

BEYOND THE HUMAN VOICE: FRANCIS POULENC'S PSYCHOLOGICAL DRAMA
LA VOIX HUMAINE (1958)

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Thesis Prepared for the Degree of

MASTER OF MUSIC

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

May 2000

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Francis Poulenc's (1899-1963) music has been described often as humorous and light, pleasant but not serious. A closer examination of his works proves that this assessment fails to do justice to a composer who is also a product of a century of change and musical experimentation.

The culture of Paris in the early twentieth century was a major factor in shaping Poulenc's attitudes toward music. In particular, a young group of composers, called "Les Six"¹ by critic Henri Collet, of which Poulenc was a "member," formed a circle even though their musical styles were quite diverse.² Sometimes this group simply organized concerts that featured their compositions, but five of the six also collaborated on music for a theatrical event led by Jean Cocteau.³ This work, entitled *Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel* (1921), was poorly received and caused the group of composers to disband and follow different paths.

Poulenc greatly admired Cocteau and Erik Satie, who collaborated on the ballet *Parade* (1916-17). Satie, a role model for Les Six, encouraged Poulenc to find his own

¹ Georges Auric, Louis Durey, Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, and Germaine Tailleferre.

² Henri Hell, *Francis Poulenc*, trans. Edward Lockspeiser (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 14.

musical voice during a time when styles were moving in many different directions from the young Poulenc's developing musical language. In response to a critical comment made by Paul Vidal about Poulenc's *Rhapsodie Negre* (1917), Satie wrote a supportive letter to Poulenc, expressing amusement at Vidal's attack.⁴

Cocteau worked closely with a number of composers, including Satie, Stravinsky, and Poulenc. His play *La Voix humaine* was premiered in 1930 at the Comédie Française, the only theater still allowed to feature one-act plays,⁵ and served as the text for Poulenc's one-character opera *La Voix humaine*, which appeared in 1959.

Like Cocteau's other plays, *La Voix humaine* challenged the audience to accept radically different perspectives on drama. The plot involves a nameless, prototypical woman abandoned by a lover who intends to marry someone else the following day. As the woman anxiously sits in her bedroom, the man calls her to check on her emotional state. At first, she feigns stability and calmness, but this façade eventually gives way to her distress. During the course of the evening, several interruptions divert the ex-couple's conversation, forcing the woman to acknowledge the outside world. Although the entire dialogue takes place over a telephone, the audience only hears the woman's part of the exchange. In the end, she clings to her love for this man, even as she hangs up the telephone.

This dramatic presentation poses some problems. First and foremost, the

³ Hell, 20.

⁴ Ornella Volta, *Satie Seen Through His Letters*, trans. Michael Bullock (London: Marion Boyars, 1989), 93.

⁵ Margaret Crosland, *Jean Cocteau* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), 94-95.

audience must rely solely on the woman's "monodialogue."⁶ She is obviously emotionally unstable and seems to be suffering from delusions. With this in mind, it is difficult to accept her statements. She even admits at one point that she has lied, singing "c'est parce que je viens de te mentir là, au telephone." If the audience rejects the woman's account, there is no other means to discover the truth.

If the text provides only one perspective of the conversation, the music reveals deeper levels of psychological complexity. Although Poulenc's vocal music is praised for its lyricism, *La Voix humaine* treats the voice in a declamatory manner. An awareness of the dramatic element helps explain why Poulenc sought an untraditional treatment of the voice in this opera.

Poulenc uses quotations from his *Dialogues des Carmélites* in *La Voix humaine*, resignifying the religious subject matter of the Carmelite nuns in the worldly context of the woman's telephone conversation. The end of *La Voix humaine* then becomes a theme for the first movement of his *Sonate pour Clarinet et Piano*, creating a dramatic reference for the purely instrumental work.

This investigation has examined more specifically the ways in which Poulenc builds the drama into the music, particularly with reference to the dramaturgy of Claude Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Placed within the context of Poulenc's life, including his relation to Cocteau and Parisian musicians, this late work recontextualizes an earlier opera as it explores the dramatic subtleties of Cocteau's text.

⁶ Cocteau's term.

CHAPTER 2

POULENC, COCTEAU, AND PARIS IN THE 1920s

The friendships with intellectuals and artists that Francis Poulenc established during the 1920s, a time when Paris was a hub of musical activity, set the stage for Poulenc's collaboration with Jean Cocteau in *La Voix humaine*. Poulenc's reputation as a composer, however, preceded this prolific encounter. In 1915 he began studying piano with Ricardo Viñes, who introduced Poulenc to Erik Satie and Georges Auric, two composers who influenced him.¹ Satie served as a role model for Les Six, a group that included Poulenc and Auric, along with Louis Durey, Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, and Germaine Tailleferre.

After Poulenc's unsuccessful attempt to enter the Paris Conservatoire in 1917, Satie (who heard of the incident from Auric) wrote Poulenc an encouraging letter. Poulenc was upset because composer and Opéra Comique director Paul Vidal, who taught at the Conservatoire, responded negatively to the young composer's *Rapsodie nègre*, dedicated to Satie. According to Poulenc,

He read it attentively, wrinkled his forehead, rolled his eyes furiously on seeing the dedication to Erik Satie, stood up and yelled at me exactly these words: "Your work stinks, it is idiotic, a load of crap. You're making fun of me, fifths all over the place, and what the hell's this 'Honoloulou'? Ah! I see you're one of the gang of Stravinsky, Satie & Co., very well, goodnight!" and he almost threw me out of the house.²

¹ Henri Hell, *Francis Poulenc*, trans. Edward Lockspeiser (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 3-4.

² Ornella Volta, *Satie Seen Through His Letters*, trans. Michael Bullock (London: Marion Boyars, 1989), 93.

Satie was enraged:

Who is giving you such odd advice? It's funny.
Never get mixed up with 'schools': there's been an explosion—quite natural, by the way. . . . Your visit to Vidal was that of an *amateur pupil*, not of an *artist pupil*. He showed you that. He's one of the old school and he intimidated you.³

Ironically, *Rhapsodie nègre* was the work for which Poulenc first received recognition, leading to the inclusion of his works in concerts featuring prominent French composers.

Satie's relationship with Poulenc changed as the result of a conflict over artistic styles. When Poulenc and Auric allied themselves with the Surrealist poets in 1924, Satie expressed his disagreement. He objected to what was deemed to be “automatic writing” of the surrealists as well as André Breton's dislike of music.⁴

Satie collaborated with Jean Cocteau and Pablo Picasso on a ballet that inspired young French composers, including Poulenc. Produced by the Ballet Russe under the direction of Sergei Diaghilev, *Parade* (1917) has been called a Cubist ballet, mainly because of Picasso's sets. While Cocteau's scenario and Satie's music also fall into the Cubist umbrella, Glenn Watkins prefers music critic Huntley Carter's description of *Parade* as “simultaneous.” The audience is able to listen simultaneously to a parade outside of the staged theater and the music inside the theater.⁵ The collaborative effort of Satie, Cocteau, and Picasso reveals further aspects of simultaneity and reflects the artistic

³ Volta, 93.

⁴ Robert Orledge, *Satie the Composer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 234-35.

⁵ Glenn Watkins, *Pyramids at the Louvre: Music, Culture, and Collage from Stravinsky to the Postmodernists* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994), 257.

atmosphere of Paris during that time. Simultaneity can be seen in other projects during the 1920s and even beyond that decade. Although it was used in various contexts, the term simultaneity implies a synesthetic relationship between the arts that surfaces in unexpected modes of expression.⁶

Parade presents a number of music-hall scenes promoted by two managers who hope to attract the attention of a crowd and draw them into the theater for a show. Therefore, the three numbers become the ballet, rather than the performance that the managers advertise.⁷ Cocteau revered Satie as a paradigmatically French composer, and, consequently, it was natural for Satie to have supplied the music for *Parade*. However, Satie objected to some of Cocteau's ideas, especially concerning a dialogue that Cocteau wanted to include as part of the ballet. Picasso, who also disagreed with Cocteau's vision, convinced Cocteau to remove the dialogue completely, something that satisfied Satie.⁸

Satie's simple, sometimes "popular," music inspired other composers to emulate this mode in their own compositions. In addition to forms such as the waltz, Satie quotes Irving Berlin's Tin Pan Alley ragtime song "That Mysterious Rag" during the scene about an American girl. This reflects the popularity of songs from the United States in Paris of that time.⁹

⁶ Watkins, *Pyramids at the Louvre*, 258.

⁷ Nancy Perloff, *Art and the Everyday: Popular Entertainment and the Circle of Erik Satie* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 112-13.

⁸ Volta, 122-23.

⁹ Perloff, 132-133.

The members of Les Six (with the exception of Durey) collaborated with Cocteau for a *pièce-ballet* influenced by *Parade* and entitled *Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel* (1921). Commissioned by the director of the Ballets Suédois, Cocteau's creation consisted of ballet and music, with choruses and songs. The subject matter addressed common events, reflecting the fascination with popular music culture. The première at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on 18 June 1921 featured choreography by Cocteau and Jean Borlin.¹⁰

Poulenc's "The General's Speech" from *Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel* serves as an example of the influence of popular music on the ballet. Rather than composing music to reflect the stately character of a general, Poulenc supplied polka rhythms to ridicule it.¹¹ The shocked audience jeered at the end of the premiere, and the only number that received acclaim was Honegger's "Funeral March." Critics considered this piece to be the only serious part of the work, unaware that even Honegger mocked the seriousness of the theme by placing the waltz from *Faust* in the bass.¹² Yet Auric, Milhaud, and Poulenc benefitted from the collaboration because Diaghilev, impressed with their contributions, commissioned ballets from each of them.¹³

Cocteau confirmed his enjoyment of working with other artists, especially musicians, in his essay *Le Coq et l'arlequin*. He defined the aesthetic of Les Six with his

¹⁰ Perloff, 186.

¹¹ Ibid., 189.

¹² Hell, *Francis Poulenc*, 20.

¹³ Perloff, 191.

call for a unique French style of composition, separate from the Wagnerian tradition. He even attacked Debussy, asserting that he “missed the way because he fell from the German frying-pan into the Russian fire,”¹⁴ expressing, however, his appreciation for inherently Russian music. Rather than promoting French music based on another country’s tradition, he wanted music from France’s heritage. Cocteau’s attacks on other styles centered around his agenda to promote Satie, whom he believed served as a model of simplicity in music.¹⁵

Ironically, Cocteau also criticized the theater and instead, along with many composers, preferred the popular music heard in the music-hall. He viewed the theater as a place in which artistic visions were compromised for the benefit of immediate success.¹⁶ He even writes, “Our *Parade* was so far from being what I could have wished that I never went to see it from the ‘front,’ confining myself to adjusting with my own hands, from the wings, the notice-boards bearing the number of each ‘turn.’”¹⁷ Disappointed that his vision for *Parade* had not measured up to his expectations, Cocteau avoided viewing the ballet as a member of the audience.

