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Toby Patrick Moschard

*The Sacred Choral Music of Francis Poulenc: a
contextual and analytical study*

**Submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the
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Faculty of Arts,
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Contents

Abstract	page iii
Preface	page iv
Introduction	page 1

Section A

Chapter 1 : Paris: music, education, the Church and the State	page 15
Chapter 2 : Poulenc, Cocteau and Parisian Intellectualism	page 26

Section B

Chapter 3 : A Renewal of faith: <i>Litanies à la Vierge Noire</i> , and the <i>Mass in G</i>	page 41
Chapter 4 : The mature sacred style: <i>Quatre motets pour un temps de pénitence, Salve Regina, Exultate Deo</i> , and <i>Quatre prières de Saint François d'Assise</i>	page 68
Chapter 5 : The late liturgical works: <i>Quatre motets pour le temps de Noël, Ave verum corpus</i> and <i>Laudes de Saint Antoine de Padoue</i>	page 87

Bibliography	page 103
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Toby Patrick Moschard
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Abstract

Poulenc is perhaps best known for his instrumental works, for his adherence to the aesthetics of Neo-classicism, and his place among the Parisian intellectual circles in the 1920s and 1930s in which his friend, Jean Cocteau, played a central role. This essentially secular side of Poulenc's creativity was, after the composer's return to Roman Catholicism in 1936, challenged by a need to express a newly-found religious conviction in sacred music. Consequently Poulenc, who had been accustomed to the secular aesthetics of Neo-classicism of Parisian artistic life and the French capital's concert halls, found it necessary to 'rediscover' and assimilate the language of French church music and its history (notably through the filter of the Cecilian Movement, Niedermeyer and the plainchant of Solesmes) in order to create for himself an appropriate 'sacred style' that could also incorporate those essential elements of his characteristically playful and sensual, 'secular' language. This study aims to explore this confrontation of styles and how Poulenc successfully forged a cohesive and congruent language for his sacred works.

The opening chapters have several distinct perspectives: chapter one outlines the tortuous history of the Church's relationship with the State in France dating back to the pivotal effects of the 1789 Revolution, in an attempt to provide a necessary context for the importance that Poulenc and his predecessors and contemporaries (most significantly Debussy) attached to the past; chapter two, by contrast, discusses some of the principal issues at the heart of Parisian artistic society in the early decades of the twentieth century and focuses on the lively artistic community which existed in Paris with the influx of large numbers of foreign musicians (particularly Americans and Russians) and artists, the emergence of 'Les Six' (of which Poulenc was a member) and the artistic leadership and inspiration given by figures such as Jean Cocteau, Serge Diaghilev and Igor Stravinsky. Cocteau and Stravinsky, indeed, had a huge impact on the young Poulenc.

The second part of the thesis is an analytical study of Poulenc's sacred works (putting aside the *Gloria*, *Stabat Mater* and *Sept Répons de Ténèbres* which are unmistakably concert works) and connects these analyses with the issues presented in the earlier chapters, beginning with the emotionally powerful *Litanies à la vierge noire* for women's voices, composed soon after his Catholic faith returned in 1936, and ending with the decidedly hard-edged, Stravinskian Neo-classicism, yet relative placidity, of the *Laudes de Saint Antoine de Padoue* for men's voices, completed in Cannes in 1959. Central to the analytical discussion are the well known eclectic *Mass in G* (1937), the dramatic *Quatre motets pour un temps de pénitence* (1939) and the stylistically distilled *Quatre petite prières de Saint François d'Assise* which display the greatest variety of style and form and which combine to present significant examples of Poulenc's skilful unification of sacred and secular, ancient and modern sound worlds.

Preface

My passionate interest in the choral music of Francis Poulenc developed during my days as an undergraduate student at the University of Durham. Monday afternoons throughout the three years were spent singing tenor as a member of Durham University Consort of Voices, run by my supervisor for this thesis, Professor Jeremy Dibble. Having spent a childhood being increasingly immersed in the sacred music of the great English and Italian masters as a chorister in a parish church choir and then at senior school, choral music was always my main musical interest. This interest developed into an obsession due to the undying enthusiasm and support of Professor Dibble who consistently displayed an admirable ability to pass on his wealth of knowledge of the arts whilst ensuring that every lecture, tutorial and rehearsal would be most exceptionally enjoyable and thus an inspiration for my work and for my wider artistic life. Following my discovery of Poulenc's *Quatre motets pour un temps de pénitence*, two of which were my first taster of the music of Poulenc when the Consort of Voices sang them as part of an end of term concert in Durham Cathedral's Chapter House in May 2000, I was immediately stuck by the individuality of Poulenc's musical voice, in particular the strongly modal dimension to these pieces whilst recognising their strongly Stravinskian neo-classical style as well as their daring combination of both sacred and secular ideas. These specific musical issues along with the musical, social and cultural happenings in Paris from the turn of the twentieth century until the 1930s as well as the varied influences of Poulenc's life provided further fascination and confirmed that I should like to use Poulenc's sacred music as a basis for my postgraduate study. I therefore owe Professor Dibble the greatest gratitude for all his help, encouragement and, above all, for his patience in the many enjoyable hours spent discussing my thesis.

Introduction

Discipline must be sought in liberty and not in the formulas of philosophy which is in decay and of use only in the weak; let us accept the advice of none save the wind that passes and tells us the history of the world.¹

It is true to say that French visual art, as well as the emerging voice of French-speaking philosophers, of the nineteenth century played an integral role in the dramatic development of European culture as a whole. The sheer skill and the resulting recognition of figures like Claude Monet, Henri Matisse and Auguste Renoir, the so-called 'Impressionist' painters of the late nineteenth century, as well as that of photographic artists from around 1920, were so great that France, and more particularly Paris as its capital city, came to be regarded as the new European, if not worldwide, centre for artistic insight. Paris was to become a place to which artists of all manner of disciplines, particularly from Scandinavia, Eastern Europe and the United States, flocked to voice their ideas and make an impact on the reawakening of the arts following a relative dearth in the late eighteenth and early part of the nineteenth centuries. This extraordinary cosmopolitan atmosphere and cultural maelstrom engendered in France's capital city a world of the artistic 'salon' in which 'la vie Bohème' and 'la vie de café' as well as occultism, mysticism, spiritualism and exoticism were allowed to thrive unhindered by the trammels of conventional manners and etiquette.² Henry James, an American, defined the French capital as "the mysterious home of art, the country which had given her inhabitants something called 'taste' which distinguished them from other people".³ Both native and foreign artists, clearly, were able to identify with this creative freedom which France could offer, suggested by Claude Debussy in the quote which opens this chapter, a freedom which is still viewed as a common characteristic of French

¹ Claude Debussy. Quoted in Jean-Aubry, G. - *French Music of Today* (London, 1919), ii.

² Brody, Elaine. *Paris - The Musical Kaleidoscope 1870-1925* (New York, 1987), xii.

³ Brody, 226.

mentality in all walks of life, appearing at times like complacency which leads at times, rather amusingly, very close to anarchy. This rather chaotic image of the lifestyle of a nation is summarised in a quote from Jean Cocteau, a Frenchman himself: "In France, every time an attempt is made to organize, to adopt systems, the individual rebels and slips in between the gears of the mechanism," and he goes on to acknowledge this precarious lifestyle as being advantageous with reference to film production: "thanks to that tradition of anarchy which still makes it possible, here in France, for chance to intrude amidst all the order".⁴

Music was increasingly being viewed as one of the Paris's foremost attractions as the second decade of the twentieth century drew to a close though the city had been home to a number of performances of several avant-garde works, most significantly Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*, before the outbreak of the First World War. By contrast to the comparatively small amount of widely known and influential French compositions of the pre-war years, the eclectic range of musical styles was increasing at an alarming rate with the influx of such diverse foreign artistic influences resulting in a freedom of musical expression comparable with the independence which the other arts had allowed. It should, however, be clearly emphasised at this stage that it would be most unfair to claim that France was in any way negligible in its musical output in the nineteenth century when one considers the large number of well recognised figures such as Bizet, Chabrier, Charpentier, Debussy, Dukas, Fauré, Franck, Gounod, D'Indy, Massenet, Meyerbeer, Widor, Ravel, Ropartz, Saint-Saëns and Thomas amongst many others who had made significant contributions to both church music and the operatic stage. Thus, in the cautious employment of the word 'dearth' in the opening paragraph relating to the arts in general, it should be made clear that such an apparent situation was made to appear the case by the predominating German operatic and symphonic activities

⁴ Steegmuller, Francis. *Cocteau: A Biography* (London and Basingstoke, 1970), 461.

which had assumed great significance in Europe and so diminished the achievements of these French composers.

It was, above all, undoubtedly due to the fact that Paris was geographically extremely well placed for artists to reach from all corners of Europe and North America that it was to gain such prominence, one that resulted in the city's gradual emergence as the musical capital of the Western world by 1925. This took away the artistic leadership of Europe from Germany in the early twentieth century by which time the greatest destructive and emotional impact of the First World War had had sufficient time to subside and a new and exciting artistic world was about to reach its height under the auspices of the French.⁵

The 'symphonic' French organ school, led by Louis Vierne and Charles-Marie Widor and also the now extremely underrated French composer Erik Satie were all extremely significant as was the influence of Russian composers (Igor Stravinsky and members of the 'Mighty Handful' – Balakirev, Borodin, Cui, Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov – following the initial visits of several Russian musicians as part of the *Exposition* of 1889⁶) in forming this fresh and innovative approach to French composition in the early twentieth century and, more importantly, which aided the consolidation of a characteristically twentieth-century French style in music at a particularly influential time. The introduction of oriental art to France (in which Debussy took a great interest, revealing this most explicitly in his piano music) was to have an equally dramatic impact. The organ school had the advantage over the others in that its roots lay in an established French tradition of the Baroque period which had thrived in the Organ Masses of François Couperin only to be abandoned by subsequent generations of composers before interest in the organ was renewed, two hundred years later, in the mid-nineteenth century.

The performance of Mussorgsky's opera *Boris Godunov* in Paris in 1908 was an exhibition to French audiences of a characteristically most individual Russian music of the late nineteenth century, demonstrating the accomplishments of a pioneer of modernism who laid foundations for the French school of Debussy and Ravel.⁷ This process established the roots of lasting stylistic affinity between the two countries, reaching its climax in the inter-war sensation of Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* and the controversial works of Stravinsky.⁸ These Russian influences also became more powerful with the gradual decline of the Wagner cult which, after the Symbolists' infatuation in the late nineteenth century led by Baudelaire, began in the early years of the twentieth century (and caricatured so pungently in Debussy's denunciations), reaching its apogee after the First World War.⁹ There was also an equally increasing tendency to view elements of jazz, music hall and circus music and music heard at café-concerts (the latter of which had been in existence since as early as 1731¹⁰), which were largely imported from the United States, as having serious musical content which could offer inspiration for the young composers (notably 'Les Six', so branded by Henri Collet, music critic for the magazine *Comœdia*),¹¹ whilst creating an originality that could be recognised as characteristically French. Indeed, jazz was only to become a fascination amongst French musicians following the return to the 'Casino de Paris' of Gaby Deslys, a famous *chanteuse*, from New York in 1917, who brought with her the first jazz that Paris had heard.¹² These factors all aided in advancing a French musical voice which was renowned for being behind the times, all due to the continuing cultural shadow which had been cast by the Revolution. Poulenc demonstrated his own enthusiasm for this

⁵ Brody, xii.

⁶ Ibid., 197.

⁷ Oldani, Robert. 'Musorgsky, Modest Petrovich', in *Grove* 7, xvii (London, 2000), 541.

⁸ Brody, xii.

⁹ Ibid., xv.

¹⁰ Ibid., 99.

¹¹ Rašín, Vera. 'Les Six' and Jean Cocteau', *Music and Letters* (April 1957), 164.

new phase in French music by summing up these influences, and the wealth of possibilities that they offered, superbly very early on in his compositional career in his *Rhapsodie Nègre* (1917). Indeed, these fresh interests, whilst showing some obvious foreign stylistic foundations, furthered the principles of the pivotal *Société Nationale de Musique* which had been formed in the nineteenth century by Camille Saint-Saëns and the singer Romaine Bussine in an attempt to promote French music whilst purging it of over-prevailing German and Italian influences. This institution was to make a dramatic impact on composition in France into the twentieth century¹³ with the support of several leading French composers though the individuality and independence of virtually self-taught composers like Poulenc added fresh spice to composition which could otherwise have been overridden by academic rules. Earlier attempts, in the Baroque period, to rid French music of foreign influence were, perhaps inevitably, subverted by indigenous composers of later generations, particularly those of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (who rejected the xenophobia of the eighteenth century); this subsequently allowed for the diverse influences I have mentioned above. It is clear that French composers of the twentieth century deliberately wished to pursue Russian and *ipso facto* more exotic influences alongside the German ones (the latter of which was the preoccupation in England at the time),¹⁴ in order to act as a foil to Chabrier's ardent Wagnerism which had stemmed from prominent early French Wagnerians such as Villiers and Mendès. Chabrier did, however, not simply take their word but was noted to have been captivated by a performance of *Tristan* in Munich in 1880.¹⁵ Indeed, the presence and sensibility of Chabrier accentuated a form of musical anarchy (or at least opposition to established conventionalities) which was powerfully present as a dynamic

¹²Brown, Frederick. *An Impersonation of Angels - A Biography of Jean Cocteau* (London and Harlow, 1969), 162.

¹³ Brody, 17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁵ Huebner, Stephen. 'Chabrier, (Alexis-)Emmanuel', in *Grove 7*, v (London, 2000), 404.

in much French music of the twentieth century. One might argue that such anarchy was already prevalent in the formal and harmonic experiments of Berlioz, as evidenced in his hybrid symphonic, concerto and oratorical forms, but by the time of Debussy and Satie, a new, anti-‘academic’ and anti-Teutonic mindset was at work which eschewed traditional formal disciplines such as fugue and sonata, and which set itself apart from the long-established strictures of the organ school.

Meanwhile, the volume of sacred vocal music produced in France was rather insignificant despite the emergence of the *École Niedermeyer* in 1853 which quickly emerged as a pivotal institution in French musical education in its drive to create church musicians with a thorough knowledge of Gregorian chant as well as the works of the polyphonic masters of the Renaissance.¹⁶ Despite the modest body of sacred compositions by one of the school’s teachers, Saint-Saëns, and one of its early pupils, Fauré, as well as the influential position of the Belgian organist and composer César Franck (who was strongly influenced by Wagner and showed affinities with Bruckner), few memorable settings of the liturgy emerged.¹⁷ The emergence of the Cecilian movement, centred in Germany, in which Catholic Church music was reformed in order to promote a ‘pure’ art, emphasising the intelligibility of words as well as general simplicity of musical design, was pivotal to the nineteenth century’s zeal for historicisation.¹⁸ Indeed, as the twentieth century dawned, French composers were clearly faced with an immensely demanding task, with far greater demands than neighbouring Germany or Britain, in order to re-establish acceptable music for liturgical performance which took into account the principles of the Cecilian movement whilst allowing an original and national musical voice to emerge, in many ways recalling the ideals of the pre-Revolutionary years.

¹⁶ Ferchault, Guy and Gachet, Jaqueline. ‘Niedermeyer, (Abraham) Louis’, in *Grove* 7, xvii (London, 2000), 883.

¹⁷ Hutchings, Arthur. *Church Music in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1967), 26.

The purpose of the first section of this thesis, therefore, is to provide an historical context for Francis Poulenc's liturgical music built around these factors which made up such a complex and culturally diverse organization of French artistic and musical society from the late nineteenth until the mid-twentieth century, bearing in mind that the Roman Catholic Church in France had very little standing as an influential institution, both educationally and artistically. There is an account of the problems concerning French musical education and the declining power of the Church from the days preceding the 1789 Revolution. This serves to illustrate how significant the concept of history was to composers of Poulenc's generation and provides a background for their national and personal artistic identity through both the sacred and the secular traditions of their predecessors. The historical questions addressed are those affecting the Church and the arts which centred around the problems created by the impact of the 1789 Revolution, Napoleonic rule and the consistently strained links between the Church and State, leading to their official separation in 1905.¹⁹ The presentation of these issues assist in providing an historical framework for Poulenc as a composer of sacred music before exploring the tumultuous events of his own life, mostly centred around his constant preoccupation with love of his various homosexual lovers and female friends as well as that of God, music and art, and also the circumstances brought about by his links with eminent artistic thinkers who worked alongside him. Also of importance is the study of the spiritual symbolism of his music in light of his own faith, the experiences he encountered in his secular life, the artistic thought which surrounded him, his significant decision to compose in established forms (the sonata and concerto as well as the mass,

¹⁸ Gmeinwieser, Siegfried. 'Cecilian movement', in *Grove* 7, x (London, 2000), 333.

¹⁹ Heywood, Colin. 'Society and People in the Nineteenth Century', *French History Since Napoleon* (London, 1999), 83.

motet and litany) which owe a great deal to Stravinsky and the great technical demands he placed on singers in his sacred choral works. This includes a discussion of the dramatic changes brought about by the closely related movements such as Symbolism, Dadaism, Surrealism and Cubism amongst poets and painters, the significant influence of Jean Cocteau and also by the issue of homosexuality and its conflict with Christian faith which was particularly important to Poulenc. The fact that a great number of his sacred works were inspired by his lovers and friends is evidently pivotal and provides one with an accentuation of how he combined an actively social and homosexual sex life alongside a strict adherence to Catholicism. The second part of the study contextualises Poulenc's sacred works with references to specific works and forms an account of the unity he achieves between both ancient and modern forms and sacred and secular gestures. The analyses of the sacred choral works themselves demonstrate Poulenc's distinctly original liturgical sound world, clearly embodying the fervour of his own Roman Catholic faith, but allowing the opposing 'moine' and 'voyou'²⁰ sides to his both musical and social personality to be exhibited (reflecting the radically different intellectual, social and musical tastes and personalities of his father, Émile, and mother, Jenny, respectively). His characteristic wit, charm and sensuality, as is revealed, are consistently never far from reach. The early deaths of his parents (his mother when he was sixteen and his father when he was seventeen) obviously made him seek alternative role models and these are in many ways explicitly illustrated in his correspondence as well as in his approaches to composition. He made clear his appreciation for the early piano tuition he had received from Viñes, writing: "my dear Viñes whom I adored and to whom I owe EVERYTHING in my musical career, both as a pianist and composer".²¹

²⁰ Burton, Richard E. *Francis Poulenc* (Bath, 2002), 61.

²¹ Chimènes, Miriam. 'Poulenc and his patrons: social convergences', *Francis Poulenc – Music, Art and Literature* (Aldershot, Hampshire, 1999), 212.

It will be observed that Poulenc combined sacred and secular nuances in a skilful depiction of the issues affecting his own life as well as reflecting artistic thought of the time through his work and active social life spent with poets which led to his setting their work in his *mélodies* and secular choral works. He had the courage, almost single-handedly, to voice his admiration for Debussy (his favourite composer second only to Mozart) despite the rife anti-Debussyism and general anti-impressionism which was prevalent in France during the first quarter of the twentieth century, particularly amongst the other members of 'Les Six' (probably due to its opposition to traditional academic methods of approaching composition), and he identified closely with the Neo-classicism of Stravinsky and also with popular music whilst deciding not to pursue the route of atonality and serialism which was being introduced and pursued by Schoenberg and others during his early years. One could be led to believe that Poulenc's great admiration for Debussy set him apart from the ideals of 'Les Six' (a group of composers which, besides Poulenc himself, comprised Georges Auric, Louis Durey, Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud and Germaine Tailleferre) and this was to some extent inevitable. However, the group had the advantage that they were not united for any common musical reasons but merely by friendship, they nevertheless encouraged each other by sharing their new compositions when they met but agreed never to pursue a single stylistic path (other than the fact that they all followed Chabrier's non-developmental discipline²² and the majority rejected impressionism).

These greatly varied sources of inspiration which Poulenc was to adopt followed his initial debt to the eccentric style of the musical maverick, Emmanuel Chabrier, about whom he was to comment in retrospect: "suddenly a harmonic universe opened up before me and my music never forgot that first kiss of love", causing him even to refer to

²² Daniel, 4.

