An analysis of the historical and biographical influences on the music of Francis Poulenc as portrayed in his Les Soirées de Nazelles

Gay K. Grosz
Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE HISTORICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL INFLUENCES
ON THE MUSIC OF FRANCIS POULENC
AS PORTRAYED IN HIS LES SOIRÉES DE NAZELLES

A Written Document

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
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in

The School of Music

by
Gay K. Grosz
B.M., Centenary College of Louisiana, 1990
M.M., Louisiana State University, 2000
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This paper is dedicated to my dear husband, Ken. His loving support, through three years of living apart and many nights and weekends of being buried in research, allowed this dream to become a reality.
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ABSTRACT

As a composer, Francis Poulenc has been under-appreciated and overlooked by many contemporary performers and teachers. Poulenc wrote music from the heart, paying little heed to formal systems or musical fashions of his day. In matters of harmony, he was content to use conventional chromatic harmony, but in a manner uniquely his own. Poulenc’s compositions always reflected his personality and Les Soirées de Nazelles is no exception. The many facets of Poulenc’s personality cannot be separated from his music and they contribute to its wit and charm.

This document is an examination of Poulenc’s background, personality, and influences, and how they affect Les Soirées de Nazelles. Chapter One describes the cultural atmosphere of Paris at the turn of the century. Chapter Two traces Poulenc’s background. Chapter Three looks at teachers and composers who were influential in his life. The focus of Chapter Four is on Poulenc’s personality and is presented from the perspective of several people who were part of his inner circle. Elements of Poulenc’s compositional style as they apply to Les Soirées de Nazelles are the focus of Chapter Five. Chapter Six is an analytical view of the individual movements of Les Soirées de Nazelles.

As Poulenc’s most technically challenging work for solo piano, Les Soirées de Nazelles should only be performed by advanced pianists, and only then by performers who are willing to seek to understand the complex nature of its composer. It is an excellent representative, not only of Poulenc’s compositional style, but also of the change of attitudes in French music at the turn-of-the-twentieth-century.
CHAPTER 1

PARIS: CA. LATE 19th – EARLY 20th CENTURIES

The “Banquet Years” is the designation given by Roger Shattuck to describe Paris during the period from 1885 to the beginning of World War I in 1914:

The banquet had become the supreme rite. The cultural capital of the world, which set fashions in dress, the arts, and the pleasures of life, celebrated its vitality over a long table laden with food and wine. Part of the secret of the period lies no deeper than this surface aspect. Upper-class leisure—the result not of shorter working hours but of no working hours at all for property holders—produced a life of pompous display, frivolity, hypocrisy, cultivated taste, and relaxed morals...It was the era of gaslights and horse-drawn omnibuses, of the Moulin Rouge and the Folies Bergère, of cordon-bleu cooking and demonstrating feminists...The café came into its own, political unrest encouraged innovation in the arts, and society squandered its last vestiges of aristocracy. The twentieth century could not wait fifteen years for a round number; it was born, yelling, in 1885.1

Such was the setting for Francis Poulenc’s early years. It was, indeed, a charmed way of life that left a lasting impression on him. Born into a prosperous family, Poulenc did not have to make a living for himself as a young adult, as did many of his contemporaries. Therefore, he had the time and financial means to enjoy all of the pleasures that Paris had to offer.

Paris at the turn of the twentieth century was home to many famous and influential people in both literature and the fine arts. Among these were novelist Jean Cocteau (1889-1963), poet Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918), actress Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923), painter Henri Rousseau (1844-1910), singer/actor Maurice Chevalier (1888-1972), and composer Erik Satie (1866-1925), whose works epitomized the new and changing ideas in the arts and literature.

Shattuck further states:

The century had taken its first steps. Fauvism and then cubism had replaced impressionism as the artistic avant-garde; the principal figures of the “New Spirit” in literature, Apollinaire and Jacob, were working in close touch with painters. The Ballets Russes would soon shock Paris with the distinctly fauve rhythms of Stravinsky’s *Sacre de printemps*; Debussy was attracting disciples and imitators. It turned out that Satie himself had been changing and could not be relied on to act as if he had been dead for twelve years. His new works belied all preconceived ideas about his style.²

Paris prided itself in being a leader in the *avant-garde* and over a short span of years it witnessed the rise and fall of several movements or “isms”, according to Shattuck. These include Impressionism, Symbolism, Pointillism, Fauvism, Cubism, and Surrealism. Artists and musicians worked diligently to distance themselves from the last vestiges of Romanticism and Impressionism. Gone were the days of seemingly irrational emotionalism, virtuosic displays, and tendencies to dwell on lost love or death. Also gone were the days of Claude Monet (1840-1926) and his invisible brush strokes, and Georges-Pierre Seurat (1859-1891) and his pointillistic emphasis on light and its changing qualities.

In the Spring of 1918 Jean Cocteau published *Le Coq et l’Arlequin*, a short manifesto that called for a new kind of music from French composers.

He urged them to abandon the philosophical mists and wanderings of German romanticism and French impressionism in favor of a light, tuneful, popular French art, based on the music of the circus, the café-concert, and the music-hall. He explicitly rejected Debussy:

² Shattuck, 145.
“Enough of clouds, waves, aquariums, undines, and perfumes of the night; we need music with its feet on the ground, a music for daily use”……..He encouraged the creators of this new French music to be brief and to the point, to favor melody over harmony and counter-point, to avoid the “caress of strings,” and to write accessible music. And he asked for a music of instinct, rather than intellect: “Instinct must be controlled by method, but only instinct helps us discover a method which is our own, and through which we can control our instinct.”

It should be noted that Cocteau’s tract was not calling for a new musical taste. By the time the manifesto was published, Satie and his disciples had been composing his “new French music” for several years. *Le Coq et l’Arlequin* was Cocteau’s way of showing approval of the qualities he heard, particularly in the music of Erik Satie, Georges Auric (1899-1983), and Francis Poulenc (1899-1963).

Roger Shattuck states:

> In all the arts, 1885 is the point from which we must reckon the meaning of the word “modern.”

The Banquet Years were ushered in by innovations in art, literature, and music. Contemporary performers who wish to get a sense of this important epoch would do well to study the music of Francis Poulenc whose music so accurately reflected the tenor of these times.

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4 Shattuck, 19.
CHAPTER 2

POULENC'S BACKGROUND

Francis Jean Marcel Poulenc was born in Paris on January 7, 1899. His mother, Jenny Royer, came from a long line of Parisian craftsmen. She was socially active, progressive in her thinking, and held a deep love for the arts, all attributes she passed along to young Francis. His father, Emile, had grown up in a more provincial atmosphere in south central France and was manager of the family business that later became the pharmaceutical giant Rhône-Poulenc. Throughout his life, Poulenc readily acknowledged the influence of both of his parents -- that of his mother in music and culture, and of his father, a devout Catholic, in the spiritual realm.

Due to the diverse backgrounds of his parents, Poulenc grew up with conflicting views and attitudes toward social and cultural matters. While Parisians consider their city the center of political power and culture, provincials tend to place less emphasis on the importance of these issues. As a consequence, the rural areas of France have never had any real influence in cultural matters. The opposing concepts of Poulenc’s Parisian mother and provincial father left their mark on young Francis, and he struggled throughout his life to reconcile these conflicting attitudes within himself.

Poulenc inherited the tastes of his mother, who was a talented amateur pianist. She encouraged his musical aptitudes and he shared her love for Mozart, Chopin, Schumann, Scarlatti, and Couperin. He also shared her appreciation of poetry, painting, literature, drama, ballet and cinema. Her brother, “Uncle Papoum,” was known as a man about town and gave young Francis an early education in the less desired aspects of Parisian theatrical life. However, the aristocrats, singers, and more legitimate actors that were frequently entertained in the
family’s Paris apartment were deemed acceptable as proper cultural stimulation for young Poulenc.

Poulenc’s mother introduced him to music at the age of four. At the age of six he began formal piano lessons and quickly became proficient enough to play the music of Chopin and Debussy. Although his mother wanted him to attend the Paris Conservatoire, his father’s desire that his son receive a more traditional education at the Lycée Condorcet prevailed. Therefore, unlike many of his contemporaries, Poulenc never attended the Conservatoire. His mother’s concern that young Francis would not receive proper musical instruction at the Catholic Lycée prompted her to seek the instruction of noted Catalan pianist Ricardo Viñes (1875-1943). Poulenc studied piano with Viñes for three years. As Viñes began to realize his student’s thirst for knowledge about painting and poetry, he gradually lengthened Poulenc’s piano lessons with further discussions of these aspects of the arts as well.

