Francis Poulenc and Surrealism

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I. Introduction

While it is true that surrealism was first and foremost a literary movement with strong ties to the world of art, and not usually applied to musicians, I believe the composer Francis Poulenc was so strongly influenced by this movement, that he could be considered a surrealist, in the same way that Debussy is regarded as an impressionist and Schönberg an expressionist; especially given that the artistic movement in the other two cases is a loose fit at best and does not apply to the entirety of their output. In this essay, which served as the basis for my lecture recital, I will examine some of the basic ideals of surrealism and show how Francis Poulenc embodies and embraces surrealist ideals in his persona, his music, his choice of texts and his compositional methods, or lack thereof. I will explore Poulenc’s relationship with surrealism by focusing on two of his song cycles, Banalités and Le Travail du Peintre, and his relationship to their respective poets, Guillaume Apollinaire and Paul Éluard, both of whom were surrealists and had profound impact on Poulenc. I will also look at the events surrounding the composition of his choral work, Litanies à la Vierge Noire from a surrealist perspective.
II. Surrealism

Surrealism was a movement that evolved in the fertile art and literary world of Paris in the early twentieth century, though its scope was not confined to that time and place. The publishing of André Breton’s Manifesto of Surrealism in 1924 codified the movement. As is often the case with philosophical and literary movements, there is no clear line of demarcation where one philosophy ends and another begins. Inevitably, schools of thought are born out of the philosophies that preceded them, whether they are similar or radically different. This is certainly true of surrealism. While on the surface it may appear quite different from nineteenth century poetry, and in many ways it is, you can look carefully and see how surrealism evolved from and was an outgrowth of nineteenth century romanticism.

We understand that romanticism was a reaction against the emotionally sterile environment created by the Enlightenment and rationalism. The romantics looked beyond the confines of the natural world to the inner world of the imagination. They viewed the outer world through the imaginative and emotional lens of the inner world, imbuing it with mystery, fantasy and wonder. Surrealism is a continuation of this reaction, but takes a new direction in a world that has been ravaged by war and disease. Over the course of the 19th century and into the 20th century, many of the mysteries that the romanticists revered had been explained away by science. Surrealism was a continued search for the mysterious in a culture where there was little that had not been explained away. Such things as the horrors of war and the flu epidemic left many feeling that evolution and rationalism had failed them. The world they were experiencing did not seem to make sense nor did it seem to be on an upward trajectory. In the wake of World War I, as people became distrustful of those in authority, they turned inward for answers. Heavily influenced by the work of Sigmund Freud, the surrealists sought to release the imagination from
the confines of the material world and instead to plumb the depths of dreams and the subconscious. Breton writes in his manifesto, “I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality, if one may so speak (Breton 14).”

One technique of surrealists was that of automatic writing. In this practice, the writer attempts to write down whatever bubbles up from the subconscious and resists any urge to filter or edit their thoughts or force them to conform to any accepted form. This form of writing was practiced at times by Apollinaire, the forefather of the surrealist movement, as well as by the group of poets that were later more specifically identified as surrealists by Breton. This raw material that was mined from the subconscious was often reworked and not always presumed to be in its finished form at conception.

The surrealists believed their poetry had incredible power, a mystical quality found not necessarily in the words themselves but in the power of those words used in illogical ways to conjure images in the imagination that would facilitate what Breton calls the “pointe sublime”. It is at this point sublime that man becomes whole, where all the disparate elements within him fuse into oneness. For the surrealists, poetic experience was the vehicle for this transformative experience.

The surrealist aim could be loosely defined as the intention of transforming (with all the deliberately alchemical force which attaches to the latter verb) sets of static polar contraries into potentially powerful juxtapositions, intellectually uncomfortable to contemplate, shocking to the normal perception in their intense irrationality (Caws 14-15).
In her book entitled *Surrealism*, Anna Balakian gives this eloquent description of the philosophical foundation and purpose of the surrealist movement:

The objective of surrealism was the infinite expansion of reality as a substitute for the previously accepted dichotomy between the real and the imaginary. Acknowledging the human need for metaphysical release, the surrealists believed that through the exploration of the psyche, through the cultivation of the miracles of objective chance, through the *mystique* of eroticism, through the diverting of objects from their familiar functions or surroundings, through a more cosmic perspective of life on this earth, and finally through the alchemy of language that would learn to express this more dynamic reality, man might be able to satisfy his thirst for the absolute within the confines of his counted number of heartbeats. (14)

Since feminism was rapidly gaining in popularity during the Modernist period, it is interesting to note the surrealist attitude toward women was one of reverence. The surrealists believed that the uniting of male and female was a necessary part of the transformative experience (Balakian 2-3). Woman in surrealist poetry is symbolic of all women. It is in this union with woman that man is keenly aware of his individuality while at the same time completely identified with the woman. They are separate, but in a complete state of oneness (Caws 164-166).

