not employed in the contrasting section. The contrasting section itself is a rapid passage for the right hand. The dynamic and other performance markings are characteristically highly specific as to matters of accent. The "Rustique" is based on a reiterated dactylic rhythm; it is a modified A B A form. The "Petite Ronde" is a monothematic piece with an unusual organization. A melody is first stated alone, then over a pedal point and is finally doubled at the octave.
The piece is diagrammed A A' A'' . The "Coda" is a cyclic form, opening with the first half of the Valse Tyrolienne and subsequently presenting sections of the other four movements in progressively abbreviated form.

The final work to be discussed in this chapter is the Bourrée d'Auvergne. It was composed in 1937 as part of an omnibus collection of short pieces by several French composers (including Germaine Tailleferre, Georges Auric, Darius Milhaud and Poulenc from "Les Six", as well as several other French modernists) entitled À l'Exposition. The pieces are dedicated to Mlle. Marguerite Long and constitute musical portraits of the various attractions at the 1937 Paris Exposition.

The full title of Poulenc's contribution is Bourrée au Pavillon d'Auvergne. It is a short, three-sectional work with a rhythm reminiscent of J.S. Bach's keyboard Bourées. The first section begins with an estimate
which is maintained with occasional slight modifications throughout the first section.

Example 23: Bourrée d'Auvergne,
Measures 1-2

sec sans pédale.

The second section employs a contrasting ostinato; simply a repeated half-note throughout. The "Neo-Baroque" flavor of this piece is reminiscent of the Concert Champêtre.
CHAPTER THREE

LES SOIREEs DE NAZELLES

In the introduction to "Les Soirées de Nazelles" Poulenc writes:

The variations which form the center of this work were improvised at Nazelles in the course of long country evenings when the author played at "portraits" with some friends grouped around his piano. We hope today that, presented between a preambule and a final, they will have the power to evoke this scene played in a Touraine salon with a window opening into the night. 1

"Les Soirées de Nazelles" is quantitatively Poulenc's most ambitious single work for piano solo. As his introduction indicates, the composer considered the work de facto a salon piece, but the work may not be dismissed as a collection of engaging superficialities.

There is a striking parallel between "Les Soirées de Nazelles" and Robert Schumann's "Carnaval." Both works consist of a series of character pieces preceded by a

"Preambule". Poulenc has labeled his character pieces as "Variations", but he is obviously using the term in a special sense, since the pieces are in no way figural variations on a given theme. Both Carnaval and Les Soirées de Nazelles contain descriptive titles for the various character pieces— in the case of the latter work such titles are used as "A Taste for Sorrow" and "Carefree but Discreet". In addition both works contain character portraits of specific persons— "character portraits" in the sense of Gertrude Stein's literary "portraits".

As indicated, the overall structure of Les Soirées de Nazelles consists of a "Preambule" followed by a "Cadence" and eight so-called "Variations", culminating in another "Cadence" and a "Final".

The "Preambule" is a fast waltz in A B A form, containing hints of the musical stage. The first "Cadence"
(which is the French for cadenza) is in the recitative style encountered in the Aubade. It is exaggerated to the point of burlesque.

Example 24: Les Soirées de Nazelles,
"Cadence", Measure 6
The first "Variation" is monothematic with an introduction marked \textit{espressivo rubato}, entitled "The Height of Distinction". It is a syncopated and heavily-accented piece in the style of the Staccato from the Villageoisés.

Example 25: \textit{Les Soirées de Nazelles},

First "Variation", Measures 1-2

The first "Variation" proceeds without pause to the next,
which is entitled "La Coeur sur la Main". It proceeds episodically through three contrasting melodies. Of particular interest is the final episode in which the rhapsodic nature of the music approaches parody.

Example 26: Les Soirées de Nazelles,
Second "Variation", Measure 35

\( \text{Au Mouvement} \)
The third "Variation, "La Desinvolture et la Discretion" is in A B C form. The fast, staccato opening theme is reminiscent of the presto movement of the Aubade. The principal musical interest lies in the second theme with its lyrical melody.

Example 27: Les Soirées de Nazelles,
Third "Variation", Measures 8-11
The fourth "Variation" is again episodic in nature and one of the most successful as a musical portrait. Entitled "La Suite dans les Idees", it is marked tres large et porpeux. It is a dotted-rhythm march with a thick chordal texture.

