

## AN ANALYSIS OF THE GENRE, STYLE, AND INTERPRETATIVE ASPECTS OF FRANCIS POULENC'S *PIANO SONATA FOR FOUR HANDS*

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**SUMMARY.** Composed in the 20th century, Francis Poulenc's *Piano Sonata for Four Hands* is a significant piece for piano duets. Its musical characteristics are represented in a unique way, as if it were an archive of its own. A piece of music where the composer paid close attention to every detail, even choreographing the posture and movement of the performers, which distinguished this piece from other piano four-hands compositions. The objective of this research is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the distinctive features of this sonata, along with the characteristics that are commonly found in piano duets prior to this composition.

**Keywords:** piano four-hand, Francis Poulenc, Claude Debussy, sonata.

### 1. Introduction

The *Sonata for Four Hands* (1918) by Francis Poulenc was the first work of its kind in the sonata genre for piano duo<sup>2</sup> in the development of French piano music from the age of the harpsichordists to the early twentieth century. The composer wrote it when he was nineteen years old and dedicated it to Miss Simone Tilliard<sup>3</sup>. Franck Ferraty points out that the previous year Poulenc had written a *Scherzo for two pianos* called 'Zebra', which was never

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<sup>2</sup> For the piano duo in French literature there is a wide range of well-known cycles and individual pieces by Bizet, Fauré, Schmitt, Saint-Saëns, Debussy, Ravel, Satie, Milhaud to Messiaen, Dutilleux, Boulez and others.

<sup>3</sup> Pianist, neighbor of the composer at the Nogent estate, friend since childhood. She performed his early works. She also dedicated the first song of the cycle for voice and piano Calligrammes (1948). Her letters to Poulenc are preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.



published and there is no record of its fate.<sup>4</sup> Apparently 1918 was the year of the piano duos, as Poulenc composed another piece for two pianos, *Le Jongleur* (The Juggler), as well as *Quadrille* (Quadrille) for four hands (1919), but these were lost or most likely destroyed.

The Sonata has resonated strongly with contemporary artists and performers: the Swiss conductor Ernest Ansermet says: "I cannot but express my satisfaction with this music, which has struck me as the most genuine and alive music created in France in recent times. Poulenc is one of the most attractive personalities in new music"<sup>5</sup>. Appreciating Poulenc's compositional talent, Bartók wrote in 1921 that he was greatly impressed by the Sonata for Four Hands and the Sonata for Two Clarinet<sup>6</sup>. Stravinsky recommended the work to the London publisher Chester, who published it in 1919, and Poulenc reissued it in 1939. Only this last version of Sonata is known in concert practice. There is no indication in monographic studies to what extent it has been revised from the 1918 original. I assume that the 1939 reissue was a reprinting of the work without any significant 'revision' in the text.

The sonata lasts up to six minutes at the most, strictly following the composer's tempi. Poulenc insists on their observance: 'If pianists had more confidence in my metronome markings, many "misfortunes" would be avoided'<sup>7</sup>.

Due to the brevity and specific titling of the movements, the work could be defined more as a suite. The tonal unity also points towards this idea: the residence of all movements and their individual parts in one tonal level (C) with tonal variety (Part I - C minor, Part II - C major, Part III - C major in Part I and C minor in the middle part, synthesized in the final chord with major and minor thirds). To the major-minor chordal contrasts are added pentatonic intonation nuclei, as well as the appearance of a Phrygian chord in the finale. The brevity of the movements and their clearly delineated triadicity further distances the initial impression from the stated genre nomination - sonata. And it is here that the composer's originality and powerful synthetic thinking come to the fore, integrating sonority on various levels throughout the work:

- 1) in the construction of the apparently simple three-part form as a miniature sonata form (Part I)
- 2) in the structural modulation from triadicity to sonority (Part II)
- 3) in the astonishing thematic unity pervading the entire work

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<sup>4</sup> Ferraty, Franck (2011). Francis Poulenc a son piano: un clavier bien fantasma. Paris: L'Harmattan.

