POULENC

MUSIC FOR TWO PIANOS
ANTONY GRAY & ROB HAO

POULENC: MUSIC FOR TWO PIANOS

1. **L'embarquement pour Cythère** 2:20
   Rob Hao & Antony Gray, pianos

   Concert Champêtre
   Antony Gray & Rob Hao, pianos
2. I. Allegro Molto 10:43
3. II. Andante 6:25
4. III. Finale, Presto 8:35

5. **Élégie** 5:49
   Rob Hao & Antony Gray, pianos

   Sonata for Two Pianos
   Antony Gray & Rob Hao, pianos
6. I. Prologue 6:18
7. II.Allegro molto 5:14
8. III. Andante lyrico 5:37
9. IV. Epilogue 4:44

   Le Voyage en Amérique
   Antony Gray & Rob Hao, pianos
10. Le Voyage en Amérique - 1a 2:01
11. Le Voyage en Amérique - 1b 0:59
12. Le Voyage en Amérique - 2 0:24
13. Le Voyage en Amérique - 3 0:44
14. Le Voyage en Amérique - 4 1:02
15. Le Voyage en Amérique - 5 0:42
16. Le Voyage en Amérique - 6 1:40
17. Le Voyage en Amérique - 7 0:26
18. Le Voyage en Amérique - 8 0:34
19. Le Voyage en Amérique - 9 0:53
20. Le Voyage en Amérique - 10 0:57
21. Le Voyage en Amérique - 11 0:31
22. Le Voyage en Amérique - 12 1:40
23. Le Voyage en Amérique - 13 1:09
24. Le Voyage en Amérique - 14 0:37
25. Le Voyage en Amérique - 15 0:35
26. Le Voyage en Amérique - Valse for Accordion 2:16
    Alise Silina, accordion;
    Rob Hao & Antony Gray, pianos

27. **Adieu Maison** 1:42
    Helen Miles, soprano; Antony Gray, piano

Total Playing Time 74:49

*Additional tracks available on the digital edition
Sonate pour piano á 4 mains
Capriccio for two pianos
Valse de musique de soie for solo piano

Between Waltz and Elegy: Poulenc for Two Pianos

Francis Poulenc was an extraordinary pianist. With very little professional training he enjoyed a parallel career as composer and pianist, particularly of his own music, but often the music of others as well. His partnerships with singers were especially fruitful, and many recordings were made and survive. His pianistic style was inimitable. He often said that one could never use too much pedal in his music, and when one hears him playing, with his quicksilver touch and ferocious speeds, one hears what he means. For the rest of us, attempting to re-create this unique style is a challenge, and we must do the best we can, perhaps with slightly less pedal!

Poulenc wrote most of his piano music in the early part of his career, and later was quite scathing about its quality, absolutely condemning Napoli and having very little time for all but a couple of his piano works. Most of us would disagree. While many of his shorter piano works were written directly as money making ventures, at a time when this was still possible, they are without exception charming, delightful and gratifyingly written. And often contain real depth of feeling. His catalogue would be greater, but he destroyed a number of works over his lifetime, particularly in the early stage of his composing career when he was trying out different styles of writing, as can be seen in the early Promenades or Impromptus. Sadly lost or destroyed as well were a number of works for two pianos (*Zebra*) or four hands (*Le Jongleur*, *Quadrille a 4 mains*). One work which he did publish was the *Sonate pour piano a 4 main*s, written in 1918 when he was all of nineteen years old. It has gone on to be one of his most played works. It was the second in a series of sonatas for small ensembles. It was preceded by the Sonata for two clarinets and followed by the Sonata for clarinet and bassoon, and one for trumpet, horn and trombone. More were either planned or lost/destroyed. He subsequently arranged these wind sonatas for solo piano. The Sonata for four hands is often said to be influenced by Satie and Stravinsky, and it is possible to hear echoes of these composers, and perhaps Chabrier in the middle movement, but it is already stylistically unique, and could not be mistaken for anyone else – a real achievement for a nineteen year old. Bela Bartok no less wrote to Poulenc thanking him for the scores Poulenc had sent him, and mentioning that he was particularly impressed with the sonatas for two clarinets and for four hands.

