

19. Poulenc

Sonata for Horn, Trumpet and Trombone: movement I

(For Unit 6: Further Musical Understanding)

Background Information

Biography

- Poulenc was born in Paris on 7 January 1899 into a wealthy family.
- His father, who was director of a pharmaceutical business, was a devout Roman catholic, while his mother, who came from a family of artists and craftsmen, was of a much freer-thinking persuasion.
- Sacred and profane elements can readily be seen in Poulenc's music.
- Poulenc first learned piano with his mother, before becoming a pupil of the distinguished pianist, Ricardo Viñes from 1914 to 1917.
- Viñes, who played a major role in popularizing the works of Debussy and Ravel, introduced Poulenc to Auric, Satie and de Falla.
- In the early stages of his career, Poulenc was associated with 'Les Six', a group of composers who sought inspiration in the popular music of the time, and Paris in particular.
- The members of the group, which also included Auric, Durey, Honegger, Milhaud and Tailleferre, were strongly influenced by the theories of Jean Cocteau, a poet, novelist, dramatist, playwright, artist and filmmaker.
- Poulenc's early compositions were light in style and mood, and Cocteau described his *Suite in C* as clear, light-hearted and entertaining.
- An obvious contrast can be drawn with some other music of the period, notably the serialism of the Second Viennese School.
- By 1921 Poulenc turned to Charles Koechlin for lessons in harmony and counterpoint.
- The same year he wrote the *Promenades* for piano, in which he experimented with the styles and techniques of other composers, notably Ravel and Stravinsky.
- He composed the Trio for Horn, Trumpet and Trombone in 1922, revising it in 1945. It is heavily influenced by the neo-classical style, a harking back to structures from the past but 'spiced up' with novel technical features.
- In marked contrast to these early pieces, Poulenc subsequently composed religious choral works, notably *Stabat Mater* (1950) and *Gloria* (1959).
- Other late works include the sonatas for flute, oboe, and clarinet, clearly reflecting his preference for composing for wind instruments.

Performing Forces and Their Handling

Throughout the 19th century, brass instruments were subject to rapid development. The introduction of valves made it possible for the instruments to provide both harmonic support drawing on the notes of the harmonic series and fully chromatic, melodic lines. In the German tradition the French horn became the instrument of the hero, exemplified in the music of Wagner (Siegfried's horn) and Richard Strauss (Ein Heldenleben).

In France the natural trumpet and cornet à piston were frequently used together by Hector Berlioz.

The trombone is the oldest brass instrument in the orchestra. Its earliest medieval form was the sackbut, the term deriving from the French words sacquer (to move violently) and bouter (to push). The term trombone derives from the Italian, meaning large trumpet.

In Poulenc's piece, the tessitura of the instruments is not wide by modern standards:

- The horn has a range of two octaves and a fifth, from the concert-pitch G (bar 74) up to the concert-pitch D (bar 32). Remember that the horn in F sounds a fifth below the notated pitch.
- The trumpet ranges from F# (bar 21) to A (bar 39), two octaves and a minor 3rd above.
- The trombone has a range of two octaves and semitones from F in bar 39 to the F# in bar 86, where the skill of the player is tested on this note by the ppp dynamic.

A variety of articulations is used, ranging from legato phrases (as in the trumpet and horn melodies in bar 26 and bar 30) to sec (dry, in effect staccato) in the horn in bar 40.

All instruments are directed to play très sec in bar 4. The humour of the piece is highlighted by these sudden contrasts as in bar 55 - très marqué (well marked) immediately followed by très lié (very smooth) in bar 56 and also by the very detailed dynamic markings throughout.

Notice, for example, the trumpet part at bars 36-39 where besides the two octaves leaps, the dynamic rises from f to ff, then a triple forte in 38 before descending to piano.

The trombone is largely used as the bass instrument defining the harmony, although it exchanges lines with the horn when the trumpet melody of bar 48 returns at bar 66. It also echoes the triadic figures of the horn and trumpet at bars 23 and 25. In the last four bars it not only plays ppp but descends chromatically before dropping a 10th for the final staccato notes. The most technically demanding passage for the trombone occurs at bars 30-33 where it has rapid wide intervals including 6ths and 7ths to be played piano as an accompaniment to

the horn solo. The horn has a similarly challenging accompaniment figure in the passages either side of these bars.