The surrealist movement was not closely associated with music, but in addition to poetry was expressed in art and film. Some artists closely associated with the movement were Picasso, Salvador Dali, Joan Miró, René Magritte, Frida Kahlo, Marc Chagall, Marcel Duchamp,
Man Ray, Giorgio de Chirico, Paul Klee and Max Ernst. Poets associated with the movement include André Breton, Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard, Max Jacob, Tristan Tzara, Jean Cocteau, Arthur Rimbaud, Robert Desnos, Pierre Reverdy, Charles Baudelaire and Guillaume Apollinaire. Some of these figures were artists as well as poets. Most surrealists distanced themselves from music, seeing it as an elitist art form. However, Paul Éluard was an exception, he was more open to music and did whole-heartedly embrace the music of Francis Poulenc. It is interesting to note that the tentacles of surrealism reach in to the late twentieth century as well as into other parts of the world as evidenced in the poetry of Chilean poet Pablo Neruda (1904-1973) and Mexican poet, Octavio Paz (1914-1998).

III. Poulenc

Francis Poulenc, who lived from 1899 until 1963, was literally in the midst of the artists, poets and the movement that was surrealism. He was born to a wealthy family in Paris, France where he grew up; and where he had both the opportunity and means to indulge in a variety of experiences that shaped his unique aesthetic. His very Parisian mother, herself a lover of the arts and his more modest and devoutly catholic father both had profound influence on Poulenc, as did his uncle who exposed him to the delights of popular music in cabaret clubs and music halls. All of these influences manifest themselves in the two extremes that we see in Poulenc and his music, which some have described as the sacred and the profane.

As a teenager, Poulenc studied piano with famed pianist Ricardo Viñes. He was well connected and helped Poulenc and his music find their to Parisian society. Poulenc owed much of his success to Viñes (Bernac 23). Poulene’s mother had hoped that he would study
composition at the Paris Conservatory, but the outbreak of World War I necessitated that he become a soldier instead of a student. After the war he was considered too old for the Paris Conservatory, hence he was never formally trained as a composer, a fact that seems fortuitous in hindsight. Though he did not attend the conservatory, he did eventually study privately with Charles Koechlin, who fortunately was very open-minded and didn’t try to force Poulenc to adhere to certain systems of composition (Buckland and Chimènes 15). Poulenc was a member of the group of composers known as Les Six. Even though he had less training than other members of the group, Poulenc’s star has continued to rise while the music of the other members of Les Six is either barely memorable or forgotten altogether. None of them left them has continued to impact the world like Poulenc. (This is much the same scenario that surrounded Schubert several decades before.) He was not as educated or highly regarded as some of his peers, but their music is largely forgotten, while he has become a seminole figure on the landscape of music history, especially in the genre of Art Song.

Poulenc’s dear childhood friend, Raymonde Linossier was responsible for introducing him to literary circles at the fashionable bookstore, La Maison des Amis des Livres, owned by her friend Adrienne Monnier. It was through frequenting this bookstore, which was a gathering place for creative intellectuals that Poulenc met Paul Valéry, Léon-Paul Fargue, André Breton, Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard and many others. He considered himself a literary man, much in the spirit of Claude Debussy. But Debussy and Poulenc were quite different composers as noted by Bernac in Poulenc, The Man and His Music:

When Debussy wrote, ‘Music must humbly seek to give pleasure’, our thoughts turn to the music of Poulenc with its sonorous sensuousness, its subtle harmonies, the flexibility of its modulations and the play of the resulting colours, to the beauty and charm of its
melodic lines. It can be that the art of our greatest musicians is an art of suggestion. Poulenc, with his great sensibility, undoubtedly excelled in the creation of a poetic climate (36).