By 1916, Poulenc had made the decision to become a composer. Through his affiliation with Viñes, he was introduced to Georges Auric (1899-1983), Arthur Honegger (1892-1955), Darius Milhaud (1892-1974), and Erik Satie (1866-1925). Poulenc would later become linked with some of these composers as part of Les Six. In 1916, he composed his first work, Préludes, for piano. The work remained unpublished and was later destroyed. During the Spring of 1917, Poulenc composed Rapsodie nègre, which was to be his first publicly performed work. Poulenc dedicated the work to Satie and it premiered in Paris on a program of avant-garde music by various composers including Auric, Honegger, Louis Durey (1888-1979), Germaine Tailleferre (1892-1983) and Alexis Roland-Manuel (1891-1966). While the work branded him as an “enfant terrible” and linked him in the musical world with Erik Satie, Jean Cocteau (1889-1963) and Les Nouveaux Jeunes (“The New Young Ones,” a group of Satie disciples active in
1917-18), it also attracted the interest of Stravinsky and art critic/impresario Sergei Diaghilev (1872-1929).

In the fall of 1917, Poulenc was drafted into the military. After his first few months of service, he was periodically stationed at several small towns just outside of Paris. He was never sent to the front, suffered from boredom, and was assigned to a desk job for the last two years of his enlistment. He was released from military duty in October of 1921. Although he suffered emotionally from the strict discipline of military life, a total of eight compositions emerged from his time in the service, two of which particularly caught the attention of Hungarian composer Béla Bartók (1881-1945). These were the Sonata for Piano Duet (1919; later revised in 1939), the Sonata for Two Clarinets (1918; revised in 1945), and *Trois mouvements perpetuels* for solo piano (1918; revised in 1939 and 1962), three short vignettes which were influential in establishing Poulenc’s reputation as a composer. Apparently sensing Poulenc’s ability to compose longer, more large-scale works given the right guidance, Bartok stated the following in a letter to Poulenc dated November 29, 1921:

> Above all it is your piano sonata for four hands and the Sonata for two clarinets that have interested me most keenly. I am already looking forward to the other compositions on a bigger scale which you promised in your letter, and which may perhaps have already been published?[^5]

Concerned about his inadequate formal musical training, Poulenc decided to address the issue by seeking lessons in composition. He first tried Paul Vidal (1863-1931) and Maurice Ravel (1875-1937), but did not get beyond a first lesson with either of them. He eventually took

his friend Darius Milhaud’s (1892-1974) advice, and approached the composer Charles Koechlin (1892-1974) for lessons. In a letter to Koechlin dated September of 1921, Poulenc wrote:

I do not want to wait until I return to Paris to express the very great desire that I have to work with you. Circumstances, and in particular three years of military service which I completed in January 1921, have prevented any sustained study until now. I have therefore been obeying my instinct rather than my intelligence. I have had enough of this now and wish to put myself very seriously in your hands. I hope that you will accept a pupil as self-educated as myself and that my ignorance will not repel you. With your help I would like to become a musician.  

Quickly realizing his student’s lack of natural talent for counterpoint, Koechlin steered Poulenc away from fugues and canons and encouraged him to write harmonizations of chorale melodies of J.S. Bach. Poulenc was so enamored with Bach’s masterpieces that the study of his works became a lifelong passion. Koechlin and Poulenc worked sporadically for three years on orchestration, fugue, and counterpoint, and after a recorded fifty-eight lessons, parted as teacher and student. These sessions with Koechlin marked the end of any formal instruction Poulenc was to receive in his lifetime.

The years during and immediately after the 1914-18 war spawned a new attitude in the prevailing ideas and emotions in art. There was a desire to revolt against Impressionism, to return to firm outlines in art and strip it of its superfluous ornamentation. Artists sought to return to expressing their views of the every day world with brevity and clarity. These ideas are observed in the artwork of Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), the poems of Jean Cocteau and Guillaume Apollinaire, and the music of Erik Satie. This group of artists, poets, and musicians met regularly to discuss the latest trends in the arts.

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6 Buckland, 42.
In January of 1920, critic Henri Collet wrote an article linking composers Georges Auric, Louis Durey, Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, and Germaine Tailleferre as members of a group he designated *Les Six*. Collett fashioned his group after the Russian Five (Balakirev, Borodin, Cui, Moussorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov). Whereas, the Russian Five had a common musical ideal, Collet’s group were just friends. According to Milhaud, “Quite arbitrarily, he [Collett] had chosen six names...merely because we knew one another, were good friends, and had figured on the same programmes; quite irrespective of our different temperaments and wholly dissimilar characters.”\(^7\)

Francis Poulenc found himself touted as a member of a group who, on the purely musical side, were linked by technique. The scholar Vera Rašin describes the group’s agenda as follows:

The return to what was almost a form of classicism helped to guide French music out of the harmonic jungle of the past quarter-century. The works of the group were kept short and all pretentiousness was avoided. In their search for simplicity they turned to the tunes of popular songs, even to nursery rhymes. Their rhythms were either very simple indeed (2/4 or 4/4) or exceedingly complex. All that might appear to be deliberately graceful was avoided. Except in the case of Honegger, their works were strongly tonal.\(^8\)

The appointed members of *Les Six* collaborated on two ventures, one an album containing pieces by all of them, and a burlesque, anti-bourgeois ballet devised by Cocteau. Within two or three years of their being designated a cohesive group, the composers began to go their separate ways.

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Only Poulenc remained faithful to the group’s inclination towards prankishness, wit, and charm. Stewart Gordon states:

Of that group, Poulenc was the most consistent in developing and sustaining a style of directness, simplicity, clarity, and the inclusion of influences from popular music. Poulenc’s music is, in fact, so filled with tuneful, obvious melodies and music-hall clichés that the temptation is ever present to dismiss his work as lacking seriousness of purpose. A remarkable alchemy emerges, however, through Poulenc’s deft use of modulation to create freshness, his ability to craft mundane material into charming gestures, and his penchant for surprising the listener with passages of heartfelt sensitivity.

Francis Poulenc’s works fall into three fairly distinct periods, each with its own characteristics. Early works, or those written from 1916-1921, reflected the influence of Erik Satie and Les Six with their bare, linear simplicity, modality, polytonality and “wrong-note” dissonances. The years 1922-1937 produced works for solo piano that displayed more virtuosic bravura and exploited the traditional capabilities of the instrument. According to editor Stanley Sadie, this was:

a time when he was reappraising the materials of his art. He [Poulenc] later admitted that his reliance on past formulae (long pedal notes, arpeggios, repeated chords) was not always free of routine and that in this regard his familiarity with the piano could be a hindrance.

Although Poulenc’s works for solo piano cover a span of time from 1918-1959, most were written before 1940. As mentioned previously, the Trois mouvements perpetuels of 1918

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were instrumental in establishing Poulenc as a composer. Over the next twenty years, Poulenc composed sets of character pieces that include: *Promenades* (1921); *Napoli* (1925); eight nocturnes (1929-38); and *Les Soirée de Nazelles* (1930-36), his most extensive and most challenging work for solo piano.

The fifteen *Improvisations* were composed at three separate times: Nos. 1-10 between 1932 and 1934, no. 11-12 in 1941, and the last three in 1958-59. *Trois pieces* was composed over the decade of 1918-1928, and all three pieces were revised in 1953. Composition of the eight *Nocturnes* encompassed the years 1929-1938, and the *Intermezzo* in A-flat is dated March, 1943. Poulenc seemed particularly pleased with the *Improvisations*:

I tolerate the *Mouvements perpétuels*, my old *Suite en ut*, and the *Trois pieces*. I like very much my two collections of *Improvisations*, an *Intermezzo* in Ab and certain *Nocturnes*. I condemn *Napoli* and the *Soirées de Nazelles* without reprieve. I do not think much about the others.\(^\text{12}\)

Poulenc’s deep love of poetry inspired nearly 150 of the finest French melodies ever written. Nearly one hundred of these songs were composed for his longtime companion, baritone Pierre Bernac (1899-1979), who states that:

Beyond all doubt, most of Francis Poulenc’s finest work was in the field of vocal composition—choral works, lyrical works, and melodies. His inspiration never flowed more spontaneously than when stimulated by a literary text.\(^\text{13}\)

It was in the French mélodie that Poulenc excelled and felt most comfortable, and the years immediately following World War II found him focusing his creative energy in the song genre.

