

Concerto for Organ, Strings and Timpani

FRANCIS POULENC

BORN 1899, Paris, France

DIED 1963, Paris, France

FIRST PERFORMANCE December 1938, Hôtel Singer-Polignac, Paris, with Maurice Duruflé (organ), conducted by Nadia Boulanger

DURATION 23 minutes



If you were an ambitious composer in Paris in the 1920s and 30s, you were well advised to get to know the Princesse de Polignac. She was a remarkable woman – and fabulously wealthy, too. Born Winnaretta Singer in Yonkers, New York (and always ‘Winnie’ to her friends), she was heiress to the mighty Singer sewing machine empire, but left the US to settle in France. There, she became first a countess and then a princess by her two marriages into French nobility, and devoted herself and her immense wealth to a life of artistic (especially musical) patronage.

She was friends with everyone who was anyone in avant-garde culture at the time, from Gabriel Fauré in the 1890s to the young Benjamin Britten half a century later, and such eminent artistic figures as Marcel Proust, Claude Monet, Jean Cocteau and Colette frequented her Paris salon. She commissioned music, or had works dedicated to her, by Satie, Milhaud, Weill, Stravinsky and Ravel, among many others.

Cheeky wit and pious faith

She was also the woman behind Francis Poulenc's highly individual Concerto for

Organ, Strings and Timpani. Poulenc, too, was born into a wealthy family and never needed a job in the conventional sense, and with the cheeky wit and nonchalant sophistication of his early music, as well as his friendships with Satie and Cocteau, was quickly admitted into the Polignac circle, where he felt entirely at home. Winnie was a keen amateur organist – indeed, she'd commissioned a magnificent instrument for her Greek-revival Parisian mansion from eminent French builder Cavallé-Coll – and she asked Poulenc in 1934 for a concerto with a relatively easy solo part that she could play herself.

He gladly accepted the commission (in fact, it had first gone to his friend and fellow composer Jean Françaix, who'd turned it down), and began work. But what emerged over the four long years that the Princesse waited with increasing impatience for her concerto was very different from the effervescent, high-spirited music he'd written a few years previously.

During that time, Poulenc's world view was darkened by the seemingly inexorable rise of German and Italian fascism, and he

was deeply affected by the sudden death in a horrific car crash of his close friend, composer and critic Pierre-Octave Ferroud, at the age of just 36. Having never paid more than lip service to his Catholic faith, following the death Poulenc immediately made a pilgrimage to the ancient shrine of the Black Virgin of Rocamadour, and it was there that he found again the faith that would inspire so much of his later music – from his 1936 *Litanies à la Vierge Noire* right through to his opera *Dialogues des Carmélites* in 1956, and including the Organ Concerto you hear tonight.

Bach at the fairground

He wrote to Françaix of the Concerto: ‘This is not the happy-go-lucky Poulenc who wrote the Concerto for Two Pianos, but a Poulenc en route to the cloister – a 15th-century Poulenc, if you like.’ The composer stressed that its backward-looking style was pointed straight at Renaissance music, but in fact it's hard not to see the work as inspired directly by Bach – with a bit of Mozart here, a bit of Tchaikovsky there, and even a bit of the fairground thrown in for good measure. It's an almost disarmingly sincere work, innocent and heart-felt, ranging from ebullient *joie de vivre* to aching nostalgia, and seeming to simultaneously celebrate and poke gentle fun at the eminent French tradition of organ music that produced such masters as Widor, Vierne, Franck and Tournemire.

By the time the Princesse received the finished Concerto – in 1938 – its solo part had gone far beyond her amateur capabilities, and it was premiered in a private performance at her mansion, the Hôtel Singer-Polignac in Paris, in December 1938, with composer and organist Maurice Duruflé as soloist (who had also helped Poulenc decide on the organ voicings and registrations for the work), and Nadia Boulanger as conductor. Despite her impatience, the Princesse was deeply moved by the Concerto. After the premiere, she

wrote Poulenc a succinct but heartfelt note: ‘Its profound beauty haunts me.’ It's hard to disagree.

The music

The Concerto for Organ, Strings and Timpani is in a single movement, but within that are contained seven contrasting sections, alternating fast and slow. The organ opens the Concerto alone in an imperious, Bach-like flourish, complete with unashamedly 20th-century dissonances, the steady tread of timpani and basses its only accompaniment. After a more consoling passage for strings, the return of the organ's huge, dissonant chords leads straight into the breathless, scampering figures of the second section, whose radiant, rushing, major-key passages recur again and again throughout the Concerto.

The longer third section has more ruminative writing for the organ, and ideas tinged with typically French sophistication are passed back and forth between soloist and strings, before the stormy fourth section erupts with a dark, dance-like, *tarantella*-esque feel, as well as hints of the earlier radiant major-key music. A passionate passage for strings that sounds as though it's straight out of Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* Symphony leads into the fifth section, which begins like a Baroque-style aria but soon becomes far more jazzy and Parisian, and soon we're right in the middle of the fairground with the gloriously free-wheeling music of the sixth section, based on that radiant major-key music from earlier. Things end more ominously, however: there's a return of the imperious opening music, and despite the gently consoling strings, complete with solos for viola and cello, an unexpectedly dissonant, unsettling conclusion.