2016.17 MSO Teen Series

Poulenc’s Gloria

GUIDE

FEBRUARY 8, 2017
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What is sacred music?

Easy, right? Music for church, synagogue or mosque, to praise God or draw people nearer to God. But what makes the music “sacred”?

**Its purpose?** If I write a piece and call it “sacred”, does that make it so?

**Its words?** That seems easy. If the words come from the Bible or another sacred text, it’s sacred. But could a poem by Bob Dylan be sacred music? In what sense? And instrumental music — with no text? Can that be called “sacred”?
Its sound? This gets tricky. Is there a sacred music “sound”? Can any kind of music be sacred? If it sounds like music from a nightclub, a bar, or a football game, could it be “sacred”?

When Poulenc wrote his Gloria in 1959, it was immediately popular with audiences. But listeners puzzled over how to make sense of its sound, which seems to alternate between sacred and secular. One minute, it sounds like church music. The next, it feels like musical theatre or a dance party or pep rally. What is Poulenc saying about what’s “sacred”, by mixing seemingly contradictory styles?

**sacred adj.**
Connected with God (or the gods); dedicated to a religious purpose; set apart. From Latin sacer, meaning “holy” or “set apart.” Opposite: secular

**secular adj.**
1. Of or related to worldly things or things not regarded as religious, spiritual, or sacred. 2. Concerned with non-religious subjects (i.e. secular music). From Latin saecularis, meaning “worldly” or “temporal.” Opposite: sacred

“Still Life with Bible”, 1885, Vincent van Gogh

“Bedroom in Arles”, 1888, Vincent van Gogh
Who was Francis Poulenc?

Francis Poulenc [frahn-seese pooh-lenk] was born in 1899, into an extremely wealthy family living in one of the most fashionable, expensive neighborhoods in Paris.

When Francis was two, he was given a white toy piano with cherries painted on it. He pretended to “sightread” everything from department store catalogs to railway timetables. By eight, he played and sang Schubert songs and dreamt of a career as an opera singer. His mother introduced him to the music of Mozart, Chopin, and musical theatre. His father emphasized the importance of going to church and preparing for a career in business. He loved to read and visited famous bookstores to hear poets recite their own work. He never attended music school, which made him insecure for many years, and was largely a self-taught composer.

By his teens, Poulenc became known around Paris for his compositions. He spent 1918-1921 serving in the French army in the last months of World War I and in the post-war period. He hated military service, but his position as a typist gave him time to compose.

In the 1920s and 30s, Poulenc’s success as a composer grew. He enjoyed a reputation as a fun-loving young man with lots of friends and a busy social life. Musicians saw Poulenc and his music as lightweight and light-hearted, even frivolous. This changed in 1936.

Francis Poulenc
Tragedy

On August 17, 1936, Poulenc received word that his friend, the young composer Pierre-Octave Ferroud had been killed in a horrible car crash. Poulenc said he was “absolutely stupefied” and began “pondering the fragility of the spirit.” Shaken by his friend’s death, Poulenc dealt with his grief by making a spiritual pilgrimage to an ancient sacred site, the Sanctuary of Rocamadour (ROKE-ah-mah-DOOHR).

Pilgrimage

Poulenc described it this way: “A few days earlier I’d just heard of the tragic death of my colleague ... As I meditated on the fragility of our human frame, I was drawn once more to the life of the spirit. Rocamadour is perilously situated alongside a winding road, and inspiring in those who have been privileged to visit it a feeling of unbelievable peace ... the humble chapel cut out of the rocky mountainside, the courtyard surrounded by pink laurel trees and, inside, the wonderful Virgin carved out of black wood, the work of Saint Amadour who had climbed up a tree to see Christ.

Rocamadour had the effect of restoring me to the faith of my childhood. This sanctuary, undoubtly the oldest in France ... had everything to captivate me ...”

