

Keith W. Daniel. *Francis Poulenc: His Artistic Development and Musical Style* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), 390 pp.

Defining a composer's style and artistic development is an imposing task. A composer's style is what makes his music his. A definition of that style would determine all the features common to individual works, separating those specific to the composer from those common to his contemporaries. An account of his artistic development would add to the definition of his style the sources and changing nature of that style.

This is the central concern of Keith W. Daniel's book, the first complete survey of the music of Poulenc. Considering both the diversity of sources for Poulenc's style and the size and diversity of his output, Daniel set himself a sizable undertaking. While the resulting study does not reach any great depth in dealing with individual works or with Poulenc's style as a whole, the book is a good introduction to the composer's life and works.

Although not intended as a biography, the book includes a brief outline of the composer's life, concentrating on Poulenc's professional career. Unlike many of his colleagues, Poulenc was not trained at the Conservatoire. Mr. Daniel discusses Poulenc's studies with the pianist, Ricardo Viñes, as well as the composer's place in "Les Nouveaux Jeunes" or "Les Six." Also included are the writers and poets whose texts Poulenc set; the author details Poulenc's professional relations with Cocteau, Apollinaire, and Eluard. As the author himself points out, Poulenc's life and career have already been dealt with more extensively elsewhere, for example, in Henri Hell's *Francis Poulenc, musicien français*.

Most of the book, as evidenced by its title, is given over to the central question of Poulenc's style and the place of individual works within his development as a composer. Mr. Daniel is not entirely successful in dealing with this. The sheer size of the repertoire is perhaps too great for a single-volume study: Poulenc wrote about 150 songs for voice and piano. In his attempt to be comprehensive, Mr. Daniel is sometimes superficial in his treatment of individual works.

One of the central problems in defining a composer's style is an inclination to make sweeping generalizations. "Nevertheless, his style can and ought to be described in order to discover its unique blend of traditional techniques and a modern aesthetic."¹ Mr. Daniel's generalization that Poulenc's compositional techniques were traditional becomes the main flaw in the book. His view of the composer as a traditionalist rather than as an innovator leads to descriptions of the music in analytic terms which are equally traditional. The descriptions of the music are atomistic. The author describes melodic,

harmonic, rhythmic, contrapuntal, formal, instrumentation, and dissonance practices as separate entities. The features obvious to anyone are easily described: Poulenc's conservative choice of genre and instrumentation and the brevity of many of his works. Other features of Poulenc's music are sufficiently similar to older practices that Mr. Daniel's choice of terminology serves adequately as an analogy. It is important to note that he did not set out to analyze individual works and so he does not attempt to explain the coherence of any individual piece. The language is an attempt to describe certain features of the works in terms which will be easily understood by the reader. However, if the reader were unfamiliar with a particular work being discussed, some of Mr. Daniel's statements might prove misleading.

The author's terminology is least clear when he discusses the formal construction of the music and the melodic and harmonic language. He says "Poulenc's formal structures are quite conservative, reflecting the neoclassic tendency to hark back to the conventions of the early 18th century. The most prevalent in the instrumental music is modified ternary form (ABA')." It is true that many of Poulenc's instrumental works follow a pattern of statement-contrast-return. However, Mr. Daniel's assertion needs amplification on two points. First, Poulenc's use of contrast often involved changes in meter and tempo, as well as changes in melodic content. This should be stated as being an integral feature of Poulenc's formal structures, rather than being mentioned later on in the book. Otherwise, the reader might be led to think that Poulenc's instrumental forms resembled classical Menuet and Trio, or perhaps, da capo aria form. Second, models for ternary forms with central sections in contrasting tempi and meter are often found in 19th-century music. Thus, the first movements of Poulenc's Trio and Sextet bear a closer resemblance to some 19th-century piano music, in which two more-rapid sections flank a slow central section. Poulenc's use of this form is a continuation of a 19th-century tradition rather than a return to earlier models. Poulenc's ternary forms do not necessarily indicate a neoclassic influence.