In a 1924 addendum to the original manifesto, Cocteau addresses Poulenc’s ballet *Les Biches*, with the observation, “Yes, Poulenc’s music is distant. It is haughty, exhibiting itself half-naked, and by failing to understand itself, producing the same effect

¹⁴ Jean Cocteau, “Le Coq et l’arlequin” in *Cocteau’s World: An Anthology of Writings by Jean Cocteau*, ed. Margaret Crosland, trans. Rollo Myers (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1972), 310.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 311.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 312-13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 313.

as perversion.”¹⁸ Among members of Les Six, Cocteau only praises Poulenc and Auric, noting his admiration for their individual styles.¹⁹ Cocteau further sealed his association with Les Six with his dedication of the original 1918 manifesto to Auric on account of the composer’s abandonment of a “German musical style.”²⁰

Cocteau’s *Le Coq et l’arlequin* preceded the official grouping of Les Six. The circle of musicians was originally involved with “Les Nouveaux jeunes,” a group of fluctuating membership and inspired by *Parade*. Satie was a member until 1918, after which time he merely commented on the group’s aesthetics.²¹ A series of concerts featured compositions by members of the group, along with works by other French composers. Many of the concerts took place at an artist’s studio known as the Salle Huyghens. Owned by Swiss painter Émile Lejeune, the studio also exhibited art (including works by Matisse and Picasso) and featured poetry readings by writers such as Cocteau.²² When Cocteau wrote his *Le Coq et l’arlequin* he was speaking to the group of composers with whom he associated at the Salle Huyghens.²³

In 1920, music critic Henri Collet identified the members of Les Six: Georges Auric, Louis Durey, Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, and Germaine

¹⁸ Cocteau, 335-36.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 337-38.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 303.

²¹ Perloff, 2-3.

²² *Ibid.*, 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, 4.

Tailleferre. The initial association emulated the Russian Five, and the second of two articles for *Comœdia* labeled the group as Les Six.²⁴

The group enjoyed the publicity spawned by their association, mainly for concerts featuring their compositions. The cooperative effort of the members of Les Six on *Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel* actually led to their disbanding later that year. By this time, the group that had united in the spirit of a new aesthetic influenced by Satie and verbally articulated by Cocteau, realized that their personal views were actually quite different. The popular styles incorporated into the musical numbers of Auric, Milhaud, and Poulenc reflect a common goal to promote café and cabaret music.²⁵ However, the other three members of Les Six held more traditional views, as they embraced Satie's music while refraining from speaking against Wagner and Debussy.²⁶

Poulenc's work with Cocteau extends beyond *Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel*. Even before Les Six--with the exception of Durey--collaborated with Cocteau, Poulenc set three of Cocteau's poems for a collection called *Cocardes* (1919). The songs reflect Poulenc's fascination with popular music, including mimicry of a barrel-organ. His original scoring for violin, cornet, trombone, bass drum, and triangle (revised in 1939) lent itself to imitations of popular music-hall styles.²⁷ Another Cocteau poem, *Toréador*,

²⁴ Perloff, 5.

²⁵ Ibid., 188.

²⁶ Ibid., 6.

²⁷ Hell, 11-12.

was set as a song in 1918.²⁸ Although Poulenc withdrew his setting, he supplied the music for a one-act comic opera entitled *Le Gendarme incompris* (1921), with text by Cocteau and Raymond Radiguet. This work, which is not listed in catalogues of Poulenc's œuvre, also incorporated a text by Mallarmé, delivered by the protagonist in an incomprehensible accent.²⁹

Later in life, Poulenc reestablished his association with Cocteau when he turned to the opera *La Voix humaine* (1958). He also supplied music for an unstaged monologue entitled *La Dame de Monte Carlo* (1961). In 1962, Poulenc provided incidental music for Cocteau's *Renaud et Armide*. However, he was not satisfied with this effort.³⁰ This renewed connection reflects Poulenc's general nostalgia for the past during his last years.³¹ Poulenc's *Sonate pour Clarinet et Piano* (1962) also reflects nostalgia, as it is dedicated to the memory of Arthur Honegger, a member of Les Six.

The revitalized interest in the past sets the stage for Poulenc's operatic setting of Cocteau's *La Voix humaine*. Although the music occasionally reveals Poulenc's fascination with popular music in the early twentieth century, the overall mood of the opera summons a different aesthetic. Ironically, Poulenc uses musico-dramaturgical

²⁸ Hell, 90.

²⁹ Ned Rorem, "Cocteau and Musicians," in *Cocteau and the French Scene* (New York: Abbeyville Press, 1984), 180-81.

³⁰ Keith Daniel, *Francis Poulenc: His Artistic Development and Musical Style* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982): 55.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

devices associated with Debussy's *Pelléas*, whose Impressionistic "haze" Cocteau had attacked in the 1920s, although in a far more compressed manner.

CHAPTER 3

FROM THE THEATER TO THE OPERA HOUSE: POULENC'S SETTING OF COCTEAU'S PLAY

The Play

Jean Cocteau created his tragic monodrama *La Voix humaine* while receiving treatment for opium addiction. Completed in 1929, the play was premiered at the Comédie Française, the only theater that produced one-act plays, on 17 February 1930, with Berthe Bovy as the abandoned woman.¹ Christian Bérard, who later collaborated with Cocteau on another monologue entitled *La Bel indifférent* (1940), designed the set.²

Well-received at its premiere, the play has enjoyed several notable performances. In New York, Liv Ullmann performed the play in English, as did Ingrid Bergman for a recording and television. The forty-five minute work is preserved on film by Anna Magnani in a collection of short dramas entitled *L'amore* (1948), directed by Roberto Rossellini.³ Even after Poulenc transformed Cocteau's play into an opera, the original version remained popular, evident by its revival by Louise Conte in January 1962.⁴

¹ Margaret Crosland, *Jean Cocteau* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), 94-97.

² Neal Oxenhandler, "The Theater of Jean Cocteau," in *Jean Cocteau and the French Scene*, (New York: Abbeyville Press, 1984), 137.

³ Francis Steegmuller, "Jean Cocteau: 1889-1963, A Brief Biography," in *Jean Cocteau and the French Scene* (New York: Abbeyville Press, 1984), 28.

⁴ Elizabeth Sprigge and Jean-Jacques Kihm, *Jean Cocteau: The Man and the Mirror* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1968), 249.

The play represents a turn toward the popular realistic movement, and a departure from Cocteau's usual fascination with the supernatural. His famous play *Orpheus* demonstrates Cocteau's general preference for imaginary worlds, with its blend of Greek mythology and a Christian angel.⁵ *La Voix humaine*, on the other hand, stands as a realistic examination of the abandoned woman's reactions and emotions.⁶

At the same time, *La Voix humaine* defines a world through the invisible realm of an unseen and unheard antagonist. This allows Cocteau to exploit the woman's need to feign stability, as she lies to the man. For instance, the woman tells her ex-lover that she is wearing a red dress while the audience can see that she is in a dressing gown. The man also deceives the woman by saying that he is at home, and the woman discovers his deception only when she tries to call him after their call is disconnected.

By centering the plot around the telephone conversation, Cocteau creates a cold, mechanistic scenario for his drama. The man is detached through his absence on the stage, and the audience must imagine what he says. When the conversation ends, the situation remains unchanged: the couple has already parted, and their conversation merely prolongs the inevitable end of the relationship.⁷ The lack of teleology in Cocteau's play is built into the dramaturgy of predetermination: there is no other possible

⁵ Oxenhandler, "The Theater of Jean Cocteau," 134.

⁶ Ibid., 137-38.

⁷ Lydia Crowson, *The Esthetic of Jean Cocteau* (Hanover: The University Press of New England, 1978), 64.

course of action. In this context, the telephone represents a mechanistic world not only through its presence but also as a depersonalized symbol.⁸

Ironically, the woman depends on this mechanistic element of her world. Without the telephone, she has no means of communicating with the man. When the conversation is interrupted, she loses her connection to the man; consequently, the telephone actually assumes fatalistic control over the woman.⁹

Cocteau uses the telephone line as the catalyst to articulate the action. Before the woman receives the call from the man, she first converses with the operator who controls the party line. The multiple-user telephone line later causes an interruption in the conversation, when the woman discovers that another woman is eavesdropping on the two ex-lovers. The woman demands,

Allo, âllo, Madame, retirez vous. Vous êtes avec des abonné. Allô! Mais non, Madame . . . Mais, Madame, nous ne cherchons pas à être intéressants . . . Si vous nous trouves ridicules, pourquoi perdez-vous votre temps au lieu de raccrocher?

Hello! hello, Madame, hang up. You are with a subscriber. Hello! But no, Madame . . . But, Madame, we are not trying to be interesting. If you find us so ridiculous, why are you wasting your time instead of hanging up?¹⁰

At other times, the woman is disconnected from the man and waits in distress for him to call her back.

The telephone is a sign for the man with whom the woman converses. If we apply

⁸ Crowson, 65.

⁹ Ibid., 66.

¹⁰ All translations of the play and opera are my own.

the semiotic division of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), into sign, object, and interpretant, the object is concrete evidence of the sign, and the interpretant is the process by which one recognizes the sign.¹¹ Peirce defines a sign as “anything which determines something else (its *interpretant*) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its *object*) in the same way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on *ad infinitum*.”¹² Thus, the telephone (object) is the sign that refers to something else. The woman would not be holding the telephone if she were not conversing with her ex-lover, and yet she is talking to him, even if the audience does not see the “something else,” the man, to which the sign refers. The man remains unrevealed to the audience, both visually and audibly. Even so, the audience is aware of him through the sign whose object is the telephone.

The woman refers to the telephone several times during the conversation, reminding the audience of the distance between the ex-lovers. At one point, the man cannot hear her clearly, and the woman responds,

Pourtant je parle très fort . . . Et là, tu m’entends? . . . Je dis: et là, tu m’entends? . . . C’est drôle parce que moi je t’entends comme si tu étais dans la chambre.

Yet I am speaking very loudly . . . And there, do you hear me? . . . I said: do you hear me? . . . It is peculiar because you sound as if you were in the room.

Cocteau’s insertion of telephone problems not only serves partially as a plot device, but also demonstrates that the woman has not separated herself completely from her ex-lover. As the conversation continues, she also experiences difficulty hearing the man, and she

¹¹ James Hoopes, Introduction, *Peirce on Signs*, ed. James Hoopes (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 7-8.

¹² Charles Sanders Peirce, “Sign” in *Peirce on Signs*, ed. James Hoopes (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 239.

complains about a buzzing sound. This conflict foreshadows the woman's discovery that the man is calling from a telephone away from home, in spite of his insistence that he is at his home. The woman even observes, "On dirait que ce n'est pas ton appareil" ("It sounds as though it is not your telephone.") Later, the call is disconnected, and the woman attempts to contact the man again. She dials his telephone number but, surprisingly, only his hired help is at home. The servant, Joseph, informs the woman that her ex-lover intends to stay out all night.

Although the telephone is merely a means of transmitting a conversation, the woman views it as a symbol of their mediated connection. She observes,

Ce fil, c'est le dernier qui me rattache encore à nous. . . . Je suis très ridicule, mais j'avais le téléphone dans mon lit et malgré tout, on est relié par le téléphone.

This wire—it is the last thing that connects us still. . . . I am very ridiculous, but I had the telephone in my bed and all the same, we were linked by the telephone.

