

## **Phone-Crossed Lovers: Dehumanizing Technology in Cocteau's and Poulenc's *La Voix humaine***

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Jean Cocteau: Evangelist of the Avant-garde  
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Résumé de l'article

En 1958, soit quarante ans après sa dernière collaboration avec son ancien mentor Jean Cocteau, Francis Poulenc entamait un nouveau projet avec le dramaturge, l'opéra *La Voix humaine* (1958). L'unique personnage, une femme nommée Elle, s'entretient au téléphone avec son ex-amoureux; cet appareil représente l'aspect négatif du progrès technologique accompli durant les premières décennies du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle. L'essai décrit la nature de la collaboration entre Cocteau et Poulenc et interprète, à l'aide de la théorie de la narration, la puissance du téléphone dans cet écrit dramatique.

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# PHONE-CROSSED LOVERS: DEHUMANIZING TECHNOLOGY IN COCTEAU'S AND POULENC'S *LA VOIX HUMAINE*<sup>1</sup>

Lynette Miller Gottlieb

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*Why don't I have a telephone? ... There are two chief reasons: because I don't really like the telephone, and because I find I can still work and play, eat, breathe and sleep without it. Why don't I like the telephone? Because I think it is a pest and a time-waster. It may create unnecessary suspense and anxiety, as when you wait for an expected call that doesn't come; or irritating delay, as when you keep ringing a number that is always engaged.*

William Plomer, "On Not Answering the Telephone," 1959

Almost forty years after his previous collaboration with his former advocate Jean Cocteau, Francis Poulenc embarked on another project with the playwright. This work, the monodrama *La Voix humaine* (1958), was Poulenc's last opera. The sole character is an unnamed, emotionally unstable woman referred to as Elle, who participates in tumultuous conversation with her former lover on the telephone. When Cocteau's play *La Voix humaine* was written in 1927, he and Poulenc were exploring the recent aesthetic of observing beauty in the everyday and the popular. At this time, the machines of the First World War that had caused so much destruction were viewed with cynicism, and a general disillusionment with technology prevailed. Accordingly, in both the dramatic and the operatic versions of *La Voix humaine*, Cocteau and Poulenc show the telephone to impede human relationships and dehumanize emotional situations.<sup>2</sup>

*La Voix humaine* concerns a single character, Elle, who participates in a torturous conversation with her former lover on the telephone. The words of Elle's "ex" are never heard in a spoken or sung form, but remain eerily implicated and entirely "present" throughout the opera. As the ensuing conversation demonstrates, the telephone tests the endurance and feasibility, even the possibility, of authentic human-to-human connection in a world increasingly enamored with technology. The infamous French telephone system's continu-

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper presented at the 2002 conference of the Canadian University Music Society in Toronto. I would like to thank James Deaville and Serge Lacasse for their helpful feedback, and Christopher Gibbs and Tom Gordon for their editorial suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> Disillusionment with technology, however, did not preclude a more optimistic fascination with it. For example, in Cocteau and Les Six's collaboration *Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel* (1921), phonographs and a camera are similarly dysfunctional, but ultimately more humane.

ous wrong-numbers, interruptions from the operator, disconnections, and busy signals put an unbearable strain on the woman's attempts to establish and maintain an intimate link with her former lover. In the end, the telephone replaces the man: she goes to bed with the receiver cradled in her neck, and appears to strangle herself with its cord. Contrary to the famous slogan, Elle is unable to "reach out and touch someone."

Poulenc wrote *La Voix humaine* while his third opera, *Dialogues des Carmélites*, was successfully traveling around the world after its 1957 premiere in Milan.<sup>3</sup> The later opera was supposedly conceived at La Scala, where Poulenc was in attendance with the Paris director of Ricordi Publishers, Hervé Dugardin. Poulenc relates the story as follows:

Madame Callas was pushing aside tenors and baritones to take her bows before the deservedly wild applause. At that point Dugardin turned to me and said: "But what you ought to set for her is *La Voix humaine*, since it's written for just one woman, and then she could have *all* the applause." So this work was born quite by chance, but there was never any question of Callas performing it, mainly because it didn't interest her in the slightest.<sup>4</sup>

Although Poulenc states that the possibility of creating *La Voix humaine* for Callas was never anything more than a suggestion, and one that he did not take seriously, the rumor traveled as far as America.<sup>5</sup> But, as Edward Lockspeiser explains, the parts typically played by Callas

hardly resemble the role, designed by Cocteau, of an anonymous woman, jilted in love. Callas is a tragic not a disillusioned heroine. But the seed had been planted in the composer's mind and the sole character of Elle was accordingly conceived for Denise Duval, who had triumphantly created the lead role in both *Les Mamelles [de Tirésias]* and *Dialogues*.<sup>6</sup>

Contrary to the legend of the Callas impetus, *La Voix humaine* did not grow out of coincidence or serendipity from a night at the opera. Rather, Poulenc's final opera roots itself in the long-ago planted ideas of Cocteau, and is realized by an intensive collaboration between the playwright, the composer, and Denise Duval.

Before delving into Cocteau's input specifically, one should note that this opera is also indebted in its narrative and form to Arnold Schoenberg's

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<sup>3</sup>The premiere took place on 26 January 1957 at La Scala, followed by a 21 June 1957 opening at the Paris Opéra. Poulenc's first opera, *Récits for Gounod: La colombe* (1923) is unpublished, and his second opera, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, was composed in 1939–44 and premiered in 1947.

<sup>4</sup>Quoted in Denis Waleckx, "In Search of a Libretto," trans. Sidney Buckland, in *Francis Poulenc: Music, Art and Literature*, ed. Sidney Buckland and Myriam Chimènes (Brookfield USA: Ashgate, 1999), 268, n. 4. See also Sidney Buckland, ed. and trans., *Francis Poulenc: Selected Correspondence 1915–1963* (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1991), 401, n. 1.

<sup>5</sup>Ned Rorem reminisces that the day Samuel Barber won the Pulitzer Prize for his opera *Vanessa* (in 1958), they dined together and Rorem asked Barber whether he had heard that Poulenc was writing a monologue for Callas on *La Voix humaine*. Barber responded that Poulenc was an opportunist and so was Callas, because she "can't stand other singers on stage." Rorem insisted that the Poulenc-Callas partnership was a "swell idea." See Ned Rorem, *Music and People* (New York: George Braziller, 1968), 37.