<sup>5</sup> Hell, Henri (1978). Francis Poulenc, musicien français. Paris: Fayard

<sup>6</sup> Poulenc, Francis (1991). "Echo and Source": Selected Correspondence 1915-1963. London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd.

<sup>7</sup> Poulenc, Francis (1991). "Echo and Source": Selected Correspondence 1915-1963. London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd.

4) in the synthetic role of the finale, where, in addition to the arch reminiscences of the preceding movements, complex processes take place, affirming the organic relationship of the thematic cores.

Poulenc's creative individuality is encoded in this early work as in crystal. The apparent simplicity is saturated with messages. There seems to be an artistic game going on here, consciously evoked by the composer and expressed in a stage-by-stage transformation of aesthetic perception: Stating an unambiguous genre definition ("Sonata"); distancing from the stated genre idea (through the movement titles and the outward signs of suite-ness); building the sonority through the immense inner energy of the thematic and dramaturgical conception realized in an unusually short time, which precisely determines the over-concentration of ideas and messages. Thus, this early work reveals how ambiguous (and therefore so appealing) is the compositional world of Francis Poulenc - an astonishing combination of outward simplicity, accessibility, openness and inner depth that is illuminated on different levels according to the ability of performers and listeners to peel back the layers of meaning.

## 2. First movement

The first movement is entitled Prelude. In it, Poulenc sets the "climax" of the musical-perceptual challenges. In the terms of a three-movement cycle, the idea of prelude can unlock for the educated listener and performer inexhaustible allusions embedded in the history of the genre. On the one hand, associations are made with the original meaning of preluding as improvisatory music-making with an introductory function. On the other, the prelude (thought of as a 'fantasia') recalls its various incarnations in the development of the sonata (from the introduction of the prelude as the first movement in Corelli's sonatas to the fantasia-like first movement of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata). But Poulenc's approach is clearly different. It casts the idea of a toccata pulsation (historically related to the idea of an introductory movement) but organized in the clear structural and functional outlines of a miniature sonata form.

The brief introduction (Example 1, measures 1-4) is built on a sharply dissonant, hauntingly repeated in ostinato rhythm minor seventh chord with an added second (C72), compacted in the high and low register by the second piano part. Thus, at the outset the composer covers almost the entire range of the instrument with an interesting textural distribution between the two parts. From a performance point of view, the very first bars of the work pose specific technical and interpretative challenges. The composer's remark *très rythmé* (very rhythmically) requires the second pianist to articulate the

rhythm as clearly as possible. This 'compressed' dynamic and rhythmic 'code' with which the Sonata begins, and ends is reminiscent of Bartok's 'barbaro' style. The pulsating chord should be played in *ff*, distinctly, but without weight. It is necessary to achieve absolute simultaneity in the attack of the two hands with as short a stroke and "prickle" as possible. The theme in the first pianist's part should be articulated with 'sparkling' staccatos and accents, which correspond in sound emission and character to the author's recitative decisively and projected.

E.g. 1

#### Francis Poulenc. Sonata for four hands. First movement, m. 1 - 11

The beginning of the Sonata (introduction and first theme) is played with the pianists' arms "crossed". This compositional conceit contains at least two aspects related to the work's stage life and its interpretation.

The first aspect concerns the artistic effect, which in this case, however, is not an end, but is directly related to musical perception. The first pianist's outstretched arms visualize the idea of encompassing a large musical space. We can say with a high degree of certainty that Poulenc (as a composer with a strong spatial and color sense and an urge to communicate musical art) consciously relied on this visual effect. In fact, according to twentieth century works on music psychology, moments concerning the placement of performing ensembles (in this case, the pianists' hands) were highly influential in forming spatial representations in the audience<sup>8</sup>. However, this is over-explored by some performers, and one may even encounter attractive approaches, such as the first pianist playing the beginning of the Sonata not seated but standing, to enhance the spatial effect and to draw the audience's attention to the crossing of the hands as a 'show' element.

