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Airs chantés

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

Jean Moréas (1856-1910)

The *Airs chantés* are a set of short melodies by Francis Poulenc composed between 1927 and 1928 with poetry by Jean Moréas. In these songs, Poulenc's goal was to set the poetry ironically: "I detest Moréas and I chose these poems precisely because I found them suitable for mutilation." (Poulenc, 2006) This mutilation manifests itself through an over emphasis of the poetic meter, accents and strange leaps in pitch, ridiculously fast tempos, and the repetition of words or lines of poetry that are insignificant. *Air romantique* and *Air vif*, for example, are incredibly frantic with an exaggeration in beating the poetic meter. In *Air Champêtre*, Poulenc meddles with the poetry in such a way that he changes the meaning: "sous la mousse, sous la mousse à moitié". *Air Grave* is composed in a minor key with a lot of dissonance. The music sounds tormented and overly romantic which contradicts the light pastoral poetry of Jean Moréas. Despite Poulenc's deep hatred for the poetry, this cycle is quite pleasant to perform and entertaining to listen to. *Air Champêtre* recalls the famous Parisian pop music of the time sung by Edith Piaf. Poulenc asks: "have I been punished for my vandalism? I fear so, because this song that irritates me is said to be a hit."

La Voix Humaine

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

Jean Cocteau (1889-1963)

The curtain opens on a disheveled bedroom where a young, elegant woman struggles to fall asleep. Suddenly, the phone rings. *La Voix Humaine* proceeds to bring us on our anonymous protagonist's journey through unbearable loneliness. The telephone is the protagonist's last connection to her ex-lover, who has abandoned her to be with someone else.

The one act opera, with one set, and one singer mirrors this sense of psychotic boredom and

isolation. Jean Cocteau's play was set to music in a recitative-like, declamatory style by Francis Poulenc in 1958. The phone conversation is carried out but the audience is unable to hear any answers from her lover on the other end. The protagonist's fears are highlighted through the unreliable phone service and the overhearing of jazz music from the receiver. She fears that her lover isn't home and has lied to her. The telephone becomes a symbol of pretense and deception. Her deteriorating psychological state is brought out by many recurring lyric motifs. As she anxiously waits for the phone to ring, motifs in the accompaniment reiterate obsessively. Her loss of control is highlighted in the music by a change from a tonally ambiguous, declamatory delivery to a tonal, lyrical section which resembles an aria. In it, she blatantly admits to her lover that she has attempted suicide by swallowing 12 sleeping pills. After having been cut off yet again, she desperately prays to God for help. When her lover calls back, she wraps the telephone wire around her neck and urges him to hang up. Gradually, she slips into oblivion and drops the telephone as she repeats the words "I love you".

Cocteau's play was originally performed in 1930 at the Comédie-Française. It's inspiration was derived from the desire to create a work of utmost simplicity. He stripped his set design of any mechanical effects. Similarly, Poulenc rejected the idea of writing *La Voix Humaine* for Maria Callas, despite his editor's suggestion: "We were at La Scala, with my editor Hervé Dugardin, and Madame Callas had just sung. And she pushed aside tenors and baritones to bow to the applause that she had earned. Hervé Dugardin told me at that moment: "What we should write for her is *La Voix Humaine*, because there is only one woman, she would have all the applause." "(Berenguer, 2003) A woman of such "diva-status" may not have suited the role of an anonymous, entirely selfless protagonist. The role was therefore written for Denise Duval who was a favorite of Poulenc's. She premiered his Thérèse in *Les mamelles de Tirésias* and

Blanche de la Force in *Les Dialogues des Carmelites*. Her humble voice was rectified by her acting abilities: “she was a most gifted singing-actress.”(André Tubeuf, Elizabeth Forbes)

Poulenc considered her a co-composer of *La Voix Humaine* since he worked very closely with her throughout the composition process. Her subtle and elegant portrayal of this dramatic scene was exactly what Poulenc and Cocteau wanted. Cocteau was the stage director, costume designer and librettist of this work. Poulenc met Cocteau early on in his career but felt he needed a great deal of experience before setting his play. *La Voix Humaine* is one of Poulenc’s later works. His late operas depict serious subjects. This is unlike his earlier dramatic works that “deal with the inconsequential, if not the downright absurd”. (Roger Nichols)

The telephone was invented in 1876 and greatly revolutionized the lives of the common people. The frequent cutting and interruption of the lines was a reality and a source of great frustration. Our heroine is a regular, lonely woman in the 1930s struggling against realistic obstacles. She is quite a relief from the dramatic heroines of Italian opera who are either exotic women or women of high status that are difficult to relate to. Despite its differences with Italian opera, Poulenc’s love for the human voice is made quite evident by Bernac: “he wanted some of his larger works... to be sung almost in the style of Tosca or Otello. He hated what he called the “pseudo-intelligent singer, usually without voice... I like to hear some singing with a good sauce of pedal (the butter!), without which my music is destroyed.” (Bernac, Elliott, 2006)

Luckily, there are gramophone recordings of this wonderful work with Duval and Poulenc performing. Since then, *La Voix Humaine* has been revived by the best singers of our time including Jessye Norman and Renata Scotto.

La Dame de Monte Carlo

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

Jean Cocteau (1889-1963)

World War I took the lives of many men but it also left behind many widows. *La Dame de Monte Carlo* is a dramatic monologue written by Jean Cocteau and set to music by Francis Poulenc in 1961. It chronicles the final hours of one of the many widows left in poverty after the war. To escape the emptiness of poverty, our protagonist enjoys the pleasures of gambling at the glamorous Monte Carlo casino. She sells her most precious possessions to satisfy her addiction. When she finally realizes that she can not escape from her accumulating debt, she throws herself into the sea.

The casino was a very popular destination at the time. This area was also home to the Opera de Monte Carlo and the Hôtel de Paris where the elite enjoyed utmost luxury. Poulenc lived in Monte Carlo between 1923 and 1925 and described it as the “Venice of [his] twenties” (Poulenc, 2006). He depicts the widows as such: “I have often seen at close quarters those old wrecks of women, light fingered ladies of the gambling tables.” (Poulenc, 2006)

La Dame de Monte Carlo’s orchestration is similar to that of *La Voix Humaine* and it is also written in a declamatory style. Despite this, the underlying pulse is maintained throughout. Poulenc explains that to avoid monotony, he has attempted to give a different colour to every verse of the poem: sadness, pride, lyricism, violence and sarcasm. (Poulenc, 2006) These colours can be heard very clearly as we follow our protagonist’s journey toward her death. The piece ends in anguish and misery as our protagonist throws herself into the water. The jump and splash is personified in the music through the long decrescendo on the high note and the final splash, or short chord reiteration in the piano. The heroines of *La Voix Humaine* and *La Dame de Monte Carlo* are intrinsically linked by an all-encompassing desperation and feeling of loss. Both resolve to escape through suicide.

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