

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: SIMPLY PLEASING AND UNIQUELY
ORIGINAL: UNCOVERING AND RE-
EVALUATING THE VALUE OF SOLO
PIANO WORKS BY FRANCIS POULENC

Ji Won Lim, Doctor of Musical Arts, 2020

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Francis Poulenc, though highly regarded by many musicians for his vocal and chamber works, is not considered one of the “mainstream” composers in the world of piano music. Though praised by many musicologists and music critics for his beautiful melodies and uniquely individual writing style, Poulenc’s solo piano works have not been a major part of the recital repertoire. While searching for some less technically-demanding recital pieces due to the recent recovery of a shoulder injury, I found hidden gems of this great composer. His solo piano works are delightfully pleasing but also shockingly eccentric, light-hearted and humorous but also warm and solemn. This fascinating juxtaposition of completely contrasting ideas led to more serious research, and I began to question why his solo piano pieces are not performed more regularly.

The purpose of this project is to discuss the little-known solo piano compositions of Poulenc and to re-evaluate their significance as part of classical

piano literature. Possibly eclipsed by the popularity of the music by Debussy and Ravel or even by his own vocal and larger scale works, or perhaps because of the lack of virtuosity and bold emotional expression, Poulenc's solo piano works have largely been neglected by many pianists. Focusing mainly on three relatively early compositions, *Suite en ut*, *Huit Nocturnes*, and *Suite française*, I hope to emphasize the value of his solo piano music through thorough examination and musical analysis using articles, interviews, diaries, and letters written by Poulenc and his contemporaries.

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POULENC

by

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Musical Background

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) is one of the significant French composers in the history of classical music. Born during the turn of the century when the “new music” boom— impressionism, nationalism, and neoclassicism to name a few – was dominating the musical world, Poulenc remained unshaken by those styles and instead created his own. Though Poulenc is most well-known for his vocal works, his musical genres cover a wide variety including opera, chamber music, solo instrumental concertos, ballets, and solo piano works. Interestingly, Poulenc wrote a large number of solo piano pieces throughout his life, outnumbered only by his vocal works, but unfortunately only a few of his solo piano compositions have gained popularity while the rest are mostly unknown to many contemporary pianists.

Poulenc was born into a wealthy musical family – his mother was from an artistic Parisian family and was an amateur pianist herself, and his father was a devout Catholic and an industrialist. The piano was an important instrument for Poulenc since childhood as his first instrument and it became the only instrument that he played fluently throughout his life. Due to his father’s insistence, Poulenc did not attend the conservatory to pursue musical study, but instead went to a conventional school to pursue general studies. Poulenc’s professional musical training began in 1914 with the Catalan pianist Ricardo Viñes, a virtuoso who mastered the music of Debussy, Ravel, and Satie. While Poulenc admired Viñes as a teacher and mentor, the lessons with a French composer and teacher Charles Koechlin from 1921-1925

quenched his thirst for formal musical training after he got rejected from the Paris Conservatoire in 1917. Poulenc paid tribute to both teachers:

If Koechlin enabled me eventually to perfect my craft, it's really to Viñes that I owe my first efforts in composition and everything I know about the piano.¹

Poulenc published his first composition (which included piano) in 1917, continuing to write for solo piano throughout his life, publishing a new work almost every year until 1940. Despite his love for piano and his dedication to composing for solo piano, Poulenc seemed to never have been satisfied with his writings for piano.

In his own remarks about his piano works:

My piano pieces are often massacred, but never to such an extent as my songs and, heaven knows, I place a higher value on the songs.²

No doubt you'll find me paradoxical when I say that it's because I'm too familiar with writing for the piano that I've failed with many of my pieces. Facility, dodges, knowing the ropes – these often, I'm sorry to say, take the place of true musical interest. I think in all honesty that my piano music is neither as good as pianists claim, nor as bad as some of your fellow critics have said. The truth lies in between.³

Social Background

Poulenc's social life was also unconventional. He was surrounded by vibrant, wide-ranging circles of friends, many of whom not musicians. For instance, his circles included the poets such as Cocteau, Radiguet, Jacob, Apollinaire, and Éluard,

¹ Francis Poulenc, *Moi et mes amis: Confidences recueillies par Stéphane Audel*, (Paris—Geneva: La Palatine, 1963), 43.

² Francis Poulenc, *Diary of My Songs: (Journal De Mes Mélodies)*, (London: Gollancz, 1989), 19.

³ Francis Poulenc, *Francis Poulenc, Articles and Interviews: Notes from the Heart*, ed. Nicolas Southon, trans. Roger Nichols, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 193.

and the painters such as Picasso and Matisse. Amongst the prominent musicians included Pierre Bernac (a baritone and life-long recital partner), Ricardo Viñes (Poulenc's piano teacher and mentor), and *Les Six*. As an exceptionally sociable person, Poulenc's networking skills facilitated him to interact with the professional artists and commissioners of the twentieth century.

The influences of Poulenc's social circles – musicians, poets, and painters – were particularly significant in forming Poulenc's musical style. The technical efficiency and interpretation of Poulenc's piano works were greatly influenced by Viñes's teaching and playing.⁴ The unique, creative group of French composers called *Les Six* (of which Poulenc was one of the members) most notably influenced the simplistic writing of Poulenc.⁵ Two of his singer friends, Pierre Bernac and Denise Duval, and his life-long friendship with the poets were the motivation for Poulenc to become one of the best song-writers of the twentieth century. The artworks of leading painters of the early twentieth century such as Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso inspired Poulenc to become fascinated with abstract ideas and modernism.

Hailing from a Parisian bourgeois family, the pressure he felt to maintain his above-standard lifestyle was constant; hence, a large percentage of his output was commissioned. Some notable commissioners included Serge Diaghilev who asked

⁴ This will be discussed more in detail in chapter 4.

⁵ Although Poulenc's individual musical style was not directly influenced by a particular composer of the group.

Poulenc to compose a ballet, *Les Biches*, and the Princess Edmond de Polignac who commissioned the Concerto for Two Pianos and Organ Concerto.

Poulenc's diverse circle of friends and artists helped him form a unique musical style of his own. Despite or perhaps because of his failure to sustain professional training, Poulenc was naturally influenced by the creative ideas of his large circle of friends and colleagues who had a tremendous impact on his music and who were especially important in forming his diverse, yet unique style.

Chapter 2: Unique Musical Style

Juxtaposition of Two Contrasting Styles

Poulenc's musical style is often described as "individual" and "original", but what precisely is individual and original about his music? One notable aspect of his musical style is the coexistence of two contrasting styles: traditional vs. eccentric and humorous vs. serious. Listening to his mother playing the music of Mozart, Schubert, and Chopin as a child, Poulenc was naturally exposed to the traditional musical style of his predecessors. At the same time though, he was exposed to the music of the progressive composers of the time such as Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky, and Satie. It is known that he had great admiration for both the tradition and the advancement in music:

I have always adored singing and I owe my first great musical memories to Don Giovanni, Pelleas, Boris and Rigoletto. So it is quite natural that the names of Debussy, Mussorgsky and Verdi should figure in the dedication of the Carmelites. If the name of Mozart is absent, that is because, in all decency, one cannot dedicate anything to God the Father.⁶

Despite a self-defensive anti-Debussy crisis in 1917, when I met Satie, Debussy has always remained the composer I like best after Mozart. I can't do without his music. It's my oxygen.⁷

When Pierre Monteux conducted a concert performance of The Rite of Spring at the Casino de Paris in the winter of 1914, I went alone with a friend at whose house I was supposed to be spending the day. I came home so shocked and thunderstruck that, during the evening, I couldn't conceal from my parents how I'd spent the day.⁸

⁶ Poulenc, *Articles and Interviews*, 55.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Juxtaposition of old and new is nearly always present in his music which, while mostly diatonic, contains unexpected, unrelated materials. More descriptively, the formal structure of most of his piano works is ABA form but the transitions are rather abrupt and the middle section is usually more atonal and “bizarre”. This is well-represented in his *Nocturnes* No. 3 and No. 6 (see Figures 1-4).

Figure 1: Beginning of *Nocturne* No. 3, mm. 1-4



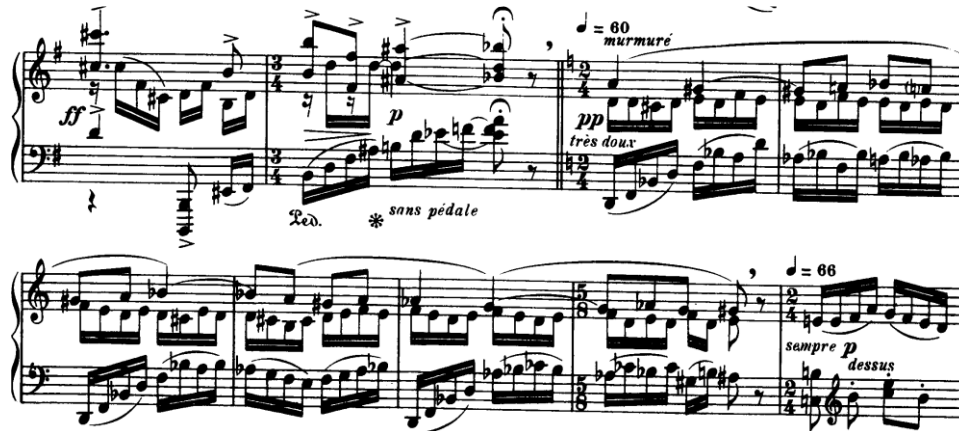
Figure 2: Transition into middle section, *Nocturne* No. 3, mm. 38-48



Figure 3: Beginning of *Nocturne* No. 6, mm. 1-4



Figure 4: Transition into middle section, *Nocturne No. 6*, mm. 10-18



The use of traditional harmony and formal structure typical of the character pieces shows that Poulenc never strayed too far from tradition. However, Poulenc's musical style is also described as carefree and unorthodox. Within traditional models, he displays eccentric sudden changes in tempo, daring harmony, and quickly changing textures. This distinctive characteristic is distinguishable both from the character pieces of Chopin and Schumann, his predecessors, and from the neoclassic works of Stravinsky and Prokofiev, his contemporaries.

Another important characteristic of Poulenc's music is the coexistence of both humorous/cynical and divine sentiments. According to the music critic and musicologist Claude Rostand, the cynical and religious sides of Poulenc are "perfectly balanced".⁹ He described these contrasting natures of Poulenc in more detail:

There is the slightly cynical Poulenc – whom some people take for a 'petit maitre'... And then there is the Poulenc who is not always recognized as much as he should be, the solemn, even austere Poulenc of the choral works and some of the song cycles... We shall also find any number of reasons not

⁹ Poulenc, *Articles and Interviews*, 180.

to underestimate the first in favour of the second.¹⁰

In an interview with Rostand later in life, Poulenc admitted that he absorbed religious structure from his father while the happiest memories of his childhood were based in mischief.¹¹ In his diary, Poulenc mentioned that “faith is strong in all the Poulencs” and that “[his] conception of religious music is essentially direct and often intimate.”¹²

Although he was not formally educated in the French tradition, every aspect of Poulenc’s music is “French” by nature – rapid, linear passages, thin (sometimes hollow) texture, and clear articulations. However, Poulenc enjoyed adding a random note in a chord that did not belong in the harmony, ending with an unexpected note or a passage, or inserting musically unrelated passages. These “jokes” may appear irreverent, yet they also add wit and charm to the music – a quality that defines Poulenc’s musical signature. Bold interruptions of an otherwise harmonious composition avoids banality and offers wit, charm and eccentricity.

The Original Melody

Poulenc’s lack of traditional musical training helped him create unique, original melodies. A gifted melody-writer, Poulenc’s ability to write beautiful and memorable melodies became one of his musical signatures. Mostly, his compositions are more melody-oriented than harmonically driven, and it is clear that melody was

¹⁰ Poulenc, *Articles and Interviews*, 180.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 184-5.

¹² Poulenc, *Diary of My Songs*, 49.

primary importance to him. Although Poulenc seemed to prefer fragmented, shorter melodies than those of long and continuous ones, they are nonetheless very flowing.

Seldom expanding beyond a range of fourth, the use of small intervals (especially seconds) is noticeably present in his melodic construction. This particular feature contributes to the pleasant, flowing melodies of Poulenc as shown in Figures 5 and 6. It is comparable to the long, continuous melodies of Mozart and Schubert where more variety of intervals are used (Figures 7 and 8).

