

A Perfect Accord: Music and Gesture in Francis Poulenc's *Les Biches*

Un accord parfait : musique et gestuelle dans *Les Biches* de Francis Poulenc

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Volume 13, Number 1-2, September 2012

Danse et musique : Dialogues en mouvement

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1012355ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1012355ar>

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Publisher(s)

Société québécoise de recherche en musique

ISSN

1480-1132 (print)

1929-7394 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Moore, C. (2012). A Perfect Accord: Music and Gesture in Francis Poulenc's *Les Biches*. *Les Cahiers de la Société québécoise de recherche en musique*, 13(1-2), 97–104. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1012355ar>

Article abstract

The critical reception surrounding the ballet *Les Biches* (1924) reveals that the work's initial success was largely attributable to the aesthetic synergies that unified the musical and gestural components of the work. Indebted to musical and visual themes derived from high-society fashion, and receptive to the aesthetic lure of contemporaneous (and specifically Stravinskian) neoclassical experiments, Francis Poulenc's music and Bronislava Nijinska's choreography display complementary approaches towards the artistic juxtaposition of past and present. This article draws on the reception of both the Monte Carlo and Parisian premieres of this Ballet russes production and emphasizes how *Les Biches* constituted a landmark achievement in Poulenc's musical development and early career.

A Perfect Accord: Music and Gesture in Francis Poulenc's *Les Biches*

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Francis Poulenc's ballet *Les Biches* was premiered in Monte Carlo on 6 January 1924. Commissioned in 1921 by Serge Diaghilev for the Ballet russes, it was featured as part of a "Festival français" which also included premieres of Georges Auric's ballet *Les Fâcheux*, as well as a reprise of a trio of nineteenth-century operas—Chabrier's *Une Éducation manquée*, Gounod's *Le Médecin malgré lui* and *La Colombe*—for which Darius Milhaud, Erik Satie and Francis Poulenc respectively contributed music to replace the traditional spoken dialogues.¹ Poulenc's *Les Biches*, his first major work in any genre, benefited from a close collaboration with leading artists of the day, including the dancer and choreographer Bronislava Nijinska, as well as the painter Marie Laurencin, who designed the sets and costumes. A spectacular critical success at its premiere, *Les Biches* also received positive reviews when the production was presented at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on 26 May of the same year. An examination of this rich corpus of critical reception reveals that the initial success of *Les Biches* was largely attributable to the aesthetic synergies that unified the musical and gestural components of the work.

Some critics characterized the music of *Les Biches* in terms of "classicism" and "art dépouillé," concepts that, as Scott Messing has shown, discursively intersected with the term "neoclassicism" in France during the early 1920s (Messing 1998, 75-127). To be sure, the form of Poulenc's ballet (a suite of eight dances preceded by an overture) linked the work tenuously to eighteenth-century musical models.² The composer's bold use of unadorned major and minor triads further reinforced stylistic ties to the classical era. Long range tonal planning, as the composer wrote to

Milhaud, was also conceived in accordance with classical norms:

Les Biches will be very clear, sturdy and classical. The opening ensemble fluctuates between F major, dominant, sub-dominant, relative minor, etc... just like the finales of classical symphonies; "Jeu" is in E, B, A, etc... and the final "Rondeau" is in D, A, G, etc. For the songs, I have some beautiful but slightly obscene texts (from the 18th century) (Poulenc 1994, 174).³

Jean Cocteau's assertion that *Les Biches* could be viewed as a type of Watteau-inspired *Fêtes galantes* further emphasized the work's perceived aesthetic debt to (predominantly French) eighteenth-century sources (Cocteau 1924, 911).

Whereas Poulenc's musical language certainly pays homage to the past, it would be incorrect to view *Les Biches* solely in terms of a self-conscious reconstruction of eighteenth-century musical practices. Indeed, the composition of *Les Biches* was profoundly indebted to numerous modern stimuli which arguably had a far more decisive influence on the composer than any immediate contact with eighteenth-century music. These ranged from ragtime and folk music to late-nineteenth-century influences both French and foreign, as well as the latest music of Erik Satie and Igor Stravinsky. As a young composer who was still in the process of searching for his musical voice and accumulating the technique that would allow him to express it fully, Poulenc was particularly receptive to rapid changes taking place within the Parisian artistic and musical world at this time (Orledge 1999, 9-47). *Les Biches*, a work-in-progress for close to three years, bears the marks of these contemporary influences, all of which contribute to its distinctive synthesis and transformation of heterogeneous artistic stimuli.⁴

¹ Georges Auric also wrote recitatives to be included in a performance of Gounod's *Philémon et Baucis*, but Gounod's descendants prohibited them from being performed. See Poulenc (1994), 190n8.

² The movements are: Overture; Rondeau; Chanson dansée; Adagietto; Jeu; Rag-Mazurka; Andantino; Petite chanson dansée; Final.