It was in *La Maison des Amis des Livres* where he first encountered Guillaume Apollinaire reading some of his poetry aloud, a first impression that Poulenc never forgot. He considered Apollinaire and Paul Éluard to be the greatest influences on his life, especially Éluard; and in his song compositions he preferred the texts of Éluard and Apollinaire above all others. In fact, he is quoted as saying: “If on my tomb were inscribed: here lies Francis Poulenc, the musician of Apollinaire and Éluard, I would consider this to be my finest title to fame (Bernac 50).”

IV. Poulenc and the Poets

While Poulenc’s friendship with Éluard lasted decades, until our Éluard’s death in 1952, his relationship with Apollinaire was very brief in comparison, partly due to the difference in their ages, but also because Apollinaire’s life was cut short, due to injuries he sustained in WWI. Poulenc was only 18 when Apollinaire died, but his influence on the young Poulenc was profound and would be a guiding force throughout his life. Poulenc believed that in order to adequately compose a song, he must know and understand the poet. This is why he only set poems that were written by poets whom he knew personally, or had at least met. It was imperative that he was able to hear the voice of the poet internally and bring out the subtleties and nuances in their unique delivery style. This is why, when he intended to compose songs specifically for the female voice, he would choose the poetry of a female poet, like that of his
friend Louise de Vilmorin found in the cycle *Fiancailles Pour Rire*, FP 101. In the case of Apollinaire, he is reported to have had a low pitched speaking voice and would read his poetry in an intoned, chant-like style, which one can hear in the melodic lines of the first set of Apollinaire songs that Poulenc composed in 1919, *Le Bestiaire ou le Cortège d’Orphée*. The set employs eight poems from a book of animal poems by Apollinaire of the same title. Raoul Dufy, using the medieval technique of hand-printed woodcuts, illustrated the book. Given Poulenc’s love of art, he was doubtless inspired by the images as well as the poetry. Upon hearing Poulenc’s *Le Bestiaire ou le Cortège d’Orphée* performed, Marie Laurencin, artist and romantic companion of Apollinaire, wrote to Poulenc and remarked, “Ever since my return, I have been humming, as best I can, your *Bestiare*, and you cannot imagine… how well you captured the nostalgia and the singability of these admirable quatrains. And what really moves me is that one hears in your music the voice of Guillaume Apollinaire reciting these poems (Daniel 253).” After composing this first set of songs on Apollinaire texts, Poulenc claimed to feel a metaphysical connection to and understanding of the poet; to whom he would return many more times for inspiration and whose writing was the basis for some of his most significant works, including the opera *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, FP 125. I would suggest that this psychic connection is a manifestation of surrealist ideology in Poulenc’s creative process.

V. Apollinaire and Banalités

One of Poulenc’s most important and popular song cycles is *Banalités*, FP 107, a setting of 5 texts by Guillaume Apollinaire, 4 poems and one excerpt from a prose work entitled
Onirocritque. The excerpt, *Chanson D’Orkenise*, was indeed a song within the prose work. The content of this set of songs is:

*Banalités*, FP.107, Cing Mélodies Sur de Poèmes de Guillaume Apollinaire

I. Chanson D’Orkenise

II. Hôtel

III. Fagnes des Wallonie

IV. Voyage a Paris

V. Sanglots

*Banalités* is not a song “cycle” in the truest form of the word, but more accurately a collection or set, intended to be performed together in a particular order, but with no thematic connection. Each of these songs can just as easily be performed individually as they are not part of a larger narrative. He selected the texts and composed the work in the fall of 1940. It is one of his most popular works, with good reason. These songs are more traditionally constructed and have a lightness of style, except for the final song, *Sanglots*. The first song in the cycle, *Chanson D’Orkenise*, was first conceived by Poulenc while a serving as a soldier for the second time, albeit briefly, during World War II. He claims that he began singing the opening lines of the song while marching to Cahors. Ultimately he opted to compose it the style of a folk song rather than a march. Personally, I think you can still hear the march. Though he has conceived it as folk song, the blurred, flourish of open fourths and fifths in the introduction combined with a pedal tone, make it feel more a part of a fantasy world than a familiar one. The constant motion in the
accompaniment conveys a sense of movement throughout the piece leading to the ominous closing of the gates. The opening line of the piano part under the vocal line ascends in thirds in way that sounds like an untrained child at play on the keys. It seems as if it is going keep ascending and float away, but the pedal tone is at once a stabilizing force, as well as a constant source of dissonant bite and rhythmic propulsion.