Apart from the 1932 Concerto for two pianos, Poulenc then abandoned the two piano/four hand medium, and didn't return to it (with one exception) until the 1950s, his last composing decade when he was at the height of his powers.

'On Friday I am doing the recording with Jacques (Février) for my film. It is not a bad work of its kind - popular dance-hall style, Max Lindner silent cinema!' Thus Poulenc wrote to his friend, the composer Henri Sauguet regarding *Le Voyage en Amérique*, the first work he would write for two pianos after this break. The 1951 film was produced by Henri Lavorel, with whom Poulenc was on friendly terms, and starred Yvonne Printemps in her final film role. Printemps and Poulenc had known and worked with each other for several years. She had premiered *Les Chemins de l'amour* in Jean Anouilhs' *Leocadia* in 1941, and would subsequently record it. For the film Poulenc provided her with two songs – *Chanson de marin* and *Adieu maison*. *Chanson de marin* has been previously recorded, and is not included on the present recording.

The score, like many film scores of the time, has not survived, and is offered here in transcription form the film sound track. The film tells the story of a middle-aged couple from rural France travelling to America on their first ever flight to visit their daughter, and draws from Poulenc music of real charm. It is light on the surface but there is a bitter-sweet quality to much of the score which few other composers can equal. Some cues are very short, in some cases only a few bars, but each cue feels complete and sufficient, and several use material from the two songs in the film, a rare case of Poulenc using musical 'development'. Poulenc had strong ideas about film music, and believed it should always take second place to the story and action. Consequently, there are moments in the score where the music basically beats time under dialogue, however this does not affect the overall quality of this delightful score.

Only one piece from *Le Voyage en Amérique* was published, and in fact the timeline is unclear. The American piano duo of Robert Fizdale and Arthur Gold, whom he had originally met at the home of Germaine Tailleferre in 1948, had requested a piece for a concert they were to do in New York in 1952. Poulenc produced *L'Embarquement pour Cythére* in July of 1951, so before the recording of the film score had been made. It is therefore unclear which version came first. Poulenc may well have added the accordion part to the existing valse, and shortened the ending to accommodate the

requirements of the film, or the film score may have already been complete when the request from Gold and Fizdale - affectionately known by Poulenc as 'Les Boys' - came in. Poulenc speaks of it as if quite removed from the film, saying that it was inspired by the open-air cafes with dancing on the banks of the Marne near his grandparents' house at Nogent. Poulenc felt it was his most 'Dufy-like work', Raoul Dufy being a painter with whom Poulenc felt a great affinity. In a letter to Gold and Fizdale he wrote 'I don't think you should include it in your programme, but rather keep it as a *bombe-surprise* for an encore.' The dedication in the score reads 'To Henri Lavorelle, this evocation of the banks of the Marne, so dear to my childhood. Very affectionately, Francis Poulenc. October 1951.'

Following that, in 1952 Poulenc made a transcription of the *Final* of his cantata *Le Bal Masqué* for 'Les Boys'. This was the second arrangement of the *Final* that Poulenc had made, publishing a version for solo piano shortly after the cantatas' publication in 1932. The two-piano arrangement is arguably not as effective as the solo version, with Poulenc adding some rather gratuitous pianistic flourishes which are somewhat out of character. However the music is hilarious and surreal, befitting the cantata text by Max Jacob.

The following year Poulenc completed his Sonata for two pianos, again for Gold and Fizdale. This is surely one of his most important works, and arguably his finest keyboard work. It inhabits the dark emotional territory of the 1942 violin sonata, and looks forward to both the tenderness and the anguish of Dialogues des Carmelites of 1956. There are few works in the duo piano that match this sonata in power and emotional force, with Poulenc using aggressive dissonance in a way that is rare for him. This, contrasted with passages of achingly beautiful material give the work its power. The sonata was commissioned by the American soprano and patron of the arts Alice Etsy.

