AN ANALYSIS OF FRANCIS POULENC’S *SEXTUOR*

FIRST MOVEMENT

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Francis Poulenc was an early twentieth-century French pianist and composer. Throughout his lifetime, Poulenc wrote for many different ensembles, including ballet, orchestra, voice and piano, solo piano, opera, film, and a variety of chamber groups. Poulenc’s musical style developed throughout his lifetime and was affected by a number of people, events, and artistic movements. A closer examination of Poulenc’s distinctive musical style will provide the musician and the listener alike with a better understanding of this singular composer.

Francis Poulenc’s musical style can be traced to a number of important circumstances in his life. Born in January 1899 to a prosperous Parisian family, Poulenc’s parental heritage had a profound impact on his musical career. His father, Emile Poulenc, was from the French department of Aveyron, one of the most devoutly Catholic regions of the country. In describing his father’s personal faith, Poulenc depicted his father as “religious, without the slightest trace of pettiness.”¹ Poulenc embraced his father’s faith, remaining deeply Catholic throughout his lifetime. His mother, Jenny, née Royer, hailed from a family of Parisian artist-craftsmen. She was considered to be an “urban socialite,” a free-thinker, and an artist.² As a native of Paris and a member of the bourgeois artistic society, Poulenc’s mother encouraged the young child’s attraction to poetry, painting, literature, drama, ballet, and cinema.³ Her family, particularly her brother, also influenced Poulenc’s artistic development by taking him to art galleries, concerts, and plays at a very young age. Poulenc’s parents shared an appreciation for music, and his mother, an

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² Chimènes, “Francis Poulenc.”
amateur pianist, became his first musical instructor when he was only five years old.\footnote{Daniel, 2.} After his parents’ untimely deaths, Poulenc explained his parents’ diverse backgrounds as a defining factor in his musical personality. To his father, he attributed his deep Catholic faith, passed down through generations of the Aveyronais; to his mother, he credited his artistic heritage.\footnote{Chimènes, “Francis Poulenc.”} Even a marginal grasp on the influences of Poulenc’s early life proves valuable to the performer attempting to interpret the divergent strains, sacred and profane, running through much of Poulenc’s music.

In 1914, Poulenc became the pupil of Richard Viñes, a pianist who profoundly influence his young student’s career.\footnote{Pamela Poulin, “Three Styles in One: Poulenc’s Chamber Works for Wind Instruments.” \textit{The Music Review} 50, no. 3-4 (Aug./Nov. 1989): 270-271.} Poulenc considered Viñes “far more than a teacher, was a spiritual mentor and the dedicatee or first performer of his earliest works.”\footnote{Chimènes, “Francis Poulenc.”}

In 1918, Poulenc entered the military as a conscript, and served in this capacity until 1921. After being released from duty, he began taking compositions lessons Charles Koechlin. Before this instruction, however, Poulenc had already composed several pieces. He was autodidactic throughout much of his life, learning through examining the scores of past and present composers. Although audiences loved his pieces, Viñes saw a need for composition lessons.

Throughout his lifetime, Poulenc’s music became popular among audiences and performers alike. Despite this widespread acclaim, his music is rarely a topic of analytical or theoretical discussion because of Poulenc’s inconsistency of system. As Poulenc himself stated, “I am not concerned with principles and I am proud of that; thank God! I
have no system of writing…and as for inspiration, it is so mysterious that it is wiser not
to try to explain it.”

Poulenc’s compositional style is best reflected in his chamber works for winds. This preference is illustrated by the number of compositions he wrote including winds; only three out of the thirteen chamber works do not feature winds prominently. Poulenc wrote chamber works for wind instruments throughout his lifetime, but only Sextuor had the advantage of being written and rewritten over the course of seven years. This work demonstrates both his predilection for the wind family and his inclination toward piano chamber music. It also reveals and combines several of Poulenc’s different musical styles, developed throughout his lifetime; these include his experimental, popular, and Neoclassical styles. A closer examination of this work, first by means of a formal analysis and then through an in-depth discussion of his compositional characteristics, will allow the performer to give a much more nuanced and informed performance of this work.

