

Francis Poulenc

Concerto in G minor for Organ, String Orchestra, and Timpani

FRANCIS POULENC WAS BORN IN PARIS ON JANUARY 7, 1899, AND DIED IN PARIS ON JANUARY 30, 1963. HE COMPOSED HIS ORGAN CONCERTO BETWEEN 1934 AND 1938; THE FIRST PERFORMANCE, A PRIVATE ONE, TOOK PLACE IN THE PARIS SALON OF THE PRINCESSE EDMOND DE POLIGNAC ON DECEMBER 16, 1938, WITH MAURICE DURUFLÉ, ORGAN, AND NADIA BOULANGER CONDUCTING. THE PUBLIC PREMIERE TOOK PLACE ON JUNE 21, 1939, IN THE SALLE GAVEAU, PARIS, WITH DURUFLÉ, AND ROGER DÉSORMIÈRE CONDUCTING.

THE CONCERTO IS SCORED FOR SOLO ORGAN WITH STRINGS AND TIMPANI.

Poulenc was in the habit of noting dates at the end of his published scores, and on the last page of the score of his Concerto for Organ, String Orchestra, and Timpani we read: "Noizay, April 1938—Anost, August 1938," suggesting that this work occupied him for only four months in his thirty-eighth year. In fact its gestation was long and difficult, and the composer admitted that it was one of the hardest pieces he ever had to write. This was no doubt because he had never written for the organ before, and although there were a few pieces for organ and strings in circulation (Handel's concertos, for example), the addition of timpani to the mix creates a completely new ambience for which there was no precedent whatever. In addition, Poulenc had decided to avoid the traditional three-movement or three-part concerto form and develop a looser structure related to the 18th-century *Fantaisie*, a form without standard guidelines of any sort.

Two remarkable women, both of whom contributed immensely to French music between the wars, were at the heart of the concerto's origin. The first was the Princess Edmond de Polignac, born Winnaretta Singer, heiress to the sewing-machine fortune. Born in America and brought up in England, she made Paris her home, and by marrying the Prince de Polignac (a modest composer) she supplied her husband with a fortune and herself with a title. After her husband's death in 1901, the Princess replaced their fashionable residence in the XVI^e Arrondissement with an enormous Greek-revival mansion containing a sizeable concert room in which she had an organ installed by the celebrated builders Cavaillé-Coll. She established a pattern of commissioning works by young composers for performance at her home; the long list of composers who benefited from her largesse includes Satie, Stravinsky, Milhaud, Falla, Tailleferre, Sauguet, Françaix, Poulenc, and Weill. At its height, between the wars, the Princess's salon was where the most important new French music of any kind was to be heard.

The other godmother to the Poulenc concerto was Nadia Boulanger, who pioneered the revival of early music, taught several generations of young composers, and forced the acceptance of women as conductors upon a resistant world. She became a close friend of the Princess and in 1933 started conducting concerts in the salon. The following year the Princess suggested to Nadia that the very young Jean Françaix might write an organ concerto simple enough for her, Winnaretta, to play. Françaix, who had a film score to write, suggested that Poulenc be asked instead (or as well), but the latter, although he accepted the commission, found it exceedingly difficult to do. He had already composed a concerto (for two pianos) for the Princess in 1932, which he had played with Jacques Février at the Venice Biennale, where she took obvious pride in her patronage. In the case of the new concerto, three years passed in which Nadia was trying to bring it to the center of Poulenc's attention, but early in 1938 it was still not ready. His *Litanies à la vierge noire*, a film score, the Mass in G, and a series of fine songs all somehow got in the way. By the time Poulenc completed the work, making a special effort in the summer of 1938, it was no longer intended for the Princess as its solo performer. When it was finally heard in the Hôtel Singer-Polignac in December 1938, it was Maurice Duruflé who played the solo part with Nadia Boulanger conducting, and it was again Duruflé who gave the first public performance in Paris six months later, this time under the baton of Roger Désormière (who in Poulenc's opinion lacked Nadia's warmth and lyricism). The score acknowledges Duruflé's help with the registration of the solo part and is dedicated to the Princess.

