

Looking Through a Mirror: Poulenc's Self-Reflection in *La voix humaine*

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Abstract

The monodrama is an underdeveloped genre in the field of Western classical music. Francis Poulenc (1899-1963), French pianist and composer, would have heard of only one example of a monodrama in his time, and yet he still decided to set the one-woman play La voix humaine (The Human Voice) to music. Having just written two operas that follow successful formulas, why did he deviate from this path? I argue that Poulenc saw a unique opportunity to express deeply personal feelings in La voix humaine. The troubled story of the main character coupled with the excellent performance by his muse Denise Duval would adequately express Poulenc's fascination with the female psyche, his failed romantic relationships, and his struggle with his homosexuality that plagued him for most of his life.

Francis Poulenc's fascination with femininity, his obsession with the operatic diva, and the torment of his sexuality inspired him to compose within a consistently underdeveloped genre, the mono-opera *La voix humaine*. In many ways, writing a monodrama poses more challenges than rewards whereas the well-established framework of traditional opera has been proven successful over the centuries. Deviation from this formula suggests Poulenc wrote this mono-opera for deeply personal reasons. Through the single character of "Elle", the protagonist of Jean Cocteau's play, and with the perfect vocal conduit of Denise Duval, Poulenc conveyed his personal feelings, revealing aspects of his romantic relationships and mental health, both of which were lifetime struggles for him.

Monodrama or mono-opera are interchangeable terms for an opera that stars only one singing character throughout the show. It is a genre that is rarely explored in Western classical music. To date, fewer than 10 monodramas have reached any recognizable level of fame, at least half of which have been written in the 1950s or later, including Poulenc's contribution of *La voix humaine*. When comparing the number of compositions in this genre to the lengthy history of operatic compositions beginning in the 1600s, clearly monodrama is an underdeveloped genre. Most composers are unwilling to invest their time and talents in these types of projects, and understandably so. In a traditional opera, there are infinite possibilities to create visual and musical interest by having the various characters interact with each other. The powerful sound of the many singers is usually matched with an impressive and dense orchestra. The most notable advantage of a traditional opera is that the burden of the show's success is more evenly spread between the cast members.

In a monodrama, the composer must put their faith in the sole performer to make their work a success. The source material or libretto must be compelling, the vocal line must be

engaging to captivate the audience with the limited timbre and range of a single performer, the orchestra must not be too overpowering to hear the singer, and the chosen vocalist must be an incredibly capable actor. Even after ensuring that the source material and music are quality, a mediocre performance by the singer could make the opera a flop. Creating conditions for success in a monodrama is a risky and rarely rewarding move. And yet, these exact conditions were met within Poulenc's *La voix humaine*. Poulenc rediscovered the compelling source material in his longtime friend Jean Cocteau's one-woman play while his professional relationship with soprano Denise Duval had developed into a close friendship. The trust among these three creatives fostered an ideal setting for Poulenc to showcase Cocteau's writing and Duval's performance.

Poulenc and Cocteau first became friends in the 1920s with the formation of the now-famous composer friend group, "Les Six." While Cocteau was not a core member, he would collaborate frequently on creative projects with the six composers, providing texts to set to music. It was during this time when Cocteau was writing his early works that Poulenc first set some of the writer's poems to music. Poulenc enjoyed Cocteau's whimsical aesthetics that were written to highlight the gay camp style.¹ As a young person who was just beginning to live as an "out" gay man, this expressive style of writing highly appealed to Poulenc. As his fame increased, Poulenc's network of friends and colleagues in the arts expanded, allowing him to make friendships with other singers, instrumentalists, and poets who would help him develop his compositional style. Poulenc had plenty of male friends in the field, but he was especially drawn to talented women, with whom he made deep and long-lasting friendships. One woman Poulenc met in the 1930s and remained friends with for the rest of his life was poet Louise de Vilmorin.

