

Mots cachés: Autobiography in Cocteau's and Poulenc's *La Voix humaine*

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Article abstract

Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites* has been consistently identified as the summit of his operatic works. Such an assessment has assured that his final opera, *La Voix humaine*, based on Cocteau's monodrama, has been overlooked, the impetus for its composition inadequately defined. Musically, *La Voix humaine* employs a complex tonal language unprecedented in Poulenc's compositional arsenal. Rather than advancing the interpretation that Poulenc composed *Voix* out of loyalty to Cocteau, I propose that the opera represents his final attempt to come to terms with his homosexuality. Numerous references in correspondence expose the opera as a mirror of Poulenc's emotional life. Poulenc and Cocteau's employment of gay camp also informs the work and provides a glimpse into possible hidden meanings. A closer examination of this neglected work reveals new insights into Poulenc's troubled and elusive personality.

MOTS CACHÉS: AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN COCTEAU'S AND POULENC'S *LA VOIX HUMAINE*

Keith Clifton

La Voix humaine occupies a curious and uncomfortable place in the collective *œuvres* of Francis Poulenc and Jean Cocteau. Representing Cocteau's "largest step toward popular success,"¹ the monodrama is not easily situated within Poulenc's vocal music. To complicate matters further, the work is separated in time from Poulenc's brief period with *Les Six* by more than three decades. As I will argue below, *La Voix humaine* represents a challenging, but not altogether foreign, example of the typical Poulenc / Cocteau approach to the feminine, one presented via a series of associated motives, veils, and disguises. In fact, the predominant style of discourse evident in the work—homosexual camp—is a familiar trope for the two artists. A potent example of camp raised to the level of high art, *Voix* embodies paradigmatically the expressive possibilities of kitsch, a sensibility often greeted with disdain and scorn by the academic community.

Scholarly discussions of *Les Six*, rare in the English language, have tended to focus on the novelty of the group and its connection to Cocteau. Typically, studies have focussed on the connection between the group as paradigm of the French avant-garde in the *fin-de-siècle*, and the cultural milieu of the music-hall and cabaret. By avoiding the obvious disparities between their individual temperaments, the members of the *groupe de Cocteau* are linked together in a chain of associations, tastes, and artistic principles, as if the relationship between these six highly disparate personalities was beyond question. Quite the opposite is true. The members of *Les Six*—Auric, Durey, Honegger, Milhaud, Poulenc, and Tailleferre—were united at the impetus of Cocteau's fetish for publicity, and formally for the 1921 premiere of the bizarre *Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel*, a proto-futurist work with avant-garde implications far beyond its original performance. In her seminal study of popular influences on the works of Cocteau and *Les Six*, Nancy Perloff notes that Cocteau, Milhaud, Poulenc, and Auric

met each Saturday evening and roamed the Paris streets in search of fair, circus, music-hall, and film spectacles. Their descriptions both of early experiences and of the Saturday evening wanderings allude to aesthetic

¹ Frederick Brown, *An Impersonation of Angels: A Biography of Jean Cocteau* (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), 286.

principles of popular entertainment which they found appealing and useful as an inspiration for their artistic activity. The fascination of all four artists with the Parisian popular world and the interest in turning to popular spectacles as a model for their own work marked a disregard for traditional divisions separating popular and classical form of creative expression.²

As pertinent as Perloff's observations are, such statements concerning the influence of pop culture in *fin-de-siècle* France dominate the critical writing on the group, often to the exclusion of other equally potent forces.

Certainly the desire for a new style of music as articulated by Erik Satie, "without sauerkraut," was a significant impetus for the fundamental shift taking place in French music following the ascendancy of Debussy and Ravel in the first two decades of the century. Cocteau, above all, intended to promulgate a new form of art, one free from Romantic and Impressionistic trappings. After their christening by Henri Collet in the now familiar article for *Comoedia* titled "Un livre de Rimsky et un livre de Cocteau: Les Cinq Russes, les Six Français et Erik Satie," the group rarely performed together and certainly did not establish a recognizable collective identity in any way comparable to the Nouveaux Jeunes or the Second Viennese School.³ Cocteau's doctrine of simplicity was not shared equally by every member of the group, and by about 1918 the group was unraveling, leaving Poulenc to further the ideas of his mentor largely unaided. As Honegger proceeded to rework the compositions of his beloved J. S. Bach into his own image; as Milhaud traveled to South America to absorb the sunny profundity of the tango and zarzuela; and as Durey retired from composition to pursue his communist political interests, Poulenc remained loyal to Cocteau and to the aesthetic of simplicity that he inspired. Even Auric, often given short shrift in discussions of the group continued to write music exhibiting traits commonly associated with Les Six at least through the 1920s. The friendship between Cocteau and Poulenc remained intact for more than four decades although, curiously, Poulenc set only four Cocteau works to music (listed below), a small number compared to the prolificacy of the Eluard and Apollinaire settings:⁴

Toréador, chanson hispanienne (1918)

Cocardes, three songs for voice and piano (1919)

La Voix humaine, tragédie lyrique (1958)

La Dame de Monte Carlo (1961)

Although there is no evidence that Cocteau and Poulenc ever extended their relationship beyond the platonic, the warmth and affection that characterizes

²Nancy Perloff, *Art and the Everyday: Popular Entertainment and the Circle of Erik Satie* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 86.

³Henri Collet, "Un livre de Rimsky et un livre de Cocteau," *Comoedia* (16 January 1920): 2. For a thorough discussion of the origins of Les Six, see Keith W. Daniel, *Francis Poulenc: His Artistic Development and Musical Style* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), 18–22.