Figure 5: *Nocturne No. 1*, mm. 1-4

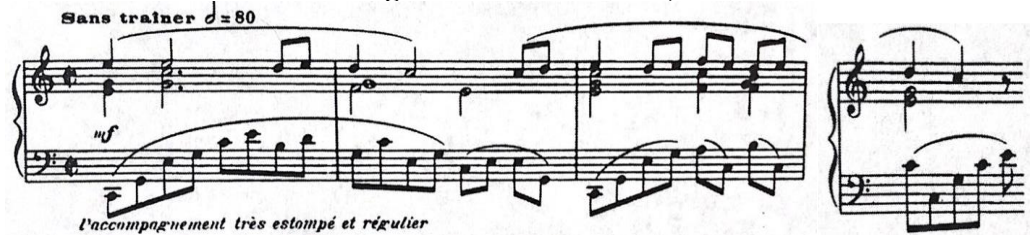


Figure 6: *I. Bransle de Bourgogne, Suite française*, mm. 1-4



Figure 7: 1st movement, *Mozart Piano Sonata in C Major, K. 545*, mm. 1-4



Figure 8: 1st movement, Schubert Piano Sonata in A Major, D. 664, mm. 1-3



While the melodies of Mozart and Schubert are elegant and lyrical, Poulenc's melodies are equally pleasing but somehow more innocent and light-hearted; perhaps, the limited intervallic range recalls nursery rhymes and suits smaller hands. This quality is closely related to Poulenc's use of scalar passages. The use of bright, fast, diatonic scales in the high register of the piano reflects the honest, juvenile nature of Poulenc.

His use of scales is clearly different from that of other composers. For instance, scales were mainly used for smoother transitions and modulations in works by Mozart and Beethoven, and for coloristic effect in the twentieth century compositions of Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky, and Prokofiev. While most composers used scales as a compositional tool to elaborate on main themes or coloristic effects, Poulenc treated scalar passages as a melody and used them throughout the piece. It appears that at least a movement or two of every solo piano works of Poulenc contain a melodic line that is based on or consists of scales. Some of these examples are shown in Figures 9-11.

Figure 9: *Toccata* from *Trois pieces*, mm. 1-3

Très animé (commencer un peu au dessous du mouv!)

$\text{♩} = 160$

sf *mf clair*

Red. *

Figure 10: 1st movement, *Suite en ut*, mm. 4-11

mf *p* *f*

Figure 11: III. *A cheval*, *Promenades*, mm. 1-7

Modéré ($\text{♩} = 86-92$)
bien chanté

mf *p* *f*

mf en dehors

Poulenc's obsession with seconds is also apparent in his use of chromatic scales. If the humorous and traditional side of Poulenc favored diatonic scales, the unique, eccentric side of Poulenc is reflected through the constant use of chromatic passages. Chromaticism was used by great melody-writers such as Mozart and Chopin¹³ and chromatic scales were often used as a way to deepen emotional expressions in the nineteenth century or to express abstract and intricate feelings in the twentieth century.

Poulenc's pervasive use of chromatic scales creates two distinguishing effects: 1) melancholy mood when used in a melodic context and 2) nonchalant and jocular mood when used in more rhythmic context. Frequently, Poulenc's slow melodies consist of a part of a chromatic scale or simply a combination of semitones, creating a melancholy and unsettled feeling. In his *Nocturne* No. 4 (Figure 12), the overall descending melodic line primarily consisting of semitones produces a ghostly, somewhat serious atmosphere that is quite the opposite of other fast movements.

Figure 12: No. 4 "Ghost Ball", *Nocturnes*, mm. 1-7



¹³ It is not surprising that the names of Mozart and Chopin appear here again as composers who might have affected the chromatic writings of Poulenc. As already mentioned in Chapter 1, Poulenc grew up listening to his mother playing the piano works of Mozart, Schubert, and Chopin.

Another melodically chromatic piece is the fifth improvisation from the fifteen *Improvisations*. The first two measures contain descending chromatic scale starting from C (mm. 1-2, Figure 13) and this short theme reappears a few more times throughout the piece. Following the chromatic scale, the arch-shaped diatonic melody (mm. 3-5, Figure 13) is introduced setting a contrasting mood. These two melodies alternate producing two different moods: mysterious and unsettled (chromatic) and hopeful and dreamy (diatonic).

Figure 13: No. 5, *Improvisations*, mm. 1-5

Modéré mais sans lenteur $\text{♩} = 120$

PIANO *p clair*

The musical score for Figure 13 is presented in three systems. The first system (measures 1-2) features a descending chromatic scale in the right hand, starting on C4 and ending on C3, with a simple accompaniment in the left hand. The second system (measures 3-4) introduces an arch-shaped diatonic melody in the right hand, starting on C4 and ending on C5, with a more complex accompaniment in the left hand. The third system (measures 5-6) continues the diatonic melody and accompaniment. The piece concludes with a 3/4 time signature.

Conversely, the cynical and humorous Poulenc is reflected in the use of chromaticism in more rhythmic textures. He was a mischievous person and his humor

certainly comes across in some of his music.¹⁴ Mostly in fast movements, Poulenc cleverly employs chromatic motives in a rhythmic manner to create humorous, clownish effect (Figures 14 and 15).

Figure 14: Prélude from *Soirées de Nazelles*, mm. 1-5



Figure 15: No. 2, *Trois novelettes*, mm. 7-12



Another common feature is the use of chromatic motives often accompanied by cheerful dance-like rhythms. This light-hearted, jocular character became a significant trait of Poulenc's style, especially apparent in works of his early and

¹⁴ When Poulenc and his childhood friend Jeanne-Marie Darré attended a large festive gathering at a fancy hotel in Paris, they decided to play a prank on the guests who were using the restrooms. They switched the “men” and “ladies” signs and then hid nearby to watch the expressions of surprise when men entered the ladies’ room and vice versa; in an email to Louis Martin on September 25, 2019.

middle periods such as the song cycles *Chansons gaillardes* and *Chansons villageoises*.

Using the simplest building blocks of traditional classical music, Poulenc was able to pen exceptionally beautiful and memorable melodies, cementing his title as a gifted melody-writer.

The “Wrong” Note

As mentioned earlier, one of the most notable traits of Poulenc’s music is the intentional use of “wrong” notes. Though mostly tonal, his music can be described as “pleasantly dissonant”. Poulenc’s use of dissonant harmonies is more sporadic and often limited to developing or modulating sections. However, many times, a non-harmonic note is deployed in a consonant chord, usually at the end of the piece. What appears to be a “wrong” note is intentional and this eccentric quality is closely related to his mischievous personality, as discussed in the previous section.

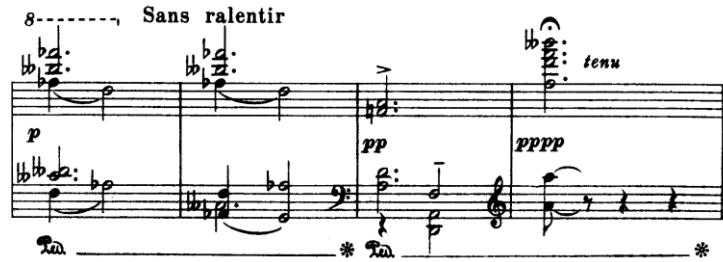
In the second *Nocturne*, the piece ends with a three-measure *très lent* (Figure 16) that is not related to the preceding musical material. This random and bizarre ending was perhaps not satisfactory for Poulenc so he decided to put a C-natural at the end of the piece which otherwise, is entirely in the key of A-major (m. 30, Figure 16). It is an opposite scheme from the Picardy cadence where, instead of the expected minor chord, the piece ends with a major chord by raising the third scale degree.

Figure 16: No. 2, *Nocturnes*, mm. 28-end



A similar example is found at the end of *Mélancolie*, a single movement piece written in 1940. This extremely lyrical and tonal work ends peacefully with slow-moving blocked chords that finally resolve to the home key of D-flat major (m. 108, Figure 17). However, in the last measure, a non-harmonic note (B double-flat) is

Figure 17: *Mélancolie*, mm. 106-end



added, producing a piercing dissonance with the A-flat octave in the left hand. Like in the second *Nocturne*, this surprising dissonance almost sounds like a “wrong” note that one would not normally expect to hear at the end of a mostly tonal piece. It is left unresolved, leaving an unsettling and questioning feeling to the listener. This musical fingerprint is frequently discovered in a number of Poulenc’s solo piano compositions (Figures 18 and 19).

Figure 18: *Novelette No. 3*, ending



Figure 19: *Variation VII, Thème varié*, ending



Self-borrowing

Self-borrowing was a common compositional method for many nineteenth century composers. The composers who favored this technique include nineteenth century Italian opera composers, Berlioz, and Berg. As the term itself explains, it is borrowing one's own musical material(s) and using it in other works. Self-borrowing was often used as a musical quotation symbolizing a particular character or a theme, but sometimes the composer's use of self-borrowing is less defined as in the case of Poulenc. As an "unrepentant self-borrower"¹⁵, Poulenc frequently reused his melodies, whether consciously or not, for a number of his works. The evidence is present not only in his solo piano pieces but across different genres of his compositional output.

Already in the first *Nocturne*, there are multiple examples of self-borrowing. The opening is strikingly similar to the melody in *Pièce brève sur le nom d'Albert Roussel* ("Brief piece on the name of Albert Roussel"), a very short single movement work written in 1929.¹⁶ Apart from the left hand accompanying figures, the harmonic progression and the contour of both melodies are noticeably similar as shown in Figures 20 and 21.

¹⁵ Carl B. Schmidt, *Entrancing Muse: A Documented Biography of Francis Poulenc*, Lives in Music Series, no. 3 (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2001), 169.

¹⁶ It is important to note that the piece was written in 1929 because it was also the year when the first *Nocturne* was written. Each of the eight *Nocturnes* was composed separately and later they were combined together as a set. Only the first *Nocturne* was written in 1929 and the rest were written from 1933 to 1938.

Figure 20: *Nocturne No. 1*, mm. 4-8



Figure 21: *Pièce brève sur le nom d'Albert Roussel*, mm. 14-17



Other examples are found in the endings of the first and the last *Nocturnes* and in the finale of *Dialogues des Carmélites*. The first *Nocturne* ends with somewhat sequential, slow-moving chords which have not appeared previously in the piece (Figure 22). This ending only reappears at the very end of the last *Nocturne* unifying the work as a set, not as eight individual pieces (Figure 23). This seemingly intentional reuse of the same material appears again, though very briefly, at the end of *Dialogues des Carmélites*, one of Poulenc's last and most successful works (Figure 24). This time, it occurs in a higher register and instead of ending in a succession of chords, it leads to an A diminished chord by chromatic descent.

Figure 22: Nocturne No. 1, ending

The musical score for Nocturne No. 1, ending, is presented in two systems. The first system consists of three staves: a treble clef staff, a bass clef staff, and a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The piece concludes with a final chord in the right hand, marked with a dynamic of *mf* and the instruction "précédente". A fermata is placed over the final chord. The second system shows the continuation of the piece, starting with a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The key signature changes to one flat (Bb) and the time signature is 4/4. The piece ends with a final chord in the right hand, marked with a dynamic of *pp*. A fermata is placed over the final chord. The word "Ped." is written below the first system, and an asterisk (*) is placed below the second system.

Figure 23: Nocturne No. 8, ending

The musical score for Nocturne No. 8, ending, is presented in two systems. The first system consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The piece concludes with a final chord in the right hand, marked with a dynamic of *pp*. A fermata is placed over the final chord. The second system shows the continuation of the piece, starting with a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The key signature changes to one flat (Bb) and the time signature is 4/4. The piece ends with a final chord in the right hand, marked with a dynamic of *ppp* and the instruction "len.". A fermata is placed over the final chord. The word "Noisy, Decembre 1938." is written below the second system.

Figure 24: *Dialogues des Carmélites*, finale

The image displays two systems of musical notation for the finale of *Dialogues des Carmélites*. The first system, starting at measure 72, features a vocal line for Soprano (Sf) and Contralto (C) with the lyrics "0 cie - mens...". The vocal line is marked *ppp très doux*. The piano accompaniment is marked *pp*. The second system, starting at measure 73, includes a parenthetical instruction: "(Reprenant sa marche à l'échafaud, elle sourit doucement à Blanche)". The vocal line continues with the lyrics "0 pi - a, 0". The piano accompaniment remains marked *pp*. Both systems are in 3/4 time and use a key signature of one flat (B-flat).

More examples of self-borrowing are spotted in *Badinage*, a short piece written in 1934. The opening strongly reminds of the opening of *Suite française*. Both works begin with an open major ninth interval in the left hand with a single G note repeated in the right hand. The melodic shapes of both openings are also quite similar. More strikingly, a beautifully harmonized antecedent-consequent phrase from *Badinage* (mm. 19-27, Figure 25) is used again, only rhythmically a little more elaborated, in the seventh *Nocturne* (mm. 4-8, Figure 26). The bass line and the harmonic structure of these two examples are mostly similar, except the end of the phrase where it modulates to the key of G instead of C in the *Nocturne*. The resemblance observed in these examples are notable because all of them were written around the same time (*Badinage* in 1934, *Suite française* and the seventh *Nocturne* in

Figure 25: *Badinage*, mm. 16-27

The musical score for Figure 25, *Badinage*, mm. 16-27, is presented in three systems. The first system (measures 16-17) features a complex texture with arpeggiated chords in the right hand and a steady eighth-note bass line in the left hand. The second system (measures 18-19) begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic and includes a crescendo hairpin. The third system (measures 20-21) starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The piece is in a minor key and 3/4 time.