¹ Keith Clifton, "Mots cachés: Autobiography in Cocteau's and Poulenc's *La Voix humaine*," *Canadian University Music Review / Revue de musique des universités canadiennes* 22, no. 1 (2001): 76, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014499ar>

While Poulenc would frequently choose poems written by his friends Guillaume Apollinaire, Paul Éluard, and Max Jacob, Vilmorin was one of Poulenc's favorite poets, saying "Few people move me as much as Louise de Vilmorin."² He was captivated by her writing style; her poems were boldly expressive yet not so overwhelming to be unrelatable to the common reader. Compared to the work of great French poets such as Paul Verlaine and Charles Baudelaire that would inspire the huge genre of *mélodie* during the 19th century, Vilmorin's romantic expressions were more laidback and aloof. Despite her cool-headed nature, Vilmorin's work was criticized as too feminine, a critique that Poulenc would also receive as he frequently undermined the standard tonality made popular by German composers during the 1800s. Linked by the commonality of their artistry and aesthetics, Poulenc was thrilled to set her works to music, saying "The poems of Louise de Vilmorin provide material for truly feminine songs. That is what delights me."³ Poulenc was never trying to fit into the mold developed by the great composers of the German Romantic era. Poulenc selected feminine texts and composed feminine music because they were the most authentic to his expressive style.

Poulenc's compositional style, characterized by his selection of text and musical choices, is most evident in his operas *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, *Dialogues des Carmélites*, and *La voix humaine*. Each opera features women as the main characters; in the case of *Carmélites*, it has an almost all-female cast. Each story explores profound topics such as how to gain satisfaction from life, the importance of religious devotion in the face of death, and the intense suffering caused by losing the love of your life, all told from a female perspective. The characters in these stories express themselves authentically and with unashamed sentimentality, qualities of communication

² Francis Poulenc, *Diary of My Songs [Journal de mes mélodies]*, (London: Victor Gollancz, 1985), 37.

³ Francis Poulenc, *Diary of My Songs [Journal de mes mélodies]*, (London: Victor Gollancz, 1985), 39.

that Poulenc valued in his own life and relationships. Poulenc experienced heightened emotions such as elated highs and depressive lows throughout his life due to his manic-depressive disorder.⁴ While his condition caused him much suffering, it is also likely the reason Poulenc developed his compositional style of intense emotional lyricism, highlighted in his operatic works. Poulenc found the grand opera stage to be the perfect place to express feelings that were too large for ordinary life.

The operatic diva has been celebrated for centuries. It started with the creation of the "prima donna" or "first lady" of the opera. This would be one of the opera's main characters and the person with the most virtuosic and impressive passages of music. Over time, composers wrote even more challenging music for the *prima donna*, and the singers who acted in these roles began to accumulate huge fan bases. With the accumulation of fame, power, and status, the *prima donna* was transformed into the *diva*, from the Italian word "goddess." Divas were popular among all audiences, but gay men especially were drawn to worship these singers and actresses.⁵ The concept of a diva became a reliable character trope in gay camp performative arts and remains largely unchanged to this day.

Poulenc was no exception to this trend of becoming enamored with the operatic diva. He attended the opera frequently and was supposedly struck with inspiration to write *La voix humaine* after attending a Verdi opera starring Maria Callas.⁶ It was through his observation of

⁴ Keith Clifton, "Mots cachés: Autobiography in Cocteau's and Poulenc's *La Voix humaine*," *Canadian University Music Review / Revue de musique des universités canadiennes* 22, no. 1 (2001): 81, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014499ar>

⁵ Keith Clifton, "Mots cachés: Autobiography in Cocteau's and Poulenc's *La Voix humaine*," *Canadian University Music Review / Revue de musique des universités canadiennes* 22, no. 1 (2001): 74, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014499ar>

⁶ Roger Nichols, "Joy, Suffering and Farewell: 1957-1963," in *Poulenc: A Biography*, (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2020), 254. Though this may be true, Poulenc later says in an interview that he was inspired to look at the play after a recommendation by his friend Hervé Durgardin.