The long gestation of the concerto may be in part attributed to the shift in Poulenc's world-view that occurred at that time. His early music earned him prodigious success just following the end of World War I, and of all the members of Les Six he was the one who most clearly personified the spirit of clowning and frivolity for which they became quickly notorious. His music did not exactly lack seriousness, but its wit, its tunefulness, and its sprightly rhythms seemed to cast him as the ideal composer for *Le Jazz-Age*. Through his exploration of modern poetry and his reattachment to the Catholic church, a new strain of religious devotion and of poetic depth can be heard. He was aware that the Organ Concerto would probably be performed in churches, and its devotional tone belongs there. It was in keeping with his

quest for a deeper spiritual language that he created for himself the obstacles of instrumentation and form that called for a special creative effort to overcome. The clown's grin is nowhere to be seen.

Bach's organ fantasias provide the closest model on which Poulenc might have drawn. Bach-like phrases are heard at intervals throughout; Stravinsky's spiky style is also to be heard (Bach and Stravinsky were Nadia Boulanger's twin gods). Poulenc's harmonic palette ranges from forthright common chords (major and minor, offered without shame or embarrassment) to dense coagulations of notes that sound harsh on the organ yet sweetened by the strings. The organ, of course, can tinkle or roar; it can hold a melody over string accompaniment or itself provide a chordal background for the other instruments. In the context of 20th-century French organ music, especially that of Messiaen, the solo writing does not approach the virtuosity which the instrument can accommodate, but remains more narrowly within the Bach orbit.

If Poulenc was thinking of a normal orchestra, just omitting wind instruments on the grounds that the organ is itself a battery of wind instruments, then the timpani would be a normal remnant. But the timpani adds such a striking *tinta* to the ensemble that a normal orchestra never even comes to mind. Poulenc writes for the timpani as a fully chromatic instrument with a range of half an octave, leaving the re-tunings and the choice of drums to the player. But like the organ part its purpose is not virtuoso display.

The piece is perhaps best understood as an Introduction and five principal sections, respectively fast-slow-fast-slow-fast, with many suggestions of themes and figures borrowed from one section to another. The Introduction offers an imperious statement in a solid G minor from the organ with a mild-mannered response. The strings suggest a lamentation, and the music remains tentative until a decisive Allegro sets up a bright forward motion, the first main section. This reaches a brilliant G major ending and gives way to another Andante, perhaps to be seen as a slow movement in which the music flows modestly along, mostly subdued. This too rises to a brilliant ending, this time with huge A minor and A major chords on the organ. The third episode is speedy and agitated, and the fourth is calm. The fifth is a reworking of the first Allegro, followed by the return of the opening bars. The rest is a sublimely peaceful coda in which a solo viola and then a solo cello join the organ's chords against a gently rocking figure in the rest of the strings and a long held G from the organ pedalboard.

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The first American performance of Poulenc's Concerto for Organ, String Orchestra, and Timpani was in a concert at the Germanic Museum at Harvard on February 24, 1942, under the auspices of Mrs. Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge; E. Power Biggs was organ soloist with the Fiedler Sinfonietta, Arthur Fiedler conducting.

The First Boston Symphony Orchestra performances of Poulenc's concerto were given on October 29 and 30, 1948, with Richard Burgin conducting and E. Power Biggs as soloist, an additional performance being given that November 21. The only BSO performances since then featured Biggs with Charles Munch conducting in November 1949 (a benefit for the Albert Schweitzer Hospital); Berj Zamkochian with Munch conducting in November 1960 (at which time the work was recorded for RCA); and Simon Preston, in his BSO debut, with Seiji Ozawa conducting on November 30 and December 3, 1991, as part of a program marking the 100th anniversary of Charles Munch's birth (and on which occasion the work was recorded in concert by Deutsche Grammophon).