Figure 26: *Nocturne no. 7*, mm. 3-8

The musical score for Figure 26, *Nocturne no. 7*, mm. 3-8, is presented in three systems. The first system (measures 3-4) features a flowing eighth-note melody in the right hand and a similar eighth-note bass line in the left hand. The second system (measures 5-6) begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The third system (measures 7-8) starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The piece is in a minor key and 3/4 time.

1935).¹⁷ Such passages of striking similarity between pieces are likely due to Poulenc's improvisational method of piano composition, either consciously or not.¹⁸

The recurrence of a brief motive (instead of a full-length melody) is also apparent in many of Poulenc's works. The opening dotted figure of "Hymne" from the *Trois pieces* (1928) recurs frequently in his later works; in particular, at the end of the first *Nocturne* (1929) and as the opening gesture of the *Gloria* (1959).¹⁹ Whether Poulenc was conscious of his self-borrowing or not, his unrepentant self-borrowing is indeed an endearing characteristic of his musical style.²⁰

¹⁷ Refer to footnote 16 on page 17.

¹⁸ Kirk A. Severtson, "Poulenc's Development as a Piano Composer: A Comparison of the Solo Piano Works and the *Mélodies*" (D.M.A. thesis, University of Cincinnati, 2005), 52.

¹⁹ Schmidt, 168-69.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Chapter 3: Solo Piano Compositions

Miniatures

Although miniature-style writing continued in the twentieth century by neoclassicists such as Schoenberg and Webern, hardly any composer devoted his or her entire solo piano opus to miniature form except Poulenc. It seems that Poulenc may have struggled to write other forms – it may be due to his unique style of writing short, fragmented melodies or his natural habit of improvisatory writing. It has been speculated that Poulenc was unable to produce large-scale works or simply did not care about the criticisms regarding the lengths of his pieces.²¹

That said, Poulenc's compositional style did grow from small-scale to larger scale. Before 1930, Poulenc composed mainly petite, miniature solo piano works and songs. During his middle period (1930-50), he began to explore chamber music in addition to producing somewhat larger scale piano works. In his later life after 1950, Poulenc's music became noticeably more profound and spiritual, during which the major large-scale orchestral/choral works and operas were composed.

Despite these gradual changes, all of Poulenc's published solo piano compositions are either a set of short pieces in the form of a suite or single movement pieces that are mostly no longer than five minutes (see Figure 27 on page 24-25 for the complete list of solo piano compositions by Poulenc). Poulenc was not a

²¹ Alfred Cortot, though he appreciated Poulenc's *Mouvements perpétuels*, encouraged him to write on a larger scale and with some aim beyond tickling the ear; Roger Nichols, in an e-mail to the author on September 20, 2019.

Figure 27, List of Solo Piano Compositions by Poulenc²²

Year	Title	Timing of Individual Movement	Total Timing
1917	Trois pastorales	I. 1'03'' II. 3'33'' III. 2'41''	7'17''
1918-1928	Trois pièces	I. 3'29'' II. 5'26''* III. 2'14''	11'09''
1918	Trois Mouvements perpétuels	I. 1'24'' II. 1'33'' III. 2'53''	5'50''
1919	Valse en ut		2'08''
1920	Suite en ut	I. 2'14'' II. 2'24'' III. 1'41''	6'19''
1920-1921	Cinq Impromptus	I. 1'03'' II. 1'07'' III. 2'04'' IV. 1'19'' V. 2'39''	8'12''
1921	Promenades	I. 2'07'' VI. 1'27'' II. 1'01'' VII. 2'11'' III. 1'07'' VIII. 0'46'' IV. 1'18'' IX. 1'23'' V. 2'38'' X. 2'14''	16'12''
1922-1925	Napoli	I. 1'48'' II. 3'26'' III. 6'02''*	11'16''
1927	Pastourelle		2'33''
1927-1959	Trois novelettes	I. 3'10'' II. 1'59'' III. 2'50''	7'59''
1929-1938	Huit Nocturnes	I. 3'55'' V. 1'22'' II. 1'25'' VI. 4'35'' III. 3'41'' VII. 2'10'' IV. 1'43'' VIII. 2'32''	18'23''
1929	Pièce brève sur le nom d'Albert Roussel		2'03''

²² This table was made based on the performance times of Paul Crossley's "Poulenc: The Complete Music for Solo Piano" recorded in 1987.

1930-1936	Les Soirées de Nazelles	I. 3'34'' VII. 1'15'' II. 1'18'' VIII. 2'56'' III. 3'17'' IX. 1'15'' IV. 1'10'' X. 1'55'' V. 2'12'' XI. 4'24'' VI. 2'47''	24'03''
1932	Valse-improvisation sur le nom de Bach		1'33''
1932-1959	Quinze Improvisations	I. 1'34'' IX. 1'14'' II. 2'02'' X. 1'51'' III. 1'32'' XI. 1'02'' IV. 1'39'' XII. 2'20'' V. 2'01'' XIII. 3'28'' VI. 1'37'' XIV. 1'55'' VII. 2'53'' XV. 4'02'' VIII. 1'31''	30'41''
1933	Villageoises	I. 0'51'' IV. 0'34'' II. 0'49'' V. 0'50'' III. 0'49'' VI. 1'03''	4'56''
1933	Trois Feuilletts d'album	I. 1'18'' II. 1'45'' III. 0'59''	4'02''
1934	Presto en si bémol		1'44''
1934	Humoresque		2'01''
1934	Badinage		1'58''
1934, 1943	Trois intermezzi	I. 1'53'' II. 4'24'' III. 5'45''*	12'02''
1935	Suite française	I. 1'22'' V. 2'35'' II. 2'56'' VI. 1'49'' III. 0'56'' VII. 1'33'' IV. 2'03''	13'14''
1937	Bourrée, au pavillon d'Auvergne		1'34''
1939	Française (d'après Claude Gervaise)		1'58''
1940	Mélancolie		6'34''*
1951	Thème varié	I. 1'42'' VII. 0'34'' II. 0'18'' VIII. 2'10'' III. 1'02'' IX. 0'33'' IV. 1'49'' X. 0'28'' V. 0'30'' XI. 0'43'' VI. 1'30'' XII. 2'38''	13'57''

* Notice that only four individual movements among Poulenc's entire solo piano compositions are a little over five minutes.

meticulous composer who edited painstakingly; rather, he was an intuitive composer who was receptive to critique from other sources. Since Poulenc was a spontaneous and flexible writer, it is understandable why most of his solo piano pieces are small-scale and less cohesive; they tend to be more improvisatory and idea-oriented rather than thoroughly planned out.

Poulenc produced most of his major piano compositions from 1930-50 which can be considered his middle period. Especially from 1932 to 1934, Poulenc was under great pressure to compose short piano pieces according to Schmidt:

The opening months of 1931 witnessed Poulenc's embracing of a genre in which he had worked only sporadically...Poulenc also added significantly to his piano works in 1932 and 1934. Some were the result of pressure from his publisher Jacques Lerolle to provide short works for a receptive public.²³

As a result of his self-conscious nature and external pressure, all of Poulenc's solo piano pieces are in miniature form. Even *Thème varié*, Poulenc's last and only relatively "large-scale" piano composition, is only slightly little longer than eleven minutes with each movement lasting about a minute or less.

Despite their brevity, Poulenc's solo piano compositions reflect his infinite talent of writing small-scale works. From simple works for children like *Villageoises* to the virtuosic *Presto en si bémol*, his solo piano works vary in their technical difficulty and musical style. The entire body of Poulenc's piano music also explores the balance between tradition and experimentation. The use of traditional terms such as "suite", "intermezzo", and "impromptu" is contrasted to the descriptive, creative titles of *Promenades* and *Les Soirées de Nazelles*. The musical content of

²³ Schmidt, 182.

each composition reflects an amalgamation of different periods and of different styles – from Satie-like simplicity to Ravel-like complexity.

Poulenc gradually formed a style of his own by embracing radical, contemporary ideas while not abandoning conventional techniques. Open-minded in accepting the influences of others in his music, Poulenc was a master of writing miniatures that were not only influenced by professional artists of the early twentieth century but also unmistakably his own.²⁴

Extra-musical and Musical Influences

Heavily influenced by his mother's side, Poulenc grew up appreciating the arts. With the help of his teacher and mentor Ricardo Viñes, Poulenc was introduced to some active French poets and composers of the time such as Cocteau, Meyer, Satie, and Milhaud who later became great friends and inspiration to him. Poulenc was especially interested in and inspired by the poems of Cocteau, Radiguet, Jacob, Apollinaire, and Éluard, and wrote a large number of songs based on them. He is also known to have been an admirer of paintings by Picasso, Matisse and Vuillard. In his diary and interviews, Poulenc frequently paid tribute to his muses:

It is with Apollinaire that I think I have found my true melodic style... 'Hier'. While writing it I imagined an interior painted by Vuillard.²⁵

People will never know how much I owe to Éluard, how much I owe to Bernac. It is due to them that lyricism has entered my vocal works.²⁶

²⁴ Schmidt, 356.

²⁵ Poulenc, *Diary of My Songs*, 27.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 33-35.

Quite a bit later, I wrote the *Cinq Poèmes de Ronsard*, for which Picasso designed me a cover. No question, it's the best thing about the work.²⁷

The musical translation of a poem must be an act of love, never a marriage of reason. I've set Apollinaire and Max Jacob to music because I love their poetry. That's all there is to it. I've never been able to do without poetry; at the age of ten, I was ecstatically reciting Mallarmé's 'Apparition' with the secret hope of one day becoming... a great tragic actor.²⁸

Poulenc's love for arts had a tremendous impact on his musical works, not only songs but every genre.

Though the influence of poems and paintings is most clearly visible in his vocal works, some of Poulenc's piano pieces also reflect this artistic side of him. The programmatic and abstract titles of the *Nocturnes* (e.g. "Ghost Ball", "The Bells of Mechelen") and *Les Soirées de Nazelles* (e.g. "Wear His Heart on His Sleeve", "The Continuation in the Ideas") are closely related to abstract ideas and artworks of the twentieth century. It is presumably why a lot of Poulenc's successful works include voice, the most emotional instrument that can express the lyricism and abstraction of arts most effectively. Emphasizing the importance of poetry and imagination, Poulenc claimed in his diary that "the colour will come of itself if you think carefully of the words you are saying".²⁹

Just as he was significantly affected by literature and visual arts, Poulenc also admitted that he was a great admirer of a number of composers of his time. He frequently mentioned the names of Debussy, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, and Satie as

²⁷ Poulenc, *Articles and Interviews*, 211.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 212.

²⁹ Poulenc, *Diary of My Songs*, 27.

composers who inspired him the most. In his interviews with Claude Rostand Poulenc remarked:

It was unquestionably Debussy who awoke me to music, but it was Stravinsky who then served as my guide, as a father-figure...I'm also enormously indebted to Satie, but rather more aesthetically than musically.³⁰

When Rostand asked Poulenc about his six favorite twentieth century composers, he replied:

First there's Debussy, of course, then Stravinsky, and Satie, then the admirable Falla...Ravel and Bartók...But I'm sad to leave out my dear Prokofiev!³¹

Often times, Poulenc directly referred a particular composer as a motivation for a work, or for even just a single phrase. Although Poulenc was receptive of other composers and their influences on him, he also made sure that he was not a “mimic” of their music:

In any case the reaction of Les Six was directed against Debussyism and not against Debussy. At 20, one always has to turn one's back, for a time, on one's idols so as not to get covered in ivy.³²

Truly, Poulenc's original melodies and harmonic language are not inherited from others; he was not a traditionally trained musician nor was he a composer whose musical style clearly falls into one of the categories of the “-isms” of the twentieth century.³³ Poulenc's personal style of composition is probably the result of the diverse range of influences, both musical and social, from his mother to his private

³⁰ Poulenc, *Articles and Interviews*, 273-74.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 274.

³² *Ibid.*, 190.

³³ Impressionism, serialism, neoclassicism, modernism, etc.

teacher Viñes and many contemporary composers whom he encountered. In fact, one can hardly point out a direct similarity between the musical style of Poulenc and that of another composer. That is to say, there are notable similarities in the style of music and writing between composers such as Mozart and Haydn, Chopin and Scriabin, Debussy and Ravel, and Schoenberg and Webern, while Poulenc's music frequently draws from many varied sources.