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Poulenc had acquired his mother’s love of literature and poetry at a very young age and this love was further enhanced by his studies with Viñes. He had a particular interest in the poetry of Guillame Apollinare and Paul Éluard (1895-1952), who was considered one of the founders of the Surrealist movement. Bernac states:

> He had an exceptional feeling for French declamatory style, and his melodic gift, which was the very essence of his music, inspired him to find the appropriate musical line to heighten the expression of the literary phrase. To quote his own words: “The musical setting of a poem should be an act of love, never a marriage of convenience.”

Poulenc’s collaboration with Bernac resulted in several international concert tours where the duo performed the music of “Gounod, Chabrier, Debussy, Ravel, Satie, Poulenc, Schubert, Schumann, Wolf, and others.” Poulenc credits Bernac’s influence on his own musical development:

> All of the evolution that took place in my melodies was due to Bernac. Just as Viñes had revealed to me certain secrets of pianistic writing, Bernac showed me the possibilities of singing, and since singing is my greatest love, I need say no more as proof of my happiness during these years of collaboration.

Poulenc and Bernac worked as musical partners for twenty-three years between 1935 and 1959. The duo undertook a series of three concert tours in the United States during the years 1948, 1950, and 1952. Bernac sang Poulenc’s songs, including his song cycle _Tel jour, telle nuit_ (1936-37), and Poulenc performed as soloist his _Concert champêtre pour clavécin et orchestre_ (1928) and _Concerto pour piano_ (1949).

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14 Bernac, 269.
Poulenc was a product of a devout Roman Catholic upbringing, but the death of his father in 1917 caused him to abandon his religion. After an automobile accident claimed the life of his close friend and fellow composer Pierre-Octave Ferroud (1900-1936) in the summer of 1936, Poulenc’s works became less virtuosic and exhibited a heightened level of lyricism as well as a more somber, religious tone caused by a return to his roots in the Roman Catholic faith. In an interview with Claude Rostand, Poulenc described his reaction to the news of Ferroud’s accident:

…I had learned, several days before, of the tragic death of my colleague, Pierre-Octave Ferroud. The horrible snuffling-out of this musician so full of vitality had absolutely stupefied me. Ruminating on the frailty of our human condition, I was once again attracted to the spiritual life…17

Poulenc’s inherited wealth afforded him pleasures that few composers have ever experienced. By 1937 he owned both an apartment in Paris and a beautiful eighteenth-century home at Noizay, in the Loire Valley. At his country home, Poulenc would rise very early in the morning, have tea and biscuits and go about his composing. His work day ended at lunchtime. He never set foot in the countryside that surrounded his home because it depressed him. As a true townsman, Poulenc stated:

Paris takes me out of myself [he said], in a sense it is this that is one of its benefits; there are many days when I dislike myself! It is also the only place in the world where I can bear great sorrow, anguish, melancholy. I have only to take a walk in the quartiers that I love, and life seems suddenly lighter.18

CHAPTER 3

MUSICAL INFLUENCES

Poulenc credits several individuals for their various influences on his music. His first major influence was his mother who instilled in him a love for Mozart, Chopin, Schumann, Scarlatti, and Couperin. Jenny Royer was an accomplished amateur pianist. As a young child, Poulenc would lie on the floor under the piano while she played classical music as well as the semi-popular piano pieces of the day. Keith Daniel suggests, “It seems likely that Poulenc’s gift for lyric melody and his adherence to diatonicism can be traced, at least in part, to this light music that he so frequently heard early in his life.”19 His mother encouraged him to keep an open mind to every kind of music, particularly to music of the contemporary composers of his time and those that would follow.

Poulenc describes his first profound musical memory as occurring during the winter of 1910-11 when he discovered a copy of Schubert’s Die Winterreise in a music shop in Venice. He sat down at the piano, read through the famous song cycle, and later wrote:

I went from magic moment to magic moment. By a bizarre coincidence, city-raised as I had been, I discovered all at once the beauty of the country, the winter, and its sublime musical transmutation…something very profound was changed in my life.20

Although it is difficult to see any direct influence of Schubert on Poulenc’s style, it can be heard in his predilection for major-minor alternations. Poulenc also credits his collaboration with

19 Daniel, 2.
Bernac and their years of study of Schubert’s lieder for helping him perfect his mélodie
techniques.

Poulenc’s teacher, pianist Ricardo Viñes, went to Paris in 1887 to study at the Paris
Conservatoire. His stellar performances of the music of Debussy, Ravel, Satie and other French
composers of the time earned him a reputation as the premier interpreter of French music. Of his
teacher and mentor, Poulenc is quoted as saying:

I admired him madly, because, at this time, in 1914, he was
the only virtuoso who played Debussy and Ravel…I owe him
everything…In reality it is to Viñes that I owe my fledgling
efforts in music [i.e., composition] and everything I know
about the piano.\(^{21}\)

In an interview with Claude Rostand he stated:

He was a delightful man, a bizarre hidalgo with large
moustaches, who wore a brown “sombrero” in the purest
Barcelonnaise style, and who wore fine buttoned boots
which he used to kick my shins with I didn’t change the
pedals properly. The art of pedaling, this essential
ingredient in modern music; no one could teach it better
than Viñes since he managed to play clearly in a wash of
pedaling, which seems paradoxical. And what science he
demonstrated in staccato!\(^{22}\)

In 1914, Poulenc became familiar with the music of Emmanuel Chabrier (1841-1894) by
listening to a recording of his \textit{Idylle} for piano. Poulenc wrote that “suddenly a harmonic
universe opened up before me, and my music never forgot that first kiss of love.”\(^{23}\)

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Poulenc, Francis. \textit{Moi et mes amis} (Paris: Éditions La Pallatine, 1963). English trans. in

Carl B. Schmidt, \textit{Entrancing Muse: A Documented Biography of Francis Poulenc}. Hillsdale,
NY: Pendragon Press, 2001, 20.}

\footnote{Jourdan-Morhange, Hélène. \textit{Mes amis musiciens}. Paris: Les Editeurs françois reunis, 1955,
Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1982, 3.}
\end{footnotes}
a considerable influence on French music at the turn of the century. His elegant melodies and simple textures were the antithesis of romantic, Wagnerian music, and would have particularly ingratiated him to the members of Les Six. Poulenc also identified with Chabrier because both composers lacked the training and influence of the Paris Conservatoire.

Poulenc had admired and studied the works of Erik Satie for two years before meeting him in 1916. Satie’s initial impression of Poulenc was that he was “…only a middle-class son, still wet behind the ears”. 24 Satie would actually leave the room when Poulenc’s early works were being played, but eventually he accepted the youth when he became convinced of his worth as a composer.

Erik Satie influenced me a great deal, as much spiritually as musically. He saw things so clearly…that a young musician could only gain by knowing him. Furthermore, he was marvelously funny. 25

Satie was the first French composer to ignore all surrounding musical influences of the time including Wagner, romanticism, impressionism, and Russian exoticism. His spare, charming style, infused with a characteristic wit, appealed to Poulenc and influenced the younger composer’s music.

Although Poulenc never met Claude Debussy (1862-1918), his first experience of Danses sacrée et profane (1904) made a profound impression on him. In 1916, Poulenc fashioned his first work, a set of Préludes, after several of Debussy’s Preludes. He notated the music over three or four staves and sometime later admitted to Claude Rostand that the Préludes were

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24 Daniel, 12.
“…rather second-rate Debussy.”

Poulenc’s Préludes were never published and were later destroyed.

Poulenc always revered Debussy’s gift of mélodie as well as his emphasis on correct poetic rhythm in his vocal works. Scholar Keith Daniel suggests that Poulenc might have “borrowed his [Debussy] fondness for cellular construction, in which a one-or two-bar phrase (cell) is repeated immediately.”

Poulenc denied his admiration of Debussy during the years 1917-22 and his affiliation with Les Six. As one of the younger members of the group, Poulenc was forced to concur with the group’s leaders, Jean Cocteau and Erik Satie, in their professional dislike for Debussy. Poulenc tried to make amends for disavowing Debussy:

Despite an attack of anti-Debussyism out of self-defiance at the time when I came to know Satie, in 1917, Debussy has always remained my favourite composer after Mozart. I could not do without his music. It is my oxygen. Moreover, the reaction of Les Six was directed against the imitators of Debussy, not Debussy himself. It is always necessary to repudiate for a time, at the age of twenty, those whom you have idolized, for fear of being overgrown with ivy.

The influence of Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) is heard throughout much of Poulenc’s piano music. Although Poulenc’s harmonic language is unique, as in the music of Ravel his melodies float above thick, luxurious chords and must always be prominently voiced. Keith Daniel suggests that Poulenc might have also been influenced by Ravel’s eclecticism.

