



Francis Poulenc / January 7, 1899 – January 30, 1963

SUITE FROM LES BICHES GLORIA

Poulenc belonged in the 1920s to an avant-garde circle of French composers called, Les Six. Their style of composing reflected a reaction against Debussy and the impressionists as well as against super-heated romanticism and Germanic formality. Les Six rejected the prevailing idea that a composer had to be some kind of strange being battling with demons, communing with nature, or struggling with the cosmos. They believed instead that a composer could be, to quote Aaron Copland, a regular fellow “who liked to go to nightclubs like everybody else.”

The youthful Poulenc fit this description to a “t.” He was intentionally an enfant terrible, audacious in spirit, extroverted, and brash in manner. His early music reflected these characteristics, giving it the timeless feeling that it is fresh and new. He said, “I am not a cubist musician, even less a futurist, and certainly not an impressionist. I’m a musician without a label. What counts is not what is played, but what is played again and again.” And here we are 100 years later with two of his enduring pieces.

Poulenc wrote Les biches on commission for a ballet from Serge Diaghilev of the Ballet Russes. Les biches (without a “t”) meant Darling ladies. Poulenc described it as “an atmospheric ballet. I had the idea to situate a grand party in a vast, white country drawing room, with an immense blue divan as the only article of furniture. Twenty ravishing and flirtatious young women would frolic about with three handsome men dressed as oarsmen. It’s not a question of love, but of pleasure, and it creates the erotic atmosphere of my early 20s.” Years later, he extracted the sunny suite of six instrumental numbers we’ll hear tonight, which has always been a concert favorite for its spirit and wit.

After years filled with unabashed antics, Poulenc returned to Catholicism into which he was born and from which he had strayed, producing thereafter a stream of religious works. He approached religious music, however, with the same playful sense of humor and love-of-life style as before. No requiems, thank you.

The Gloria, which is a setting of the Gloria text of the Catholic Mass ordinary, exemplifies this approach. In fact, one stuffy critic panned it as sacrilegious – but maybe he had a point. In response to the criticism, Poulenc said, “While writing it I had in mind those Crozzoli frescoes with angels sticking out their tongues, and also some solemn-looking Benedictine monks that I saw playing soccer one day.”

Poulenc was a free spirit. One of his friends said, “There is in him something of the monk and the street urchin.” Both show through in his captivating music. I might note that he gave this program annotator some good advice: “Above all, do not analyze my music—love it!”