The woman often questions the man's devotion to her, wanting reassurance that he loves her, even though she knows that he plans to marry another woman. He compliments her beauty, and she indicates that she needs further affirmation from him. In this context, the telephone again serves as a symbol of their relationship. In saying that she feels fortunate to be loved by him, she says,

Heureusement que tu es maladroit et que tu m'aimes. Si tu ne m'aimais pas et si tu étais adroit, le téléphone deviendrait une arme effrayante. Une arme qui ne laisse pas de traces, qui ne fait pas de bruit.

Fortunately you are clumsy and you love me. If you did not love me and you were shrewd, the telephone could easily become a frightening weapon. A weapon that would not leave marks, that would not make a sound.

Perhaps she means that he would not have called her had he not love her and thus the telephone would be silent. She also believes that the telephone could be a weapon and could transmit unkind words instead of his continual compliments.

Near the end of the play, the telephone actually takes on the role of a potential weapon, when the woman wraps the cord around her neck. Some critics have viewed this dramatic turn as an indication that she intends to commit suicide, although she has reassured the man already that she will not attempt to kill herself again. In actuality, the woman's action transfers the man's destructive behavior into the telephone. The woman explains,

J'ai le fil autour de mon cou. J'ai ta voix autour de mon cou . . . Ta voix autour de mon cou.

I have the cord around my neck . . . I have your voice around my neck . . . Your voice around my neck.

This comment also suggests that he is taking away her life by abandoning her. Earlier, the woman compares herself to her friend Marthe and complains,

Mais, mon pauvre chéri, je n'ai jamais eu rien d'autre à faire que toi . . . Marthe a sa vie organisée . . . Seule.

But, my poor dear, I never had anything else to do as you did...Marthe has organized her life. . . Alone.

The woman is comparing herself to her friend Marthe and lamenting that her life has lost meaning without the man. When she wraps the cord around her neck, she alludes to the point in the conversation where she said that the man had fulfilled her life.

As the woman realizes that the conversation is ending, she clings to the telephone as it were the only remaining connection between them. She drops the telephone and it falls to the ground after he hangs up. This final action further illustrates her identification of the telephone with the man.

The portrayal of the woman's fate unfolds in Cocteau's forty-minute drama, revealing the woman's gamut of emotions as she accepts the man's decision to abandon her. During this monologue, the telephone is both a prop and a sign for the unseen and unheard man.

The Music

Poulenc began composing *La Voix humaine* in February 1958, at the suggestion of Hervé Dugardin, director of the Paris office of Ricordi. The publishing house also commissioned Poulenc's previous operatic success, *Dialogues des Carmélites*. Although Dugardin believed that Maria Callas should create the role, Poulenc rejected this recommendation, as he believed Callas could not act, and wrote instead for the singing actress Denise Duval, who had portrayed Blanche in *Dialogues des Carmélites*.

Poulenc recounts the genesis of the work in various letters, especially to singer Pierre Bernac.¹³ As early as March 1958, Poulenc already had gathered many ideas for the opera, including the important waltz section. After describing the waltz, Poulenc continues,

Parts of it have already come to me. I am quite definitely a man of the theatre. I would be incapable nowadays of writing any of the three symphonic commissions from America. But I do not think this indicates that my music is unimportant (look

¹³ Poulenc toured with Bernac, performing songs composed for the singer.

at Verdi, Puccini).¹⁴

In another letter to Bernac, Poulenc indicates his absorption with the opera and relays more details about the music. He claims, “my catharsis is *La Voix humaine*.”¹⁵ Poulenc also acknowledges his reliance on Cocteau to endorse of his ideas, writing that “Cocteau approves of my whole plan, which structures the text into ‘phases’. (Phase of the dog, the lie, the overdose.)”¹⁶ Furthermore, he elaborates on the thematic content that articulates these phases: “I have a lot of ideas already. Two shocking themes, among others, which ‘*ces messieurs*’ will find quite scandalous: one full of love, the other erotic. For the responses, the rhythm came to me quite instinctively.”¹⁷ Poulenc again refers to the waltz section, which will be examined later. He also stresses his role as an operatic composer, saying, “If I succeed with *La Voix*, it will reinforce this situation. After all, there are no symphonies by Verdi, nor operas by Brahms.”¹⁸ Only two months before completing the composition, Poulenc had already expressed his intentions to have it performed the following winter.

During the compositional process, Poulenc also communicated with the singer of his choice Denise Duval (b. 1921), who Geoffrey Norris characterized as a French

¹⁴ Francis Poulenc, *Selected Correspondence 1915-1963*, ed. and trans. Sidney Buckland (London: Victor Gollancz, 1991), 250.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 252.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

soprano known for her interpretation of Poulenc's operas,¹⁹ sharing with her his ideas about the opera. Duval attests that Poulenc gave her the music as he composed it, eager to hear her sing it. He also incorporated some changes she recommended to make the part more suitable for her voice.²⁰

The opera only took four months to complete, and Poulenc quickly orchestrated it. In August, he told Bernac in a letter that he had finished copying the parts for *La Voix humaine* and would be playing the music for Cocteau later that day.²¹ Cocteau provided the design for the work's première, which took place on February 6, 1959, including Duval's costume. Exactly two months before the première, Cocteau sent Poulenc a letter, that contains instructions to costume designers, and illuminates the woman's character. He wrote,

The appearance of the 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 lover *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, or a trench-coat, or a loden, which she will throw over her shoulders without a trace of *coquetterie*—because she is cold, 'cold within'. This is how I will show her inner coldness on stage. Attached is a drawing of the costume.²²

¹⁹ Leslie Orrey, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Opera* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), 113-14.

²⁰ Denise Duval, "Une oeuvre que j'ai vu naître," *L'avant-scène opéra* 52 (May 1983): 134.

²¹ Poulenc, 253-54.

²² Poulenc, 254-56.

Poulenc's work on the score consumed him. He often wrote to his friends about his attachment to the opera, and he commented on it long after its premiere. In June 1959, he wrote to Claude Rostand,

I would like Georgette to go to *La Voix humaine* (with *Capriccio*) on the 25th. Try to go too, and see if this most secret part of myself really does still elude you. I cannot reconcile myself to the fact that you are the only one who is not moved by this work—written with the heart of a 20-year-old, alas, and the experience of a 60-year-old, double-alas.²³

Although Poulenc significantly reduced the original text in the musical setting, he preserved Cocteau's drama. The omissions allow the forty-two minute opera to be close in length to the original play, and marginal facts are eliminated. In the play, for example, the woman mentions her Aunt Jeanne immediately following the discussion about the dog. Because the aunt has no effect on the current situation, Poulenc leaves out this part of the play in the opera.

In some instances, Poulenc omits redundancies to move the drama forward. When the woman says, "Elle a raccroché tout de suite après avoir dit cette chose ignoble," Poulenc edits the preceding sentence, which also states, "Elle a raccroché." Thus, he avoids immediate repetitions of the text.

Although he omitted sections of the play, Poulenc made few alterations to the text he retained. These minor changes leave the meaning unaffected and simply allow for a better musical flow. For example, Poulenc inserts the word "te" to Cocteau's "je mens" (two mm. before Rehearsal 55.) The woman declares, "je te mens:" instead of saying "I

²³ Poulenc, 261.

lie,” she confesses, “I lie to you.” The statement would be clear even without the indirect object, but Poulenc’s modification affects the musical rhythm. Consequently, the word “mens” sounds on a strong beat following two and one-third beats of triplets (Example 1).

Example 1. 2 mm. before Rehearsal 55, Poulenc’s modification of Cocteau’s text

depuis un quart d'heur', je te mens.

A similar insertion appears two bars before Rehearsal 66. In this instance, the modification does not affect the text setting, but the addition of the direct object “me” as a contraction follows the same logic of Poulenc’s earlier adjustment, as it clarifies the object of a verb. Furthermore, adding the direct object allows for a more articulate vocal line with a consonant sounding on each note of that measure, as the woman sings, “parce que tu m’avais dit que tu téléphonerais.” (Example 2) Cocteau includes the direct object of “empêche” (“et j’avais peur qu’on m’empêche de te parler.”)

Example 2. 2 mm. before Rehearsal 66, Poulenc’s modification of Cocteau’s text

par-ce que tu m'avais dit que tu téléphonerais et j'avais peur qu'on m'empêche de te parler.

A different type of modification appears three measures after Rehearsal 76. Although the change is subtle, the replacement of “parce que” with “et” slightly affects the meaning of the text. Yet, Poulenc’s alteration appears to be a matter of preserving the musical pattern established two measures earlier. Using “et” allows the word to be set with an eighth note rather than the two sixteenth notes that would be required for the words “parce que.” The longer note relates to the dotted eighth-note that precedes it at Rehearsal 76. The second measure is actually a transposition of the earlier measure, with a few rhythmic alterations to fit the text. Placing two sixteenth notes at the beginning of this later measure would de-emphasize the parallelism between the two measures by eliminating the rhythmic accent caused by a longer note.

The replacement of the word “pense” with “songe” four measures after Rehearsal 83 seems rather arbitrary. Perhaps Poulenc’s decision stemmed from the soft sound of a word that starts with “s” in contrast to the harsher “p.” Both words can be set to the same rhythm and have similar meanings, although “songe” suggests a dreamlike meditation rather than contemplation (“pense.”)

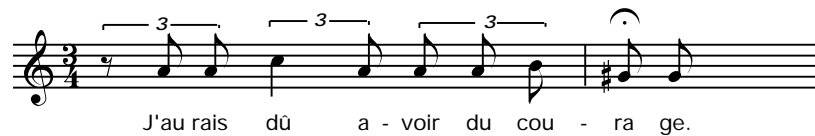
Two other instances occur where the textual alteration is merely a matter of personal preference. At the very end of the opera, the woman sings, “Je suis forte” rather than “Je suis brave” (Example 3). In this instance, the replacement provides a stronger second consonant that adds weight to the voice. The words “forte” and “brave” actually have different meanings, and Poulenc selects a word that emphasizes the woman’s strength rather than her courage. Ironically, Poulenc replaces the word “force” with

Example 3. Rehearsal 108, Poulenc's modification of Cocteau's text



“courage” in an earlier instance. Two measures before Rehearsal 94, he reverses his later decision to stress the woman’s strength by using the word “courage” (Example 4). In this instance, the choice of the word “courage” changes the textual accent to the second syllable of the word.

Example 4. 2 mm. before Rehearsal 94, Poulenc's modification of Cocteau's text



The treatment of the play by Poulenc reflects the twentieth-century practice of adapting a staged work, also exemplified in Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, and Berg's *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*. Poulenc retains Cocteau's drama, including the function of the telephone, as will be examined in Chapter 7.

CHAPTER 4

MUSICAL STYLE

During his lifetime, Poulenc was known primarily as a song composer, due to his extensive tours with singer Pierre Bernac and later with Hugues Counod. Poulenc's composition of songs spans his entire lifetime. He demonstrates his mastery of this genre even in purely instrumental music, with his focus on melody and subsidiary accompaniment.¹ Poulenc also composed music for chorus, piano, chamber groups, and orchestra.