Not a slave to any system of compositional regulations, Poulenc paid little heed to musical fashion of
the time and his music is replete with the art of “subtle borrowing” from various composers. In a
1954 interview with French musicologist José Bruyr, Poulenc described his eclecticism:

Whom shall I imitate in order to be original?” seems to me as silly
as “How, in order to be original, can I avoid imitating anyone?”
I wish to be able to employ at will a chord of Wagner, Debussy,
Schumann, or even of Franck [whom he disliked] if it more clearly
expresses the nuance that I wish to render…³⁰

Much of Poulenc’s music reflects the neoclassicism of Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) with
its unexpected harmonic turns and delightful dissonances. However, Poulenc was conservative
to the end and never severed his ties to the nineteenth-century harmony of Schumann, Fauré, and
Chabrier. Although he flirted with polytonality, his compositions never left the tonal realm.
Perhaps this is the reason that critics of the 1920s and 1930s did not take him seriously. Those
days of “modernism” demanded dissonance and anyone composing basically “white-key music”
could not be accepted as an important creator.

Late in his life, Poulenc divulged the following to critic Claude Rostand:

It was without doubt Debussy who awakened me to music, but it
was Stravinsky who later served as my guide. On the harmonic
plane I owe much to Ravel, enormously also to Satie, but more
aesthetically than musically. And Chabrier is my grandfather!³¹

The eclecticism of Poulenc’s writing has been compared to the contents of a bird’s nest.
Indeed, his musical influences are many and varied. However, as Geoffrey Bush states, “…but
one secret ingredient – the composer’s unique musical personality – sufficed to transform the

heterogeneous mixture into a magic brew, potent enough to cast its spell unchanged throughout forty years of creative life.”

CHAPTER 4

FRANCIS POULENC, THE MAN

Baritone Pierre Bernac, Poulenc’s long-time collaborator, described his friend’s physical appearance as:

striking. He was tall and heavy, with a strange walk, feet turned outwards. An overcoat habitually floated about him, for he was highly sensitive to cold and always traveled with a luxurious assortment of woolens, shawls and coverlets. His large, strong-featured face, with its big nose and oversized ears, was not handsome. His brown eyes were rather small and drooped downward at the sides like commas, but if one could express their gentleness and intelligence! His hands were very unusual—large and plump, with fingers that he nibbled all his life. Surprisingly expressive hands they were, that he held not in the usual fashion but turned outward with his fingers spread apart. He used them a great deal while speaking, holding them stiffly and bending his wrists. They were extraordinary pianist’s hands. He had a sort of little cushion at the end of each finger and easily encompassed a tenth on the piano.33

This dichotomy that was Poulenc was further explained by his friend Ned Rorem:

Like his name he was both dapper and ungainly. His clothes came from Lanvin but were unpressed; his hands were scrubbed, but the fingernails were bitten to the bone. His physiognomy showed a cross between weasel and trumpet. His sun-swept apartment on the Luxembourg was elegantly toned in orange plus, but the floors squeaked annoyingly. His social predilections were for duchesses and policemen, though he was born and lived as a wealthy bourgeois. His villa in Noizay was austere and immaculate, but surrounded by densely careless arbors...He was deeply devout and uncontrollably sensual...In short, his aspect and personality, taste and music, each contained contrasts which were not alternating, but simultaneous.34

Poulenc’s numerous friends hailed from all social walks. As illustrated by his voluminous correspondence, friendship was extremely important and he looked to his friends for validation and confidence. The writing style of his letters is as witty and spontaneous as his conversation, and no topic was off limits, no matter how crude. Poulenc purposely avoided conversing about politics and philosophy wanting, rather, to spend time talking about music, art, or literature. Ned Rorem describes Poulenc’s self-absorption as “stupefying,” yet notes that he was also kind and generous, and never spoke about anyone in an unkind way.\(^{35}\)

The personality of Francis Poulenc was indeed complex. He lived his life tormented by an inner turmoil, was in fear of many things, and suffered lifelong bouts of depression. Pierre Bernac is quoted as saying that his music was a reflection of the man – full of contradictions.

\[
\text{…a disconcerting mixture of cheerfulness and melancholy, seriousness and futility, triviality and nobility. He could be the very example of the } \textit{bon vivant}, \text{ loving life and all that was in it to be enjoyed, but he could also fall into grave depths of depression. His mood could vary from one day to the next, even from one moment to another, for he was extremely sensitive and emotional, actually an anxious person.}^{36}\]

Poulenc struggled all of his life to reconcile issues that stemmed from the diverse views of his parents during his youth. The culturally progressive views of his Parisian mother seemed to clash with those of his provincial, devoutly Catholic father. Keith Daniel says “it is undeniable that a gentle, devout Poulenc coexisted with a rakish \textit{bon vivant} throughout his life, and these two opposing natures emerged rather unpredictably in his music.”\(^{37}\) In a July 1950

\(^{35}\) Rorem, 29.
\(^{37}\) Daniel, 2.
article, critic Rostand described Poulenc as "half monk, half guttersnipe" ("le moine et le voyou"), a tag that was to be attached to his name for the rest of his career.\textsuperscript{38}

In his music, Poulenc often contrasts episodes of humor and emotional outbursts with moments of lyric beauty. French musicologist and ethnologist Andre Schaeffner once said:

There sometimes enters into his music a devil, some kind of unruly child or a creature possessed who, in a flash, turns everything into confusion, jumbles one style with another, stops at no extravagance, pushes in a street song or a music-hall hit, keys up his harmony and rhythm to the sophisticated standards of polytonality, the resultant chaos including, too, a bit of jazz or imitation Blues. Exposed, then, are those features, which he has no intention of hiding, of raucousness, crowing and swagger…The best and the worst of Poulenc collide in these outbursts, though in time such irrational elements may be seen to be at the core of the composer’s inspiration.\textsuperscript{39}

Many examples of Poulenc’s vacillating mood swings can be found throughout his music and certainly Les Soirée de Nazelles is no exception. The performer finds himself in the midst of a serious, quasi-religious passage one moment only to be interrupted by the gaiety of a Parisian music hall or circus the next.

One of the fascinations of Poulenc’s larger works…is the way the composer hurls all the main ingredients into the stewpot with a seemingly reckless disregard for logic and compatibility. Mozartian pastiche will be followed instantly by Stravinskian dissonance, cool melodist by vulgar café tunes, languishing apoggiaturas by diatonic sequences, lifted wholesale from the baroque. This effect of happy-go-lucky carelessness is just another magic illusion: the incongruities are deliberate, and their juxtaposition meticulously organized with an unerring sense of timing.\textsuperscript{40}


\textsuperscript{39} Bernac, 29.

These emotional fluctuations occur not only between movements, but often several times within individual movements as well. This constant juxtaposition of moods and personalities can make Poulenc’s music difficult to interpret, and is the reason why many of his contemporaries did not take his music seriously. The frivolity of his style will almost certainly keep Poulenc from being considered one of the most influential composers of the twentieth century, but there are few composers that have left such a genuine and unmistakable musical footprint behind. His former teacher Charles Koechlin remarked “You know how to be, sincerely and simply, yourself.”

This tribute was echoed by Poulenc’s close friend Dom Angélico Surchamp, a Benedictine Monk in Yonne, France:

He always knew how to proportion his work to his talents.
He never tried to appear other than he was, either in his music or his life.

Francis Poulenc died suddenly, of a heart attack, on January 30, 1963. He was alone in his Paris apartment. He left no compositions unfinished. His friend Ned Rorem said:

Certain composers when they die, like Hindemith, are placed in cold storage for a generation, sometimes forever. A far smaller group—Bartók, for instance—are no sooner cold than they suffer a resurgence. What Parisian in 1950 would have dreamed that Poulenc, not Milhaud or Honegger, would eventually be the composer to represent his generation?

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43 Rorem, 15.
CHAPTER 5

ELEMENTS OF POULENC’S COMPOSITIONAL STYLE
AS SEEN IN LES SOIRÉES DE NAZELLES

The compositions of Francis Poulenc flow gracefully and are the epitome of French elegance and lightness. His music reflects the diverse aspects of his personality, and depicts such scenes as street musicians, outdoor cafés, music halls and circus bands, all of which were a hallmark of his Parisian life. At the same time, he was a neo-classical purist who was influenced by a number of great composers. Poulenc borrowed musical ideas from many, but he always managed to turn anything he lifted into something that was uniquely his own.