From this moment, Poulenc began writing more sacred music, music that reflected his Catholic upbringing. His friends noticed a change: while he still liked to party with friends, he also took his spiritual life seriously. He said, “I am religious by deepest instinct and heredity. I feel myself incapable of ardent political conviction, but for me it seems quite natural to believe and practice religion. I am a Catholic. It is my greatest freedom.”
Sacred Places

Since the beginning of recorded human history, mankind has identified sacred places on earth — where the material, visible world (the secular world we move in on a daily basis) intersects with the invisible spiritual world (the mystical, sacred world of God or heaven).

Especially in the Middle Ages, certain places in Europe were identified as especially holy, sacred sites. Legends of healings, visions, and miracles became associated with these places. Christian pilgrims made long treks to experience them firsthand, to capture the mystical, spiritual aura of the place.

Rocamadour had been a famous spiritual site for a thousand years. Besides a place of beauty and tranquility, it was famous for its “Black Madonna” — a carved wooden statue of the Virgin Mary and Jesus — said to have been carved by St. Amadour himself.

The Gloria

Poulenc wrote this piece relatively quickly, between May and December 1959. It was first performed in Boston in 1961, with Charles Munch conducting the Boston Symphony. Poulenc had visited the United States several times before — his music was popular with American audiences. He once said, “Decidedly, I love America and America loves me.”

Poulenc’s Gloria received many performances soon after its premiere. Today, it is the second most frequently performed piece of French music in the world, after Ravel’s Bolero.

The Text

The text of the Gloria is in Latin and comes from the Roman Catholic Mass. This text has been sung and set to music by composers for centuries. The first sentence translates as “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men ...” According to Luke 2 in the Bible, these words were first sung by angels to shepherds, on the first Christmas night. The text that follows is a series of short sentences of praise to God, addressing him with his titles, such as “Almighty God” and “Heavenly King.” After that, a prayer to Jesus Christ for mercy. The Gloria text was introduced in the 5th century, as part of the Christmas Mass. By the 11th century, it was a regular part of the Mass on holy days and most Sundays.

Poulenc got the idea for his Gloria from another famous one, the Gloria of Antonio Vivaldi, composed in 1715 in Venice. Poulenc loved the Vivaldi Gloria and it was becoming more popular in the 1950s. Like Vivaldi, Poulenc separated the Gloria text into separate sections, each one a different musical movement with its own tempo and mood. Poulenc’s Gloria shares many similarities with Vivaldi’s — use of chorus and soloists, plus orchestra, and that both are mostly sunny, tuneful pieces.

Antonio Vivaldi
Poulenc: Monk or Bad Boy?

A music critic famously described the contradictions in Poulenc’s music by describing the composer’s personality as “something of the monk and something of the rascal.” What did he mean? Poulenc’s friends knew him as fun-loving and gregarious, a guy who liked to gossip, stay out late, and have fun. But they also knew him as a traditional and deeply religious Catholic, who had (in his own words) the “faith of a country priest.”

It’s too simplistic to think of Poulenc as just these two opposing forces, like light and dark. His friend Nadia Boulanger said, “Poulenc’s personality was much more complex than what met the eye. He was entirely paradoxical. You could meet him as easily in fashionable Parisian circles ... or at Mass.” We also know that, although Poulenc was witty and effervescent, he also struggled with depression.

The truth is, Poulenc was a bundle of contradictions. A mix of confidence and insecurity, cheerfulness and melancholy. Walt Whitman, in *Leaves of Grass*, wrote:

*Do I contradict myself?*
*Very well then I contradict myself.*
*(I am large, I contain multitudes.)*

Poulenc reminds us that each one of us is a bundle of contradictions. We “contain multitudes."

**Freedom**

Many people hear Poulenc’s *Gloria* as wildly secular because of the freedom he took in composing it. For example, he didn’t treat the ancient Latin text as sacrosanct, but rather more like poetry, which he could fragment and repeat however he liked. At the end of the “Laudamus te,” for example, he splits the word “laudamus” into short, incomplete bursts of just “lauda, lauda,” for rhythmic excitement.