³ All translations by the author unless otherwise indicated. "Les Biches feront un ballet très clair, râblé et classique. Mon ensemble du début oscille entre *fa* majeur, dominante, sous-dominante, relative, etc... tels les finales des symphonies classiques; le *Jeu* du milieu est en *mi, si, la*, etc... et le *Rondeau* final en *ré, la, sol*, etc... Pour les *Chansons*, j'ai de beaux textes un tantinet obscènes (du 18^e)."

⁴ It was a work-in-progress even after the premiere. Following the performances at Monte Carlo, Poulenc continued to iron-out and modify details of orchestration. Although a piano-vocal score was published by Huegel in 1924, an orchestral score was only released to the public in 1948 following Poulenc's re-orchestration of 1939-1940. This version, an orchestral suite, does not include the ballet's three vocal numbers: "Chanson dansée," "Jeu," and "Petite chanson dansée." For details and commentary, see Schmidt (1995), 100-107.

The tremendous success of *Les Biches* was in large measure attributable to Nijinska's choreography, one which, as critics of the day noted, also aimed to combine the traditional techniques of classical ballet with gestures that reflected modern sensibilities. As Boris de Schloezer wrote in his review:

In *Les Biches*, the classical style as it was developed and enriched by the masters of the nineteenth century undergoes the influence of modern dances with their characteristic movements, their syncopated rhythms, their off-beat accentuations. The composite style that is the result of this bold synthesis contains a very strong expressive power and a new type of formal beauty (de Schloezer 1924, 166)⁵.

The “synthetic” character of Nijinska's choreography, directly inspired by the mixture of diverse musical sources that informs Poulenc's score, conferred upon the production a significant unity of tone and atmosphere. In this sense, despite being influenced by stimuli both classic and modern, the collaboration of Nijinska and Poulenc in *Les Biches* may be understood in terms of what Daniel Albright has described as “figures of consonance,” that is, “a deep concord among artistic media” (Albright 2000, 6). As critic Jacques Courneuve enthusiastically observed:

We have rarely admired a more complete accord between the silhouette of a character, his costume, gesture and dramatic significance. The painter, the choreographer and the composer certainly did not limit themselves to making separate, independently conceived contributions to this charming work and then rely on the skill of a ring leader (and the unpredictability of rehearsals) to see to fitting it all together. This little ballet is a model of unity (Courneuve 1924).⁶

Chic Sources

One of these unifying elements was the theme of high-society fashion. Indeed, from the outset, Poulenc's “Grande Oeuvre” was highly influenced by the fashion-conscious Parisian elite of which, as the descendant of a wealthy bourgeois family, he was nothing less than a de facto member (Poulenc 1994, 120). His ballet for Diaghilev was initially to be based on a scenario entitled *Les Desmoiselles*, a ballet-cantata written by the well-known fashion designer, Germaine Bongard (Poulenc 1994, 138). As Mary Davis

has discussed, Bongard's boutique on the rue de Penthièvre aimed to produce an aesthetic rapprochement between couture and modern art. Featuring paintings by Picasso, Léger and Matisse, Bongard's showrooms were decorated in an eclectic style that served as a backdrop to couture creations that boasted “classical designs tweaked with modernist sensibility” (Davis 2006, 97).⁷ Bongard's scenario was of intense interest to Poulenc and Diaghilev who, along with Nijinska, met the designer in order to convince her to grant them permission to use *Les Demoiselles* on their own terms (Poulenc 1994, 161n2). Their efforts were ultimately rebuffed, but, soon after, Poulenc actively contemplated the possibility of composing “a suite of dances without a libretto” which, it seems safe to surmise, remained at least partly indebted to Bongard's plot (Poulenc 1994, 160).⁸

Although *Les Biches* was premiered and performed without a printed scenario, the theme of high-fashion that presumably informed Bongard's *Les Desmoiselles* showed up again in Poulenc's ballet. In his review in *Le Temps*, Henry Malherbe asked his readers to “imagine that you are entering, on a clear festive day, into the dressing room of fashion designer. [...] The young employees are decked out in a “collection” of pink dresses which they hike-up impertinently. They have those humid, glossy and jaded gazes of the vicious flirts of the eighteenth-century” (Malherbe 1924)⁹. Robert Brussel commented that *Les Biches* could have been subtitled *Les Sylphides dans le hall de la couturière* [“The Sylphides in the Salons of the Fashion Designer”], thereby acknowledging both the ballet's indebtedness to both high fashion and Michel Fokine's similarly plot-less ballet of 1909 (Brussel 1924). Louis-Léon Martin wrote about dancer Vera Nemtchinova's incarnation as the “Woman in Blue” and how she struck the pose of a “fashion model, but *en pointe*” (Martin 1924). Finally, writing for *Vogue*, the pre-eminent standard-bearer of contemporary Parisian chic, Jean LaPorte described the entire *corps de ballet* as “models who play and simper close to an enormous blue couch” (LaPorte 1924, 50).¹⁰ Poulenc himself acknowledged how these flappers were drawn to luxury brand names when in an interview with Jules Méry published only three days before the premiere, he proclaimed that his “*biches*” were “women

⁵ “Dans les *Biches*, ce style classique tel qu'il fut développé et enrichi par les maîtres du XIX^e siècle, subit l'action des danses modernes avec leurs déhanchements si caractéristiques, leurs rythmes syncopés, leurs arrêts à contretemps. Le style composite résultant de cette synthèse hardie possède une grande puissance d'expression et une beauté plastique toute nouvelle.”