"La Charme Enjoleur", the fifth "portrait" is a two-sectional piece with a distinct separation in moods between the sections. The A idea is a long-line melody supported by a constantly reiterated triplet figure - a kind of rhythmic ostinato.

Example 28: Les Soireés de Nazelles,

Fifth "Variation", Measures 1-3
The second section of the "Variation" is a music-hall waltz of the variety noted in connection with the 1919 *Valses*.

Example 29: *Les Soirées de Nazelles*,

Fifth "Variation", Measures 33-36
The sixth "Variation", "Le Contentment de Soi",
is another of Poulenc's modifications of the rondo
form; in this case, an A B C A' D A', fairly close
to the Classic era seven-part rondo. The principal
theme is heavily-accented and staccato.

Example 30: Les Soirées de Nazelles,

Sixth "Variation", Measures 1-5

Tres vite et tres sec
The penultimate "Variation" is entitled "Le Gout du Malheur". It is an A B A form with a lyric pianissimo series of chords for the piano reminiscent of the final movement of the Aubade. The melody moves as the top note in the series of chords.

The final "Variation" is entitled "L'Alerte Viellesse" and is two-sectional. The first section bears a strong resemblance to the Brahms D-Minor Capriccio.

Example 31: Les Soirées de Nazelles,

Eighth "Variation", Measures 1-2
The final "Variation" is followed by a second "Cadence", similar in style to the first. After a comma, the Final begins - a toccata-like section, again episodic in nature, marked follement vite, mais tres precis. The work ends with a sectional coda, alternating between bravura fortissimo passages and quiet, heavily-pedaled ritards. Of particular interest in view of Poulenc's relationship with Vines is the direction "creer une sorte de halo sonore avec les deux pedales."

Les Soirees de Nazelles was published in 1936 and is one of the composer's more frequently-performed works. In addition to its merits as a repertory piece, it is one of the few examples of musical "portraiture" in music literature.
CHAPTER FOUR

L'HISTOIRE DE BABAR

Poulenc's L'Histoire de Babar is a charming work based on Jean de Brunhoff's famous series of children's books. Poulenc wrote the piano score to this work in 1940 for the amusement of some of his young relatives, but publication was delayed until 1949, presumably because of wartime conditions. The work was originally scored for piano and narrator; a further version for narrator and orchestra with an orchestration by Jean Francaix appeared in 1962. It is in the piano version that the score is most successful. As Henri Hell has noted: "This is a pointed and charming score, containing some of the composer's best piano music,
a counterpart in Poulenc's piano music of Schumann's Kinderszenen or Debussy's Children's Corner.¹

L'Histoire de Babar consists of twenty separate pieces, each introduced by the narrator and each describing an incident in the story of the small elephant who went to live in Paris. The affinity of the score for the narrative is marvellously apt. The work, for example, opens with the following text:

Dans la grande forêt un petit éléphant est né. Il s'appelle Babar. Sa Maman l'aime beaucoup. Pour l'endormir elle le berce avec sa trompe, en chantant tout doucement. ²

Then follows a lullaby marked très modéré, with a harmonization in seconds. There is a wealth of variety in the pieces; for example, a molto agitato depicting Babar's mother being killed by a wicked hunter with grandiose mock-dramatic flourishes; a "tea house waltz"

¹Heil, p.17.

which features a quotation from *The Boxer* and an unforgettable episode in which the king of the elephants consumes a poisonous mushroom to the accompaniment of a chain of descending diminished seventh chords.

The styles, in short, run the gamut of Poulenc's pianistic vocabulary. Missing, of course, is the highly-detailed formal organization of his other short pieces. *L'Histoire de Babar* is program music in the classic sense of the word, and the musical organization is cued almost visually to the narrative line. A particular case in point is the finale in which, for the first time, the narrator speaks during the performance of the pianist, introducing various musical motives. "Night fell... and the stars came out... the hearts of King Babar and queen Celeste were filled with happy dreams... then all the world slept."  

3 Ibid., pp. 30-31.
The finale resembles in its elegiac mood the last movement of the Aubade. It is the degree of nuance and scaling that makes the piano version more satisfactory than the orchestral. The wealth of detail in the piano score is unfortunately lost in the orchestration. Perhaps the success of this work may be attributed to the fact that, as in the case with his song accompaniments, Poulenc is here again setting a text.
CHAPTER FIVE

THE 1949 PIANO CONCERTO

Poulenc's 1949 Piano Concerto is dedicated to his protegée, Denise Duval, and to Raymond Béstückes. It was first performed in the United States by the Boston Symphony in 1950 with the composer as soloist. The work is not generally regarded as one of Poulenc's most successful efforts; it is of far greater difficulty, pianistically, than the content warrants, although certain sections of the work have all the wit and charm of Poulenc's earlier concerti.