<sup>6</sup>Edward Lockspeiser, "An Introduction to Poulenc's *La Voix humaine*," *Opera* 11 (1960): 531. *La Voix humaine*'s British debut was at the Edinburgh festival, in August 1960.

monodrama *Erwartung* (1909). Poulenc, accompanied by Darius Milhaud, made Schoenberg's acquaintance in 1922 at the home of Alma Mahler-Werfel, and soon thereafter, lunched with him at his home in Mödling, where Schoenberg discussed his operas *Erwartung* and *Die glückliche Hand* (1910–13).<sup>7</sup> In light of his later adoption of the monodramatic genre, I have argued elsewhere that this meeting was a formative experience for Poulenc, and have examined more closely the aesthetic and stylistic connections between *Erwartung* and *La Voix humaine*.<sup>8</sup> However, the connection between Poulenc and Cocteau is more significant. I will begin by illuminating their rekindled partnership, inspired by their shared past, and examining the ways in which Poulenc adapted the play. I will then focus on the importance of the telephone as an object that becomes an active, non-human character, at once permitting, limiting, and violating the communication that occurs by way of its connection. I will then explore the strategies and techniques Poulenc uses in his musical portrayal of this frustrating device. Adapting the terminology of cultural and narrative theorist Mieke Bal, I will argue that the telephone is the “focalizer” of the drama: the element which sees and shapes the narrative, and the stance from which all words are assembled and enunciated.<sup>9</sup> I will also demonstrate that the genius of Poulenc's score lies not only in the brilliant setting of a lone soprano voice for forty continuous minutes, or the creation of evocative motives, but also in the composer's inventive deployment of the orchestra. At times restrained to silence and at others granted a voice, the orchestra plays the role of the un-present present, of the voices (especially, the ex-lover's) that are within the world of the opera, but whose words are unheard by the audience. Finally, I will argue that Poulenc's most brilliant stroke in *La Voix humaine* is his calculated placement of the audience out of earshot, into an unstable and disconcerting listening position. Like Elle herself, we are in a tenuous situation, always listening but not always able to hear the words we yearn to hear.

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*La Voix humaine* was Poulenc's first setting of a Cocteau text in almost forty years. In his recollections of the night at La Scala, Poulenc claims happenstance motivated the idea to write *La Voix humaine*, but in reality, the composer's search for libretti was always a hard-fought struggle. Indeed, part of the reason that Poulenc only ever came to write three successful operas, and these in the later stages of his career, is that he held an extremely high standard for texts and mulled them over excessively.<sup>10</sup> Plot, thematic content, characters, and

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<sup>7</sup>For details, see Francis Poulenc, *My Friends and Myself*, ed. Stéphane Audel, trans. James Harding (London: Dennis Dobson, 1978), 22, and Darius Milhaud, *My Happy Life*, trans. Donald Evans, George Hall and Christopher Palmer (New York: Marion Boyars, 1995), 112. Although written several years before, *Erwartung* and *Die glückliche Hand* were still two years away from their first performances in June and October of 1924, respectively.

<sup>8</sup>Lynette Miller Gottlieb, “Narrating Modernism: Technology and the Changing Voice of Musical Collaboration, 1909–1958” (Ph.D. diss., University at Buffalo, SUNY, 2002), chapter 5.

<sup>9</sup>See Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, trans. Christine van Boheemen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 100–102.

<sup>10</sup>Walecx, “Libretto,” 252.

literary nature of the material were not merely measures by which to select libretti, but also measures by which to discard them.<sup>11</sup> By first briefly considering the way Poulenc employs texts by Guillaume Apollinaire throughout his career, we gain insight into the composer's long hiatus from Cocteau. In one respect, Poulenc's attitude towards the poetry of Apollinaire and that of Cocteau is similar; both were key poets of his youth. In the years 1918 and 1919, Poulenc worked with the words of both poets, writing the song cycle *Le Bestiaire* (1918) to poems of Apollinaire, and the song *Toréador* (1918) and song cycle *Cocardes* (1919) to poems by Cocteau. (In addition, Poulenc wrote incidental music to Cocteau and Raymond Radiguet's play, *Le Gendarme incompris* in 1920, and the former's *Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel* in 1921.) Both Cocteau and Apollinaire provided inspiration to Poulenc at the onset of his career, but the composer used Cocteau's words at this point in time more frequently. This trend would shift, however; while Poulenc habitually returned to the texts of Apollinaire over the course of the next few decades, he would not work with Cocteau's words again until *La Voix humaine*.<sup>12</sup>

Apollinaire died as a young man in 1918, therefore remaining forever connected to that exciting artistic epoch in Paris;<sup>13</sup> Cocteau was more fortunate, sustaining a long and varied career. Poulenc's association continued with Cocteau from the time the composer was just seventeen years old until both artists passed away in 1963 (Poulenc in January and Cocteau in October), an artistic connection that was the longest of the composer's life, but also the most irregular. As Poulenc explains, between the wars Cocteau wrote works with which the composer did not sympathize, saying in 1958, "nothing seemed quite right to me, until very recently, when I set *La Voix humaine*."<sup>14</sup> There had been an aesthetic rift of sorts between the poet and composer: "Cocteau wrote many works, not exactly neoclassical, but works like *Orphée*, which did not touch me in the least ... but with *La Voix humaine*, I discovered a work by Cocteau that really spoke to me."<sup>15</sup> Of course, Cocteau's play had been written long before the aesthetic break between him and Poulenc, hence its attractiveness to the composer even several decades later is not surprising.

Cocteau had never been actually forgotten, but Apollinaire and others, like Paul Eluard, spoke more meaningfully to Poulenc during the inter-war years, as the catalogue of his vocal music attests. Importantly, however, the length of the gap between Poulenc's initial work with Cocteau's texts and his final opera is perhaps not as conspicuous as it might initially seem: Poulenc attended the premiere of Apollinaire's *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* in 1917, only to wait some

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 267. For more on opera projects of Poulenc's that never came to fruition, libretti that fell by the wayside, and Poulenc's general literary interests, see *ibid.*, 252–73.

