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Francis Poulenc, *Francis Poulenc, Articles and Interviews: Notes from the Heart*. Collected, introduced and annotated by Nicolas Southon. Translated by Roger Nichols. Farnham and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2014. ix + 313pp. Illustrations, musical examples, notes and index. \$109.95 U.S. (hbk). ISBN 9781409466222; \$109.95 U.S. (ebk-PDF). ISBN 9781409466239; \$109.95 U.S. (ebk-ePUB). ISBN 9781409466246.

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2013 marked the fiftieth anniversary of French composer Francis Poulenc's death (1899-1963), a milestone at least cursorily acknowledged in North America (the Met dusted off an older production of the composer's 1957 opera *Dialogues des Carmélites* for a three-night run while the Canadian Opera Company mounted Robert Carsen's 1997 production), and somewhat more enthusiastically celebrated in France and the U.K. where a number of special performances, new productions, publications and academic conferences were organized throughout the year.[1]

Unlike Debussy and Ravel, two composers with whom Poulenc had a conflicted relationship at the beginning of his career, Poulenc has never traditionally benefitted from close study in musicological circles. The primary reason for this is no doubt a result of the fact that, on the surface at least, Poulenc was no musical innovator; the narratives of musical progress that dominated the discipline of musicology for much of the twentieth century were easily composed without so much as a tip of the hat in Poulenc's direction, and even within a specifically French musical context it was more expedient to acknowledge the technical advances made by Debussy (1862-1918) and link them to the music of Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) and Pierre Boulez (1925-) than to worry about what some viewed as the interwar musical trifles of Poulenc and his friends of the Groupe des Six.[2] That such teleological narratives of musical progress long obscured our historical understanding of musical cultures and traditions in the West has been thoroughly acknowledged over the past two decades, and one consequence of this is that in recent years Poulenc's anti-revolutionary approach to composition has been somewhat rehabilitated from the category of vice to that of virtue.

Indeed, Poulenc's life-long dedication to tonality, an ostensibly "regressive" aesthetic strategy first affirmed in the early 1920s within a French climate of ultra-modernist experimentation marked by polytonality and atonality, may be viewed as having been singularly clairvoyant—but also professionally dangerous—for a composer so young. That this choice was inspired, or at the very least encouraged, by the example of Igor Stravinsky there can be no doubt, but nor has it proven particularly helpful to view Poulenc's musical output as simply a derivative form of musical neoclassicism. Unlike his Russian colleague, who cultivated a public persona that stressed emotional detachment in the creative process, Poulenc increasingly emphasized the sincerity of his musical language; his works were "notes from the heart" which, despite their almost promiscuous use of stylistic allusions and musical borrowings, emerged from an authentic wellspring of musical memory and experience.

The volume under review here is a highly abridged translation of Poulenc's public writings (articles, reviews, lectures, interviews) that first appeared in 2011 under the title *J'écris ce qui me chante* (hereafter *J'écris*).[3] As Nicolas Southon—the book's compiler and editor—points out in his preface to this volume,

less than one third of *J'écrits* has here been offered in English. Furthermore, many cuts have been made to Southon's original—and thorough—"Introduction," but also to his introductory texts to each article, as well as to the footnotes, some of which include important excerpts of other, previously unpublished, documents. In short, this translation is a much more compact version of Southon's original 980-page tome and scholars of French music would do themselves a huge disservice to entirely overlook the latter in favour of the former.