Poulenc tended to judge his solo piano music more harshly than his works in other genres.

Many of my pieces have failed because I know too well how to write for the piano. It is curious, but true, that as soon as I begin writing piano accompaniments for my songs, I begin to be innovative. Similarly, my piano writing with orchestra or chamber ensemble is of a different order. It is the solo piano that somehow escapes me. With it I am a victim of false pretenses.\(^{44}\)

Although his early piano lessons before his association with Viñes were not remarkable, Poulenc’s facility at the keyboard and his preference for mature, complex music enabled him to become quite proficient technically at a young age. Keith Daniel suggests that because Poulenc has such a good, knowledgeable pianist, his “familiarity with the piano literature led him to facile borrowing.” Daniel also says that Poulenc’s borrowing from composers such as Chopin and Schumann resulted in his “most artificial, least personal body of music…\(^{45}\)”


\(^{45}\) Daniel, 163.
The works for solo piano display much variety and consist primarily of short pieces or “miniatures.” Several of these pieces are grouped in suites such as *Trois pieces* (1928), *Trois mouvements perpétuels* (1918), and *Villageoises* (1933). For titles he used such nineteenth-century labels as “nocturnes”, “improvisations”, “intermezzo”, and “impromptu”. Other titles were descriptive of places he had visited such as *Napoli* (1925) and *Les Soirées de Nazelles* (1936).

In a series of radio interviews conducted in 1954 with critic Claude Rostand, Poulenc gave this advice to those who chose to perform his piano music:

> The great technical errors which deface my piano music, to the point of rendering it unrecognizable, are: tempo rubato, stinginess in the use of pedal, and too much articulation in certain arpeggiated phrases which should, on the other hand, be rather smooth and blurred. Let me explain: I hate rubato…once a tempo is adopted, under no circumstances should it be altered until I so indicate. Never stretch or shorten a beat. That drives me crazy. As for the use of pedals, that is the great secret behind my piano music (and often its true drama!) *One can never use enough pedal, do you hear me! never enough! never enough!* In a fast movement, I often rely on the pedal for the realization of a harmonic passage that could not be rendered completely in writing. [Finally], the arpeggios and accompanimental chords should be in the background most of the time so that the melody can be heard.46

Poulenc’s conception of the piano lies somewhere between the percussive effects of Prokofiev and Stravinsky, and the ambiguity of color touted by Debussy and Scriabin. With few exceptions, he preferred not to explore the extreme sonorities of the instrument as did Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) and Béla Bartok (1881-1945), his closer contemporaries. Instead, he chose to remain true to the conservative techniques handed down by Chopin, Schumann, and

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Satie. In order to understand Poulenc’s compositional methods, it is constructive to look at several aspects of his techniques as demonstrated in his work for solo piano *Les Soirées de Nazelles*.

**MELODY**

As a master of French *mélodie*, he insisted that melody was, without question, the most important musical element. Poulenc’s melodies are simple, pleasing, emotionally expressive, and easily remembered. Melodies set in fast tempos are full of gaiety, playfulness, and mischief. The slow melodies are sentimental and almost always exhibit an undercurrent of nostalgia or melancholy. Poulenc’s melodies are often accompanied by thick chords (Ex. 5.1) or play the dual role of melody as well as accompaniment (Ex. 5.2).

Ex. 5.1. *Les Soirées de Nazelles* – *Le gout du Malheur*, measures 2-6
Composer Ned Rorem (b. 1923) once said:

Take Chopin’s dominant sevenths, Ravel’s major sevenths, Fauré’s straight triads, Debussy’s minor ninths, Mussorgsky’s augmented fourths. Filter them, as Satie did, through the added-sixth chords of vaudeville [which the French called “le music hall”], blending a pint of Couperin with a quart of Stravinsky, and you get the harmony of Poulenc.\footnote{Rorem, 12.}

Although based on functional diatonic harmony, Poulenc’s harmonic language is distinctive. Daniel Keith points to a comment made by the critic Clarendon:

Poulenc was the best harmonist of his generation, the last lover of harmony; let us not complain that his chords are too beautiful.\footnote{Clarendon, Bernard Gavoty. “Hommage à Poulenc.” \textit{Le Figaro,} 13 Dec. 1963, 26. quoted in Keith W. Daniel, \textit{Francis Poulenc: His Artistic Development and Musical Style}. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1982, 73.}
Daniel also states that Poulenc’s chords and the manner in which he employs them in harmonic progressions provide interest in a “luxuriant, even blatantly seductive” way when compared with the methods of his contemporaries.⁴⁹

One of Poulenc’s favorite devices is the use of unprepared modulations. Passages of tonal stability are often interrupted by short phrases of nonfunctional harmony that may also be of a vastly different character (Ex. 5.3). Chords are, almost without exception, built in thirds. He favored seventh chords, freely adding sevenths even to tonic triads.


Since most of Poulenc’s piano works are short, they do not display the elaborate developmental procedures so common in larger, sonata-type structures. A typical Poulenc development consists of a succession of melodies that modulate rapidly and frequently to unexpected tonal areas (Ex. 5.4). These numerous free modulations drive the music forward and prevent monotony from lack of thematic development. Poulenc often uses natural signs to cancel out old key signatures (Ex. 5.5), enabling seamless movement from one tonality to the next without the encumbrance of constant key changes.

⁴⁹ Daniel, 73.
Ex. 5.4. *Les Soirées de Nazelles – Le Coeur sur la main*, measures 27-36

Ex. 5.5. *Les Soirées de Nazelles – Cadence (#2)*, measures 6-14
Poulenc’s distinctive harmonic style is often enhanced by the use of “wrong-note” dissonances. This technique is demonstrated below in the use of clashing minor seconds (Ex. 5.6). In this example, Poulenc is using the “wrong-notes” to enhance the playful mood.

Ex. 5.6. *Les Soirées de Nazelles – Le comble de la distinction*, measures 6-10

In example 5.7, Poulenc uses the “wrong-note” dissonance to color the lovely, melancholy melody in B-flat minor. The “wrong-note” is the C-flat in measures two through four, which should be heard slightly over the surrounding chordal textures. This presents a balancing challenge between the hands for the performer. Poulenc stopped this particular dissonance on an accented G-flat on the downbeat of measure 5. Although dissonance appears elsewhere in the movement, Poulenc uses it in a more subtle way.
Although Poulenc reportedly did not like jazz, its influence can be heard in his music.

Late in 1920, he and his Les Six companions could be found listening to American jazz on Saturday afternoons at the Gaya, a small Parisian bar. While Poulenc shunned overt references to jazz in his own compositions, he enjoyed these afternoon soirées and was often seen sitting in at the piano during some of the jam sessions. There are no direct references to the jazz idiom in Les Soirées de Nazelles, but Poulenc does appear to be ahead of his time with his use of seventh chords with added ninths and thirteenths. Examples 5.8 and 5.9 show Poulenc’s nod towards the jazz idiom, with jazz chord symbols indicated on beats two and four in measures 5 and 6, and beats two and one in measures 14 and 15, respectively.

Ex. 5.7. Les Soirées de Nazelles –– Le Gout du Malheur, measures 1-7

50 Daniel, 92.
Poulenc often creates a sense of ambiguity by using colorful final chords. Three of the movements in *Les Soirées de Nazelles* end in such a manner, as illustrated in examples 5.10-5.12.
Poulenc’s use of pedal plays an important part in his harmonic language. He credits his teacher Ricardo Viñes as being the definitive master of pedal technique.

No one understood the employment of pedals, an essential factor of modern music, better than Viñes. He was able to play clearly with a flood of pedal!\textsuperscript{51}

Most of Poulenc’s pedal markings appear towards the ends of movements immediately preceding cadential passages. At other times, he uses the pedal to create a wash of color in the manner of Debussy and Ravel (Ex. 5.13).

Ex. 5.13. *Les Soirées de Nazelles* – *Cadence*, measures 2-3

**DYNAMICS**

Poulenc uses numerous dynamic markings throughout, although there are relatively few crescendo and diminuendo markings. Poulenc recalls the Baroque practice of terraced dynamics as he often prefers dynamic “levels” or “planes” to achieve maximum contrast (Ex. 5.14). *Les Soirées de Nazelles* is replete with sudden dynamic shifts that are reflective of the highs and lows of Poulenc’s personality.

TEMPO

In all his music, Poulenc marks tempi with extreme care. He may change tempi several times during a movement to correspond with a mood or character change. He wants the performer to maintain a steady tempo without rubato or rallentando (sans ralentir) unless he specifically indicates it. Example 5.15 illustrates Poulenc’s method of indicating tempo changes as well as the designation he uses to drive the music forward to the end.

