

19. Poulenc

Sonata for Horn, Trumpet and Trombone: movement I

(For Unit 3: Developing Musical Understanding)

Background information and performance circumstances

Biography

- Francis Poulenc was a French composer born in 1899.
- Poulenc was a member of a group of composers known as Les Six.
- The members of Les Six all shared a similar musical outlook.
- They found inspiration in the popular music of Paris, whether that of street musicians, the music halls or the circus.
- In 1922, Poulenc composed the piece *Sonata for Horn, Trumpet and Trombone*.
- Poulenc died in 1963.

Sonata for Horn, Trumpet and Trombone

- Was inspired by the Russian composer Stravinsky and pieces like the 'Vivo' from Stravinsky's ballet *Pulcinella*, which was completed only two years earlier.
- *Sonata for Horn, Trumpet and Trombone* shares stylistic elements with Stravinsky's pieces.
- Both composers wrote for Diaghilev's ballet company, the Ballets Russes.
- The *Sonata for Horn, Trumpet and Trombone* has many of the characteristics of the Neo-Classical style.

Neoclassical Style

- Movements in this new style were often short – unlike the large-scale movements of late Romantic composers.
- Structures were based on simple traditional forms, such as rondo and simple, binary and ternary forms.
- Harmonies were similar to those of eighteenth-century composers but were often 'spiced up' with added note discords.
- Rhythms often reflected the influence of jazz, especially its syncopated style, and time signatures tended to change frequently.
- Pieces used a much wider variety of instrumentation and instrumental techniques than would be found in eighteenth-century music.
- Melodies were often broadly tonal and diatonic.
- Poulenc's piece is light hearted and makes no attempt at producing a profound emotional effect.

Performing forces and their handling

- Poulenc was unhappy writing for solo strings and even went so far as to throw away a recently written string quartet in 1947.
- He preferred to write for piano (his own instrument) and/or wind instruments. His sonatas for clarinet and piano, oboe and piano, and flute and piano are widely performed today.
- Despite suggestions of eighteenth-century style in some aspects of this music, no eighteenth-century composer would have written for this instrumental combination.
- The modern trumpet with valves could play chromatic music as in bar 39, which would have been impossible on the eighteenth-century instrument.
- The trumpet part is wide ranging, with some particularly wide leaps, e.g. two octaves and a tone from its lowest note in the piece (F# below middle C, bar 21) to its highest (A, bar 37).
- The trumpet is the main solo instrument, though the horn takes over the principal tune occasionally (e.g. bar 30).
- The trumpet has a virtuoso flourish in bar 39.
- The trombone and trumpet have a comic, 'oom-pah' accompaniment from bars 40 to bar 45.
- The trombone has many awkward leaps, e.g. bar 30.
- The horn has some very low notes in bar 74 (sounding bottom G).

Texture

- There is a simple melody-dominated homophony texture at the beginning. The trumpet here has the tune, the trombone plays a simple bass line, and the horn has alternating notes which provide harmony.
- Sometimes the top two instruments join forces in two-part texture, e.g. bar 12, where they are in 6ths. Note that the horn in F sounds a perfect 5th below.
- Monophony appears in bars 22-25, where the tune is shared between the instruments.
- There are various three-part textures, including bar 26 where the trumpet and trombone move together in two-part counterpoint, while the horn has wide-ranging broken chords.
- The 'oom-pah' accompaniment from bars 40 to bar 45 has already been mentioned.
- In the last bar all the instruments move together in octaves, in homorhythm.

Structure

The structure is a very loose ternary form containing several short themes. The first section, for instance, being composed of three separate ideas.

The overall structure is as follows.

Bars 1-25 Section A: G major

1-8: Main theme modulating to D major.

9-17 and 17-21: Faster subsidiary pair of themes.

22: Return of opening idea but slower and with suggestions of tonic minor (Gm).

Bars 26-57 Section B

26: New slower theme in E flat, played by the trumpet.

30: The horn then takes over.

34: The trumpet resumes the theme.

39: A four-bar linking section includes two octave leaps for trumpet, followed by a miniature trumpet cadenza.

40: A further theme, related to the opening melody of the movement, is heard in B flat.

Bars 58-end Section A (including 4 bar coda)

Return of the main theme in the tonic key (G). Music from the end of Section B (from bar 48) is then interpolated (added in).

73: The subsidiary ideas return.

86: A short chromatic coda, gradually slowing down, begins.

Tonality

- The music is fundamentally tonal.
- There are frequent discords, which reduce the strength of the keys.
- Frequent chromatic notes also weaken the sense of key.
- The coda (bar 86) includes a chromatic scalar phrase in the trombone.
- Poulenc tends to modulate to remote keys instead of closely related ones.
- The beginning is in G major
- The middle section is in the unrelated key of E flat (bar 26), though there are a number of chromatic notes, including the A and B naturals in the trombone (bars 26-28).
- The music at bar 40 is in B flat.

Harmony

As there are only three instruments, with no chordal instrument like a piano, harmonies are often quite bare. The last bar is all in octaves with no chordal notes at all.

- What appear to be simple perfect cadences (e.g. bar 4) are often transformed by discord.
- In bar 4 Poulenc avoids the traditional I_c-V-I by introducing the dissonant C in the horn. The second chord is a V₇ and the final chord is a simple root position tonic chord.

- Harmony is often outlined by broken chords. At the beginning of the middle section (bar 26) there is a first inversion chord of E flat, with the horn outlining the root and fifth of the chord.
- In bars 86-87 there is a pedal B flat on the trumpet, sounding underneath the trombone's chromatic descent.

Melody

- Frequently the melodies are simple diatonic tunes, e.g. main theme in G, bars 1-4.
- Often the tune outlines broken chords, e.g. the first three notes of the trumpet music.
- Simple balanced phrase structure can be found (e.g. bars 1-8), even if the cadences sometimes occur on the 'wrong' beats.
- There are occasional large leaps, e.g. the octave in bar 2.
- There are leaps of two octaves in the trumpet part in bar 36.
- Conjunct music is also often found, e.g. trumpet bar 4.
- This sometimes extends to more scalar music e.g. bar 9.
- The trumpet scale bar 39 contains chromatic notes.
- Tunes often feature repeated notes, e.g. trumpet melody bar 18.
- There are occasional ornamental phrases e.g. the grace notes in bar 12.

Rhythm and metre

- The principal melody contains mainly quavers and semiquavers, with crotchets for the cadence.
- Tunes often begin on the anacrusis (upbeat), e.g. the first phrase.
- There is a semiquaver scale in free rhythm, bar 39.
- There is syncopation in the two upper parts in bars 13-14.
- Rhythm is sometimes broken up by rests (e.g. bar 40).
- Time signatures change frequently.
- The music begins in quadruple time, but bars with three and four beats alternate from bar 9 to bar 11.
- The 9/8 time signature at bar 39 should not be regarded as compound triple, but as a way of notating a bar of 4/4 (trumpet cadenza) plus a quaver anacrusis leading into the next section of the movement.
- There are three bars in quintuple time (bars 17, 65 and 81).
- Speeds change frequently and are often used to differentiate between sections.

Further reading

Stanley Sadie (ed.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, (Oxford, 2001) Entry on Poulenc

W. Mellers, *Francis Poulenc*, (Oxford, 1993)