Example 1. Chanson D’Orkenise, Banalites, Francis Poulenc, FP 107, 1941
You can see in the example 1 that the pedal tone, which is on the bottom staff, continues for the first twelve measures of the song. The flourish of open fourths and fifths is found in the third and fourth measures, establishing the atmospheric yet ever driving piano part over which a simple melody sits. It is the piano part that is the source of interest and intensity. The ascending thirds begin in measure five and continue for eight full measures. This example gives a glimpse of the perpetual motion of the song, but the piano part does open up into some thicker and harmonically lush chords eventually. However, there is nothing of a sustained nature in the piano part. It pulses and moves continuously, relentlessly to the end. There isn’t a single beat in a single measure that doesn’t have the left hand of the piano part actively pulsing in quarter notes or pairs of eighth notes as seen in the example.

One of the expressions used in the text of the song refers to the guards of the city knitting superbly, which is a figure of speech that is similar to our expression, “being tied up in knots”. There is a lot to overcome when translating poetry of this style. First, it is not always intended to make sense; ambiguity is one of its more interesting qualities. It allows the hearer or reader to engage their imaginations and create their own meaning. This nonsensical quality is part of what makes it surreal. Secondly, there are sometimes hidden meanings or colloquial expressions that we may mistakenly take at face value. What we can see clearly is the word play, alliteration and other delicious linguistic effects that give them aesthetic appeal, apart from the translation, as in the poem from the third song, “Fagnes de Wallonie”. If you look at the final lines of the poem you will see several words that either rhyme or sound the same, creating a bit of a tongue twister as well as obscuring the meaning, especially when taken into consideration that final consonants are not pronounced in French making words like “mord” and “mort” sound exactly the same when spoken or sung.
Fagnes de Wallonie

Tant de tristesses plénières
Prirent mon cœur aux fagnes désolées
Quand las j'ai reposé dans les sapinières
Le poids des kilomètres pendant que râlait
Le vent d'ouest

J'avais quitté le joli bois
Les écureuils y sont restés
Ma pipe essayait de faire des nuages
Au ciel
Qui restait pur obstinément

Je n'ai confié aucun secret sinon une chanson énigmatique
Aux tourbières humides

Les bruyères fleurant le miel
Attiraient les abeilles
Et mes pieds endoloris
Foulaient les myrtilles et les airelles
Tendrement mariée
    Nord
    Nord
La vie s'y tord
En arbres forts
    Et tors
La vie y mord
    La mort
A belles dents
    Quand bruit le vent

Poulenc said of *Voyage a Paris*, “When one knows me, it seems quite natural that I should open my mouth like a carp to snap up the deliciously stupid lines of ‘Voyage a Paris.’ For me Paris often brings tears to my eyes and music to my ears. ‘Hotel,’ the second song in the cycle, is still Paris; a room in Montparnasse (Schmidt 270).” It is little wonder that Poulenc was inspired by these seemingly trivial texts. During the fall of 1940, when he was composing these songs, he and his family had just returned to their beloved Paris after having taken refuge in the country during World War II. He dressed these two very Parisian texts in musical settings that
are at once simple and wonderful. For “Voyage a Paris,” he composes one of his signature waltzes; and for “Hotel” a tune that sounds like torch song a la Édith Piaf.

Example 2. *Sanglots, Banalites*, Francis Poulenc, FP 107, 1941
As you can see in example 2, Poulenc begins this fifth song in the set, *Sanglots*, very similarly to the first song, *Chanson D’Orkenese*, with a pedal tone in the left hand of the piano part and open fourths and fifths for intervals. This time, instead of the quick ascending thirds of *Chanson D’Orkenese*, we have a slow descending line, rhythmically and harmonically similar, but so different in feel. This example is from the third page of the score, and shows some of the intense moments of the song. Up until this point the song has been very small and quiet in the key of F# minor, then modulates to Eb minor. As we enter this page, the intensity start to build and climaxes on the third system with dramatic effect of the voice descending by half steps on a triplet rhythm. He takes us through a series of chords and keys the first of which is a benign sounding E major chord, though it doesn’t look like one on the surface. Then we begin what feels like a free-fall in the vocal line, descending by a series of seven half steps with an unstable harmonic progression underneath it in the piano part. The lowest voice is in piano part climbs as the voice falls, creating tension. The tension is heightened by the lack of a feeling of tonal center as many of the chords are constructed with the third on the bottom and by the insertion of some fully and partially diminished. The affect created here is nothing short of terrifying and thrilling. At the end of the progression when the voice and the piano are brought together in a tender and vulnerable moment, he unexpectedly flings the voice back up into the high range to underscore the word “joyeux,” meaning joy. There is such turbulence and pathos contained in these twelve measures, even a sense of horror, and incredible beauty and transcendence. There is more drama and emotion and more harmonic interest and variety on this page than one sometimes finds in an entire song. In many ways Poulenc’s setting of this text, as well as the poem itself, evoke the spirit of Apollinaire - wounded and changed by the experience of war, having a sense of longing for the unspoiled past and a fear of the future, while trying to hold onto hope and joy, albeit with
a broken heart. He is man who has been awakened to the painful truth that his is the experience of every man.