Texture

With just three instruments extensive variations in texture are hard to achieve. Poulenc manages to exploit the instrumental textures so that there is as much colour and variety as possible often within adjacent bars.

He opens with melody dominated homophony with the tune in the trumpet and the chordal accompaniment split between the horn quavers and trombone crotchets.

At bar 9-17 the trombone continues its bass accompaniment but the melody is doubled in 6ths by the trumpet and horn.

At bar 22 there is a form of monody as the motif is passed through the instruments creating a continuous melodic line but going through the octaves.

A distinct three part texture occurs at bar 26 where the trombone has a sustained bass; the horn uses a two semiquaver-quaver rhythm which provides broken chordal support while the trumpet plays the melody as a form of counterpoint. At bar 30 the roles are changed as the melody goes to the horn, the trumpet plays a variation of the bass line and the trombone plays the harmonic outline. Thus the texture is maintained but variety is achieved.

A variation on melody dominated homophony is applied at bar 40 where the horn has the melody with the trumpet and trombone playing a form of 'oom-pah' accompaniment with alternating crotchets outlining the harmony.

A further use of 6ths plus a bass line is used at bar 46 with variety of colour within the texture achieved through moving the horn melody to the trumpet in bar 47 but maintaining the 6ths with the horn.

Another contrast of the same textural idea comes at bar 73 where the horn plays the bass line of the trombone from bar 10 while the trumpet and trombone play in 6ths.

A rare and brief example of a homorhythmic chordal writing occurs at bars 54/5 before another use of monodic scales in 56/7.

The B flat of the coda could be considered as a brief pedal to underscore the chromatic figure in the trombone.

A final contrast comes in the last bar with all three instruments playing in octaves.

Structure

Themes for Section A

- a - 1-8 (trumpet)
- b - 9-17 (trumpet + horn in 6ths)
- c - 18 - 21 (trumpet)

Themes for section B

- d - 26 - 29 (trumpet) + 30 - 39 (horn) + 34 (trumpet) extended
- a (modified) - 40 - 45 (horn)
- e - 48 - 55 (trumpet)
- link - 56 - 57

Reprise of Section A - a - e - b - c

Coda - 86

Although a miniature, the work shows fundamental technical skill in its construction with distinct classical style phrasing contrasting with extended phrase structures.

The overall structure is a variation on ternary form with themes from section A in the middle section and a theme from the middle section appearing in the return of A

Section A : Bars 1 - 21

Bars 1-4 is a balanced antecedent/consequent phrase of two 2-bar phrases with the melody in the trumpet (a). The humorous ending is underlined by the forte cadence which in turn defines the tonality of G major.

Bars 5 - 6 start as a repetition of the opening theme but with longer note values i.e. the trumpet loses the semiquaver and the trombone has minims.

Bars 7-8 provide a different answer taking the music to a cadence in the dominant with increased quaver movement.

Bars 9 - 17 use the idea of the moving quavers of bars 7 and 8 to develop a new idea (b) at a slightly faster tempo. This is more Stravinsky-like with meter changes and irregular phrasing.

Bars 18 - 21 involve a third theme (c) on the trumpet defined by repeated notes and a falling octave. This 2 bar phrase is repeated an octave lower on the trumpet but omits the semiquaver figure to cadence in G major and define the end of the first section.

Transition : 22 - 25

This uses the opening arpeggio figure shared between the instruments with longer note values for each instrument. The idea is repeated, but in the tonic minor. It also slows down in preparation for the slow middle section.

Section B: Bars 26-57

Bars 26-29 consists of a four-bar phrase of two balancing two-bar phrases. Melody (d) is heard on the trumpet, and is then repeated on the horn in bars 30 - 33. The horn melody has a modified answer in bars 32/3 with repetition of the same phrase with the addition of grace notes. At bar 34 the trumpet plays the same melody again but instead of leading to the answering phrase it plays two-octave intervals for three bars, leading into a short cadenza.