an opera rehearsal of *Madama Butterfly* that he met his future muse, Denise Duval. Impressed with her beautiful singing but more importantly, her capacity to portray complex emotions, Poulenc asked Duval to star in the premiere of his first opera *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*. The two of them quickly developed a close relationship and he chose Duval again for the lead role of Blanche in the French premiere of his next opera *Dialogues des Carmélites*. By the time Poulenc was working on his third opera *La voix humaine*, Duval was the natural choice for the role of "Elle," the main and only character. Duval took on more than a performing role in this opera, working directly with Poulenc while he was writing the music so that it fit her voice "more perfectly".⁷ By this time their friendship had deepened such that Duval could critique Poulenc's work without causing resentment. One exchange between the two of them found Poulenc commenting in the rehearsal room that a phrase, "[sounded] 'un peu dur à mon avis' [a bit harsh in my opinion], to which Duval [replied], 'il est un peu dur parce qu'il est trop aigu' [it's a bit harsh because it's too high], and Poulenc duly [transposed] it down a third."⁸

Historical sources are quick to label Poulenc as gay, but like the people of the time, these sources often lack the language to accurately describe alternative sexualities with nuance. While Poulenc may have fit into the accepted gender binary, the society of his time had little framework for understanding a sexuality that was neither heterosexual nor homosexual. In modern terms, his sexuality would possibly be described as bisexual or fluid. He grew up in love with a female childhood friend, Raymonde Linossier, whom he wanted to marry, but was deeply impacted by her sudden death in 1930. He had a few notable relationships with men over the

⁷ Roger Nichols, "Joy, Suffering and Farewell: 1957-1963," in *Poulenc: A Biography*, (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2020), 256.

⁸ Roger Nichols, "Joy, Suffering and Farewell: 1957-1963," in *Poulenc: A Biography*, (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2020), 256.

years but fathered a daughter with a woman named Frédérique Lebedeff in 1946. Perhaps because he had already acquired a reputation as a gay man, or perhaps because his daughter Marie-Ange was born out of wedlock, Poulenc never publicly acknowledged that he had a daughter and instead claimed to be her godfather. Poulenc was in a relationship with career sergeant Louis Gautier when Poulenc passed from a heart attack in 1963.⁹ Despite the growing acceptance of homosexuality by Parisians at the time, Poulenc was still under pressure from a largely Roman Catholic society to have more standard relationships that were centered on heterosexual monogamy. Raised as a devout Catholic, Poulenc may well have felt conflicted between his sexuality and his faith. The cognitive dissonance of trying to reconcile these two opposing aspects of his identity may have been what spurred him to express himself through his music.

Much of what Poulenc wrote demonstrated the pull between the two sides of his nature, one of a monk and one of a rascal.¹⁰ Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the contrast of two compositions written between 1945 and 1950. Written in 1945 and first performed in 1947, his first opera *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, meaning *The Breasts of Tirésias*, is a surrealist *opéra bouffe* with an outrageous plot. After the main character Thérèse tires of being a submissive housewife, her breasts turn into balloons and fly away, changing her into a man named Tirésias. Just a few years after the premiere and success of this outrageous work, Poulenc composed a setting of *Stabat Mater* as a tribute to the passing of his friend Christian Bernard.¹¹ The Medieval

⁹ Roger Nichols, "Joy, Suffering and Farewell: 1957-1963," in *Poulenc: A Biography*, (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2020), 251.

¹⁰ Roger Nichols, "'Liberty, I Write Your Name': 1944-1952," in *Poulenc: A Biography*, (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2020), 203.