⁶ “On a rarement admiré un accord plus entier entre la silhouette d'un personnage, son costume, son geste et sa signification dramatique. Le peintre, le chorégraphe et le musicien ne se sont assurément pas bornés à contribuer, chacun pour sa part, à ce charmant ouvrage en s'en remettant à l'adresse du meneur du jeu, et au hasard des répétitions, du soin de lier l'œuvre de l'un à l'œuvre de l'autre. Ce petit ballet est un modèle d'unité.”

⁷ On Bongard's artistic circle, see Davis (2006), 93-116.

⁸ “Nous allons peut-être faire une suite de danses sans livret.”

⁹ “Imaginez que vous pénétriez, par un clair jour de fête, dans le salon d'essayage d'un couturier à la mode. [...] Les jeunes employées se sont parées d'une ‘série’ de toilettes roses qu'elles retroussent avec impertinence. Elles ont ces regards humides, luisants et fatigués des coquettes vicieuses du dix-huitième siècle.”

¹⁰ “[...] des mannequins qui jouent et minaudent près d'un énorme canapé bleu [...]”

¹¹ “Ici, ce sont des femmes habituées aux Rolls-Royce et aux colliers de perles de chez Cartier.”

accustomed to Rolls-Royce and Cartier pearl necklaces” (Méry 1924).¹¹

This was a “lifestyle modernism”—an aesthetic posture catering to the fashion sense of the social elite—that cut across all the ballet’s artistic components (Garafola 1998, 98–115). Poulenc himself later claimed that the “*Rag-Mazurka* woman [danced by Nijinska], wearing a Chanel dress covered in jewels, was in my mind the hostess of this “*House party*,” and whose money and fashion sense were the most likely assets to seduce the three men” (Poulenc 1954, 53–54)¹². In fact, Marie Laurencin’s costume for Nijinska may perhaps be viewed as an homage to Coco Chanel’s famous “little black dress”; the freedom of movement afforded by Chanel’s revolutionary design and the dress’s understated elegance were all preserved in Laurencin’s creation. The only notable transformation concerned the colour—a light beige, offset by a hat consisting of “two waving ostrich feathers”—that distinguished Nijinska’s costume from the pastel pink dresses (“pink enough to bite into” according to Louis Laloy) that graced the *corps de ballet* (Sokolova 1960, 215; Laloy 1924)¹³.

Not surprisingly, as an urban sophisticate wearing the latest creations of modern fashion designers, Poulenc’s “hostess” danced to music that matched her social status: rag-time. Although Poulenc’s “*Rag-Mazurka*” strongly reinforced this characterization, the composer, unlike his friends Milhaud and Auric, was never entirely seduced by jazz. As Renaud Machart suggests in his biography of the composer, Poulenc’s “*Rag-Mazurka*,” while certainly employing distinctive dotted rhythms, seems only to evoke the genre “from afar” (Machart 1995, 47). The distance Machart alludes to no doubt stems from the primary “problem” with Poulenc’s rag: its obstinate respect for the downbeat. The jazziest sections of the “*Rag-Mazurka*” are written in 4/4 time (see for example, rehearsals 101 to 103), but despite regularly stressing beats two and four Poulenc refrains from accentuating weak subdivisions and thus inadequately imitates ragtime’s signature syncopated style. Poulenc’s orchestration, on the other hand, does evoke the atmosphere of 1920s dance-halls, but it is quite plausible that his inspiration for these sounds derived less from soaking them up on a night on the town, than from disciplined study of the rags of Igor Stravinsky, especially his *Rag-Time for Eleven*

Instruments, first published in Paris in 1919. Indeed, the 4/4 passages of the “*Rag-Mazurka*” may be read as rhythmically ironed-out renderings of Stravinsky’s Joplin-inspired score, while all the while conserving much of the Russian composer’s distinctive orchestral palette.¹⁴

In the spring of 1923 Poulenc informed his teacher Charles Koechlin that he had started to write the “*Rag-Mazurka*” four times, claiming that “not a note has been left to chance” but adding that he was coming to “hate more and more all the musical stuffing that one finds so frequently in ballets” (Poulenc 1994, 195).¹⁵ The comment strongly echoes the sentiment of a letter Poulenc received from Stravinsky in early 1923 in which the Russian composer wrote about his own preoccupation with composing music that was “naked” [*à poil*] (Poulenc 1994, 183). Like in Stravinsky’s *Rag-Time*, Poulenc, in his “*Rag-Mazurka*,” writes muted and “very dry” [*très sec*] attacks in the brass and concentrates most of his melodic motifs in the trumpet and winds. The absence of unnecessary “musical stuffing” is highly apparent, especially in the terseness of the string writing and the general economy with which Poulenc employs his orchestral resources. In short, the “*Rag-Mazurka*” reveals the composer’s attentiveness to various manifestations of contemporary chic, not only that of the consumerist world of the French upper-classes, but also that of Stravinsky’s challenging new scores and their modernist appeal.

