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Roger Nichols, *Poulenc: A Biography*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020. 372 pp. \$38.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-0300226508.

Review by Christopher Moore, University of Ottawa.

The past ten years have witnessed a number of remarkable contributions devoted to the twentieth-century French composer Francis Poulenc, including a commanding French-language biography by Hervé Lacombe, an impressively edited collection of Poulenc's writings and interviews by Nicolas Southon, and two collections of essays comprised of contributions by experts from across the globe that followed in the wake of a Parisian conference dedicated to the composer on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of his death in 2013.[1] Roger Nichols, the author of this new biography through Yale University Press, has obviously followed these developments carefully, and indeed came out with an abridged translation of Southon's volume in 2014.[2] Following Nichols' noted 2011 biography of Maurice Ravel, this new work on Poulenc brings the English-speaking world up-to-date and then some in terms of current understanding of this fascinating man, and will no doubt invite comparison with another biography of the composer, by pianist Graham Johnson, also published in 2020.[3]

One would be hard pressed to find a more enticing subject for a musical biography than Poulenc, not least because the composer seemed to be so concerned with crafting that biography while he was alive through other means than, well, simply living. We know that his letters were written, at least to some extent, with an eye to publication after his death; indeed, the first in-depth biographical writing on Poulenc was actually an autobiography, couched in the form of a radio interview for which the composer wrote the dialogue himself.[4] One could say that persona-building was a habit ingrained in Poulenc from an early age; he knew that people would talk about him, and he wanted to shape the way in which they did. Personality mattered for Poulenc: it was a primary motivator when it came to the approach and materials of his compositions and most critical appreciations of his work are deeply informed by it. Which underscores why the composer, especially in the final decades of his life when an ostensibly personality-denying compositional system like serialism was dominating elite conceptions of music making, could be so worried about the place and longevity of his music. Perhaps the singularity of the composer's music resides in how it entwines in myriad ways his extra-musical tastes and his lived experiences. "Ma musique est mon portrait," he once quipped; yet, as all painters know, portraits are constructed; things are left out, angles are chosen, light is considered.

Nichols' portrait of the composer, thankfully, allows the reader to see well beyond the surface of Poulenc's public image and resists any cartoonish rendering of the composer, most apparent in

critic Claude Rostand's now-famous description of Poulenc as part "*moine*," part "*voyou*." When Poulenc accepted to be referred to in this way in the early 1950s, he probably understood "*voyou*" in the same manner as the turn-of-the-century artistic group "*Les Apaches*" (which included Maurice Ravel as well as Poulenc's piano mentor, Ricardo Viñes) who also saw themselves as "*voyous*"—a much removed imitation of the brigands that lurked, if only in the Parisian imagination, among the shadows of the city's ancient fortifications. Yet nothing truly criminal animates Poulenc's personality, nor can he be accused of living a cloistered, monk-like existence; owning luxurious residences in Paris and Noizay and benefitting from invitations galore, he was hardly one to forego worldly comforts for the purpose of ascetic withdrawal. Yes, there was some naughty subversion, notably sexual, at a time when homosexuality was still deemed subversive; and on the other side some prayer and Church-going, but Nichols' account is a welcome reminder that Poulenc's life was ultimately that of a very active musician for whom the contrasting impulses of "*moine*" and "*voyou*," while undeniably present, were just two of so many characteristics within a particularly complex personality.

Nichols' approach to his subject is undeniably sympathetic. His literary style—free of technical jargon or the conceptual weight of a theoretical framework—aims to reflect the composer's own aesthetic proclivities. (In a curious "Envoi" that concludes the volume, Nichols quotes Francis Bacon to describe his biographical method—or perhaps Poulenc's compositional approach—as a middle course located somewhere between experiment and dogma). Poulenc was averse to systems, enjoying referring (in private) to twelve-tone music as "dodecaphonic poo" (*dodécaca*). Even such a mildly academic genre as the string quartet went against his nature (after many destroyed attempts—one that he tossed down a Parisian sewer (p. 182)—he partly reworked some material into his *Sinfonietta*). Nichols rightly positions Poulenc's family as full-fledged members of the haute bourgeoisie, but Poulenc was drawn early to what he called "delicious bad music"; combined with his lifelong distaste for Wagner and the stuffy grandiloquence of French composers like Vincent d'Indy, his ideas about what constituted "good music" clearly contrasted with some of the aesthetic habits of his class. As a young Parisian of privilege, Poulenc was at liberty to experiment musically and to explore across the artistic disciplines even if his interests in the modern invited the scorn of professors of the Paris Conservatory, an institution that Poulenc never attended. One result of his early aesthetic orientations was to weed out any obvious form of emphasis (*emphase*) from his musical style, often with the help of some ironic humour or incongruity that links his music very clearly to that of Emmanuel Chabrier and Erik Satie. Indeed, Nichols goes further to suggest that Poulenc's life-long allergy to emphasis is at one with a certain form of "French temperament" that can be traced through the lightness of touch found in his most direct musical forebears (including Gounod, Massenet, Bizet, Fauré, Debussy and Ravel).