Chabrier as his 'grandpapa'²³ following his initial fascination with 'Idylle' from the *Pièces pittoresques*.²⁴ Indeed, Chabrier's music, much as it remains largely unfamiliar and unperformed today, had a great impact on the majority of French composers after 1900, beginning with Erik Satie. Poulenc's compositional originality is made even more apparent when one witnesses his combination of Chabrier's influence along with the adoption of the fresh Debussyian quasi-liturgical modal impressionism (of the sort that one observes in Debussy's secular piano *Préludes*) which is closely linked to his allusion to Gregorian chant as well as making a form of atavistic reference to the musical inheritance of French folksong and the rediscovery of sixteenth-century music by figures such as D'Indy at the *Schola Cantorum*. These juxtapositions give rise to an amalgam of buoyancy, spirituality, light-heartedness, sensuality, pathos and melancholy, reflecting his parentally inherited dual personality and providing particularly extreme and daring contrasts of mood for church or liturgical settings. Such contrasts of mood are explicitly demonstrated in the secular *Concerto for Organ, Strings and Timpani* and the liturgical *Quatre motets pour un temps de pénitence*, both composed around the same time, in 1938. It will be observed that several ideas from the *Mass in G* were reused in the *Concerto* which adds a further dimension to this unity of sacred and secular ideas.

Poulenc's musical individuality stemmed partly from the fact that he was denied a conservatoire training due to his father's, but not his mother's, wish for him to pursue a more general *lycée* education rather than an exclusively musical one, though this arguably contributed to his strikingly self-taught originality to which he owes a great deal more than his private tuition from Charles Koechlin, received in his early twenties. One cannot fail to be struck by the fact that a musician who was not an organist and who did not have any training at all as a church musician as well as no conservatoire training could produce liturgical music of such subtlety and technical complexity decked with

²³ Burton, 3.

deeply felt and at times enchantingly emotional Christian mysticism and symbolism, whilst displaying a distinctly new and technically accomplished approach to choral writing. This is seen particularly in the way the singers are divided which often results in quasi-orchestral textures, thereby creating striking antiphonal effects. Any discussion of Poulenc's music will present the combination of opposites to which Willfrid Mellers refers as 'a metaphysical chastity and physical sensuality',²⁵ a stylistic duality which recurs in Poulenc's composition throughout his career and not only in his sacred works, beginning with his two early compositions which set poetry by Jean Cocteau: *Le Bestaire* (1918) and *Cocardes* (1919). The reason for Poulenc's preoccupation with these conflicting ideas was, above all, due to his own personality which, as has been suggested, reflects the contrast of the serious and hard-working personality of his father (who came from a quiet rural background in Aveyron in the Mid-Pyrénées) with the fun-loving and daring attitudes of his mother (the product of an eccentric family with undiluted Parisian roots dating back several generations)²⁶ as well as the introduction to the arts he received from his mother's homosexual brother whom he knew as Uncle 'Papoum' (due to Poulenc's inability to pronounce the word 'parrain' (godfather) as a young boy).²⁷ The innocence and playfulness one associates with many of Poulenc's chamber works, revealing his mother's secular personality, is contrasted by the generally more serious demeanour of the sacred works, demonstrating the fervour of his father's religious beliefs, though his characteristic secularisms are, interestingly, not in any way excluded. The latter of these two personalities came to fruition in 1936 with the first of his liturgical compositions, the *Litanies à la vierge noire* for three women's voices and organ, composed following the renewal of his Catholic faith as a result of the death his colleague and friend Pierre-Octave Ferroud in an horrific motoring accident in

²⁴ Ivry, Benjamin. *Francis Poulenc* (London, 1996), 16.

²⁵ Mellers, Wilfrid. *Francis Poulenc* (Oxford, 1993), 7.

²⁶ McLeod, Donald. *Composer of the Week* (BBC Radio 3, 2004).

Debrecen, Hungary, near the Austrian border, on 17 August 1936.²⁸ The great emotional significance of this event in changing his musical and personal outlook and its power to bring his Christian faith back to life (Poulenc having allowed it to lapse following his father's death) are made clear in his own words to Claude Rostand:

In 1936, a significant date in my life and my career, taking advantage of a working holiday with Yvonne Gouverné and Bernac at Uzerche, I asked the latter to drive me in his car to Rocamadour, a place about which I had often heard my father speak. [...] I had just learned, several days before, of the tragic death of my colleague, Pierre-Octave Ferroud. The tragic decapitation of this musician of such vitality had stupefied me. Thinking about the frailty of the human condition, I was once again attracted to the spiritual life. Rocamadour served to lead me back to the faith of my youth. This sanctuary, certainly the oldest in France (St Louis stopped there upon his departure for the Crusade), completely captivated me. Suspended in full sunlight in a vertiginous rock crevice, Rocamadour is a place of extraordinary peace, which accentuates again the very limited number of tourists. Preceded by a courtyard surrounded by pink laurel trees, a very modest chapel, half constructed in the rock, shelters a miraculous statue of the black virgin, sculpted, according to tradition, from black wood by St Amadour, little Zachée of the Gospel, who had to climb a tree in order to see Christ. The same evening of that visit to Rocamadour, I began my *Litanies à la Vierge noire* for female voices and organ. In this work I tried to depict the 'rustic devotion' side that struck me so strongly in this lofty place. That is why one must sing this invocation without pretension. From that day onward, I returned often to Rocamadour, putting under the protection of the Black Virgin such varied works as *Figure humaine*, *Stabat Mater*, dedicated to the memory of my dear friend Christian Bérard, and the *Dialogue des Carmélites* of Bernanos. Now you know, my dear Claude, the true source of inspiration for my religious works.²⁹

Interestingly, the statue of the Black Virgin at Rocamadour had an uncanny resemblance to Poulenc's close friend Raymonde Linossier, to whom he was to propose marriage and be refused and whose existence continued to charm him throughout his life.³⁰ He never forgot the depth of the impact that Linossier had on his life whatever happened to him, feeling an immense sadness when she died in January 1930 (after which he kept a photo of her on his desk which he took with him whenever he travelled). The *Litanies à la Vierge Noire* came, unknown to the composer, in the advent of the Second World War, anticipating a period during which he suffered greatly from depression and which led him very close to a nervous breakdown as the war raged. This anguish was certainly more a result of the breakdown of several personal relationships as well as his constant

²⁷ Ivry, 12.

²⁸ Landormy Paul. *La musique française après Debussy* (Paris, 1943), 327.

²⁹ Poulenc, in a conversation with Claude Rostand in 1954, quoted in Schmidt, Carl B. *Entrancing Muse – A Documented Biography of Francis Poulenc* (New York, 2001), 231.

wrestling with his homosexuality, particularly his consistent liking for younger men who would have been considered to be of the 'working classes' (an inclination which has been attributed to the freedom he experienced whilst visiting his grandparents at Nogent-sur-Marne, near Paris, in his youth until the age of twenty-five)³¹ and its opposition to his Christian faith rather than a result of the events of the war.

Such diverse musical influences, as well as the significant issues concerning religion, sexuality and intellectual lifestyle were to make the creative lives of young composers in the early inter-war years especially challenging in their search for an individual voice. Poulenc, despite his lack of formal musical education, decided to pursue his own route (with the early guidance of Viñes and Koechlin) to achieve an individuality which was a true expression of himself, and in his sacred works an additional expression of the depth of his religious devotion which showed a determination to steer clear of the rising phenomenon of atonality. The historical account of the political, religious and musical make-up of France over the centuries, which follows now in chapter two, should fittingly illustrate a necessary depiction of the circumstances built up by the gradual developments in Parisian life over the centuries in terms of the declining status of the Church, the problems encountered in French musical education, the changing principles regarding foreign influences, Paris's transformation into a worldwide artistic centre by the mid-1920s and the effects of all these factors on liturgical music the twentieth century. This will reveal the extent of the remarkable strength of French culture in the twentieth century and will help to highlight the open-mindedness as well as the musical skill of French composers, particularly the largely self-taught Poulenc, in pursuing an artistic goal only with the aid of his own personal and largely unguided musical discoveries. The paradox with Poulenc was that, having assimilated the fashion and mindset of cultural

³⁰ Ivry, 90.

anarchy in post-war Paris, personal experience and a zeal for a new musical stringency caused him increasingly to rediscover and explore more archaic practices of counterpoint and modal harmony. Hence, Poulenc's musical style developed into an amalgam of the 'ancient' and the 'modern' in which there was ample room for an independent, new and innovative variety of compositional disciplines characterised by opposing parameters of rebellion and tradition, but which remained wholly and distinctively Parisian and French.

³¹ Ibid., 17.

Section A

Chapter 1

Poulenc and French Sacred Music

The world of French church music that Francis Poulenc inherited after the First World War was one that had, in the previous 150 years, experienced much turbulence and change. The political hiatus of the 1789 Revolution, with its vehemently anti-religious and anti-clerical mindset invoked for twelve years a spirituality closer to what was termed 'natural religion' – one that was consistent with the entirely secular imperatives of the new French governmental administration. Moreover, France, like other European countries, had been enthralled by the gathering pace of the Enlightenment whose call for reason and the use of intellect cut across the traditional 'spiritual' demands of the Christian faith. Secularism, therefore, became a seminal watchword of the new French constitution and it remains so today. In consequence the French church, denuded of its wealth and influence, inevitably dwindled in its public influence and, in the absence of its once powerful position patronage for the arts, church music and musical education suffered notable decline. The story of French sacred music throughout the nineteenth century is one of survival, reformation and historicisation as the Church battled with the ever-increasing supremacy of those two 'cathedrals of the bourgeoisie', the opera house and the concert hall. Sacred music in many ways represented a 'reaction' to the secular genres of opera, symphony and chamber music which were being led by the Austro-German axis of composers, and this gave rise to various European ecclesiastical movements in search of a 'true' church music which could return the ideals of a past spiritual age free of secular influences and practices. As a result, a conflict emerged, especially in Germany (notably Regensburg in Bavaria and Berlin in Prussia) between 'modernism' and 'archaism' where, potentially, musical practices (such as the use of

chromatic harmony) in one style were irreconcilable in the other, and a deep polemicism established itself and aesthetic parameters became entrenched. The generations of French church musicians, however, had their own way of confronting this aesthetic discourse (as they did in Italy) and found ways in which the 'old' and the 'new' could be amalgamated, so that by the beginning of the twentieth century, French church musicians had transformed themselves through the inauguration of new institutions, educational methods, choral foundations and aesthetic imperatives which would have far-reaching consequences for French ecclesiastical music during the rest of the century. Such a tradition was to have a profound effect on Francis Poulenc's sacred music.

French church music had already begun to suffer a gradual decline, in favour of secular forms, before the 1789 Revolution. Established sacred genres (the mass and motet), which had gained great popularity through Renaissance figures such as Josquin des Près and Johannes Ockeghem, no longer provided the goals and high aspirations of many French composers of the Baroque period. There had already been, however, some opposition to the inclusion of instruments other than the organ in church in some circles (their use had, in fact, been strongly discouraged by the Council of Trent¹), particularly amongst the Protestant reformers who only permitted the singing of congregational hymns to popular melodies with organ accompaniment. This culminated in the well known *Genevan Psalter* in Switzerland, in 1542,² and Claude Goudimel's activities in developing a Huguenot polyphonic psalter in Paris in the 1560s.³ However, with Roman Catholicism being consistently the predominant religion by far in France, Louis XIV clearly wished to continue a valuable tradition of French church and court music and attempted to fuse the two, previously separate, genres by introducing large-scale instrumental works to the liturgy, such as the instrumentally and formally extravagant

¹ Anthony, James R. 'Paris (III. 1600-1723)', in *Grove* 7, ix (London, 2000), 85.

² Marti, Andreas. 'Reformed and Presbyterian Church Music', in *Grove* 7, xxi (London, 2000), 79.

³ Hertz, Daniel and Freedman, Richard. 'Paris (II. 1450-1600)', in *Grove* 7, ix (London, 2000), 81.

'grand motet' genre (a popular form with its roots in the Italian Sacred Concerto) to settings of liturgical texts, whilst not completely neglecting the austere musical foundations of Catholic church music, i.e. Gregorian chant. Indeed, chants were known to have been sung in the Chapelle Royale at Versailles at the small number of services for which his musicians (the most renowned being the keyboard player François Couperin) did not play. However, extravagant operatic music in church was to be the rising strength, perhaps culminating in Le Sueur's highly criticised Mass (during his year-long directorship of the choir at Notre Dame from 1786) in which he included vocal soloists and a full orchestra, thus turning the cathedral into an operatic stage.⁴ Musical education, at this pre-Revolutionary stage, was provided by the *mâitrises* (choir schools) both in singing and theory and patronage for these institutions came almost exclusively from the Church. However, sacred choral music developed principally at the concert-giving *Concert Spirituel* (founded by Anne Danican Philidor in 1725) rather than in the churches which were limited in resources.⁵ Besides this, Louis XIV was very nationalistic in his views and disapproved of French professionals who sought professional training outside the country⁶ despite the success which François Couperin achieved through his demonstration of Italian influences which represented his *goûts réunis* style.⁷ He voiced hostility towards foreign musicians who attempted to establish themselves in France, eventually banning their contribution and demanding that several important figures (the vast majority were Italians who proved to be influential in Germany as well as France), such as Cavalli, return to their own countries.⁸ One exception to this hostile approach was the welcoming of the renowned composer Jean-Baptiste Lully (born as Giovanni

⁴ Mongrédien, Jean. *French Music from the Enlightenment to Romanticism, 1789-1830* (Portland, Oregon, 1996), 161.

⁵ Cook, Elizabeth. 'Paris (IV. 1723-89)', in *Grove 7*, ix (London, 2000), 90.

⁶ Lesure, François. 'France', in *Grove 7*, ix (London, 2000), 141.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 149.

Battista Lulli in Florence in 1632) who was permitted to play a major role in the life of the French court and was given administrative control of the *Académie Royale de Musique*.⁹

After the Revolution, however, the valuable *maîtrises* were disbanded as a result of the widespread secularisation of French society and there was a period of ten stagnant years (analogous, perhaps, to those years in England during the Commonwealth when church choirs were outlawed and organs torn out of churches) until the signing of the Concordat in July 1801 (the rapprochement of Church and State under Napoleon), when church music was completely absent from French musical life. During this comparatively long period of artistic silence in the Church, the French nation became a resolutely secular society in which any visible indications of religious inclination in public places were frowned upon (an issue which is echoed in the present day as the French government has controversially ordered that any clothing or jewellery symbolising religious adherence may not be worn in schools) and church music, evidently, was in such a weak position that it is likely that the majority of the French population would have been completely ignorant of its existence.¹⁰ Indeed, the end of the Enlightenment, in the years immediately following the 1789 Revolution, witnesses radical changes in French spiritual life which reached far deeper than the means of devotional expression. The revolutionary authorities were keen to ban religious worship altogether and much as they did not succeed in destroying the private enclaves where people continued to worship secretly, they were obviously successful in ensuring that all forms of public worship and church music would be disbanded.¹¹ It was only with the signing of Napoleon Bonaparte's 1801 Concordat that worship was legalised once more and the opportunity therefore arose for composers to write for the Church. Unfortunately, however, it is true to say that much as the effects of the moribund nature of the French

⁹ Anthony, 87.

¹⁰ Mongrédien, 161.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

Church in the ten pre-Concordat years had been a painful experience for a faithful minority, the task of restoring a tradition of liturgical music (which maintained a sense of sacred mysticism set apart from the increasingly emerging secular styles of opera and symphony) was to be an almost impossible task to undertake particularly in the context of a public who had literally stopped going to church. This was not least due to the fact that the powers of the Church were ever-declining and that several weak attempts to revive some of the pre-Revolution *maîtrises* were made impossible due to the lack of financial input by the decidedly secular government. Much as composers of the Revolutionary era, such as Cherubini, Gossec, Le Sueur and Méhul had all received training as church musicians in the late eighteenth century, they predominantly turned their attention to the popular genres of opera, as has been suggested, and song which began to lead the artistic framework from 1789, the latter form of which was a particularly significant means of musical expression for a large percentage of the population who could neither read nor write.¹² Cherubini was particularly renowned for his fusion of the unrelated traditions of Gluck and Pasiello¹³ as well as the absorption of the Italian style, techniques of Parisian opera, nuances of the Viennese Classical School and elements of Renaissance polyphony.¹⁴ He established a lasting influence through his teaching manual which was written in collaboration with Gossec.¹⁵ French music as a whole gained an extremely patriotic quality from this point and created an extremely large artistic gap between the dwindling achievements of the aforementioned composers of the Revolutionary era and as the gradual relegation of the Church's influence in the new French Republic took hold. No French music which would now be considered to possess any lasting artistic merit emerged until Hector Berlioz began to attract attention with his secular *Symphonie Fantastique* of 1830 (despite the inappropriate quality of his

¹² De Place, Adelaïde. *La Musique en France au temps de la révolution* (Paris, 1989), 20.

¹³ Fend, Michael. 'Chrubini, Luigi', in *Grove 7*, v (London, 2000), 573.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 571.

Requiem in a liturgical context) and with the pivotal position of the sacred compositions of Gabriel Fauré.

Despite the nearly non-existent position of French church music following the signing of the Concordat, Napoleon Bonaparte reinitiated Paris as a centre for church music by means of the particularly artistically active Tuileries Chapel and was able to combine the activities there with lavish musical provision at the Chapelle Royale in the knowledge that the monarchy had been safely restored. Contrary to the intensely nationalistic objectives in music which were voiced by Louis XIV, Napoleon actively sought to appoint his two favourite composers, Cimarosa and Paisiello, to run the music at the chapel (only the latter of which was able to accept the king's offer).¹⁶ The first religious celebration following the reinstatement of free worship was on Easter Sunday, 1802 which included music by the newly-appointed Paisiello. French musicians would undoubtedly have shown great disappointment in witnessing the appointment of a foreigner as director of music in the Tuileries Chapel and it is perhaps as a result of this, though there is no proof, that the failure of the Italian composer's French opera, *Prosperine*, of 1803, was more a result of the French people's hostile attitudes rather than any indication of the work's lack of compositional merit. Despite the relative success of the twenty-five masses and numerous other sacred pieces which Paisiello had written for the chapel, Napoleon was not at all pleased with his employee's failure, leaving the Italian composer disillusioned with his own work and the French environment in which he worked. This, significantly, made Paisiello decide to return to Italy in the Spring of 1804, allowing Le Sueur (a recognised French composer) to take over his position.¹⁷

Clearly, with the immensity of Le Sueur's liturgical performances (some of which used up to four hundred performers), one of which has already been noted, and the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 579.

¹⁶ Mongrédien, 162.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 164.

rising ambitions of grandeur of Bonaparte in the first fifteen years of the nineteenth century (before he went into exile), the French people undoubtedly began to realise that the financial input being granted to the Church, an institution to which few members of the public were linked was unacceptable for their own wellbeing. Following the joint appointment of Cherubini and Le Sueur to run the chapel music jointly from 1816, the musical activities of the Tuileries chapel continued in very much the same manner (including an increasing number of compositions by the two directors themselves), playing an increasingly important role in official musical life of Paris as the Opéra (or Académie Royale de Musique, as it was more specifically known) began to decline.¹⁸ The arrival of the 1830 Revolution caused the sudden need for the entire artistic workforce of the Tuileries to retire due to King Louis-Philippe's decision that such a costly institution could no longer be supported by the state. Additionally, the fact that Italian and operatic music was beginning to play such a large part in performances, to the extent of creating an apparent break with the much earlier French liturgical musical tradition brought about an increasing sense of an absence of French musical identity. German visitors to the Tuileries were known to have been amazed by the inappropriately operatic direction which French church music had taken, favouring their own rich culture of liturgical music from throughout the Baroque period, from Michael Praetorius to J.S. Bach and Heinrich Schütz.¹⁹

Undoubtedly aware of the sorry state of French church music and the nation's lack of heritage compared with neighbouring Britain and Germany, Alexandre Choron, who had begun his career as a music publisher in partnership with Leduc, decided that drastic measures had to be taken in order to attempt to build up an appropriate tradition of church music in France. Choron devoted much of his life to the promotion, through publication, of early music and old-established musical skills (namely the *style sévère* or

¹⁸ Ibid., 183.

‘learned style’) which had been lost with the dismembering of the pre-Revolutionary *maîtrises*. One of his most important publications was a collection of music of the Papal Chapel which he largely lifted from the English scholar Charles Burney’s significant publication (in London) *La musica ch si canta annualmente nelle funzioni della settimana santa nella Cappella Pontificia* of 1771. This publication, though it had relatively little effect on the France of his day, chimed with the immensely significant Cecilian movement that was gathering pace in southern Germany.