<sup>8</sup> Nazaikinsky, Eugene. On the psychology of musical perception. 1972, Moscow, Muzyka.

The second perspective to the excerpt analyzed refers to the sound extraction related to the more awkward positioning of the hands. For example, the left hand of the first pianist is in a low tessitura and the wrist is in an unusually high position. At the same time, it is necessary for the second pianist to play with the hands tucked in towards the body, with a low attack and minimal movement - a 'crouch' - to provide full space for the theme led in octaves by the first pianist. Beyond the purely technical difficulty, which any experienced instrumentalist will overcome without much problem, one other point is more significant here: in practice, the 'awkward' (atypical) position of the hands actually aids the desired sonority, because it prevents the performers from over-exposing power and depth, i.e. it is this position that to some extent 'guarantees' the touch and Poulenc's specially requested performance without weight. The interpretive concept of the Shchereva-Simeonova duo therefore excludes all external effects at the beginning of the Sonata, and the music is mastered through a special attention to tone, touch and balance, with the position of the hands being exploited to the utmost in this very direction.

The penalization to bar 26 is symbolic. I use a very short pedal 3 on the notes with tenutos to stabilize the ostinato rhythm but keep the atmosphere of tension and secco.

In measures 17-22, with the indication *très doux* (very soft, gentle), Poulenc exposes the second theme. It is sounded again on the accompanying ostinato rhythm (example 2), but with a new tone in the vertical: as. The thematic core is derived from the first theme (sub motive G-F-D), but the rhythmic organization shifts the melodic support tone from f (theme I) to g (theme II). Thus, with impressive economy, the composer achieves a striking effect of intonational renewal while preserving tonal flatness.

E.g. 2



Francis Poulenc. Sonata for four hands. First movement, m. 17-22

With the indication *très sonores* (very sonorous), are one of the composer's favourite devices, by means of which a rich palette of chiming sounds is reproduced, and which gives the music a particular pictorial charm. This sonic device is not, of course, the 'trademark' of Poulenc alone.

The middle section combines in an original way the qualities of a "b" section in the tripartite form and of a sonata development. The poetic excerpt in the solo first part (example 3) is thematically a vertical synthesis achieved by counterpointing the second theme and the descending chromatic movement from the end of the first. It is performed in legato, with a subtle sonority: *très doux* (very gentle) and *sider un peu* (slower, 'more stretched'). Perhaps this episode is one of the few occasions with a rubato idea. The filigree harp moments (measures 29, 33) momentarily sound like a Debussy-style veil. They should be played lightly and nimbly. Poulenc says that despite the anti-Debussian sentiment during his infatuation with Satie, Debussy remains the musician he prefers after Mozart. "I can't do without his music. It's like oxygen to me. In fact, the reaction to The Six was directed not against Debussy, but against "Debussyism"<sup>9</sup>.

E.g. 3



**Francis Poulenc. Sonata for four hands. First movement, m. 26-36.**

Two approaches to penalization are possible in this partition. One is the use of a solid pedal with two changes in the bar - a classical type of penalization. The other (in my opinion more masterful) requires the second pianist to cover the whole measure in half-pedal, possibly with some thinning towards the end of measure<sup>10</sup>. This will sonically nuance the first pianist's solo, and the pedal will blend the interesting "run-on" dissonances.

In the next stage of the development of the middle section, the composer placed the designation "*avec charme*" (with charm). The second pianist's part creates an allusion to a lullaby. This idyllic musical picture is suddenly interrupted as the abrupt change in texture is "cut in" with a dynamic *ff*. Poulenc notes *feroce* (fierce, angry) and *strident* (sharp, shrill). This is the third phase in the unfolding of the middle section (Example 4). The first pianist's part should be pianistically brilliant: with bright appoggiaturas and

<sup>9</sup> Bernac, Pierre. Francis Poulenc et ses melodies. 2014, Paris, Buchet Chastel, pg 40.