Sextuor, also known as the Sextet, is a chamber work for flute, oboe, clarinet, French horn, bassoon, and piano. Poulenc began composing this piece in 1932, and it was premiered in December 1933. However, Poulenc continued revising this work throughout the succeeding years, and finally published it with Chester of London in 1939. This final version was performed on December 9, 1940 at an Association Musicale Contemporaine concert. Poulenc described Sextuor as, “chamber music of the

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8 Poulin, 270.
9 Daniel, 116.
most straightforward kind: an homage to the wind instruments which I have loved from
the moment I began composing.”¹¹ Knowing more about the first movement of this
piece, Allegro vivace, also described as “the hurly-burly of everyday life,” will help the
performance. Also, looking at the first movement alone contains a wealth of writing that
exemplifies the many faces of Poulenc’s musical style.

Many of Poulenc’s musical forms reflect Neoclassicism, a popular style among
composers of the twentieth century. Like many of his chamber works, the first movement
of Sextuor is in a modified ternary form.¹² A five measure introduction commences with
a rapid A melodic minor scale that is quickly transformed in the third beat of m. 1 to an A
natural minor scale, ending on a G-sharp in mm. 2. The winds then play an energetic,
monophonic melody with off-beat accents, leading to the first theme group in mm. 6.
Example 1: Poulenc, Sextuor, first movement, mm. 1-5.

¹¹ Daniel, 116.
¹² Daniel, 58.
Unlike a traditional ternary form, the A section of *Sextuor* contains two themes. At 111 measures, the quick A section is quite extensive. The first theme group, mm. 6-63 tosses the theme throughout different parts. There are times when the melody is doubled, while the piano and other instruments provide the accompaniment. The theme keeps returning in the original key of A minor. Harmonically, Poulenc touches upon several different keys, but has no traditional harmonic changes. Shown in example 3, the piano accompaniment left hand figure is in the key of F major with an A natural minor descending scale. The next measure plays e minor in the left hand with a G-sharp minor ascending scale. This is a classic example of how Poulenc jumps to different keys.
Example 3: Poulenc, *Sextuor*, first movement, mm. 14-16.

At mm. 64 the second theme group is introduced by cantabile melody in the flute and piano.

Example 4: Poulenc, *Sextuor*, first movement, mm. 63-6.

The second theme in the A section is in the key of B-flat, the Neopolitan chord in the key of A minor. As indicated *Presser tres peu*, the cantabile theme is faster in tempo.
The piano part, doubling the melody quite often, is passed around among different instruments. The tempo pushes forward to the end of the A section, and abruptly ends on a G major chord with an added A-flat.

Example 5: Poulenc, *Sextuor*, first movement, m. 111.

![Example 5: Poulenc, Sextuor, first movement, m. 111.](image)

The slow B section is introduced by a lyrical bassoon melody in mm. 112.

Example 6: Poulenc, *Sextuor*, first movement, mm. 112-25.

![Example 6: Poulenc, Sextuor, first movement, mm. 112-25.](image)

In mm.120 piano takes over the melody line. As indicated by *Subitement, Presque le double plus lent trainer*, the tempo of the B section is half the speed of both A sections. The melody in the piano in mm. 120 is modeled after the introduction, but the note lengths are doubled in the B section.

Example 7: Poulenc, *Sextuor*, first movement, mm. 120-125.

![Example 7: Poulenc, Sextuor, first movement, mm. 120-125.](image)
Example 8: Poulenc, Sextuor, first movement, mm. 3-4.

The B section ends on a F-sharp and C-sharp open chord followed by a fermata.

Suddenly the A’ is brought back starting with the first theme.

Example 9: Poulenc, Sextuor, first movement, mm. 178-183.
In the A’ section, the second theme group is omitted entirely, reducing the length of this section to only thirty-eight measures. The first theme group is brought back in a different key, now in the key of D minor. In the piano part, there is no change in the key signature, just different accidentals. Poulenc “preferred to repeat his themes, to restate them in a new key and/or with different scoring or accompaniment, or to move immediately to another contrasting idea, perhaps returning to the first at a later time.”


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13 Daniel, 59.
An extensive twenty-eight measure coda begins in mm. 222.