<sup>12</sup> However, *Toréador* was revised in 1932 and *Cocardes* in 1939.

<sup>13</sup> Apollinaire had been plagued since 1916 by a severe head injury he received during service, but it was Spanish influenza that killed him, just two days before the Armistice.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Waleckx, "Libretto," 266. The source of Poulenc's statement is an interview with Francine Bloch, recorded 15 Dec. 1958. Tape no. 216, archives of the Phonothèque Nationale, Paris.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Waleckx, "A Musical Confession": Poulenc, Cocteau and *La Voix humaine*," trans. Sidney Buckland, ed. Buckland and Chimènes, 323. The comment is from the Bloch interview.

twenty years before beginning to sketch it into his first opera in 1938. As Carl B. Schmidt writes,

As is frequently the case with Poulenc, *Les Mamelles* was in his mind years before its serious composition was undertaken. Precisely what place these seemingly dormant works occupied in Poulenc's psyche cannot be guessed, but when he moved them from the contemplative realm to his work table he often did so with great energy and consuming devotion.<sup>16</sup>

There is no evidence that Poulenc attended the first production of Cocteau's play *La Voix humaine* in 1930, but the scandalous production could not have escaped the knowledge of a well-read and active Parisian artist.<sup>17</sup> In any case, the span of thirty-odd years from *La Voix humaine*'s first theatrical performance to Poulenc's operatic adaptation was not the first time the composer took a long while to turn to a subject.

Poulenc's return to Cocteau is a return of friendship. By the late 1950s, Poulenc held a sexagenarian's sense of nostalgia, closely linked to the significant relationships he had maintained since his youth. A homosexual, his social and familial life had always been defined by a large circle of loving companions. The singer Pierre Bernac, Poulenc's longtime collaborator and close friend, writes of the composer's dire need of society, and how sometimes this disrupted his work:

In Paris he could never find his rhythm of work, he was too much disturbed by the telephone, there was too much distraction, he knew too many people and naturally went out every evening, to a concert, a theatre or to visit friends. He could not bear an evening alone at home. For emotional and nervous as he was, he had two fears, solitude and boredom.<sup>18</sup>

This description shows that socializing warded off certain evils for Poulenc, and that his busy social calendar was motivated by a fear of being alone. The character of Elle must have held a great poignancy for him, for his exhaustive social life was constructed to avoid the very loneliness and longing for human companionship that she suffered.

Many of the close friends Poulenc made while young remained in his circle for several decades, and as years passed, the intensity of emotion and fondness for shared memories increased. Louis Durey, one of Les Six, points to Poulenc's nostalgia for the old days and the pride that both he and Poulenc took in their long relationship in a letter written 20 June 1959:

You say that "the older you get, the more you like to think back on our youth." This is the surest way of refusing to grow old; and being as I am eleven years

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<sup>16</sup>Carl B. Schmidt, *Entrancing Muse: A Documented Biography of Francis Poulenc* (Hillsdale, New York: Pendragon Press, 2001), 295.

<sup>17</sup>The role was first created by the Belgian actress, Berthe Bovy, at the Comédie Française. Paul Eluard was ejected from the audience, and exchanged words with Cocteau. See *ibid.*, 422.

<sup>18</sup>Pierre Bernac, *Francis Poulenc: The Man and His Songs*, trans. Winifred Radford (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 34. Poulenc did most of his composing at his country home in Noizay, where he would compose only in the mornings and leisurely correspond or visit with his guests for the rest of the day.

your senior, I can assure you that the prescription is one of the best ... the youthfulness I imagine I still possess sustains itself at the source of our friendship—an extraordinary friendship that will always stand as an example to those younger than ourselves.<sup>19</sup>

Ned Rorem tells how Poulenc reminisced about Les Six and displayed anxiety about the members' futures, when Rorem visited the composer a few months before Honegger's death and found him "rubbing the large forehead above his closed eyes, ... mutter[ing] with a grin of nasal irony: 'Les Six are aging!'," a statement that Rorem understands as "which one of us will be the first to go?"<sup>20</sup> The past played heavily on Poulenc's mind and as such it is not surprising that remembrance informed his later compositions: "The extraordinary euphoria, the prodigious artistic vitality of Paris at this period [the 1920s] which permitted all that was most daring ... remained for Poulenc the Golden Age."<sup>21</sup> Bernac blames Poulenc's "nostalgia for the dazzling, halcyon days of his youth" for what he considers a mediocre work: *La Dame de Monte Carlo* (1961), a monologue for soprano and orchestra that also employs a text by Cocteau.<sup>22</sup> For Poulenc, musing on past times meant thinking again about Cocteau. Waleckx points out the formative connection Poulenc had with Cocteau as a teen and a logical reappropriation of the early days: "During those golden years [Cocteau's] genius was manifest mainly in his works for theatre. It was therefore fairly predictable that Poulenc, turning to composing for the theatre rather late in life, should sooner or later renew ties with Cocteau, who had initiated him into this art form."<sup>23</sup> Further, Poulenc's lyric music tends to draw inspiration from his youth, and "[c]onsequently, the renewed collaboration with Cocteau may be seen within a wider movement of reappropriation of a rich past."<sup>24</sup>

Poulenc makes only minimal changes to the basic sequence of Cocteau's narrative, a digressive unfolding of a volatile conversation. The play begins with Elle alone in her bedroom, anxiously waiting for a phone call. She receives two wrong numbers before calling the Exchange (operator) to say that someone is calling her, but because people are on the party line her caller cannot get through. She asks the operator to command the other woman to hang up. When her ex-lover finally gets through, the connection is so poor that Elle implores him to ask to be put through again. After several attempts he calls her back, only to have her tell various untruths: that she just got home from dining out, and that the night before she went straight to bed, took "just one" sleeping pill, woke at 9 a.m., lunched with a friend, and did some shopping. They discuss their love letters, she tells him he is not at all to blame for the demise of their

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<sup>19</sup>Poulenc, *Selected Correspondence*, 263.