The concerto is in three movements—Allegretto, Andante con moto and Rondeau à la Française. The opening movement is in conventional sonata-allegro form; the piano opens the movement with the principal theme.

Example 32: Piano Concerto, First Movement, Measures 1-2
There is a contrasting, march-like second theme and a developmental section containing material based on motives from the first theme and a good deal of free passage-work for the piano. The principal theme is recapitulated in the orchestral winds and there is an extremely brief cadenza (six measures) for the solo piano shortly before the close of the movement.

The second movement of the concerto, Andante con Moto is additionally marked très doux et expressif. It is an A B A song form with the principal idea first introduced in the violins and then answered by the pianist over a rhythmic ostinato.
Example 33: Piano Concerto, Second

Movement, Measures 1-4

The middle section of the movement is marked

`tempo exact de l'allegretto` and is contrastingly
double-forte with rapid scale passages and bravura
piano writing. The A theme is re-introduced by the
piano and briefly answered by the winds.
The third and final movement of the concerto is the *Rondeau à la Française*. It is a seven part rondo (A B A C A D A) with a coda containing references to all the previous themes of the movement. This is the most successful movement of the concerto; it represents Poulenc at his wittiest and most eclectic. The rondo theme, marked *presto giocoso* is a polka-like melody for the pianist over an orchestral accompaniment.

*Example 3a: Piano Concerto, Third Movement, Measures 1-3*
The contrasting themes include quotations from La Sorolla and Swane River. The movement as a whole is successful enough to warrant performance as a separate piece.
CHAPTER SIX

THE IMPROVISATIONS

The last group of Poulenc's works for piano solo that will be discussed is his collection of Improvisations, which, in sum, reflect most of the stylistic traits discussed in connection with his previously-cited works. The Improvisations are known to be Poulenc's own favorites among his piano works, and, as they were composed over the interval 1932 to 1959, they may be expected to provide an indication of his previously-mentioned stylistic consistency. The first twelve Improvisations were published in sets of six between 1933 and 1945. The 13th, 14th, and 15th Improvisations were published between 1957 and 1960 individually. The fifteen pieces share equivalent length and difficulty, but Improvisations 7-12 and 15 reflect Poulenc's direct comments on other composers and musical personalities.
Improvisation No. 7 was completed at Noizay in November, 1933. It is Poulenc's homage to the Impressionists in music, particularly to the Ravel of Gaspard de la Nuit. It is a four-sectional piece with a diagram of A B C A' for the sections. The principal theme, marked modéré sans lenteur, is a long melody over an ostinato. The first section concludes with a series of Ravel-esque chords.

Example 35: Improvisation No. 7,
Measure 16
In the extension of the A' section, which functions as the coda, Poulenc introduces a measure which employs a right-hand figure similar to that which Ravel used in the opening section of Caspary's "Ondine".

**Example 36, Improvisation No. 7, Measure 33**

![Music notation image]

The eighth Improvisation was completed at Noizay in May, 1924. It is a presto with a marking très sec et ironique. As in so many of his other short pieces,
Poulenc uses here a kind of rondo from A B A C A D.
The D section is, in effect, a coda, and it introduces new material in the form of a quotation from a popular melody rather than being purely cadential.

Improvisation No. 9 has been compared by one critic to the Chopin F-Sharp Minor Prelude, but the resemblance is familial rather than specific. The piece is of extreme pianistic difficulty. It is marked presto possible and, uncharacteristically for the composer, presque sans pédales. It is principally based on a series of disjunct, arpeggiated figures; accents frequently occur on weak beats, and there are wide leaps between pitches.

Improvisation No. 10 is subtitled "Cloque des gammes" and is, in effect, Poulenc's homage to the scale. It is in A B A form; the opening section is based on antecedent and consequent phrases, well-balanced throughout the section, using ascending and descending running scale passages with frequent key changes. The B section adds a long-line melody in the soprano register to further scale passages.
which occur in the inner voices.

Improvisation No. 11 is principally concerned with the left hand with a staccato eighth-note figure in the bass part juxtaposed against quarter-note chords in the upper register. The harmony moves by diminished seventh chords in a manner often observed in Moussorgsky's work. The first measure is illustrative of these points.