The Cecilian movement, which had established its roots in the eighteenth century in German cities such as Munich and Passau, enjoyed a new momentum in the nineteenth century. In part its zeal for a new purity in church music (philosophically anticipated by the writings of Ludwig Tieck, Herder, Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel, E.T.A. Hoffman and Anton Thibaut’s hugely influential *Reinheit der Tonkunst*), its rejection of the symphonic (and, *ipso facto*, instrumental) practices of Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven and Hummel in their orchestral masses and its desire to promote vocal music (and the exclusion of instruments other than the organ) found a sympathetic niche within Romanticism’s rediscovery of the historical. Moreover, with the emergence of Regensburg as its artistic centre, the movement spawned a generation of clerical scholars – Proske, Haberl and Witt – who sought to promulgate their values through journals and editions of Palestrina, Lassus and the composers of the Netherlands as well as through original compositions. The principles of the Cecilian movement in France were adopted by Choron and were manifested through his anthologies of early polyphony and Gregorian chant. However, Choron’s work lacked financial support, and by the early 1850s church music had reached a state of serious atrophy.²⁰ Only after the death of

¹⁹ Ibid., 172.

²⁰ Choron wrote an essay in 1825 entitled *Mémoire sur la situation actuelle de la musique religieuse et sur les moyens d’en opérer la restauration* in which he declared that France was the only country in Europe that did not have its own religious music and insisted that the purity of a cappella singing was the perfect form of sacred music. After becoming director of the *École royale et spéciale de chant*, he successfully made editions of music

Louis-Philippe and the emergence of Third Republic under Napoleon III, were funds finally made available to establish a new pedagogical institution under the Swiss musician, Louis Niedermeyer (as the *École Niedermeyer*) in 1853, of which Gabriel Fauré was one of the first notable graduates.

The aim of the new *École Niedermeyer* was to raise standards in church music, and, in so doing, an attempt was made to provide a modern replacement for the pre-revolutionary educational stimulus of the *maîtrises*. The school aimed to establish certain benchmarks for musical attainment in church music, among them were the performance and study of polyphony, plainchant (and accompaniment thereof) and J.S. Bach's organ works. Meanwhile, Niedermeyer's teaching of harmony embraced decidedly modern idioms such as a propensity for enharmonic modulation as well as the exploration of distant tonalities, some degree of chromaticism and the assimilation of modal harmony (with plainchant as its foundation) into the established Western musical language, thus providing the primary precepts which were to become the epitome of French sacred music in the twentieth century. Saint-Saëns was one of the first teachers at the *École Niedermeyer*, and was to impose these principles of liturgical composition on the young Fauré who studied alongside many important nineteenth century figures such as Gigout and Messager. Fauré provided a characterisation of many of the school's principles in his Requiem of 1877-90 (though his music was surprisingly hated by Poulenc) whilst, admittedly, continuing to allow a degree of theatricality to intrude (in the same way as Gounod did in his masses).

Vincent d'Indy's *Schola Cantorum* (1894) was founded with a similar agenda to the *École Niedermeyer* in that it taught the principles of plainchant and sacred music. But, in

by Palestrina and his contemporaries available to his students and, in turn, he managed to establish the weekly singing of mass at the Église de la Sorbonne, using the works that he had edited, involving student

time, its agenda evolved as it sought to rediscover not only early church music such as Palestrina but also France's own composers of the Renaissance and Baroque. Indeed its own zeal for antiquarianism led it to explore France's indigenous folk music which encouraged a new modernism in its composers. Charles Bordes, a member of staff at the *Schola Cantorum* was a central figure concerned with liturgical music and he received much praise from Gounod for his significant work.²¹ The archaisms revealed in the works of both Debussy and Ravel (such as the *Trois chansons de Charles d'Orléans* and *Le Tombeau de Couperin* respectively) explicitly reveal the extent of this rediscovery and commemoration and the Neo-classical assimilation of such ideas after World War 1.

Although Cecilianism became a focal movement in the Catholic Church, not least because it enjoyed the endorsement of successive popes, its reforms were vehemently rejected by its opponents, particularly in Germany and Austria, who wished both to restore the use of musical instruments in worship and to have the freedom to write church music in a more contemporary style, thereby discarding the banality of Palestrinian pastiche and saccharine homophony which had become the constraining mindset of Cecilian composers. In France, a fascinating amalgam was created, as has been suggested, in the sacred works of Fauré, which, though untypical of much of the sacred music being composed in France at the time, use modality, pseudo-plainchant, chromaticism and modulation (the latter two being generally associated with theatre music rather than the church). Fauré, perhaps surprisingly, achieves a strikingly fitting sense of liturgical transcendence by these means and achieved a sense of stirring reverent simplicity in his *Messe Basse* (1881). The composers of the emerging 'symphonic' organ school, comprising figures like Gigout, Guilmant, Saint-Saëns, Vierne and Widor, wrote a large amount of church music, much of it for solo voices and organ (and other obligato

musicians from the university. Such a project was very successful indeed and, as a result of this, Choron organised a series of public performances of the works that he continued to disseminate.

²¹ Cooper, Martin. *French music from the death of Berlioz to the death of Fauré* (London, 1969), 70.

instruments) which were far from Cecilian in their outlook but which consistently used plainchant and modality as their foundation, a good example being Widor's immense *Messe pour deux chœurs et deux orgues*. After the First World War, the French church found itself with a generation of organist-composers, among them Alain, Dupré, Duruflé and Tournemire, who continued to adopt the fundamental principals of Niedermeyer, for, although their large-scale works exuded a sense of symphonic grandeur, the underlying thematic and harmonic substance was still derived from plainchant and modality together with early techniques such as fauxbourdon and *cantus firmus*, and thus retained a 'conservative' aura betting the demands of its liturgical context. Much as Poulenc had an unconventional means of acquiring the skills of a professional composer, the aesthetics of these post-First World War composers formed the backdrop of sacred music which he would have experienced from childhood. In turn, he was able to make his own valuable contribution the genre in a most original fashion. His work was to embody an even greater sense of stylistic and ideological diversity than his contemporaries, shaped through his particularly educated awareness of the French musical past, his pivotal experience of the music of Igor Stravinsky and the wide experience of Parisian secular life that he enjoyed. Thus Poulenc could be said to have assimilated the vast majority of these ideas which have been discussed, into a distinctly French approach to liturgical composition, embracing the significant primary foundations of modality and plainchant whilst reflecting secular developments in French music and art as a whole at the time. In many ways, this satisfied his artistic contemporary, Jean Cocteau's demand: "Je demande une musique française de France."²²

²² Cocteau, Jean. Quote from 'Le Coq et l'Arlequin', Bancroft, David - 'Two Pleas for a French, French music', *Music and letters*, xlviii, 1967, 257.

Chapter 2

Poulenc, Cocteau, Neo-classicism and Parisian Intellectualism

Assez de nuages, de vagues, d'aquariums, d'ondines
et de parfums de nuit; il nous faut une musique sur la
terre, UNE MUSIQUE DE TOUS LES JOURS.¹

Je demande une musique française de France.²

As has been suggested, aside from his musical interests, Poulenc led a particularly active social life which revolved around the eccentric 'café society' of Paris in the 1920s and 30s. With an influx of so many artists of numerous disciplines and nationalities, it was left to the particularly idealistic Jean Cocteau to act as the ambassador for Parisian intellectual life at a time when widespread homosexuality and opium smoking as well as the regular meeting of artists to talk at length were perceived as 'chic'. Despite the fact that Cocteau was not a musician, he appears to have been an extremely prominent and influential figure in Parisian musical circles of the 1920s, constantly stressing the importance of simplicity and a national voice in music, becoming the self-appointed spokesman for 'Les Six' and a great influence on Parisian artistic thought in general. Cocteau came from an aristocratic background, growing up surrounded by the camaraderie of Montmartre, during which time he developed an encyclopaedic knowledge of Wagner's operas as well as speaking fluent German whilst writing poetry and drawing frequently sexually explicit sketches which are exhibited on occasions today.³ He thus revealed himself to possess moderate skill in most of the arts but he was a master of none and thus did not fit comfortably into any single artistic unit until well into the 1920s when he reached reasonable artistic maturity as a poet and visual artist. He did have the great advantage, however, of having sufficient all-round talents to be

¹ Cocteau, Jean. Quoted in 'Les Six' and Jean Cocteau', *Music and Letters*, April 1957, 165.

² Cocteau, Jean. Quote from 'Le Coq et l'Arlequin'. Bancroft, D. - 'Two Pleas for a French, French music', *Music and Letters*, xlviii (1967), 257.

³ Brown, Frederick. *An Impersonation of Angels - A Biography of Jean Cocteau* (London and Harlow, 1969), 9.

able to seek alternative artistic areas which helped him to pursue his interests and energies having exhausted his efforts in one particular discipline. Having been introduced to music by his grandfather on his mother's side, Cocteau became acquainted with the works of Wagner whilst still a boy and came to view music as a kind of theatre (he is recorded to have said that the raising of the conductor's baton was 'like the flaming sword of an archangel standing on the threshold of Paradise⁴'). Thus his lifelong relationship with Parisian artistic circles began. Having had a rather distressing time at school, he was expelled from the Lycée Condorcet where his marks were increasingly poor and where he adopted a largely passive attitude. It was following this expulsion, whilst he was a student at a *pension* in the Rue Claude Bernard that in his free time he made the greatest effort to explore the wider world. Cocteau soon made his way to the stage by befriending the famous actor Jeanne Reynette and then getting to know René Rocher, through whom he entered Édouard de Max's Circle.⁵ Cocteau had made his successful debut as an actor at the age of seventeen in a production of Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* at the 'Théâtre des arts'.⁶ He felt very much at home throughout his life in such company of performers and artistic thinkers, as did Poulenc, in which homosexuality prevailed and for whom socialising in Parisian cafés took up a large portion of their time. Elaine Brody fittingly describes these cafés as 'smoke-filled arenas where they ate, drank and roared with laughter at the jibes directed at local politicians, at the boredom of traditional family life and the frustrations of their work'.⁷ Cocteau was always self-assured and unabashed in revealing his homosexual inclination outwith the intellectual café society and did not fear ridicule at all. Following his own amazing successes (the greatest of which was his play *La Voix humaine*, involving only one character, which Poulenc was to set to music in 1957 and 1958), he credited Erik Satie

⁴ Ibid., 8

⁵ Ibid., 24.

⁶ Ibid., 5.

and Pablo Picasso as 'my masters' in his speech entitled 'On an Order Considered as an Anarchy' given to the *Collège de France* in March 1923, when he was thirty-four.⁸ Recalling Picasso and Cézanne's earlier insistence on simplicity,⁹ he was highly critical of other people's art, constantly blaming the public for being behind the times in artistic outlook. Unfortunately he did not find it easy to accept criticism of his own work or the mocking of other people's works which he held in high regard (among them was Satie's *Parade*).¹⁰ Cocteau rejected the extravagance of Diaghilev's pre-1914 ballets and disapproved of the colourful excesses which were visible in the work of Impressionist and some Cubist painters due to the fact that they showed a large amount of foreign influence and complexity which were distant from his own ideals of nationalism and simplicity. Oddly, many of his strongest critics who had spent most of Cocteau's lifetime ridiculing his ideas became increasingly friendly towards him following his heart attack in 1954 (which was followed by a long illness). It is true to say that they realised the extent of his impact on the artistic community only when it was no longer the driving force. Mauriac, who was one of his strongest aesthetic opponents was to say: 'It is entirely to his credit that, a prisoner (as we all are) of his own nature, he nonetheless aspired to another Cocteau, he spent all his strength straining toward an ideal Cocteau whose unfinished portrait he would construct, feature by feature, before our very eyes'.¹¹ This contradicted Jean Marnold's earlier article 'Mercure de France' which was one of the harshest attacks ever on Cocteau's famous aesthetic outlined for 'Les Six'.

It was to this lively community of eccentric artists that Cocteau was to introduce the music of the young composers of 'Les Six' at a time when an infinite variety of music was being exhibited in Paris, bringing many of his friends along to hear the new works.

⁷ Brody, Elaine. *Paris – The Musical Kaleidoscope 1870-1925* (New York), 99.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁹ Bancroft, 253.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 256.

¹¹ Brody, 396.

These friends included the famous writer Raymond Radiguet (latterly Cocteau's lover who died tragically at the age of twenty) who was responsible for initiating Cocteau's taste in the literary classics and who was probably the inspiration behind much of his poetry.¹² Cocteau presented the disparate, and highly secular, modern styles of 'Les Six' as a musical alternative to the continuing traditions of the *Schola Cantorum* which continued to teach religious music in the footsteps of César Franck and Vincent d'Indy,¹³ while at the same time using them in an attempt to establish the characteristically French musical style which centred around simplicity, his ultimate ideal. His seminal pamphlet *Le Coq et l'Arlequin*, completed in March 1918, dedicated to George Auric and inspired by *Parade*, was widely accepted for many years as the code of aesthetics for 'Les Six' in which he also expressed his belief that music was the greatest of the arts. Indeed, *Parade* was a work of pivotal stylistic importance in that it negated the prevailing compositional trends in France at the opening of the twentieth century. Stravinsky spoke favourably of *Parade* due to its 'opposing the vagueness of a decrepit Impressionism with a precise and firm language stripped of all pictorial embellishments',¹⁴ while Cocteau in turn acknowledged that the ballet taught him much about the necessity to discipline his own artistic techniques far more than he had been doing previously. The thesis of *Le Coq et l'Arlequin* is summarised by the decidedly xenophobic tone of the second quote which opens this chapter. Despite his own extensive knowledge of the works of Wagner, Cocteau shunned Germanic influence on French music. He also opposed Debussyism in an attempt to assert a linear rather than a colouristic approach to composition, opposing the strong Wagnerisms which could be detected in *Pélleas et Mélisande* as well as pentatonicism, the whole-tone scale and Oriental influences which were prominent in Debussy's style. However, he was unable to prevent, and therefore appeared to accept,

¹² Ibid., 225.

¹³ Ivry, Benjamin. *Francis Poulenc* (London, 1996), 36.

¹⁴ Perloff, Nancy. *Art and the Everyday – Popular entertainment and the circle of Erik Satie* (Oxford, 1991), 6.

the large amount of 'immigrant' musicians from Russia and the United States in the first two decades of the twentieth century and the resulting dramatic impact it had on contemporary French compositions whilst positively continuing to raise the profile of Paris as the international centre for art. His call for a rejection of Debussy's aesthetic appears to have fallen on deaf ears and Poulenc was to go so far as to say that he considered Debussy's music to be his 'oxygen' (despite the anti-Impressionistic feeling which prevailed over 'Les Six'). Cocteau later demonstrated a liking for Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps* and admired the 'illustrious martyrdom' which the Russian composer endured as a result of the work's first performance in 1913,¹⁵ and made out that *Parade* had caused a similarly tumultuous situation despite the fact that this was not actually the case. Cocteau's goal was to establish a style of music which encapsulated the spirit of France by echoing sounds of everyday entertainment such as street fairs, circus music, jazz (which was introduced to France by American musicians) and café concerts, thus furthering Satie's concept of 'musique d'ameublement' (music which reflects one's surroundings or 'furniture music' as it has been clumsily translated on one occasion).¹⁶ He was clearly aware that his principles put into musical practice would be intensely forward-looking and outwith the grasp of concert-goers, concluding that 'when a work of art seems in advance of its time, it is simply because time has yet to catch up with it'.¹⁷

Ideas for *Le Coq* had been forming in Cocteau's mind as early as 1915, the year that he first met Satie. Satie was acknowledged as such a great inspiration behind Cocteau's artistic life that Cocteau is recorded to have said of the composer's work: 'There is, in French contemporary art, scarcely an intellect in which are more clearly gathered together, or graven, in deeper relief, the qualities and characteristics most appropriate to our race. Works more strongly stamped with the impression of a French

¹⁵ Brown, 97/98.

¹⁶ Burton, Richard E. *Francis Poulenc* (Bath, 2002), 33.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

form of excellence do not exist in literature, or in painting; and music, though revealing more than one valid effort to give free expression to our national spirit, could not put forth the manifestations of our essential qualities with greater clearness'.¹⁸ The pamphlet was divided into seven sections, each of which demonstrated a different perspective on French music in the context of art in general, taking account of the author's wish to establish a detectably French compositional style whilst accepting the benefits of the increasing Russian and American influences. These sections were not given subject headings by Cocteau but have been appropriately defined by David Bancroft as:

- 1) Art in general and music in particular
- 2) *Le cas Wagner*
- 3) Satie as prophet of a French, French music
- 4) Everyday music and the music hall
- 5) A defence of *Parade*
- 6) An attack on the public
- 7) The rejection of Stravinsky (and his reacceptance in a subsequent footnote).

The two opening sections discuss what Cocteau regards as the negative influence of both Wagner and Debussy and demonstrate a wish to 'cleanse' French music of the Germanic orchestral style, chromaticism and the 'Tristan' harmonic innovations, and to stem the excessive use of the whole-tone scale and Oriental influences. Such animosity towards Wagner was rather inevitable owing to the events of the First World War in which a large number of French artists were hostile to anything German. (Use of the insulting term 'boche' to refer to the race and giving alternative titles to streets and products which had previously had German names were highly prevalent.) But after World War 1 there were

¹⁸ Jean-Aubry, G.M. *French Music of Today* (London, 1919), 69/70.

other aesthetic imperatives which militated against continuation of Romanticism in its nineteenth-century guise. With Stravinsky in its vanguard, the emerging Neo-classical movement (which included a broad range of composers such as Strauss, Roussel, Martinu, Nielsen, Hindemith as well as 'Les Six') rejected the 'emotional' rhetoric of Romanticism and, in so doing, also turned its back on the organicism of Romanticism's *modus operandi*. In other words, the traditional ideals of symphonicism and organicism were spurned in favour of a style which was effectively atavistic in its need to look back the ancestral type of 'Classicism' in the *eighteenth* century and to the clean, 'unemotional' language and rhetoric of Mozart. Neo-classicism, with its denunciation of traditional methods of composition, also favoured disjunction over conjunction, non-congruity over congruity, episodic over organic, and the juxtaposition and assimilation of entirely incongruous musical styles (such as fairground music, music hall, popular song etc). Moreover, there was an inclination to lampoon the nineteenth-century's ethics of 'serious' composition – Neo-classicism had much room for satire and humour – in a bid to promote a new, anti-academic, anti-establishment ethos. These, ultimately, were the values that Cocteau was attempting to articulate and it was these that had such a profound effect on 'Les Six' and, in particular, Poulenc.

Notwithstanding this strong anti-Wagnerian feeling in France, several artists did acknowledge the Wagner's positive contribution to the re-establishment of French music in the nineteenth century, and his references to symbolism and epic legends undoubtedly appealed to Parisian intellectuals who recognised the broader artistic and philosophical consequences of his works and writings.¹⁹ André Suarès wrote the following in 1923, confirming a French admiration for the German composer: 'Wagner is the greatest artist of his time, the Titan of art, of music, in France and Europe as a whole. And he is responsible for the musical resurrection in France. By marrying the symphony to drama,

he gave music back to France. He made good music universal for the first time. There had been court music (Monteverdi, Lully, Rameau, Gluck and even Mozart), church music, bourgeois music (created by the Revolution) and popular music. A common thread existed only in church music. But that made good music synonymous with religion!²⁰

Saurès, in his highly concise statement, encapsulated those elements of French history and culture which made the pursuit of religion and the arts a subject of aesthetic and philosophical controversy. While religion and music continued to thrive in neighbouring countries such as Germany and England (indeed, in England, church music had been a defining cultural influence throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), in France the position of the French Church as a cultural influence was diminutive next to its secular giant. Yet Parisian intellectuals were not as distanced from religious faith as one might at first be led to think, even though the juxtaposition of homosexual behaviour, lively social lives and other elements that challenged the normative moral practices of social behaviour seemed the very antithesis of traditional Christian faith and practice. Cocteau, like Poulenc, renewed his Catholic faith in mid-life rather suddenly after Christ allegedly appeared to him in a cinema and with the subsequent encouragement of his friend and colleague, the homosexual poet Max Jacob. He had previously outwardly voiced jealousy towards Jacob's fervent faith, on one occasion expressing his own frustration directly to the poet: 'I envy you. It is excruciating, *excruciating*, to be an unbeliever with a spirit that is deeply religious'.²¹ Cocteau then took Communion for the first time on Christmas Eve 1925, following the death of Radiguet, having been instructed by Jacob that he should receive the Sacrament

¹⁹ Brody, 22.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Steegmuller, Francis. *Cocteau: A Biography* (London and Basingstoke, 1970), 336.