<sup>20</sup>"*Le groupe des Six vieillit!*" Ned Rorem, *Music and People*, 33. Honegger died in 1955, while Poulenc himself was the second of Les Six to pass away.

<sup>21</sup>Bernac, *Songs*, 25.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 26. This was Poulenc's last complete composition. Composed quickly in April 1961, the composition did not involve any input from Cocteau. *La Dame de Monte Carlo* was not as successful as *La Voix humaine*, and has been performed and recorded infrequently since its premiere on 5 December 1961.

<sup>23</sup>Waleckx, "Libretto," 266.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 266.

relationship and after having thought it over, understands his leaving her. He does not seem to believe her. They discuss their five-year relationship, as well as the event that will occur tomorrow for which he must get up early and after which he will be traveling to Le Touquet.<sup>25</sup> The connection worsens again and then goes dead. In the process of attempting to reach him at home, she is forced to speak to his manservant and learns that her lover is not at home. She suspects that he is at a restaurant, but when he calls her back a moment later, Elle hears jazz from a phonograph, and now suspects he is at the home of his new girlfriend. Although she gives him the opportunity to tell the truth, he continues to lie about where he is. She eventually confesses her suicide attempt of the night before (she took twelve sleeping pills) and that she called her friend because she didn't have the courage to die alone. She also tells him that she went to bed with the telephone two nights before and now has the cord wrapped around her neck to feel his voice around her throat through the phone line. After more reminiscences, they are cut off again, to the woman's horror. She frantically repeats "Oh! God, make him call me again" until he does. Shortly afterward, he tells her a final goodbye, with the woman begging him to disconnect while she repeats "I love you, I love you, I love you."<sup>26</sup> She drops the telephone receiver and appears to have strangled herself.

As Émile Vuillermoz pointed out at the time of *La Voix humaine*'s operatic premiere, Poulenc "has chosen with sagacity a play already plebiscite."<sup>27</sup> As such, the composer did not necessarily need Cocteau's involvement. Similarly, the monodrama need not have been written with a specific singer in mind; Elle's voice could have been imagined for any woman who might come to sing the role. But in light of Poulenc's long friendship with Cocteau, his intensifying relationship with Duval, as well as his nostalgia for the camaraderie of Les Six, we can understand that Poulenc would have wanted to work with others on *La Voix humaine*. A certain sense of trepidation may also have played a role, since Poulenc was returning mid-century to a genre that had been more or less left alone for forty years.<sup>28</sup> Finally, collaboration here could take on a compensatory role; in its supporting and loving conception, the group effort behind the opera could make up for the bleak state of human communication that Poulenc, Cocteau and Duval strive to portray.

Poulenc adjusted the play into a libretto and wrote the music, and Duval assisted to a large degree with the libretto in addition to realizing Elle.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>The event is not explicitly named, but one surmises that it is to be the lover's marriage to his new girlfriend. Poulenc states that this is the case in an unpublished letter to the singer Rose Dercourt-Plaut, which Sidney Buckland quotes in her program notes to Francis Poulenc, *La Voix humaine*, Orchestre National de France, Jean-Pierre Marty, INA, mémoire vive compact disc 262019.

<sup>26</sup>"Mon Dieu, fait' qu'il redemande" and "Je t'aime" are each repeated five times.

<sup>27</sup>"Francis Poulenc ... a choisi, ici, avec sagacité, un livret déjà plébiscité." Émile Vuillermoz, "*La Voix humaine*," *Paris Presse* (8 February 1959). This article and others are included in the "Recueil de Presse: *La Voix humaine*," Bibliothèque nationale de France.

<sup>28</sup>To the best of my knowledge, no monodramas had been written since Schoenberg's *Erwartung* (1909).

<sup>29</sup>For more on Poulenc and Duval's friendship and a more extensive discussion of her contribution, see Gottlieb, "Narrating Modernism," chapter 5.



Cocteau, at Poulenc's request, designed the sets, lights and costumes for the opera. Poulenc cut and arranged Cocteau's text according to his own wishes; the playwright was satisfied with leaving the direction to Poulenc, and trusted the composer's artistic judgment. The set design sketches were complete by October 1958, when Cocteau was photographed with them at Cap-Ferrat.<sup>30</sup> Cocteau's health made it necessary for Poulenc and Duval to travel to him in order to rehearse (they stayed a week), and also made it impossible for Cocteau to attend the premiere in February 1959. Unlike his role in earlier collaborations like *Parade* and *Les Mariés*—where he respectively suggested the “noises” for Satie's music and sometimes voiced the narration—Cocteau stayed within the limits of design elements with this operatic production, the style of which one French critic labeled “Bohemian luxury.”<sup>31</sup>

It would be a mistake, however, to underestimate the significance of Cocteau's contributions to the overall effect of Poulenc's opera. His specifications regarding design are meticulous and pregnant with meaning. The design elements blur into dramatic characterization, demonstrative of the fact that it was he who dreamed up Elle's character. In a letter written to Poulenc 6 December 1958, Cocteau begins with a brief greeting, succeeded by these points:

The appearance of [Elle's] character must not be tragic. It must not be frivolous.

No studied elegance.

The young woman has simply put on what was at hand but she is waiting for that telephone call from her love *and believes she will be visible to him*.

In spite of her lie about the pink dress there is a natural elegance about her, that of a young woman used to looking elegant.

The tragic touch will come from a shawl ... because she is cold, “cold within.” This is how I will show her inner coldness on stage.<sup>32</sup>

All the details of Elle's appearance are symbolic: her attire, comportment, and emotional state are each linked to one another. For instance, the shawl implies a deadness of spirit, while her effortless elegance displays her denial that her lover is ending the relationship. Because of the meaning with which he imbued each physical detail, Cocteau was fanatical about Elle's look. Included in this remarkable letter is a line drawing that Cocteau made depicting Elle in her tunic, holding the phone in her left hand, with almost illegible marginalia regarding her costume: for example, “no jewelry”, “never bare” feet, and the stipulation that “this tunic is of a shiny material.”<sup>33</sup> He also considers whether Duval should wear a hair ribbon, and in which sort of wig:

<sup>30</sup> Bibliothèque nationale de France, Rés. Vma 0475.