That said, for some readers the relative brevity of this translation may no doubt be viewed as a virtue. After all, for sheer reading pleasure, Poulenc's published writings do not pack the same punch as his private correspondence in which his wit, verve, joie de vivre, anxieties and self-doubt are revealed amongst the behind-the-scenes context of his working life and the intrigues of French musical and cultural life.[4] Necessarily, a certain amount of repetition can be expected in the public writings of well-known individuals, and this selection of texts does mitigate this eventuality at the cost of being less exhaustive. Ultimately, while much shorter than *J'écrits*, this collection of articles and interviews does provide what can be considered the essentials from across Poulenc's career, offering insight into his musical, literary, and artistic tastes, the personal roots and development of his musical aesthetic, as well as new information that modifies our understanding of the creative genesis of particular works (such as his "secular cantata" *Figure humaine*, and his opera *Dialogues des Carmélites*). It also highlights how Poulenc—who but for a brief moment in the mid-1930s never relied on journalistic writing for financial security—used the press to defend his aesthetic orientation and to highlight the heterogeneous sources of his musical creativity (which ranged from Emmanuel Chabrier to Maurice Chevalier, Franz Schubert to Erik Satie, and many points between and beyond). The volume also allows us to track the way in which Poulenc crafted his persona for public consumption and how his autobiographical narrative took on increasing refinement as his fame and prestige grew throughout his career. It also demonstrates Poulenc's undeniable skill at narration; indeed the anecdote, which Southon views as an important "device" in Poulenc's literary style, plays an integral role in captivating the reader and ensuring a "friendly tone" that would ostensibly ingratiate the composer to his public (p. 2). This "anecdotalisation" of experience is common to Poulenc's approach across most of the genres of his critical writing included here (articles, critical articles and reviews, contributions to works by others, responses to surveys, lectures, and interviews) and is striking for the parallels it provides with the equally anecdotal (non-developmental) style of much of his music.

Nowhere are these anecdotes put to greater use than in Poulenc's eighteen interviews with critic Claude Rostand, initially broadcast over French radio and published in 1954. Never before translated in their entirety into English, their inclusion is particularly welcome given the influence they have had on the posthumous crafting of Poulenc's biography and legacy. In them, Poulenc lends credence to Rostand's suggestion (first proposed in a short review from 1950) that his musical personality incorporates the contrasting personalities of a "monk" and a "naughty boy" [*voyou*] (p. 247).[5] Thus acknowledging both the Catholic and decidedly profane aspects of the composer's music, Rostand's journalistic slogan—for better or for worse—quickly emerged as a structuring component in all subsequent writings on the composer. Such flashes of insight remain curiously underdeveloped throughout the interviews, prompting Emmanuel Buenzod, a contemporaneous reviewer, to claim that "what is really interesting here, is the very French art of elucidation, the nimble and charming way of dealing with all types of subjects, from the most serious to the most superficial, and to only say that which is appropriate in a tone that varies from casual elegance to real engagement." [6]

As these texts illustrate, Poulenc was little inclined to propose anything resembling an aesthetics, let alone a theoretical analysis, of his musical language. One noteworthy exception is his 1935 article "In Praise of Banality" (pp. 27-29), in which he defends the artist's right to "copy" the music of others, convinced as he was that if such copying was "intentional, felt, earthy and not born of weakness" it held the possibility of producing works of value. Citing Picasso ("the truly original artist is the one who never manages to copy exactly") and echoing the creative aesthetics of figures such as Jean Cocteau and

Maurice Ravel, Poulenc here avows his profoundly subjective dependency on pre-existing music. For Poulenc, imitation and citation should find their wellspring in desire, memory or love, but never from calculation or pastiche: “I detest in equal measure synthetic cuisine, synthetic perfume and synthetic art—I want garlic with my leg of mutton, real rose perfume and music that says clearly what it wants to say, even if it has to use vulgar words” (p. 28). As Hervé Lacombe’s recent and authoritative biography makes clear, Poulenc’s use of citation and even auto-citation increased throughout his career, and even though such citations do not always engage with a progressive paring down of material in the manner of Henri Matisse (a painter whom Poulenc viewed as a “model” for some of his own works) (p. 269), they do propose a successive recycling and reframing of musical material that is quite unique in twentieth-century musical practice. [7] Ultimately Poulenc’s personal reservoir of musical material evolved into one of the primary subjects of his compositional discourse, thus constituting a form of creative narcissism that can be equally located in the tone and content of many of his public writings.

