

DLA thesis abstract

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The Songs of Francis Poulenc  
Song Cycles on Poems of Louise de Vilmorin

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## I. Research background

I have been interested in Poulenc's vocal music since my time at university. Having had the privilege of encountering his enthrallingly beautiful and unique-sounding works in both solo and ensemble settings, the idea of creating an overview of his solo vocal repertoire has grown in me over the course of the past few years.

Lacking any definitive Hungarian language source on Poulenc—and such a work would be very timely indeed—I turned primarily to the English and French literature on the subject. In what follows, I wish to highlight the most important pieces of this rich international scholarship.

The first biographical work which dealt also with his major compositions was published in Poulenc's lifetime by Henri Hell (Henri Hell: *Francis Poulenc. Musicien français*, Paris: Librairie Plon, 1958.). Mr. Hell's close friendship with the composer ensures the authenticity of his work. The comprehensive study by Keith W. Daniel (*Francis Poulenc. His artistic Development and Musical Style*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1982.) was the first to step outside the biographical framework and address the compositional style and genre of Poulenc's work. Daniel's book is seminal reading often referenced by other authors. Wilfrid Mellers' book titled *Francis Poulenc* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.) provides an overview of the Poulenc oeuvre through the

analysis of a few selected works, while Richard E. Burton's concise, yet compelling piece offers an in-depth exploration of the composer's Catholic faith and sexual orientation (Richard E. Burton: *Francis Poulenc*. Bath, England: Absolute Press, 2002.).

The most exhaustive and extensive work on the subject is Carl B. Schmidt's *Entrancing Muse: A Documented Biography of Francis Poulenc*, which is a detailed study both of the composer's life and of his oeuvre. Poulenc's published collection of letters, *Correspondance 1915-1963* is also worth mentioning along with the extended and annotated versions of the volume such as the 1991 *Echo and Source Selected Correspondence 1915-1963* translated by Sidney Buckland and the 1994 *Correspondance 1910-1963* edited by Myriam Chimènes. The latter contains over 1000 letters, a number of which had never been published before. Several publications exist that contain Poulenc's writings on music, his lectures, and interviews. Nicholas Southon's *Articles and Interviews* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013.) and Stéphane Audel's conversations with the composer are the most frequently cited sources (Audel: *My Friends and Myself. [Moi et mes amis.]* Trans: James Harding. London: Dennis Dobson, 1978.).

The most unique sources touching his vocal works are perhaps Poulenc's own diary that he kept about the songs he wrote, the *Journal de mes Mélodies (Diary of My Songs*. Trans: Winifred Radford. London: Gollancz,

1989.), and Pierre Bernac's *The Man and His Songs* (*Francis Poulenc et ses mélodies*. Trans: Winifred Radford. London: Gollancz, 1977.).

## II. Sources

Of the above mentioned sources I relied most heavily on the study by Keith W. Daniel and on Carl B. Schmidt's biography. Both works divide the Poulenc oeuvre into clearly defined periods—this is in fact true of all the Poulenc biographies—and both discuss the vocal works in relative detail. Daniel's study is analytical and descriptive, while Schmidt focuses on the circumstances of composition and relevant data. The most extensive study of Poulenc's *mélodies* is Pierre Bernac's *The Man and His Songs*. Bernac first introduces Poulenc, both as a composer and as a man, then discusses the poems and songs—which he translates into English—progressing poet by poet, and later shares the wealth of performance-related advice that he gleaned from the composer as they prepared for concerts and during lessons he took from Poulenc. The other unique source is Poulenc's diary (*JdmM*), in which one can find data on the origins of the songs, interesting facts, technical and performance advice, and private reflections. In the CD companion booklet to *The Complete Songs* as published by Hyperion, Graham Johnson provides a detailed study of

the songs relying mostly on the previously mentioned two sources.

Over the course of my study of the *mélodies* I made use of the (unfortunately incomplete) four-volume compilation of vocal scores published by *Salabert*, which itself draws on several publications. The opuses circulated by *Durand*, *Eschig* and *Salabert* can be found in this compilation, while those missing from the aforementioned four-volume series are available in the *Boosey & Hawkes* edition (*Fancy*).

Luckily there is no lack of relevant recordings; I listened primarily to records released by *Hyperion* and *Signum Records*, but at the same time numerous excellent recordings – including several Poulenc-Bernac collaborations – can be found on the most popular music portals.

While writing the chapter on Louise de Vilmorin's life and work I relied on the essay by her brother André de Vilmorin as well as on the memoirs of her second husband, Count Pál Pálffy. For my analysis of the song cycles I drew on my own in-depth study of the songs as well as on my experiences as a performer.

### **III. Method**

Before writing my thesis I assembled the source material that concentrated on the *mélodies*. I chose to study the

songs in the order in which they appear in the catalogue of Poulenc's works as I felt this chronological approach would grant a more transparent, holistic picture of the stages of the composer's life as well as of the songs themselves.

The scores related to the subject needed to be ordered from abroad as the collections in the Hungarian libraries were patchy at best. Over the course of my analysis of the *mélodies* I attempted to highlight the material that was most relevant and interesting. I distinguished among the various creative periods of the composer taking care to place emphasis on the poets behind the lyrics and on Poulenc's relationship with them. After cataloguing the *mélodie oeuvre* I surveyed Poulenc's compositional techniques from the aspects of his choice of text, the piano accompaniment, form, structure, melody, and harmony.

Being aware of the circumstances behind the writing of the Vilmorin poems, I was also able to consider the Hungarian influence on Poulenc with the help of Albert Gyergyai's *A szép kertésznő*, Ferenc Bodri's *Louise de Vilmorinről*, François Gachot's *Írók között* and the Pálffy memoirs. These works – including some volumes of Vilmorin's poetry in French – are available at the most important Budapest libraries.

#### **IV. Results**

What lead me to the topic of my thesis was primarily my love of Poulenc's vocal works on the one hand and the unfortunate fact that his *mélodies* are so seldom performed and taught on the other. I believe my thesis to be a vital contribution to the literature on Poulenc primarily because it is the only extensive overview and discussion of his *mélodies* in the Hungarian language. Furthermore, the Hungarian sources relating to Louise de Vilmorin make for a unique chapter, and finally the discussion of the song cycles in such depth in any language is a first in Poulenc scholarship.

## V. Activity related to the topics of the dissertation

**Feb, 2001** – Poulenc: *Il vole; Violon; Fleurs*

Concert of Fischer Annie Scholarship winners

Hungarian Radio Marble Hall

Pianist: Balázs Réti

**May, 2008** – Poulenc: *Fiançailles pour rire*

Master Diploma Concert, University of Debrecen

Pianist: Judit Böszörményi

**Feb, 2016** – *Montparnasse, Les chemins de l'amour*

Nádor Hall, Budapest

Pianist: Márton Levente Horváth

**Feb, 2016** – Poulenc: Vilmorin song cycles

*Trois poèmes; Fiançailles pour rire; Métamorphoses*

Maladype Theatre, Budapest

Pianist: Katalin Hegedüs Gönczy

**Nov, 2016** – Poulenc: Vilmorin song cycles

*Trois poèmes; Fiançailles pour rire; Métamorphoses*

Szabó Ervin Library, Budapest

Music Palace, Miskolc

Pianist: Katalin Hegedüs Gönczy

**Sept, 2017** – Poulenc: *Violon, Fleurs*

Academic Day – University Concert Hall, Győr

Pianist: Balázs Réti

### **In teaching:**

Montparnasse, Paganini, Hier, Jezioro, La reine de cœur,

Les anges musiciens, Toréador, Aria of Tirésias.