<sup>31</sup> “Ces décors de Cocteau sont du style ‘Bohème de luxe.’” J. F., “De son lit de malade Cocteau met en scène *La Voix humaine* mise en musique par Poulenc,” *D'Aurore* (5 February 1959). Photographs of Cocteau with the designs were published alongside. The author states that although Cocteau could not leave Cap-Ferrat, he gave “very precise information for the production that he conceived himself” [“Cocteau, lui, est en Cap-Ferrat, que son état de santé ne lui permet pas de quitter. Mais de là il a donné de très précises indications pour la mise en scène qu'il a conçue lui-même”].

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Poulenc, *Selected Correspondence*, 255–56.

<sup>33</sup> “Aucun bijou,” “Aucun nu,” and “Cette tunique est en étoffe circée” are written by Cocteau next to the pertinent parts of Elle's body. See Walecx, “A Musical Confession,” 342.

For the hairstyle, will you ask Duval to go with you to Alexandre's in the rue du Faubourg St-Honoré? Tell him I sent you and explain the position to him. By far the best idea for the theatre is a small wig so that the disorder is deliberate—and is there once and for all. Alexandre is the only one who knows how to create this pastiche ... Tell Alexandre that I want hair that is slightly reddish, or with red tints in it, through which she has run her hands a thousand times during the last few days.<sup>34</sup>

A second included drawing depicts Elle's head only, in order to show the hairstyle Cocteau had in mind. This letter, with its two attached sketches, not only demonstrates the manner and character of Cocteau's contributions to the production, but also displays the intense feeling the playwright held for the woman of *La Voix humaine*. His contribution extended to the very day of the Parisian premiere, 6 February 1959, when despite his illness, he sent Poulenc both a telegram and a letter from Cap-Ferrat. The telegram would likely have reached Poulenc before the evening's concert, but the letter's advice would have had to wait for implementation, likely at the Milan performance on 18 February. Curiously, the telegram's information seems less important than the content of the letter; the former reminds Poulenc about the hairdresser Alexandre, because Elle needs this "theater lesson in hair," whereas the letter tells Poulenc not to create a true bedroom, but a bedroom "asleep with remembering," which contains nothing of importance except the woman and the phone she holds "like a revolver."<sup>35</sup>

Poulenc and Cocteau's renewed partnership re-confirms artistic, aesthetic, and personal ties that the two men had initiated four decades earlier. Now just four years before the end of each of their lives, their collaboration allowed them to tackle once more post-First World War concerns about technology, as they had back in 1921 with the production of *Les Mariés*, and to revitalize these concerns now more somberly and without farce. The bittersweetness of their partnership in realizing *La Voix humaine* arises from our knowledge that their relationship was so affectionate and lasting, and that the outcome on stage would be so poignant and visceral. Moreover, we know with hindsight that Elle was singing the swan song of Poulenc-Cocteau collaboration.

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*La Voix humaine* employs distinctive narrative techniques to communicate its concerns about technology, without actually using a spoken narration. Instead, the opera reconstitutes into melody what is best described as Cocteau's term "monodialogue": monologue because the words are spoken/sung by only one character, and dialogue because the other person's words are present but not spoken/sung.<sup>36</sup> The progression of Elle's monodialogue is achieved by what

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<sup>34</sup>Quoted in Waleckx, "Libretto," 256.

<sup>35</sup>"Surtout ne pas oublier Alexandre coiffeur ... car Elle a besoin urgent de cette leçon du théâtre"; "Ne la mettre dans une vraie chambre mais dans une chambre 'dont on se souvient' et ne donner n'importe quoi à la femme et au téléphone qu'elle promène comme un revolver." "Lettres d'hommages adressées à Francis Poulenc," (51) and (52), Bibliothèque nationale de France.

<sup>36</sup>Jean Cocteau, *The Human Voice*, trans. Carl Wildman (London: Vision Press, 1951), 18.

Cocteau called “phases,” which are depicted by the changing poses of the actress/singer playing Elle: “Each pose would be used for a phase of the monodialogue (the phase of the dog, of the lie, of the private-telephone-subscriber, etc.).”<sup>37</sup> Waleckx extends Cocteau’s brief mention of phases into a specific list, apportioning the play into twenty-three phases, noting for each phase the basic plot of the play and any changes that occur in Poulenc’s libretto. He then further categorizes the phases into four types: chronological phases that have a dramatic function in the progression of the conversation, psychological phases that develop non-linearly and often contain contradictory information, social interaction phases that concern Elle’s relationships with others, and telephone-problem phases that involve interruptions on the line of an “untimely and repetitive nature.”<sup>38</sup> However, the outlined succession of these phases interprets little more than how the drama unfolds; although Cocteau mentioned the technique of phases in his preface to the play, the method does not stand as the play’s most vital narrative technique.

Instead, the text’s telephone problems constitute the primary locus of narrative meaning for the opera as a whole. Waleckx notes that “the breakdown of the telephone system becomes a metaphor for the relationship between the woman and her lover—she is cut off, when she tries to call back, the line is engaged, she can no longer ‘get through’ to her lover in any sense of the term.”<sup>39</sup> This communication breakdown between Elle and her lover has a much wider significance in that the rupture represents the futility of human communication in general, at least in modern society as we know it, despite progressive communication technologies. Poulenc’s biographer, Wilfred Mellers, writes, “Cocteau’s device of the telephone conversation as a synonym for the alienation inherent in modern life—the too easy access of one human creature to another, and the still easier severance of the one from the other—is adapted by Poulenc with just the right balance between realism and stylization.”<sup>40</sup> But the telephone in *La Voix humaine* is much more than a prop, and more than the medium through which Elle speaks to her lover. Much like Cocteau’s camera in *Les Mariés*, the active telephone might be interpreted as a character in the drama. Carol Kimball calls the phone a “second character,” which due to

[i]ts importance as a conduit to others in the drama[, is] invest[ed] ... with an almost human personality. At no point in the opera does the woman talk to herself nor does she think aloud. She addresses all her speech to the telephone and from her words we can imagine the conversation on the other end of the line. She is totally at the mercy of the infamous French phone system and her dependence on the mechanical entity that links her to her love renders her all the more pathetic.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>38</sup>For a table of phases, alongside their pertinent plot descriptions and changes in the libretto from the play, see Waleckx, “A Musical Confession,” 325–29.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 329.