**Eclecticism**

Poulenc mixed musical styles with a dizzying, kaleidoscopic effect. Any movement in the *Gloria* might swing quickly from jazz to musical theatre to vaudeville to a more traditional “sacred” kind of sound. Early audiences were alternately delighted and shocked by this approach — now it is recognized as Poulenc’s unique (and very effective) style.
Rhythm

Poulenc conveys the moods of the text mostly through rhythm. The rhythms he wrote come from the text. How does this work? Poulenc explained he recited the poem to himself many times, memorizing it, listening to its shape and places to breathe, looking for its internal rhythms. He invented a short, memorable tune to fit this fragment, determining the mood of the piece.

Color

Poulenc described the Gloria: “The colors are very clear, primary colors — rude and violent like the Provence chapel of Matisse.”

What did he mean? Perhaps it was the way he uses the 3 primary families of the orchestra — strings, woodwinds, and brass — as separate, bright colors, often alternating them like separate “voices.” His use of the woodwinds is notable, especially the oboe, clarinet, and flute solos which appear throughout.

He noted: “I think the sound quality of the end will be very beautiful. I love the voice so much.” There are many moments in the Gloria where the orchestra disappears completely. It is just the sound of pure, unaccompanied voices carrying the text’s mood and message.

A Cathedral of Sound

Poulenc structured his 6 movements intentionally in a kind of “arc,” to provide contrast in tempos and mood. Notice the architecture, and its symmetry:

• II and IV are the shortest, quickest and most lighthearted.
• III and V are slower and serious.
• The grand outer movements, I and VI, are both longer and marked “majestic.” In fact, to draw attention to their status as “outer pillars,” the final movement repeats again the grand theme from Movement I.
A Closer Look

I. Gloria in excelsis

Chorus: Maestoso (majestic)

_Gloria in excelsis Deo,_ Glory be to God in the highest,
_et in terra pax_ and on earth peace
_hominibus bonae voluntatis._ to men of good will.

The piece opens in grand style, like the entrance of royalty. Poulenc seems to hearken back to France’s glorious past, especially the reign of the “Sun King,” Louis XIV (1638-1715). Louis’ palace at Versailles was famous for its splendid music, much written by court composer Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632-1687). The opening fanfare with prominent brass and stately dotted rhythms, sounds like Lully with a few 20th century “twists” in the harmony.

The men’s voices enter. We are thrown into the past with sounds like Gregorian chant:

In fact, this alternating between voices in a chant style with other styles is a major feature of the entire work. Listen for those chant-like melodies when they appear.

The Hall of Mirrors, Palace of Versailles, France
II. Laudamus te

Chorus

Tempo: Très vite et joyeux (Very fast and joyous)

Laudamus te, benedicimus te,
adoramus te, glorificamus te,
Gratias agimus tibi
propter magnam gloriam tuam.

We praise You, we bless You
we adore You, we glorify You,
we give thanks to You
for Your great glory.

This movement shows Poulenc at his most playful. Many audience members were taken aback at its mischievous, carnival-like atmosphere. It did not feel like sacred music to them. Poulenc explained: “The second movement caused a scandal. I wonder why? I was simply thinking, in writing it, of the Gozzoli frescoes in which the angels stick out their tongues; I was thinking also of the serious Benedictines whom I saw playing soccer one day.” He expanded on the fresco image, which relates to the decorations Benozzo Gozzoli painted circa 1460 in the Chapel of the Magi of the Palazzo Medici Riccardi in Florence: “If you go to Florence, if you go to the Riccardi Palace, if you go to admire the sublime Gozzoli frescoes of the angels, you will see a whole series of angels. And if you look at the angels very closely, there is one who is sticking out his tongue at his neighbor, right? I take the position that angels are not always well-behaved.”

Did an angel stick out his tongue? James Keller wrote: “It doesn’t matter. Nonetheless, these angels are far from solemn. Instead, they resemble a children’s choir that has just returned to rehearsal and is still stoked up on recess. Inattention reigns, and one senses that the whole bunch of them could erupt into chaos at any moment. The important thing, though, is that Poulenc believed that one of them was sticking out its tongue at

Gozzoli fresco (detail), Palazzo Medici Riccardi, Florence, Italy
another, that it was real in his memory. In spirit, he was on the mark, and it is probably far from incidental that the golden halos of those very angels are inscribed with words plucked from the Gloria."