Stravinsky Subsumed

Poulenc’s work on the “*Rag-Mazurka*” is but one example of the composer’s on-going “Stravinskyist crisis,” a state-of-mind that he first alluded to in letters to friends during the summer of 1921 (Poulenc 1994, 127). Throughout the planning and composition of *Les Biches* Poulenc was exposed to a handful of Stravinsky’s works that would leave an indelible mark on his compositional style. The Parisian premiere of *Mavra* in 1922 was crucial in this regard, and in a letter to Paul Collaer, Poulenc argued that Stravinsky’s work “proved that there is some good in the triad. Once again Satie is right. Believe me, *polytonie* is a dead-end that will be obsolete in five years’ time...not to mention atonality: it’s crap” (Poulenc 1994, 162).¹⁶ Poulenc first heard *Mavra* while working on his own *Sonata for Horn, Trumpet and Trombone*.¹⁷ This short chamber work, first performed at the Concerts Wiéner

¹² “La dame du *Rag-mazurka*, en robe Chanel, couverte de bijoux, c’était, dans mon esprit, l’hôtesse de cette ‘House party,’ dont le chic et le fric étaient les plus sûrs atouts pour séduire ces trois messieurs.”

¹³ Writing to Milhaud in 1923, Poulenc described the dress as follows: “a very large, short dress in off-white tulle with a plunging neckline, adorned with pieces of pink moiré fabric; a ‘chapeau galette’ with aigrettes in the same colour” (Poulenc 1994, 199).

¹⁴ See, for example, measures 33–40 in Stravinsky’s *Rag-Time for Eleven Instruments*. On Stravinsky’s fidelity to the rhythms of Joplinian rag in this piece, see Taruskin (1996), 1307–1310.

¹⁵ “Il n’y a pas une note mise au hasard. Je [...] déteste de plus en plus les remplissages si fréquents surtout dans les ballets.”

¹⁶ “*Mavra* m’a prouvé que l’accord parfait a du bon. Une fois de plus Satie a raison. Croyez-moi, la polytonie est une *impasse* dont on sentira la caducité d’ici 5 ans [...]. Je ne parle pas de l’atonalité, c’est de la merde.”

¹⁷ On the importance of Stravinsky’s *Mavra* for les Six see Kelly (2003), 15–17.

on 4 January 1923, may be viewed as a defining moment in Poulenc's musical development. Compositionally focused on the expressive possibilities of major and minor triads, it breaks with the polytonal experimentation present in the earlier *Sonata for Two Clarinets* (1919) and the more recent *Sonata for Clarinet and Bassoon* (1922). Its forthright tonal idiom and classical formal strategies strongly anticipate the musical style in much of *Les Biches*. In fact, the triad, or "*accord parfait*," became Poulenc's guiding harmonic principle during the composition of his ballet. As he explained in another letter to Paul Collaer from September 1922, he was banishing "wrong notes" and "polytonality" from his musical vocabulary: "I'm hanging out with triads and modulation" (Poulenc 1994, 162-163n2).¹⁸ Writing to Prokofiev in January 1923, Poulenc spoke of his admiration for the composer's use of "triads, simple harmonies and uncluttered melody" in his Piano Concerto No. 3, and reasserted his impatience with "wrong notes, Schoenberg and everything that calls itself *modern*" (Poulenc 1994, 187).¹⁹

Of course, by aesthetically aligning himself with Stravinsky and by adopting what has come to be known as a "neoclassical" compositional approach, Poulenc could not have actually assumed a more resolutely "modern" aesthetic stance. Indeed, Henry Malherbe wrote that the "originality" of Poulenc's ballet movements "lies in the unexpected fashion with which he presents chords that have been catalogued for a long time already" (Malherbe 1924).²⁰ Boris de Schloezer summed up some of the synthetic qualities of the score when he wrote: "here's some Mozart, and here's some Stravinsky, this reminds me of Pergolesi (*Pulcinella*) and this of...Beethoven" (de Schloezer 1924, 165).²¹ But Poulenc's sources were not confined to the classical and modern periods, and Raoul Brunel pointed out (somewhat fancifully) some of the extreme stylistic promiscuity found throughout the ballet:

The author, whose talent is obvious, amused himself by accumulating the most disparate styles, combining Bach and Offenbach, Gounod, Wagner and the café-concert. From time to time, a gang of dissonant brass instruments interrupts a fugue in the best style as if to surprise the audience. It is a very curious sampling, and which becomes amusing once we have gotten used to it (Brunel 1924).²²