In *La Voix humaine* much of singer's music is declamatory, rather than lyrical. At times, the orchestra supplies the melody that is lacking in the voice,² as when the woman recalls a vacation in Versailles (see Example 23). Although Poulenc's other vocal works typically feature a more conjunct diatonic melody, *La Voix humaine* emphasizes the woman's emotions through disjointed singing. The woman's speech-like delivery allows for the articulation of very few "melodies" during the opera. The voice follows regular speech-patterns rather than fitting into poetic meters.³ Yet, traces of Poulenc's song technique can be found in his instrumental preparations for vocal entrances. For instance, when the woman first sings, the xylophone cues her, playing her first pitch. The

¹ Keith Daniel, *Francis Poulenc: His Artistic Development and Musical Style* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), 62.

² *Ibid.*, 309.

³ *Ibid.*, 307.

xylophone supplies her pitch only at certain times, while in other instances the singer must ignore the instrument, as when the xylophone pitch is a tritone away from her note. The opera presents extensive use of chromaticism, especially in the chromatic wedge (Example 5).

Example 5. 3 mm. before Rehearsal 53, chromatic wedge

Presser beaucoup (affolée)

Oui, je sais, je sais, je te crois. j'en suis con-vain - cue...

Poulenc typically uses chromatic motion for dramatic tension and coloring.⁴ At the end of the opera, as the woman prepares to conclude the conversation, the music becomes highly chromatic (Example 6), with dissonances underscoring moments of dramatic tension in the opera.

The beginning of the opera sets up dissonances, with an F-sharp trill immediately followed by an F-natural grace note in the winds. F-natural is then sustained in the

⁴ Daniel, 308-9.

Example 6. Rehearsal 100, increased chromaticism

Très calme et morne *p* (*bien timbré*)

(Elle enroule le fil
autour de son cou) Je sais bien qu'il le faut, mais c'est a-tro-ce.

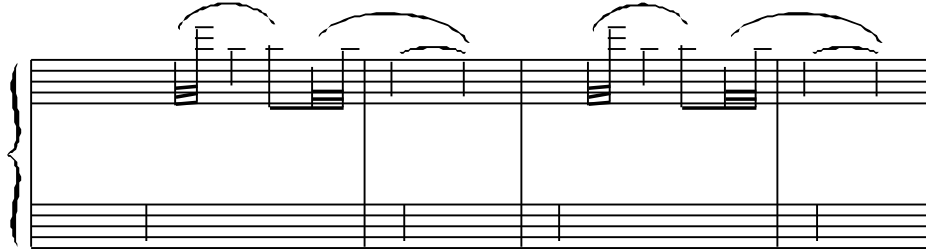
100

Ja mais je n'aurai ce cou - ra - ge.

following measure (Example 7). The vertical chromatic conflict established in this instrumental introduction informs the audience of the woman's plight.

La Voix humaine is scored for a full orchestra. Considerable sections of the work, however, are scored for a chamber group. Perhaps Poulenc saw the woman's personal

Example 7. Beginning, vertical conflict



sacrifice as a grandiose gesture that could best be expressed by a full orchestra.⁵ Also, the orchestra carries most of the opera's melodic material, and a larger ensemble provides the composer with a wider canvas to display the range of the woman's feelings. Only when the woman's emotions become heightened does the full orchestra sound. At calmer moments, the brass instruments rarely play, and the strings and winds carry the bulk of the musical motives.

The opera's structure differs from the simple forms Poulenc used in other works. Rather than creating small forms within sections of the opera, Poulenc uses repeated motives to unify it. Not only do these motives recur, but they are often repeated consecutively, creating a "cellular" structure.⁶ Sometimes repeated motives appear as interjections between the woman's comments, as when she is trying to convince another woman to hang up the telephone, because, otherwise, the man would be able to reach her (Example 8). The motive is heard consecutively eight times at different positions within

⁵ Wilfrid Mellers, *Francis Poulenc* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 128.

⁶ Daniel, 311.

the measure, always between the woman's statements.

Example 8. 5 mm. after Rehearsal 5, cellular structure

The musical score consists of three systems, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The piano part is marked *brusque* and *ff*. The lyrics are in French and describe a scene of violence.

System 1:
Vocal: raccrochez, Vous ét' a vec une a - bon - née Mais, Ma-
Piano: *brusque ff*

System 2:
Vocal: da-me, raccrochez vousmêm' Al lô, Mad'moi sel'! Mais
Piano: *ff*

System 3:
Vocal: au comble de la violence
non, ce n'est pas le docteur Shmit. Zé - ro huit,
Piano: *ff*

In other cases, the orchestra supports the woman's delivery of the text. A typical instance occurs as the woman tells the man that she was planning to wait under his window to see him (Example 9).

Example 9. Rehearsal 60, orchestral support of text delivery

Bien plus calme (*tendre*)

très expressif Tu as rai - son. Si, je t' é cou - te...

(*tendrement enfantin*)

Je se - rai sa - ge, je ré - pond rai à tout, je te ju - re.

The instrumental motive appears three times before it is transposed down a fourth, and its final appearance is moved to the bass. The motive begins on C in the bass to preserve the descending fourth motion from B-flat to F and finally to C. Although slight alterations

are made to this motive, Poulenc's technique remains additive rather than developmental.⁷ This somewhat static dramaturgy underscores the fact that nothing really changes. The motive still appears as a repetition, with minor adjustments to lead to the end of the section. Even the important motives that articulate stages in the opera undergo few alterations: all motives maintain their essential character.

One consideration that deserves special consideration in discussing *La Voix humaine* is the use of a waltz. Poulenc often wrote waltzes and other dances heard in the cafés of Paris⁸ and, although the waltz-section in *La Voix humaine* is subdued, it still reflects his affection for popular styles. In this instance, however, the waltz carries ironic connotations.

The eclectic musical language of the opera involves a fluctuation between functional tonal passages, chromatic passages, and material referable to the octatonic 1-2 model. The interval-3 basis of the octatonic material allows Poulenc to integrate tertian harmonies into a non-functional setting. In fact, the interval-3 cycle is a prevailing feature of the vocal line. The wedge at Rehearsal 14 is referable to an octatonic 1-2 model on G# (see Example 10). The prominent harmony G#-B-D-F# outlines the interval-3 cycle to which octatonic disposition of pitches is referable. This passage is purely octatonic, unlike other passages in which there is a basic octatonic content with diatonic interaction.⁹ After these octatonic two measures Poulenc moves to

⁷ Daniel, 311.

⁸ Ibid., 67.

⁹ Pieter C. van den Toorn, *The Music of Igor Stravinsky* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

Example 10. Rehearsal 14, octatonic 1-2 model and chromatic wedge

reprendre le tempo plus calme

f J'a-vais un peu mal à la tête, mais je me suis se-coué-e. *mf* Mar the est venu -e.

14 15

f *mf*

Elle a déjeuné a-vec moi. *f* J'ai fait des courses.

a wedge that is purely chromatic whose boundaries are Eb-C and F-Ab (see Example 10).

This shifting between octatonic and chromatic pitch contexts also occurs at other instances in the opera, as in Example 10.

Example 10 illustrates the same fluctuation between octatonic and chromatic contexts, following an emotionally intense waltz. Two measures before Rehearsal 64, the cadence at the end of ternary neighboring-tone groupings is referable to the octatonic 1-2 model (on E). These three measures are followed by two measures of chromaticism (Rehearsal 65), and a return to the octatonic environment on E. (Example 11).

Example 11. 2 mm. before Rehearsal 64, octatonic 1-2 model and descending chromatic line

Octatonic 1-2 model

au bout d'une heu - re j'ai té-lé-pho-né à Mar-the.

très librement (à bout de force) *Lent (dans un souffle)*

p Je n'avais pas le courag' de mourir seu le *long* *pp* Chéri...

64

Chromaticism
Plus vite (*sans emphase, naturel!*)

Chéri... *p* Il é tait quatre heur' du matin.

65 *long* 65

Elle est ar rivée a - vec le docteur qui ha - bi - te son immeu - ble.

p

In summary, *La Voix humaine* departs from Poulenc's typical style, with the woman's emotions characterized by a declamatory text setting. Poulenc further illustrates the uncertainty that the woman feels, as explored in Chapter 7, through cellular structures and a shift between octatonic and chromatic pitch contents.

CHAPTER 5

POULENC'S MUSICAL DRAMATURGY FOR *LA VOIX HUMAINE*

La Voix humaine recalls techniques found in Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1893-1902). Both operas are settings of plays, without the mediation of librettos. According to Joseph Kerman, "Indeed, Debussy's orchestral web beneath his naturalistic dialogue is the element that rescues his opera from the stony ideal of sung play."¹ The same observation applies to *La Voix humaine*; however, Poulenc's motivic treatment may be defined as a compression of Debussy's approach.

Pelléas defined impressionism in opera. As Elliott Antokoletz observes,

Debussy's static musical language, based on parallel seventh and ninth chords, modal and whole-tone melodies and harmonies, and chromatic fragments, as well as his mosaic-like handling of repeated motivic, phrasal, and periodic constructions, provides an ideal medium for the absorption of worldly objects into the fatalistic realm.²

Kerman notes that *Mélisande*'s motive, "the chief musical thematic idea in the opera, represents the overall mood rather than the person."³ "Impending doom," for instance, is associated with whole-tone configurations.⁴ The motives elude specificity, as they do in *La Voix humaine*.

¹ Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama*, new and revised edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 149.

² Elliott Antokoletz, *Twentieth-Century Music* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1992), 84.

³ Joseph Kerman, 154.

⁴ Glenn Watkins, *Soundings: Music in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Schirmer Books: 1995), 77.

Poulenc uses similar tools to dramatize fragmentation in his opera. His well-defined motives fit the woman's shifting moods, avoiding specific references.⁵ The alternation between octatonic segments, functional harmony, or chromaticism further articulates motivic definition, representing the swift changes in the woman's state of mind.

We can identify comparable procedures in both works. In *La Voix humaine* for instance, the chromatic wedge motion two measures before Rehearsal 74 presents semitonal motion by inversion with tertian harmonies (Example, 12).

Example 12. 2 mm. before Rehearsal 74, chromatic wedge

The image shows a musical score for Example 12. It consists of three staves: a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in 4/4 time and features a chromatic wedge motion. The piano accompaniment is in 4/4 time and features a chromatic wedge motion in the right hand and a semitonal motion in the left hand. The lyrics are: "et que tu as bien de la pa - tien - ce,". The piano part is marked *mf*.

In Act 3, Scene 2 of *Pelléas*, a similar instance occurs, as the upper and lower parts create a whole-tone wedge. Even the rhythmic pattern is similar, with a shift to upbeats in the upper part (Example 13). The ghost of *Pelléas*'s whole-tone segments lingers in Poulenc's opera, as thirty-second notes embellish a descending whole-tone scale,

⁵ Henri Hell, Liner notes to *La Voix humaine*, Francis Poulenc, 1961.