⁴Related projects would include *Jongleurs* (1919–21), later destroyed; incidental music for *Renaud et Armide* (1962); and a song setting of Raymond Radiguet's *Paul et Virginie* (1946). An opera based on Cocteau's *La Machine infernale* was also considered but not even sketched.

their early correspondence was to remain largely intact throughout their professional careers.⁵

POULENC AND THE FEMININE

Femininity was central to the career and emotional well-being of Poulenc, who frequently surrounded himself with beautiful young women. The homosexual man/straight woman bond has been a staple in gay culture for centuries, with close female associates occupying the position of surrogate sister, mother, or confidante for men often more comfortable in intimate, non-sexual relationships with women than with members of their own gender.⁶ Poulenc was one of the first modern composers to view female writers as serious artists on par with Mallarmé, Verlaine, Eluard, or Jacob. One of his important muses in this regard was the charming Louise de Vilmorin (1902–1969), whose works are imbued with the very qualities that also characterize the music of the composer: charm, wit, grace, and melancholy. Poulenc adored her, both as an artist and a woman, and in a typically adulatory letter he extolled her virtues when writing that “Few people move me as much as Louise de Vilmorin.... because she writes innately immaculate French, because her name evokes flowers and vegetables ... Her beautiful face recalls the seventeenth century, as does the sound of her name.”⁷

Poulenc’s desire to write “truly feminine songs” using Vilmorin’s texts resulted in a remarkable series of seventeen *mélodies*, including *Trois Poèmes de Louise de Vilmorin* (1937), *Fiançailles pour rire* (1939), *Métamorphoses* (1943) and “Mazurka” from *Mouvements du cœur* (1949).⁸ Vilmorin’s poetry has been criticized, even berated, for its unabashed sentimentality—criticisms also leveled against the composer—but these are the very qualities that attracted Poulenc and inspired him to produce some of his finest songs. They provided an ideal outlet for ambiguous, jazz-tinged harmonies, and lyrical vocal expression. Emotional, melancholy verses are typical of Vilmorin, and a certain textual trope, that of the “dame déjà morte,” a woman on the brink of physical death but already expired emotionally, was to prove especially potent in *La Voix humaine*. The opening line of the central song in *Fiançailles pour rire*, “Mon cadavre est doux comme un gant,” is typical of Vilmorin’s poetry in both subject matter and octosyllabic construction:

Mon cadavre est doux comme un gant
Doux comme un gant de peau glacée
Et mes prunelles effacées
Font de mes yeux des cailloux blancs

⁵Terms of endearment abound in the correspondence on both sides, with Cocteau, for example, referring to Poulenc as “ma cher Poupoule.” See Benjamin Ivry, *Francis Poulenc* (London: Phaidon Press, Ltd, 1996) 49–50.

⁶In the modern gay world, such women have often been referred to as “fag hags,” a term that the urbane and discreet Poulenc would likely have resisted.

⁷For a complete discussion of the Vilmorin works, see my “Vilmorin Songs of Francis Poulenc,” *The Journal of Singing* 55, no. 3 (January/February 1999): 7–13.

⁸*Ibid.*, 7.

(My body is limp as a glove
 Limp as a glove of glazed calfskin
 And my two hidden pupils
 Make two white pebbles of my eyes)

Poulenc's interest in the feminine extends beyond isolated examples into the realm of an *idée fixe* that I have termed the Poulencian archetype of femininity. By this I mean Poulenc's systematic avoidance of formal clarity for its own sake, as well as a harmonic language that celebrates the beauty of sound often far removed from traditional tonal relationships, a gesture sometimes viewed as feminine and thus inferior (especially by German critics). Poulenc will often eschew convention for the sake of expression, and such gestures have colored the reception of the composer, as well as many of his predecessors, including Lully, Gounod, and Massenet. As Susan McClary and others have noted in recent feminist writing on music, the trope of the masculine taming the feminine informs several diverse genres of music. The most overt usage of these gendered dualities occurs in the symphony, where the "male" first theme, confident and assured, tames the "female" secondary theme, timid and lyrical. Such a critical apparatus has now been expanded to a wide range of composers, styles, and compositions. In short, "feminine endings" relate to chords that refuse the masculine domination of authentic cadence or clearly articulated harmony, "sonorities that extend beyond the barline."⁹

In Poulenc's *œuvre*, the "feminine ending" takes on a favored status, as works presumably clothed in a male, heterosexual guise are emasculated, often at the final cadence, a defining moment in common practice harmony as the weaker pre-tonic chord gives way to the final, masculine sonority. A typical example occurs in the song cycle *Le Travail du peintre* (1956), with texts by Eluard. Here, a pantheon of great (male) modern artists—Braque, Gris, and Picasso among them—are presented as each song provides a miniature sound portrait; Poulenc's songs can be considered no more than a vague impression of their styles. The opening *mélodie* is devoted to the great macho icon of modern art, Pablo Picasso, an artist whose very name conjures up images of virility and raw sexuality. Far from offering sympathetic views of women, his works often satirize them, whether the subject is his former lover Françoise Gillot or the prostitutes of Barcelona in *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907).

The piano prelude to "Pablo Picasso" finds the composer in his masculine, Eluardian *modus operandi*—reminiscent of the opening of *Tel jour, telle nuit*—as stark parallel octaves exemplify Picasso's machismo. As opposed to the discursive and enigmatic text, with its opaque references to the disparate parts of some unknown Picasso still life, the music remains resolute throughout in its high dynamic level and motivic cohesion. In the final bar, however, something unusual happens, revealing a dichotomy between Poulenc's attempt to "play it straight", and his true nature. Almost as if he were ashamed of his own butchness, the final chord, which had settled firmly into a resolute C major,

⁹Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 11.

is emasculated via an added jazz chord that completely catches us off guard. The effect is far more than aural, but visceral as well, as the new sonority impels the final cadence from the realm of the “masculine” authentic cadence to the realm of “feminine” *frisson*. The masculine closure expected in the final sonority is thus evaded and colored, even replaced, by a new harmony far removed from the tonic (example 1).