Example 37, Improvisation No. 11,

Measure 1

The form of this Improvisation is A B A CODA. It was composed in Paris and completed in June, 1917.
The most well-known example of Poulenc's commentaries on other composers is the twelfth Improvisation which is subtitled, "Hommage à Schubert". After a brief introduction, Poulenc introduces a direct quotation from the Schubert Soirée de Vienne No. 6:

Example 38, Improvisation No. 12,

Measure 4

The form of Improvisation No. 12 is A B A C D A Coda. It was completed by the composer in Paris in November, 1941.
The Improvisation No. 15, sub-titled "Homage à Edith Piaf" is one of Poulenc's last keyboard works. He completed the piece in the spring of 1959 at Bagnols en Foret. It is a 20th-century French "valse-chanson" with a brief introduction. Poulenc vividly re-creates the idiom that virtually belonged to Mlle. Piaf—the café song. The melody might be an actual café song; at any rate it is a synthesis of many such; it again demonstrates Poulenc's gift for making other idioms his own. As with the 1919 Valse we find the composer utilizing the popular materials of the moment and adding the ineffable touch that is only Poulenc.

Another of Poulenc's late keyboard works is the Novelette No. 3 in E minor, which was completed at Brive in June, 1959. While there are two earlier Novelettes which are among the most often-played of the Poulenc piano works, they are not "homages" as is the third. The third Novelette is included in the discussion at this point as it is based on a theme from Manuel de Falla's El Amor Brujo.

Example 39, El Amor Brujo,
Poulenc begins the piece with an embellishment of the above melody:

Example 10, Novelette No. 3,

Measure 1

the basic theme is then varied, inverted, stated in different registers, throughout the remainder of the piece. This is essentially a nonothematic piece; the variety, as in certain sections of the Aubade is achieved through episodic variation of one principal idea.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Summary and Conclusion

It is too short a time since Poulenc’s death to assess the position that his piano solo works will occupy in the concert repertory ten years from now, but certain general conclusions may be drawn about his piano works nonetheless. Poulenc, like Debussy believed that music "humbly sought to please", and the factor that elevates his piano works out of the ordinary salon music category is his extraordinary melodic gift. The Poulenc piano music is unquestionably facile to a degree, but its spontaneity, its charm and especially the quality of the melodic writing more than offset the meretricious aspects of the music.

It is important as well to remember Poulenc’s French-ness; in a sense Poulenc’s piano music could have only been composed by a Frenchman:

And so the illogic of Poulenc’s music has never bothered his compatriots nor those who understand France. Borrowing of others’ styles? Why not—if the result is good. Mozart one minute and Prokofiev the next? Excellent, if well-made. Music-hall tunes, cheap sounds, lack of elegance, no aspirations at all towards "greatness"? How charming! No twelve-tone complications, no language of consistent dissonance? Not important. Must one write in a current style to be great? Not in France, where the greatest paradox of all is that a nation so supremely style-conscious can ignore style and get away with it every time.¹

Poulenc's piano works do exhibit certain symptomatic similarities that make them unclassifiable in a chronological manner. His fondness for the eclectic, his use of the antecedent-consequent type of melodic organization, his fondness for ostinati, his formal clarity are all traits found in the latest as well as the earliest of his piano pieces. He was an homme, a miniaturist; his most successful piano works are those that deal with the small forms.

In France, without the slightest question, Poulenc had risen to greatness— or rather its special French equivalent. In the rest of the Western musical world his French status was widely respected by professionals of importance. And yet— for the casual or amateur listener, the music startlingly lacks the sound of "greatness" that we unfortunate listeners have been trained to expect. The problem is aesthetic, even moral. It is pleasant music, surely, but why does it sound so "popular"? And how can it be both great and frankly imitative??

This is, of course, the central question pertaining to Poulenc as a composer in all aspects of his work, and it is perhaps fortunate that his ultimate reputation rests on other works than those for piano solo. In sum, delightful as they are, Mr. Canty's question above will continue to be asked about all of Poulenc's "mauvaise musique" pieces, and the answer will not be readily forthcoming. Suffice it to say that the piano

2 Ibid.
works are of great value to a performer and a recital programmer, but that they represent the minor work of a major composer.
# APPENDIX I

**A Bibliography of Francis Poulenc's Music Involving Piano**

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