Ex. 5.15. Les Soirées de Nazelles – Le comble de la distinction, measures 20-30
STRUCTURE

Poulenc’s piano works are generally short and non-developmenta. His compositional forms of choice are ABA and ABA’. Phrase lengths of four bars are most prevalent; often, however, Poulenc’s phrasing is deceptive. Several measures of regular phrasing may be interrupted by a three-bar or five-bar phrase. Poulenc’s harmonic rhythm is similarly unpredictable. He often inserts short passages of frequent and rapid harmonic change (Ex. 5.16).

\[ E^\flat \ G_b \ A \ C \ c \ e^\flat \ f^\# \ C^7 \]

Ex. 5.16. *Les Soirées de Nazelles – Le contentement de soi*, measures 12-15

TEXTURE

Knowing his weakness in the art of counterpoint, Poulenc seldom tried to simulate contrapuntal textures in his compositions. Brief passages of imitation appear from time to time, as seen in example 5.17.

Ex. 5.17. *Les Soirées de Nazelles – Préambule*, measures 11-12
Keith Daniel points out that, in his piano music, Poulenc’s preferred textures include: “melody with chordal and/or arpeggiated accompaniment; parallel and octave writing; and, less frequently, melody over an ostinato.” Example 5.18 illustrates the first of these textures, melody over a chordal accompaniment. In this case, the melody notes are doubled below the chords and played with the thumb. As with much of Poulenc’s piano music, voicing issues become paramount. This passage requires that the pianist transfer the weight of the right hand to the 4th and 5th fingers in order to effectively voice the top notes of the chords, thereby ensuring effective melodic projections.

Ex. 5.18. *Les Soirées de Nazelles – Final*, measures 30-35

Many of Poulenc’s melodies float effortlessly over flowing arpeggiations that provide a smooth, forward motion. Poulenc certainly did not pioneer this idea of simple arpeggiation as accompanimental figuration, but the manner in which he employs the technique enhances his distinctive harmonic style (Ex. 5.19).

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52 Daniel, 167.
Francis Poulenc once said “My music is my portrait.” His lifelong friend Pierre Bernac wrote:

He always had the privilege of being able to do what he wished. This applies as much to his life as to his work. He always followed the impulses of his sensitivity and of his heart, and did so with full abandon.

Poulenc was traditional in the ways he followed eighteenth-century practices of tonality. His music is French to the core and is infused with the prankishness, melancholic, religious, and sensual aspects of his personality. He was not governed by systems or rules. Poulenc’s music is intuitive and was written from the heart.

Ex. 5.19. Les Soirées de Nazelles – Finale, measures 23-26

54 Bernac, 30.
CHAPTER 6

AN ANALYTICAL VIEW OF LES SOIRÉES DE NAZELLES

Dr. Maurice Hinson states that as Poulenc’s longest work for solo piano, *Les Soirée de Nazelles* is “Poulenc’s most important solo piano work…complete pianism is required.”\(^{55}\) The work was sketched out during 1930 while Poulenc was in Nazelles, in central France, at the home of a family friend he lovingly referred to as his favorite aunt, Tante Liénard, to whom it is dedicated: “à la mémoire de ma tante LIÉNARD, en souvenir de Nazelles.”\(^{56}\) Reminiscent of the shorter character pieces of Schubert and Schumann, *Les Soirée* is a collection of musical “portraits”. Poulenc spent many evenings in the salon of Tante Liénard’s home playing the piano, and it is suggested that these portraits were of people present in the salon, perhaps family members or composers he held close to his heart.\(^{57}\) Poulenc judged this work critically and later cut variations 4-6 from the definitive performance edition. Keith Daniel suggests that Poulenc was justified in omitting these particular variations because they lack the charm of the others.\(^{58}\)

The work was expanded and revised until 1936, and was premiered in England on December 31\(^{st}\) of that same year, with the composer himself at the keyboard. As the early sketches of the work are no longer available, it is impossible to discern the actual compositional changes that occurred along the way. Figure 1 illustrates the differences between the original 1930 version of *Les Soirées de Nazelles* and the final performance edition of 1937.

\(^{58}\) Daniel, 187.
**Les Soirées de Nazelles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1930 Sketch</th>
<th>1936 Final Version</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ouverture</td>
<td>Préambule; Cadence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Le Contentement de soi</td>
<td>1. Le Comble de la distinction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Le Joie de vivre</td>
<td>2. Le Coeur sur la main</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L’Instinct</td>
<td>3. La Désinvolture et la discrétion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Suite dans les idées</td>
<td>4. La Suite dans les idées</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Le Comble de la distinction</td>
<td>5. Le Charme enjôleur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Le Charme voulu</td>
<td>6. Le Contentement de soi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Les Points de suspension</td>
<td>7. Le Goût du Malheur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romance</td>
<td>8. L’Alerte vieillesse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frissons</td>
<td>Cadence; Final</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nerfs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soupirs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L’Alerte vieillesse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Les Soirées de Nazelles is a suite of eight variations which are enclosed by a ‘Préambule’ and a ‘Final’. Poulenc inserted the following preface to the final edition:

The variations that form the center of this work were improvised during long country evenings when the author played musical “portraits” with his friends gathered around the piano. We hope today that these variations, presented here between a Préambule and a Finale’ will have the power to evoke this game in the frame of a Touraine salon, with a window open to the evening.59

The only person that was identified by her portrait was “Tante Liénard,” who is depicted in Variation 7, “L’Alerte vieillesse.” Poulenc did clarify that the Final is a self-portrait, because of its many diverse moods.

Poulenc’s idea of musically portraying his friends is not unprecedented. In 1899, the year of Poulenc’s birth, English composer Edward Elgar (1857-1934) completed his Variations on an Original Theme for Orchestra, Op. 36, also known as the “Enigma” Variations. A theme and fourteen variations, Elgar’s orchestral piece also comprises musical portrayals of his circle of close acquaintances. Like Poulenc’s work, each movement conveys a general impression of its subject’s personality. However, whereas each of Elgar’s variations are built on the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic elements of a theme, only one of Poulenc’s movements, number five, reflects back to his Préambule. Therefore, Les Soirées de Nazelle does not fit into the classical mold of a theme and variations.

Figure 5.2 charts the basic design of Les Soirées de Nazelle, including key/overall tonality, tempo, internal key changes, and ending cadences of each movement. Six of the twelve movements have conclusive cadential endings while the other six have been left open-ended due to the use of a $V^7$ with chromatic extensions that serve as preparation for the next movement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movement</th>
<th>Préambule</th>
<th>Cadence</th>
<th>Variation 1</th>
<th>Variation 2</th>
<th>Variation 3</th>
<th>Variation 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key/Overall Tonality</td>
<td>b♭ minor</td>
<td>G Major</td>
<td>g minor</td>
<td>c minor</td>
<td>G Major</td>
<td>e♭ minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tempo</td>
<td>Extrêmement animé</td>
<td>Largo</td>
<td>Vif et gai</td>
<td>Modéré</td>
<td>Presto</td>
<td>Très Largo et pompeux</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Key Changes</td>
<td>B♭, G, E♭, D♭, B♭</td>
<td>Tonal instability</td>
<td>g, G</td>
<td>C, E, C, D♭, A♭</td>
<td>G, c, G</td>
<td>e♭, tonal instability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ending Cadence</td>
<td>Open: jazz chord</td>
<td>Conclusive</td>
<td>Conclusive</td>
<td>V′ to Var. 3</td>
<td>Conclusive</td>
<td>V′ to Var. 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movement</th>
<th>Variation 5</th>
<th>Variation 6</th>
<th>Variation 7</th>
<th>Variation 8</th>
<th>Cadence</th>
<th>Final</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key/Overall Tonality</td>
<td>f♯ minor</td>
<td>C Major</td>
<td>Gb Major</td>
<td>a minor</td>
<td>D Major</td>
<td>A Major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tempo</td>
<td>Très allant</td>
<td>Très vite</td>
<td>Lent et mélancolique</td>
<td>Très rapide</td>
<td>Très large et très librement</td>
<td>Follement vite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Key changes</td>
<td>f♯, C, D♭, C</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>D, C</td>
<td>A, C, D♭, C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ending Cadence</td>
<td>V′ to Var. 6</td>
<td>Conclusive</td>
<td>V′ to Var. 8</td>
<td>Conclusive</td>
<td>V′ to Final</td>
<td>Conclusive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 6.2. Layout Overview of *Les Soirées de Nazelles*
Préambule is a waltz in B-flat minor that begins with percussive octaves in the lowest range of the piano (Ex. 6.1). The waltz motif that evolves from these octaves is teeming with “wrong-note” dissonances in the form of major sevenths and minor ninths.