'as one goes to the doctor' and being told that 'the Host should be taken like aspirin',²² thus healing him from his sinful life. Jacob also encouraged Cocteau's practising Catholicism as a means of opposing the atheism of the Surrealists who had shown great hostility towards Cocteau.

Both Cocteau and Poulenc constantly experienced near desperation in their wish, and need, to be loved, believing that such a comfort would prove a valid reason for their art and even their existence. Cocteau's frustration which he encountered as a schoolboy (about which he wrote ten years after leaving school: 'At an age when gender does not yet influence decisions of the flesh, my desire was not to reach, not to touch, nor to embrace the elected person, but *to be* him... What loneliness!'²³) constantly recurred. Similarly, Poulenc almost had a near nervous breakdown following the refusal of his proposal of marriage to Raymonde Linossier, his childhood female friend, which was around the same time that he was feeling increasing affection towards his first homosexual lover, Richard Chanlaire. The lesbian harpsichordist Wanda Landowska proved to be a valuable mentor for Poulenc, encouraging his relationship with Chanlaire, believing that it would transform his personal wellbeing and boost his self-confidence. She was the dedicatee of his *Concert Champêtre* (1929) as he felt that she would be the ideal soloist for the work whilst being a perfect choice as a close friend who had been a great help to him in time of personal trouble.

Art and lively company were clearly insufficient in providing satisfaction and inspiration for both Cocteau and Poulenc, and through a series of failed relationships and an element of guilt (as a result of their wild social lives and previous inability to embrace Christianity), both Cocteau and Poulenc undoubtedly found much love and solace in

²² Ibid., 366.

²³ Brown, 13.

God.²⁴ Despite the fact that homosexual acts had been decriminalised in 1791 in France, the Church still regarded such behaviour as ‘sins that cried out to heaven for vengeance’,²⁵ and thus the emotional turmoil encountered by many, including both Cocteau and Poulenc, must have been appreciable.

The intellectuals who met at the Parisian cafés inevitably exchanged their artistic ideas and enjoyed themselves well into the early hours. The continuing religious adherence of Parisian intellectuals, following on from the renewed interest in Catholicism and spirituality to the demise of the development of contemporary music in the 1920s,²⁶ was accommodated by a single church, La Madeleine, whose Sunday Mass at one o’clock in the afternoon proved to be a most congenial time for Cocteau and his circle of intellectual contemporaries.²⁷ This illustrates the fact that many artistic figures had in fact experienced a turn to religion, clearly seeking a spiritual release from the ‘impurities’ they felt they had accumulated through their wildly secular and permissive lifestyles. Indeed, Cocteau was almost always to be found in close proximity to La Madeleine, a landmark to which he appeared to feel drawn, derived from his view that the Place de La Madeleine had ‘a perpetual aura of 1900’ so redolent of contemporary Parisian art and culture.²⁸

Poulenc found great difficulty establishing any firm political beliefs as did many of his artistic contemporaries, though he did attempt to embrace pacifist ideals. Cocteau was, by contrast, known to have been attracted to Nazism and he demonstrated an admiration for Hitler’s charisma; indeed, he was not alone, for several other Parisian artists shared his political interests, viewing Germany as a sign of power and, in turn,

²⁴ Cocteau later articulated his theistic belief by later declaring in his pamphlet *Letter to Jacques Maritain*: ‘If He counts us, if He counts our hairs, He counts the syllables of verse. Everything is His, everything derives from Him. He is the model of audacity. He has borne the worst insults. He requires neither religious art nor Catholic art. We are His poets, His painters, His photographers, His musicians.’ (Brown, 245)

²⁵ Burton, 56.

²⁶ Pasler, Jann. ‘Paris’, in *Grove* 7, ix (London, 2000), 118.

power as a sign of virility.²⁹ The political and religious ideas of 'Les Six' were varied with only Durey showing any political interests (he became a Communist). The group contained two practising Catholics (Auric and Poulenc latterly), one Provençal Jew (Milhaud), and a French-born Protestant of Swiss roots (Honegger).³⁰ Taillefaire appears never to have shown any concern for political or religious interests perhaps due to her preoccupation with two failed marriages and persistent financial worries. This issue of conflicting political and religious ideals, accompanied by simultaneous attempts to create avant-garde art in which artists exchanged ideas in 'café society', encapsulates the preoccupations regarding the evolving poetic and painting styles in Paris in the late nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century. This provided the line of Impressionist, Cubist, Dadaist and Surrealist movements. The Surrealists were known to have been firm atheists and they also rejected music as an art form. The poet Guillaume Apollinaire coined the term 'Surrealist' in the programme notes he wrote for a performance of *Parade*, thus highlighting the highly secular aesthetic of Satie who was regarded initially as the leader, though not a member, of 'Les Six'. Apollinaire wrote: 'From this new alliance – for up to now décor and costumes on the one hand and choreography on the other were only artificially allied – the result has been, in *Parade*, a kind of surrealism wherein I see the jumping-off point for a series of manifestations of this New Spirit which, finding today an opportunity to exhibit itself, will not fail to seduce the elite and promises to renovate, from stem to stem, the arts and mores'.³¹ Surrealism was the last of these artistic movements and was preceded by the short-lived Dadaist movement, to which Poulenc was most closely attached and which bridged the gap between Cubism and Surrealism. Cocteau, particularly after the controversy

²⁷ Brown, 20.

²⁸ Ibid., 14

²⁹ Ibid., 360.

³⁰ Burton, 35.

³¹ Brown, 149.

concerning *Parade*, stood at the crossroads of modern art (having been somewhat incorrectly branded, in place of the poet Paul Éluard, as the rising leader of Surrealism by Weisstein in his article 'Cocteau, Stravinsky and Brecht') faced the dilemma of whether to follow the Dadaist movement of the time or to develop his own increasing sense of form in art despite the weakness of not being attached to any specific artistic circle. He determinedly pursued the latter option. Due to the close-knit friendships and shared intellectualism of the Parisian artists of the time, the composers of 'Les Six', Poulenc in particular, were drawn to set Surrealist poetry above all other forms due to the extent to which they were able to identify with the personal ideals which much of the poetry illustrated.

Poulenc set a great deal of Surrealist poetry in his *mélodies*, particularly work by Apollinaire and Éluard; the magazines *Littérature* and *Sic* were channels through which much of this poetry was disseminated. These magazines were also responsible for giving an account of what Cocteau referred to as a French 'spectacle of an incredible literary revolution'³² while reporting on the parallel developments in contemporary art generally. Many of the artists that wrote and were written about in these publications, including Bayreuth, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Verlaine, were like Cocteau in that they all declared their belief that music was the greatest of the art forms,³³ - as Verlaine was to say 'La musique avant toute chose'³⁴ (this quote is used on the front of the modern Salabert editions of Poulenc's sacred choral works) - and thus deeming it necessary that all the other arts should aspire to the supremacy of music. Symbolism was a large part of the aesthetic of these figures and they judged the concept to be significant, recalling its pivotal position in the influential operas of Wagner despite the strong anti-Wagnerianism, on musical terms, which prevailed in France. Indeed, many poets were

³² Steegmuller, 233.

³³ Brody, 152.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 165.

increasingly deserting the previously leading Realist movement in favour of Symbolism whose foundations dated from as far back as the 1870s. Mallarmé, who was the author of the ballet plot for Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*, was frequently considered to be the epitome of Symbolist expression alongside Rimbaud and Verlaine. This evident close affinity between the symbolism, rather than the musical style, in Wagnerian opera and Symbolist poetry in the context of French identification with Wagnerian aesthetic is summarised by Léon Daudet: 'the foggy, uncertain mystique, the penchant for the primordial, the ethnic horizons, the brusque and exorbitant feelings bordering on the miraculous that characterize Wagner's dramas, seemed, in the eyes of French youth, to hold a promise of deliverance'.³⁵ With these emerging poetic movements which varied drastically in their style and aesthetic, Maeterlinck expressed the fact that poetry was an extremely problematic genre in that it was very much open to individual interpretation and thus not universally comprehensible. As a solution, he greatly encouraged the setting of poetry to music as this would demonstrate the composer's interpretation of a text which could be relayed to an audience for them to share the specific angle on the prose. *Littérature* was produced by the Dadaists following the movement's establishment in Paris not long after it was founded by the Romanian Tristan Tzara in Zürich, Switzerland, in 1916. It attracted many refugee artists and writers whilst publishing work by Fargue, Gide, Stravinsky and Radiguet and almost predicted that the Dadist movement was to be shortlived, paving the way for the rise of Surrealism. Poulenc was familiar with such examples of modern literature from the age of ten, largely thanks to his lifelong friend Raymonde Linossier and later from exposure to writers and poets such as Léon Bloy, Jaques Maritain and Apollinaire from the time he was fourteen.³⁶ Poulenc obviously demonstrated a detailed literary knowledge, particularly with regard to the Surrealist poets, as Claude Rostand was to write: 'It is Poulenc who should be consulted by those

³⁵ Brown, 8.

who do not entirely understand the meaning of the poetry of Max Jacob, of Jean Cocteau, of Louise de Vilmorin, and above all of Guillaume Apollinaire'.³⁷ Poulenc admitted that he favoured Éluard's poetry over all others, for obvious reasons if one considers his comment: 'I had a weakness for Éluard right away, because he was the only Surrealist who tolerated music. Also because his work is a musical vibration'.³⁸

One may question, at this stage, whether Poulenc's choice of liturgical texts for his vocal works can be satisfactorily reconciled with his evident attraction to Surrealist poetry. It is clear that in the same way that Poulenc kept sacred and secular aspects of his lifestyle distinctly separate from each other, he drew a distinct separation between the texts he chose for his religious music and those he chose for his *mélodies* or a cappella secular choral works, though demonstrating that his secular and sacred inclinations could be expressed through this poetry and accentuated through the music he set to it. When he became inspired to write the *Litanies à la vierge noire*, the first work which will be explored in the next chapter, it seems that he was unsure as to where he could find an appropriate text and then merely stumbled upon words which he liked on the back of a small card displaying a picture of the black Virgin which he obtained in the chapel at Roacamadour.³⁹ The *Mass in G*, his second sacred composition, and many subsequent works employing Latin texts show that he was exploring a new world in which he wanted to readdress the roots of traditional Roman Catholic worship and was identifying with the traditional texts which continued to be sung and read during Laudes, Mass or Vespers whilst continuing to compose using secular French texts in the same way that he had always done, thus maintaining the 'voyou' side to his artistic personality to oppose the 'moine' religious side.

³⁶ Ivry, 19.

³⁷ Brody, 157.

³⁸ Ivry, 96.

³⁹ Schmidt, Carl B. *Entrancing Muse – A Documented Biography of Francis Poulenc* (New York, 2001), 232.

In his decision to write sacred music, Poulenc was ultimately faced with a new challenge in which the 'voyou' and 'moine' sides of his personality needed to establish a different equilibrium. Those elements of his 'voyou' side, both articulated by his social behaviour and environment and the Neo-classical imperatives defined in Chapter Two, now found themselves placed in a musical context which was unfamiliar with the aesthetics of the secular 1920s. Humour, satire, disjunction, incongruity and popular musical styles had little to do with a musical milieu (i.e. the sacred choral tradition) which had focussed itself increasingly on purity, stylistic homogeneity, historicisation and anti-secularism (e.g. Pius X's pronouncement *motu proprio* of 1903 which forbade the use of instruments in church except for the organ; it also banned women from singing in choirs). Yet the combination of Poulenc's conversion, which lent additional prominence to the 'moine' side of his personality, and hearing a performance of some madrigals by Monteverdi conducted by Boulanger, provided a new and compulsive stimulus to compose sacred music, thereby posing the problem as to how the secular 'modernisms' familiar in his songs, orchestral works and sonatas might be reshaped or reinterpreted for the purposes of established sacred genres such as the mass, the motet and the litany.

Section B
Chapter 3

A Renewal of faith :
Litames à la Vierge Noire and the *Mass in G*

‘Francis Poulenc is music itself, I know no music more direct, more simply expressed nor which goes so unerringly to its target,’ said Poulenc’s contemporary Darius Milhaud, and this praise was accentuated by another member of ‘Les Six’, Arthur Honegger, who said: ‘the man, born a composer, [who] in the midst of fashions, systems, prescriptions, has stayed true to himself with that rare courage which demands respect.’¹ This distinct individuality of thought in terms of composition with which Poulenc has been identified on numerous occasions is clouded with contradiction in the same way that so many aspects of Poulenc’s life were. He was clearly very different from his contemporaries in Paris at the time in his techniques and ideas, and perhaps due to his lack of compositional tuition was particularly eclectic in the influences which he assimilated, taking on the varied nuances of Debussy, Satie and Stravinsky as well as influences of popular entertainment, but, as has been mentioned, he chose to ignore significant developments in twelve-tone composition and atonality, setting himself apart from Austro-German modernism. Poulenc was to summarise the individual nature of his stylistic assimilations as early as 1919 as is evident from a letter dated 6 September:

I was born in Paris on 7th January 1899 ... I studied piano under Viñes and composition almost solely through books because I was fearful of being influenced by a teacher. I read a lot of music and greatly pondered musical aesthetics ... My four favourite composers, my only masters, are Bach, Mozart, Satie and Stravinsky, I don’t like Beethoven at all ... I loathe Wagner ... In general, I am very eclectic, but while acknowledging that influence is a necessary thing, I hate those artists who dwell in the wake of the masters ... Now, a crucial point, I am not a Cubist musician, even less a Futurist and, of course, not an Impressionist. I am a musician without a label.²

¹ Battioni, Isabelle. Accompanying notes to CD *Poulenc – Complete Chamber Music Volume 1* (Munich, Germany, 2000), 2.

² Ibid.

He freely admitted that he was not a stylistic innovator but was determined to express that he was not alone, and indeed on a par with many great masters in the manner he gained his ideas. In a letter, written much later, in 1942 he wrote: 'I know perfectly well that I'm not one of those composers who have made harmonic innovations like Igor [Stravinsky], Ravel or Debussy, but I think there's room for 'new' music which doesn't mind using other people's chords. Wasn't that the case with Mozart-Schubert?'³ In truth, what Poulenc endeavoured to express was his desire to cleave to tonality and the vocabulary of the immediate past (which, ironically also included Romanticism). Moreover, his inclination towards modernism and Neo-classicism did not preclude him from composing in genres that had enjoyed a broad nineteenth-century currency such as songs, piano miniatures, concertos and ballets. In this sense, therefore, Poulenc sought to find a distinct niche for himself in which the contradictions of form, method and style could be reconciled.

In the 1920s and early 1930s, Poulenc succeeded in drawing together these various stylistic components into a cogent and consistent musical language. These components, however, were drawn exclusively from a secular musical world. With the decision to write sacred music in the mid 1930s, after the immense emotional impact of the death of Ferroud (and its pivotal place as the inspiration behind Poulenc's decision to begin composing sacred music), Poulenc confronted a new aesthetic challenge, one that potentially seemed at odds with the secular ethos of his creative life (a dimension of his creativity that continued unabated and with equal enthusiasm), yet one that he evidently needed to express as a catharsis for his rediscovered religious convictions. Poulenc himself was conscious that he was walking on new ground in composing (secular as well as sacred) choral music in which his characteristic wit and charm would no longer be explicitly detectable, though he certainly seemed pleased that it should be

³ Nichols, Roger, 'Francis Poulenc', *The New Grove Twentieth-Century Masters: Fauré, Debussy, Satie, Ravel, Poulenc, Messiaen, Boulez* (London, 1986), 211/212.

possible for him to be identified by distinctly different styles and timbres, commenting on one occasion: ‘When my sacred and secular choral works are better known, the public will have had a more exact image of my personality and they will see that I am not just the frivolous author of works such as *Les Biches* and *Mouvements perpétuels*. Such, in any case, is my hope.’⁴

The sacred music is unmistakably bound up with Poulenc’s preoccupation with love and its power over all aspects of life, revealing the composer’s own torment as a result of both the love of God and his passionate love for each of his many lovers. He claimed that his deep faith enabled him to translate his suffering into art, thus making his music a perfect depiction of himself and serving as a necessary means to express his anxious emotions. He acknowledged Éluard as a true soulmate who was capable of expressing these deep emotions (though they were expressed on a secular level) and found his poetry most appropriate in writing his songs: ‘Paul Éluard was truly my spiritual brother, through him I learnt how to express the most secret part of myself and especially my vocal lyricism.’⁵ Even more importantly, Poulenc said that Éluard was responsible for enabling him ‘to express love in musical terms’, thus, in effect (as shall be explored in analysis), acknowledging that he felt able to unite his sacred and secular love and emotion in the same way that he was to combine both sacred and secular styles when composing sacred music.⁶ Shortly before his death in 1963, Poulenc was to make a particularly important statement: ‘I think I’ve put the best and most genuine part of myself into my choral music,’⁷ obviously summing up his increasing belief that vocal music was the epitome of musical expression in which one could most effectively express all human emotions in sounds produced by singers without the obstacle of intermediary

⁴ Daniel, Keith W. *Francis Poulenc: His artistic development and musical style* (Michigan, USA, 1982), 199.

⁵ Buckland, ‘The coherence of opposites: Eluard, Poulenc and the poems of “Telle jour telle nuit”’, *Francis Poulenc – Music, Art and Literature* (Aldershot, Hampshire, 1999), 146.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Wood, Mark Andrew. *The Influence of Stravinsky on Francis Poulenc* (PhD thesis, University of London, 1997), 46.

instruments. Significantly, Poulenc found the vehicle of Éluard's verse germane in expressing secular *human* love in song; even more significant, however, was his belief that his deepest existence – his religious life – and the spiritual world of the Catholic Church could be expressed most profoundly and aptly in vocal terms, and most essentially in *a cappella* music.

Given the paucity of contact with sacred music, either theoretically (à la Niedermeyer) or practically, Poulenc, a largely self-taught composer, nevertheless evinced a remarkably idiomatic aptitude towards the skill of writing for concerted voices. This proficiency must have derived largely from his experience as a song-writer and of his awareness of the solo voice's capabilities and tessituras. He was now faced with the task of combining voices of varying tessituras and qualities in which issues of vocal ensemble, antiphony, polytextuality and, on a technical level, issues of vocal dexterity and tuning were to create new challenges. He does push the assumed technical proficiency of choirs very far at times, as will be seen, often clearly only envisaging a professional group of singers (such as the *Chanteurs de Lyon*, for whom many of the choral works were intended) performing them. However, much of his music has a pragmatic ethos in that much of it, in spite of its experimental manipulation of voices, textures, harmonies, chord-spacings and contrasting moods, is accessible to accomplished amateur choirs. This may be said of his first excursion into sacred music – the *Litanies à la Vierge Noire* – where technical proficiency for both singers and organist is relatively modest, and is of a secondary consideration to matters of effect and spiritual edification.

Litanies is the second choral composition which Poulenc composed in 1936, some four months after the secular *a cappella Sept Chansons* which were completed in April, and a matter of days after the death of Pierre-Octave Ferroud. Yvonne Gouverné,

for a time Pierre Bernac's repetitrice wrote a fitting account of Poulenc's reaction to Ferroud's brutal death:

I shall always remember Francis Poulenc getting off the train at Uzerche, where Pierre Bernac and I had gone to meet him, in that famous month of August 1936. 'Ferroud has just been killed in an horrific car accident somewhere near Salzburg,' he said as soon as he saw us. We had spent the previous two summers in Salzburg where we came daily into contact with Pierre-Octave Ferroud – an extremely intelligent musician whose intense musical activities we had often shared. He had founded a chamber music society, *Le Triton*, for which we gave frequent first performances. Poulenc was deeply affected by his death. The region of Uzerche where we were staying stirred in Francis a sense of his close affinity with Aveyron, birthplace of his father. It was a region conducive to spiritual revelations. Poulenc wanted to go to Rocamadour, an ancient place of pilgrimage which, thirty years ago, did not attract the crowds one finds there today. We all three entered a silent chapel in which stood the statue of the Black Virgin. Outwardly, nothing happened, yet from that moment everything in the spiritual life of Poulenc changed. He bought a little picture with the text of the Litanies of the Black Virgin, and as soon as we were back in Uzerche he began to write that very pure work for female choir and organ, the *Litanies à la Vierge Noire*.⁸

Indeed, this pilgrimage to the Black Virgin of Rocamadour proved to be so significant that Poulenc was to return there on numerous occasions for personal spiritual renewal and inspiration which resulted in some of his most emotionally charged and meticulously crafted sacred and secular choral works, among them *Figure humaine* (1943-4), *Stabat Mater* (1950), his opera *Dialogue des Carmélites* (1953-6) and the final work before his death: *Sept répons de ténèbres* (1960-1). His preoccupation with secular love in relation to the subject of the text of the *Litanies* was made apparent in his noticing a physical resemblance between the Black Virgin of Rocamadour and his close female friend Raymonde Linossier.⁹ This idea provides an important issue in the aforementioned argument concerning the parallel interests in sacred and secular love which were mirrored by the consistent combination of sacred and secular musical nuances in his sacred compositions. Indeed, this lies as the cornerstone behind Poulenc's compositional individuality.