Example 13. *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Act 3, Scene 2, p. 142, mm. 10-11, whole-tone wedge

The image shows a musical score for a piano. It consists of two staves. The top staff is in bass clef with a 4/4 time signature. It features a melodic line with a whole-tone wedge indicating a crescendo. The bottom staff is also in bass clef with a 4/4 time signature, providing harmonic accompaniment. A triplet of eighth notes is marked with a '3' above it. The dynamic marking 'pp' (pianissimo) is present at the beginning. A dashed line labeled '8vb' is positioned below the bottom staff.

which omits Bb (Example 14).

Example 14. 5 mm. after Rehearsal 72, whole-tone scale

The image shows a musical score for a single instrument in treble clef with a 2/4 time signature. The tempo/mood is indicated as 'Calme et décidé'. The score features a whole-tone scale starting on C4 and moving upward. The dynamic marking 'ff' (fortissimo) is placed below the first few notes.

Similar instances of chromaticism occur in both operas. For example, Debussy uses a descending chromatic bass in Act 4, Scene 2, as Arkel says that he is sad to see his son living under the shadow of death. The bassoons move upward chromatically, serving as an earlier reference of Poulenc's prevalent chromatic wedge. More specifically, though, the descending chromatic line in *Pelléas* is similar to that used later by Poulenc, as the woman refers to letters sent by her ex-lover (Example 15). Poulenc, however, exposed the descending chromatic bass, unlike Debussy, who combined it with other parts.

Example 15. 1 m. after Rehearsal 19, descending chromatic line

Très calme et morne

p

Le sac? Tes let tres et les mien nes. Tu peux le fair' pren dre quand tu veux.

p

Parallel motion, one of the defining features of Debussy's style, is used in *La Voix humaine*. For instance, the motive at Rehearsal 22 emphasizes this motion, though some of the inner parts are not strictly parallel (Example 16). The effect, however, evokes Debussy's style.

Example 16. Rehearsal 22, parallelism

Fiévreux et très violent

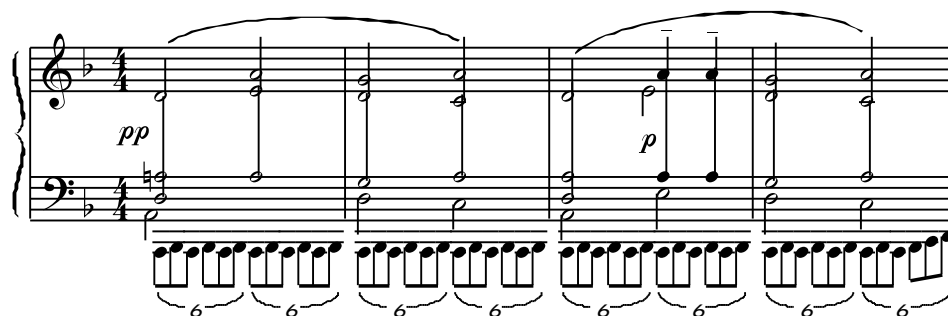
ff

22 presser Pas dutout...

f

The neighboring-tone triplet pattern that follows the waltzes in *La Voix humaine* recalls similar figuration in *Pelléas*. Triplets appear throughout Debussy's opera. At the beginning, triplets that include both upper and lower neighboring tones introduce Golaud (Example 17). These triplets are much more pervasive in *Pelléas*, and surface in *La Voix humaine* as a transition from the waltz back to duple meter.

Example 17. *Pelléas et Mélisande*, mm. 24-27



Both plays present a fatalistic view of the world. As Kerman observes, “Not only are human deeds and emotions shown to be futile, but the dramatic action itself is turned to no account. Action is meaningless.”⁶ The woman’s fate in *La Voix humaine* is also predetermined, as she has no control over her future (or lack of future) with the man. The drama unfolds a prefigured conclusion, revealing only her emotional reactions to her destiny.

⁶ Kerman, 156.

Pelléas leads ultimately to the protagonists' death. However, in Cocteau's play there is no change: the end is no different from the beginning. Rather, the internal drama is externalized, with a focus on the psychological progression of the woman's emotions.

Paradoxically, Poulenc's "neo-impressionism" defies his earlier connection with Cocteau's anti-impressionistic stance in *Le Coq et l'arlequin*. Yet, Poulenc still adheres to the aesthetics articulated by Cocteau through the fragmentation of well-defined motives (the focus of Chapter 7) that differ from Debussy's impressionistic web.

CHAPTER 6

STRUCURE OF THE OPERA

In *La Voix humaine*, only one character reveals the entire plot. The woman speaks on the telephone throughout the play, allowing the audience to discover minimal aspects of her personal life. While Cocteau's stage directions refer to the woman as "Elle," he never personalizes her. All we know is that she has dedicated her life to the man who is abandoning her, and that she feels lost without him. As a result, the generic "Elle" is an every-woman of sorts, embodying the emotions and actions that any woman would express under the circumstances presented.

The mysterious man remains anonymous during the course of the conversation, as the woman avoids using his name. Limited characteristics are presented entirely by the woman as the two converse, discussing their current lives and reminiscing about their past connection. We can assume that the man is well-off because he has a servant.

The woman's action on stage occurs near the end of the play, when she wraps the telephone cord around her neck while telling her ex-lover that she has surrounded herself with his voice. As a final gesture, she drops the telephone to the floor, signifying the end of the relationship. Other than these actions, she paces about the room, sometimes pausing to rest on the bed, but these gestures are secondary to her words. The fact that the audience witnesses her distress adds to the intensity of the telephone conversation. Cocteau's psychological drama unfolds in the woman's speaking into the telephone, only revealing one side of the conversation. The audience must trust her words because it has no other method of deducing what the man says to the woman.

Although the woman has accepted that she will no longer see the man, very little has changed by the end of the play. She already knew that he planned to marry another woman, and the conversation simply brings closure to her relationship with him. At the end of the conversation, she laments,

Mon chéri . . . mon beau chéri . . . Je suis forte. Dépêche-toi. Vas-y. Coupe! Coupe vite! Je t'aime, je t'aime, je t'aime . . . t'aime . . .

My dear . . . my beautiful dear . . . I am strong. Hurry up. Go on. Cut off! Cut off quickly! I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you . . . love you . . .

Her character is basically static in that she seems no different from the woman frantically speaking to the operator at the beginning of the play. Perhaps she can continue with her life, but the audience has no way of knowing what will happen after the curtain drops.

Poulenc articulates sections of Cocteau's play with a limited number of sections that correspond to phases of the drama. Because little action occurs, the musical ideas for the sections focus on topics of the woman's conversation. The plot and corresponding motives can be outlined as follows:¹

Table 1. Dramatic Phases of *La Voix humaine*

Beginning-Rehearsal 5	Introduction	Instrumental; Dotted rhythms and thirty-second notes with intense chromaticism.
Rehearsal 5-9	Conversation with various people.	Solo vocal line with occasional fragments of beginning motive.

¹ See Appendix 1 for motives that correspond to the plot.

Rehearsal 9-18	Talking to the man, the woman lies about her evening.	Chromaticism; Offbeat bass in conflict with quarter-note upper voices; at 13, dotted-rhythmic motive.
Rehearsal 18-20	She talks about him and asks him questions.	Descending bass; Upper parts move in wedge motion.
Rehearsal 20-21	She blames herself for the turn of events.	Ascending line; Accent on third beat of each measure.
Rehearsal 21-26	She denies being upset about his abandonment.	Ambiguity motive introduced.
Rehearsal 26-29	She recalls a trip with the man to Versailles.	Lyrical F# melody; Offbeat bass; Retrograde of F# melody.
Rehearsal 29-32	She learns that his marriage is planned for the following day.	Beginning motive; Rhythmically displaced version of motive from Rehearsal 20.
Rehearsal 32-36	Telephone problems distract the conversation.	Wedge chromatic line.
Rehearsal 36-39	She imagines what the man is wearing and doing while he is talking to her.	Beginning motive; Idea from Rehearsal 9.
Rehearsal 39-43	She indicates her concern about her future and acknowledges his love for her.	Motives continued from previous section.
Rehearsal 43-46	Another woman interrupts the conversation.	Motives continued from previous section.

Rehearsal 46-49	She calls the man back but reaches his servant, Joseph. She discovers that the man is not home, in spite of his earlier insistence that he was.	Offbeat bass; Retrograde of Rehearsal 26.
Rehearsal 49-52	The man calls her again.	Beginning motive.
Rehearsal 52-54	She denies being upset.	Offbeat bass.
Rehearsal 54-56	She admits to deceiving him.	Continued offbeat bass.
Rehearsal 56-60	She reveals what she has lied about.	Beginning motive; Offbeat bass. Motive from Rehearsal 29.
Rehearsal 60-61	She continues to admit the truth about her evening.	From Rehearsal 13.
Rehearsal 61-63	She confesses that she attempted suicide the previous night.	C-minor waltz.
Rehearsal 63-66	She describes her suffering because of her suicide attempt.	Triplet bass after end of waltz.
Rehearsal 66-68	She insists that she feels better and has recovered from her depression.	From Rehearsal 13; Offbeat bass.
Rehearsal 68-69	She remembers a time when the couple still saw each other.	Motive from Rehearsal 29.
Rehearsal 69-71	She complains about music in the background of the man's telephone line.	Imitation of music that she hears.

Rehearsal 71-73	She informs the man that the doctor will return the next day and that she feels better.	Descending line. Descending tritone; Motive from Rehearsal 13.
Rehearsal 73-75	She apologizes for creating an emotional scene.	Lyrical melody from Rehearsal 26, first in B minor, then in F minor.
Rehearsal 75-78	She admits to waiting for his telephone call all evening.	Motive from Rehearsal 26; Offbeat bass; Motive from Rehearsal 31 in F#
Rehearsal 78-81	She says she has lived through him for five years.	Offbeat bass.
Rehearsal 81-84	She complains that her dog misses the man and is angry with her.	Motive from beginning; Motive from Rehearsal 26.
Rehearsal 84-88	Another woman interrupts the conversation, and the couple discusses her after getting her off the telephone. The woman explains that other people do not understand the ex-lovers.	Beginning motive; Unembellished version of Rehearsal 13; wedge pattern.
Rehearsal 88-91	She regrets that they are no longer together.	From Rehearsal 13; Offbeat bass.
Rehearsal 91-93	She once again discusses the suicide attempt.	Waltz in A minor, followed by triplet bass again.
Rehearsal 93-97	She hints that she is aware of the man's deception.	Descending chromatic line; Offbeat bass.
Rehearsal 97-98	The telephone line is disconnected.	Beginning motive.

Rehearsal 98-100	She repeats her suggestion that she knows the man has lied to her.	Offbeat bass; Beginning motive; Motive from Rehearsal 29 in F#.
Rehearsal 100-103	She knows they must end their conversation.	Continuation of same rhythm in upper voices; Chromatic bassline in straight eighth-notes; Later this is picked up by upper voice with descending chromatic bassline in half-notes; Beginning motive.
Rehearsal 103-106	She learns about his honeymoon.	Lyrical melody from Rehearsal 26 in A minor.
Rehearsal 106-108	She assures him that she is much better now.	Chromatic bassline from Rehearsal 100; Dotted rhythm from Rehearsal 1 in woodwinds, leading into Rehearsal 108.
Rehearsal 108-end	They talk about terminating the telephone call, and consequently, their connection to each other.	Motive from Rehearsal 29; Dotted-rhythmic motive from Rehearsal 107 concludes the opera.