Example 11: Poulenc, *Sextuor*, first movement, mm. 222-225.
Although a discussion of the second movement of *Sextuor* is beyond the realm of this paper, it is interesting to note that the tempo patterns of the first and second movements are opposite. As already noted, the ternary form of the first movement included fast A and A’ sections and a slower B section. The second movement features slow A and A’ sections and a fast, eccentric B section. This reversal of patterns may reflect Poulenc’s reinterpretation of the Classical ideal of symmetry, but it also provides a much-needed sense of variety to a performance of both movements simultaneously.

Although the above analysis provides an overview of the first movement, many more details must be examined to fully grasp the disparate elements of Poulenc’s compositional style. Poulenc’s use of neoclassicism has already been discussed in terms of his formal structures, but his use of motives and themes also reveals a sense of order and design reminiscent of the Classical era. Like one of his favorite composers, W.A.
Mozart, Poulenc uses several different themes in his A section to create theme groups. In addition, Poulenc also repeats and develops his motives before moving on to another motive. For example, mm. 31-37 the solo in the clarinet is passed to the oboe and flute before moving on to the next motive, which is also repeated several times. Similar to many moments in Mozart, this technique is used throughout Poulenc’s entire first movement.

Example 12: Poulenc, Sextuor, first movement, mm. 31-37.

\[\text{Example 12: Poulenc, Sextuor, first movement, mm. 31-37.}\]

\[\text{Ivry, 9.}\]
Mozart was also known for his memorable tunes, which were simple in structure and pleasing to the ear.\textsuperscript{15} Similarly, nearly all of Poulenc’s tunes are unforgettable and tuneful. Although some of the melodic lines in \textit{Sextuor} have been described as “jagged and somewhat diffuse,” Poulenc almost always manages to reinterpret even the most disjunct tune in a melodic and lyrical sense later in the piece.\textsuperscript{16} For example, in the first movement of \textit{Sextuor}, the opening melody is angular.

Example 13: Poulenc, \textit{Sextuor}, first movement, mm. 3-4.

These short motives are repeated throughout the piece, sometimes as an exact reproduction of the opening melody and other times with variations. For example, in the B section, the motive occurs in the piano part, slowed down considerably with notes augmented to twice the original speed; here, the tune makes a beautiful, lyrical melody. In the B section, this melody also has an even structure, with two groups of two measures each followed by two groups of one measure each.

The first theme in the A section returns unexpectedly several times throughout the first movement. Throughout the slow section there are several lyrical tunes played throughout. A few of the melodies used in the slow section are melodies that were

\textsuperscript{15} Daniel, 67.
\textsuperscript{16} Daniel, 67-68.
played in the faster movement. In the next example it shows the melody in the piano part that is then played in the oboe part.


Example 15: Poulenc, *Sextuor*, first movement, mm. 138-41.

Poulenc’s melody “are considerably more convoluted or disjunct, but an overriding emphasis on the diatonic notes is always in evidence.”\(^{17}\) Poulenc often adds chromaticism to diatonic line, which usually are analyzed as added major sevenths. These non-scalar chromatic notes have been justified as “a result of his flexible harmonic style and freedom of modulation.”\(^{18}\) For example, in one of his *Lenten Motets*, Poulenc retains the diatonic line but colorfully adds chromaticisms, creating unique harmonies amidst the clear B minor tonality.

Example 16: Poulenc, *Lenten Motets*.\(^ {19}\)

\(^{17}\) Daniel, 64.  
\(^{18}\) Daniel, 65.  
\(^{19}\) Daniel, 64.
An example of his flexible harmonic style and freedom of modulation is evident in the first theme group of *Sextuor*. In m. 41, the harmony alludes to F major, but the added major seventh in the piano, clarinet, and flute undermines a clear sense of key. In m. 45, the key suddenly shifts and the pattern occurring in mm. 41-44 is sequenced up a minor third. Here the tonality is touching upon the key of A-flat, but again it is undermined by the major seventh in the piano, flute, and bassoon. At m. 47, the key touches to F-sharp minor. In m. 49, an ascending chromatic line comes to the forefront; in this same measure, the key of A is also being tonicized, but the reoccurring A in the piano part. Touching upon four keys within twelve measures is a classic example of Poulenc’s use of “flexible harmonic style and freedom of modulation.”  

The chromatic run in the French horn from mm.43-4 is an example of his emphasis on diatonic lines with chromatic notes added in. Key changes and chromatic alterations occur frequently throughout this entire movement.