<sup>10</sup> On similar issues - a lecture by prof. K. Ganey on some "unconventional" ideas of penalization, delivered to students and teachers at the P. Vladigerov National Academy of Music.

virtuosic sextolets. Stability in the 4th and 5th fingers of the right hand is required, as well as played "up" by hand and wrist heavy fretting of the quarters in staccato in the left hand. *Beaucoup de pedale* (much pedaling) is the composer's logical recapitulation, requiring tight pedals to shape the dynamic and sonic volume of the climax.

E.g. 4



Francis Poulenc. Sonata for four hands. First movement, m. 41-45.

### 3. Second movement

The second movement - *Rustique - Naïf et lent* (naive, innocent and slow) is short and built in a simple three-part form. Poulenc's designation 'rustic' (*rustique*) is a product of his view of folklore. Although the composer never resorted to the use of folk quotations and sources, his music magnificently reflects the French spirit in art. It is no coincidence that Ravel says of him: "The nice thing about Poulenc is that he creates his own folklore"<sup>11</sup>. Ravel was probably referring to Poulenc's ability to create simple melodies, intonationally like some popular songs of the era. They are never quotations but are 'à la' or in the 'spirit of' the songs of his childhood in Nogent-sur-Marne or of the Parisian chansons. In a broader sense, the word *rustique* means "naturalness" and "unadulterated," which I think is the truer interpretation of the piece.

The first section is constructed as a complex period based on the principle of variant repetition. The theme is led by the left hand in legato and *mf* in the tessitura of a small octave. To sound balanced, a discreet accompaniment in the right hand is necessary (example 5a). Poulenc said that if he was sometimes dissatisfied with someone's performance, it was

<sup>11</sup> Daniel, Keith. Francis Poulenc. His Artistic Development and Musical Style. 1982, London: UMI Research Press, pg. 57

because "there was a lack of balance and proportion"<sup>12</sup>. The second variation on the theme (*trés chanté and rubato* – very sung and free) is in the first part, soloing an octave higher, doubled by the left hand of the second pianist (in the lower octave). Here, the composer preserves the idea of thematically framing the sound space, but unlike in the Prelude, he now entrusts it to the two pianists. This is made possible by the slow tempo and the uniform accompanying layer, and probably also by the search for a subtle "stereo effect" that enhances the sense of space. The theme sounds pastoral and peaceful. The special flavor of the beginning of the second movement also comes from the quasi-pentatonic sound.

The middle section (bars 9–14) in a wide register (range g3 and g2 for the first part and a large octave for the second part) has more pronounced rhythmic punctuation (example 5b). There is an intonational connection with the theme of the first section (unfolding within a descending fourth – see the enclosed motifs in example 5). Thus, the middle section takes on a developing character, but at the same time possesses its own thematic independence with the effect of complementary contrast.

### E.g. 5



**Francis Poulenc. Sonata for Four Hands, Second movement**  
a) m. 3 – 5; b) m. 9 – 11

During the exposition (measures 13–14), the two performers must simultaneously combine the different strokes deliberately sought by the composer—staccato in the prima part and legato in the secondo part. The short transition (measure 15) introduces dynamically contrasting sixteenth-

<sup>12</sup> Poulenc, Francis. *Conversations with Claude Rostand*, 1954, Paris: R. Julliard, pg 32-33



note passages (f – subito p), distributed between the two parts, which must sound as if played by a single performer – decisively, without delay. The ensemble problem, which I conditionally call "transmission" or, more precisely, "dialogue" between the two pianists, is sometimes overlooked as "well-known" and "implicit." In concert practice, however, this is a very provocative and interesting musical process. Dialogic mastery is expressed not only when a reply is correctly answered or delivered, but also when it is necessary to react flexibly – to "improvise" on stage, in the best sense of the word.