A significant example of this unique feature of Poulenc's musical style is well represented in *Les soirées de Nazelles*, a set of eleven pieces in the form of theme and variations. In this improvisatory work, each movement depicts a portrait of a different friend of Poulenc who often gathered at his home in Noizay. Not surprisingly, the movements reflect diverse styles and the techniques of multiple composers are exhibited throughout the work (Figures 28-33). This unique composition is unfortunately lesser known to contemporary pianists in spite of its colorful musical elements and pianistic aesthetics.

Figure 28: Variation II, in the style of Scriabin

The image displays a musical score for Variation II, in the style of Scriabin, from the work *Les soirées de Nazelles*. The score is written for piano and consists of two systems of music. The first system features a treble and bass clef with a key signature of two flats. It includes dynamic markings such as *rubato*, *p*, and *mf*, and performance instructions like *m.g. en dehors* and *sc.*. The second system continues the piece with a *pp* dynamic and *très rubato* instruction, marked with several asterisks and *sc.* symbols. The notation includes complex chords, arpeggios, and melodic lines characteristic of Scriabin's style.

Figure 29: Variation IV, in the style of Debussy

Figure 30: Variation V, hint of De Falla

Figure 31: Variation VI, in the style of Prokofiev

Figure 32: Cadence, in the style of Couperin



Figure 33: Finale, in the style of Schumann



In the second variation, the melancholy and highly chromatic melodies accompanied by transparent right hand chords in high register strongly remind of Scriabin. The use of three clefs, largely spaced-out chords between hands, and the use of parallel chords in the fourth variation are trademarks of the writing style of Debussy. The sudden appearance of tango rhythm after a waltz-like passage in the fifth variation seems to be a purposeful one, probably in homage to De Falla who was one of the highly respected composers by Poulenc.³⁴

³⁴ This rhythm briefly reappears in the Finale. Poulenc also wrote his third *Novelette* based on a theme of De Falla.

The distinctive compositional method of Prokofiev is also easily spotted in many of Poulenc's pieces – mostly in the fast, toccata-like movements, Poulenc uses dissonant, detached scalar passages in order to depict light and sarcastic mood. The sixth and eighth variations of *Les soirées* sound very much like the toccatas and miniatures by Prokofiev.

By contrast, the Cadence which appears twice in this work (at the end of prelude and before finale) undoubtedly mimics the style of Baroque music, especially that of Couperin – highly ornamented chords, double-dotted notes, and long, improvisatory passages.

The influence of some of Poulenc's beloved composers such as Chopin, Ravel and Schumann is also found in this set. The waltz-like passages in the prelude resemble those of Chopin waltzes while the use of extended chords and harmonies is reminiscent of Ravel. The diatonic, melodic sixteenth notes in the right hand accompanied by jumping chords (usually in large leaps) in the left hand in the last movement reflect the writing style of Schumann.

More examples of these influences are found in other solo piano works of Poulenc. One can hear a reminiscence of Chopin etude Op. 10 No. 10 in *Promenade* No. 2 and the main theme from Prokofiev's *Suggestion diabolique* is briefly referenced in *Humoresque*. The simplicity and eccentricity of Satie, dry articulation and dissonance of Prokofiev and Stravinsky, simple and beautiful melodies of Mozart and Chopin, exotic harmonies and modulations of Debussy and Ravel, complex harmonies and virtuosity of Rachmaninoff and Scriabin are all present in many of Poulenc's piano pieces. That said, Poulenc, with his masterful skill in synthesizing

different styles, created his own musical style that is distinguishable from others. He does not simply mimic or borrow others' compositional methods; there is always a unique and original musical signature – the naughty, innocent, and melancholy – in every piece of his opus.

Early Piano Compositions

The most well-known works of Poulenc include the songs, *Trois mouvements perpétuels*, the *Gloria*, and most certainly *Dialogues des Carmélites*. Even though Poulenc felt the most comfortable writing for the piano, his successful works are mainly vocal. Poulenc seemed to be well aware of this:

What's strange is that when the piano is accompanying singers, then I innovate. My piano writing is also quite different with orchestra or in chamber music. It's only the solo piano that eludes me. There I'm the victim of pretence.³⁵

Interestingly, the enormous amount of time and effort Poulenc invested in his large-scale works such as *Gloria* and *Dialogues* garnered much success while his smaller works, written with much more ease, did not enjoy as much critical attention.

While most of his vocal works continue to be acclaimed and performed today, only a few solo piano works have gained popularity. Although Poulenc wrote a significant number of solo piano pieces before 1935, only *Trois mouvements perpétuels*, one of the earliest works, became known to most pianists today. One of the first published works by a young, new French composer, *Trois mouvements perpétuels* shocked many composers and music-lovers of the early twentieth century.

³⁵ Poulenc, *Articles and Interviews*, 193.

Written in a most simplistic and carefree style which differed greatly from “impressionistic” music, Poulenc’s *Trois mouvements perpétuels* was unique and universally appealing. Poulenc himself was also very fond of the work and urged his teacher Viñes to premiere it:

You know I spoke to you the other evening at Adrienne Monnier’s about some simple little *Mouvements perpétuels* for piano that I’d written, easy enough for a child to play. Well, this is a request for you to give the first performance of them...In any event, you must reply *as quickly as possible*, either in the affirmative or in the negative...but it will be yes, won’t it?³⁶

A brief comparison between Poulenc's two early works for piano, *Trois mouvements perpétuels* and *Suite en ut*, aids in further defining Poulenc's characteristic style.

Before 1921, Poulenc was mostly self-taught and his solo piano pieces written during that time are extremely simple and juvenile in style. Not surprisingly, the two major works of this time, *Trois mouvements perpétuels* (1919) and *Suite en ut* (1920), exhibit a close resemblance in their musical content and formal structure.

Both works consist of three short movements with the sonata-style fast-slow-fast tempi: both first movements are based on constantly moving scalar passages flavored with accidentals and dissonances (compare Figures 34 and 35).

The second movements, due to extremely fragmented and scalar phrases, are hardly melodic and the ranges of notes are limited to the middle register of piano (compare Figures 36 and 37).

³⁶ Francis Poulenc, 'Echo and source'; *Selected Correspondence 1915-1963*, trans. and ed. Sidney Buckland (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1991), 33.

Figure 34: *Trois mouvements perpétuels*, 1st mouvement, mm. 4-9

Musical score for measures 4-9 of the first movement of *Trois mouvements perpétuels*. The score is in 4/4 time and consists of two systems. The first system (measures 4-5) features a treble clef with a melodic line and a bass clef with a rhythmic accompaniment. The dynamic marking *mf* and the instruction *en dehors* are present. The second system (measures 6-9) continues the melodic and rhythmic patterns, with a dynamic marking of *p* in measure 7.

Figure 35: *Suite en ut*, 1st mouvement, mm. 4-11

Musical score for measures 4-11 of the first movement of *Suite en ut*. The score is in 4/4 time and consists of two systems. The first system (measures 4-5) features a treble clef with a melodic line and a bass clef with a rhythmic accompaniment. The dynamic marking *mf* is present. The second system (measures 6-11) continues the melodic and rhythmic patterns, with dynamic markings of *p* and *mf* in measures 7 and 10, respectively.

Figure 36: *Trois mouvements perpétuels*, 2nd mouvement, mm. 1-5

Musical score for measures 1-5 of the second movement of *Trois mouvements perpétuels*. The score is in 4/4 time and consists of two systems. The first system (measures 1-2) features a treble clef with a melodic line and a bass clef with a rhythmic accompaniment. The tempo marking *Très modéré* (♩ = 92) and the dynamic marking *indifférent p* are present. The second system (measures 3-5) continues the melodic and rhythmic patterns, with dynamic markings of *mf* and *p* in measures 3 and 5, respectively.

Figure 37: *Suite en ut*, 2nd movement, mm. 1-5

Andante ♩ = 88 - 92
mp assez uniforme

mf *f*

The third movements consist of a collage of small ideas and motives exhibiting lively and humorous character – the quintessential Poulenc (compare Figures 38 and 39). Possibly due to the close resemblance to *Trois mouvements perpétuels*, *Suite en ut* did not gain as much popularity.

Figure 38: Short motives in the 3rd movement of *Trois mouvements perpétuels*

Motive 1

Alerte (♩ = 138)
f

Motive 2

ff sans dureté-très lié

Motive 3

Le chant en dehors *mf*

Motive 4

Un peu moins vite
 gris *pp*
 les deux pédales

Figure 39: Short motives in the 3rd movement of *Suite en ut*

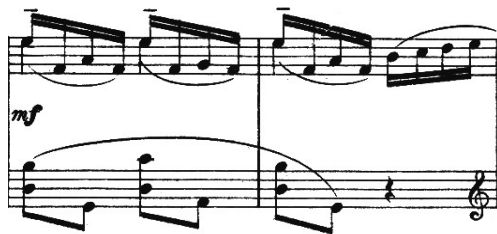
Motive 1



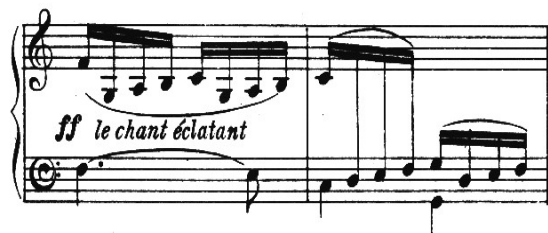
Motive 2



Motive 3



Motive 4



The frequent use of self-borrowed material and the improvisatory style of writing led to the frequent appearance of similar phrases/passages in the early piano works. The scalar passage moving up and down in sixteenth notes in an arch shape is one of the trademarks found in these light-hearted pieces as well as many of his other smaller pieces (Figures 40-42).

Figure 40: *Trois mouvements perpétuels*, 3rd movement, mm. 1-2



Figure 41: *Suite française*, VII. Carillon, mm. 84-95



Figure 42: *Humoresque*, mm. 1-4



Development of Stylistic Traits

1921 was an especially important year for Poulenc musically; he began professional training with Charles Koechlin from whom he learned counterpoint technique and orchestral writing, and he met Sergei Diaghilev who commissioned *Les Biches*, one of the most successful ballet works of Poulenc. It was also the year Poulenc began to develop and experiment with writing for the piano using extreme dissonances and chromaticism. This is especially notable in the early works such as *Promenades* and *Impromptus*, unusually complex works that were written only two years after the *Trois mouvements perpétuels*.

From then on, Poulenc began to write larger-scale (chamber and orchestral) works though after 1921, Poulenc occasionally came back to piano writing until 1932. The piano works produced during this period already reflect musical and compositional maturity. Rather than being solely simplistic (*Suite en ut* and *Trois mouvements perpétuels*) or experimental (*Promenades* and *Impromptus*), works such as *Napoli* (1925) and the first *Nocturne* (1929) became larger in texture and harmonically more sophisticated. It was also the period when Poulenc's virtuosic writing started to mature, proving the composer knew and understood the instrument extremely well (Figure 43).

Figure 43: Poulenc's virtuosic writing, 3rd movement of *Napoli*



The years between 1932 and 1934 were the most crucial ones for Poulenc. He not only wrote the most number of piano pieces during this period but the works produced also convey a greater range of individual style. After the success of *Les Biches* and the songs, Poulenc's already active social life flourished and brought him

more commissions than ever. A large number of individual pieces, most of which became a part of a set, were written during this time: five *Nocturnes*, first ten *Improvisations*, and the majority of *Les soirées de Nazelles*, as well as small single movements. In addition to the smaller works, Poulenc wrote the Concerto for Two Pianos in 1932, one of his most well-known works.

Due to his busy schedule, Poulenc wrote most of the piano pieces separately and later combined them as a set. The suites composed during this period are notably less cohesive than the ones written during the other periods. While the earlier suites either resemble mini-sonata movements (*Suite en ut* and *Trois mouvements perpétuels*) or have a clear theme that unifies the individual movements as a whole (*Promenades* and *Napoli*), the suites composed after 1925 somehow lost the meaning of unification with each movement being too independent and individual.