Interesting to note about this example is the number of times B♭ is surrounded by the neighbor notes C♭ and A natural. The neighbor relationship actually begins in the opening measure, but it is obscured by the low register. These introductory measures appear to set the stage for a

Ex. 6.1. Les Soirées de Nazelles – Préambule – measures 1-19
movement that is dark and brooding. However, Poulenc uses the motive in measure 2 to gradually develop a pleasant and charming mood that is filled with lilting melodies. He pauses along the way (mm. 67-92) to pay homage to his good friend Manuel de Falla (1876-1946), and then continues to move forward with the motive of measure 2. The waltz is suddenly interrupted (m. 100) by a percussive intrusion that ends as abruptly as it began. The last seven measures of the movement (mm. 103-109) do not appear to be related to the rest of the movement in any way. Keith Daniel suggests that the last eight measures were written in 1936 rather than in 1930, “for the mood and the harmonies are irrefutably connected to Poulenc’s religious style, which evolved during the summer of 1936.”

Poulenc’s lifelong friendship with harpsichordist Wanda Landowska was quite influential on his keyboard writing. The slow tempo, elaborate figuration, frequent fermatas, and rolled chords of the Cadence are suggestive of eighteenth-century harpsichord works by French composers Francois Couperin (1668-1733) and Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764). Examples 6.2 and 6.3 demonstrate the similarities between Rameau’s figuration and that of Poulenc’s Cadence. Rolled chords create minor, diminished, and major-minor seventh sonorities that are framed by harmonic minor and octatonic scales. The brief movement arrives at a dominant pedal point (m. 5), which resolves in the final measure. The Cadence ends with a conclusive $V^7$ to I cadence in G major that includes a 4-3 suspension (mm. 8-9).

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60 Daniel, 186.
Ex. 6.2. Jean-Philippe Rameau – Sarabande - Nouvelles Suites de Pièces de Clavecin ou 2e Livre (d’après l’Edition du temps) [ca. 1728]

Ex. 6.3. Les Soirées de Nazelles – Cadence, measures 1-5
Using G as a common tone, Poulenc switches from the brieflly established major mode to minor for Variation 1, *Le comble de la distinction* (“The Height of Distinction”). This lively variation, along with Variation II, shows a marked influence of Polish composer Frederic Chopin (1810-1946) in its use of tempo rubato. Poulenc normally rejected the use of rubato, and is careful to dictate exactly where it should occur.

Example 6.4 also presents another mark that is used quite often in *Les Soirées de Nazelles*. Poulenc uses what appears to be a vocal breath mark (’) in several measures, and there are nine of these punctuation marks in this particular variation. Poulenc uses these “musical hiccups” to briefly arrest the momentum of the melodic line (mm. 1-2 and 9-10), and to separate musical ideas (mm. 11-13 and 23). These marks are seen in every movement of *Les Soirées de Nazelles*, with the exception of the first *Cadence*. *Le comble de la distinction* is eclectic in nature, presenting several ideas that seemingly have nothing to do with each another, but Poulenc pours them into his unique musical blender, producing a movement that is full of wit and playfulness.

![Music Example](image)

Ex. 6.4. *Les Soirées de Nazelles – Le comble de la distinction*, measures 1-5
Once again using G as a common tone (Ex. 6.5), Poulenc moves effortlessly into Variation II, *Le Coeur sur la main* (“Heart on Sleeve”).

Ex. 6.5. *Les Soirées de Nazelles - Le Coeur sur la main*, measures 1-10

This movement is full of tempo and key changes (Ex. 6.6). The lush harmonies of this passage are punctuated with accent marks on beats one and four, providing the elegant Parisian lilt that pervades much of Poulenc’s piano music. Whereas variation I is multi-faceted and offers just a hint of return of the opening (mm. 23-24), *Le Coeur sur la main* is a cohesive vignette in ABCBA’ form. However, Poulenc leaves this movement open-ended, arriving on a D\(^7\#5\) chord (m. 55). This colorful pseudo-dominant sets up the tonality of the next movement.

Continuing the common tone thread of G, Variation III, *La désinvolture et la discretion* (“Offhand and Discreet”) displays Poulenc at his wittiest; it is also fraught with technical difficulties for the pianist. The sixteenth to eighth-note motif (mm.1-2, 13-14, and 17-18) is rather perilous given the movement’s “presto” tempo marking (Ex. 6.7).

Ex. 6.7. *Les Soirées de Nazelles – La désinvolture et la discretion*, measures 1-4
Examples 6.8 and 6.9 show that Poulenc also used the melody in measures 21-24 in his *Ariette* from *Feuilles d’Album* (1933).

Ex. 6.8 - *Les Soirées de Nazelles* - *La désinvolture et la discretion*, measures 21-24

Ex. 6.9 – Poulenc – *Ariette* - *Feuilles d’Album*, measures 10-11

One prevalent characteristic of Poulenc’s compositional technique is evident in this movement (mm.45-47); rocking back and forth on two pitches over two measures (Ex. 6.10).

Ex. 6.10. *Les Soirées de Nazelles* - *La désinvolture et la discretion*, measures 43-50
It is at this point that Poulenc decided to amend the final performance version of *Les Soirées de Nazelles* by omitting variations IV through VI. It is interesting to note that the end of Variation III could easily connect to the beginning of Variation VII, considering the half-step relationship of the two movements.

A foreground analysis of the work up to this point suggests a thread of a common tone throughout the first five movements. Each of the movements either begins or ends with a G in the top voice, indicating that these variations could actually form a small “group” in the overall scheme.

Variation IV, *La suite dans les idées* (“A Series of Ideas”), recalls the double dotting technique of the French Baroque. There is no key signature, although E-flat minor appears to be the predominant tonality. Poulenc chose to write *La suite dans les idées* on three staves, evoking several of Debussy’s *Preludes* (Ex. 6.11). Chords that allude to the jazz idiom are shown in this movement: E♭₇♭₅ (m. 5); Eb₁³(b₉) (m. 14); and D♭₁³/b₀ (m. 15). After arriving on a V₇, Poulenc instructs the performer to move immediately to the next movement (“attaquer de suite”).

Ex. 6.11. *Les Soirées de Nazelles – La suite dans les idées*, measures 13-15
Poulenc executes a seamless move into Variation V, *Le charme enjôleur* (“Coaxing charm”). The theme that begins in F# minor (mm. 22-23), appears again in truncated form (mm. 22-23), this time in F minor, before returning to the original key supported by diminished harmonies (mm. 68-77). Poulenc recalls the tribute to Manuel de Falla (mm. 40-54) that was introduced in the *Préambule* (mm. 67-79). This movement changes from light and elegant to dark and sinister (mm. 68-90), which could be particularly insightful if, indeed, this movement alludes to Poulenc’s view of his own personality. The inner turmoil with which he lived showed up in much of his piano music, and the opposing moods that appear in *Le charme enjôleur* are good examples of his wide emotional swings and how suddenly they could shift. Poulenc, again, leaves the movement open-ended with a G⁷b⁹+⁵, setting up the next variation.

Variation VI, *Le contentement de soi* (“Contentment with One’s Self”), is marked très *vite et très sec* (“very fast and dry”) and suggests the style of Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) with its jagged tonal shifts, percussiveness, dry articulation, and high register writing (Ex. 6.12). It is certain that Prokofiev’s devil-may-care humor appealed to Poulenc, and that attitude is obviously prevalent in this variation. Poulenc works his way up to the highest register of the piano (mm. 19-26) and descends by a series of V-I progressions (mm. 28-38). One can envision a lively, high-kicking line of showgirls in a Parisian dance hall (mm. 58-65). Poulenc brings in a full band (mm. 58-65) and the gaiety just gets under way when it is interrupted by a return to the opening motif (mm. 66-69).