Musical procedures reinforce the woman's fluctuation between fact and fiction, and the audience is given a means to recognize this vacillation. Basic associations are underscored by recurring motives. For instance, each time the telephone rings, a xylophone mimics its sound with repeated sixteenth-notes, emphasizing the fact that the drama centers on a telephone call.

Early in the opera, Poulenc introduces the musical idea associated with uncertainty. The outer parts above the bass move up by semitone, reinforcing the vocal

line, while the bass arpeggiates a C-minor triad. The dramatic tension created by the off-beat bassline suggests the woman's deception (Example 18).

Example 18. 2 mm. before Rehearsal 11, off-beat bassline

The musical score for Example 18 is presented in three staves. The top staff is the vocal line, marked *très naturel*. It begins with a rest, followed by a melodic line in 4/4 time. The lyrics are: "Je rentre il y a dix mi-nu-tes. Tu n'avais pas encore ap-pe-lé?". The middle staff is the piano accompaniment, starting with a piano (*p*) dynamic. It features a chromatic wedge in the right hand, moving from a C-minor triad (C3, E3, G3) to a C major triad (C3, E3, G3) over the course of the phrase. The left hand plays a steady, off-beat bassline consisting of eighth notes, arpeggiating a C-minor triad (C3, E3, G3).

The chromatic wedge, which closely resembles the previous example, suggests a contradiction (Example 19). In spite of recurring throughout the work, it assumes no consistent association other than serving as a general reminder of the woman's uncertainty about her future after she hangs up the telephone.

After the woman admits that she has lied to her ex-lover, she proceeds to sing the only aria-like section in the opera. Poulenc sets the text to a C-minor waltz, a symbolic indicator of honesty. During this section, the vocal line is more melodic and moves conjunctly rather than wavering monotonically. The typical interchange between bass and upper voices emphasizes the dance-like quality of this section, but a deeper connection underlies the rhythm as it refers to the alternation of parts associated with the

Example 19. Rehearsal 12, chromatic wedge

sans hâte

12 Hi-er soir je me suis cou-chée tout de sui-te et

p

presser un peu

f *mf*

com-me je ne pou-vais pas m'en-dor-mir, j'ai pris uncompri-mé.

f *p*

uncertainty motive. Poulenc's waltz shifts among various compound meters, starting in 9/8 and passing through 12/8 as well as 6/8. The changing meter accommodates the vocal line while maintaining a constant waltz rhythm (Example 20).

During the previous night, the woman dreamed she was alone. When she described her torment upon waking and realizing that she was indeed alone, the vocal line

Example 20. Rehearsal 61, waltz

p Dououreux mais très simple

61 Hi - er soir, j'ai vou - lu prendre un comprimé pour dormir;

m.d. *p*

mf

je me suis dit que si j'en prenais plus, je dor-mi-raismieux et que si je les prenais

f

tous, je dor-mi-rai sans rê-ve sans ré-veil, je se-rai mor - te.

ff *molto*

ff *p*

ascends, as is suggested by Poulenc’s notation “au comble de la passion” (full of passion). At this point, the bassline emphasizes the intensity of the woman’s voice with a pedal tone. The heightened waltz ends as the woman sings, “j’ai senti que je ne pouvais pas vivre” (“I knew I could not go on living”).

Example 21. Rehearsal 63, triplets following waltz

à peine plus vite *p (douce)*

Lé-gè-re, lé-gère et froi-de

p

en pressant *mf*

et je ne sen tais plus mon coeur bat-tre et la mort était longue à ve-nir

mf

6 et com j'avais une angoisse é-pou-vante, au bout d'une heu-re j'ai té-lé-pho-né à Mar-the.

Although there are moments where the continuous triplets subside, they reappear as the

woman continues to relay the consequences of her attempted suicide. Only when she assures the man that she has recovered from the incident does the music change back to triple simple meter (3/4).

Poulenc brings back the waltz later in the opera, as the woman mentions her attempted suicide again. Now, however, the waltz appears in A minor, a third lower than in its earlier occurrence. The brief reappearance of the waltz is followed by a different version of the triple-note groupings than what occurs at Rehearsal 63 (Example 22). In the later instance, the neighboring tones are replaced by arpeggiations, compressing the same procedure associated with the woman's earlier account of her attempted suicide.

Example 22. Rehearsal 92, triplets following second waltz

The image displays a musical score for Rehearsal 92, featuring a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The score is written in 3/4 time and A minor. The vocal line begins with the lyrics "Où trou ver ais - je la" and continues with "for - ce de com bi - ner un men - songe, mon pauv re ado - ré?". The piano accompaniment includes triplets and arpeggiations, with dynamics markings of *p* and *pp*. A box labeled "92" is placed above the first measure of the piano accompaniment. The score is presented in two systems, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment.

Poulenc's reference to the waltz as a "Sibelius-like *Valse triste*" could be interpreted as a trivialization of the woman's emotions. Another interpretation would be that the waltz emphasizes her earlier dishonesty, as well as her self-deception, by providing music that contradicts her emotional state.² Poulenc's letter to Pierre Bernac in which he empathizes with the woman's plight confirms his identification with her feelings of abandonment.³ Yet the music contradicts the woman's intensity, just as Poulenc mocked the general in "The General's Speech" from *Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel*. This paradox suggests that although Poulenc understands the woman's feelings, he offsets the melodramatic potential of the situation.

² Wilfrid Mellers, *Francis Poulenc* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 133.

³ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 7

MOTIVIC TREATMENT

Attachment

A prominent motive in the opera represents the woman's attachment to her ex-lover. When the woman recalls a Sunday in Versailles, Poulenc provides a lush instrumental accompaniment in F# minor to convey the woman's fondness for the past (Example 23). The woman claims responsibility for seducing the man, insisting that she pursued the relationship at a time when he avoided her.

Example 23. Rehearsal 26, lyrical motive in F# minor (Attachment)

Andante moderato *mf*

26

p

très doux

Souviens-toi du dimanche de Ver -

3

sail - les et du pneu - ma - ti - que. Ah! A-lors!

As the woman remembers occasions spent at a hotel in Marseilles, the passionate phrase sounds again, this time in A minor (Example 24).

Example 24. Rehearsal 104, lyrical motive in A minor

Un peu plus vite mais très peu
p (*sans nuances*)
j'ai-me-rai que tu ne des-cendes pas à l'hô -

104
pp très doux

tel — où nous des cen - dons d'ha - bi - tu - de.

The woman learns that her ex-lover plans to spend his honeymoon in Marseilles, and she requests that he stay at a hotel other than the one he shared with her. Although reflecting upon the past yet again, she also reminds the man of her dependency on him. As in the previous example, this motive is associated with vacationing away from Paris, first in Versailles and then in Marseilles.

This motive also appears as the woman expresses her appreciation to the man for tolerating her emotional anguish. When she acknowledges his patience for listening to her, she expresses her dependency on him that connects her to the past relationship (Example 25).

Example 25. Rehearsal 73, lyrical motive in B minor

Plus vite mais pas trop
très lyrique *mf*

73 Par don ne - moi. Je

sais que cet - te scène est in - to - lé - ra - ble

et que tu as bien de la pa - tien - ce,

Example 25. continued

74 *f*

mais _____ com prends - moi, je souf - fre,

f

3 *ff*

jesouf - fre. Ce fil, c'est le der-

6 *ff* *long*

nier qui me rat - tache en - core à nous.

The musical score consists of three systems. The first system (measures 74-75) features a vocal line starting with a forte (*f*) dynamic and a piano accompaniment. The second system (measures 76-77) includes a triplet in the vocal line and a fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic in the piano accompaniment. The third system (measures 78-79) continues the piano accompaniment with a fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic and a long note in the vocal line. The score is in 4/4 time and F minor.

She insists, “Ce fil, c’est le dernier qui me rattache encore à nous” (“This wire, it is the last link between us”) as the motive sounds in F minor. Her emotional anguish reaches a

peak, with the ascent to Ab, at the end of this extended appearance of the lyrical motive.

Although this statement of the motive is not associated with past vacations in Versailles and Marseilles, it still indicates her attachment to her former relationship. The telephone becomes an outward sign of her memories with the man. In each instance, the walking ostinato, also associated with the prevalent wedge motion, underscores the motive and suggests the woman's uncertainty about her future as she reflects on the past.

Ambiguity

Another important motive appears first without connection to a specific textual idea but later takes on meaning. Although this motive incorporates the previously discussed upbeat bassline, the upper parts present a prominent melodic motion (Example 26). While this first appearance stresses the second beat, future occurrences of the motive will divide the measure into two equal parts.

Example 26. Rehearsal 22, "Ambiguity" motive

Fièvreux et très violent *ff*

22 *f* *presser* *Pas du tout...*

The next entrance of this motive relates to the ex-couple’s discussion about another person’s marriage. After learning that the person intends to marry in the near future, the woman questions the man about the date of his own wedding. This is the first time she realizes that the man is truly leaving her, as his wedding is scheduled for the following day. During the discussion of marriage, the motive (now in a different rhythm) expands to form a four-measure unit followed by a repetition of the first measure of the phrase (Example 27). In future appearances, the motive refers to this part of the conversation, indicating the woman’s dependency on the man.

Example 27. 5 mm. after Rehearsal 29, “Ambiguity” motive

The musical score for Example 27 consists of two systems. The first system features a vocal line in 4/4 time with the lyrics "Oh! non, sû-rement pas tout de sui-te, et". The piano accompaniment is marked *pp* *très chanté* and includes a *très enveloppé de pédale* instruction. The second system continues the vocal line with the lyric "toi? —" and the piano accompaniment. Performance instructions include *Très expressif*, *p*, and accents over the first two notes of the vocal phrase. Trills are indicated by a '3' over the notes in both systems.

The woman informs the man of her plans to stay in the countryside with her friend Marthe for the next few days to cope with the emotional trauma of abandonment. Not only is she once again indicating her dependency upon the man, but she also refers to the wedding indirectly by discussing her plans during that time.

Before the waltz in which the woman confesses her suicide attempt, this motive appears again, this time as part of the initial admission that she has lied (Example 28). In this instance, the motive contradicts its earlier connotation when the woman denied that she was lying. The woman reaches an emotional climax, exemplified by the ascending vocal line that then drops an octave on “folle” (frantic).

Example 28. 3 mm. before Rehearsal 58, “Ambiguity” motive

The musical score for Example 28 consists of three staves. The top staff is the vocal line, starting with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The lyrics are "fol - le!" and "céder beaucoup". The middle and bottom staves are the piano accompaniment. The piano part begins with a fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic and includes markings for *molto* and *pp* (pianissimo). The score is in 4/4 time and features a key signature of one flat (B-flat).

This same motive begins before the woman recalls the man spending the night with her, and it continues as she comments on how his voice sounds as if he were right beside her (Example 29). The phrase appears as it did when she discussed her plans to spend

time in the country. Her reference to lying in bed with the man suggests a relationship somewhat like a marriage, perhaps if only in her mind.