Mr. Daniel's basic view of Poulenc's harmonic language is difficult to fault. "The vast majority of Poulenc's music is unambiguously tonal. Though he did not always employ key signatures (a matter of convenience in a rapidly modulating style), the music nearly always gives a sense of being firmly in a key." Certainly, in the sense that one pitch is felt as a goal, the music is tonal. However, Mr. Daniel adds, "It is also safe to say that Poulenc's harmony is fundamentally diatonic and functional. The functions are often intricate or circuitous, but they can usually be discerned." The difficulty here is with two terms, "function" and "modulation." Mr. Daniel has tacitly taken Riemann's view of function—all chords must fit as tonic, sub-dominant, or dominant—and applied it to Poulenc's music in the narrowest sense possible. His chord registration is restricted to only those passages with easily identifiable diatonic progressions. If the music departs from this at all, Mr. Daniel views the harmonic language as non-functional. He equates chord counting with function.

Mr. Daniel has defined modulation as any departure from the initial key

center, no matter how brief. "The 'game of modulations' which gives Poulenc's music such expressivity and personality, is nowhere better played than in the song '*Tu vois le feu du soir*.' Here he passes effortlessly from C-sharp minor, through such unrelated keys as A-flat minor at bar 9, B minor at bar 11, F minor at bar 14, C minor at bar 20, and B-flat minor at bar 25, finally arriving in E-flat major at bar 33. He returns to minor (E-flat) at bar 38, passes to F-sharp minor at bar 41, and returns to the home key of C-sharp minor at bar 47."⁵⁵

These views of function and modulation yield odd results when Mr. Daniel applies them to Poulenc's music. In discussing the Sextet, Mr. Daniel says of the piano part of the first movement: "Strangely enough, though the A section begins in the key of A, its return . . . is in the key of D, yet the piano accompaniment is the same for both passages; the harmonies suggested by this accompaniment are among the most nonfunctional that Poulenc ever wrote."⁵⁶

This analysis is highly questionable. In the first place, it is only the initial two measures of the two parallel phrases which indicate different tonal areas. Both times the lines lead back to the same pitches in the woodwind parts in the space of eight measures. Second, while a key center of A may be said to be established by the material preceding the entrance of the piano figure mentioned by Mr. Daniel in the first instance, in the second instance the area of D is suggested only by the opening octave leap in the winds. The close of the contrasting "B" section does not suggest D very strongly; if anything it suggests F-sharp.

The difficulty with this as analysis lies with taking such a narrow view of function. The harmonic language of any composer working in the 20th century will not be exactly equivalent to that of earlier composers. The passage Mr. Daniel cites in the Sextet cannot be adequately explained in terms of an analytic method which deals only with a diatonic collection. In part, Mr. Daniel suggests the solution to this difficulty when, in discussing the use of seventh and ninth chords in Poulenc's music, he says: "What is unusual is Poulenc's insistence on added sevenths on the tonic triad, along with the normal seventh chords on the other scale degrees. Though Poulenc might have denied it, this practice can be traced back to Fauré, one of the most, though subtle harmonic innovators of the late 19th and early 20th centuries."⁵⁷ The question should be raised as to whether Mr. Daniel's method of chord registration would meet with any great success with music by Poulenc's immediate predecessors, or indeed, how well it works in explaining French, as opposed to German, harmonic practices.

Again, Mr. Daniel is not seeking an analysis of coherence within Poulenc's music; the terms he uses might be justifiable because they convey the sound of the music to a certain extent. The treatment of dissonance and harmony as two separate elements is an awkward compromise between analysis and description. Mr. Daniel develops a distinction in Poulenc's style by suggesting types of dissonance treatment. The first, "wrong-note" dissonance, "involves the addition of one or more notes 'out-of-tune' with their conventionally

determined context.”⁸ The second, “harsh” dissonance, is described thus: “While ‘wrong-note’ is dissonant against a conventional background, ‘harsh dissonance’ is more autonomous, not as easily analyzed or ‘cleaned up.’”⁹ The third type is Poulenc’s use of added note chords, sevenths, ninths, and thirteenth. The question remains that if Mr. Daniel had started from a different premise regarding Poulenc’s harmonic language, one which did not see the composer’s harmony as basically diatonic, would he be led to make the same distinctions among the types of Poulenc’s dissonance treatment? Are sevenths, ninths, and thirteenth really dissonant in the context of Poulenc’s music?