This famous movement is a great example of how Poulenc took a small phrase of text and found the perfect tune and rhythm, creating a melody that’s hard to get out of your head!

III. Domine Deus
Soprano solo and Chorus
Tempo: Très lent et calme (Very slow and calm)

_Domine Deus, Rex coelestis, _ Lord God, heavenly King,
_Deus Pater omnipotens._ God the Father almighty.

This is the first movement that feels “sacred” in the traditional sense — a very serious and meditative prayer for soprano solo and chorus, in a minor key.

Poulenc builds the piece like a mosaic. He broke the text into four fragments, giving each one its own melody.

_DON’T MISS THIS ENDING?

Although the piece is in a minor key (somber, melancholy), it ends on a gentle major chord, a radiant B major. Just when the piece is “over,” Poulenc adds one note. The harp and horn play an added A natural. This “fits” if the piece were a jazz ballad, which it is not. What was Poulenc thinking? What is the effect? Does it feel like an ending? If so, what kind of ending is it?

He put them together in various combinations, as if each were a colored tile, generally with two similar tiles next to each other.
“If you fear classical religious music as long, grim and boring, don’t worry — Poulenc charges constantly ahead through a dense but joyous kaleidoscopic journey. The fourth movement, lasting barely a minute, is woven from no fewer than a half-dozen evanescent melodies. Like a well-structured pop song, it’s over so fast you just want to hear it again. There’s nothing intense or prolonged here — in deference to modern attention spans, Poulenc effortlessly careens among moods of elation, wonder and contentment.”

Peter Gutmann, music critic

IV. Domine Fili unigenite

Chorus
Tempo: Très vite et joyeux (very fast and joyful)

Domine Fili unigenite,
Lord the only-begotten son,
Jesu Christe.
Jesus Christ.

V. Domine Deus, Agnus Dei

Soprano solo and Chorus
Tempo: Bien lent (very slow)

Domine Deus, Agnus Dei,
Lord God, Lamb of God,
Filius Patris, Rex coelestis,
Son of the Father, King of Heaven
qui tollis peccata mundi,
Who takes away the sins of the world,
miserere nobis,
receive mercy upon us,
suscipe deprecationem nostram.
receive our prayer.

This is the darkest, longest movement. It opens with two odd, unsettling gestures: a kind of grunt from the horns and bassoons, then a suspenseful chromatic scale in the low strings. What kind of piece will this be? We don’t know until the woodwinds sing out a beautiful, almost tragic melody and the soprano enters with another of her own.

What makes this melody hard to sing?

SOMETHING ABOUT THE CLARINET

French music is famous for using woodwinds. Poulenc’s music shows this. Listen for the flute, piccolo, and oboe “singing” beautiful melodies in this movement. Poulenc saves some of his most haunting musical ideas for the clarinet.

What is it about the sound of the clarinet at these moments?
VI. Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris

Soprano solo and Chorus
Tempo: Maestoso (Majestic)

Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris, You who sit at the right hand of the Father,  
miserere nobis, Have mercy upon us,  
quoniam tu solus sanctus, For You alone are holy,  
tu solus Dominus, You alone are the Lord,  
tu solus altissimus, Jesu Christe, You are the Most High, Jesus Christ,  
Cum Sancto Spiritu, with the Holy Spirit,  
in gloria Dei Patris. in the glory of God the Father.  

Of all six movements, this is the most eclectic, mixing styles in quick succession. Tenors and altos proclaim the opening sentence loudly, without orchestra, like a medieval chant. Then the orchestra begins a jolly musical theatre style accompaniment to underscore repetitions of this chant. The surprise is the interruptions of brass fanfares from the First Movement! Suddenly, the piece stops and is transformed into a radiant, shimmering picture of heaven with “You are the Most High.” Rich harmonies and lush textures offer another a striking contrast. Poulenc isn’t finished: the final Amen reveals its own surprises.
About Our Conductor