Example 1. *Le Travail du peintre*, “Pablo Picasso,” bars 45–50

Some seventeen years before, in his second Vilmorin cycle, the composer celebrated the feminine in *Fiançailles pour rire*, borrowing the title from a collection of Vilmorin poems. Presented from the point of view of a jilted lover, a young woman recalls *le passé* in poignant lines overflowing with sentiment. The opening song, “La Dame d’André,” sets a text concerning the transitory nature of love shown through a random meeting between André (who may refer to Vilmorin’s companion, André Malraux, or to her brother, who shared the same first name), and a nameless young woman whom he has just met. In the final couplet of the poem, Vilmorin asks:

Pâlera-t-elle aux feuilles blanches
De son album des temps meilleurs?
(Will she fade on the white leaves
Of his album of better days?)

In fact, the question is never answered via poetry or music, and Poulenc concludes the song with an ambiguous chord that transforms the cadence in A major into a jazzy A13 harmony, mirroring the tentative quality of the poetry. The moment is pure Poulencian *frisson*, a love of *sonorité* for its own sake (example 2).

Given this strong penchant for the feminine in his personal and professional life, two important questions arise: How might this sensibility be rationalized, if indeed it needs to be, and how might the trope of femininity have affected the tepid critical reception that has greeted Poulenc’s works in the academic community? In Poulenc’s case, the answer extends beyond the composer’s desire to avoid writing “the music of the future” or to “please an audience and himself.”¹⁰ Rather, a partial explanation may lie in two disparate but related

¹⁰Ivry, *Francis Poulenc*, 9.

Très calme, très à l'aise ♩ = 60
très expressif, les appoggiatures sans hâte

Example 3. *Métamorphoses*, “C’est ainsi que tu es,” bars 1–2

POULENC, COCTEAU, AND THE DIVA

If a true opera queen belongs to the cult of the diva, then Poulenc was one of its high priests. From the early years of his career until the end of his life, the composer focused his energies on certain talented women who fired his creative imagination and provided inspiration for musical works. In Cocteau’s case, the admiration for Edith Piaf or Berthe Bovy—the first Elle in *La Voix humaine*—was largely practical. He appreciated these women for their talent and insight but not necessarily in the same way that he regarded the handsome young men who were his companions and confidants. Poulenc and Cocteau, however, have been correctly described as “passionate observers of women.”¹³ Although Poulenc’s friendships with women included Yvonne Printemps—for whom he composed the music-hall *Valse chantée* “Les Chemins de l’amour”—and Marie Laurencin, who provided the décor for his early ballet *Les Biches*, his ideal muse was Denise Duval. No diva was more central to his energies than “the adorable one,” whom he met in 1945 at a Parisian music-hall.¹⁴

Single-minded devotion to one diva is a central tenet of the opera queen, and as Wayne Koestenbaum has written in his important and campy diatribe on opera and the homosexual, *The Queen’s Throat*, “The opera queen must choose one diva. The other divas may be admired, enjoyed, even loved. But only the diva can reign in the opera queen’s heart; only one diva can have the power to describe a listener’s life, as a compass describes a circle.” Stripped of the cultish paraphanelia, Mitchell Morris expresses the same phenomenon in more lucid prose: “Central to the true opera queen’s aesthetic is the cult of the singer.”¹⁵ Poulenc’s admiration for Duval was resolute, loyal, and effusive,

¹³Ivry, *Francis Poulenc*, 201.

¹⁴Daniel, *Francis Poulenc*, 45. Duval (b. 1923), studied in Bordeaux before starting her career at the Folies-Bergères in Paris. After she was brought to Poulenc’s attention by the producer Max de Rieux, he immediately cast her in *Mamelles de Tirésias*, which debuted at the Opéra-Comique on 3 June 1947. See Sidney Buckland, ed. and trans., *Francis Poulenc: Selected Correspondence 1915–1963* (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1991), 303.

¹⁵Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 19. See also Mitchell Morris, “Reading as an Opera Queen,” in

with terms of endearment ranging from “pure sunlight” to “my angel.”¹⁶ Duval, in fact, owed much of her career success to the composer, who first cast her as the ambiguously gendered Thérèse/Tirésias in the Apollinaire farce *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* (1947) and then in the coveted role of Blanche for the world premiere of *Dialogues des Carmélites* (1958), a work that occupied his attention for more than two decades. When the pivotal role of Elle was to be decided for *La Voix humaine*, Poulenc once again called upon Duval, who performed and eventually recorded the role with Georges Prêtre conducting. Duval was a major source of personal and artistic inspiration for a composer inclined to writing miniatures while also struggling to find his own unique voice in the saturated and competitive world of opera.¹⁷ Duval served not only as an artistic inspiration, but as an extension of himself. As I shall argue below, when we see Duval as Elle, we are really seeing Francis Poulenc himself, emotionally naked in the very public forum of the opera house.