The tense emotions of much of the *Litanies* illustrate Poulenc's desperation to be able to believe in God at the stage when his faith had not returned in earnest, and this emotion was intensified by his fevered industry to complete the score in one week. The

⁸ Burton, Richard E. *Francis Poulenc* (Bath, 2002), 68/69.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

work explicitly depicts, particularly in its setting for high voices, the image of young children praying to a loving mother in gentle voices, rising in dynamic only to accentuate the pleading qualities of their supplications. Structurally the work does not serve as a template for the majority of his future choral compositions in that it is not written for *a cappella* voices (though for a large part of the work the organ part compliments the unaccompanied vocal singing by providing punctuating comment either with single chords or short phrases), the text is in the vernacular (rather than in the usual Latin) and it is in a single movement as opposed to the multi-movement schemes of the motet collections and the mass (*Salve Regina*, *Exultate Deo* and *A te verum corpus* are the only other single movement sacred works as all the other compositions are part of a set).

The whole movement takes between seven and eight minutes to perform during which dramatic contrasts are manifestly experienced, each section beginning in a mood of calm prayer at a low dynamic and rising in each case (other than at the conclusion) to at least *fortissimo*. In a rare description of his own work, Poulenc wrote:

The text (very beautiful) of the *Litanies* is in French, [and] the work lasts seven minutes. It begins with several bars of introduction in D major-minor, followed by numerous modulations in distant keys and then a *lengthy* conclusion in G minor. It is very special, humble and I believe quite striking. Suddenly fully half of my Aveyronnais [voyo] blood triumphs there over the other Nogentais [moine] half.¹⁰

In accordance with Poulenc's description of the larger architectonic level, the tonality moves obliquely from the heavenly angelic heights of the opening D major (interpreted as a structural dominant) to the key of G minor (interpreted as the tonic, signifying the level of human life on earth) when the text fittingly brings to mind the worthiness of man to Christ. The contrasts of mood which Poulenc achieves in such a short space of time is striking and it is clear that, whilst undoubtedly being aware of the

¹⁰ Schmidt, Carl B. *Entrancing Muse – A Documented Biography of Francis Poulenc* (New York, 2001), 233.

responsorial structure of the traditional form of litany text, the expected monotonous chanting dialogue of such texts experienced in the Roman Catholic liturgy is given new life in seamless vocal phrases which are often modally and tonally, as well as dynamically, adventurous. Despite the decidedly modern dimension that Poulenc adds to setting the supplicatory text, he never strays from reference to the 'archaic' sound world of pseudo-plainchant. Indeed, the responsorial 'priez pour nous' and 'ayez pitié de nous' lines are not presented, as one might expect, in dialogue form between the voices; instead, the (often violently dissonant and musically unrelated) organ interludes, interestingly, take their place and serve as responses or comments to the text, as if Poulenc was accentuating a *personal* belief that music was able to express feelings that were beyond words. Poulenc described these vivid musical contrasts himself as being those that moved from a serene prayerful atmosphere to one that is 'perceptively more animated, fortissimo, exploding'. The most powerful moment (to which it is most likely that Poulenc was specifically referring) occurs approximately half way through the piece when the Virgin is mentioned as the victor in battle and deliverer of captives.¹¹ Here Poulenc specifically gives the direction *éclatant* to accentuate the heaviness and pathos of the *fortissimo* phrases comprising declamatory repeated notes accompanied by thrilling organ trills. The three phrases which are handled in this way, each concluding with the words 'priez pour nous', are followed by characteristically dramatic punctuative organ chords, contrasted on each occasion by variegated dissonances. Interestingly, Poulenc is said to have indicated that he wanted the organ in *Litanies* to sound like the harmonium that he had heard at Rocamadour,¹² though this seems inconceivable to listeners now who undoubtedly envisage the dramatic contrasts of the organ timbre to be integral to the piece's effect. Similarly, the claim that Poulenc had consulted Nadia Boulanger to provide assistance in suitable accompanimental organ writing for choral singing does not

¹¹ Ivry, Benjamin. *Francis Poulenc* (London, 1996), 91.

¹² *Ibid.*

seem to fit in with the independence of the organ writing in Poulenc's finished work.¹³ The popularity of the work and Poulenc's own liking for it led to him orchestrating it in May, 1947,¹⁴ though, for all its catalogue of timbres, the orchestra lacks the mystical associations engendered by the organ.¹⁵

The nine-bar organ introduction immediately sets up the aforementioned Poulencian fingerprint of uniting the ancient with the modern. Whilst presenting the archaic precepts of pseudo-plainchant – rhythmic and metrical irregularity (which are achieved here by the use of syncopation and several changes of time signature), the modal quality of the left hand voice in particular and quasi-organum consecutive fifths – he introduces elements of Neo-classical, Stravinsky-influenced harmony (here elements of functional and non-functional harmony intermingle) which lend a contemporaneous sensibility to the language. In addition, there is constant fluctuation within these opening bars, between the major and minor modes on D (a favourite Stravinskian rhetorical device and one used extensively by other Neo-classicists such as Walton and Rawsthorne) with an additional strand of ambiguity in the opening chord which lacks a third (i.e. F sharp) followed by further modal inflections, among them the flattening of the seventh of D, all of which generate a sense of the 'old' and the 'new'. These opening bars fittingly summarise, in microcosm, the musical language of the entire movement in that the combination of varying aspects of modal and rhythmic manipulation from an array of historical periods and styles is presented, even providing a reference to the harsh punctuating organ dissonances which are so important to the syntax at several later stages. The final chord of these introductory bars reveals Poulenc in a decidedly Stravinskian mode; here he introduces a bi-modal ambiguity which fails to resolve at the cadence, leaving a simultaneously sounding E flat and E natural hinting at C

¹³ Schmidt, *Entrancing Muse – A Documented Biography of Francis Poulenc* (New York, 2001), 232.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹⁵ The same might be said of Gerald Finzi's motet *Lo, the full final sacrifice* which the composer orchestrated from the original, but the version for organ is much more effective.

minor/major (itself clouded, in typically Stravinskian fashion, by the addition of flattened seventh – B flat – reminiscent of the last movement of the *Symphony of Psalms*) and also F sharp and F natural giving an uncomfortable superimposition of D minor/major.(Ex. 3.1).

Example 3.1

The image shows a handwritten musical score for Example 3.1. It consists of three staves. The top staff is a soprano line with a conjunct melodic shape. The middle and bottom staves are piano accompaniment. The score includes a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#), a 3/4 time signature, and various musical notations such as notes, rests, and accidentals. The piano part features a complex harmonic structure with multiple flats and sharps, and the soprano part has a simple, conjunct melodic line.

The entry of the unaccompanied conjunct and modal soprano line which then moves within the close confines of a minor third (following the eerie aftermath of the release of the immense organ dischord) initiates the untransposed Dorian mode (banishing any reference to the previous possibility of C minor/major) which is subsequently adopted by the all the voices. Poulenc reflects the responsorial character of the text by repeating the melodic shape when the words ‘ayez pitié de nous’ are repeated and then, without breaking the conjunctivity of plainchant, makes the first hint towards Neo-classicism in the vocal writing by lifting the voices to the tonic an octave higher than the soprano line began and punctuating this with a non-functional dischord on the organ. The decidedly secular (and rather sensual) dimension to Poulenc’s rather post-Debussian vocal harmony is then made manifest in the following three-part, homophonic vocal writing in which he maintains the seamless flow of pseudo-plainchant melody in the uppermost voice but combines this austerity with a propensity for significant diatonic consecutive seventh chords (Ex. 3.2) in a very similar fashion to that which he was to

reveal in the harmonic language of the Concerto for Organ, Strings and Timpani (1939) (perhaps the best example of all of Poulenc's uniting of sacred and secular precepts when one considers the opening 'pseudo-Bach G minor Fantasia' material with the contrasting

Example 3.2

Dieu le père, cré-a - teur, ay-ez pi-tié de nous.

Dieu le père, cré-a - teur, ay-ez pi-tié de nous.

Dieu le père, cré-a - teur, ay-ez pi-tié de nous.

playfulness of fairground-style music) as well as in the majority of his *a cappella* sacred works. The transparent diatonicism is only briefly broken in creating a perfect cadence in D minor from bar 22 into bar 23 as the final member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, is addressed before a suddenly colourful A minor inflection (though a perfect cadence is avoided) and a curiously unresolved seventh is left hanging in the alto part. Meanwhile, he maintains the repetitive phrase structure to reflect the model of the opening soprano line, showing the function of the litany text and thus sets up a series of antecedent and consequent phrases.

Among the organ's violent interjections is that in bars 31 to 34, immediately preceding a return to the modal purity (now in the key which eventually concludes the piece, G minor) of the earlier monophonic vocal writing as the piece takes on the guise of a new beginning in which the Virgin Mary (the central subject of the text) is addressed for the first time. The addition of the single arpeggiated line, entirely on the tonic chord, in the organ part (and distinctly redolent of Stravinsky) provides a light and austere

harmonic foundation to the single vocal line and is a texture which Poulenc was to adopt a few years later in the Organ Concerto which, incidentally, assimilated a great number of features from earlier liturgical works (particularly the chromaticism of the Mass in G as will be explored later). Following a similar pattern to the opening section (up to bar 34), Poulenc adopts a similar scheme in which the opening liturgical modal austerity is 'corrupted' by the introduction of 'secular' dissonance (i.e. those used in his instrumental works). Indeed, in this instance the lower voices move a step further from the consecutive sevenths which we encountered in the opening section to an even more profane and incongruent chromatic language (as if the characteristic chromaticism of the organ writing has suddenly spread to the voices). This very much anticipates the sound world of some of the chromatic writing in the motet *Salve Regina* (1941) (Ex. 3.3) in

Example 3.3a (Litanies)

Example 3.3a (Litanies) shows three staves of handwritten musical notation. The top staff is in treble clef, the middle in alto clef, and the bottom in bass clef. The time signature is 3/4. The key signature has two flats. The lyrics are: "Vier-ge que Za-chée le pub-li-cain nous a fait con-nai-tre et ai-mer,". The notation includes slurs, dynamic markings "mf très lié", and various chromatic alterations in the lower staves.

Example 3.3b (Salve Regina)

Example 3.3b (Salve Regina) shows two staves of handwritten musical notation. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom in bass clef. The time signature is 4/4. The key signature has two flats. The lyrics are: "et glen-tes in hac la-cri-ma-rum val-le.".

particular, and thus provides an appropriate example of the forward-looking secular (and Neo-classical) nuances which were to become increasingly prominent in the sacred

works. Such an attempt at introducing chromaticism is made to seem minimal compared with the extremely arresting (an unprepared) move from G minor to C sharp minor in bar 46 as all three vocal parts are combined with two-part organ-writing, heavily accentuated, cleverly illustrating the textual image of 'eleva ce sanctuaire'. The tonality then moves dramatically through a transitory E minor (bar 47) before a final spectacular move back to G minor as the plea 'priez pour nous' reaches its most poignant level, echoed by the urgency of the semiquaver movement in the organ pedals (Ex. 3.4). The

Example 3.4

The musical score consists of six staves. The top three staves are vocal parts, and the bottom three are organ accompaniment. The lyrics are: "E-le-va ce sanc-tu-ai-re, Vierge qui Za-chée ou Saint A-ma-dour E-le-va ce sanc-tu-ai-re, Vierge qui Za-chée ou Saint A-ma-dour E-le-va ce sanc-tu-ai-re,". The organ part features a semiquaver movement in the pedals, marked with accents and dynamics like "8.16 f".

3 soli
p très doux

ff Pri - ez pour nous. Rei - ne

ff Pri - ez pour nous.

ff Pri - ez pour nous.

Example 3.5

Ex - au - [#]cez nous,

Ex - au - ^bcez nous,

approach to the following soprano *très doux* entry is similar to the eeriness which has been discussed in relation to the vocal entry in bar 10. Also, the soprano entry here shows a remarkable likeness to the transition from the second to the third section of the last of the *Quatre motets pour un temps de pénitence*, 'Tristis est anima mea', in which the loud drama, illustrating flight, is contrasted by exactly the same descending figure as one witnesses here, giving a striking sense of renewed austerity as well as a contrasting mood of tranquillity.

The final section (in which the words of the *Agnus Dei* are used) and the section preceding it (beginning at bar 84) provide a contrast from the rest of the piece in that the organ part provides accompanimental material. Following the decidedly Marcel Dupré style of organ writing in the sequential progressions of bars 98 to 102 and a near-perfect cadence in bars 104 into 105, the organ moves placidly through simple, diatonic progressions (with consistently undulating quavers within the chord) as the vocal lines recite Ds, in plainchant fashion, to the words of the *Agnus Dei*. A similarly distorted Neo-classical 'implied' half-close occurs 'in' D minor in bars 118 into 119 and 119 into 120; this concludes a particularly dark moment in which the Neapolitan of D is used both as a progression and as a distorting colour to the passing tonic, D, though the superimposition of two pedal notes (G and B flat) confirm the underlying tonic of G minor (Ex. 3.5). This passage, perhaps more than any other in the work, shows Poulenc's indebtedness to Stravinsky and particularly the last movement of the *Symphony of Psalms* with its hushed, contemplative mantras. The piece concludes by setting up a very hushed atmosphere from bar 129 from which two phrases are sung (the first by the mezzo sopranos and the second by the altos). The first of these is very declamatory in nature, declaiming the important text on a single note (though implying a definite richness of tone, as Poulenc directs *très doux, mais chaud*) before the altos take up the

organ bass line an octave higher. This alto phrase lends darkness to the concluding vocal octave Gs, sung *pianissimo*, and the placid organ postlude which follows.

Almost exactly a year after the completion of the *Litanies*, having continued to compose secular songs in the meantime, Poulenc felt an urge to compose a setting of the Latin mass whilst he was staying in the beautiful village of Anost in the Morvan area of Burgundy with Pierre Bernac and Yvonne Gouverné. Having had sufficient time to recover from the greatest emotional pain created by the death of Ferroud and having been helped through his grief by his increasing workload (whilst staying in Anost he was preparing concert performances of song repertoire with his colleagues and was also composing the cycle *Tel jour telle nuit*) he was able to resume his particularly active life as before, though with fresh confidence in his religious beliefs. Evidently, the renewal of his Catholic faith (which had waned, as one may recall, following his father's death when he was seventeen) caused him to think much about his dead father which resulted in his dedication of a setting of the liturgy's core text (though omitting the lengthy text of the *Credo* which would on most occasions be sung to plainchant during mass anyway) to him twenty years after his death. It seemed particularly appropriate that the composition of the Mass was inspired by the idyllic surroundings of the Morvan which Poulenc had adored for many years. Poulenc himself wrote on the subject of his Mass:

Arriving in Anost in August 1937, I had decided to write a Mass dedicated to my father's memory. Because I am from Aveyronais stock, that is to say Montagnard and already Mediterranean, the Romanesque style had always been at the root, quite naturally, of my preferences. Thus I tried to write in a rough and direct style, this act of faith called a Mass. This roughness is especially striking in the opening *Kyrie*, but do not forget that at the beginning of the Church, the unbaptized people could also sing the hymn with the priests. It is what explains the almost savage style of my *Kyrie*. For the *Sanctus*, I thought of the heads of angels intermingled in the frescos of Gozzoli in the Riccardi Palace in Florence. It is a carillon of voices. As for the concluding *Agnus*, sung by a solo soprano in a high register, it symbolizes the Christian soul, confident of a life after death.¹⁶

¹⁶ Poulenc (1954), in Schmidt, *Entrancing Muse – A Documented Biography of Francis Poulenc* (New York, 2001), 242/3.

It is clear that Poulenc wished to demonstrate a large degree of symbolism in each movement of the *Mass in G* and much as the movements can in no way be described as pictorial or programmatic, Poulenc manipulated a far greater variety of traditional liturgical genres (such as plainchant, the *a cappella* style and vocal sonorities ranging from a4 to a6) than one encounters in the *Litanies* and thus presents music which is even more rooted in the fundamental cornerstones of Roman Catholic church music. Simultaneously, his use of profane or secular styles (strongly influenced by Stravinsky and the rhetoric of Neo-classicism) are freely juxtaposed with a deeply spiritual, liturgical style, one which proved to be extraordinarily modern, even for the avant-garde secularised society of Paris in the 1930s.¹⁷ Poulenc demonstrates a breadth of artistic expertise in his treatment of voices and handles his musical material in breathtakingly skillful ways. This is music for virtuosi; indeed, each of the technically demanding movements has challenged professional choirs ever since the first performance of the work by the Chanteurs de Lyon on 2 May, 1938 at the Chapelle des Dominicains, making it without doubt one of the most challenging choral works in twentieth century repertory.¹⁸ Poulenc was certainly aware of the technical demands which the Mass was to present to singers, and commented: 'this is, harmonically speaking, my most complex *a cappella* work; [but] the *Messe* is more sober, more *Romanesque* than the *Stabat Mater*.'¹⁹ Working extremely quickly (in the same way as he had done in the *Litanies*), Poulenc appeared to be amazed by the ease with which he was able to write sacred choral music and surely questioned the fact that such a skill had lain dormant within him throughout his younger years as a composer.²⁰

¹⁷ The early 1930s continued the widespread decadent lifestyle which had begun in the prosperous 1920s though this comfortable situation was soon to change as economic circumstances drastically reduced disposable income for the average western European.

¹⁸ Schmidt, *Entrancing Muse – A Documented Biography of Francis Poulenc* (New York, 2001), 251.

¹⁹ Daniel, Keith W. *Francis Poulenc: His artistic development and musical style* (Michigan, 1982), 223. The *Stabat Mater*, like the *Gloria*, is, through its length and forces (for soli, chorus and orchestra) a non-liturgical work.

²⁰ Schmidt, *Entrancing Muse – A Documented Biography of Francis Poulenc* (New York, 2001), 243.