An interesting technique used by Apollinaire in the poem is the intertwining of two different poems. Toward the end of the poem, it actually appears we are encountering two different poems, or at least two different voices within the poem. Pierre Bernac points this out in the book Francis Poulenc: The Man and His Songs. Poulenc and baritone, Bernac were close friends and collaborated in many performances and in other ways, with Bernac serving as a sounding board for many of Poulenc’s ideas. Many of Poulenc’s songs were composed expressly for Bernac and/or were premiered by him with Poulenc himself at the piano. Therefore, the writings and recordings of Bernac are considered authoritative with regard to Poulenc’s compositions. More than any other person, he exactly what the composer was attempting to accomplish and what he would have wanted with regard to performance practice. Of the song Sanglots, Bernac shares this insight,

It must be conceded that the poem is not always easy to understand. But Poulenc had such feeling for this poetry that, as always, his music clarifies the text, giving it its form, it rhythm, it intensity, and the temperatures should have no difficulty in adopting his conception. Nevertheless I believe it necessary to reproduce here the arrangement of the poem on the page as in the literary edition. I have added, for sake of greater clarification, some parentheses for certain recessed lines, because there are, in a way, two poems in one. Without the lines in parentheses the poem is much easier to understand, and it will be realized that the lines in parentheses are connected with each other. Despite Poulenc’s great ability, it is without doubt difficult to bring out all the points.
Soblots

Notre amour est réglé par les calmes étoiles
Or nous savons qu'en nous beaucoup d'hommes respirent
Qui vinrent de très loin et sont un sous nos fronts
C'est la chanson des rêveurs
Qui s'étaient arraché le coeur
Et le portaient dans la main droite
Souviens-t'en cher orgueil de tous ces souvenirs
Des marins qui chantaient comme des conquérants.
Des gouffres de Thulé des tendres cieux d'Ophir
Des malades maudits de ceux qui fuient leur ombre
Et du retour joyeux des heureux émigrants
De ce cœur il coulait du sang
Et le rêveur allait pensant à sa blessure délicate
Tu ne briseras pas la chaîne de ces causes
Et douloureuse et nous disait qui sont les effets d'autres causes
Mon pauvre coeur mon cœur brisé pareil au cœur de tous les hommes
Voici nos mains que la vie fit esclaves
Est mort d'amour ou c'est tout comme
Est mort d'amour et le voici. Ainsi vont toutes choses
Arrachez donc le vôtre aussi et rien ne sera libre jusqu'à la fin des temps
Laissons tout aux morts et cachons nos soblots

Sobs

Our love is ordered by the calm stars
Now we know that in us many men have their being
Who came from very far away and are under our brows
It is the song of the dreamers
Who tore out their heart
And carried it in the right hand (Remember the dear pride all these memories
Of the sailors who sang like conquerors
Of the chasms of Thule of the gentle skies of Ophir
Of the cursed sick people of those who fled form their shadow
And the joyous return of happy emigrants)
This heart ran with blood
And the dreamer went on thinking of his wound delicate
(You will not break the chain of these causes)
And painful and said to us (Which are the effects of other causes)
My poor heart my broken heart resembling the heart of all men
(here here are our hands that life enslaved)
Has died of love or so it seems
Has died of love and here it is such is the way of all things
Tear out yours also (And nothing will be free until the end of time)
Let us leave all to the dead and hide our sobs

Fig. 2. Chanson D'Orkenise, Banalites, Francis Poulenc, FP 107, 1941
VI. Rocamadour and *Litanies à la Vierge Noire*