André Levinson felt that *Les Biches* "could be interpreted as a suite of homages to the Masters" and that "each part could be dedicated to one" (Levinson 1924).²³ For Levinson, however, this was not a sign of originality, but rather of pastiche. For him, the "Rag-Mazurka" seemed too close to Satie's "Ragtime du Paquebot" from *Parade*, and the sung movements of *Les Biches*, for which the singers were placed in the orchestral pit, were "a direct pastiche of [Stravinsky's] *Les Noces*" (Levinson 1924). But this verdict was contrarian at best, and most critics were quite willing to acknowledge the distinctiveness of Poulenc's own musical voice. Boris de Schloezer, for one, emphasized that the composer "is not an imitator; he does not plagiarize his elders. If he sometimes takes things from where he finds them, in the end he really appropriates them and makes them his own" (de Schloezer 1924, 165).²⁴

A brief comparison of a few measures of Poulenc's "Jeu" with Stravinsky's *Les Noces* is sufficient to underline Poulenc's ability to adapt creatively the music of others. Poulenc knew *Les Noces* intimately. He was supposed to perform as one of the work's four pianists for the Parisian premiere on 13 June 1923 at the Théâtre de la Gaîté, and received a dedicated score from the composer bearing the mangled date of "5 May, no 5 June, 1923" (Poulenc 1994, 197n1). Though he ultimately did not take part in the premiere, Poulenc did take in some rehearsals, and writing to Collaer described Stravinsky's work as "immense" and "brilliant." It was, he explained,

[...] music without a system, music by a musician and not a pawn. I am transfixed with admiration. Here's somebody who doesn't give a damn about being atonal, bi-tonal, poly-linear or what have you (Poulenc 1994, 196).²⁵

A few weeks following the premiere, Poulenc wrote to Milhaud to inform him that he had finally figured out what to do for the "*chanson dansée*, a kind of game [*jeu*] that makes up the middle of the ballet" (Poulenc 1994, 198). That *Les Noces* provided a palpable inspiration to his ongoing work on *Les Biches* seems particularly evident, especially in the (sung) dance entitled "Jeu." Here, Poulenc makes clear reference to the rhythmic declamation employed in Stravinsky's ballet. Similar to Stravinsky's plumbing of folk songs

¹⁸ "Plus de fausses notes, plus de polytonie. Je rôde autour de l'accord parfait et de la modulation."

¹⁹ "Je suis las des fausses notes, de Schoenberg et de tout ce qui se dit 'moderne'."

²⁰ "Leur originalité réside surtout dans la façon inattendue de présenter des accords depuis longtemps catalogués."

²¹ "Voici du Mozart et voici du Stravinsky, ceci fait songer à Pergolèse (*Pulcinella*) et cela à... Beethoven."

²² "Mais l'auteur, dont le talent est indiscutable, s'est amusé à y accumuler les styles les plus disparates, mêlant Bach et Offenbach, Gounod, Wagner et le café-concert. De temps à autre, une bande de cuivres dissonants vient faire irruption dans une fugue du meilleur style, comme pour interloquer l'auditeur. C'est un curieux échantillonnage, qui devient amusant quand on en a pris son parti."

²³ "Celle-ci pourrait être, croyons-nous, interprétée comme une suite d'hommages aux maîtres; chaque partie en pourrait porter une dédicace."

²⁴ "Mais Poulenc n'est pas un imitateur; il ne démarque pas ses aînés, car s'il prend parfois son bien où il le trouve, ce bien il se l'approprie réellement, il le fait sien."

²⁵ "C'est immense, génial. De la musique sans système, de la musique de musicien et non de pion. Je suis pétrifié d'admiration. En voilà un qui se fout d'être atonal, bi-tonal, planaire et que sais-je encore."

²⁶ See Poulenc's letter to Stravinsky dated 31 July, 1922 (Poulenc 1994, 169). On Kireyevsky see Taruskin (1996), 1333-1337.

from Pyotr Vasilyevich Kireyevsky's anthology of 1911, Poulenc lifted the texts for the sung dances of *Les Biches* from sources—as yet unidentified—at the Bibliothèque nationale.²⁶ As Richard Taruskin has demonstrated at length, in *Les Noces* Stravinsky sought to reflect both “the letter and [...] the spirit of Russian folk song,” one of the results being the seemingly arbitrary but imaginatively-wrought prosodic organization that pervades the entire work (Taruskin 1996, 1363). In “Jeu,” Poulenc seems at times to be taking his cue from Stravinsky's prosodic experiments, but obviously in complete ignorance of the “highly specific customs” that his Russian friend had gone through such pains to replicate in *Les Noces* (Taruskin 1996, 1363). At rehearsal 75 in “Jeu,” following on the heels of a chorus of fortissimo and primal “Aï”s, Poulenc introduces a passage which, with its prosodic irregularities mapped onto an obstinately isochronous rhythmic backdrop, strongly alludes to the declamatory style of the “Friends of the Bride” in the first part of Stravinsky's ballet.²⁷ Poulenc's stylistic homage to *Les Noces*, however, foregoes Stravinsky's percussive orchestral effects and quasi-monotonous melodic line. In fact, the composer fashions a chromatically-descending melodic and harmonic gesture that contrasts with the harmonic stasis of Stravinsky's accompaniment, just as it contrasts with much of the surrounding music in “Jeu” itself. Always willing to acknowledge an influence, Poulenc later admitted that “the rhythmic echo of *Les Noces*, very Frenchified to be sure, may be found in the *chansons dansées* in *Les Biches*” (Poulenc 1954, 180).²⁸ Essentially, Poulenc adopted the rhythmic and declamatory style that characterizes Stravinsky's folk-bound “Friends of the Bride” while imagining a different harmonic and orchestral palette to clothe his own chically modern “demoiselles.”