Poulenc wrote a description of the sonata, and its genesis, to Gold and Fizdale;

'Do you remember that room in the Hotel Beauvau in Marseilles where, in December 1952, looking out of the window at the activity of the port, I began the present Sonata? It was in that very hotel that Chopin had stayed with George Sand on his return from Majorca.

I began with the Andante, with the general architecture of the work already in mind. Framed by a Prologue, an Allegro Molto and an Epilogue, this Andante is for me the very core of the work. Here it is no longer a matter of poetic play before a portrait of Mozart hanging on my wall, as in the Andante of the Concerto for two pianos, but rather of a profoundly lyrical élan. Sometimes drawing inspiration from aspects of my choral music, I tried, at certain points, to achieve a great purity of line - for example, the bass notes in unison on the final bars of the Andante.

The first piece is conceived not as the first movement of a classical sonata but as a true Prologue. Its second theme, 'animé', is simply a rhythmic progression intended to bring out the lyricism of the *extremely slow* melody in C major, which forms the central episode.
The Allegro Molto is a Scherzo, the main interest of which lies in the middle episode, *extraordinarily peaceful*.

The Epilogue is not strictly speaking a Finale but a recapitulation of the other three movements, preceded by a new theme.

I would readily describe the Concerto for two pianos as blithely bravura, whereas the present work has the gravity of a string quartet.

... at that point in my career - in 1952 - ... I was thirsting for music of a kind that was quite simply human.'

One of Poulenc's final keyboard works, followed only by the final Improvisation, was the *Élégie f*or two pianos (*en accords alternés*), written during the summer of 1959. It was written to mark the death of Marie-Blanche de Polignac, a close friend of Poulenc for much of his life, and a great patron of the arts. As the title suggests, the work is written throughout, until the last page, in chords alternating between the two pianos, with a gentle and wistful opening which rises to an anguished climax before returning to the gentle opening, but with the harmony now even more bitter-sweet. An anguished coda rounds the work off. It is not just the chords which alternate, but the musical material throughout is passed between the two pianos, an egalitarian trait that runs through all of Poulenc's music for two pianos. Poulenc adds a note to

the score instructing the performers that ‘This Elegy should be played as if you were improvising it, a cigar in your mouth, a glass of cognac on the piano.’

The ‘exception’ mentioned above is the *Concert Champêtre,* completed in 1928. Written originally as a concerto for harpsichord and orchestra, with a very prominent orchestral part, for Wanda Landowska, Poulenc subsequently expanded the harpsichord part for piano, changing the register here and there and adding more material for the solo piano in places where the harpsichord would not have been audible. Poulenc himself often performed the work in this form. Thirdly, he created a version for solo harpsichord/piano with orchestral reduction. However, given the importance of the orchestra, he arranged all the tuttis, with the exception of the opening of the second movement, for two pianos, meaning that the piece would not be performable on harpsichord and piano, as half the material in the tuttis would be missing. These passages are written in small notes in the ‘solo’ piano part, and in a footnote on the first page Poulenc writes that the ‘small notes are only to be played in performance on two pianos’, thus authorising it as a work for two pianos alone. In fact the first private performance was given by Landowska with Poulenc playing the orchestral part on the piano, although it is unlikely that the orchestral reduction that was eventually published had been prepared by then.

One initially misses the rich orchestral palette, but the musical material is so strong, and the reworking so clearly thought out that the two piano version really stands as a strong work in its own right. Poulenc also made some minor textual changes, omitting a couple of orchestral lines that there were certainly enough hands to play, or doubling the two pianos, obviously for aural effect. In the end it adds a substantial and satisfying work to the two piano repertoire.

Excerpts from Poulencs’ letters translated by Sydney Buckland, and published in her book ‘Echo and Source, selected correspondence’

Le Voyage en Amérique - Valse for Accordion

Poisson d'Avril, herbes de joie,
Les nuits divines, les nuits s'écoulent,
Les nuits divines, tendre poupoule,
La belle étoile est dans ma main.