<sup>40</sup>Wilfrid Mellers, *Francis Poulenc* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 137.

<sup>41</sup>Carol Kimball, “Reach Out and Touch Someone: Poulenc’s One-Act Phone Call,” *The Opera Journal* 22 (1989): 3.

In its continual presence and usage, the telephone necessarily replaces the presence of Elle's lover, and becomes her companion for the evening. Kimball's analysis of the phone as a second character is supported by the intimacy with which Elle uses her phone as bedroom companion, sleeping with it, caressing it, and winding it about her body. However, a separation between the telephone (that which is *with* Elle) and the lover (that which is *without* Elle) is maintained throughout the narrative via the content of the monologue and its one-sidedness. Thus, the phone as character is really more of a third than a second; it is the apex of a (love) triangle, with one character physically present in the story and the other physically absent.

Stopping here, however, would be to stop short of recognizing the full extent of the telephone's command. To discuss the telephone further, I will borrow Bal's neologism "focalizer." This term refers to the vantage point from which all events in a drama are viewed; in other words, that which *sees*, as opposed to that which *speaks*. Bal suggests that readers, or in our case, listeners, must ask the question, "What is the vision and where does it come from?"<sup>42</sup> In *La Voix humaine*, the telephone is the answer, for the scenario is created and controlled by its machinations. At first, the phone may seem questionable as focalizer, for the simple fact that one does not think of the instrument as a seeing vehicle. Generally speaking, the phone's place is in the realm of hearing; to listen to a private telephone conversation like Elle's, one would either overhear or eavesdrop.<sup>43</sup> However, the phone's visual power becomes clearer when one considers Elle as the object it views and manipulates, or what Bal calls the "focalized object." I interpret Elle as the object of manipulation in the opera, that which is *seen*, metaphorically by the telephone, and literally by the audience. Kimball, without engaging in any analysis of the phone's focalizing power, observes that as listeners, "we are forced to imagine the unheard conversation and are thus irresistibly drawn into the drama as it unfolds. In a sense we become *voyeurs* enveloped in a dramatic microcosm of frozen time."<sup>44</sup> Her use of the word "voyeurs" suggests the phone's role as the focalizer that puts Elle in a position that in turn allows the audience to voyeuristically watch her. Every action, every sentence spoken, every emotion revealed is granted by that phone, without which there would be no narrative. Elle is seen but cannot achieve the action of seeing for herself; she tells her "ex" towards the end of their conversation: "A look could change everything. But with this instrument what is finished is finished for good."<sup>45</sup> If the conversants were able to see one another, they would learn some truths. Elle would learn that her lover is not calling her from home, but from a restaurant. The man would learn that Elle has not just returned from a pleasant evening out, wearing a pink dress, but is still in her pajamas and has not left her apartment for days.

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42 Mieke Bal, "Focalization," in *Narrative/Theory*, ed. David. H. Richter (New York: Longman Publishers, 1996), 152.

43 An increasingly common phenomena, as cell phones proliferate. It is the "memory of conversation overheard on the telephone with all the strange, deep tones which the voice assumes ... and the age-long silences" that Cocteau says partly motivated him to write *La Voix humaine*. Cocteau, *The Human Voice*, 7.

44 *Ibid.*, 8.

45 "Un regard pouvait changer tout. Mais avec cet appareil, ce qui est fini est fini."

Turning to compositional aspects, it is important to note that all of Elle's words are prose to her; she believes that she is *talking* on a telephone, although the audience hears her words as *sung*. Thus, the sung voice of *La Voix humaine* is entirely what Carolyn Abbate would call "noumenal," which is to say that there are no moments where Elle or the lover become aware that she sings.<sup>46</sup> She does so in a naturally declaimed style that does not utilize *Sprechstimme*, and at prominent moments blossoms into aria. The voice adheres to short phrases or extremely brief interjections in order to maintain the illusion that Elle is conversing in prose with someone on the telephone. The singing is consistently emotional, expressive and raw, often sung with little or no accompaniment by the orchestra. The compositional challenges of this monodrama are clear: Poulenc could not make use of ensemble voices, could not take advantage of other tessituras for differentiation of color and harmony, and ran the risk of limiting the emotional range.

Whether Poulenc succeeded in setting and maintaining interest in an opera with just one singing voice was a major concern of its early criticism. Some reviewers were negative, because they saw the monodramatic genre as limited, especially since it utilized an existing play as libretto. Of the British premiere in 1960, Noël Goodwin wrote:

Denise Duval, who created the part of Elle ... repeated her solo success in terms of vivid singing and acting to match, but I found the work as a whole excessively tiresome after the first five of its forty-five minutes. Poulenc's watery wholetone musical convolutions add no new dimension to a stage work already existing in its own right as a dramatic monologue, while at times it seems positively to restrict the range of dramatic expression.<sup>47</sup>

Ten years later in the same journal, Winton Dean writes that "Poulenc's bitter-sweet orchestral commentary, short on memorable phrases, is too narrow in range for a forty-minute work in which the single character has little tangible to react against. Both as drama and music it outruns its ideas."<sup>48</sup>

Other critics compare the opera to Cocteau's play, and see the musical version as not living up to the original: Harry R. Beard suggests that while Cocteau's text is imaginable in dozens of different interpretations, "Poulenc's music imposes a fixed and insufficiently varied pattern on the artist."<sup>49</sup> Jacques Bourgeois in *Arts* argues that Poulenc chose a text that was already a dramatic *tour de force*, but his adaptation is otherwise. He states that "Cocteau's decor and production are perfect"; against such high praise, he does not measure the composer completely favorably, although his critique is ultimately positive.<sup>50</sup> These reviews suggest that *La Voix humaine* is limited and dull, charges that do not ring true upon closer

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<sup>46</sup>For more on the concept of noumenal and phenomenal occurrences in opera, see Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 5, 119–23, 131–35.