The eight *Nocturnes* were written over a span of nine years (1929-1938) and each *Nocturne* was composed separately at a different time and place. Despite its title, Poulenc's *Nocturnes* are differentiated from those of Chopin and Fauré in their musical style. While the nocturnes of Chopin and Fauré are distinguished from other genres by their slow, romantic melodies and clear ternary form, Poulenc's *Nocturnes* are descriptive and imaginary, more like night-scenes than night-music. Though Poulenc tried to make them a set by designating the last *Nocturne* "pour servir de Coda au Cycle (to serve as a coda of the cycle)", there are no visible relationships between the eight *Nocturnes*. Even Poulenc himself never played the entire set (he

occasionally played and recorded a selection from the set) and mentioned that he only liked certain *Nocturnes*.³⁷

Another valuable set of pieces written during the middle period is *Les soirées de Nazelles*, a suite in the form of theme and variations. It is the largest solo piano work of Poulenc excluding the fifteen *Improvisations*, which is a collection of improvisations (rather than a multi-movement “work”) written throughout the second half of Poulenc’s musical life. *Les soirées de Nazelles* was written over a span of six years (1930-36) and is in the traditional theme and variations form: prelude – eight variations – cadence – finale. This suite is a perfect mixture of conventional and unconventional traits of Poulenc – the use of traditional formal structure and musical elements in contrast to the abstract titles and the idiosyncratic “Poulenc-style” endings. It is also the single work with the most variety of styles³⁸ and one of the few virtuosic works Poulenc wrote for solo piano. Despite the mastery of synthesizing the composer’s own and others’ musical styles and of effective and idiomatic writing for the instrument, *Les soirées de Nazelles* is Poulenc’s one of the most underrated piano works. Poulenc was not satisfied with this suite and harshly criticized some of his own works including *Les soirées*:

I tolerate the *Mouvements perpétuels*, my old *Suite in C* and the *Trois pièces* (originally pastorales)...I condemn beyond redemption *Napoli* and the *Soirées de Nazelles*. As for the rest, they don’t interest me.³⁹

³⁷ Poulenc, *Articles and Interviews*, 194.

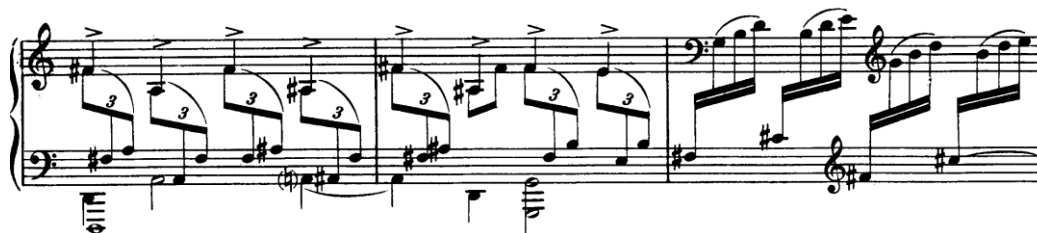
³⁸ As discussed previously under the title “Extra-musical and Musical influences” in the same chapter.

³⁹ Poulenc, *Articles and Interviews*, 194.

The fifteen *Improvisations* (1932-1959) are a significant collection of pieces in that they were composed during second half of Poulenc's life. In terms of time, the *Improvisations* took the longest to be published as a set among all the other works of Poulenc. Only the first ten were composed before 1934 and they exhibit quintessential Poulenc-style – the linear writing, flashy scalar passages, extremely thin texture, and humorous and light-hearted atmosphere. As a great improviser, Poulenc seemed to have written these pieces quite easily and naturally. The last five *Improvisations*, however, were written after 1940, during the “solemn” period of Poulenc where he turned to religion after the death of his friend Pierre-Octave Ferroud in 1936. It led to the notable change in moods between the early and the late *Improvisations*: the later *Improvisations* are no more flashy and light-hearted, but rather calm and melancholy. The linear writing became much more chordal, presumably due to his dedication to choral and vocal writing during the 1940s. Comparisons between the early and the late *Improvisations* are shown below (Figures 44 and 45).

Figure 44: Linear writing of early *Improvisations*

Improvisation No. 1, mm. 11-13



Improvisation No. 5, mm. 2-3

Musical score for Improvisation No. 5, measures 2-3. The score is written for piano in a vertical, choral-style format. It features two staves: a treble clef staff on top and a bass clef staff on the bottom. The music is characterized by dense, overlapping textures with many beamed notes and complex rhythmic patterns. The key signature has one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The piece concludes with a double bar line.

Improvisation No. 7, mm. 3-4

Musical score for Improvisation No. 7, measures 3-4. The score is written for piano in a vertical, choral-style format. It features two staves: a treble clef staff on top and a bass clef staff on the bottom. The music is characterized by dense, overlapping textures with many beamed notes and complex rhythmic patterns. The key signature has one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The piece concludes with a double bar line.

Figure 45: Vertical (choral-style) writing of late *Improvisations*

Improvisation No. 11, mm. 3-5

Musical score for Improvisation No. 11, measures 3-5. The score is written for piano in a vertical, choral-style format. It features two staves: a treble clef staff on top and a bass clef staff on the bottom. The music is characterized by dense, overlapping textures with many beamed notes and complex rhythmic patterns. The key signature has two flats (Bb, Eb), and the time signature is 4/4. The piece concludes with a double bar line. Dynamic markings include *sf* (sforzando) in the bass staff.

Improvisation No. 14, mm. 4-7

Musical score for Improvisation No. 14, measures 4-7. The score is written for piano in a vertical, choral-style format. It features two staves: a treble clef staff on top and a bass clef staff on the bottom. The music is characterized by dense, overlapping textures with many beamed notes and complex rhythmic patterns. The key signature has three flats (Bb, Eb, Ab), and the time signature is 4/4. The piece concludes with a double bar line. Dynamic markings include *m.g.* (mezzo-giochiato) in the bass staff and *mf* (mezzo-forte) in the treble staff.

Apart from the relatively large suites, Poulenc also wrote a number of short, single-movement pieces between 1932 and 1934. *Valse-improvisation sur le nom de Bach* (1932) was the second piece (after *Pièce brève sur le nom d'Albert Roussel*) that was written based on musical cryptogram. Poulenc dedicated this bold, Russian-style waltz to Vladimir Horowitz, one of the pianists whom he admired the most. In 1933, Poulenc only wrote two small suites for solo piano *Villageoises* and *Trois Feuilletts d'album*, extremely simple and naïve pieces possibly written for children and amateur pianists.⁴⁰ Three miniatures – *Presto*, *Humoresque*, and *Badinage* – were composed in the year of 1934 along with the first two *Intermezzi*. *Presto*, another dedication to Horowitz, is Poulenc's most technically challenging piece which requires formidable finger technique. Its extremely fast tempo and etude-like writing are reminiscent of Chopin etude Op. 10 No. 4. The other two miniatures, *Humoresque* and *Badinage*, are delightful and light-hearted pieces with some self-borrowed materials. These miniatures are more or less neglected works of Poulenc despite of their great value as concert encore pieces.

After 1934, Poulenc took a break from writing for piano and explored choral and incidental music. He continued to write songs and occasionally composed a few works for string instruments such as violin sonata and cello sonata, though it only reaffirmed his belief that he could not write for string instruments. Until 1950, Poulenc composed the piano transcription of his orchestral work *Suite française* (1935), two extremely short pieces *Bourrée, au pavillon d'Auvergne* (1937) and

⁴⁰ Possibly influenced by Debussy.

Française (1939), and the indubitably underrated masterpiece *Mélancolie* (1940). Considering that the *Suite française* is a transcription and *Française* is almost like an alternative of “Bransle de Champagne” of *Suite française* (the comparison between these two works are shown in Figure 46 below), the only “major” solo piano works produced between 1934 and 1950 were *Bourrée* and *Mélancolie*. Poulenc also wrote a few more *Improvisations* and the last *Intermezzo* during this period although he was much more dedicated to writing other genres.

Figure 46: Comparison between *Suite française* and *Française*

V. Bransle de Champagne, *Suite française*, mm. 1-4

Modéré, mais sans lenteur (*)
mystérieux

Française, mm. 1-3

Modéré

Late Years

The late period of Poulenc’s life is the most significant because his greatest works were published after 1950 though none of these were piano compositions. Poulenc proved himself as one of the greatest choral composers of the twentieth century after the success of *Stabat Mater* (1950) and *Gloria* (1959). The remarkable

Dialogues des Carmélites (1956) was also written during his late years and the woodwind sonatas (flute, clarinet, and oboe) became standard repertoire. The solo piano compositions written during this period are *Thème varié* (1951), the last *Novelette* (1958), and the last three *Improvisations* (1958-59). The utmost melancholy Poulenc is reflected in the last *Novelette* and the thirteenth *Improvisation* – considerably different style comparing to the earlier pieces of the sets.

Thème varié, the last complete work Poulenc wrote for solo piano, is considered as the most mature piano composition of Poulenc. It consists of a theme and eleven short variations based on moods. The calm and beautiful theme in a choral setting is evocative of the third movement theme of Beethoven's piano sonata in E major, Op. 109. This peaceful theme is briefly interrupted by the usual Poulenc-style harmonic idiom before the beginning motive returns at the end. Each variation depicts a specific mood such as "joyous", "pastoral", and "sarcastic", and each mood is expressed with a different style of writing. All of Poulenc's musical characteristics are explored in this single work – the witty, the light-hearted, the solemn, the flashy, the melancholy, and the eccentric. Although the last variation (finale) is a bit disoriented, *Thème varié* is another valuable solo piano work that is absolutely unique in its abridged formal structure, original musical contents, and sophisticated pianistic elements.

Mostly commissioned and written before 1935, some of the featured characteristics of Poulenc's solo piano compositions include cellular formal structure, short phrases and collage of fragmented melodies, and the extreme contrast between simplistic and complex writing. Unfortunately, with the growing popularity of his

songs and the movement toward more radical, virtuosic piano pieces of Debussy and Ravel, Poulenc's solo piano pieces might have been less recognized despite of their experimental and original promise. Other possible factors of the declined popularity of Poulenc's piano pieces include the repetition of similar musical substances⁴¹ and the lack of variety in formal structure.⁴²

⁴¹ This is probably related to Poulenc's tendency of "recycling" similar melodies and harmonies discussed in chapter 2.

⁴² Many of Poulenc's solo piano pieces are either in short ternary form or rondo form. A number of them are also considered to be in quasi-improvisatory form.

Chapter 4: Analysis and Performance Practice

Suite en ut

Suite en ut (Suite in C) is one of the earliest piano works of Poulenc, written in 1920. Despite its close resemblance to *Trois mouvements perpétuels* – similar length, formal structure, and musical materials – *Suite en ut* somehow did not receive equal attention. Consisting of three movements (Presto, Andante, and Vif), each movement is closest to the formal structure of the Classical sonata. It was one of the three works premiered by Poulenc’s beloved teacher Ricardo Viñes.

The first movement is in a simple ABA ternary form (or a vague sonata-allegro form might be applicable). It is largely based on C major scales and the B section begins with a modulation to C minor. The recapitulation after the B section is an exact repeat of the A material with extension of two measures in the coda. Its purely scalar and clear melodies are representative of anti-impressionism, which appear frequently throughout Poulenc’s oeuvre. This movement is all about the pure, juvenile Poulenc, though never to the point of sounding childish. Nevertheless, elements of Poulenc’s unique style were already seeded in this early opus: extraordinary harmonic changes, simple, authentic melodies, and the use of “sans ralentir”.

Though Poulenc did not receive any conservatoire-level musical education at the time he wrote *Suite en ut*, most of his works are structured and fundamentally traditional. Yet, Poulenc’s fascination with modern music continuously grew as he encountered a number of radical composers of the early twentieth century such as

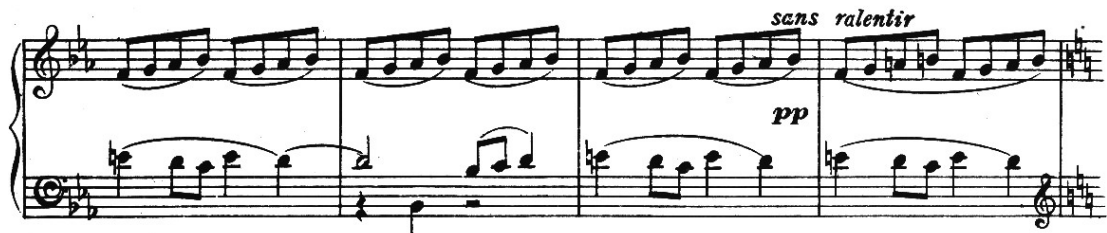
Debussy and Stravinsky, whom he later remarked were his role-models. The continuous support of Satie and Viñes also contributed to the development of Poulenc's modernism. An example of this "deviation from the norms" is found in the first movement of *Suite en ut*, where the brief and abrupt shift from dominant harmonies to mediant (Figure 47) adds a refreshing surprise to the movement, avoiding banality. Instead of the expected E octave in measure 27 (Figure 47), Poulenc created a dissonance by putting an E-sharp.

Figure 47: 1st movement, *Suite en ut*, mm. 25-28



Another similar example of unexpected dissonance is found at the end of the B section. A transitional passage suddenly interrupts the B section, modulating back to the C major recapitulation (Figure 48). Here, Poulenc put an E-natural creating a

Figure 48: 1st movement, *Suite en ut*, mm. 64-67



pungent dissonance with right hand F. The repeated E in the left hand, in coordination with the B-flat in the bass, becomes a strong leading tone to the key of F major, which contradicts with the C minor in the right hand. However, Poulenc cleverly manipulated the harmonies to quickly modulate back to the home key by canceling

the flats in the right hand (m. 67, Figure 48). This brief but interesting transition is an early example of Poulenc's use of polymodality.⁴³

Poulenc's charming melodies already exist in his early works. The call-and-response style short lyrical passage (Figure 49) brings a life to the simple, somewhat mechanical first movement. Poulenc seemed to be especially particular in this three-measure melodic passage marked "avec charme", "m.g. en dehors", and "souple" respectively. This passage has a musical significance and must be played in the most charming and lyrical way possible, for it is the only time Poulenc marked "souple (flexible)" throughout the work. As a composer who despised excessive rubato and overly romantic writing, such indications by Poulenc gain meaning to learned performers.