CAMP IN THE MIRROR

In her now (in)famous article on camp (dedicated, appropriately, to Oscar Wilde), Susan Sontag argues in favor of camp as an apolitical, ephemeral sensibility often lost on those without the taste to appreciate its subtleties. Gay men, according to her theory, possess the most acute sense of camp and can thus truly appreciate a “love of the exaggerated,” whether in poetry, theater, or Strauss’s *Der Rosenkavalier*, a work forming, in her words, part of the “canon of camp.”¹⁸ The presence of camp and kitsch—terms not always clearly defined or distinguishable—in serious musical culture has been sharply criticized in some quarters. Certain scholars have even engaged in their own style of camping as they assault the degenerate and insidious nature of the camp aesthetic. In his influential essay on commodity music, Adorno argues that works such as Rachmaninov’s Prelude in C-sharp minor, “one gigantic authentic cadence,” are responsible for the erosion of serious art in favor of predictable, banal kitsch.¹⁹

Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 184–200. Morris defines the opera queen as “any member of that particular segment of the American gay community that defines itself by the extremity and particularly of its obsession with opera.” (184) In a related article, Paul Robinson refers succinctly to such men as “voice fetishists.” See Paul Robinson, “The opera queen: A voice from the closet,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 6 (1994): 285.

¹⁶Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat*, 169, 225.

¹⁷Duval’s role as muse for Poulenc mirrors a similar pattern evident in Debussy’s admiration for Mary Garden and Kurt Weill’s for Lotte Leyna.

¹⁸Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Farrar, Strau and Giroux, 1982), 107–8. For an informed discussion of the camp style vis-à-vis *Der Rosenkavalier*, see Gary Le Tourneau, “Kitsch, Camp, and Opera: *Der Rosenkavalier*,” *Canadian University Music Review* 14 (1994): 77–97. The camp aspects of *Voix* are further reinforced by Poulenc’s designation of the opera as *tragédie lyrique*, a deliberate evocation of an operatic style associated with the apex of campiness, the court of Louis XIV.

¹⁹Theodor Adorno, “Commodity Music Analysed,” in *Quasi una fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1992), 38–40.

Very little French music is mentioned in Adorno's diatribe, and Poulenc is omitted entirely. But he is guilty by association. There is an unspoken rule that music exhibiting even the perception of camp is somehow substandard.²⁰ Poulenc's music has yet to receive the acclaim and scholarly attention lavished on the titans of modern music, such as Debussy, Schoenberg, or Stravinsky. In Ivry's view, "One reason behind the underestimation of Poulenc during much of his lifetime was his open homosexuality at a time when only the most prestigious cultural figures, such as Jean Cocteau, could get away with such frankness."²¹ With a musical style hovering between modernity and classicism, Poulenc turned to a negotiated discourse with which he was familiar and comfortable: expanded tonality, formal clarity, and unapologetic lyricism.

Poulenc's penchant for humor exhibited itself fairly early in his career, perhaps coincidentally, in a Cocteau-inspired *mélodie*. Written in 1918 as a "spoof on café-concert song" as popularized by Satie, *Toréador* is delightfully tongue and cheek, where the "eight-bar introduction, the alternation between verse and refrain, the waltz tempo, and the use of an accompaniment in which low notes fall on strong beats and higher-register chords on weak beats place *Toréador* within the tradition of popular song."²² But perhaps an even more potent influence is the campy text and music, exhibited in Cocteau's giddy refrain:

Belle Espagnole
 Dans ta gondole
 Tu caracoles
 Carmencita
 Sous ta mantille
 Œil qui pétille
 Bouche qui brille
 C'est Pépitaa.
 (Lovely Spanish woman
 In your gondola
 You gambol
 Carmencita
 Under the mantilla
 Eye that sparkles
 Glittering mouth
 It's Pépitaa)

Poulenc's setting emphasizes the absurdity of Cocteau's tale of "a poor Spanish Toreador who is killed during a bullfight in the unlikely location of the square of St. Mark's in Venice" by employing a lilting triple meter which simultaneously places the wrong stress on the wrong part of the beat and the

²⁰A study of the critical literature concerning acceptable versus substandard music is long overdue and beyond the scope of this paper. In my view, works influenced by a French popular aesthetic—which would include compositions of Chabrier, Satie, and Ravel in addition to Poulenc—have been consistently chastised in the press, and especially by Austro/German critics.

²¹Ivry, *Francis Poulenc*, 9. With the Poulenc centenary in 1999, attention was finally paid to the composer in the critical literature, although much work still needs to be done.

²²Perloff, *Art and the Everyday*, 154.

word, as in “Espagnole” below (example 4). *Toréador* is a potent example of Sontag’s division between “naive camp” and “deliberate camp.”²³ Because of its exaggerated style, the song would fall into the latter category. Works that become campy without trying to be are examples of the former, and *La Voix humaine* clearly fits that mold.

Example 4. *Toréador*, bars 88–94

For Cocteau and Poulenc, the camp sensibility presents itself in more than their works, but permeates the very fabric of their daily lives. Poulenc, who was given to bouts of depression and sour moods, was quite capable of moments of wicked, wry humor, generally in the company of close friends, many of them gay. According to Cocteau, the composer was fond of entertaining party guests with naughty pantomimes, often with an unexpected finale as the composer exposed himself at the conclusion.²⁴ For the “emaciated Cocteau” who “whirled through life like an overgrown, opiated poodle, irritating as many people as he astonished,” the discourse of camp is evident in numerous ways, from his dandian dress to his outrageous films that pre- and post-date the Dada movement.²⁵ A typical camp moment would include a photograph given to Poulenc after his friend had returned from a trip to London. Dressed in gentlemanly finery and surrounded by seven hats and other assorted items, including two ties used to frame his gaunt visage, Cocteau is the very epitome of gay showmanship as he plays dress-up.