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20 Daniel, 65.
Example 17: Poulenc, *Sextuor*, first movement, mm. 41-52.
Poulenc also experimented with chromaticism in transitional locations in *Sextuor.*\(^{21}\) In Example 10, the piano is shifting from A minor to B-flat major. Notice in particular how Poulenc manages to transition to B-flat with little sense of traditional harmonic functions.

Example 18: Poulenc, *Sextuor,* first movement, mm. 58-63

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\(^{21}\) Poulin, 272.
Much of Poulenc’s music is tonal, but he frequently omits key signatures from his music, preferring instead to suggest keys via accidentals. Also, his music does not have intense chromaticism, but rather the chromatic tones are “usually a means of embellishing diatonic textures.”

Heavily influenced by the music of Debussy, Poulenc frequently employs seventh and ninth chords simultaneously with tertian. For example, in the B section of *Sextuor*, mm. 132-3 begin with tertian harmonies. However, the second chord of both measures has an added ninth.

Example 19: Poulenc, *Sextuor*, first movement, mm. 130-133.

Example 11 also demonstrates Poulenc’s use of experimental tonality.

Throughout his career, he consistently pushed the boundaries of tonality, “incorporating non-tonal materials within the context of tonality.”

Poulenc’s harmonic language includes “wrong-note” dissonances, so-called because their traditional harmonies with one or more “wrong notes” added in for intentional dissonance, and the added sevenths,

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22 Poulin, 272.
23 Poulin, 272.
ninths, and thirteenths, as discussed earlier.\textsuperscript{24} As seen in Example 1, Poulenc often disguises the harmony via the use of “wrong notes;” here it seems as if the music in the key of A minor, but the second chord in m. 6 is comprised of a cluster of different tones that returns frequently throughout the entire first movement.

Example 20: Poulenc, \textit{Sextuor}, first movement, mm. 6-7.

One element which is featured in many of the B sections of Poulenc’s works is his popular style, derived from ballads of the 1930s and 40s. During his childhood in Paris, Poulenc often heard these songs on the streets and along the banks of the Marne River. He commented that “I’ve often been reproached about my “street music’ side. Its genuineness has been suspected, and yet there’s nothing more genuine in me.”\textsuperscript{25} Popular ballads, music hall songs, and circus music all found their way into Poulenc’s music, usually in the B section of his pieces, as mentioned above. Poulenc frequently transmuted popular tunes into a more Classical style by lifting arch-shaped melodies out of the more common music and fashioning it to serve his purposes. For example, m. 120 in the B section of \textit{Sextuor} resembles a popular song of the early 1900s, \textit{Melancholy Baby}.

\textsuperscript{26} The underlying harmonies in this example, such as the flat-ninth chord followed by the E-flat

\textsuperscript{24} Daniel, 88.
\textsuperscript{25} Poulin, 277
\textsuperscript{26} Poulin, 278.
seventh chord, A-flat, and B-flat eleventh chord, are also elements of a more popular style.

Example 21: Poulenc, *Sextuor*, first movement, mm. 120-121.

*Sextuor* is an excellent example of Poulenc’s treatment of the piano in chamber music. As an accomplished pianist, Poulenc claimed that “many of my pieces have failed because I know too well how to write for the piano…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 pretense.”27 Because Poulenc himself was a very skilled pianist, he rarely let the pianist take a break, preferring to have the pianist double other instruments rather than refrain from playing.

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27 Daniel, 163.

Poulenc employed many of the same compositional techniques discussed above in his melodies. With regard to accompaniment, he tended to treat the piano like an equal partner to the voice, often doubling the melody of the vocalist for short periods of time. The piano always enhances the expression of text, even if the accompaniment is simple. He also preferred short melodic motives comprising theme groups in his pieces, with infrequent use of longer unbroken lines. The harmonic language in most of his songs is tonal, but there are also instances of the various types of dissonances discussed previously.

The first movement of *Sextuor* provides both performer and listener with an insightful excursion into Poulenc’s diverse musical style. Throughout, one can identify a

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29 Wood, 63.
multitude of musical influences that Poulenc absorbed into his musical style, ranging from Classical thematic structures to popular melodies and harmonies. *Sextuor* also demonstrates Poulenc’s partiality for wind instruments, his attachment to the piano, and the development of his three musical styles.
Bibliography