The compositional palette of the Mass stems from a far more diverse variety of Neo-classical techniques than that which was encountered in the *Litanies*. Though he manages to maintain a consistent atmosphere of prayerful mysticism, essential to the spiritual heart of the genre, he also succeeds in assimilating many of those Neo-classical elements – some of which are strongly derived from Stravinsky – which help to shape both the larger framework of the work as well as the detail – namely matters of tonality, texture and form, as well as the inversion of traditional concepts of style. Poulenc also consistently reveals an eye for detail in the way in which he meticulously places quaver rests (in the jerky ‘qui tollis peccata mundi’ section of the *Gloria* in particular) in order to communicate his intended phrase structures and accents with taut precision. These Neo-classical devices are both combined with the archaic world of pseudo-plainchant and are used to form stylistically contrasting sections, creating an interesting comparison with Poulenc’s own Concerto for Two Pianos (1932) which juxtaposes Debussian impressionistic dreaminess with Stravinskian rhythmicity. Indeed, the Mass has a constant forward-moving energy fuelled by the intensity of these techniques at work; moreover, this energy derives much of its excitement and *élan* from the rapid juxtaposition of contrasting sections, in which the very tessellation or mosaic-like construction of each movement provides an ever-changing kaleidoscope of sonorities and vocal effects. The work is framed by two movements of extremely serious and emotional disposition in the home key of G (based to a large degree on pseudo-plainchant) which surround the widely varied tonal, rhythmic and stylistic surprises of the inner movements. The B minor Gloria has a brooding energy redolent of the sinister rhythmic character of moments in Stravinsky’s *Oedipus Rex* which is contrasted by the work’s ecstatic climax in E major in the repetitively joyful and melismatic Sanctus which is startlingly loud and capricious (though strangely similar to his later motet ‘Vinea mea electa’ in much of its harmony) and which inverts convention by setting a traditionally

exultant text to tranquil music. This is surely derived from yet another Stravinskian legerdemain, where that composer creates such an effect in the final movement of his *Symphony of Psalms* ('Laudate dominum, Alleluia') by setting the extrovert text of Psalm 150 largely in a mood of tranquillity and meditation. The Benedictus begins by exhibiting rich pseudo-Renaissance lyricism within the diatonic purity of C major (as a foil to the distinctly Neo-classical divergent musical syntax of some simultaneously sounding melismatic lines in the Sanctus) and the rhythmic uniformity of constant crotchet movement before the harmony becomes more subtly chromatic (though with consistently conservative resolution of suspensions) and recognisably Poulencian through the employment of modern 'wrong-note' harmony (i.e. chords containing added notes in otherwise traditional harmonic progressions) before finally initiating a return to the coda material which closes the Sanctus. This same exultant 'Hosanna' that concludes the Sanctus and Benedictus reflects the more conventional practice of earlier mass settings, but Poulenc's stark juxtaposition of this material with the more tranquil main body of the Benedictus only serves to accentuate the episodic or tessellated method of construction of the mass in general, and of the prevailing Neo-classical propensity for disjunction and disparity. This also demonstrates an allusion to Stravinsky's propensity for ending movements with epilogues (a feature which recurs almost *ad nauseam* in both the *Quatre motets pour un temps de pénitence* and the *Quatre motets pour le temps de Noël*) which allows a conclusion with a sense of climactic achievement without the need for the development of material.²¹

Taking on a similar sound world to the austerity of the first vocal entry that one experiences in the *Litany*, Poulenc opens both the Kyrie and the Agnus Dei with pseudo-plainchant melodies which communicate a sense of archaic timelessness. The Kyrie begins with such material sung in octaves accompanied by droning Gs (another

²¹ Wood, 217.

rhetorical gesture) in two other voices before the quicker dance-like tempo (which is the speed for the remainder of the movement) is established. By contrast, the beautiful, ethereal monophony of the soprano solo, which lasts for the first ten bars of the *Agnus Dei*, embodies a far greater sense of Neo-classical inspiration, mainly due to the use of a tritone (itself an interval entirely antipathetical to 'early music') and the change from the initially transposed Ionian mode to the untransposed Mixolydian mode. These bars introduce a movement of tremendous emotional depth in which the melody reaches symbolically towards heaven by means of the supertonic (A) at the height of the soprano's register. The melody is then taken up by varying combinations of voices from the tutti chorus before adopting a droning effect in the same manner as the *Kyrie*. This solo melody and droning effect constitutes the largest part of the *Agnus Dei* (of which only sixteen of its fifty-two bars are sung in harmony and some of which decidedly emulate pseudo-organum, particularly when consecutive fifths and octaves are employed simultaneously).

Having reached the 'Tempo subito (sans trainer)' in the third bar of the *Kyrie*, Poulenc engages tutti voices in a rhythmically energetic section, ignited by the opening dotted figure, in which there is an inclination towards alternation between wide and closed chord-spacings, divisions of individual voice parts into two and directions such as '6 soli' and 'tutti'. Indeed, the introduction of six soprano soli and three tenor soli in bar six creates a striking antiphonal effect with the preceding tutti (as if representing brass and wind sections of the orchestra) and such alternation of forces continues until the tutti voices re-enter and drive towards a rapturous perfect cadence in C minor with a Tierce de Picardie (Ex. 3.6). These factors summarise the distinctly quasi-orchestral manner in which these tonally adventurous bars are conceived. The opening bars of the *Gloria* are similarly orchestrally antiphonal in their effect, conceived as a series of antecedent and consequent phrases in which a consistently animated rhythmic drive is

Example 3.6

Handwritten musical score for 'Kyrie eleison' in 4/4 time. The score consists of six staves. The lyrics are: Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son. Performance markings include: *sf* (sforzando) with a hairpin, *6 Soli*, *p* (piano), *p très doux*, and *3 Soli (falsetto)*. The score shows melodic lines for multiple voices and a bass line.

maintained and varying combinations of vocal timbres are explored in alternation, whilst successions of parallel 6/3 chords (creating pseudo-organum consecutive fourths between the two soprano parts) are a prominent feature of the harmonic language.

Examples of a more recognisably Poulencian witty harmony make their mark immediately after the first antiphonal bars of the Kyrie (this includes the profane sensuality of bar 12 and the major-minor opposition of bar 13) and these anticipate the

Handwritten musical score for Kyrie eleison. The score is written on five staves. The top two staves are vocal parts, with the first labeled 'Soli' and the second '(2 Soli)'. The bottom three staves are bass parts. The lyrics are 'Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son'. Performance directions include 'Soli', 'Tutti', and 'f subito'. The music is in B-flat major and 4/4 time, with a key signature change to B-flat minor for the second half. The first bass line has a rising line that reaches a middle F sharp on the final chord.

almost menacing vigour of bars 30 to 41 as well as the 'cheeky' stylistic impudence of much of the Gloria (encapsulated in the particularly amusing rising first bass line at the conclusion which reaches a middle F sharp on the final chord!). Equally, the juxtaposition of the major and minor forms of the tonic chord anticipates the pseudo-seventeenth-century antiphonal false relations (a feature that one would normally associate with composers such as Campra, Charpentier, Louis Couperin and Lully) of the nimble opening section of Gloria as well as brief references in the Agnus Dei, recalling the technique which was used to great effect in the first of Poulenc's own *Sept Chansons*, 'La Blanche neige'. In the same manner as the central E flat minor 'Domine Deus' genuflection of the *Gloria* (the 'rising minor sixth' imitative motif of which is, interestingly, copied almost verbatim in a section of the Organ Concerto), Poulenc briefly approaches the striking ten-bar 'Christe' section of the *Kyrie* with a contrasting sense of

traditional harmonic uniformity and flow in which the key of B minor and the hushed high register of the voices (placing immense technical demands on the first sopranos who are required to pitch a top B *pianissimo*) reach heavenwards to the ascended Christ and use similar quasi-instrumental divisions of the ensemble (as identified earlier in the movement). Indeed, the heavenward yearning quality reaches an even more emphatic magnitude in the ecstasy of the concluding bars of the Sanctus and Benedictus (further examples of the aforementioned propensity for concluding epilogues in Poulenc's sacred choral movements) in which Poulenc achieves a dramatic sense of climax through a similar unprepared change in tonality which is in the same vein as the transition to the concluding bars of the Kyrie. Furthermore, Poulenc creates a heightened sense of exhilaration in these bars of the Sanctus and Benedictus by creating an eight-part texture with an impressive juxtaposition of tonal centres, where the initial D major is superseded by a modal F minor and a startling cadential move back to the Sanctus's home key of E major – see bars 42-49 of the Sanctus (Ex. 3.7). This cadential progression captures a sense of being set free from sin. Not only does the return to the 'bright' tonality of E major recall the Sanctus in all its capriciousness and the location of that movement's centrality to the Mass, but it also suggests an alleviation from the burdensome darkness engendered by the F minor tonality (see bars 46-47 of the Sanctus).

The war-march-like section of the Kyrie from bar 30 (by which time Poulenc has craftily returned to the home key of G minor from, as one may recall, the B major of the preceding section) displays a heightened sense of energy over the movement's opening and, in bars 35 and 36, anticipates the sinister quality of moments in the Organ Concerto in particular, in which melodic conjunctivity in the parts, incorporating close proximity of dominant and Neapolitan chords, is widespread (Ex 3.8). The aggression of this section

Example 3.7

Ho - san - na in ex - cel - sis Ho - san - na in ex - cel - sis

Ho - san - na in ex - cel - sis Ho - san - na in ex - cel - sis

Ho - san - na in ex - cel - sis Ho - san - na in ex - cel - sis

Ho - san - na in ex - cel - sis Ho - san - na in ex - cel - sis

Ho - san - na in ex - cel - sis

Ho - san - na in ex - cel - sis

Ho - san - na in ex - cel - sis

Ho - san - na in ex - cel - sis

(which is again rhetorically quite the reverse of the conventional supplicatory style of the movement) reaches its peak in the contrary motion of the two melodramatic bass lines which begin each bar with violent dissonance created by clashing semitones and the superimposed line of diminished chords. These culminate at the end of bar 41 in which

Example 3.8

A
Ky-ri-e e-le-i-son

T
Ky-ri-e e-le-i-son

B
Ky-ri-e e-le-i-son

the dominant seventh C sharp is left unresolved and is succeeded by an eerie silence in the same way as the dramatic organ dischords were left to do so in the *Litanies*. Indeed, this is one of many examples of Poulenc's use of a succession of diminished chords (chords, it has to be said, that were common currency in the world of melodramatic silent film music) to create dramatic effect and this anticipates the approach to the conclusion of the Gloria (marked out in the distorted diminished chords in bar 68) as well as perhaps the most effective example of such use in the third of the Lenten motets, 'Tenebrae factae sunt', in which the angular nature of the soprano line provides a heightened sense of painful intensity (Ex. 3.9).

It is certainly clear that much as Poulenc had composed a number of secular *a cappella* choral works in the past (notably the *Sept Chansons*), the Mass in G comes across very much as an experiment in introducing Neo-classical *a cappella* writing for the liturgy

Example 3.9 a (Kyrie)

The image shows a handwritten musical score for a Kyrie, labeled "Example 3.9 a". It consists of five staves, each representing a different vocal part: Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), Bass (B), and a second Bass part. The lyrics are "Ky-ri-e e-le-i-son" repeated across the staves. The music is written in a key with one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The notation includes various note values, rests, and dynamic markings such as "fff" and "très soutenu". The score is divided into measures by vertical bar lines, with some measures containing time signatures like 7/4 and 5/4. The lyrics are written below the notes, with some syllables split across lines. The overall style is that of a handwritten manuscript.

S
Ky-ri-e e-le-i-son Ky-ri-e e-le-i-son

A
Ky-ri-e e-le-i-son Ky-ri-e e-le-i-son

T
Ky-ri-e e-le-i-son Ky-ri-e e-le-i-son

B
fff très soutenu
Ky-ri-e Ky-ri-e Ky-ri-e i-son

B
fff très soutenu
Ky-ri-e Ky-ri-e Ky-ri-e e-le-i-son

Example 3.9 b

S
ex - cla - ma - vit Je - sus

A
ex - cla - ma - vit Je - sus

T
ex - cla - ma - vit Je - sus

B
ex - cla - ma - vit Je - sus

B
ex - cla - ma - vit Je - sus

and an attempt to unite factors drawn from both a sacred and a secular sound world in order to provide a vivid depiction of his own inner personality. In dedicating the work to the memory of his father, an acknowledgement of the aforementioned contrasting personalities of his parents (which were the catalysts behind his own distinct individuality) was clearly intended. The level of experimentation and the considerable technical demands that the Mass exacts from the singers is also perhaps an indication of Poulenc's approach to the Mass as a larger sacred genre, where (just as in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in which the sections of the mass were frequently split into 'movements' forming part of a symphonic composition, following the model of Haydn and Mozart) a composer's 'body and soul' formed part of the spiritual as well as physical composition. Despite the great merits of the Mass, its intense technical difficulty must have been recognised by the composer who was never again to write *a cappella* sacred vocal music of such complexity. In continuing to fuse the significant features of both sacred and secular music into one, Poulenc was evidently keen to simplify his technique of composing for voices in his next collection of motets, the *Quatre motets pour un temps de pénitence*, by creating relative distance from orchestral textures and drawing on the simpler and more conservative techniques of ecclesiastical vocal writing where matters of tessitura, vocal line and chordal spacing were more traditionally accessible, yet at the same time not compromising upon the ever important expressive moods of drama and pathos which continued to distinguish him.

Chapter 4

The mature sacred style:

*Quatre motets pour un temps de pénitence, Salve Regina, Exultate Deo, and
Quatre petites prières de Saint François d'Assise*

The *a cappella* sacred works which Poulenc composed between mid-1938 and 1948 display the greatest variety of approach to vocal composition (whilst, in the light of the Mass in G, displaying an unequivocally tempered approach to choral writing); we should also bear in mind that all the works under discussion in this chapter, other than the *Quatre petites prières de Saint François d'Assise*, were completed by the end of May 1941. All these works, other than the *Quatre prières*, use Latin texts which demonstrate Poulenc's desire to provide a continuation of the evocation of a deliberately archaic ethos (the seeds of which he had sown in the Mass in G) and one that chimed more closely with former nineteenth-century practices of the Cecilian movement and the École Niedermeyer with their emphasis on plainchant, modal harmony and Renaissance 'purity'. These works do not neglect Poulenc's characteristic penchant for moments of chromatic 'obliquity' (i.e. where the prevailing diatonic language is inflected by chromatic colour or deviation), but these instances are, in most cases, more fully integrated into the modal fabric of the language which is itself much more unequivocally tonally functional. The propensity for antiphonal gestures, as was rife in the Mass in G, is minimal in these works, and other than in providing an emphatic resource in contrasting the voice of narrative and of Christ himself in 'Tenebrae factae sunt' (the third of the Lenten motets), any hint of the technique is curiously rare in the post-Mass in G liturgical compositions. Each of the single motets, including those that make up the *Quatre motets pour un temps de pénitence*, have personal dedications to some of Poulenc's friends, colleagues and mentors (though this is not the case with the *Quatre prières* which stand more

as an interesting Neo-classical allusion to the practice of medieval male-voice monastic singing, having been prompted by the monastic community at Champfleury). Those who are most significant as dedicatees are the singer and teacher Yvonne Gouverné (to whom the beautifully lyrical 'Vinea mea electa', the second of the *Quatre motets pour un temps de pénitence*, is inscribed) and the enthusiast of both early vocal music and Neo-classicism, Nadia Boulanger (to whom the 'Tenebrae factae sunt', embodying both these dimensions, is dedicated). The remainder of the dedications are to people to whom Poulenc was not necessarily very close but who had obviously made a great impact either on his professional or personal life.

The *Quatre motets pour un temps de pénitence* were written between July 1938 and January 1939 and in a different order from the one established by modern editions. Interestingly, all of the motets other than 'Tristis est anima mea' were composed at 'Le grand coteau', Poulenc's country retreat at Noizay in the Loire valley, and despite his claim that he found composition difficult with the distraction of hectic Parisian life, this motet, which he wrote in Paris, is perhaps the most dramatic, texturally illustrative and emotional of the set. It is also a fitting summation of the ecclesiastical preoccupations such as fasting and penitence in the serene Lenten season. Poulenc claimed that the inspiration behind the sudden incentive to write the four motets lay in his attendance at the first performance of Milhaud's *Cantates de la paix* and *Deux Cités* about which he wrote: 'I suddenly came up with the exact image of my motets ... and I wrote four motets for Holy Week which are realistic and tragic as a Mantegna painting.'¹ Originally this collection included a now unknown setting by Poulenc of 'Plange quasi virgo plebs mea' which stood in place of 'Vinea mea electa', but clearly the composer was unhappy with it and discarded it; it remains unpublished.² The texts of the Lenten motets are all in common use in the Catholic liturgy though it is quite likely that,

¹ Daniel, Keith W. *Francis Poulenc: His artistic development and musical style* (Michigan, 1982), 225.

² Schmidt, Carl B. *Entrancing Muse – A Documented Biography of Francis Poulenc* (Hillsdale, New York, 2001), 253.

rather than through the process of worship, Poulenc came upon them by chance in a similar manner to his discovery of the text for the *Litanies*. The motets were, like the Mass, written for the Chanteurs de Lyon, and were therefore intended to be sung originally as a concert item. Indeed, it is evident from the choice of texts that a narrative of the crucifixion is represented in the four texts: fear, trembling and supplication dominate the first motet in preparation for the second which makes allusion to the Last Supper and Christ's bitterness and questioning of his fate over that of Barrabas; the third motet narrates the crucifixion and is effectively the darkest point of the collection, while the final motet relates a summary of Christ's betrayal and detention by the Romans.

The text of the first motet ('Timor et tremor'), interestingly, is not found in any liturgical literature but consists of verses and phrases from several psalms in the Vulgate of St Jérôme, a translation which the saint made from the ancient Greek Septuagint.³ Poulenc's extremely dramatic yet consistently lyrical setting of these words brings out the image of the 'fear and trembling' of the Christian people at the imminent prospect of Christ's death on the cross by the rapid transition from a pseudo-plainchant opening to two-part pseudo-organum, four-part modal diatonicism and, finally, a gradual dexterous move towards a more adventurous tonal palette, inspired largely by his characteristic Neo-classical inclinations. This engrossing stylistic progressive process – indeed one of Poulenc's most overt through-composed structures for *a cappella* voices – almost feels as if it is dictated by the text's increasing intensity which drives towards the concluding painful plea 'non confundar', incorporating the last line of the *Te Deum* text. At this particular point Poulenc uses his increasingly prominent emphatic technique of repeating single bars (found abundantly in

³ Thibodeau, Ralph, 'The Sacred Music of Francis Poulenc: A Centennial Tribute', *Sacred Music*, Volume 2:5, Summer 1999, 8.

these motets) and in the heavy chromatically descending soprano line in bar 36 which solemnly illustrates the desperate final supplications of the sinful world as it symbolically descends into suffering in Christ, mirroring the preceding weak hopefulness of the ascending tenor part (Ex. 4.1).

Example 4.1

mf

non con-fun-dar non con-fun dar

non con-fun-dar Do-mi - ne in vo - ca - vi

non con-fun-dar Do-mi - ne in vo - ca - vi

non con-fun-dar Do - mi - ne con-fun-dar

The more poetic sentiment of the second motet, 'Vinea mea electa', is thrown into relief by the striking shift from A minor and the five-part-texture of 'Timor' to C sharp major and even more sonorous six-part homophonic writing. The setting of the text (the third Responsory for Matins on Good Friday, representing the words of Christ) embodies the conflict between the loving references to the vine (which are depicted with rhythmic regularity and repetition of two one-bar phrases in 6/4) and the anger engendered by the questioning nature of the passage which addresses the possibility of Barrabas taking the place of Christ as saviour (which is more timeless due to constant fluctuations of metre).

The sectional structure, essentially ternary in design, also embodies subtle changes from the warmth of the initial bright C sharp *major* to the *modal* tonic minor for the darker moments of the text. Poulenc uses the aforementioned technique of repeating single bars twice in the six-part texture of the opening four-bar period in order to provide contrast with the unrepetitive nature of the subsequently stern text from bar 5. This repetitive device is most prominent in the third (though the first to be composed) of the motets, 'Tenebrae factae sunt' (the fifth Responory for Matins on Good Friday), in which Poulenc, using an austere Phrygian colour, maintains a seamlessly prayerful mood throughout, interrupted only by the exploding succession of diminished chords accompanying the jaggedly descending soprano line which introduces the words of the dying Christ (see example 3.10). The recurring droning quality of the accompanying lines, creating a thoroughly ascetic two-part harmonic fabric, recalls a similar technique which one encounters at the opening of the Kyrie from the Mass in G and takes the effect a step further by moulding it into the timbre of the full six-part chorus (e.g. bars 5-6). A similarly sectionalised design to 'Vinea mea electa' structures the final motet in the set, 'Tristis est anima mea' (setting a text for the service of Matins on Maundy Thursday), in which Poulenc succeeds in recalling the particularly poignant qualities of the soprano in the Agnus Dei from the Mass in G alongside the innovatively contrasting drama of the flight of the people (a strikingly Stravinskian juxtaposition) depicted once again by his penchant for 'melodramatic' diminished harmonies. This motet, despite its remarkable dramatic contrasts, begins and ends in an extraordinary 'pure' diatonicism of G minor. Significantly this 'purity' is depicted and vividly contrasted: the monophonic opening is a brief solo threnody, while the conclusion – one of Poulenc's most striking epilogues (for both the individual motet and the collection as a whole) – lies at the opposite extreme, for eight voices. Typically, too, Poulenc introduces rhetorical inversion here by setting words of

absolute tragedy and desolation to music of rapturous richness. Poulenc handles this rapt ending by cleverly bringing back the soprano solo (which began the motet monophonically) over the dense yet polarised texture of the chorus, whilst re-initiating the recurring fingerprints of repeated short phrases and the supplicatory droning of the bass line - in effect demonstrating a mark of genius in summing up all the main stylistic novelties of the Lenten motets in a mere ten bars and epitomising Poulenc's economy of resources though inherent pragmatism of musical design (Ex. 4.2).