To return briefly to Sontag, camp is “good because it’s awful.”²⁶ Ample opportunities to view such entertainment may be seen in vaudevilles, music-

²³Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 110–11. She refers to “naive camp” as a mode of “failed seriousness,” where works that try to be serious do not succeed. In a related article, Cocteau is included among other artists—including Warhol, Capote, and Dorothy Parker—as paradigms of camp style. See “Camp” in *The Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990), 189–90.

²⁴Ivry, *Francis Poulenc*, 43. Cocteau recalls a certain party with “Poulenc completely naked. Valentine [Hugo] dying of fear that her maid would be scandalized. Poulenc as comfortable as if he were wearing a monk’s cowl.”

²⁵*Ibid.*, 36.

²⁶Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 115–19. For a broader interpretation of the origins of camp and its current political significance, see Moe Meyers, ed., *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (London: Routledge, 1994).

halls, cabarets and drag clubs. Such venues have been and continue to be important meeting places for the gay demi-monde, and Poulenc visited these places frequently, as did Cocteau. Here, singers such as Yvonne Printemps and Edith Piaf first presented themselves to the public as artists of all sexual persuasions looked on with admiration. After attending performances of Berthe Bovy, Cocteau immediately decided to engage her in his new monodrama for the Comédie Française in early 1930. Cocteau's fascination with the rejected lover was not unique to *Voix*, however, but may extend back to his own love affair with the young Raymond Radiguet (1903–23), who died suddenly at the age of twenty. The event was a crisis from which Cocteau never fully recovered, a tragedy he exorcised on the stage in works such as *Le Bel Indifférent* (The Handsome Indifferent One), written as a monodrama for Piaf.

The camp aspect of *Voix* is immediately evident in Cocteau's exceedingly precise and melodramatic stage directions, which include such indications as a "lampe envoyant une lumière cruelle" and the general setting of "une chambre de meurtre" where Elle is "étendue, comme assassinée." Added to these directions are further stipulations for Elle herself, who must be played "par une femme jeune et élégante." Given Cocteau's penchant for younger men, this direction is hardly arbitrary. For Poulenc, the camp aspects are perhaps less overt, but no less present in the musical setting. While his strict Catholic upbringing precipitated enormous guilt regarding same-sex romantic liaisons, according to some reports, Poulenc was involved in frequent covert sexual activity, primarily with men of low social status. In his elevated role as a celebrated composer, Poulenc lived a double-life as dutiful Catholic on the one hand, and the wild gay party boy on the other. Reports of his exploits are generally excluded from biographies of the composer, perhaps as an attempt to preserve his status as a composer, but also because of an ingrained homophobia that is just beginning to be addressed in musicological discourse.

Such events point to a fundamental dichotomy in the life of the composer: the division between piety and secularization. In an often-quoted statement, "My Music is My Portrait," Poulenc declared that his works present more than meets the eye.²⁷ *La Voix humaine* blurs the boundaries between popular music and traditional classicism where sentimentality expressed in autobiographical terms is more important than prescribed musical structure. When we view Elle on stage we are actually observing Poulenc himself and, to a lesser extent, Cocteau. I shall return to this point later.

For all the changes that took place in modern French music from the *fin-de-siècle* until 1960, Poulenc's style of composition remained remarkably consistent, anchored by a firm sense of tonality and certain allowable dissonances à la *Stravinsky*. Moments of extreme lyricism alternate with acerbic writing to create a tapestry of styles that emerge in work after work. In *La Voix humaine*, however, Poulenc's customary lyricism is replaced with a conversational style that rarely allows for lyrical expression, even in the vocal line. The small orchestra is used with great care to highlight and in some cases define

²⁷Francis Poulenc, "My Music is My Portrait," *Opera News* (5 February 1977): 30.

the emotional landscape of the play. With the absence of a second character, Elle must shoulder the weight of the entire drama alone.

Poulenc's typical approach to musical structure may be related to the style of block form used in numerous modern compositions, with Stravinsky as the paradigm. Alternating blocks of sound are the norm, sometimes with limited recourse to functional harmony. In composition after composition, Poulenc's musical *modus operandi* may be summarized as follows: lush, jazz-tinged harmonic sequences alternating with shorter, motivic ideas. Generally, the proportions of these ideas tend to favor moments of lyrical expression. Again, *Voix* is different in this regard. Here, Poulenc employs a small group of rhythmic motives that appear in numerous guises as the work continues. As Keith Daniel has noted in his study of the composer, such "cells" are used throughout the work as the threads that will hold the opera together.²⁸ I would argue, however, that these musical motives are in fact the only means of musical clarity in a work where the vocal line, in a constant state of flux and unrest, is focused on the expression of Cocteau's text. The autobiographical implications of *Voix* for Cocteau and especially Poulenc condition the structure of the music, presented in a jumbled haze of images, emotions, and feelings. In an important letter from Poulenc to Rose Dercourt-Plaut, the composer confirmed the significance of *Voix* for his emotional well-being: "My *Voix humaine* is opening in Paris on 6 February and in Milan on the 18th. Duval is superb in an astonishing production by Cocteau. I will send you the music to this atrocious tragedy (my own). It is a musical confession!!!"²⁹

LIFE AS THEATRE

"I have copied out *La Voix*. It is a monstrous work." Poulenc, August 1958

We know very little about this beautiful woman, Elle, at the opening of *La Voix humaine*. Cocteau has provided no details concerning her background, social status, financial security, temperament, or real name. We know even less about her former lover, "l'homme inconnu." Even though he is the cause of her anxiety, he never appears on the stage, never speaks, never interjects. As a result, Elle is thrust into the dramatic and emotional spotlight, where our sympathies are manipulated in her favor. We have been given no other choice. A lonely, isolated figure, with only the invisible audience for comfort, we assume the guise of voyeur, enchanted and confused by her often incoherent ramblings.