Nijinska, who choreographed both works, clearly sensed the difference. As Louis Laloy wrote, “she knew how to find, for the delicacy of music that is very French, movements that are totally real, and thus completely different in character, and even opposed to those that were dictated by Stravinsky's severe and strong accentuation” (Laloy 1924).²⁹ Indeed, what Poulenc later referred to as “the instinctive genius of Nijinska,” ultimately guided her to imagine chor-

eography for *Les Biches* that reflected the composer's own synthesis of styles, both old and new (Poulenc 1954, 54).³⁰ As Laloy wrote elsewhere,

Nijinska [...] took advantage of classical figures (pointework, pirouettes, entrechats, turns and lifts) and required only a slight change of balance, a barely perceptible deviation or twist [...] to render upon this style, abstract in its traditional perfection, the curt and sporty attitude of elegance that is fashionable today (Laloy 1924a)³¹.

Although positing aesthetic and technical correspondances between different artistic disciplines is fraught with challenges, it is tempting to read Nijinska's use of classical figures as a corollary to Poulenc's compositional preoccupation with major and minor triads in *Les Biches*. Poulenc himself referred to Nijinska's conception as “pure dance,” a description that certainly harkens back to Stravinsky's “naked” music, and Poulenc's own ambition to abolish “wrong notes” during his creative work on his ballet (Méry 1924). The Adagietto from *Les Biches* reveals the extent to which Poulenc and Nijinska were on the same page. Cocteau, so moved by *Les Biches* that he went “home feeling humiliated,” described Nemitchnova's dance as “sublime”:

When this little lady issues forth from the wings on her toes, in an excessively short jerkin, with her long legs, and her right hand in its white glove raised to her cheek as if in military salute, my heart beats faster, or stops beating altogether. And then, with unfailing taste, she presents us with a combination of classical steps and quite new gestures (Cocteau 1924, 912).³²

Nijinska was here no doubt stimulated in her choreography by Poulenc's equally “sublime” music. The composer later revealed that he had been inspired by a “classic” source when composing the movement's main theme: Tchaikovsky's *The Sleeping Beauty* (Poulenc 1954, 54). And like Tchaikovsky's, Poulenc's theme is solidly couched in B-flat major and regularly cadences, via conventional dominant 7th chords, to the tonic.³³ Only sporadically does Poulenc's musical language suggest the “new gestures” alluded to in Cocteau's description. One example occurs in the primary theme, which, via a diminished seventh sonority, suavely introduces a ninth chord built on “E” (the augmented fourth of the key) only quickly to head back to the tonic through

²⁷ Compare especially with Stravinsky's *Les Noces* at the beginning of rehearsals 2, 3, 7 and 24.

²⁸ “[...] l'écho rythmique des *Noces*, vous pouvez le retrouver, très francisé bien sûr, dans les *chansons dansées des Biches*.”

²⁹ “[...] elle a su trouver, pour la délicatesse d'une musique bien française, des mouvements profondément vrais, donc d'un caractère tout différent et même opposé à ceux que lui dictait le rude et fort accent d'un Stravinski.”

³⁰ “[...] le génie plein d'inconscience de Nijinska [...].”

³¹ “C'est M^{me} Nijinska [...] qui a su tirer parti ainsi de toutes les figures classiques, passages sur les pointes, pirouettes, entrechats, tours et enlèvements, et il lui a suffi d'un léger déplacement de l'équilibre, d'une déviation ou d'une torsion à peine perceptible [...] pour restituer à ce style, abstrait par sa perfection traditionnelle, l'air d'élégance un peu brusque et sportive qui est dans le goût de notre temps.”

³² “Lorsque cette petite dame sort de la coulisse, sur ses pointes, avec de longues jambes, un justaucorps trop court, et la main droite, gantée de blanc, mise près de la joue comme pour une espèce de salut militaire, mon cœur bat plus vite ou s'arrête de battre. Ensuite, un goût sans fléchissement combine les pas classiques et les gestes neufs.”

³³ See the main theme of the Adagietto, which begins twelve measures after rehearsal 57 and lasts until rehearsal 58.

³⁴ See rehearsal 57, measures 17–21.