The music ascends to the upper register of the piano via a string of parallel seventh chords (Ex. 6.13). Recalling his affinity for borrowing from other composers, example 6.13 might suggest the opening passage of Stravinsky’s *Danse russe* from his work for solo piano, *Trois Mouvements de Pétrouchka* (Ex. 6.14)
Ex. 6.12. *Les Soirées de Nazelles – Le contentement de soi*, measures 1-10

Ex. 6.13. *Les Soirées de Nazelles - Le contentement de soi*, measures 70-75
Variation VII, *Le gout du Malheur* ("A Taste for Unhappiness") is classic Poulenc with its lush harmonies and gentle, delicate melody. This movement is certainly the most melancholy of the set and it is bathed in sensual color. Poulenc instructs the performer to clearly bring out the melody while blurring the underlying harmonies ("le chant doucement en dehors"), creating a balancing act that is a challenge for any pianist. As previously noted, Poulenc tended to use his own melodies or accompanimental figures in more than one work. As seen in examples 6.15 and 6.16 the left-hand accompanimental figure (mm. 10-11) is also found in the opening of the second movement of his *Sextuor pour piano, flute, hautbois, clarinette, bassoon et cor* (1931-1939). The melody in measures 10-11 returns again in a lower register (mm. 23-24) and again in D-flat (mm. 29-30). This open-ended movement concludes with a diminished chord, providing an unsettling segue that, if spelled enharmonically, becomes vii\(^{67}\) of Variation VIII.
Ex. 6.15 *Les Soirées de Nazelles – Le gout du Malheur*, measures 8-14

Ex. 6.16 *Sextour*, movement II – *Divertissement*, measures 1-2
Variation VIII, *L’alerte vieillesse* (“Sprightly Old Age”) depicts Poulenc’s dear friend Tante Liénard, a woman in her seventies. She was a colorful character who appreciated Stravinsky, modern art, a good glass of wine and, more than likely, would have approved of being portrayed ‘a la Prokofiev’. This movement has a driving quality and requires a light, rapid and well-articulated touch. Example 6.17 shows Tante Liénard’s “theme music” (mm. 3-10). Poulenc’s cleverly articulated portrayal makes it easy to visualize this puckish elderly woman. Pianists should note the strong resemblance to the Scherzo in Prokofiev’s *Piano Sonata No. 2* in D minor (Ex. 6.18).

Ex. 6.17 *Les Soirées de Nazelles – L’alerte vieillesse*, measures 1-11
Poulenc again recycles a melody that he has used in another composition (mm. 28-33) when he recalls the second movement of his *Concerto pour deux pianos* (1932). Examples 6.19 and 6.20 show the comparison between the two settings.
Poulenc ends variation VIII comically, descending into the lowest register of the keyboard (mm. 44-46). The movement ends in A major, but Poulenc obscures this by inserting an F, another of his “wrong notes,” in the penultimate measure.

The second Cadence of Les Soirées de Nazelles is a brilliant piece containing full chords, scale passages, and a wide dynamic range. Full, exultant chords (Ex. 6.21) open the brief movement. The chant-like melody (mm. 5-6) is suddenly interrupted by a series of improvisatory trills, runs, and broken chords that recall the first Cadence. Poulenc moves through a series of tonalities before arriving at an \( E^7 \) chord, leaving the movement open-ended and setting the stage for the Final.

Poulenc instructs the performer to play the Final “wildly fast, but very precise” (follement vite, mais très précis). He alludes to this movement as his “self-portrait”, which offers an interesting insight into his thoughts of his own personality. This variation is quite eclectic, as it portrays diverse sides of Poulenc’s nature. The opening is lively, boisterous, and impish.
(Ex. 6.22). The first four measures are conversational in nature and require the pianist to execute rapid register changes. The mood changes significantly (mm. 15-26) to one of calmness and gentleness. Variation II is briefly recalled (mm. 44-46) and the light, Parisian-style waltz

Ex. 6.21. *Les Soirées de Nazelles – Cadence*, measures 1-6

Ex. 6.22. *Les Soirées de Nazelles – Final*, measures 1-4
and Spanish flair from variation V make a final appearance (mm. 68-69). Poulenc recalls a favorite compositional device of Franz Liszt (1811-1886) with his thematic transformation of the exultant chords from the previous *Cadence*. The bravura has now been transformed into a tender, quasi-religious statement (Ex. 23).

Ex. 6.23. *Les Soirées de Nazelles – Final*, measures 88-100
Keith Daniel suggests that, like the last seven measures of the *Préambule*, measures 90 through 100 were possibly added in 1936 after a more somber Poulenc had returned to his religious roots. The *Final* appears to end quietly, but Poulenc has the last laugh as he suddenly crashes in with a full, orchestral C major chord. The inner struggle with which Poulenc lived is certainly reflected by the numerous mood changes within the *Final*, the movement he called his “self-portrait.”

A final look at the overall formal scheme of *Les Soirées de Nazelles* reveals a musical triptych. The first five movements, *Préambule* through variation III, all have the common thread of G, and form the first group. Variations IV through VI form the second group. Incidentally, these are the variations which Poulenc omitted from the final version. It is interesting that this group’s key relationship – G\(^b\), F-sharp minor (enharmonic), and C – form a tritone pole and do appear to be misfits in the work. Like the first group, the third group - variations VII through the *Final* - also has a common musical thread of A.

Perhaps there was a method behind Poulenc’s organization of *Les Soirées de Nazelles*, or perhaps the above-mentioned triptych was only happenstance in an ongoing effort for his music to always appear improvisatory in nature. At any rate, *Les Soirées de Nazelles* is a delightful and provocative piece for any pianist. While it challenges on a purely technical level, it also requires sensitivity from the performer in discovering the many facets of Poulenc’s personality as they are illustrated through quick-changing details of dynamics, rhythm, and texture. *Les Soirées de Nazelles* addresses many skills that are needed by the pianist and it can add great interest to any recital program.

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61 Daniel, 187.
CONCLUSION

As a composer, Francis Poulenc has been under-appreciated and overlooked by many contemporary performers and teachers. Poulenc did not blaze many original musical trails, but he wrote unashamedly as he felt, paying little heed to musical fashions. He was content to use conventional harmony, but in a manner that was distinctively his own. Poulenc’s piano works are reflective of his diverse personality, and *Les Soirées de Nazelles* is no exception. Although he suffered many bouts of depression, he was a man of immense charm and had a zest for life that his friends found infectious. Friendship was extremely important to Poulenc, and he sought to portray those he was closest to in this set of variations. His unique musical language is both captivating and provocative and is presented in many guises throughout the work. As Poulenc’s most technically challenging work for solo piano, *Les Soirées de Nazelles* should only be performed by advanced pianists, and only then by performers who are willing to seek to understand the complex nature of its composer. Critics of his day considered him a lesser composer and to some extent, that attitude is still prevalent. However, Poulenc’s piano works are excellent examples of the changing attitudes in French music at the turn-of-the-twentieth-century and they will add beauty and charm to any program.
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Gay Grosz lives in Shreveport, Louisiana, where she lives with her husband, Ken. She began piano studies at the age of six with Mrs. Gay Cook of Shreveport. She attended East Texas Baptist College in Marshall, Texas, where she studied with Mrs. Glenda Collins. After two years of college, she decided to enter the work force and spent the next twelve years as administrative assistant at the Louisiana State University Medical Center in Shreveport. During these years, she studied periodically with Mrs. Nina Wideman. Deciding to return to college as a non-traditional student, Ms. Grosz attended Centenary College, where she received a full-tuition scholarship and studied piano with Mrs. Constance Carroll. Upon graduation, she remained at Centenary as full-time staff accompanist, a position she held for eight years before becoming a full-time faculty member.

Ms. Grosz decided to pursue further education and attended Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. During work on her master’s degree in piano performance, she again studied with Mrs. Constance Carroll. Four years after receiving the master’s degree, she returned to LSU to begin pursuit of the Doctor of Music Arts degree in piano performance, and was awarded a graduate assistantship to perform accompanying duties. She studied with Dr. Jennifer Hayghe for one year and is currently a student of Dr. Willis Delony, Barineau Professor of Keyboard Studies and Professor of Jazz Studies. While at LSU, Ms. Grosz accompanied the A Cappella Choir, coached for the LSU Opera Company, performed in the LSU Symphony Orchestra, and accompanied many recitals for undergraduate as well as graduate students.

After completing course work, Ms. Grosz returned to her position at Centenary College. She currently teaches piano, accompanying, chamber music, and piano literature as well as accompanies student, faculty, and guest recitals. She serves as accompanist for the
internationally known Nena Wideman Piano Competition that is held in Shreveport, Louisiana, each year. She also serves as coach/accompanist for Shreveport Opera and Opera East Texas, and is principle pianist for the Shreveport Symphony Orchestra.

Ms. Grosz is a member of the Greater Shreveport Music Teachers Association, the Louisiana Music Teachers Association, the Music Teachers National Association, and the American Guild of Organists. She is also a principle performer with the Baroque Artists Association of Shreveport and the Evangeline Trio.