Example 29. Rehearsal 68, “Ambiguity” motive

Très calme et voluptueux *p* *câlme*

68 Tu sais, quelque-fois quand nous étions cou-
chés et que j'a-vais ma tête à sa pe - ti-te pla-ce con-tre ta poi-
tri-ne, j'en-ten-dais ta voix, ex-actement la même que ce soir dans l'ap pa reil.

ppp *long* *ppp* *long*

Although Poulenc's next use of this motive consists of only its repetition, the appearance of it signifies the woman's dependency on her ex-lover. She sings "Parce que tu me parles" ("Because you speak to me") (Example 30). Before this statement, she admits that she has kept the telephone in bed with her while waiting for him to call. Her explanation that his voice sustains her certainly indicates a deep level of fixation on him.

Example 30. Rehearsal 77, "Ambiguity" motive

Très calme et détendu
p (tendrement)

77 Par ce que tu me par - les.

pp

She continues by saying that she has lived through him, and the motive appears again as she says, "Maintenant j'ai de l'air parce que tu me parles," ("Now I have breath because you speak to me,") repeating the words "parce que tu me parles" (Example 31). Perhaps this statement best demonstrates the level of attachment the woman feels toward the man who has abandoned her.

After the woman reflects on how the past lovers disregarded the circumstances that always prevented them from being together, she comments on how the telephone now stands as a barrier between them. She first describes their willingness to be swept

Example 31. 3 mm. before Rehearsal 79, “Ambiguity” motive

excessivement calme
pp très doux (dans un souffle) *long*

par - tes. — Main te nant j'ai de l'air parce que tu me par les.

pp *ppp* *long*

Detailed description: This musical score is for a vocal and piano piece. The vocal line is in 4/4 time and begins with a half rest, followed by a quarter note 'par', a quarter rest, and a half note 'tes.' with a long breath mark. The piano accompaniment starts with a half rest, followed by a quarter note 'Main', a quarter rest, and a half note 'nant j'ai de l'air' with a long breath mark. The piano part features a complex harmonic structure with many accidentals and dynamic markings like *pp* and *ppp*. A '5' is written above the vocal line in the third measure, and 'long' is written above the piano part in the third measure.

away by their passion, emphasizing “Un regard pouvait changer tout” (“A look could change everything”). The same motive reinforces her observation, again only lasting two measures (Example 32).

Example 32. Rehearsal 90, “Ambiguity” motive

ff

Un re - gard pouvait chan - ger tout. —

90 *ff*

Detailed description: This musical score is for a vocal and piano piece. The vocal line is in 4/4 time and begins with a half rest, followed by a quarter note 'Un', a quarter rest, and a half note 're - gard' with a long breath mark. The piano accompaniment starts with a half rest, followed by a quarter note 'pouvait', a quarter rest, and a half note 'chan - ger tout.' with a long breath mark. The piano part features a complex harmonic structure with many accidentals and dynamic markings like *ff*. A rehearsal mark '90' is enclosed in a box above the piano part in the first measure.

The motive appears again before the tragic closing section of the opera (Example 33). Its occurrence coincides with her affectionate expression, “Mon amour. Mon cher amour.” These two measures again serve as an indicator of final tenderness.

Example 33. 3 mm. before Rehearsal 100, “Ambiguity” motive

The musical score for Example 33 consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is written in a treble clef with a 2/4 time signature. It begins with a rest, followed by a half note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The lyrics are "Mon a - mour Mon cher a - mour." The piano accompaniment is written in a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with a 2/4 time signature. It features a series of chords, primarily triads and dyads, with a dynamic marking of *ff* and a tempo marking of *molto*. The final notes of the piano part are marked *très long*.

These two measures serve as an indicator of final tenderness. As part of the opera’s conclusion, the motive sounds as the woman assures the man that she will survive without him (Example 34). This motive again coincides with an emotional high point, underlining the woman’s assurance that she is strong.

Although in each instance the motive reflects different aspects of the woman’s ambiguous attachment, the music illuminates the text through its passionate character. Sometimes it refers specifically to marriage but, even when the connection is less concrete, the music still emphasizes the intensity of her feelings. In comparing the first occurrence with subsequent ones, the distinction lies in the rhythmic contrast between the

Example 34. Rehearsal 108, “Ambiguity” motive

108 *ff* *très violente*
Je suis for-te. Dépêche-toi. Vas-

109 *eclatant* *fff* *comme un cri*
y. Cou-pe! Cou-pe vi-te! Je t'ai-me *f⁷p*

fpp

first and other instances. Although the initial statement of the motive retains its melodic pattern in later recurrences, its rhythm is never repeated in subsequent statements.

Opening motive

The opening of *La Voix humaine* establishes a motive that resurfaces throughout the opera, often announcing the telephone that serves as a connection between the woman and her former lover. In other instances, however, the motive subverts its initial code, suggesting something that then fails to occur. Unlike other motives in the opera, this opening motive appears in different guises.

In the brief orchestral introduction, the motive, defined by its frantic thirty-second notes, conveys the woman's emotional turmoil as she anticipates a telephone call from her ex-lover (Example 35a). The pungent conflict between F# and F stresses the woman's agitated state, although the minor sixth between F# and D in mm. 5-8 allows temporary relief from this tension.

Example 35a. Beginning, thirty-second note motive

The musical score for Example 35a consists of two systems of a grand staff. The first system is marked "Lent et angoissé" and "strident". It shows a trill on F# in the right hand, with the notes F# and F. The second system is marked "RIDEAU" and shows a trill on F in the right hand, with the notes F and E. Both systems feature rapid thirty-second notes in the right hand and sustained notes in the left hand.

At Rehearsal 3, an abbreviated form of the motive appears over a trill a major third higher, alleviating, however, the initial conflict by cadencing on a whole step instead of a semitone (A# and C, Example 35b). The motive speeds up, with the thirty-second notes sounding at different metrical positions to set up the telephone's ringing.

Example 35b. Rehearsal 3, thirty-second note motive

The musical score consists of a single staff with a treble clef. It is marked "a Tempo I." at the beginning. A box containing the number "3" is placed above the first measure. The score shows three measures of music. Each measure begins with a chord of two notes, followed by a sequence of notes. A slur covers the first two notes of each measure, and a tritone interval is indicated at the end of each measure. The notes are: Measure 1: G4, A4, B4, C5; Measure 2: G4, A4, B4, C5; Measure 3: G4, A4, B4, C5.

As the woman converses with someone who has dialed the wrong number, fragments of the initial motive appear, emphasizing a tritone at the end of each appearance (Example 36). These thirty-second notes interject between the woman's comments, when the woman at the other end of the line would speak. While the woman waits for the man to call, she changes moods suddenly. The motive only appears during her anxious states, emphasizing her distress. When the score indicates "Très calme," the motive is absent.

The thirty-second note fragments of the motive resurface when another woman interrupts the ex-lovers on the telephone. In this instance, thirty-second notes punctuate a chord that articulates the beginning of each measure with an appoggiatura, as the woman pauses (Example 37). The fourth time the chord sounds, however, the woman speaks, and the motive indicates her increasingly agitated state. Near the end of the opera, a similar version of the motive appears after the woman refers to the telephone cord wrapped around her neck (Example 38). The thirty-second note appoggiatura now descends by semitone, recalling the tension of previous statements of the motive. Although the woman is calm, the motive is marked *forte*, recalling its earlier frantic quality.

Example 36. 5 mm. after Rehearsal 5, thirty-second note motive

raccrochez, Vous êt' avec une a-bon - née Mais, Ma -

brusque ff

This system shows the first two measures of the musical score. The vocal line is in 3/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The piano accompaniment is in 3/4 time and includes the dynamic markings *brusque* and *ff*. The lyrics are: "raccrochez, Vous êt' avec une a-bon - née Mais, Ma -".

da-me, raccrochez vous-mêm' Allô, Mad' moi sel! Mais

This system shows the next two measures. The vocal line continues with the lyrics: "da-me, raccrochez vous-mêm' Allô, Mad' moi sel! Mais". The piano accompaniment continues with the same rhythmic and dynamic characteristics.

au comble de la violence

non, ce n'est pas le docteur Scmit. Zé - ro huit,

This system shows the final two measures of the score. The vocal line concludes with the lyrics: "non, ce n'est pas le docteur Scmit. Zé - ro huit,". The piano accompaniment continues with the same rhythmic and dynamic characteristics.

Example 37. Rehearsal 43, thirty-second note motive

(au comble de 'langoisse)

(rude)

43 Al-lô, al-lô, Mad' moi sell', al-lô,

ff

(Elle raccroche)

Mad' - moi - selle, on cou - pe.

ff

Example 38. Rehearsal 102, thirty-second note motive

The musical score for Example 38, Rehearsal 102, is presented in two systems. The first system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line begins with the lyrics "Il faudrait que le bureau nous cou-pe par ha-" and is marked with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The piano accompaniment features a dense texture of thirty-second notes in the right hand, with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The second system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line begins with the lyrics "sard. Oh! mon ché ri!" and is marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The piano accompaniment features a dense texture of thirty-second notes in the right hand, with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The score is in 2/4 time and includes dynamic markings such as *f* and *p*.

Although this motive sounds after the woman has hung up the telephone, it is absent after the telephone rings again. Then, as the woman learns that her ex-lover's telephone line is not free, the motive emerges. It is now more intense than before, with thirty-second notes in five parts (Example 39). The denser texture, referable to the octatonic 1-2 model on E, as well as the repetition of only its rhythmic cell, underscores the woman's increased tension as she cannot get through.

Example 39. Rehearsal 45, thirty-second note motive with octatonic 1-2 model

(au comble de 'langoisse)

(rude)

43 Al-lô, al-lô, Mad' moi sell', al-lô,

(Elle raccroche)

Mad' - moi-selle, on cou- pe.

When the motive reappears two measures later, its frantic nature is subverted by the “Très calme” tempo and its *ppp* dynamic level. The motive also takes on a different character because of its restriction to high-pitched instruments with no brasses and low strings. The upper three parts are transposed up a fifth. Fitting with the calmness (or hopelessness) of the moment, the sustained chord is an F^9 , rather than a more dissonant harmony. At this point, the woman relaxes for a moment while waiting for the man to call again.

When the telephone rings after the operator has reached the man’s line, the woman discovers that the man is not at home. The opening motive sounds as the woman speaks to the man’s servant Joseph (Example 40). The woman is calm, and the motive

appears in the same form as in its previous, subdued mood. In fact, its calm character offsets the discovery that only the servant is at home and the man is out somewhere, perhaps with his fiancée.

Example 40. Rehearsal 47, thirty-second note motive

Plus calme
(*essoufflée*)
p

47 C'est Madame. On nous avait coupés avec Monsieur. Pas là?
pp

f

The thirty-second note figure reappears as the man contacts the woman again (Example 41). The motive (in groups of 2, 1, and 2 measures) resembles its previous occurrence when the woman was angry with another woman for interrupting the telephone call. Major and minor sevenths progress by minor thirds at each occurrence. The first occurrence preserves the C-F#-B of its guise at Rehearsal 43.