Mysteries, vague recollections, and unspoken voices are in fact important aspects of Cocteau's text. Cocteau's experiences as a gay man necessarily informed his art. While not consumed by the erotic or homoerotic in his writings, at least in an overt manner, Cocteau used numerous opportunities to express coded messages that would have been clear to his colleagues and

²⁸For a thorough discussion of the cellular structure of *Voix*, see Daniel, *Francis Poulenc*, 306–12. Significantly, Daniel notes that "there is more sustained tonal ambiguity in this opera than in any other Poulenc work of comparable length." *Ibid.*, 308–9.

²⁹Letter dated 30 January 1959 in Buckland, *Francis Poulenc: Selected Correspondence*, 257.

associates. In her important study of Cocteau, Lydia Crowson writes about Cocteau's diverse personal experiences, where "he managed to participate in a boulevard tradition as well as in homosexual, elite 'in-group' creations."³⁰ The perception of Cocteau as one writing from personal experience, even if those experiences were not articulated per se in the works themselves, is a frequent topic of Crowson's study. In keeping with the image of a writer where "life is theater," Crowson also notes that "Cocteau utilized his art as a personal exorcism or protection against reality instead of as an affirmation of knowledge"³¹ and that his works form a "microcosm of his mental structures."³² In his quest for privacy amidst all of these coded personal references, Cocteau turned to the opaque language of innuendo and understatement. Crowson iterates a core of essential terms describing Cocteau's art that would include "cipher," "hieroglyph," "code," "game," and "trick."³³

Cocteau's frenetic personal life, and the numerous romantic relationships he cultivated during his career, provided ample impetus for the neurotic hysteria that would form the basis of *La Voix humaine*.³⁴ The subject matter of *Voix*, then, is not without precedent in Cocteau's œuvre, with the same general topic appearing in the 1940 *Le Bel Indifférent*. First performed as a curtain-raiser for the play *Les Monstres sacrés* at the Théâtre des Bouffes Parisiens, the work concerns a woman abandoned by a former romantic interest. On the surface, the piece appears to have much in common with *La Voix humaine*, but there are in fact several key differences, articulated by Crowson when she states that *Le Bel Indifférent*, "presented at the state-supported Comédie Française, is almost bourgeois with its commonplace framework of the mistress rejected by her lover who has decided to marry another woman." On the other hand, *La Voix humaine* "is much harsher, devoid of most romantic pretense: in the place of an impending marriage, only the man's indifference separates the two people in their hotel room, and nothing indicates that the woman's love was ever reciprocated."³⁵ In addition, Elle is of a higher social class than the nameless woman in *Le Bel Indifférent*.³⁶

Personal and private events were also a significant source of artistic inspiration for Francis Poulenc. While both Poulenc and Cocteau were influenced by their strict Catholic upbringing and wealthy social pedigrees, Poulenc was reluctant to embrace his homosexuality in the same manner as Cocteau, who openly flaunted his role as homosexual *bon vivant*. Such reticence led him into a series of failed and frustrated romantic encounters, often with men poorly

³⁰ Lydia Crowson, *The Esthetic of Jean Cocteau* (Hanover, New Hampshire: The University Press of New Hampshire, 1978), 11.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 72.

³³ *Ibid.*, 27. Crowson confirms the importance of the stage works in understanding the writer when she says that "Cocteau's theater provides a much fuller, more complex insight into his mind than his films do." *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁴ A partial list of Cocteau's love interests would include Jean Marais, Maurice Sachs, Jean Desorbes and, of course, Raymond Radiguet. See *ibid.*, 24-25.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁶ Brown, *An Impersonation of Angels*, 319.

suiting to his temperament or artistic status. Wilfrid Mellers has described Poulenc's unique situation: "When he was high he was very, very high, but when he was low he was horrid; and his moments of near-suicidal despair—'full of moss and melancholy'—were occasioned as much by failures of confidence in his creativity as by his love affairs, whether they were the agonizing traumas like the relationship with Lucien, or whether they were ephemeral like the usually low-class youths who fleetingly tickled his fancy."³⁷ Poulenc's love-related traumas—ubiquitous subjects in his correspondence—sometimes threatened to unseat several important, non-sexual relationships in his life. None was more significant to the composer than Pierre Bernac, his recital collaborator and confidant for more than three decades. At times, even this relationship was on thin ice, and after a particularly lugubrious letter concerning a falling out with Roubert, Bernac fired back angrily that

you have worn down the affection of this loyal but not very interesting boy. I am sorry for you if you really love him as much as you think you do, something of which I am not entirely sure ... Face the reality plainly and squarely, and put up with it. You are not the first nor the last to suffer from a broken heart ... Francis Poulenc, even on the human plane, is surely greater than this.³⁸

To an emotionally volatile composer, writing about his "consuming love for Lucien, which far from abating only seems to grow more intense," Bernac's words must have been difficult to take.³⁹ For Cocteau and Poulenc, personal exorcism came on the stage, and we can well see the two artists exploiting a connection between life and art discussed by Ivan Martison:

At the opera we hear our most extreme feelings take over individuals and work themselves out to justify the melodramatic catharsis we can but fantasize in real life, and liberate us, somewhat, from the miasma of reality. Next *Don Giovanni* you go to, identify yourself with Donna Elvira and picture a recent flame as the callous Don.⁴⁰

A GHOST IN THE MACHINE

For all its musical and textual finesse, *La Voix humaine* is a relentlessly cheerless work, a study in melancholy. Cocteau's text, vague and emotionally charged, is half silence, half sound, with large sections of the script filled with ellipses, creating wordless, unspoken moments. The unheard voice is that of

³⁷Wilfrid Mellers, *Francis Poulenc* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 181. Mellers is one of the few Poulenc biographers to deal openly with the sexual orientation of the composer. Poulenc's affair with the handsome Lucien Roubert was a tremendous source of anguish when that affection was not returned. Another significant love interest was Richard Chanlaire, "my big peasant." See Buckland, *Francis Poulenc: Selected Correspondence*, 250. In his extensive biographical sketches of Poulenc's correspondents, Chanlaire and Garband are curiously omitted.