A turning point in Poulenc’s life and music was the death of his beloved friend Pierre-Octave Ferroud. Upon hearing of Ferroud’s death, the grief stricken Poulenc asked to be taken to Rocamadour, a place of pilgrimage that he’d heard about all his life from his father. In this ancient, rustic environment, his faith was rekindled and he was inspired to write his *Litanies à la Vierge Noire*, based on a text he found on the back of card bearing the image of the Black Virgin while in the chapel at Rocamadour. “The *Litanies*, remain one of Poulenc’s most compelling works. Completely unpretentious in conception, *Litanies* have a power and directness unparalleled in his oeuvre.” (Schmidt 233) While on the surface, this experience represents a point of divergence from surrealist philosophy, inasmuch as they shunned organized religion, this was a mystical experience, which does not seem so far afield of surrealism. Though the *Litanies* were not based on surrealist poetry, they were composed spontaneously in response to grief and incorporated primitive elements along with modern, dissonant harmonies. The object of inspiration was an ancient statue, not dissimilar to the primitive masks that inspired the works of Picasso. This fusion of the very ancient and the very modern creates an aura of mysticism within the work. In the *Litanies à la Vierge Noire*, the unexpected and unsettling juxtaposition of sparse, chant-inspired melodies with very modern, dissonant harmonies, while possessing a religious context, presents a very surreal aesthetic, not unlike the many surrealist paintings by Dali with sacred subject matter such as *Crucifixion (Corpus Hypercubus)*. Captivated by this medieval church that is carved into the façade of a rocky mountain, a place of pilgrimage from ancient times, and out of the fertile swamp of grief, Poulenc has an experience that is not uncommon; a mystical experience that results in creative expression.
Fig. 1. Salvador Dali. Crucifixion (Corpus Hypercubus). 1954. Artstor, library-artstor.org.ezproxy.libraries.wright.edu/asset/AWSS35953_35953_31707706
VII. Éluard and *Le Travail Du Peintre*

After meeting at Adrienne Monnier’s bookstore Poulenc and Éluard became very close, life-long friends. Poulenc earned high praise from Éluard with his settings of Éluard’s poems. He set thirty four of Éluards poems to music as well as several choral works including *Figure Humaine*, one of his most significant compositions. Paul Éluard confessed that it was only after Poulenc set his poems to music that he truly understood them. He believed that Poulenc understood his poems better than he understood them himself. He acknowledges this in these lines from a poem that wrote for his friend Poulenc:

Francis I did not listen to myself  
Francis I owe it to you that I hear myself  
On a white pathway  
In an immense countryside  
Where light strengthens itself  

At night there are no longer any roots  
The shadow is behind them mirrors  
Francis we dream of expanse  
As a child of endless games  
In a starry countryside  

which only reflects youth (Bernac 92)

It would be impossible to overstate the mutual admiration that these two men shared for one another. Clearly, Poulenc was irresistibly drawn to the poetry of Éluard, while the deep and seemingly intuitive understanding that Poulenc possessed of him and his poetry mesmerized
Éluard. It is as though, like twins they spoke a special language and understood one another like no one else could.

_Le Travail du Peintre_, was Poulenc’s penultimate song cycle before his death of heart failure in 1963. The cycle was composed in 1960 and for the text he employed seven of Éluard’s poems taken from a published collection entitled *Voir*. He had spoken to Éluard about the project several years earlier, before Éluard’s death in 1952. Poulenc strongly identified with the world of art; and both he and Éluard knew most of the painters in the set personally. While Poulenc was a huge fan of Matisse and wanted to end the cycle with him, Éluard did not sure this affinity and never came through with a poem about Matisse. The names of the songs and hence the artists are listed below:

_Le Travail Du Peintre_, FP 161, Sept Mélodies Sur des Poèmes de Paul Éluard

I. Pablo Picasso

II. Marc Chagall

III. Georges Braque

IV. Juan Gris

V. Paul Klee

VI. Joan Miró

VII. Jacques Villon
In this cycle Poulenc displays his mature style. The poetry of Éluard brings out an abstractness and a denseness in his compositional style that is in contrast to the lightness of the Apollinaire songs. In describing his song cycle *Le Travail du Peintre*, Poulenc said that he himself was attempting to paint with music. Incidentally, the cover of the published version of the cycle was painted by their mutual friend Picasso. Each song attempts to bring the poem and thus the artist to life. Within the songs you can hear the bravura of Picasso, whimsy of Chagall and the joy of Miró. In the song construction you will hear several of Poulenc’s characteristic compositional styles such as abrupt key changes, atmospheric harmonies, simple child-like motifs, short phrases with no connective tissue, very little repeated material and occasional but brief sentimental indulgences all knit together in a cohesive and aesthetically interesting and appealing way, albeit with a more sophisticated palette than Banalités.
In example 3 from song VI. *Joan Miró*, we see a great example of one of Poulenc’s signature composition techniques, that of collage. This song rarely has a moment when the it seems to settle into a key or any other predictable patterns The previous page of the score has the piano part playing some dissonant chords in the key of A major, but the vocal line sitting on top of it, looks and feels like it is in the key of E major. Immediately upon turning to this page we are abruptly thrown in to a new key, and have a short melodic fragment that is unrelated to the melodic material on the previous page. Though we are thrown into a new key, which appears to be Db major we are unsettled from that in the following measure and thrown abruptly back into Db major for a measure of five beats that ascends dramatically only to a sudden stop. We switch gears once again, going from the pinnacle of the previous phrase at a fortissimo dynamic to a subito piano, now back in a 3/4 meter and into yet another key. I use the term key loosely, because there are no key signatures and the harmonies are so dissonant, that it is difficult to ascertain the key. One thing is obvious, at the bottom of the page the piano utilizes a whole tone scale, further destabilizing the sense of tonal center. The top of the next page, which you cannot see, he finally resolves into the key of A major. Since her rarely puts the root of the chord in the bottom of the chord is always adding in dissonance, there is always a blurring of the key and an unsettled quality. When you add to that short melodic fragments and abrupt changes, the effect is thrilling, as if a beautiful road of surprises is constantly unfolding before you. Somehow he is able to take all of this material that appears so chaotic and bring forth something that feels cohesive and has aesthetic appeal.

Both Poulenc and Éluard were huge admirers of art, especially painting. Éluard acquired quite a substantial collection of art over his lifetime, much of it was gifts from artists who were his friends and with whom he collaborated. Many of those collaborations involved artists
working as illustrators of his publications. He and Picasso collaborated on sixteen publications. Poulenc also strongly identified with the world of art; a subject he was intensely passionate about. He had a life-long love affair with painting, though he himself was not a painter. He loved to visit museums and wrote detailed accounts in his diary of what he had seen and his responses to those encounters. He counted among his good friends Max Jacob and Jean Cocteau, both of whom were involved in art and literature. In describing Le Travail du Peintre, Poulenc said that he himself was attempting to paint with music (Buckland and Chimènes 1). He described his work in artistic terms and said that a poem had to be visual in order to interest him. Éluard, through the poems in Voir, brought together the worlds of art and poetry. To this, Poulenc added the element of music. In this set of songs we get a real window into the world of surrealism by encountering these three forms of creative expression in a single experience. Any performance of these songs could be greatly enhanced by visually displaying images of some of the paintings of the artists referenced in the songs.

Like the surrealist poets, Poulenc’s compositional style was very intuitive and spontaneous. When asked by an interviewer about his rules and systems of composition and source of inspiration. Poulenc responded: “My ‘rules’ are instinctive, I am not concerned with the principles and I am proud of that; I have no system of writing (for me system means ‘tricks’); and as for inspiration, it is so mysterious that it is wiser not to try to explain it.” (Bernac 37) Does this not sound very much like the surrealist approach to writing poetry? In addition, Poulenc always wrote the music as it came to him, he did not try to make it conform to any predetermined forms or ideas. If a melody came to him and it happened to be in an incredibly difficult key, he left it that key rather than transposing it to a key that was more user friendly.
Not only was his method of composition surreal, but his materials were surreal as well. His harmonic palette was as varied, colorful and unusual as any surrealist painting. Some of his compositions have been compared to cubism because they contain abrupt changes and suggestions of the familiar but interpreted in a new and strange way. He had a great melodic gift, but could create atmospheres with his innovative use of harmony. Because Art Song was his favorite genre, and surrealist poems were his favorite texts, a large part of his compositional output is tied to surrealism. It is in song composition that he excels as he creates a wide variety of emotional contexts from the profoundly serious to the humorous and even zany. He manages to capture the spirit of the poem without overpowering it with the music. He achieves a perfect fusion of word and music that is stamped with his own unique style, an amalgamation of many influences.