Example 4.2
mf doucement en dehors

The musical score consists of seven staves. The top staff is a vocal line with lyrics: "Et e-go va-dam et e-go va-dam im-mo-la-ri". The second staff is a vocal line with lyrics: "Et e-go va-dam et e-go va-dam im-mo-la-ri". The third staff is a vocal line with lyrics: "Et e-go va-dam et e-go va-dam im-mo-la-ri". The fourth staff is a vocal line with lyrics: "Et e-go va-dam et e-go va-dam im-mo-la-ri". The fifth staff is a vocal line with lyrics: "Et e-go va-dam et e-go va-dam et e-go va-dam". The sixth staff is a vocal line with lyrics: "E-go va-dam e-go va-dam e-go va-dam". The seventh staff is a vocal line with lyrics: "E-go va-dam e-go va-dam e-go va-dam".

Dynamic markings: *mf*, *pp*, *f*, *p*.
 Time signature: 3/4, 5/4.

Following the opening bars of 'Timor', Poulenc introduces subtle hints of his recognisably Neo-classical harmonic language, providing the first example in the Lenten motets of his continuing fusion of elements such as added sevenths, unconventional textures, non-functional harmony and unprepared dissonances with an otherwise conservatively archaic musical vocabulary stemming from the aforementioned ideals of the Cecilians. Here Poulenc incorporates a subtle non-functional appoggiatura in bar 5 (creating an unprepared dissonance) in otherwise strictly conventional modal harmony. In bar 31, Poulenc's use of the appoggiatura is even more expressive and plangent. Here the F clashes with the alto E to produce a deliberate ambiguity between a first inversion chord of the dominant (of A) and a diminished chord; similarly, the succeeding bar also continues the ambiguity of the tonic of A and a first inversion of the submediant, enhanced by the added dissonance of the accented passing note (Ex. 4.3). Poulenc's elusively simple tonal organisation of the motets invariably reflects the strong classical (indeed Neo-classical)

Example 4.3

The image shows a handwritten musical score for four voices, likely soprano, alto, tenor, and bass, in 3/4 time. The score is written on four staves. The lyrics are "Do - mi - ne in". The notation includes various note values (quarter notes, half notes, and a dotted quarter note) and rests. There are some handwritten annotations, including a "3" above the first staff, a "4" below the first staff, and a "4" below the second staff. The key signature has one sharp (F#) indicated at the beginning of the fourth staff.

nature of these compositions. Modulations to the dominant are almost commonplace (e.g. bar 10 of 'Timor' and bars 19-26 of 'Vinea'), and these punctuative tonal events often mark, in imitation of Renaissance models, new musical departures or recapitulations. In 'Timor' we witness a quasi-imitative episode at bar 11; in 'Vinea' we experience a reprise of the opening material. Poulenc's use of structural dominants also has a skilful effect in delaying the return of the tonic and thereby enhancing the sense of longing and supplication. In 'Vinea' this is especially notable in the way most of the phrases conclude with a half-close or imperfect cadence (e.g. bars 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 19, 22, and 26, not to mention the dominants of subsidiary tonalities such as bars 9 and 16).

A further consequence of this clearly delineated organisation of material and tonality is the strongly episodic construction. Though analogous to the imitative 'episodes' of Renaissance motets, Poulenc's inclination is to juxtapose (often violently) contrasting sections, often using tonal centres, textures and different rhetorical gestures to create disjunction. Such disjunctions in 'Timor' can be seen in the following examples: the textural contrast between bars 11-15 (imitative), 16-20 (homophonic and Lydian, based on A) and the darker hue of C sharp minor in bars 21-24 using a sparser texture of first four and the three voices. The C sharp minor of this aforementioned section (bars 21-24) is particularly important, and indeed one suspects that this key had a strong sense of symbolism for the composer in communicating a sense of questioning or pleading; it is used with some effect in 'Vinea' too, where it acts a modal contrast to the prevailing tonality of C sharp major.

Approximately two years after the completion of the *Quatre motets pour un temps de pénitence* and the Concerto for Organ, Strings and Timpani, Poulenc found himself back at his retreat at Noizay during the German occupation. Whilst anxiously waiting to be called up in the latter part of 1939, he had declared that the only thing that grieved him was to leave his

piano. At this time he did not feel inspired to compose any new works and instead re-orchestrated his ballet *Les Biches* and revised the formally extremely Neo-classical Sextet for piano, flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon and horn which he had drafted in 1932.⁴ He also composed his song *C* which proved to be a veiled expression of defiance against Nazi occupation. Despite being aware of the turmoil that was increasingly raging in Europe at the time and having returned to Noizay after a short service as a private, he made a significant mark with two single motets, 'Exultate Deo' (setting the text from the Alleluia verse for the eleventh Sunday after Pentecost) and 'Salve Regina' (setting the text of a hymn to the Virgin for Offices from Trinity Sunday until the first Sunday in Advent) which, though it preceded a significant seven-year gap in his sacred composition, nevertheless provided a particularly well crafted summary of his first phase of *a cappella* liturgical compositions. The continuing uniformity of his earlier style of liturgical composition which united the ancient with the modern and the sacred with the secular was, interestingly, unhampered by the fact that one of his most popular collections of secular *mélodies*, *Banalités*, setting poetry by Apollinaire, was composed the year before. 'Exultate' is, without doubt, the most explicit tribute that Poulenc paid to Renaissance, not to say Palestrinian polyphony (by contrast to the unbroken homophony of 'Salve'), though besides displaying many features of a pseudo-Renaissance modal and imitative style, he introduces striking Neo-classical nuances, among them striking juxtapositions of unrelated keys, a consistently energetic rhythmic drive and a contrastingly heartfelt conclusion reminiscent of the final bars of 'Tristis est anima mea' (though with a particularly impertinent secular thirteenth final chord which ends the motet). Alongside this, he unexpectedly reintroduces some of the

⁴ Ivry, Benjamin. *Francis Poulenc* (London, 1996), 116.

quasi-orchestral divisions of parts and chord-spacings that were encountered in the Mass in G.

The remarkable manner in which Poulenc unites the 'old' with the 'new' in the course of the opening two-part pseudo-Renaissance writing of 'Exultate' is extremely adroit not least because Poulenc's archaic opening actually paraphrases melodic components of Palestrina's eponymous motet published in 1572 (namely the rising quaver passage across a fifth interval), but, at the same time, transforms the reference to Palestrina by couching the material in *triple* time and not *duple*. Moreover, Poulenc even goes to the extent of paraphrasing the two-part texture of Palestrina's opening by doing much the same himself, and even aping the bass entry. These initial archaisms are, however, immediately coloured by the prominent 'modern' consecutive fifths in bars five and six which feel far more marked than in the abundance of consecutive fifths (and octaves) which deck the opening bars of 'Salve Regina', the latter of which incorporates these consecutives more cohesively into the harmonic language (Ex. 4.4). Poulenc divides the ensemble for 'Exultate' in a similar manner to the Kyrie from the Mass in G, in that various irregularly sized groups (such as 'div en 3' and 'div en 2 for the sopranos) rapidly exchange material antiphonally.

Though 'Exultate' begins almost self-consciously with stark archaisms, a series of unequivocally Neo-classical gestures does follow on. After emulating the imitative repeat of Palestrina's opening point in the alto and bass parts, which culminates in an archaic Phrygian cadence (at bar 14), Poulenc proceeds with three-part homophony and a series of alternating 'modern' consonances and dissonances. Once again, this phrase, concluding in bar 18, presents a half close (though on the minor dominant) before yielding to the tonic and a more protracted passage of characteristic twentieth-century diatonic harmony in which repetitive chordal collections are strongly suggestive of Stravinsky. The mood of this lengthy

Example 4.4a (Exultate Deo)

S
De - o, — ad - ju - to - ri nos - - tro,

T
EX - ul - ta - te De - o nos - - tro,

Example 4.4b (Salve Regina)

p très doux

Sal-ve, Re-gi-na, Ma-ter mi-se-ri-cor-di-ae: Vi-ta, dul-ce-do

animated, and initially melismatic, section recalls the joyous and quirky nature of the Sanctus from the Mass in G whilst demonstrating an intensified demonstration of skill in manipulating juxtapositions of distant tonalities (as at bar 29 and after). Indeed, this involves a startling succession of tonalities, from the sudden shift from the home key of A major (at bar 19) to the astounding major key of the flattened leading note (G major) in bars twenty-nine to thirty-one (a move heightened by the tangential progression from its subdominant at the beginning of bar 29) then a spectacular move into the submediant major a bar later and a subsequent visit to C sharp major at bar 50. The latter presents, albeit briefly, a reprise of the motet's opening material, a gesture whose effect is retrospectively enhanced by the eventual *extrêmement violent* arrival into C major at bar 60. Far from being a point of tonal

repose, however, C major gives way to E flat and a registrational ascent of the entire choir through bars 64 to 69 as all sense of tonal stability disintegrates in the melodramatic succession of distorted diminished chords. A final disjunction (and an inversion of traditional 'solemn' rhetoric) is furnished by the strident epilogue 'Insigni die' which, with its series of suspensions, dissonances and pedal point, is surely a paraphrase of Poulenc's own epilogue in 'Tristis est anima mea'.

Admittedly, 'Salve Regina' cannot in any way match the energy and astounding variety of tonality and timbre that these thrilling bars of 'Exultate Deo' provide, but such a concentration of energy would certainly not be appropriate to the text. Instead, in identifying with the more intimate nature of these lyrics, Poulenc indulges in a more constrained musical design in which more subtle (though eclectic) explorations of tonality are incorporated, as well as the recurring Poulencian trait of repeating short phrases and a fresh incorporation of an astute dialogue form of antiphonal organisation. The earliest example of antiphony is in a monophonic, sequentially descending, echo-like pattern in bars twenty-six and twenty-seven and then the dialogue example occurs between the sopranos and tenors within a continuous four-part texture (Ex. 4.5). In terms of tonality, 'Salve' only strays significantly from the diatonicism of G minor after the perfect cadence which closes the opening twelve-bar section, though this sets up a string of well crafted moves through a series of secondary tonalities throughout the motet. Interestingly, the flow of this section unites a strong sense of harmonised pseudo-plainchant melody (powerfully redolent of Niedermeyer's teachings and a feature seen frequently in the music of Fauré and a long line of subsequent composers of liturgical music in France), pseudo-organum successions of descending consecutive fifths and metrical freedom, ideas which imbue this placidly archaic sound world with subtle references to more expressive 'song-like' nuances, which, with their

Example 4.5a

mf très lié

p très lié

Et Je - sum, Et Je - sum

Example 4.5b

pp

p

dul-cis Vir-go, dul-cis Vir-go

O dul-cis Vir-go Ma-ri - - - a, dul-cis Vir-go,

un peu en dehors

dul-cis Vir-go, dul-cis Vir-go

pp

Example 4.6

f

mf

ge - men - tes et fen - tes

wider melodic intervals, are thrown into relief by the greater conjunctivity of the plainchant material. Then, having communicated the momentarily dark demeanour of the text (which, after the preceding rapture, mentions 'mourning and weeping in this vale of tears'), there is a transitory move to the unrelated depths of F minor before returning smoothly, without any arresting tonal shifts, back to G minor by means of Poulenc's ever-significant (though unusually functional on this occasion) use of the diminished chord (Ex. 4.6). Similarly, Poulenc cleverly handles a move from the home key to C minor (via E flat major and F minor) in bars 22-25 and from F major to the dominant of E flat (bars 30-34) though with a consistent feeling of reassurance that the home key of G minor is constantly within easy reach.

The long gap which followed the completion of these two motets was mainly induced by the fact that Poulenc was particularly distressed by the absence of many of his close friends and mentors such as Milhaud and Wanda Landowska, and it seems that the continuing destructive impact of the Second World War gave him little spiritual inspiration.⁵ He did, however, produce a large number of secular works, among them the song collection *Chansons Villageoises*, the ballet *Les Animaux modèles*, the choral works *Figure humaine* and *Un soir de neige*, an operatic setting of Apollinaire's *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* and a Violin Sonata for the young violinist Ginette Neveu. In the immediate post-war years when Poulenc was becoming increasingly recognised as a touring accompanist, and when a rising number of foreign commissions were being bestowed upon him, he was given the idea to compose the *Quatre petites prières de Saint François d'Assise* whilst at Noizay by his great-nephew Roger who was a monk at Champfleury, thus facilitating a much welcomed return to sacred

⁵ Ibid., 117.

composition.⁶ The *Quatre petites prières* demonstrate a renewed unity of pseudo-plainchant monophony (and its combination with the aforementioned technique of accompanying this with a drone) and a particularly prevalent usage of Neo-classical enharmony in entirely syllabic settings of these French texts, drawing on several prevalent nuances that he had previously manipulated in both *Figure humaine* and *Un soir de neige*. Poulenc also recalls several decidedly pseudo-medieval mannerisms from the *Quatre motets pour un temps de pénitence* such as open fifth cadences.

The *Quatre petites prières* were more clearly intended for liturgical use, and, though they are often performed as a set, the succession of motets does not suggest a narrative in the same way as the *Quatre motets pour un temps de pénitence*. Though the stylistic basis of all his former sacred vocal works pertains here, the real import of these four motets lies in their miniature structure and compacted lyricism, not to say aphoristic construction, where each gesture takes on an almost pointillistic significance, embodying the more restrained nature of the prayerful texts. The first of these settings, 'Salut, Dame Sainte', is the longest and most representative of the four, combining the recurring use of pseudo-plainchant melody accompanied by mellifluously conjunct hummed accompanimental voices (as is also a feature in the third - 'Seigneur, je vous en prie' - and fourth - 'O mes très chères frères'), unbroken homophonic writing (which structures the entire second motet, 'Tout puissant'), a wide variety of dynamic contrast, a particularly satisfying climax when the tonality arrives in the tonal purity of C major at bar 23 (having been anticipated from the start of the homophonic writing in bar 13) and a mysteriously archaic open fifth which constitutes the final chord. Poulenc also demonstrates his predilection for pedal points and Stravinskian non-functional progressions (a term which one might employ to describe a defiance of conventional

⁶ Ibid., 152.

'functional' harmony in which neo-classical composers used successions of unrelated chords (often of dissonant kind and being 'collections' of pitches rather than traditional 'tonal' chords), frequently ignoring rules of voice-leading, as can be observed in many of Stravinsky's works such as *Les Noces*, the *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* and the *Symphony of Psalms*), such as that found in the *éclatant* passage at bar 17 (this rhetorical gesture is also repeated with even greater aplomb in bars bar 20-25) in the last motet.

All the *Quatre petites prières* pay a degree of tribute to the quasi-orchestral divisions of parts that were experienced, to great effect, in the Mass in G. The baritones are frequently divided into two independent parts though the first and fourth prayers reach the height of a division into three parts resulting, in one instance (in 'Salut, Dame Sainte' when the basses are simultaneously divided into two) in a dense six-part texture. Reflecting his penchant for fluctuating modes (as one witnessed so abundantly in the *Litanies*) Poulenc moves from the tonic major to the tonic minor in bar six of 'Salut, Dame Sainte' by subtly changing the contour of the *très en dehors* tenor melody from the initial ascending major sixth to a minor sixth (on the anacrusis to bar seven). Following on from this, he introduces a series of more contemporary Neo-classical tonal shifts, beginning with the particularly sharp-looking opening chord of bar 13 (though merely an enharmonically notated chord II in the preceding B flat minor) which is then used as a pivotal dominant seventh into E major. It must be said that this homophonic writing possesses far greater feeling of lyricism than the almost turgid nature of the constant eerie non-functional alternation between semitonally adjacent major and minor chords in 'Tout puissant', where a single voice is used to pivot between them and provide either the major or minor third of the chord (as is summed up in the final cadence of the piece – see Ex. 4.7). Indeed, it almost seems that 'Tout puissant'

was an exercise in the possibilities offered by enharmonic changes which presents singers with an immense challenge in intonation!

Such chromaticism, as one finds in 'Tout puissant', is contrasted by the euphonious diatonicism of 'Seigneur, je vous en prie', in which Poulenc gives a passionately expressive account of the text, a meditation on God's infinite love. There is an elusive simplicity about

Example 4.7

The image shows a handwritten musical score for three voices: Tenor (T), Baritone (Bar), and Bass (B). The music is in 4/4 time. The top staff (T) has notes G4, A4, B4, C5. The middle staff (Bar) has notes G3, A3, B3, C4. The bottom staff (B) has notes G2, A2, B2, C3. The lyrics 'A - men.' are written below each staff. Dynamics *p* and *pp* are indicated above the first two notes of the top staff. The score is labeled 'Example 4.7' at the top.

the opening bars which rarely stray from traditional harmonies and functional progressions, and again one senses that we are experiencing a form of accompanied plainchant (like 'Salve Regina'). The ecstatically emotional and intensely beautiful bars 10 to 15, which are decked with suspensions and passing notes, contain some of the most traditionally 'academic' treatments of harmony that can be encountered in Poulenc's output (Ex. 4.8). This significant passage precedes a gratifying release onto the concluding tonic chord of E major by means of rich chromaticism in the penultimate bar, fascinatingly redeploing the identical three opulent chords (though with fewer notes) as well as being in the same key as the

concluding bar of both the Sanctus and Benedictus from the Mass in G. These concluding chords also echo the second and seventh movements of *Figure humaine*, demonstrating a further example of the cross-fertilisation of sacred and secular stylistic sound worlds which Poulenc was continuing to address, and would do so with a yet fresher approach in his mystical *Quatre motets pour le temps de Noël* which he began to compose in November, 1951.

Example 4.8

molto

a - fin que je meu-re para - mour de votre a - mour, puis - ou
a - fin que je meu-re par a - mour de votre a - mour, ou
a - fin que je meu-re par a - mour de votre a - mour, ou
a - fin que je meu-re par a - mour - - - r ou

- que vous a - vez dai - gné mou-rir par a - mour

Chapter 5

The late liturgical works: *Quatre motets pour le temps de Noël, Ave verum corpus* and *Laudes de Saint Antoine de Padoue*

All of Poulenc's 'late' liturgical works, apart from the *Laudes de Saint Antoine de Padoue*, were composed over little more than a year (between November, 1951 and August, 1952) and in a variety of locations all over France as he continued to tour his home country in his ongoing career as an accompanist to Pierre Bernac. Indeed, one would have expected his compositional activities to have slowed down considerably in light of the large number of international engagements he had as a performer in the late 1940s and early 1950s, including his first tour of the USA with Bernac in 1948.¹ However, many works emerged during these years including the Piano Concerto (commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1949) and the Sonata for Two Pianos (1952-3), and he made the first sketches of the Sonata for Flute and Piano which was eventually completed in 1956.² The composition of songs was curiously absent from his output for four years following the great success of *La fraîcheur et le feu*, a collection of *mélodies* setting Éluard's poetry, at its premiere in November, 1950,³ but he still found time to complete the twelve-movement non-liturgical *Stabat Mater*, dedicated to the artist and stage designer Christian Bérard (who had died at the age of 47⁴), before the end of 1950. Interestingly, the three works which form the discussion in this final chapter are based on the template of the earlier 'middle period' liturgical works (i.e. the *Quatre motets pour le temps de Noël*, the single motet *Ave Verum* and the four short pieces that make up the *Laudes de Saint Antoine de Padoue* corresponded more or less exactly to the style-

¹ Ivry, Benjamin. *Francis Poulenc* (London, 1996), 152.

² Battoni, Isabelle. Accompanying notes to CD *Poulenc – Complete Chamber Music, Volume 1* (Munich, 2000), 4.

³ Ivry, 156.

⁴ Burton, Richard D.E. *Francis Poulenc*. (Bath, 2002), 88.

forms of the *Quatre motets pour un temps de pénitence*, the two single motets ‘Exultate Deo’ and ‘Salve Regina’ and the *Quatre petites prières de Saint François d’Assise*). This template also reflects a similar time-span of composition in that, not only were the same style-forms used, but the composition of the works was carried out in a comparable fashion (i.e. the *Quatre motets pour le temps de Noël*, the single motet *Ave Verum* were written close together, while the *Laudes de Saint Antoine de Padoue* followed after a gap of seven years). There is no evidence to suggest that Poulenc’s provision of a counterpart to these earlier works and the period of time that separated their composition was, by any means, intentional, nor if he was even aware that he had done so. However, such organisation provides an appropriate starting point for an array of comparisons between the compositional approaches to the two sets of works and illustrates the extent of his supposedly ‘developed’ liturgical style which continues to display prevalent references to a distinctly Neo-classical sound world, combining the sacred and the secular in an ever-increasing harmonious unit (a trend already incipient in the distilled stylistic language and handling of form in the *Quatre petites prières de Saint François d’Assise*).