³⁸Mellers, *Francis Poulenc*, 180. In reference to Cocteau's general demeanor, Mellers correctly states that "everything is theatrical."

³⁹*Ibid.*, 181.

⁴⁰Ivan Martison, "How to Be an Opera Queen," *Christopher Street* 69 (October 1982): 18.

the male lover, who remains mysterious and enigmatic, his significance to the plot entirely filtered through Elle. Certainly Cocteau was aware that such a work would present tremendous challenges for the performer, and so he employed another mute character, the telephone itself. Far from serving as a mere prop, the phone becomes at once the final palpable link between the two former lovers, a phallic symbol, and a possible agent of suicide.

The importance of mechanical objects in Cocteau's works has been confirmed by Crowson, who states that

From Death's mechanized ritual in *Orphée* to the telephone in *La Voix humaine* and *Œdipus'* intricate destruction in *La Machine infernale*, machines and mechanical devices form one of the constants in Cocteau's art. Like his virtuosity, his use of machinery is far from gratuitous.⁴¹

Furthermore, Daniel says that since the telephone represents for Elle the "sole link to her lover, the receiver almost becomes a second on-stage character."⁴² Also significant to the plot is the unreliability of the French telephone system, constantly threatening to sever the only source of communication between the two. The telephone, "an oddly powerful trope through which to theorize mourning," has a long and lively history in psychoanalysis and gay studies. *La Voix humaine* is a work centered on nostalgia and grief: nostalgia for lost love, lost youth, for what might have been. The telephone is the conduit for the end of a relationship with "l'homme inconnu" and, metaphorically, for the end of her life, whether literally or figuratively.⁴³

The telephone is also an appropriate conduit for drama because it is immediately recognizable. Everyone in an audience can relate to using this device for some negative purpose, whether to conclude a love affair, or for a more mundane purpose. The banality of the machine masks its potency. In the 1948 Italian film of the play, *La Voce umana*, Ellis Hanson describes Anna Magnani's portrayal of Elle as

enlivened by her loss, even as it renders her suicidal. The telephone generates an absence acutely felt, and silence on the line makes her panic ... Even when connection is made, she panics ... she is suspicious ... she hears music, and she is told it is coming from next door. She hears other voices on the line. I watch Anna Magnani string out her sentences, wearing the tether thin with conjunctions, ellipses, question marks, speaking in fragments, incantory,

⁴¹ Crowson, *The Esthetic of Jean Cocteau*, 34. The cult of the machine is also a significant trope in *Le Coq et l'Arlequin*, where Cocteau refers to the Eiffel Tower as the "queen of machines."

⁴² Daniel, *Francis Poulenc*, 307.

⁴³ Ellis Hanson, "The Telephone and Its Queerness," in *Cruising the Performative: Interventions Into the Representation of Ethnicity, Nationality, and Sexuality*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case, Philip Brett, and Susan Leigh Foster (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 40. This important article discussed the role of the telephone and other types of technology in the lives of gay men, the insane, and within popular culture. At one point, Hanson states: "The telephone as an important mechanism of fantasy and pleasure in modernity is attested to by the burgeoning canon of psychological case studies on so-called telephone neuroses, compulsive telephoning, and perverse telephoning." *Ibid.*, 37. At one point or another in *Voix*, Elle engages in all of these.

summoning a lover, speaking from a fear of silence, deferring the inevitable click.⁴⁴

Elle must maintain the connection at all costs and becomes certifiably hysterical when this connection is severed, even briefly. Cocteau's usage of language in *Voix* is ideally suited to the dramatic situation where complete, coherent sentences would be less effective in communicating the drama. Instead, we see an essential element in Cocteau's dramatic method, the technique of fragmentation.⁴⁵ Equally potent in *Voix*, is the power of repetition, where "language assumes the power of incantation";⁴⁶ textual repetitions are reinforced as Poulenc repeats small musical cells throughout the opera. In the play, moments of disconnection take on the guise of campy tragedy, especially when Elle realizes that she may not reconnect with her lover, and asks God—or some unknown presence—to restore the connection. ("Mon Dieu, fait' qu'il redemande.") Desperate and near the breaking point, she will do anything to keep him on the line. Since the telephone connection remains the only point of contact between them, she must keep him there or risk losing him forever.

Musically, Poulenc's score is a perfect complement to Cocteau's discursive and non-linear libretto. At 780 bars, almost 25 percent of which are sung a cappella, the crucial text is presented with great clarity. In keeping with the hysteria of the dramatic situation, where typical operatic lyricism is inappropriate, the musical style remains tied to recitative practice, with only a few moments of typical Poulencian lyricism. These rare moments are reserved for nostalgic sections of the text, especially when Elle recalls happier times in their relationship. More often, however, "Absolute silence ... accounts for the majority of the supposed conversation of the lover."⁴⁷ The silences confirm and respect the quality of Cocteau's text, as textual ellipses are translated into musical silences. At other times, Poulenc's music can not help but fill in the gaps left by the absent second player. Here, the orchestral material—a series of brief repeated motives—holds the opera together and, more importantly, manipulates our sympathies in the direction of Elle, who is presented by Poulenc as a great tragic heroine. What we are seeing is diva campiness *in excelsis* as she rants and raves with no motivation other than to reclaim a love affair that had doubtless ended well before the play began. She is mentally and emotionally out of control.