¹¹ Roger Nichols, "'Liberty, I Write Your Name': 1944-1952," in *Poulenc: A Biography*, (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2020), 199.

text explores the suffering of the Virgin Mary during Christ's crucifixion, a grief that may have mirrored Poulenc's own loss. Whether frivolous or sacred, this dual nature was consistently present in Poulenc's artistic and personal life. While that may have made it difficult to "fit in" to society, it made him a truly expressive artist capable of setting deeply emotional texts to music with great success. Two years before deciding to write *La voix humaine*, Poulenc composed the opera *Dialogues des Carmélites* in 1957, exploring the true story of a sect of nuns who chose to sacrifice their lives rather than give up their faith during the French Revolution. Poulenc found the mental fortitude and piety of the nuns admirable to the point of transformative, and it was the emotional experience of writing the opera, as well as Denise Duval's moving performance as Blanche, that readied him for the intensity of *La voix*.¹²

La voix humaine is the story of "Elle," or "She", a woman who is going through a breakup with her lover but is still clinging desperately to the happy memories they once shared. The entire opera consists of Elle speaking to her lover on the telephone; the audience never hears his side of the conversation. Elle is hopeful that her lover will return to her, but her hopes are crushed when it is revealed that he is answering the phone from his new girlfriend's home. Once Elle deduces this, she demands the truth from her lover who never reveals his location. The two of them lose the connection, literally as the phone line disconnects and metaphorically as Elle realizes that she has no chance to convince him to return to her. After this harrowing realization, she experiences a psychotic break and ends her life. Poulenc was intimately familiar with the deep sense of loss that the protagonist Elle experiences. Due to his manic-depressive disorder, Poulenc was frequently the more emotional partner in his romantic relationships and struggled to

¹² Denis Waleckx and Sidney Buckland, "'A musical confession': Poulenc, Cocteau and *La voix humaine*," In *Francis Poulenc: Music, Art and Literature*, edited by Sidney Buckland, 320–347. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 344.

find a partner who could withstand his unstable temperament. When his relationships ended, such as the ones with Richard Chanlaire and Raymond Destouches, Poulenc was thrown into depressive episodes that he would write about in letters to close friend Pierre Bernac.¹³ Even when his relationship was going well, Poulenc couldn't help but have a negative expectation over how the relationship would eventually end, a similarity that he saw in the heroine Elle. This sentiment is displayed in a letter written by Poulenc, reading "Just as Blanche was myself, so She is again myself, in relation to Louis, because life will no doubt deprive me, in one way or another, of this angel."¹⁴ Even though Elle's relationship and Poulenc's relationship with Gautier would have drastically different outcomes, Poulenc couldn't help but see himself as Elle due to his lifelong experiences of loss.

An important contributing factor to Poulenc writing only three operas in his lifetime is his discerning approach to selecting librettos for musical adaptation. Poulenc had high standards for the quality of the poetry and prose that he selected for his works, stating, "I need to believe in the words that I hear sung."¹⁵ Poulenc stated in an interview that he first had the idea to look at Cocteau's play when it was recommended to him by his friend Hervé Dugardin.¹⁶ Poulenc would likely already have heard of the play, as it was written during the early years of his and Cocteau's friendship, but it was because of this suggestion that he revisited the text. Poulenc felt an instant connection to the text of *La voix*, and when he decided to set it to music, he said that never had

¹³ Keith Clifton, "Mots cachés: Autobiography in Cocteau's and Poulenc's *La Voix humaine*," *Canadian University Music Review / Revue de musique des universités canadiennes* 22, no. 1 (2001): 81, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014499ar>

¹⁴ Denis Waleckx and Sidney Buckland, "'A musical confession': Poulenc, Cocteau and *La voix humaine*," In *Francis Poulenc: Music, Art and Literature*, edited by Sidney Buckland, 320–347. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 321. Poulenc is referring to the characters Blanche from *Dialogues des Carmélites* and She/Elle from *La voix humaine*, as well as his partner at the time of writing *La voix*, Louis Gautier.