<sup>47</sup>Noël Goodwin, "The Edinburgh Festival," *Musical Times* 101 (1960): 644–45. The British premiere of *La Voix humaine* took place at the festival on 30 August 1960.

<sup>48</sup>Winton Dean, "Poulenc," *Musical Times* 111 (1970): 733. Dean reviews a double-bill performance of Poulenc's *Les Mamelles* and *La Voix humaine* at Camden Town Hall, London.

<sup>49</sup>Harry R. Beard, "Reports from Abroad: Milan," *Musical Times* 100 (1959): 216.

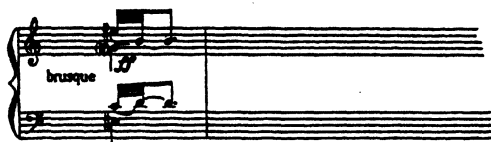
<sup>50</sup>"Le décor et la mise en scène de Cocteau sont parfaits." Jacques Bourgeois, "À l'Opéra Comique la Réussite de *La Voix humaine* repose le problème esthétique du théâtre lyrique," *Arts* (11 February 1959).

consideration of the opera and a better understanding of how Poulenc composed it. A more insightful review of the world premiere appears in *Opera News*:

Poulenc's score suggests what is being said at the other end of the line; disjointed phrases echo the woman's momentary hysteria as she feels the rift widening, and nostalgic themes underline the attempts to behave as if the relationship were unchanged. While the addition of music slows down the urgency of the play's action and allows singer and audience less freedom, it also increases the emotional depth of the performance.<sup>51</sup>

Poulenc's setting of Elle's words are consistently masterful, as he gave his full attention to the prosody in order that every word could be heard (an important quality of a work that has only one speaker). His orchestration is sumptuous and harmonically lush, while not overpowering the sole voice. Poulenc describes his orchestral sound in the notes at the beginning of the score: "The entire work should be bathed in the greatest orchestral sensuality," and the result is a vibrant, remarkable, and imaginative work.<sup>52</sup>

The above reviews do not refer to Poulenc's use of recurring motives for structural cohesion and emotional meaning, an odd fact given that the motives are easily discernible even upon an initial hearing. Waleckx analyzes the score as consisting of fourteen leading motives, categorizing them into "state of mind" motives that correspond to Elle's psychological states, and "situation" motives that correspond to circumstances that occur in the drama.<sup>53</sup> Two of particular importance are the "Suffering" and "Hammering" motives (example 1).



No. 2: 'Hammering' motif, 5 after 5



No. 3: 'Suffering' motif, no. 10

**Example 1.** "Suffering" and "Hammering" Motives of *La Voix humaine* [from Waleckx, "'A Musical Confession,'" 336–38]

<sup>51</sup> Margaret E. Davies, "The Voice of Paris," *Opera News* 23 (1959): 28.

<sup>52</sup> "L'œuvre entière doit baigner dans la plus grande sensualité orchestrale." Francis Poulenc, *La Voix humaine* (Paris: Société Anonyme des Éditions Ricordi, 1959), 1.

<sup>53</sup> Waleckx, "'A Musical Confession,'" 336–38.

Poulenc's fourteen themes were written within the first month of composition, shown by a 30 March 1958 letter to Dugardin that also points to the sexual quality of the music: "It's a secret, but I've found all my themes. Two are incredibly erotic ... they smell of sperm, of between the thighs."<sup>54</sup> Poulenc's motives unify the musical material of an opera which, because of its absence of traditional dialogue, could easily have lacked cohesion. After Waleckx sets out the motives, his main interest is their unequal sharing between the voice and orchestra; he notes that when the voice sings a motive that has already been heard in the orchestra, or when the voice has a motive at the same time as the orchestra, the impression in both situations is that the voice appears subordinate to the ensemble.<sup>55</sup> He reads this state of affairs as symbolic of Elle's acceptance of realities over which she no longer has control.

Elle's motives are not entirely subordinate; she is after all, the only singing voice in the opera and therefore she inevitably possesses a certain amount of power. Her voice gives the audience its understanding. But it is true that the orchestra has a strategic narrative role. It represents the words of Elle's lover and other persons who interrupt on the line. These words go unspoken in the opera, but not necessarily unheard. Sometimes the orchestra remains silent while Elle listens to the speaking of others, but at other times, it aurally represents those words. An example of the former technique occurs one measure before number 18, where Elle sings, "You are right, as always" followed by a long fermata that we understand as representing her lover's voice, because we hear Elle's next statement as a response to the lover's question that we cannot hear (example 2). She replies, "My pink dress. My black hat. Yes, the hat is still on my head" followed by a brief pause, then she asks, "And you've come back? You are staying at home? What trial? Ah, yes."

The time between her questions is silent, but she obviously hears answers. Here, Poulenc has the orchestra remain silent in order to allow for a hearing of the lover's voice that is a step beyond the phenomenal as defined by Abbate. Unlike a moment of phenomenal music, a hearing of music that both the operatic characters *and* the audience may share, *La Voix humaine* demonstrates phenomenal moments of hearing that the audience is not party to. As such, the moment that Elle hears the intrusion of jazz on the telephone is significant, as it is the only time the audience hears exactly what Elle does on the line. The fleeting jazz (example 3) is a more traditional, phenomenal musical event, music that both the character and the audience share, emphasized by Elle's declaration, "Hello! I hear music ... I said: I hear music."

At other times, the orchestra's aural representations of the words of others transform what would have been silence in Cocteau's original play into a silence that can be heard by the audience. Here, the music is both noumenal

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<sup>54</sup>Quoted in Benjamin Ivry, *Francis Poulenc* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 202. Ivry's translation.

<sup>55</sup>Waleckx, "A Musical Confession," 333. He notes the especially poignant music at number 104, where the strings play the beautiful "Happy Memory" motive extraordinarily gently and sensually, while Elle sings one repeated note at a piano dynamic level without nuance or feeling. The directions written in the score are *Extraordinairement doux et sensuel* for the orchestra, and *sans nuances* for the voice.

*mf* *long* **Très calme**

Tu a . vais ra . son , com me tou . jours . Ma ro . be ro . se ...