These are questions raised by Mr. Daniel’s discussion of Poulenc’s style. Given the type of analysis used, Mr. Daniel does succeed in uncovering a great deal of the nature of that style. Often he draws interesting comparisons between Poulenc’s works and possible sources in other composers’ works. In addition to the comparison with Fauré mentioned earlier, a particularly intriguing instance is the discussion of the influence of Claude Le Jeune’s choral music on Poulenc. Given Le Jeune’s interest in a naturalistic setting of French, and the great number of vocal works, both solo and choral, by Poulenc, this is a comparison which might be fruitful to investigate.

In general, Mr. Daniel’s discussion of the background of the works seems more helpful than his description of the music. In his attempt to be all-encompassing, some pieces are treated so briefly and superficially that there seems to be no reason to have included them at all. For instance, the mention of the *Impromptu for Piano*, “No. 9, in D major, is so fleeting as to be precarious. It tumbles off the fingers in one continuous flow, resulting in melodic snatches rather than characteristic Poulencian ‘tunes.’ The tail leaves us with a particularly ingratiating final impression.”¹⁰ It is difficult to say what this establishes about the piece other than that it would seem to be short and fast. This kind of commentary seems more suited to program notes than to a serious study of a composer. One wishes the author had simply omitted it.

On the whole, Mr. Daniel is to be commended for providing an often provocative study. His method of analysis and discussion raises some questions about our assumptions in dealing with the music of a 20th-century composer who is viewed as basically conservative and traditional. Mr. Daniel has raised many issues worthy of further investigation. It is a fine first step in a better understanding of the composer and his works.

—Howard Meltzer

NOTES

¹ Keith W. Daniel, *Francis Poulenc: His Artistic Development and Musical Style* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), p. 57.

² *Ibid.*, p. 58.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 75–76.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

Wolfgang Hildesheimer. *Mozart*. Marion Faber, translator. (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1982)*

Wolfgang Hildesheimer is a self-proclaimed novelist, playwright, painter, and psychoanalytic patient. It is in the last-named capacity that he feels qualified to add to the “unending failure” of attempts to write about Mozart.

For it is impossible to understand any figure of the past, let alone a genius, if one has never attempted self-understanding. Since there is surely not much affinity between the psyche of a genius and that of his interpreter, the latter must apply the perceptions of psychoanalysis as he himself has experienced it.¹

To be sure, words like “neurosis,” “trauma,” and “repression” abound, but only in the introductory pages. It is not at all apparent whether the rest of the book is grounded on a psychoanalytical approach, at least not to the unpsychoanalyzed reader.

The insight into the Mozartian psyche that Hildesheimer achieves is that Mozart’s music is not autobiographical.

Mozart’s reactions to the external and internal conditions of his life as revealed in the documents are not illuminated by his works. Moreover, they are obscured, unconsciously but systematically, and sometimes by Mozart himself. This is both a thesis of my essay and one of its conclusions.²

This is not exactly a revelation. The same thing could be said about most pre-Romantic creative figures. Hildesheimer, however, seems to have anticipated the unimpressed and uncooperative reader. He attempts to head off, so to speak, any rebellious reaction on the part of the reader right at the outset by suggesting that a critical response reveals a personality disorder:

I am, then, fully conscious of my dependence on the reader’s power of imagination and willingness to imagine; one cannot convince where an iron will refuses to understand, where an automatic defense mechanism rejects a proposed insight before testing it.³