As he had done with the *Quatre motets pour un temps de pénitence*, Poulenc dedicated each of his Christmas motets to a friend or colleague, including Simone Girard (who had organised Poulenc and Bernac’s first joint concert engagement) to whom the mellifluous second motet, ‘Quem vidistis pastores’, was dedicated. He wrote to her at the end of 1951 on the subject of this dedication:

If I were to dedicate to you a mere Carol in dialect, it would not be worthy of you, and so I shall instead dedicate to you one of the *Quatre motets pour le temps de la Nativité* (sic) which I am now composing as a counterpart to the austere *Pénitence*. I think, the way things are going, that it will be very lovely. Something like a counterpart to *Vinea Electa*.⁵

⁵ Letter from Poulenc to Simone Girard assumed to have been written in November or December, 1951. In Buckland, Sidney Francis Poulenc ‘E do and Source’ – *Selected Correspondence 1915-1963* (London, 1991), 194.

Perhaps the most important feature of the Christmas motets, however, is that, while they continue to evince the 'secular-sacred' dialectic of his former sacred works, it is also evident that this dialectic has undergone a further stage of assimilation where the more archaic side of Poulenc's style is more conspicuous. In this sense, the Christmas motets are Poulenc's most contemplative vocal works, where the more dramatic and 'secular' influences are most perceptibly attenuated. Having reached this 'extreme', Poulenc clearly decided to return to the style of his former sacred works, using *Ave verum corpus* as a 'bridge', in which the fusion of both aforementioned musical styles is most (however disjointedly) distinct, most notably in the use of orchestral textures which one associates with the Mass in G and one which is combined with a heightened propensity for chromatic writing (in which the use of the significant diminished chord is once again rife) and enharmonic shifts.

Benjamin Ivry, in his biography of Poulenc, comments that the *Quatre motets pour le temps de Noël* are highly illustrative, suggesting that they 'were the product of a composer who has studied hundreds of religious paintings, and who tried to evoke some landscapes in his writing for voices'.⁶ In the same way as he grouped the *Quatre motets pour un temps de pénitence* together as a 'cycle', Poulenc intended the set of Christmas motets to be performed as a single concert item, despite their appropriateness for individual performance as part of the liturgy, and he created a matching narrative of the Nativity which runs through the highly pictorial four vocal 'movements'. The first is concerned with the mystery of the moments immediately following Christ's birth in the humbleness of the stable before proclaiming news of the birth to the shepherds in the second; the sight of the star which fills the magi with joy and stimulates them to visit the saviour with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh in the third and, finally, the unity of the whole world's rejoicing over the new-born king in

⁶ Ivry, 162.

the fourth. These motets present an, admittedly, far greater sense of vocal lyricism than in any of the earlier choral works, as well as an increased sense of contrasting yet reflective moods whilst upholding the sense of narrative; it also appears that, by this stage, Poulenc had reached a sufficiently advanced stage in composition for choral ensemble to be able to communicate the depth of meaning and the emotions of a text to a more poignant, refined degree, in the same manner that he had done so skilfully in a great number of his *mélodies* many years earlier.

Whilst retaining his firmly established classical (and, minded, neo-classical) fingerprints, such as frequent antecedent and consequent phrase structures, two-bar concluding codas and non-functional harmony (often infused by typically Stravinskian progressions within a restricted pattern of chords), he develops several techniques of which there had previously only been passing hints. Among these is the exchange of a melody whilst the full texture remains unbroken (e.g. bars 24-27 of 'O magnum mysterium'); this he does with great skill in the first and second motets, re-introducing and expanding upon the effect of musical dialogue in 'Salve Regina' (this also shows a particularly interesting similarity to the deft antiphonal techniques which Ravel manipulates in his secular *Trois Chansons*). He also shows a new penchant for the expressive possibilities which recapitulation offers, in some cases subtly altering harmonies to highlight particular words when material recurs, as he does towards the end of the dark B flat minor of the first motet, 'O magnum mysterium', which sets the fifth Responsory for Matins on Christmas day (cf. bars 6-9 and 29-31). Indeed, this motet employs a fresh, though somewhat irregular, rondo structure (highlighting, incidentally, Poulenc's continued adherence to classical form), in which the initial three consecutive four-part phrases are recalled twice with equally subtle chromatic alterations to the pseudo-plainchant melody on each occasion. Both these

examples introduce a 'foreign' tritone to the conjunctly fluid melody and Poulenc combines these with a complimentary Neo-classical accompanying harmonic progressions involving the use of a diminished chord in the first instance (bar 17) and with more 'contemporary' non-functional distortions of such chords in the second instance (bar 30) (Ex. 5.1). Poulenc then evokes the essential placid warmth of 'Vinea mea electa' in the third 'bright' A major motet, 'Videntes stellam' (a setting of an Epiphany Magnificat Responsory and the first of the four to be composed). Though this motet evinces a similar repetitive structure to 'O magnum', the structural organisation is in fact more subtle, relating instead to a classical

Example 5.1a

ppp bien lié et bien doux

Handwritten musical score for Example 5.1a, featuring four staves of music with lyrics in French and Latin. The score includes dynamic markings like *ppp* and performance instructions like *bien lié et bien doux* and *à peine articulé*.

Lyrics (French/Latin):

O Ma - gnum mys - te - ri - um, et ad - mi - ra - bi - le Sa - cra - Men - tum

Mys - te - ri - um, mys - te - ri - um Ma - gnum

Mys - te - ri - um, mys - te - ri - um Sa - cra - Men - tum

O Ma - gnum mys - te - ri - um Ma - gnum

Example 5.1b

Handwritten musical score for Example 5.1b. It consists of four staves. The top staff is a vocal line starting with a *ppp* dynamic marking. The lyrics are: "O ma-gnum mys-te-ri-um et ad-mi-ra-bi-le sa-cra-men-tum". The second staff continues the vocal line with lyrics: "mys-te-ri-um sa-cra-men-tum". The third staff continues with lyrics: "mys-te-ri-um sa-cra-men-tum". The bottom staff is a piano accompaniment line with lyrics: "O ma-gnum mys-te-ri-um sa-cra-men-tum". The music is in a minor key and features various melodic and harmonic textures.

Example 5.1c

Handwritten musical score for Example 5.1c. It consists of four staves. The top staff is a vocal line starting with a *ppp* dynamic marking. The lyrics are: "O ma-gnum mys-te-ri-um et ad-mi-ra-bi-le sa-cra-men-tum". The second staff continues the vocal line with lyrics: "mys-te-ri-um sa-cra-men-tum ma-gnum". The third staff continues with lyrics: "mys-te-ri-um sa-cra-men-tum ma-gnum". The bottom staff is a piano accompaniment line with lyrics: "mys-te-ri-um sa-cra-men-tum ma-gnum". The music is in a minor key and features various melodic and harmonic textures.

ritornello form of construction where repetitions recur in different keys (e.g. bars 1-4 and 8-11, 15-18, 26-29 and 36-40). Poulenc also juxtaposes a framing sense of ethereal pulchritude with a rich, bass-heavy, earthly harmony (the latter of which was briefly encountered in 'Exultate Deo') whilst allowing the intrusion of a small number of distinctly secular discordant cadential progressions reminiscent of several poignant moments in *Figure humaine*. Indeed, this motet, in Benjamin Ivry's view, was most representative of the collection as a whole:

The writing for *Videntes Stellam* ('seeing the star') is especially magical, its high-reaching harmonies seeming to seek the star that the Magi saw in the sky. The pliant, sensitive vocal line has a dramatic point: a rest after the word 'Magi' gives a solid image of the Three Kings, and underlines their stately importance. The words 'videntes stellam' are repeated numerous times, with a final cadence on a lower tone, as if the chorus brought the message to heart-level, absorbing human level by lowering the notes is subtle performing psychology, and only a composer deeply familiar with choral singing and composing would have thought of it.⁷

This motet conforms with the diatonic uniformity of the second motet, 'Quem vidistis' (which rarely strays from varying modal forms of B minor) the central theme of which is a hauntingly archaic pseudo-plainchant melody which communicates the incredible awe of the shepherds very effectively. In addition, the 'Quem vidistis' relishes in a decidedly nineteenth-century French style of plainchant treatment largely characterised by the organ works of Duruflé. This is achieved by means of the singing of the pseudo-plainchant melody in octaves (suggesting the traditional mode of congregational singing), the undulating movement in thirds of the transparently diatonic accompanying voices and the occasional exposition of consecutive fifths (between beats two and three as given in Ex. 5.2); this practice and disposition of voices was originally rehearsed in the Mass in G. This piece represents one of Poulenc's most striking embodiments of nineteenth-century French church music following the paradigms of Niedermeyer. 'Hodie Christus natus est', the last

⁷ Ivry, 162.

motet in the set, which sets the antiphon for the Magnificat for the second service of Vespers on Christmas day, stands apart from the set in its particularly vigorous paean to the new-born Christ (in the largely diatonic 'purity' of C). Here a large amount of textual repetition creates an

Example 5.2

S
A
T

Quem vi-dis-tis, pas-to-res? di-ci-te

Bouche fermée

Quem vi-dis-tis, pas-to-res? di-ci-te

unbroken, electrified momentum of predominantly conjunct part-writing (which recalls the light-hearted nature of the Sanctus from the Mass in G) and introduces a strikingly fresh and more typically Neo-classical deployment of pseudo-baroque rhythmic energy. This energy is further intensified by the possibilities for expansion of musical material made possible by a recurring bar-long leitmotif ('Gloria in excelsis Deo') whose repetitions are almost excessive. Simultaneously, a degree of highly contrasted gestures (curiously absent from the other the Christmas motets despite the strong currency they had gained in Poulenc's earlier liturgical compositions) is present in the sudden interjections of hushed dynamic accompanied by momentary moves to subsidiary modes or tonalities, the best example of which is seen in bar

5, when he moves to the tonic minor (Ex. 5.3) and to *piano* from the former dynamic of *fortissimo*.

Example 5.3

The image shows a handwritten musical score for two staves. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The music is in 4/4 time. The first four bars are marked with a dynamic of *ff* (fortissimo). The fifth bar is marked with *psubito* (piano subito). The lyrics are written below the staves: "Ho-die Sal-va-tor ap-pa-ra-it, Ho-di-e in-ter-ra,". The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and accidentals.

Both 'O magnum mysterium' and 'Videntes stellam' portray their texts highly illustratively through Poulenc's choice of tonality, providing a substantial contrast from the dark B flat minor of the former which (in conjunction with the hushed dynamic) embodies the sense of magical wonder surrounding Christ's birth and the bright A major (combined with the similarly significant lack of the depths of a bass line in the opening fourteen-bar section) of the latter which reaches metaphorically towards the star which is seen by the magi. In addition to the 'dark' tonality of 'O magnum', Poulenc employs a series of non-functional harmonies (sung by the three lower voices alone) which, with an additional sense of timelessness, adds to the significant awe-inspired nature of the writing. Moreover, this creates even greater surprise when the contrastingly mellifluous and rapturously beautiful chant-like soprano melody enters in bar six (which is strikingly reminiscent of the slow

movement of the Flute Sonata in the same key!) and floats ethereally in the same way as the aforementioned harmonies of 'Videntes stellam'. Both of these motets have contrastingly brief ecstatic interjections: in 'O magnum' this is expressed through the prominent, functional harmonic progressions (e.g. bar 13 and 36-7), and in the case of 'Videntes' by a more playful and witty secular rhetorical gesture (bars 4-7, 11-14, 18-25 and 29-35). Poulenc anticipates the first of these instances in 'O magnum', having united the four parts in parallel textual movement (bar 11) two bars before the outburst created by 'jacentem in praesepio' in the relative major (D flat) in which the basses soar up to a triumphant top D flat in bar 13, a figure which fittingly returns on two occasions later in the motet. Following the second of these instances (which is, interestingly, preceded by a bar of dense chordal spacing accompanied by a broodingly chromatic forward momentum reminiscent of the Organ Concerto), Poulenc introduces a new antiphonal five-bar section in praise of the Virgin, in which a tonally ambiguous sequence of sharp tonalities initially takes on the guise of G major before pulling towards D major and then moving through an unresolving dominant seventh of D into a transitory B major. The material possessed by this last key then undergoes a cunning and deep-rootedly Neo-classical enharmonic change to the home key of B flat minor which is safely reached by bar 28 (Ex. 5.4). By contrast, in 'Quem vidistis' Poulenc introduces new material at bar 21 which is strongly articulated by the prior *rallentando* and the pause on the final chord of the preceding bar. Here Poulenc introduces the insistent words which interrogate the shepherds and demand the announcement of Christ's birth at the dramatically contrasting dynamic of *fortissimo* (compared to *pianissimo* which begins the piece). A particularly significant stylistic statement appears shortly after this new section begins (in bar 24), demonstrating a blatant reference to Stravinskian Neo-classicism in the series of consecutive seventh chords (which simultaneously contain

strikingly prominent pseudo-medieval consecutive fourths between the upper two parts) and in the decidedly quirky nature of the irregular periodicity (Ex. 5.5).

Poulenc's strongly contrasting brief and peculiarly drab setting of the Eucharistic text, *Ave verum corpus*, which was composed at Noizay in August, 1952, is the composer's first composition for women's voices only following the *Litanies* of sixteen years earlier. In this setting of 28 bars, Poulenc demonstrates a clumsy and somewhat crude juxtaposition of the ancient and the modern, beginning with the former in the diatonic purity of the Aeolian mode and in a measured pseudo-Renaissance imitative process which makes up the first seven bars. He then establishes a pattern of contrastingly melismatic lines which he combines with a tangential move into chromatically non-functional harmony combined with two instances of particularly angular leaps of a tritone by the mezzo-sopranos (Ex. 5.6). Interestingly, the modal momentum of the opening bars is recalled in the particularly medieval sound world of the identical Aeolian cadences in bars 11 to 12 (incorporating a Neo-classical coda widely applied in many of his works) and at the motet's conclusion. The opening imitative idea is also reintroduced at bar 21 though an imitative process is not pursued in the same way as the new and unexpectedly non-imitative idea is handled at bar 13.

Perhaps having realised that *Ave verum corpus* was in no way a worthy representation of his fertile output of sacred choral music since 1936, Poulenc decided to return to the 'monastic' ethos of the *Quatre petites prières* in electing to write for lower male voices. *Laudes de Sainte Antoine de Padoue* was completed in March, 1959, just under four years before his death. The composition of this work occurred at a particularly weak emotional time in the composer's life when he claimed to be financially insolvent and verging on suicidal thoughts.

Example 5.4

Handwritten musical score for Example 5.4. The score consists of four staves. The top staff is a vocal line with lyrics: "Bouche fermée bien en dehors". The second staff is a vocal line with lyrics: "Bouche fermée doucement en dehors". The third staff is a vocal line with lyrics: "Be - a - ta vir - go cu - jus vis - ce - ra mer - ru - e - rat Bouche fermée". The bottom staff is a piano accompaniment line with lyrics: "a - ta vir - go Be - a - ta vir - go Bouche fermée". The score includes dynamic markings such as *p* (piano), *mf* (mezzo-forte), and *pp* (pianissimo). It also features time signatures of 7/4 and 5/4, and various musical notations including slurs, accents, and fermatas.

Example 5.5

Handwritten musical score for Example 5.5. The score consists of three staves labeled S (Soprano), A (Alto), and T (Tenor). Each staff has the lyrics "Chris - ti Na - ti - vi - ta - tem". The score includes dynamic markings such as *mf* (mezzo-forte) and *pp* (pianissimo). It also features time signatures of 5/4 and 7/4, and various musical notations including slurs, accents, and fermatas.

Of this he commented: 'My music alone restrains me'.⁸ Indeed, his enthusiasm for life was not even restored by the challenge of a large new commission from the Koussevitsky Foundation of Boston soon after the completion of these pieces as well as the development

⁸ Ivry, 202.

Example 5.6

S *f*
ex Ma-ri-a

M-S
ex Ma-ri-a

A
ex Ma-ri-a

of a new business and the construction of a new house with his latest lover, Louis Gautier.⁹ As a result, the disillusioned Poulenc took some persuasion before embarking upon the composition of his large-scale *Gloria*. Also, this painful phase and its resulting cynicism at such a late stage in his life could plausibly have made him question the validity of his Christian faith, a strong possibility which is given substance in the fact that the *Laudes* constitutes his final liturgical work. This work, despite being for the purposes of worship, displays a comparatively immense reference to Neo-classical secularism and in many respects begins to close the doors on Poulenc's sacred style, allowing him to resume the undiluted secular style of his pre-1936 compositions.

⁹ Ibid., 202/203.

In these four short settings of prayerful texts from the Office of St Anthony by the poet and musician, Julian of Speyer;¹⁰ he recreated the ostensibly monastic sound world of men's voices which he had so effectively personified in the similarly scored *Quatre petites prières de Saint François d'Assise* and clearly intended the pieces to be performed independently and liturgically due to the similar lack of a uniting narrative. The *Laudes de Saint Antoine de Padoue*, however, represent a far more secularised Neo-classical sound world, encapsulated in the fact that each of the four motets ends on an ambiguously poised dominant seventh chord (a dominant thirteenth in the case of the second motet, 'O Proles' which neither summarises the austerity of the motet's opening nor the subsequently melodramatic diminished progressions) which are incorporated into the aforementioned trait of epigrammatic codas. These dominant chords seem to illustrate the sense of continuity of Christian prayer embodied in the responding words from the Litany (i.e. 'Ora pro nobis') which appear near the conclusion of the final motet, 'Si Quaeris'. Poulenc also combines these stylistic nuances with widespread use of non-functional 'wrong-note' harmony, chromaticism and disjunctural rhythmic gestures. He also incorporates subtle hints of ecclesiastical-style responsorial passages and a generally more coherently leitmotivic reference to his earlier trait of repeating single (usually bar-long) phrases. This clear leaning towards his more 'modern' and secular style is, however, balanced by features such as diatonic, monophonic intonations and dialogues (the latter of which provides a startling contrast to the otherwise discordant harmonic writing in the first motet, 'O Jesu'), instances of more conjunctly archaic fluidity (most overtly in 'O Proles') and the inclusion of several pseudo-medieval cadential progressions in which chords lack thirds.

¹⁰ Thibodeau, Ralph, 'The Sacred Music of Francis Poulenc: A Centennial Tribute'. In *Sacred Music*, Volume 2:5, Summer 1999, 10.

'O Jesu', is a consistently homophonic setting of the text addressing Christ as the perpetual light. In a similar manner to 'O mes très chers frères', the last of the *Quatre petites prières*, he begins with a cantor's intonation which reaches symbolically towards the perpetual light whilst retaining a deceptive Aeolian diatonicism before the two near-identical harmonised subsequent bars. Likewise, in the witty third motet, 'Laus Regi' (composed in the lovely Mediterranean surroundings of Cannes), Poulenc sets up a monophonic preamble before a longer anticipatory diatonic two-part phrase which precedes the startling string of chromatic progressions in similar motion, reminiscent of 'Tout puissant' yet even more innovatively forward-looking in terms of its denser texture and striking progressions. Recalling the climax of bar 23 of 'Salut, Dame Sainte', Poulenc also incorporates a series of emphatic contrasts of dynamic in 'O Jesu'. This can be observed from bar 19 where a whole series of fluctuations between *piano* and *forte* occur. Here, too, Poulenc is especially insistent with his repetitions of D in the tenor, an insistence of an individual pitch that anticipates the monotonous *comme une psalmodie* Gs in the second motet, 'O Proles' (which seems to refer obliquely to the brooding moments in Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*) (Ex. 5.7).

Example 5.7

The musical score consists of three staves labeled T, Bar, and B. The time signature is 4/4. The melody is monophonic, with the same notes appearing on all three staves. The lyrics are 'Lu-men det re-li-gi-o'. Dynamic markings include a forte (f) at the beginning and a piano (p) later in the phrase. The notes are: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), B4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), G4 (quarter).



As the final work in Poulenc's impressive corpus of sacred music, the *Laudes* provides a more astringent codicil in which his style has a harder, even starker edge in which the more 'unemotional' world of Stravinsky's Neo-classical works (especially those written for wind instruments) seem more palpable. Gone are those lyrical strands and harmonic euphony of the *Quatre petite prières*. Instead, Poulenc injects these miniatures with a more acerbic tone in which, perhaps, there is the suggestion that he was attempting to break out of the established style of his other sacred works in an attempt to explore a new asceticism not unlike the later, highly economical developments of Stravinsky's music of the 1940s and 1950s.

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