There is also a connection between *La Voix humaine* and traditional opera: the mad scene. Although generally associated with the Italian bel canto school, mad scenes involve women who temporarily (and sometimes permanently) escape reality for a fantasy world populated by images of their former lovers. The tonal ambiguity, frequent shifts of mood and texture, and repeated notes

⁴⁴Ibid., 43.

⁴⁵Crowson, *The Esthetic of Jean Cocteau*, 62. In many ways, *Voix* transforms the elliptical, fragmented medium of the telegram—one of Cocteau's most characteristic forms of expression—into spoken form. I would like to thank Tom Gordon for bringing this to my attention.

⁴⁶Ibid., 68.

⁴⁷Daniel, *Francis Poulenc*, 307.

in *Voix* evoke an extended version of the mad scene from *Lucia di Lammermoor*, long considered the archetypical example of madness in opera. In *Voix*, the telephone—and even the telephone cord—become agents of her eccentric, campy hysteria, as she walks around the small apartment holding the phone and caressing the phone cord as if it were “H.” The device becomes a surrogate for the lover who, as in *Lucia*, is absent from the scene. Later, the cord becomes an agent of escape as she begins to wrap it around her neck, a final attempt to win his sympathies and to restore their bond. Even this ploy fails. In several parts of the score, the unstable vocal line shows her on the brink of madness and hysteria, especially when she declares that waiting for him had caused her to temporarily lose her sanity. Here, she ascends to a high C, the top note in the entire score, as one further attempt to attract his attention. The score as a whole is peppered with disjunct vocal fragments that personify her growing anxiety (example 5).

The image shows a musical score for a voice and piano. The voice part is on a single staff in treble clef, with lyrics written below the notes: "de mar-cher de long en lar-ge, je de-ve-nais fol - - - - le!". The piano accompaniment is on two staves in bass clef. The music features a mix of chords and single notes, with a dynamic marking of *ff* (fortissimo) and a tempo marking of "8 bassa" (allegretto). The key signature has one flat (B-flat).

Example 5. *La Voix humaine*, bars 388–90

To paraphrase a statement from the opening of this essay, *La Voix humaine* is a curious, uncomfortable work which does not fit securely within the traditional boundaries of opera or play. The work is truly *sui generis*, at least in the history of opera, which makes Poulenc’s statement that the work was composed “in the state of a trance” that much more appropriate.⁴⁸ It is a work revealing the inner thoughts, emotions, and private struggles of its creators, sentiments never intended to be completely evident to the audience. This is private music, for the in-crowd. For those able to appreciate its subtleties, it is a work of genius, revealing naked emotions rarely exhibited on the stage with such realism. And yet, it is also a difficult work to take seriously, to inhabit, because of the histrionics of Elle. Her discourse is broad, campy, and exaggerated. In a sense, Poulenc’s music assists us in understanding Elle’s voice as the voice of humanity, *La Voix humaine*. The opera affords no easy resolution: happy endings or final celebratory duets are absent. What we are left with,

⁴⁸Buckland, *Francis Poulenc: Selected Correspondence*, 254.

then, is a moment in time, a snapshot of despair. In the words of Ellis Hanson, "The pleasures of paranoia are not to be underestimated."⁴⁹ Neither are the pleasures of camp. *La Voix humaine* exhibits both qualities in abundance.

Abstract

Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites* has been consistently identified as the summit of his operatic works. Such an assessment has assured that his final opera, *La Voix humaine*, based on Cocteau's monodrama, has been overlooked, the impetus for its composition inadequately defined. Musically, *La Voix humaine* employs a complex tonal language unprecedented in Poulenc's compositional arsenal. Rather than advancing the interpretation that Poulenc composed *Voix* out of loyalty to Cocteau, I propose that the opera represents his final attempt to come to terms with his homosexuality. Numerous references in correspondence expose the opera as a mirror of Poulenc's emotional life. Poulenc and Cocteau's employment of gay camp also informs the work and provides a glimpse into possible hidden meanings. A closer examination of this neglected work reveals new insights into Poulenc's troubled and elusive personality.

Résumé

L'opéra *Dialogues des Carmélites* de Poulenc a toujours été considéré comme le sommet de son œuvre opératique. Il est résulté d'une telle appréciation qu'on a négligé son dernier opéra, *La Voix humaine*, sur un livret de Cocteau, et que l'élan qui a présidé à sa composition a été mal cerné. Musicalement, *La Voix humaine* déploie un langage tonal complexe sans précédent dans l'arsenal de composition de Poulenc. Sans prétendre que Poulenc ait composé *La Voix humaine* par loyauté envers Cocteau, je soutiens plutôt que l'opéra représente la dernière tentative de Poulenc pour accepter son homosexualité. De nombreuses références mises en correspondance révèlent que l'opéra est un reflet de la vie émotive de Poulenc. L'emploi par Poulenc et Cocteau de manières efféminées propres aux gays renseigne sur l'œuvre et donne un aperçu de possibles significations sous-entendues. Un examen attentif de cette œuvre négligée jette un nouvel éclairage sur la personnalité tourmentée et insaisissable de Poulenc.

⁴⁹Hanson, "The Telephone and Its Queerness," 45.