Conductor Randal Swiggum returns for this year’s Milwaukee Symphony’s Teen Partners concert, having previously conducted Vivaldi’s *Gloria*, Fauré’s *Requiem* and last year’s *Dona Nobis Pacem* of Ralph Vaughan Williams. Widely known as a conductor of concerts for young audiences, Swiggum created ten seasons of original education concerts for the award-winning Elgin Symphony Orchestra. These popular concerts have been praised by kids, parents, and teachers alike for their imaginative approach in getting young audiences excited about symphonic music. Last season, Swiggum premiered another original concert, *Symphony Safari: What Nature Tells Us About the Orchestra*, which examined patterns, sequences, imitation, the acoustic “ecosystem,” and motifs as DNA, and featured the music of Mahler, Tchaikovsky, Shostakovich, Schubert, and Vivaldi. Swiggum’s original concerts for young audiences have been commissioned by the Madison Symphony, The Florida Orchestra, Boise Philharmonic, the Aberdeen Festival in Scotland, and the APAC Festival in Seoul, South Korea, among others. Mr. Swiggum is Artistic Director of the acclaimed Elgin Youth Symphony Orchestra, a thriving program of five orchestras, brass choir, percussion ensemble, and a vibrant Chamber Music Institute, serving 400 young musicians ages 9-21 from over sixty different communities from suburban Chicago. He makes his home in Madison, where he also co-conducts the Madison Boychoir. As a longtime fan of the MSO, he is always grateful to be “back home” in Milwaukee where he lived for fifteen years, and working with longtime colleagues and friends on this magnificent piece.

*Teen Choral Partners Guide* written by Randal Swiggum.
About Our Soloist

Recently recognized by *Opera Magazine* as “A star-to-be” following her Lincoln Center debut, young Russian-American soprano **Yulia Van Doren**’s recent debut with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra was acclaimed as “This year’s big revelation ... a ravishing lyric voice and an ease with vocal ornamentation that turned her into an enchanted songbird” (*Toronto Star*).

Particularly in love with the collaborative process of bringing to life repertoire off the beaten path, recent highlights include creating the lead female role in the world premiere of Shostakovich’s *Orango* with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, directed by Peter Sellars and released on Deutsche Grammophon; two Grammy-nominated opera recordings with the Boston Early Music Festival; the modern revival of Monsigny’s *Le roi et le fermier* at Opera de Versailles, Lincoln Center, and the Kennedy Center (recorded for Naxos); her Carnegie Hall debut premiering a commissioned work by composer Angel Lam; a leading role in Scarlatti’s *Tigrane* at Opera de Nice, and Nielsen’s *Symphony No. 3* with the American Symphony Orchestra, released on the ASO label. Dawn Upshaw is an important mentor: Ms. Van Doren was personally invited by the renowned soprano to study in her inaugural class of the Bard Vocal Arts Graduate Program, and they recently performed together with the City of London Sinfonia in nationally-televised performances at the Cartagena International Music Festival.

Born in Moscow, Yulia Van Doren was raised in the United States in a music-filled household. She and her seven younger siblings were taught by her Russian mezzo-soprano mother and American jazz pianist father. Before turning her full attention to singing, Yulia was an accomplished classical pianist and amateur flutist and violist. Ms. Van Doren is honored to be an Astral Artist, a Paul and Daisy Soros Fellow. As the recipient of a Beebe Grant for Advanced European Study, she spent the 2010-2011 season based in Paris.

“I have written the Gloria, the Stabat Mater, and the Sept répons des ténèbres, three good religious works. May they spare me several days of purgatory, if I manage to avoid going to hell.”

Poulenc, in 1961
Concerts for Schools is funded by the Herzfeld Foundation and the ENW and Irene Edelstein Memorial Funds as administered by the Greater Milwaukee Foundation. All MSO education programs are supported in part by an endowment from the Hearst Foundations. MSO Education programming is supported by the United Performing Arts Fund (UPAF) and a grant from the M&I Foundation. Concerts for Schools is also supported in part by grants from the Woman's Club of Wisconsin and the Wisconsin Arts Board (WAB), with funds from the State of Wisconsin and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).