The reprise is synthetic – it integrates the themes from the first and second movements. It is here that structural modulation occurs, revealing features of sonata form.

The third part, Finale, is performed at a tempo of *Très Vite* (Very fast, =160) and (with very few deviations) with an articulate and staccato stroke. It again forms a tripartite structure: bars 1–16, tempo *très vite* = 160; bars 17–54, tempo Subito Presto = 176; bars 55–70, Tempo primo; Coda – bars 71–72, subito Presto.

The theme is a diatonic melody with an original structure (example 6). On the one hand, it gives the impression of a period of three half-phrases, the third of which is a reprise of the first. On the other hand, it can be interpreted as a chain period, in which the idea of mirror symmetry is embedded (supported at the textural level by the mirror movement in measure 3). The specific construction of the theme highlights the opening phrase as a self-representative thematic unit – vivid, recognizable, close to the folk type of music-making.

E.g. 6



Francis Poulenc. Sonata for Four Hands. Third movement, m. 1-6

Although structurally simple and limited to a range of a fifth (evoking subjective associations with a "five-finger piano exercise"), the theme carries an enormous life-affirming and optimistic charge. It should be played clearly, evenly, with all the nuances observed (alternating staccato and legato, as well as grouped in 2 or 4 sixteenth notes), in F, but lightly and nimbly – a "pearl" type of piano technique. The staccatos, played dry (*très sec*) and clearly in the first pianist's part (bars 7-8), contrast with the legato line in the second part.

#### 4. Third movement

The finale of the Sonata is based on the active development of the motifs of the theme and reminiscences of thematic material from the previous two movements. This creates an arched compositional structure and a unique theatrical effect. The arched connections are most active in the original middle section. It begins with a sharp change of tempo (*Presto*) and dynamics (*subito pp*) with the ostinato rhythm from the beginning of the first movement (Prelude), but on a pedal bass G. Figuratively speaking, section b introduces an atmosphere of mystery, reinforced by the Phrygian mode in which the theme is heard. The rhythm must remain "relentless" while the right hand phrases correctly and in *pp*. To achieve a soft sound and due to the specific sound of the low register of the piano, the use of *una corda* is appropriate.

E.g. 7



#### Francis Poulenc. Sonata for Four Hands. Third movement, m. 17–20

Within bars 17–35, there is a rapid dynamic and dramatic build-up—the climax of the movement—based on the Baroque principle of terraced dynamics from *pp* to *ff* and *fff*. The reaching of *ff* (example 8) coincides with the moment when the composer contrapoints the theme of the Finale in C minor with the second theme of the Prelude.

E.g. 8



#### Francis Poulenc. Sonata for Four Hands. Third movement, m. 27–29

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The next wave of the middle section of the Finale (bars 35–45) is another example of terraced dynamic gradation. The theme in staccato passes sequentially (from C, from E, from G) through the scale of *p*, *mf*, *f*, and *ff*, followed by a calming and pacifying passage to dynamics *p* and *pp*, which leads to an augmented version of the introduction of the second movement. Within the bars, it is necessary to maintain the clarity and distinctness of the rhythm in *pp*, with the idea of sounding insistent and "distant."

E.g. 9



Francis Poulenc. Sonata for Four Hands. Third movement, m. 51–54

The end of the Sonata is in Phrygian mode and is filled with elegant humor. The last bars are played on a single pedal, which holds the last chord (*laissez vibrer plus que la mesure*).

E.g. 10



Francis Poulenc. Sonata for Four Hands. Third movement, m. 71–72

## 5. Conclusion

The findings of the investigation disclosed that the distinctive attribute of the composition is the evolution and refinement of techniques for piano four hands, which were initially conceived to attain a more profound musical intricacy and concord, a feat unattainable through a piano solo alone. Poulenc's exquisite composition is more than just musical notation; it's a delicate piece of choreography where two performers connect to each other to express this fine composition.

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