At Rehearsal 51, the tertian harmonies of the previous three statements of the motive (2, 1, 2 measures each) become chromatic horizontally and define vertical whole-tone segments (Example 42). The final two measures of this 10-measure transformation of this motive returns to tertian harmonies supported by a motion from D to A in the bass.

Example 41. 3 mm. after Rehearsal 50, after R. 50, thirty-second note motive with tertian harmonies

très calme
p (*morne*)

On a-vait coupé. Non, non. J'at-tendais On sonnait,

je décrochais et il n'y a-vait person-ne. Sans doute... Bien sûr...

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system shows a vocal line in 3/4 time with lyrics: "On a-vait coupé. Non, non. J'at-tendais On sonnait,". The piano accompaniment features a thirty-second note motive in the right hand and tertian harmonies in the left hand. The second system continues the vocal line with lyrics: "je décrochais et il n'y a-vait person-ne. Sans doute... Bien sûr...". The piano accompaniment continues with the same thirty-second note motive and tertian harmonies. The tempo is marked "très calme" and the dynamic is "p". The mood is noted as "(morne)".

By this point in the opera, it is important to note that the opening motive has assumed a new character, appearing when the woman is calm rather than frantic, and revealing either resignation, impotence, or just exhaustion. From this point onwards, the appearances of this motive will be mostly associated with calmness. When not sustained temporally, this motive is connected still with the woman's shifts in mood, rather than being attached to a particular emotional state.

Example 42. Rehearsal 51, thirty-second note motive with vertical whole-tone segments followed by tertian harmonies

Vertical whole-tone segments

51 *p* *tendre*

Tu as sommeil? Tu es bon d'avoir télépho-né,

Tertian harmonies

très bon. Non, je suis là.

Detailed description: The image shows two systems of musical notation for a piano accompaniment. The first system, titled 'Vertical whole-tone segments', begins with a boxed rehearsal mark '51'. The music is in 3/4 time and starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a 'tendre' marking. The right hand features a melodic line with a sixteenth-note triplet and a sixteenth-note pair, while the left hand plays vertical whole-tone chords. The second system, titled 'Tertian harmonies', continues the piece with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The right hand has a melodic line with a fermata, and the left hand plays tertian (triadic) harmonies. The lyrics 'très bon. Non, je suis là.' are written below the notes.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

SELF-BORROWINGS: POULENC'S RECONTEXTUALIZATION OF MOTIVES

Through self-borrowings, Poulenc recontextualized parts of his dramatic works into purely instrumental music, adding a semantic dimension to them. Borrowings appear in *La Voix humaine*, and Poulenc in turn uses ideas from the opera in a late sonata.

Overriding differences between their respective subjects, Poulenc takes music from *Dialogues des Carmélites* and places it in the worldly context of *La Voix humaine*. The music of the martyred Carmelite nuns becomes a part of the generic woman's world as she sings into the telephone.¹ One exact quotation is from the scene in *Dialogues des Carmélites* where the elderly Prioress, who has lost her sanity, dies² (Example 43).

Example 43. *Dialogues des Carmélites*, 6 mm. after Rehearsal 94

(infiniment doux)
pp

le - vez - vous, ma fil - le.

pp

² Keith Daniel, *Francis Poulenc: His Artistic Development and Musical Style* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), 311.

On the same pitches, Poulenc uses the music in *La Voix humaine*, when the woman says she had no problems sleeping before the previous night (Example 44).

Example 44. *La Voix humaine*, Rehearsal 75, borrowing from *Dialogues*



The musical score for Example 44 is presented in a two-staff format. The top staff is the vocal line, and the bottom staff is the piano accompaniment. Both are in 4/4 time. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The vocal line begins with a long note on a whole rest, followed by a series of eighth notes. The piano accompaniment features a long note on a whole rest, followed by a series of eighth notes. The lyrics are "A-vant-hiersoir? J'ai dormi." The dynamic markings are "mf" for the vocal line and "p" for the piano accompaniment. The tempo/mood is "Très calme". The rehearsal mark "75" is indicated in a box above the piano staff.

The music reappears up an augmented second, as the woman tells the man that she loves him and blames herself for her current situation. Poulenc quotes *Dialogues* one last time, as the woman describes that she has wrapped the telephone cord around her neck to be surrounded by the man's voice.

Even when Poulenc's self-quotation is not exact, the music still conveys this idea of suffering. When the woman speaks to the servant Joseph in *La Voix humaine*, a similar musical motive appears. At the moment when she discovers the man has deceived her, Poulenc calls attention to her suffering through the music (Example 45).

Example 45. Rehearsal 48, akin to *Dialogues*

Presser un peu *p* très doux

Ex - cu - sez - moi, Joseph. Mer - ci, merci.

48

p

In both operas, the musical motive represents suffering and relinquishing personal desire. The woman in *La Voix humaine* sees herself as a martyr, giving up her past life for benefit of the man's future. Although she might be more of a self-induced martyr than an actual one, she views herself in the same light as the Prioress in *Dialogues des Carmélites*. The young nun Constance speculates at the beginning of the second act that, perhaps, people die for others instead of for themselves. Thus, in the same way that the Prioress dies for her church (and later, all of the nuns for their faith), the woman in *La Voix humaine* inwardly dies for the man, so that he can continue his life.

Conversely, the end of the opera (1958) served Poulenc for a quotation he would use in his *Sonate pour Clarinet et Piano* (1962)³ (Example 46). Only one pitch of the melody is changed, in that the first interval in the clarinet sonata is a major second instead of minor (Example 47). Even the accompanimental parts have similar eighth-

³ Jeremy Cox, Program Notes to *Francis Poulenc: Chamber Music*, Deutsche-Grammophone 427 639-2, 1989, compact disc.

note patterns. Although Poulenc first uses the dotted rhythm at the beginning of the opera, he waits until its conclusion to expand the motive into a phrase, and this expansion is quoted in the clarinet sonata. This phrase becomes a theme for the clarinet sonata, sounding eight times during the course of the first movement.

Example 46. Rehearsal 107, end of the opera

The musical score is in 4/4 time and consists of two systems. The first system shows a vocal line starting with the instruction "commencer bien" and a piano accompaniment. A rehearsal mark "107" is placed above the vocal line. The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note pattern in the bass line and chords in the right hand. The second system shows a vocal line with the lyrics "Mon chéri..." and "mon beauchéri." and a piano accompaniment. Dynamics include *p*, *mf* (marquer le B), and *ff* subito. The piano accompaniment continues with the eighth-note pattern and chords.

Example 47. *Sonate pour Clarinet et Piano*, Rehearsal 2, autocitation from *La Voix humaine*

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The first system consists of a clarinet line (treble clef, 4/4 time) and a piano accompaniment (bass clef, 4/4 time). The clarinet line begins with a box containing the number '2' above the first measure. The piano accompaniment starts with a dynamic marking of *p* and *p très doux*. The second system continues the piano accompaniment, showing the continuation of the melodic lines in both hands.

Poulenc’s exploitation of the theme demonstrates his preoccupation with *La Voix humaine* up until the end of his life, as the clarinet sonata was composed in 1962, one year before his death. His instructions for the clarinetist encourage the performer to play the music as if it were attached to the opera itself, specifying that the melody should be played softly, as in the opera, and “*très doux*.” The movement, entitled *Allegro tristemente*, recontextualizes the purely instrumental work. Although the melody builds to a *mezzo-forte*, it returns to *piano* by the end of the movement. During the final section

of the movement, Poulenc instructs the clarinetist to play in a “*monotone*,” and he writes “*doux et monotone*” in the piano part. This suggests that, at the end, there is no more emotion, just as the woman is instructed, after having sung “*très violente*” and then “*comme un cri*,” to sing her last words “*dans un souffle*.” The resignation she feels at the end of the opera is transferred to the first movement of Poulenc’s clarinet sonata.

The opera and clarinet sonata are further connected through Poulenc’s description of the waltz in *La Voix humaine*. He called the waltz “a Sibelius-like *Valse triste*” in a letter to Pierre Bernac. Therefore, the title of the first movement of the clarinet sonata refers to the woman’s suicide attempt as well as the opera’s inevitable conclusion. Poulenc dedicated his clarinet sonata to the memory of Arthur Honegger, a member of his beloved Les Six. The first movement’s “*tristemente*” indicates his sadness upon his death, adding meaning to that in his opera. Yet, the dedication reinforces the elegiac tone established by the dramatic quotation. In this context, this theme from the opera reveals his view of fate: he has transferred the meaning of loss in the abstract to mourn a composer he admired.

Poulenc’s reflection on his youth, including the friendship with Cocteau, is evident in *La Voix humaine*. This work stands apart from his predominantly neoclassical style, conveying the nameless woman’s erratically changing emotions as she confronts her ex-lover and her uncertainty of the future. The resignification of Debussy’s impressionist style seemingly contradicts Cocteau’s aesthetic proclamation in *Le Coq et*

l'arlequin, although Poulenc's compression of the language of *Pelléas* adheres to the simpler French style Cocteau idealized.

Poulenc depicts the woman's emotional states through a number of striking contrasts. By shifting between octatonicism, chromaticism, harmonic and melodic whole-tone passages, and diatonicism, a suspended atmosphere is created. The contrast between the ever-changing beginning motive and the constantly intact "Dependency" and "Ambiguity" motives further illustrates her extreme emotions. Moreover, the use of a waltz—a constant in Poulenc's oeuvre—is brought back to subvert "normality" in the context of the woman's attempted suicide.

Poulenc's own comments on this work reflect his affection for it. He identified the telephone as a transmitter of the human voice as different from the divine, a reflection of his strong religious beliefs.⁴ *La Voix humaine* ironically moves beyond that which is human, conveying the modernist detachment in a technological world by connecting and separating two anonymous people through a telephone.

⁴ Josef Heinzelmann, "La Voix humaine," *Pipers Enzyklopädie des Musiktheaters*, vol. 5, ed. Carl Dahlhaus and the Forschungsinstitut für Musiktheater der Universität Bayreuth, dir. Sieghart Döhring (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1994): 64.

APPENDIX
MUSICAL MOTIVES

Beginning

Lent et angoissé

strident

RIDEAU

ff

Rehearsal 1

sans presser

presser

long

1

ff

Rehearsal 13

en pressant encore un peu long

f

Non, un seul, à neuf heu res. long

13

f

Rehearsal 22, Ambiguity Motive

Fièvreux et très violent *ff*

Fièvreux et très violent *ff*

presser Pas dutout...

22

f

Rehearsal 20

très intense *p*

très intense *p*

Un peu dur... Je com prends.

20

p

Rehearsal 26, Dependency Motive

Andante moderato *mf*

Souviens-toi du di man che de Ver -

p

très doux

3

sail - les et du pneu - ma - ti - que. Ah! A - lors!

Rehearsal 107

The musical score for Rehearsal 107 is presented in two systems. The first system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line begins with the instruction "commencer bien" and a box containing the number "107". The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note pattern in the bass and chords in the right hand. The second system continues the vocal line with the lyrics "Mon chéri..." and "mon beauchéri." The piano accompaniment continues with similar patterns. Performance instructions include *p* (piano), *mf* (marquer le B), and *ff* subito.

commencer bien

107

p

mf (marquer le B)

Mon chéri...

mon beauchéri.

ff subito

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