

Southon, Nicolas (ed.), and Roger Nichols (trans.). *Francis Poulenc, Articles and Interviews: Notes from the Heart*. Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2014. 346 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4094-6622-2.

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In 2011, Nicholas Southon edited *Francis Poulenc: J'écris ce qui me chante*, a collection of articles and interviews with French composer and pianist Francis Poulenc (January 7, 1899 – January 30, 1963). Poulenc is best known for being a member of Les Six, a group of six young composers (Poulenc, Georges Auric, Louis Durey, Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, and Germaine Tailleferre) under the tutelage of the colorful avant-garde French composer and pianist Erik Satie. His most celebrated pieces are: the piano suite *Trois mouvements perpétuels* (1919); the ballet *Les Biches* (1923); the *Concert champêtre* (1928) for the harpsichord and orchestra; the opera *Dialogues des Carmélites* (1957); and *Gloria* (1959) for soprano, choir, and orchestra. Roger Nichol's adept translation of selected sections of the 2011 Southon edition brings to life Poulenc's vivacious personality for a wider audience, since many of the articles and interviews in *Francis Poulenc: J'écris ce qui me chante* had not previously been available in English. This fact is significant because only recently have Poulenc's works been given more serious consideration than during his lifetime, when he had been considered a lightweight composer, mainly because his early works were light-hearted; it was not until he began composing religious works in 1936 that his work included more complex elements.

The collection is comprised of seven parts: "Articles"; "Critical Articles and Reviews"; "Contributions to Works by Others"; "Response to a Survey"; "Lectures"; "Interviews"; and "Interviews with Claude Rostand." As such, the collection brings together a bevy of topics. For those of us who are not music experts, Southon's editorial comments prove especially valuable. For example, as one reads the title of Article XXVIII, an interview with Jeannie Chauveau, "The Work of Two Great French Artists, written in Secret during the Occupation," one would expect the interview to discuss the power that music has to unite people during times of oppression. It is only when one reads that Poulenc set the poetry of Louis Aragon and Paul Eluard to music that one appreciates the difficulty of such an undertaking, since "these poems, recited clandestinely in every province, expressed the intransigence, the patience, the unyielding

resolve of the people of France” (137). Furthermore, Poulenc’s terrified excitement when challenged by Henri Screpel to set Eluard’s poem “Liberté” to music is palpable when he explains:

All through that spring I thought about the idea, already enthusiastic about it but not yet knowing what form the work might take. Then, in July 1943, I left for Beaulieu-sur-Dordogne and there, in six weeks, I wrote this cantata for unaccompanied double choir. (138)

And then Poulenc’s sheer pride shines through when he states: “I forgot to say that in the meantime the Chorale d’Anvers had heard about the project and had let me know that they would like to receive it and sing it in Belgium immediately after the Liberation” (138).

Yet it is Southon’s editorial introduction to this interview that helps the reader to understand the evolution of Poulenc’s emotions surrounding the project:

In talking about this score, which had become symbolic of a form of resistance under the Occupation, Poulenc often subsequently became inaccurate [...] unintentionally no doubt, but also, consciously or not, so as to present it as the product of personal inspiration, whereas it had its origins in a commission from Henri Screpel. (137)

Numerically, interviews dominate *Francis Poulenc: Articles and Interviews* (twelve in Part VI and eighteen in Part VII), but equally fascinating are the articles, reviews, and lectures as they provide further insight into the outside influences that helped to shape Poulenc’s career as well as his personality. It is in reading “*Le Coq* and *Le Coq Parisien*: May – November 1920” that Southon details the role that Jean Cocteau played in promoting the works of Les Six. Southon quotes the notice in the second issue of the magazine *Le Coq*, as he believes that the notice was written by Cocteau himself:

Le Coq is not the manifesto of any school. It is a leaflet in which six composers of different tastes, joined in friendship, express themselves. That this friendship should find its energy in a shared tendency differently understood, goes without saying. These composers are joined by poets and painters who are in sympathy with them. (17)

Or via Southon’s inclusion of “My Teachers and My Friends,” Poulenc’s self-deprecating nature regarding his vanity is readily discernible:

When, last September, I accepted Mme Yvonne Sarcey’s kind invitation to speak at the Université des Annales this winter, I was, I confess, the

victim of a gust of vanity. But for the last ten minutes, alas, I've been pondering the extent of my audacity and I can assure you that in that green room where I've waited many times to come on stage, I have never felt more intimidated. (95)

When one reads such comments made by Poulenc, one is able to appreciate the gentle smile that shines throughout the photographs contained in the volume. Of particular note are: photograph #2, one of Poulenc at the tender age of twelve; photograph #9, where Poulenc stands in front of a doorway with Pablo Picasso and Henri Sauguet; photograph #10, which depicts Poulenc with Denise Duval, the French soprano discovered by him and for whom he wrote many works; and, photograph #11, of Poulenc with Cocteau and the other members of Les Six, in which he is the only person looking directly at the camera.

In sum, while *Francis Poulenc, Articles and Interviews* will undoubtedly delight music aficionados for providing direct insight into Poulenc's creative genius via his warm conversational tone, not to be underestimated either is the value of the noteworthy social commentary that the articles and interviews provide. Each piece in this rich collection is a gem in itself. Moreover, for a man who was largely self-educated musically and whose contributions to the world of music have too long been overlooked, Poulenc finally receives a much-needed and much-deserved homage from Southon.