Figure 49: 1st movement, *Suite en ut*, mm. 37-39



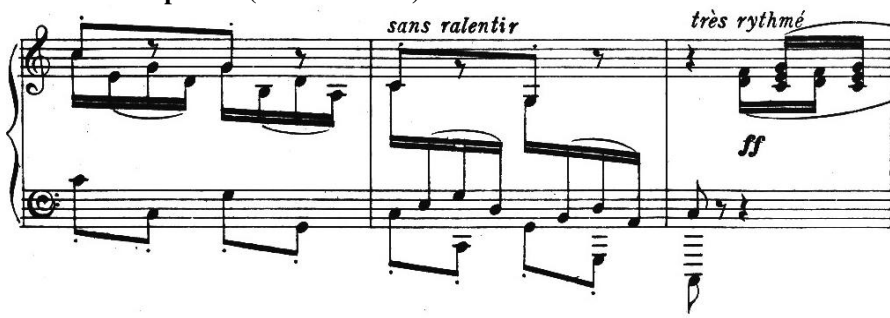
Nonetheless, the most important feature to mention about Poulenc's early piano compositions is the frequent marks of "sans ralentir (without slowing down)". Though Poulenc was not overly meticulous about his indications on the score, "sans ralentir" constantly appears throughout his compositions regardless of genres.

⁴³ A noticeably similar example of polymodality is discovered in the first movement of *Trois mouvements Perpétuels*, where left hand plays a repeated pattern throughout the movement while right hand suddenly shifts to an unrelated key. *Trois mouvements perpétuels*, I, mm. 14-18.

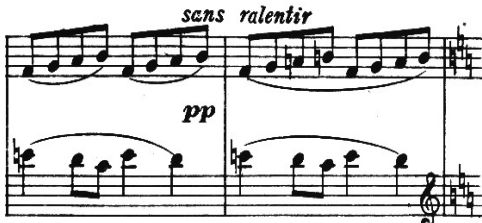
“Sans ralentir” is normally found at places where the performer would naturally slow down such as at the end of a phrase, at the end of a transitional passage, and at the end of a piece. The various examples of “sans ralentir” in *Suite en ut* are shown below in Figure 50.

Figure 50: Poulenc’s use of “sans ralentir” in *Suite en ut*


At the end of phrase (3rd movement)



At the end of transition (1st movement)



At the end of piece (2nd movement)



Poulenc frequently expressed his discomfort with the pianists who used unnecessary tempo changes when playing his works. In an interview with Claude Rostand Poulenc emphasized:

If pianists trusted my metronome markings, which have been calibrated very carefully, then many calamities would be avoided.⁴⁴

It is clear that, from the early stage of his life, Poulenc was firm about properly interpreting his works. He claimed that his “simplistic writing came from the piano

⁴⁴ Poulenc, *Articles and Interviews*, 194.

reduced to its essence” and that he “tried to give the piano the *maximum* with the *minimum* of means”.⁴⁵

The second movement is an interesting piece in that it consists of the typical Poulenc-style phrases which incorporate short, broken melodic motives. Despite its extremely short length and simple style of writing, this movement gives a challenge to both the performer and the listener due to the frequent meter changes and the incoherence of phrases. Each melodic motive is mostly scalar and pleasant to the ear, yet, there are a very few cadential points and in most times a new phrase begins before the previous phrase ends (Figure 51). The main interpretive challenge for the performer when playing this movement would be projecting the melodic lines as simply and clearly as possible (without any rubato since it is marked “*assez uniforme*” in the beginning) while refreshing each melodic motive when it occurs. As a whole, this movement is like an innocent flower, carefully crafted of tiny petals.

Figure 51: Broken melodies in the 2nd movement of *Suite en ut*, mm. 6-9

The image displays a musical score for the second movement of Suite en ut, measures 6 through 9. The score is written for piano and right hand. It features two systems of music. The first system shows measures 6 and 7. The piano part (left hand) has a melodic line starting in 7/8 time, marked *mf*, which transitions to 4/4 time in measure 7, marked *p*. The right hand part (treble clef) has a melodic line starting in 7/8 time, marked *mf*, which transitions to 4/4 time in measure 7, marked *p*. The second system shows measures 8 and 9. The piano part (left hand) has a melodic line starting in 3/4 time, marked *mf*, which transitions to 4/4 time in measure 9, marked *mf*. The right hand part (treble clef) has a melodic line starting in 3/4 time, marked *mf*, which transitions to 4/4 time in measure 9, marked *mf*. The score is characterized by frequent meter changes and overlapping melodic phrases.

⁴⁵ Poulenc, *Diary of My Songs*, 31-33.

The third movement is in a loose rondo form. It is also the most obscure and abstract movement, consisting of non-melodic short phrases and figurations. The movement begins with a lively theme accompanied by active sixteenth notes in the left hand, just like in the first movement. Then brief, improvisatory phrases and figurations (mostly two-measure long) follow one after another until the main theme returns. These little figurations are not related to each other nor are they melodic; often they are a scalic passage or repeated patterns of broken intervals. However, there are a few melodic phrases in between the figurations that are instructed to be distinguished in some way. For example, Poulenc inserted the main theme from the first movement, in a different key and mode this time, in the middle of the third movement and marked “avec charme” (see Figure 52). This time, with its minor mode and less active left hand accompaniment, the theme sounds more mysterious. It reappears only a few measures before the second return of the third movement main theme.

Figure 52: Reuse of the first movement theme in third movement

The image shows two systems of musical notation for a piano piece. The first system consists of two staves: a treble clef staff on top and a bass clef staff on the bottom. The time signature is 3/4. The right hand has a melodic line with slurs and accents, while the left hand has a rhythmic accompaniment of sixteenth notes. The second system continues the piece, with the right hand playing a melodic phrase marked 'clair' and 'p', and the left hand playing a rhythmic pattern. The piece concludes with the instruction 'les 2 pédales'.

Apart from the formal structure, a few notable features of the third movement are the large dynamic range and the use of specific indications. As simplistic as he was, Poulenc's use of dynamic marks and performance indications seemed quite reserved in the beginning of his career. It is noticeable, however, that the third movement of *Suite en ut* exhibits very specific indications and dynamic marks for each phrase. The dynamic marks range from *ppp* to *ff* and often contrasting dynamic marks are used for each hand (the examples are shown below in Figure 53). The detailed indications used in the third movement regarding the use of pedal, types of touch, tempo, and balance between hands include "les 2 pédales", "très rythmé", "très léger", "librement", "un peu flou", "très fondu", "le chant éclatant", "sans ralentir", and "très lié".

Figure 53: Contrasting dynamic marks for each hand

The image displays two musical staves from a piano score. The top staff shows a short musical phrase with a dynamic marking of *f* (forte) in the right hand, while the left hand has a dynamic marking of *p* (piano). The bottom staff shows a longer musical phrase with a dynamic marking of *ff* (fortissimo) in the right hand and *p* (piano) in the left hand. The text "ff m.g. très en dehors" is written below the right hand of the bottom staff, indicating a specific performance instruction.

As one of the few works Poulenc could tolerate⁴⁶, *Suite en ut* is a valuable piano literature that reflects the most authentic Poulenc. It contains Mozart's innocence and Stravinsky's boldness but also is truly Poulenc. The original musical content and unique style of writing of *Suite en ut* deserve to be re-evaluated by contemporary pianists and musicologists.

Huit Nocturnes

Huit Nocturnes (eight nocturnes) is a set of eight individual nocturnes that was composed over a span of nine years (1929-1938). Though named like the nocturnes by Field, Chopin, and Fauré, Poulenc's nocturnes do not share common stylistic features. Each *Nocturne* is written in a different style, most likely depicting a night scene observed by the composer. Traveling throughout Europe, Poulenc composed each *Nocturne* at different places and as a whole, the *Nocturnes* represents his middle period, namely because it is one of his largest solo piano works.

The first *Nocturne* was written in 1929 and is the longest one of the set. The piece is largely based on C major although frequent modulations occur in the middle section. The piece begins with a flowing, amiable melody in the right hand accompanied by left hand C major arpeggios. This pleasant melody is extremely lyrical in that the right hand melody flows in small leaps while the largely spaced-out left hand arpeggios add fuller sound. For the overall fluidity, Poulenc utilized this compositional technique throughout the piece except for the very end. This technique, however, brings about a challenge to performers. The spaced-out left hand arpeggios

⁴⁶ Refer to footnote 39.

require supple wrist movement and good fingering while right hand needs excellent voicing and finger-legato skill, for the melody is mostly played by the weak fingers (fourth and fifth) since the strong fingers must play the inner voices of the right hand chords (Figure 54). This main theme constantly reappears throughout the piece in variations.

Figure 54: Opening of the first Nocturne

The image shows a musical score for the opening of the first Nocturne. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff for the right hand and a bass clef staff for the left hand. The right hand part begins with a melody in C major, featuring a series of chords and eighth notes. The left hand part provides a steady accompaniment of eighth notes. The tempo is marked 'Sans traîner' with a quarter note equal to 80 (♩ = 80). The dynamic marking is 'mf'. The instruction 'l'accompagnement très estompé et régulier' is written below the bass staff.

A new harmonic development follows after the C major main theme ends with a perfect authentic cadence. A new motive in E minor begins, but after a few measures it is interrupted by the main theme again, this time in D major. The middle section is the most harmonically-driven part of the piece with constant modulations and alternations between thematic motives and transitional passages. Here, Poulenc's skillful manipulation of harmonies is evident. The transitions vary in length ranging from just one measure to nine measures and are particularly rich in harmonies with frequent use of ninth chords and the dissonances created by the chromatic passing tones. Figure 55 on the next page shows the relatively simple, linear style modulation from D minor to C minor which is compared to more complex, continuous transitional passage in Figure 56.

Figure 55: Simple modulation, first *Nocturne*, mm. 36-39

The musical score for Figure 55 consists of two systems. The first system features a treble clef staff with a melodic line starting with a 'clair' marking and a piano 'p' dynamic. The bass clef staff has a 'très estompé' marking. The second system shows a continuation of the melodic line in the treble clef and a bass clef staff with a simple accompaniment pattern.

Figure 56: Complex modulation, first *Nocturne*, mm. 47-54

The musical score for Figure 56 consists of two systems. The first system features a treble clef staff with a melodic line starting with a 'pressez un peu' marking and a forte 'f' dynamic. The bass clef staff has a 'cédrez un peu' marking. The second system shows a continuation of the melodic line in the treble clef and a bass clef staff with a 'm.g. un peu en dehors' marking.

Shortly after the stormy climax (Figure 56), the repeated A-flat in the bass in the D-flat major transitional passage (mm. 52-54, Figure 56) implies the return of the main theme in A-flat major. This time, the main theme modulates to the key of C major, the home key, and leads to the closing theme which consists of three layers – primary melody in the middle staff, secondary melody in the top staff, and the C

pedal tone in the bottom staff (Figure 57). This closing theme is closer to organ writing and therefore brings about another challenge to performers such as bringing out melodies with hands crossed and sustaining long pedal tone without blurring melodies.

Figure 57: Closing theme, first *Nocturne*, mm. 71-72



The C pedal tone is retained throughout the closing theme and after a short pause the piece ends with a unique six-measure coda. The coda consists of succession of chords and it reappears at the end of the last *Nocturne* in a slightly varied form. The first *Nocturne* is the most harmonically rich piece of the set due to the frequent use of seventh and ninth chords.

The second *Nocturne* is a bright, Schumannesque piece written four years after the first *Nocturne*. The melodic construction of the main theme is simple – a single melodic line in dotted rhythm with inner voice chords filling in the gaps (Figure 58). Titled "Bal de jeunes filles (Girls' Ball)", the animated main theme possibly depicts little girls dancing at night. The main theme ends with a perfect authentic cadence and after a short pause the passionate middle section begins in the relative minor key. The main theme briefly returns at the end and after another short pause the piece ends with a three-measure coda. This three-part formal structure,

Figure 58: Main theme, second *Nocturne*



often with a short coda at the end, is consistent in all eight *Nocturnes*. It seems to be Poulenc's attempt to follow the traditional formal structure of nocturnes of his predecessors, though the musical content and style are entirely his own. Even in this perfectly diatonic piece, Poulenc's quirky ending makes the piece unique and special. These short coda-like endings are the most noticeable feature of the eight *Nocturnes* and are not so commonly found in his earlier compositions.