¹⁵ Francis Poulenc, *Diary of My Songs [Journal de mes mélodies]*, (London: Victor Gollancz, 1985), 37

¹⁶ Nicolas Southon and Roger Nicols, "Article XXXIII Interview with Henri Hell," in *Francis Poulenc: Articles and Interviews; Notes from the Heart*, (London: Routledge, 2016), 158.

he studied and adhered to the prosody of a text so intensely before.¹⁷ It was of paramount importance to write music that allowed the intense emotions of the story to come through without interference from the orchestra. Unlike *Dialogues des Carmélites*, which took more than three years to finish, Poulenc finished the musical sketches and orchestration for *La voix* within six months.¹⁸ As discussed earlier, his collaboration with Denise Duval to polish his initial ideas was a contributing factor to Poulenc's passion and speed for the project. After finishing the music, he wrote a letter to his friend Rose Dercourt-Plaut and spoke about his excitement for its premiere, calling it "a musical confession!!!".¹⁹ Poulenc saw himself as the character of Elle, relating to her despair, her story, and the way that she expressed herself.

While it was a cathartic experience for Poulenc to express his emotions in *La voix*, he did so cleverly, obscuring the depth of his emotions under the exciting exterior of Elle's hysterical behavior. Unless the audience members knew of Poulenc's life and relationships, they would take the opera at face value and have no idea that Poulenc was using the opera as an embodiment of his experiences. This method of hiding emotional truth under the surface was intentionally developed by Cocteau, who wrote the play with the influence of the gay camp style, a form of expression that was increasing in popularity in Paris in the 1920s. Cocteau was also a gay man, though his experiences with romance and relationships were wildly different than that of Poulenc. Cocteau made no efforts to hide his sexuality and chose high-profile romantic partners, a choice that received some criticism from the more traditionally-minded public. Even amid

¹⁷ Denis Waleckx and Sidney Buckland, "'A musical confession': Poulenc, Cocteau and *La voix humaine*," In *Francis Poulenc: Music, Art and Literature*, edited by Sidney Buckland, 320–347. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 344.

¹⁸ Roger Nichols, "Joy, Suffering and Farewell: 1957-1963," in *Poulenc: A Biography*, (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2020), 260.

¹⁹ Denis Waleckx and Sidney Buckland, "'A musical confession': Poulenc, Cocteau and *La voix humaine*," In *Francis Poulenc: Music, Art and Literature*, edited by Sidney Buckland, 320–347. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 344.

potential backlash, Cocteau made a career out of his love for camp, using the style as inspiration for his films, his fashion, and several plays, including *La voix*. The influence of camp is apparent from the stage directions that Cocteau has written for the set. The room where Elle resides is supposed to be "une chambre de meurtre", or "a room of murder" and she is directed to be "étendue, comme assassinée", or "stretched out, as if murdered."²⁰ Cocteau had quick and dry humor and no doubt wrote these over-dramatic directions intentionally. Even the method by which Elle commits suicide is unbelievably dramatic. She lays in the bed, wraps the phone cord around her neck, and while murmuring "I love you" repeatedly, she drops the receiver, strangling herself. Poulenc kept the stage directions and how Elle ends her life intact, signaling that he too appreciated the campy style in which the play was written. Poulenc and Cocteau preferred that only those audience members who could see beyond the flashy surface of the work would understand their true intention of expressing intimate parts of their lives and relationships.

Francis Poulenc's manic-depressive disorder affected multiple aspects of his life, making it especially difficult for him to maintain romantic relationships. Although he often remained friends with his former lovers, Poulenc couldn't help but feel that he had failed as a partner, and this feeling of defeat inevitably impacted the success of his subsequent relationships. His struggle with the conflict between his sexuality and his religion is vividly reflected in his compositions, where he sought to express both sides of his personality. Poulenc's collaboration with his muse, Denise Duval, was particularly significant. He became enamored with her expressive capabilities and utilized her talents as an extension of himself. For Poulenc, Duval represented the perfect voice to express the intense feelings of Elle, a character in whom he saw

²⁰ Keith Clifton, "Mots cachés: Autobiography in Cocteau's and Poulenc's *La Voix humaine*," *Canadian University Music Review / Revue de musique des universités canadiennes* 22, no. 1 (2001): 78, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014499ar>

his own reflection. Ultimately, Poulenc wrote *La voix humaine* because he identified with Elle's romantic struggle, using the opera to personify his feelings and achieve a cathartic release.