³⁵ “Mon numéro III (solo de l'étoile) [...] commence en *si b* puis se livre à des modulations les plus imprévues. Je suis sûr que c'est ce qu'il faut.”

a textbook II - V7 - I cadential formula.³⁴ As Poulenc wrote to Diaghilev with enthusiasm, the Adagietto movement “begins in B-flat and then indulges itself in the most unexpected modulations – I am sure that this is what is needed” (Poulenc 1994, 178).³⁵ In her choreography, Cocteau wrote, Nijinska “simply obey[s] the rhythm, and the exigencies of the frame she has to fill” (Cocteau 1924, 911).³⁶ As many critics agreed, Nemtchinova’s performance in the “Adagietto” was outstanding; by respecting Poulenc’s musical atmosphere it produced an “extremely gracious combination of classical know-how and the whim of modern fantasy” (Courneuve 1924).³⁷ Both Poulenc and Nijinska had, as Robert Brussel noted, contributed to “the concord we find in this ballet between classical and modern art” (Brussel 1924).³⁸

Painful Charms

Not surprisingly, the “synthetic” approach of both composer and choreographer prompted some critics to view the collaboration as an exercise in irony. Louis Léon-Martin spoke of it as a “chef-d’oeuvre of humorous irony” and Adolphe Boschot heard Poulenc’s music as a kind of “practical joke” (Martin 1924; Boschot 1924). André Levinson, who penned one of the most vivid commentaries on Nijinska’s choreography, reinforced these critical misgivings by suggesting that what the dancer had conceived was not at all witty, but rather, in continuity with her earlier work on *Les Nocés*, an exercise in bad taste:

By excessively mechanizing conventional exercises, by deliberately weighing down their ordinarily light structure, by having the dancers vigorously “hit” the beats which the classical school only barely marks, by accentuating that which should be insinuated, by opening up that which should be rounded, she distorts the formal beauty derived from traditional sources (Levinson 1924).³⁹

Those who weren’t offended by these distortions tended to find the effects comical. This was particularly true in the case of “Jeu,” in which the “mechanization” of Nijinska’s choreography was brought to a new level. Indeed in this movement, which staged an erotically-tinged game of hide-and-seek, the main “dancing” role was conferred upon an inanimate object: an enormous blue couch. Maurice Martin du Gard described it as follows:

In Poulenc’s ballet, a blue couch plays, in the most gracious fashion imaginable, an extremely important role; the dancers jump on it, they throw themselves on it, they lie on it like a feather, they play hide and seek around it, they drag it around in the most exquisite manner from one end of the stage to the other (Martin du Gard 1924).⁴⁰

As Poulenc wrote to Diaghilev, “thinking that the sofa is a prima donna in the same way that she is, Nijinska makes it dance throughout the entire game!!!” (Poulenc 1994, 218).⁴¹

By deforming traditional gestures and by displacing interest from the moving body to lifeless objects Nijinska effectively disrupted the syntactical coherence of classical ballet, much in the same way that Poulenc’s “unexpected modulations” modified the syntax of classical musical structures. By refusing wholly to commit to either modernity or classicism, Poulenc and Nijinska created a ballet that walked a fragile tightrope between egregious conventionality and hardnose iconoclasm. This stylistic promiscuity, along with the consistent juxtaposition of convention and experimentation throughout the ballet, naturally prompted questions concerning the aesthetic character of the work.

For Boris de Schloezer, the integration of modernist elements within the predominately classical framework of *Les Biches* prompted the rebirth of an aesthetic category which, he claimed, had become almost entirely obsolete: “charm.” He argued that this aesthetic attribute, which “through overuse has acquired today a meaning that is almost pejorative,” was truly rehabilitated in Poulenc’s ballet (de Schloezer 1924, 164-165). For Cocteau, *Les Biches* “de-ridiculed grace”; by refusing to simply recreate “charming” classical clichés, Poulenc and Nijinska had reinvented them for a modern public (Cocteau 1924, 909). Balancing the tension between slavish imitation and creative manipulation that underlined this aesthetic stance was, as many commentators sensed, one of the work’s primary virtues. As Henry Prunières wrote in the *Revue musicale*, Poulenc’s music “comes close to being vulgar, but without ever stooping so low” (Prunières 1924, 63).⁴² Even in his engagement with popular materials—as in the “Rag-Mazurka”—the composer managed to be both “naïve and subtle at the same time” (Auric 1924).

Nonetheless, there was something troubling about all this “charm.” Cocteau compared it to a lonely visit he made to

³⁶ “Sans le moindre calcul et par simple obéissance aux rythmes et du cadre qu’il faut remplir, elle va créer un chef-d’œuvre.”

³⁷ Henry Malherbe made an almost identical appreciation of Poulenc’s music when he wrote that “very tangible classical know-how presides here over the most lively of modern imaginations” (Malherbe 1924).

³⁸ “[...] l’accord qu’on y trouve entre l’art classique et l’art moderne...”

³⁹ “En mécanisant à outrance la gymnastique d’école, en alourdissant volontairement sa contexture légère, en faisant “taper” avec vigueur les temps que l’école classique marque à peine, en accentuant ce qui devrait être insinué, en écarquillant ce qui veut être arrondi, elle dénature les éléments plastiques, puisés aux sources traditionnelles.”