Compared to *J’écris*, this abridged translation tends to lean slightly in favour of Poulenc’s articles that treat well-known composers (Beethoven, Weber, Debussy, Satie, Albeniz, Ravel, Strauss, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Messiaen). Unfortunately none of Poulenc’s eighteen published “homages” (many in praise of less celebrated figures including Christian Bérard, Jean Giraudoux, Adrienne Monnier, or Henry Barraud, among others) have been included, thus somewhat reducing the visibility of the specifically French confines of much of the composer’s creative and cultural network. The composer’s nationalism is an important theme that surfaces from time to time throughout the volume, and indeed Poulenc evoked the works of foreign composers primarily as foils to French sensibility and to remind his readers that “every great work is profoundly nationalist” (p. 66). His wartime writings, including an article about his ballet *Les Animaux modèles* (based on fables by La Fontaine) read as pointed defences of French traditions while successfully managing to skirt any suspicions of Pétainist sympathies.

Roger Nichols’s translation, while faithful to the meanings of Poulenc’s prose, does not always render its idiosyncratic style in convincing fashion. Perhaps overly scrupulous with regard to Poulenc (and Southon’s) syntactical constructions, Nichols’s English seems at times inordinately weighted down by the French original. To cite one example, a sentence like “Some people search for the unusual chord, the striking harmony, the new system” (p. 27), would benefit stylistically from seeing the definite articles replaced with indefinite ones, rendering the phrase more idiomatic without obscuring its meaning. The first page of the “Introduction” (p. 1) is especially shaky and has the unfortunate result of undermining a reader’s confidence at the outset of the volume, despite the generally solid work that follows. Indeed, it is odd to read in the first paragraph references to Poulenc as a composer “who harbours an intention of the rightness of his choices” or as a writer “who manages it all with ease, gifted as he is with a literary talent imbued with an individual style”—questions of style aside, the past tense seems more *à propos* in this particular context. On the same page “vaste” appears in the place of “vast” (or “huge”) and a few lines later an errant indefinite article (“Poulenc’s public face through a thorough a selection of his writings and interviews”) undermines readability. Errors such as these should have been caught during copy-editing, as should have the inaccurate reference to a phantom “p. 788” in this volume of only 313 pages (p. 137). Although the original French edition does not contain a bibliography it is regrettable that one was not prepared for this volume given that in all other ways it complies with the conventions of academic texts.

These criticisms aside, this collection nonetheless stands as a welcome addition to English-language literature on Francis Poulenc. Although Southon’s introductory texts, extremely helpful in *J’écris* for the work they do in contextualising Poulenc’s writings, are at times drastically shortened, the articles and interviews provided here still offer an important overview of Poulenc’s use of the press as a means of asserting his personality in a manner that complements and enlightens his compositional output.

## NOTES

[1] Two noteworthy conferences were “Rethinking Poulenc: 50 Years On,” Keele University, 21-23 June, 2013 and “Colloque Francis Poulenc 2013,” Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris, 22-23 January, 2013; Opéra de Paris, 15-16 November, 2013. Conference proceedings of the latter are in preparation.

[2] Namely Germaine Tailleferre, Louis Durey, Georges Auric, Darius Milhaud and Arthur Honegger.

[3] Francis Poulenc, *J'écris ce qui me chante. Textes et entretiens réunis, présentés et annotés par Nicolas Southon* (Paris: Fayard, 2011).

[4] Francis Poulenc, *Correspondance, 1910-1963*, edited by Myriam Chimènes (Paris: Fayard, 1994). See also Francis Poulenc, *Echo and Source. Selected Correspondance: 1915-1963*, translated and edited by Sidney Buckland (London: Gollancz, 1991).

[5] Claude Rostand, “Première audition du Concerto de Francis Poulenc,” *Paris-Presse* (26 July, 1950).

[6] Emmanuel Buenzod, “Radio-Poulenc,” Review-Article in Francis Poulenc’s collection of press-clippings, BnF, Département de la Musique, Vm-dos 10 (22)—Articles et Entretiens: “Ce qui retient ici, c’est plutôt l’art très français de l’élucidation, la façon preste et charmante d’aborder successivement tous les sujets, des plus sérieux aux plus frivoles et de n’en dire que ce qu’il convient, à mi-chemin entre le détachement élégant et l’engagement réel.”

[7] Hervé Lacombe, *Francis Poulenc* (Paris: Fayard, 2013).

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