

Thesis of a Dissertation

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Francis Poulenc's sacred a cappella choral works

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I. Antecedents of the Research

The 20th century composer Francis Poulenc is not only known as a member of Le Groupe des Six, but had also achieved great successes for his unique music. The composer's instrumental music was the main source of his fame, but his vocal works are also a real gem.

Unfortunately, there is no book or research on the composer in Hungarian, so I have always relied on French and English literature. The published books are mainly biographical and the studies are often specific.

Many letters from Poulenc's life have survived. Most of these are in the National Library of Paris, and some audio and video recordings are also available there. Writers who have chronicled Poulenc's life have quoted from his letters and interviews in many places. At the time of my visit to Paris, I was collecting data from books which are available only in France.

My research is mainly concerned with harmonic processes, but unfortunately I discovered very little analysis in these publications.

II. Sources

My main source was the French music historian Hervé Lacombe's book of more than 1000 pages, written in 2013. The work is very thorough, rich and informative. The author writes mainly about the composer's life and the genesis of his works. In essence, it covers all the writings on Poulenc published up to 2013, making the research process easier for me.

Another significant publication is the 1959 work by Henri Hell. It has the advantage of being published in the last years of Poulenc's life, so Hell could get first-hand information. The English-language book provides an overview of music history, with an indication of the author's major works.

His sacred compositions have been relatively less dealt with so far, given the smaller number of them in the repertoire. However, a few English-language dissertations and theses have highlighted some small but, for me, relevant points of interest.

III. Method

The study of the works began with an analysis of the compositions. A full tonal, harmonic and formal analysis of each work is the focus of my research. The translations of the texts of the works are also important, and I have included them in their entirety in my thesis.

Before discussing the chapters in detail, I have outlined the titles, origins and performance apparatus of all Poulenc's a cappella works. This table allows a good comparison between sacred and secular works. The two separate worlds discussed in this dissertation, which also appeared in Poulenc's private life, present the listener with a very different harmonic world. His secular works are much more daring and innovative. His church compositions evoke the world of the old Romanesque churches. The chapters are divided into choral works for men, women and mixed choirs.

In the detailed analyses, the evidential will not be mentioned in the thesis. I have concentrated on the exciting, unusual harmonies, deceptive-cadences and other innovations, as these are the elements that make Poulenc's music unique.

IV. Results

The research revealed Poulenc's penchant for drawing on the musical tools of other periods. In fact, all period styles are represented in his sacred a cappella compositions. Most exciting is when several periods can be perceived within a single work, in relatively rapid alternation.

In this sense, his works could be described as rhapsodic. However, in my view, his music always reflects the text. The sharp shifts all serve to highlight the climaxes of the text.

I have called this diverse musical world an eclectic style. In my opinion, this kind of compositional variety definitely attracts the listener's attention.

In the summary, I have presented each work in a diagram. I have classified each measure into a stylistic period according to the features most characteristic of that period. I have indicated the stylistic transitions in the compositions as percentages on these diagrams, and finally I have also made a summary diagram based on all the pieces.

**V. Documentation of the Activities Relevant to
the Topic of the Dissertation**

*13 December 2023 – MŰPA Budapest – Béla Bartók
National Concert Hall*

*Christmas concert of Zsolt Máté Mészáros and the Béla
Bartók Female Choir of Szeged*

J. S. Bach: Toccata, adagio and fuge in C major, BWV 564

Franz Liszt: Ave Maria d'Arcadelt

Mikola Leontovics: Scsedrik

Joan Szymko: Hodie

Tchaikovsky–Zsolt Máté Mészáros:

The Nutcracker, Op. 71 – Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy

Adolphe Adam: Cantique de Noël

Cesar Franck: Panis Angelicus

Morandi: Rondò con imitazione de' campanelli

Zsolt Máté Mészáros: Two Christmas Organ Pieces –
Adeste Fideles

Karg-Elert: Cathedral Windows op. 106 – IV. Adeste
fideles

Franz Liszt: Christmas Tree - IV. March of the Three Wise
Men (Adeste fideles)

Francis Poulenc: Dialogues of the Carmelites, FP 159 -

Ave Maria

Karai József: Hodie Christus natus est

Kocsár Miklós: O magnum mysterium

Kocsár Miklós: O Splendid Mysterious Night

Antalffy-Zsiross Dezső: Christmas Chimes

Louis Vierne: Symphony No. 1 in D minor, Op. 14 for
Organ - VI. Final

Francis Poulenc: Litanies à la Vierge noire, FP 82

*15 May 2025 – University of Szeged Faculty of Arts –
Fricsay-hall*

Concert of Béla Bartók Female Choir of Szeged

Francis Poulenc: Ave verum, FP 154

Francis Poulenc: Dialogues of the Carmelites, FP 159 -

Ave Maria

Francis Poulenc: Litanies à la Vierge Noire FP 82

solist: Farkasné Sipos Rita Veronika

organist: Kuzma Levente

Tóth Péter: Lángok

Tóth Péter: Pénteki ima

Bartók Béla: Falun

solist: Farkasné Sipos Rita Veronika

pianist: Kerényi Mariann

conductor: Valkai Dávid