*long* 18 *p*

Mon cha . peau noir . Oui , j'ai en . co . re mon cha . peau sur la tête .

**En animant beaucoup**

Et toi , tu ren . tres ? Tu es res . té à la mai . son ?

*très léger* *mf* *agitato*

Quel pré . cis ? Ah , oui Al . lô ! ché . ri ... Si on cou . pe ,

**Example 2.** Excerpt from *La Voix humaine*, beginning 2 bars before number 18. Editions Durand (SACEM). All rights for the US on behalf of Editions Durand (SACEM) administered by BMG Songs, Inc. (ASCAP).



The image displays three systems of musical notation. The first system consists of a single staff with the tempo marking "lens Presto" and a circled number "69". The second system is a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with the lyrics "Al-lô! J'en-tends de la musiq'" and a fortissimo "ff" dynamic marking. The third system is also a grand staff with the lyrics "Je dis: J'en-tends de la musi-que." and a "très sec" dynamic marking.

**Example 3.** Excerpt from *La Voix humaine*, at no. 69. Editions Durand (SACEM). All rights for the US on behalf of Editions Durand (SACEM) administered by BMG Songs, Inc. (ASCAP).

(Elle does not think she hears music, but a speaking voice) and representative (hinting for the audience the content of what is being said). Where in Cocteau's play one could infer the lover's words only from Elle's response to those words, in the operatic version, music contributes aural clues about what was said. The unspoken half of the dialogue in the opera becomes aurally present, even though it retains a murkiness of meaning. Elle's first conversation (no. 5 through no. 6) illustrates motivic representation of another's words (example 4). Her unaccompanied remarks alternate with the "Hammering" motive's representation of the other woman's remarks, which are intrusive and unwanted.

When Elle's lover finally gets through to her for the first time (at no. 9), we initially hear Elle's unaccompanied greeting, followed by the orchestra's *mp* repetition of the "Suffering" motive, to which Elle, obviously listening, replies "yes ... yes ... no ..." (at no. 10) (example 5).

**5** *Très agité*  
(on sonne) *ff violent*

Xylo Al.lé, Al.lé,

Mais non, Ma-da-me, nous sommes plusieurs sur la ligne, raccrochez,

*brusque ff*

Vous ét' avec une a-bon-née Mais, Ma-da-me, raccrochez vous-mêm'

*au comble de la violence*

Al.lé, Mad'moise!'! Mais non, ce n'est pas le

docteur Schmit. Éc'ro huit, pas éc'ro sept. Al.lé!

*Aug*  
c'est ri-di-cul!'

The image shows a musical score for an excerpt from 'La Voix humaine'. It consists of five systems of music. The first system includes a vocal line with lyrics 'Al.lé, Al.lé,' and a xylophone part. The second system has a vocal line with lyrics 'Mais non, Ma-da-me, nous sommes plusieurs sur la ligne, raccrochez,' and a piano accompaniment marked 'brusque ff'. The third system continues the vocal line with lyrics 'Vous ét' avec une a-bon-née Mais, Ma-da-me, raccrochez vous-mêm'' and piano accompaniment. The fourth system features a vocal line with lyrics 'Al.lé, Mad'moise!'! Mais non, ce n'est pas le' and piano accompaniment, with the instruction 'au comble de la violence'. The fifth system has a vocal line with lyrics 'docteur Schmit. Éc'ro huit, pas éc'ro sept. Al.lé!' and piano accompaniment. The final system shows a vocal line with lyrics 'c'est ri-di-cul!' and piano accompaniment, marked 'Aug'.

**Example 4.** Excerpt from *La Voix humaine*, beginning at no. 5. Editions Durand (SACEM). All rights for the US on behalf of Editions Durand (SACEM) administered by BMG Songs, Inc. (ASCAP).

**9** *Messo voce*  
*mf*  
 Al.lù, c'est toi?

Oui, très bien. C'è-était un vrai supplice de t'entendre à travers tout ce mon-de...

**10**  
 oui... oui... non...

c'est u-ne chance...

**Example 5.** Excerpt from *La Voix humaine*, nos. 9 and 10. Editions Durand (SACEM). All rights for the US on behalf of Editions Durand (SACEM) administered by BMG Songs, Inc. (ASCAP).

Here, the “Suffering” motive, in its representation of the lover’s words, intimates both a more pervasive suffering than just that of Elle, and a sympathetic tone to the lover’s voice. We are given insight into feelings of a physically absent character.

In the end, despite the orchestra’s assistance in filling in some of the blanks with meaningful silences or implicit musical motives, the telephone conversation also takes its toll on us. As the audience, we strain to hear the words on the other end of the line, and are left with knowing only half of what is really taking place. With one human voice on a telephone, Cocteau and Poulenc show us a disturbing vision of early twentieth-century technology, in which technology prevents rather than allows personal connections to be made. However, by bringing the audience merely one intensely emotional human voice, and by encouraging the utmost of sympathy from those who hear it, *La Voix humaine* shows us that art may very well save us from a lack of human connections; that while a telephone may keep two phone-crossed lovers apart, its portrayal on an operatic stage can bring many more people together.

**Abstract**

Forty years after his previous collaboration with his former mentor Jean Cocteau, Francis Poulenc embarked on another joint work with the playwright, the opera *La Voix humaine* (1958). The sole character is a woman known as Elle, who converses with her former lover on the telephone, a device representative of the negative side of technological progress made during the first few decades of the twentieth century. This study considers the nature of the collaboration between Cocteau and Poulenc, then employs narrative theory to interpret the telephone's power in this drama.

**Résumé**

En 1958, soit quarante ans après sa dernière collaboration avec son ancien mentor Jean Cocteau, Francis Poulenc entamait un nouveau projet avec le dramaturge, l'opéra *La Voix humaine* (1958). L'unique personnage, une femme nommée Elle, s'entretient au téléphone avec son ex-amoureux; cet appareil représente l'aspect négatif du progrès technologique accompli durant les premières décennies du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle. L'essai décrit la nature de la collaboration entre Cocteau et Poulenc et interprète, à l'aide de la théorie de la narration, la puissance du téléphone dans cet écrit dramatique.