Bars 40-47 is a modified version of the opening theme (a) but played on the horn and in the key of B flat. It consists of two balanced 4 bar phrases, but bars 44 - 47 introduce textural and dynamic variations.

Bars 48-55 open with a new melodic idea (e) in the trumpet consisting of two-bar phrases and with material derived from theme (b) in bars 9-17. As the theme is repeated in bar 53 there is a rising semiquaver figure upbeat. The answer to this phrase is abruptly cut short and the rising semiquavers used to modulate equally abruptly.

Bars 55-57 are a link consisting of descending scales.

Section A (modified): Bars 57-85

Bars 57-65: Theme (a)

Bars 65-72: Interpolation of the theme (e) from bar 48.

Bars 73-85: Return of the themes (b) and (c).

Coda: Bars 86-89

The trombone has a ppp descending chromatic figure before the final bar in which all three instruments play the descending G major arpeggio, the figure which has formed the main thematic idea throughout the piece.

Tonality

The piece is in G major.

There are three main tonal areas

Section A - G major

Section B – E flat at bar 26 and B flat at bar 40

Section A - G major from 58 to the end.

The opening theme (a) consists of three repetitions of a figure using the G major arpeggio. As in classical works, the antecedent phrase moves to chord IV but affirms the tonic key in the consequent in the cadence in bar 4.

The varied repetition of the theme modulates to the dominant as is traditional. With only three instruments chords are often implied but tonality is distinct if only transient at times. Poulenc often uses major-minor shifts, notably between bars 22 and 25 with alternations between G major and minor.

At bar 26, the music moves to E flat, albeit with frequent chromatic alteration. The first section of the middle portion of the movement ends at bar 39 with the dominant seventh of B flat major, in preparation for the next phase.

At bars 54-5 there is an abrupt implied shift to D flat with the use of A flat 7 but this is immediately cancelled out by the descending figure in G, preparing the way for the return of the main theme at bar 57.

The theme at bar 65 (e) is this time played in the tonic key of G. The tonic is maintained till bar 85 but the coda has a mischievous B flat in the horn and trumpet while the trombone plays a tonally destructive chromatic line before the final statement of the tonic chord in the final bar.

Harmony

Within the context of a tonal piece Poulenc uses some strong dissonance without distorting the overall tonality and consequent harmonic progressions. It is worth noting that Poulenc was working with Koechlin at this time and was being trained on Bach Chorales. Many of the cadences are standard chorale progressions but disguised by touches of dissonance.

His opening phrase simply involves the use of the tonic chord moving to chord IV (C) in bar 2. When he returns to the tonic in bar 4 the cadence is spiced with a C in the horn disguising what would be a standard Ic chord on the first beat of the bar. It becomes the 7th of the dominant 7th on the second beat. Notice that the F# is omitted as the three part texture cannot accommodate the full four-note chord. In bar 10 he makes a rare use of a diminished chord.

In essence Poulenc's harmony is symptomatic of a reaction to the intense chromaticism of the Wagner as well as the sumptuous chromatic style of the impressionists. For Poulenc, chromatic harmonies do not have the traditional functional use but act as colouring of individual chords and cadences as described at bar 4 and at bar 10.

In bar 26 the harmony is outlined by way of horn broken chords. The melody on the 3rd beat of bar 26 (G) results in an implied dominant 13th, despite the three part texture, with the A flat in the horn acting as a 7th. This makes the progression at beats 3-4 broadly V (B flat) - vi (c minor) in the tonic key of E flat.

A further interesting progression occurs at bar 29. Here the dominant on beat 4, seemingly used to prepare for the return of E flat in bar 30, is heavily disguised with the horn adding A flat (7th), C (9th) and E natural (sharp 11th). The comma indicates a break in the music as in fact this progression does not naturally lead to E flat.

Some chromatic movement appears from bar 36 with the progression from the G major chord to A flat minor (notice the enharmonic move from B to C flat in the trombone), and then a tonal change from major to minor in bar 38, leading however to F7 in bar 39 as a tonal preparation for B flat at bar 40.