The third *Nocturne* is the most picturesque piece of the set. Titled "Les Cloches de Malines (The Bells of Mechelen)", it begins with random alternation between Fs and Cs in the left hand depicting the sound of old church bells. Written in 1934 in Mechelen, Belgium, this *Nocturne* arises a scene of Poulenc listening to the church bells at night while traveling. The two significant features of the third *Nocturne* are the extremely dissonant middle section and the utterly delicate and sensitive articulations of the "bells".

Like the other *Nocturnes*, the third *Nocturne* is clearly divided into three sections (ABA') and the middle section is particularly marked "Agité et mystérieux". In this section, while right hand is tonally centered, the left hand grace notes that are mostly a semitone apart from each chord create a cacophony, a shocking disruption of the peaceful sounding of the "bells" (see Figure 59). This bold insertion of a highly

dissonant material could be interpreted as either a realistic situation (e.g. honking cars or a thunderstorm) or an imaginative one (e.g. Poulenc's inner troubles). Poulenc's treatment of dissonance exhibited in the middle section already appears in his earlier

Figure 59: Middle section, third *Nocturne*



work *Promenades* where the succession of heavy chords depict the movement of the bus. In the third *Nocturne*, the dissonant, heavy chords are more carefully deployed in the middle of the piece completing the “night scene”.

The “bells” consisting of randomly accented Fs and Cs that appear throughout the A section give an impression that the piece would provide no technical challenge (Figure 60). From a pianistic perspective, however, the opening of the third *Nocturne*

Figure 60: Opening of third *Nocturne*



brings about a great challenge because of the highly sensitive and delicate touch required to maintain the even tone and accents in a soft dynamic. Moreover, the use of much pedal (“mettre beaucoup de pédale”) gives even greater challenge, for there needs to be a perfect balance between sustaining the ringing bell sound in the background and projecting right hand melodies without blurring. This highly

sophisticated pedal technique and sensitive articulation reflect the typical French side of Poulenc. As a whole, the third *Nocturne* is a significantly original work of Poulenc that contains both the delicacy of Debussy and the creativity of Bartók’s night music.

The fourth *Nocturne* is a dreamy, slow waltz that is reminiscent of Chopin’s seventh prelude. Among the eight *Nocturnes*, it is the only one that is in the style of traditional nocturne in its dance-like 3/4 rhythm and slow, lyrical melody. Dedicated to his friend Julien Green, a French-born American writer, the fourth *Nocturne* begins with a quote from Julien Green’s novel *Le visionnaire*, creating an image of a man recalling his youth. Titled “Bal fantôme (Ghost ball)” and marked “Lent, très las et piano (very tired and soft)”, one can imagine the lazily moving ghosts through the overall descending semitonal melodies. The rich use of augmented harmonies and Poulenc’s favorite cadence using a ninth chord leading down to tonic enhance the fantastical quality of the piece. Figure 61 below shows an example of Poulenc’s colorful harmonization of chords. It is an epitome of what can be called “night music” – dreamy, beautifully harmonized music that is just pleasant to the ear. The fourth *Nocturne* is undoubtedly one of the hidden gems of Poulenc’s piano literature.

Figure 61: Rich harmonies used in the fourth *Nocturne*



The fifth *Nocturne*, titled “Phalènes (moths)”, is the most exciting piece of the set. Largely influenced by the style of Prokofiev and Bartók, the piece depicts the

movement and sound of moths by deploying fast-moving semitones in constantly changing meters. Poulenc’s use of major seventh is especially apparent in this *Nocturne*, which produces a great dissonance that mimics the buzzing sound of moths. Poulenc utilized a simple but very effective compositional technique to describe the image of flying moths at night. The right hand notes circulating around the note D and the left hand notes circulating around E-flat, a major seventh below D, create a bitonal sound and overall greater dissonance combined with semitonal movements of each hand (Figure 62).

Figure 62: Use of bitonality, opening of the fifth *Nocturne*



The fifth *Nocturne* is the unique one of the set not only because of its distinguished atonality but also because it is the most articulate and dry piece among the eight *Nocturnes*. In addition to staccato marks, Poulenc marked “sec (secco – dry)” twelve times throughout the piece to make sure that certain parts are played without pedal with crisp articulation. He also added marks such as “léger (light)” and “très rythmé (very rhythmic)” to emphasize clarity and the rhythms are consistent even at a fast tempo. Thus extremely active and independent fingers are necessary in order to play this piece effectively. The imaginative aural and visual descriptions of moths projected through constantly changing meters, sudden dynamic changes, dissonant harmonies, and crisp articulations are quite successful, almost comparable to Bartók’s *Out of Doors*.

The sixth *Nocturne*, on the other hand, is probably the least successful one of the set. The last of the four *Nocturnes* written in 1934, during Poulenc’s “piano period”, the sixth *Nocturne* is the most abstract and disoriented one. The piece begins with a flowing melodic line in octaves, with the tenor line doubling the melody, accompanied by inner voice arpeggios in G major. This calm and plain melody becomes more abstract at the end of the phrase by suddenly leaping in dissonant intervals and landing on a non-cadential chord. After a pause, a new section, vaguely in the key of D minor, begins with a non-melodic tune which only lasts for a few measures. Then another pause leads to the next motive which also ends with an abrupt pause. Until the G major main theme returns at the end, the non-melodic, motivic tunes follow one after another, separated by pauses. This extremely sectional and disoriented middle section is highly contrasting to the flowing G major theme, displaying juxtaposition of both sides of Poulenc – the beautiful and the eccentric – as discussed previously in chapter 2. The comparison of the two sections are shown below in Figure 63.

Figure 63: Comparison between sections A and B, sixth *Nocturne*

Section A, primary theme



Section B, multiple short motives

ff
p
pp
très doux
♩ = 60
murmure
Ped. * sans pédale

-----[End of section A][Beginning of section B, new motive]

♩ = 66
sempre p
dessus

-----[Pause] [New motive]-----

p
pp sans pédale
p doucement expressif

[Pause]-----[New motive]-----[Pause][New motive]-----

Although musically less appealing, the sixth *Nocturne* clearly represents Poulenc as both a natural melody-writer and a modern French boy who loved abstract arts. Whether Poulenc wanted to describe his turbulent mind as he was looking at the peacefully flowing river at night or simply just gathered pieces of spontaneous ideas, the sixth *Nocturne* is a freely interpretive piece that adds a variety to the set.

The seventh *Nocturne* is one of the best of the set filled with charming melodies and rich harmonies. Also in ternary form, the piece is largely based on the primary theme which is close to a musical period (2+2). Although the piece is in E-flat major, Poulenc deceptively manipulated the harmonies so the cadences of the first two periods end on G minor and G major respectively. It is not until the end of

the A section that the phrase ends on E-flat chord resolved down from F, which seems to be Poulenc's favorite method of resolving chords. Similar cadences are discovered in other *Nocturnes* as well (Figure 64).

Figure 64: Poulenc's resolutions using I⁹⁻⁸

Seventh Nocturne

surtout sans ralentir

The musical score for the Seventh Nocturne is presented in a grand staff with treble and bass clefs. The key signature has two flats. The piece is marked 'surtout sans ralentir'. The right hand (m.d.) features a melodic line with slurs and accents, while the left hand (m.g.) provides harmonic support with chords and moving lines. A 'Ped.' (pedal) marking is present. At the bottom, a diagram shows a horizontal line with 'I⁹' on the left and '8' on the right, connected by a dashed line, representing the I⁹⁻⁸ resolution.

First Nocturne

The musical score for the First Nocturne is shown in a grand staff. The right hand has a complex melodic line with many slurs and ties, while the left hand has a more rhythmic accompaniment. At the bottom, a diagram shows a horizontal line with 'I⁹' on the left and '8' on the right, connected by a dashed line, representing the I⁹⁻⁸ resolution.

Fourth Nocturne

The musical score for the Fourth Nocturne is presented in a grand staff. The right hand features a melodic line with slurs and ties, and the left hand has a harmonic accompaniment. At the bottom, a diagram shows a horizontal line with 'I⁹' on the left and '8' on the right, connected by a dashed line, representing the I⁹⁻⁸ resolution.

From a pianistic point of view, there are some major technical challenges in playing the seventh *Nocturne*. Because of constantly flowing sixteenth notes in both hands along with inner voices, the right hand fingering is exceptionally tricky and many times the consecutive use of fifth finger and finger substitutions are inevitable (see Figure 65 below for the suggested finger numbers for playing the opening of the seventh *Nocturne*). Moreover, the large leaps in the left hand arpeggios make it even more challenging to produce the essential *legato* sound or the feeling of “*Assez Allant* (fairly moving)”. This is a similar technical challenge found in the first *Nocturne* and due to relatively longer phrases and unnatural fingering, the *Huit Nocturnes* is one of the trickiest sets to perform among Poulenc’s solo piano literature.

Figure 65: Fingering suggestion for the opening of seventh *Nocturne*

Mm. 1-2

4 5 4 3 5 4 3 2 1 3 4 5 3 5 4 3 5 4 3 4 5 4 (1 2 4) 5

Mm. 5-6

2 3 4 5 2 3 4 5 5 4 5 4 5 4 3 2 1 2* 4 5 2 (1 4 5) 3

* The inner voice F-flat can be played by left hand

The last *Nocturne*, specifically indicated as “to serve as a coda of the cycle (pour servir de Coda au Cycle)”, is a beautiful short piece in chordal setting. Written in 1938, three years after the seventh *Nocturne*, the eighth *Nocturne* is the most pure and simple one of the set. The undisturbed, somewhat nostalgic characteristic of this piece is distinguished from the other *Nocturnes*. It is the only *Nocturne* that was written after 1936, known as Poulenc’s “religious” period – Poulenc’s solemn period inspired by the sudden death of his friend in 1936 – which probably affected the overall stylistic change after the seventh *Nocturne*.

The most interesting feature of the eighth *Nocturne* is the five-measure ending which is intentionally self-borrowed from the ending of the first *Nocturne*.⁴⁷ Unrelated to the previous materials, the chordal five-measure ending that is entirely in the key of C major (although the piece is in G major) perfectly concludes the cycle by beginning the first *Nocturne* in C major and ending the last *Nocturne* in the same key. The eighth *Nocturne* is filled with simply beautiful melodies and colorful harmonies serving as the “coda” of the set.

Suite française

Poulenc composed *Suite française* for small orchestra in 1935 and shortly after transcribed it for solo piano in the same year. Consisting of seven brief movements, *Suite française* was inspired by the dance music of little-known sixteenth century French composer Claude Gervaise. While the orchestral version is considered relatively successful, the solo piano version is less recognized by contemporary

⁴⁷ Refer to the figures on page 19 under the subtitle “Self-borrowing”.

pianists. As a great example of Poulenc's incidental music, *Suite française* is another hidden gem of Poulenc's piano literature that is full of charms.

The first movement is "Bransle de Bourgogne", a bright dance in 2/4 meter. The short, rhythmic theme is continuously repeated throughout the movement and each time it is slightly varied. In the original orchestral score, the theme is played by different combination of instruments or in a different register. Similarly, in the piano transcription, the recurrence of the theme is always slightly modified with different dynamic, range, accompaniment, or articulation.

Poulenc's adjustment of what-could-have-been banal harmonies makes this movement more intriguing. His trademark of ninth chords is apparent in the left hand, adding a sour dissonance. In the middle of the piece, Poulenc intentionally left the chords unresolved by putting non-harmonic tones in the left hand (Figure 66), creating a dissonant, somewhat antique sound – like a broken old music box. Again, the signature of Poulenc is present here and in the other movements of *Suite française* as well.

Figure 66: I. Bransle de Bourgogne, *Suite française*, mm. 27-28



The contrasting second movement is titled "Pavane", a slow, meditative dance. The movement is entirely chordal and is clearly in three-part (ABA), where the exact repetition of A section occurs at the end of the piece. After almost hymn-

like A section, the B section begins with seventh and fifth chords moving in parallel arousing mysterious atmosphere. This simple but modern alignment of chords, paired with the conventional A section, shows Poulenc's unique musical style that is both traditional and contemporary.

The third movement is "Petite marche militaire", a fast march in duple meter. Similar to the first movement, the march-like theme is constantly repeated in a slightly varied form throughout the piece. It is easily predictable that the piece was originally written for woodwinds by the range of notes, frequent use of the interval of thirds, fourths, and fifths, and dry articulation. In this petite march, the Stravinskian bold march rhythm is incorporated in the middle of the piece (Figure 67). Here, as well as in the third and fifth *Nocturne*, Poulenc's decisive use of tritons and seventh chords creates merciless dissonances, possibly influenced by his beloved Russian composer friends.