I would suggest that not only was Poulenc’s method of composition surreal and his use of materials surreal, but he was the embodiment of surrealism. He is often referred to as the man of extremes. These extremes coexisted in him beautifully and at times did appear to unite. Many people believe that his two operas represent the two extremes of Poulenc himself. *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* based on a surrealist play by Apollinaire, represented the bawdy and profane side of Poulenc. It is sometimes referred to as an opera burlesque and is musically evocative at times of popular entertainment of the day. While watching the transformation of Thérèse to Tirésias and of her husband to a woman is entertaining, there are obviously deeper issues beneath the humor that lies on the surface, issues of gender roles and sexual ambiguity (Buckland and Chimènes 261).

The opera that represents the other extreme of Francis Poulenc is the very serious *Dialogues des Carmélites* with the libretto by Georges Bernanos, which is the story of a group of
Carmélite nuns who were beheaded during the French Revolution. In explaining what attracted him to Bernanos libretto he said:

It was often the more spiritual side of Bernanos that attracted me. The story, admirable though it is, and sadly true, naturally touched me greatly, but it was, for instance, the transference of grace, the communion of saints, that made me want to write an opera. The first scene I composed is perhaps the most dogmatic in that it depicts the initial interview between the First Prioress and Blanche de la Force (Buckland and Chimènes 260).

Poulenc’s setting of Bernanos story strikes the perfect balance, capturing the seriousness and gravity of the story, but highlighting the hopeful aspects of faith, love and grace - both divine and human. There is a quiet strength and dignity that is maintained as the sisters endure their ordeal. It is inspiring without being sentimental. There is a sense of profundity to the story that is captured perfectly in the music, lending appropriate gravitas to the subject. This is yet another example of religious subject matter, but it is not a work for religious or sacred purposes, similar to what was referenced earlier with the Litanies à la Vierge Noire and the painting by Dalí.

While Francis Poulenc composed in many genres including ballet, opera, piano works, orchestral works and chamber music, his absolute favorite genre was art song. He considered it a very important art form and thought it should be taken seriously. Song was the perfect vehicle for his many gifts. As a masterful pianist and an innovative composer, his compositions were interesting, but what really made Poulenc a great song composer was his love of the surrealist
poetry that he set to music and the sense of congruence and camaraderie that he had with the poets themselves. Along with that love of poetry came that great care with which he set it. His relationship with the poets that he set provided a knowing, an intimacy that infused these songs with something extraordinary that is difficult to put into words. His songs in so many ways seem to capture the spirit of the surrealist movement and of the times in general. You could say they are like aural time capsules. They are appealing not only because they are masterfully set, but because in them we find his generosity of spirit, his vulnerability and wit.

To those who would say that music cannot fit under the umbrella of surrealism because it is too contrived, I would argue that it is no more contrived than painting. This is especially true if the composer, as in the case of Francis Poulenc is rejecting traditional formal models of compositional training and technique, and instead relying on his inspiration and intuition. To those who would argue that music was an elitist art form at that time, I would argue that it was no more elitist than were the visual arts. And like the visual artists, Poulenc had many ordinary, unpretentious sources of inspiration for his melodies. To those who would say that Poulenc could not be a surrealist because he was Catholic and surrealists shunned organized religion, I would argue that his religious experience was not a mere association with the bourgeois morality of organized religion (which we know in practice he rejected), but rather a quest for wholeness and mystical experience. It was this drive for mystical experience, which is at the heart of surrealism, that was also at the heart of Poulenc and his music, especially the vocal music and choral works where his uncanny sense of understanding of surrealist poetry could shine. For that matter, I have not uncovered anyone who is associated with surrealism that didn’t have some points of departure from the movement, either partial or complete. Even Éluard himself eventually broke with the movement.
During the modernist period, there was no more important hotbed of creativity than Paris, France. And no composer more perfectly captured the spirit of the day in Paris than Francis Poulenc. His music is like a microcosm of modernist Europe expressed from a surrealist perspective with a decidedly French sensibility and Parisian style. It does not appear that Poulenc was self-consciously attempting to accomplish this feat; he was merely being himself, a product of the times and the people he associated with, the product of war and inner conflict, of progress and nostalgia, of cathedrals and cabarets. He embraced and embodied the surrealist philosophy, was part of the inner circle of surrealists and set many surrealist texts to music and approached composition similarly to how a surrealist poet approached writing. For all of these reasons, Francis Poulenc is uniquely qualified to be called a surrealist composer.
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Works Cited