Organized chronologically and containing a twenty-four-page listing of the main events in the composer's career (pp. 322-346), this biography offers updated renderings of the Poulenc highlight reel: the early Parisian years; his affiliation with the group "*Les Six*" and his first major success—under Diaghilev's Ballets russes—with *Les Biches* in 1924; his rediscovery of Catholicism at Rocamadour in the late 1930s; the war years and the competing tendencies of continuity and rupture that followed; the complex gestation and various premieres of his most important opera, *Dialogues des Carmélites*; and his final years. To craft this narrative, the author has looked far beyond Myriam Chimènes' reliable but increasingly dated edition of Poulenc's correspondence, drawing as well on new documents that have since come to light and spiking his tale with various appreciations and anecdotes unsuspectingly tucked away in the secondary literature.[5]

Throughout, Nichols gives ample space to Poulenc's career as a performer and recording artist, a welcome focus given that he allotted as much time in a year to performing at the piano in various contexts as he did to composing (p. 177). Whereas his musical partnership with baritone Pierre Bernac is well known, Nichols is particularly attuned to Poulenc's interactions with British musicians. Indeed, Poulenc owed much to British interest and support of his work (his first publication, *Rapsodie nègre*, came out with London's Chester & Co. in 1919, and the BBC Chorus famously premiered his cantata *Figure Humaine*—with an English translation of Paul Éluard's poems—in a 1945 radio broadcast). Indeed, by examining Poulenc through the broader lens of his portfolio career, Nichols' account shows how the composer's mobility and reputation expanded well beyond France's borders. After the Second World War, the United States became a particularly important source of income; Poulenc's first tour there in 1948 with Bernac was a success that led to repeat engagements and commissions.

The biography does not include any musical examples, but that does not prevent Nichols from slowing the pace of his narrative to provide musical descriptions of a number of works, with a particular interest given to the songs, a genre in which Poulenc was confident he had no "serious competitor" (p. 189). Indeed, Graham Johnson's new biography proposes a traversal of Poulenc's career by concentrating solely on the composer's life-long output of *mélodies*. Nichols' readings of the major cycles like *Tel jour telle nuit* (Éluard), and *Calligrammes* (Apollinaire), are among the richest areas of musical commentary and underscore Poulenc's steadfast commitment not only to tonal and indeed diatonic constructions, but also his archconservative conception of the genre (voice with piano accompaniment) whatever the poetry he was setting.

Poulenc's sexual life has been a subject of considerable scrutiny over the past twenty years, and Nichols' biography makes available new information to readers not apprised of recent French-language publications. The thirty-three reproduced photographs in the middle of the book even include one of Lucien Roubert, Poulenc's lover during the painful gestation of *Dialogues des Carmélites*. Throughout his account Nichols acknowledges Poulenc's intimate relationships (with Richard Chanlaire, Raymond Destouches, Roubert, and Louis Gautier) while suggesting that, at least between the 1930s and the 1950s, he seems to have become increasingly guarded about mentioning them. An appendix includes a recently published letter, penned in 1954, concerning the contents of Poulenc's will and which recognizes Marie-Ange Lebedeff as his daughter, "born from a simple New Year's game" between the composer and Frédérique Lebedeff (p. 293). This letter, as well as many others, point to the vital influences of his private life on his compositional projects; here indeed, Poulenc explains that the perceptible lull in his compositional output at the end of the 1940s was the result of "the Marie-Ange business." Although Nichols does not look too deeply into the ways in which the composer's sexual life may have impacted his compositional choices, he does argue that Poulenc did not become aware of his own homosexuality, or at the very least kept it deep in the closet, until the late 1920s (p. 69), citing an ostensible lack of tact in a letter from Raymonde Linossier (who the composer unsuccessfully proposed to marry in 1928) to support his claim. Of course, trying to locate a firm date for something like this is akin to establishing the true source of the Amazon, and certainly the atmosphere of *Les Biches* and other earlier works speak quite clearly to non-conforming sexual tendencies largely shared by his artistic networks.

In sum, this biography is an engaging read that wears its considerable research with comfort. It is also a part of a continuing defence of this composer who in the past had been unfairly critiqued for not being serious enough. What we have witnessed over the past ten years is the emergence

of a new portrait of Poulenc, one that perhaps speaks to us all the more because it reveals both its vices and its virtues, a reflection of our own humanity, but in a tonal world.

## NOTES

[1] Hervé Lacombe, *Francis Poulenc* (Paris: Fayard, 2013); Nicolas Southon, ed., *Francis Poulenc, J'Écris ce qui me chante* (Paris: Fayard, 2011); Hervé Lacombe and Nicolas Southon, eds., *Fortune de Francis Poulenc: diffusion, interprétation, réception* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2016); Lucie Kayas and Hervé Lacombe, *Du langage au style: singularités de Francis Poulenc* (Paris: Société française de musicologie, 2016).

[2] Nicolas Southon, ed., *Francis Poulenc: Articles and Interviews, Notes from the Heart*, trans. Roger Nichols (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

[3] Roger Nichols, *Ravel* (London: Yale University Press, 2011); Graham Johnson, *Poulenc, The Life in the Songs* (New York and London: Liveright, 2020).

[4] Francis Poulenc, *Entretiens avec Claude Rostand* (Paris: Julliard, 1954).

[5] Myriam Chimènes, ed., *Francis Poulenc: Correspondance 1910-1963* (Paris: Fayard, 1994).

[6] The letter was first published in Pierre Miscevic, ed., *Francis Poulenc, Lettres inédites à Brigitte Manceaux* (Paris: Orizons, 2019).

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