Figure 67: III. Petite marche militaire, *Suite française*, mm. 38-51

The image displays a musical score for the third movement, "Petite marche militaire," from the Suite française, measures 38-51. The score is written for piano and consists of two systems of music. The first system shows the right hand playing a melodic line with eighth-note patterns and the left hand providing harmonic support with chords and single notes. The second system continues the piece, featuring a more complex rhythmic pattern in the right hand and sustained chords in the left hand. The score includes dynamic markings such as *mf* and *f*, and a *sec* (sotto voce) marking. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major or D minor), and the time signature is 2/4.

The fourth movement is the only movement with the title associated with emotions rather than types of dance. As the title "Complainte (lament)" suggests, the piece begins with a single, melancholy melodic line. In the middle of the movement,

other voices are added and with weeping melodies and brooding chords, an extremely lamenting mood is created. Here, Poulenc utilized excessive chromaticism and noticeably soft dynamic marks (*mp* to *ppp*) to express emotions. Only twenty-six measures long, the “Complainte” is a very brief but fully emotional piece that effectively reflects Poulenc’s melancholy side. Figure 68 below shows the last five measures of the fourth movement with the usual Poulenc-style ending.

Figure 68: IV. Complainte, *Suite française*, mm. 22-26



The fifth movement “Bransle de Champagne” is a medieval-style stately dance. Although the piece is written in D minor, it has a strong feeling of G minor mixed with modal harmonies due to the constantly repeated G minor chords on the downbeats. Because the simple melody is continuously repeated throughout the piece, Poulenc specifically emphasized on the voicing by indicating that “the piece is to be played in a very precise way by alternately highlighting one of the four parts”.⁴⁸ By doing so, Poulenc seemed to attempt to evoke the colorful woodwinds sound from his original orchestral version. Neither a huge success nor a piteous failure, the fifth movement is not comparable to the original version but is characteristic enough to be part of the suite.

⁴⁸ “On jouera cette pièce d'une façon très précise en faisant ressortir alternativement l'une des quatre parties.”

Although not technically demanding, a few interpretive suggestions may be given since the score is not meticulously marked by the composer. Because Poulenc specifically indicated particular instruments to bring out the melody in the original score but not in the solo piano transcription, it is the performer's discretion to choose a voice to be highlighted each time. Also, the use of sostenuto pedal is unavoidable at the end of the piece where both hands play the chord that should be sustained throughout the measure while playing the theme in the middle and lower register (mm. 34 and 36, Figure 69). The chords on the downbeat are sustained by oboes and

Figure 69: V. Bransle de Champagne, *Suite française*, mm. 33-36



trombones in the original score (for two measures each time) and Poulenc somehow did not specifically indicate how to play this section on the piano score. The fifth movement ends with a long sustaining D octaves with added ninth note – another Poulenc signature.

The sixth movement is “Sicilienne” and it is the least characteristic of the set. The piece is in a very simple ABA form: Pastoral, hymn-like melody (A) pleasantly opens the piece and after a short middle section (B) the main theme returns (A) and ends with a brief coda. It is almost too peaceful and perfectly harmonious that one can hardly hear the “Poulenc sound”. Nevertheless, Poulenc’s treatment of sequential, chromatic harmonies (Figure 70) makes the middle section more colorful and idiomatically flowing.

Figure 70: VI. Sicilienne, *Suite française*, mm. 17-20



The last movement is titled “Carillon” – the musical instrument consisting of multiple large bells. The overall mood of the movement is bright and cheerful, almost similar to the first movement. The uplifting scalar melody mimicking the bells (Figure 71) opens the movement and recurs throughout the piece, just like in the other

Figure 71: VII. Carillon, *Suite française*, mm. 1-5



fast movements of the set. (Again, the recurrence of the theme is played by different group of instruments in the original score.) The simplicity and the use of scalar passages remind of some of the early works of Poulenc such as the first movement of *Suite en ut* and the last movement of *Trois mouvements perpétuels*. The piece is completely diatonic and mostly based on simple tonic and dominant harmonies. After a number of repetitions, the theme returns for the last time and rather unusually ends on a half cadence.

Suite française is the only complete set of pieces Poulenc wrote after his experimental and painstaking “piano period” (1932-1934) and before his “religious period” (after 1936). It contains neither overly complex harmonies nor solemn and

melancholy characteristics, yet it reflects the most original Poulenc – the most simple, light-hearted, and purest to its essence. Successfully written for woodwinds ensemble, the piano transcription of *Suite française* is one of the rare transcriptions of Poulenc that was written just right for the instrument. It is truly unfortunate that *Suite française* for solo piano is rarely performed today though it is as original as *Le Tombeau de Couperin* of Ravel.

Performance Practice

Technique

Many articles, letters, and interviews reveal that Poulenc, as a great pianist and collaborator himself, frequently stated the interpretive suggestions for playing his works. The two prominent issues are the use of pedals and rubato, for these issues were constantly brought up by Poulenc in his interviews and diaries:

How many different colours can be found through the use of the pedals, above all with modern pianos...All the same, I must insist once more that my work calls for the almost constant use of the pedals. This softens the *severity* of certain of my broken chords or of my arpeggios.⁴⁹

The serious technical errors that disfigure my piano music, to the point of making it unrecognizable, are these: rubato, stingy pedaling, and over-articulation of certain repeated chordal or arpeggiated patterns which should, on the contrary, be played very blurred.⁵⁰

Poulenc's particular attention to pedaling was greatly influenced by his teacher Ricardo Viñes, a virtuoso pianist who premiered and championed works by Debussy, Ravel, and Albéniz, considerably new and difficult works to play at that time. Viñes

⁴⁹ Poulenc, *Diary of My Songs*, 53-55.

⁵⁰ Poulenc, *Articles and Interviews*, 193.

possessed exceptional pedal technique – Poulenc recalled that his technique “allowed him to play clearly amid a welter of pedal, which seems like a paradox.”⁵¹ Ironically, however, Poulenc’s pedal marks are often not consistent and specific enough and because of his Mozart-like clear and simple style of writing, many performers failed to pull off his musical style. Because pedaling is largely dependent on ears and requires extremely sensitive foot control, it is a challenging task to mark detailed pedaling on a musical score.

However, it seems that Poulenc was more clear about “when not to use pedal” than “when to use pedal”. While his pedal marks are sporadic, the marks such as “très sec” and “sans Pédale” are more frequently found in the scores. Poulenc specifically and meticulously indicated “sec” where the pedal should not be used, and occasionally marked “mettre beaucoup de pédale” when the piece needs to be fully resonant. Rarely, Poulenc used traditional pedal marks to indicate a specific way of pedaling for certain passages (see Figure 72 on the next page).

In his own recordings, Poulenc used a great deal of pedal, more than what would normally be expected, especially when playing his own works. These recordings are surprisingly smooth and resonant, showing the composer’s pedaling skills and compelling us to examine his own pedal markings carefully. Since the French flavor of Poulenc’s music comes from blurred harmonies and color, generous use of pedals, especially the damper pedal, is highly encouraged for playing the piano works of Poulenc.

⁵¹ Poulenc, *Articles and Interviews*, 192.

Figure 72: Use of traditional pedal marks, “Cadence”, *Les soirées de Nazelles*, mm. 1-6

The musical score for "Cadence" from *Les soirées de Nazelles* (mm. 1-6) is presented in two systems. The first system begins with the tempo marking "Très large et très librement" and a metronome marking of 52. The music is in 2/4 time and features a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth notes. The dynamics range from *ff* to *ff éclatant*. The second system continues the piece, marked with *pp m.g.* and *m.d.*, and includes the instruction *très alangui*. The tempo is marked *long ten*. The dynamics range from *pp* to *ff subito*. Pedal marks are indicated by asterisks and the word "ped." below the staff.

The technical difficulty of Poulenc’s piano works ranges from as easy as early Mozart to as virtuosic as Chopin etudes. While a majority of Poulenc’s piano compositions are considered technically less challenging, there are a number of pieces that are surprisingly virtuosic, requiring expeditious finger technique. Though Poulenc did not follow the traditional “French School”, many of his pieces represent the French finger school technique. Works such as *Presto* and some of the *Improvisations* require extremely independent and fast fingers and supple wrist because of the tremendously fast tempo and constantly moving sixteenth notes. Not only solo piano works, but also some of the chamber works often involve strikingly difficult piano accompaniment (e. g. *Chansons gaillardes*). As Poulenc himself was an excellent pianist who played with great fluidity and never banged,⁵² the performer must acquire flawless finger technique in order to play such virtuosic pieces.

⁵² Roger Nichols, in an e-mail to the author on September 20, 2019.

Although sometimes criticized for being too “flashy”, it seems that the very French nature of Poulenc inspired his light and linear piano writing that is idiomatic and pianistic. Contemporary pianists who performed Poulenc’s piano works remarked that the technical challenges were “never of the unplayable sort” and that his piano pieces “well reflected his characteristics of color, liveliness, fluency and knowledge of the instrument.”⁵³ Not mutually exclusive, both enough use of pedals and light and active finger technique are significant technical key points in stylistically performing the music of Poulenc.

Interpretation

As a composer who was anti-romantic and anti-impressionistic, Poulenc pursued music that is simple and clear without any overly dramatic elements. According to his contemporaries, Poulenc was a warm and sincere man who was ready to show his wit at any time in a non-sarcastic fashion.⁵⁴ The unpretentious, simple nature of Poulenc is directly reflected in his music, most obviously through the frequent use of “sans ralentir”. Poulenc despised excessive use of rubato and tirelessly marked “sans ralentir” or “sans traîner” where natural slowdown could occur. This Baroque-inspired, neo-classical characteristic is one of the most unique features of Poulenc’s music that is often not strictly followed by the contemporary pianists.

⁵³ Evelyne Crochet, in an e-mail to the author on September 28, 2019. Evelyne Crochet is a Franco-American pianist who performed with Poulenc in the Boston premier of his Concerto for Two Pianos.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Although Poulenc frequently insisted that his tempo marks needed to be kept, his recordings reveal that Poulenc occasionally did slow down at the ends where it is not marked. However, most of the time, Poulenc's playing is extremely smooth and expressive even without significant use of rubato. Poulenc's interpretations of his own works suggest that colorful tones, warm and light touch, substantial amount of pedals, and good voicing make his music alive and beautiful, rather than excessive tempo changes. It should also allow for some 'breathing', as all Poulenc's music is governed to some extent by his love of singing.⁵⁵

Poulenc was particularly successful in writing music for woodwinds because of his uniquely clean and simple writing style. He wrote three woodwind sonatas – flute, clarinet, and oboe – only a few years before his death, and they are considered the most mature and profound works of Poulenc. In contrast to the dense and emotional tone of string instruments, the hollow and light tone quality of woodwind instruments is especially well-suited for Poulenc's musical style. In fact, Poulenc's chamber works involving woodwinds such as the Sextet for Piano and Wind and the Trio for Oboe, Bassoon, and Piano are much more successful than the works written for strings.

Naturally, the influence of choral and woodwind writings is evident in piano repertoire. The widely spaced-out diatonic chords, hollow texture, and simple tunes are key features of Poulenc's piano writing that are also applicable for choral and woodwind settings. As Mozart's piano music cannot be analyzed without discussing

⁵⁵ Roger Nichols, in an e-mail to the author on September 20, 2019.

his operas and Schubert's piano pieces cannot be perfected without learning his song cycles, Poulenc's piano compositions are closely related to his choral and woodwind works, for which Poulenc was best known. Thus, clear projection of the primary melodies, regardless of the amount of pedals used, and the creation of various tone colors are the integral factors to be considered when interpreting Poulenc's piano works.

Conclusion

The entire body of Poulenc's piano œuvre includes sixteen sets, numerous single-movement pieces for solo piano, and a few works for piano four-hands and two pianos. From a simple *Valse* to incidental music like *Suite française* and from an amateur-level work like *Suite en ut* to extremely virtuosic *Presto*, Poulenc's piano compositions encompass all levels and genres of piano repertoire. However, they are frequently heard at neither large performance venues nor at conservatory student recitals. Though the music of Poulenc was once mastered by legendary pianists such as Vladimir Horowitz and Arthur Rubinstein in the mid-twentieth century, Poulenc's name is rarely found in solo piano recital programs by contemporary pianists.

Though it may be arbitrary and subjective to argue that most of Poulenc's piano pieces are unknown to and not frequently performed by contemporary pianists, what remains unshaken is that Poulenc's musical style is unmistakably original, as unique as that of other prominent composers for the piano such as Debussy and Bartók. Poulenc was one of those artists who could draw from a variety of sources while still remaining true to themselves. My interviews and conversations with the scholars and contemporaries of Poulenc including Roger Nichols, Evelyne Crochet,

and Louis Martin, in addition to the thorough analysis of his piano pieces, further assure and support the value of his piano compositions. Poulenc's solo piano œuvre is truly valuable repertoire, deserving of more serious consideration.

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