⁴⁰ “Dans le ballet de Poulenc, un canapé bleu joue, le plus gracieusement du monde, un rôle d’une extrême importance: on saute par-dessus; on s’y jette; ou se couche comme une plume; on y joue à cache-cache; on le traîne, aux accents les plus exquis, d’un bout à l’autre de la scène [...]”

⁴¹ “[...] estimant que le canapé est une ‘étoile’ au même titre qu’elle, elle le fait danser pendant tout le jeu!!!”

⁴² “[...] la partition des *Biches*, en maint passage, frise la vulgarité, mais sans y tomber jamais.”

the *Palais de Glace* when he was twelve years old. Seduced by the elegant women on their skates, he was painfully obliged to observe them from afar, their beauty both inaccessible and mesmerizing:

I measured the distance that separated me from the celebrated *cocottes*. They would be limping round the warm passages, and then, suddenly, out there in the rink in the cold [...] I would see them bowing and gliding about like ships in full sail (Cocteau 1924, 910).⁴³

Cocteau seems to have been moved by the ambivalence and confidence with which both the musician and choreographer could navigate between contrasting stylistic and emotive zones, between the warmth and the cold of the skating rink. By being both seductive and aloof, Cocteau felt that *Les Biches* “exhibited itself half naked,” but it did so while “failing to understand itself,” thus “producing the same effect as perversion” (Cocteau 1924, 910).⁴⁴ Louis Laloy’s reading of the ballet engaged with a similar trope. He too lauded the innocence of *Les Biches*, and argued that within it “youth is scattered all over the place and never takes the time to acknowledge its own treasure” (Laloy 1924a).⁴⁵ Underneath all this “grace and so much charm,” underneath the ballet’s incorrigible “thirst for life,” Laloy was overwhelmed by what he called an “adjacent melancholy” (Laloy 1924). It was, he claimed in another review, “a hidden melancholy,” one that provides a “foretaste of regret, without which we wouldn’t feel all the tenderness contained in certain inflexions of both the music and the dance—without it, the work would not leave us with such a pleasant memory” (Laloy 1924a).⁴⁶ In sum, both Cocteau’s and Laloy’s responses to the ballet sought to verbalize something of the double nature of Poulenc and Nijinska’s creation. By merging the modern and the classic, and by playing with themes of youth and nostalgia couched in a demonstration of modern sexual mores, they had created a multivalent work whose aesthetic appeal went beyond a simple juxtaposition of the past and the present. *Les Biches* proposed a new aesthetic reality, one that blurred historic stylistic distinctions while simultaneously proposing a deliberately ambiguous narrative action. The instability of this interplay, like the “flashing [of] a ray of sunlight from a pocket mirror on a woman’s face,” constituted the aesthetic novelty of this ballet, and was responsible for its sophisticated and at times painful charm (Cocteau 1924, 913).⁴⁷

Louis Laloy’s sensitivity to the melancholy underlying the stylistic pluralism of *Les Biches* had notorious consequences. His endorsement of Poulenc’s ballet and his acceptance into the composer’s social and artistic circle exasperated Erik Satie who held a long-standing grudge against the critic. Satie wrote to Poulenc following the premiere of *Les Biches* to express his strong disapproval regarding his relationship with Laloy, a stance that ultimately prompted an irrevocable rift between the two composers.⁴⁸ As Barbara Kelly has suggested, it is possible that by the time *Les Biches* was completed, Satie had “served his purpose” for Poulenc, who was now “no longer prepared to put up with the older man’s entrenched views” (Kelly 2003, 21). The music of *Les Biches*, while indebted to Satie’s long-standing faith in pared-down tonality, announces the first flowering of Poulenc’s mature style, one that found considerable inspiration in the compositional craft of Stravinsky and which offered an entirely personal reading of contemporary neoclassical experiments. Nijinska’s provocative choreography clung to this music with impressive fidelity, thereby fashioning a seductive union of sound and gesture that helped secure Poulenc’s reputation as one of the leading French composers of his generation.

⁴³ “Je me rappelle de ma solitude, à douze ans, au Palais de Glace. J’y mesurais les distances me séparant des grandes cocottes. Elles boitaient à l’ombre du pourtour chaud, et soudain, sur la piste, dans le froid du milieu [...] s’inclinaient et glissaient comme des voiliers.”

⁴⁴ “[La musique de Poulenc] dédaigne, elle s’exhibe à moitié nue, elle arrive à force de ne pas se comprendre aux mêmes fins que la perversion.”

⁴⁵ “La jeunesse s’y répand sans les compter ses trésors.”

⁴⁶ “Il y a [...] une mélancolie cachée [...]. Sans cet avant-goût de regret, nous ne ressentirions pas tant de tendresse à de certaines inflexions du chant comme de la danse, et l’œuvre ne nous laisserait pas un si doux souvenir.”

⁴⁷ “En somme, ce ballet, on croirait voir, vous savez quoi? De la maison d’en face, la main la plus espiègle, la plus méchante et la plus adroite, dirige sur un visage de femme du soleil découpé avec un miroir de poche.”

⁴⁸ See Poulenc (1994), 222-226.

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