Here the underlying Bb harmony is maintained by the simple alternation of root and third in the trombone and trumpet as the horn reiterates the tonic arpeggio in the melody also echoing the I -IV movement of the opening bars.

A further feature involves the use of 4/2 chords, appearing first in bar 48. Poulenc engineers an interesting switch from this dominant seventh harmony in B flat to dominant seventh harmony in D flat at bar 55 with the use of a 4/3 chord over the same (E flat) bass note.

Pedal points are only occasionally used, e.g. G in bars 5-6 and B flat in bars 86-87.

Melody

Characteristics:

- arpeggio figures
- scale based melodies
- octave leaps and two octave leaps
- ornaments
- repeated notes
- repeated motifs
- modified motifs
- mostly balanced phrasing
- the use of dynamic extremes to enhance melodic character
- use of abrupt contrasts of legato/staccato
- humour

The essence of this music is the melody. The clear tonality and clear functional harmonic progressions support the constant melodic flow. Apart from the build up to the cadenza in bar 39 there is 'melody' in every bar.

The opening and closing bars are built around a motif using the G major arpeggio.

The opening phrase has a descending arpeggio followed by the simple repetition of the G. The repetition of the phrase three times defines the simplicity of Poulenc's style. After the third repetition he leaps an octave to lead to the cadence. The character of this melody is defined by the strong dynamic contrasts at the end of the phrase with the final notes being a scalic descent to the tonic in forte after a piano opening. These notes give the opening four bars a two octave range on the trumpet.

This balanced four bar phrase is repeated but simplified and kept within a one octave range. It now has quaver movement.

Theme (b) from bars 9 -17 has more conjunct movement. The addition of grace notes in bars 10, 12 and 16 add colour to a melody defined more by its rhythmic character and irregular phrasing than its simple scalic movement within a small tessitura of a 6th (D - F#). By contrast theme (c) opens out again with octave leaps, repeated G's and repetition an octave lower with strong dynamic contrasts.

The opening motif of the descending arpeggio is used at bar 22 but each time simplified rhythmically and passed between the three instruments so that continuity is maintained melodically in spite of the octave shifts. Contrast and character are again achieved in a simple idea as the trombone plays three notes tenuto and then the minor version staccato.

The slow legato melody of bar 26 is built around the chord of E flat, but leads to the most extreme melodic idea for the trumpet, namely the fff two-octave leaps. The descent in the trumpet cadenza contains some chromatic elements (E natural).

Yet another variation of the opening motif is to be found in the horn melody at bar 40, where it becomes staccato quavers with the three notes of the B flat chord and the characteristic octave leap.

The only chromatic melodic figure is that of the trombone in the coda at bars 86-7.

Rhythm and Metre

The rhythms of the melody use crotchets, quavers and semiquavers with the semiquaver anacrusis of the opening becoming a feature of the accompaniment in the horn and trombone between bars 26 and 38. It is interesting to note that there are no dotted rhythms.

The opening motif of two semiquavers followed by three quavers is subjected to too much variation throughout the piece. At bar 4 it becomes just quavers. In bars 22 and 23 it also involves quavers, before being augmented to crotchets as the music slows down.

The rhythmic character of theme (b) at bars 9 - 17 features frequent rests to break up phrases, grace notes and the use of syncopation. Coupled with metre changes from simple triple, simple quadruple and simple quintuple, this section has a pseudo-jazz feel.

Contrast is achieved in the *Plus Lent* by the use of sustained legato crotchets.

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.

Apart from the opening motivic idea semiquavers only occur as scalic figures an example would be the descending scale at bar 2 in the horn, the short rising figures at bars 53/4 or the turn or trill like figure at the ends of phrases.

The tremendous variety of colour achieved by these simple rhythmic ideas is enhanced through his use of variation in attack. The length of almost every note is specifically detailed, e.g. at bar 40 there is one tenuto note in a series of very dry staccato notes in the horn melody. In the syncopation at bars 14/5 melodic crotchets are long but accompanying crotchets in the trombone are short. Such detail to duration is a hallmark of Poulenc's style.

Reading List

Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians: Entries on Poulenc, Les Six.

Mellers, W., *Francis Poulenc*, OUP, 1993