Le soleil est dans l'eau, l'heure est à la pêche,
Pataugeons, pataugeons, mon coeur est à la pêche.
Le soleil est dans l'eau, mon coeur est à la pêche.

La rivière danse la java,
Arrosez, c'est la vie qui chante.
Les jours sont courts, n'oubliez pas,
Amours jamais ne sont perdus. Ah,

La rivière danse la java,
Mon beau pays est ma maison,
Amours jamais ne sont perdus. Ah,

Adieu maison, adieu raison,
À mon passé, mon avenir.
Mon beau pays est ma maison,
Amours jamais ne sont perdus. Ah,

Le soleil est dans l'eau,
Mon coeur est dans la pêche.

Antony Gray, piano

Antony Gray is an Australian pianist. He has recorded Bach, Goossens, Brahms and Poulenc for ABC Classics and Williamson, Carmichael and lots of Saint-Saens for Divine Art. He has recently recorded a couple of discs of music written for teacher and student, with his students. He won't be doing that again (also Divine Art). He also teaches the violin, and hopes one day to be able to play it himself, makes delicious beetroot wine and has been trying for years, and without success, to grow artichokes. He has homes in London and Marrakech.

Rob Hao, piano

Rob Hao is an Australian pianist and composer. His compositions and performances have taken him around Australia, the UK and across continental Europe, with his musicianship having been described as ‘absolute stillness’ to ‘stirring and impetuous’ (SoundsLikeSydney). Rob’s debut at the Sydney Opera House was detailed as ‘full of personality, authenticity and virtuosity’ (ClassikOn Australia) and he has since returned as both composer and performer to the Sydney Opera House and the Melbourne Recital Centre with his project Schubert Overwritten, as well as further performances around festivals in the UK, such as Aldeburgh, Manchester Festival of Song and the Beethoven Piano Society of Europe. In recent seasons he has given regional and world premieres of over thirty works in both ensemble and solo settings. Rob’s work has also been broadcast on ABC Radio National as well as 2MBS Fine Music.

Rob was born in Auckland, New Zealand and raised in Sydney, Australia, where he studied piano with Ransford Elsley. He then moved to London and graduated from the Royal College of Music, specialising in both composition and piano where he also won first prize for both disciplines in the Contemporary Music Competition alongside prizes for song accompaniment. Rob has been generously supported in recent years by the Arts Council England, the Francis Routh Trust, Help Musicians, the Australian Music Foundation and the Finzi Trust.

Helen Miles, soprano

Helen Miles, affectionately known as Flossie, is a versatile international soloist and highly experienced choral and recording session singer. Highlights include the solos in Messiah at the Royal Albert Hall, in David Fanshawe’s African Sanctus at the opening concert of Milton Keynes Theatre and solos in recordings as a member of the BBC Singers on tour to Brazil and at the BBC Proms. Helen is a consummate singing actress who works as a member of the extra chorus at the Royal Ballet and Opera (formerly Royal Opera House) also at Opéra National de Lyon. She loves to use her voice for different musical styles from classical to jazz and feels incredibly privileged to work with many eminent conductors and producers.

Alise Silina, accordion

Alise is a classical accordionist from Latvia currently studying at the Royal Academy of Music. She is passionate about building the identity of the classical accordion by performing repertoire that has been originally written for the instrument. She is constantly looking for new ways to perform so she can engage broad audiences with newly written works. This includes collaborations with other forms of art, such as spoken word, poetry, dance, acting, and creative lighting.

In October 2023 Alise had her first solo concert in London, where she worked together with “New Stages Creations” delivering a multi-art performance including solo accordion, narration, and creative light design.

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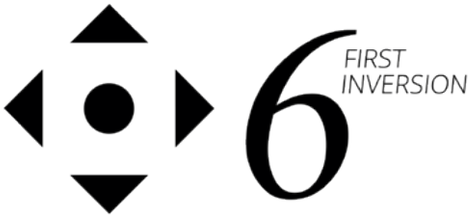

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Antony Gray, piano

Rob Hao, piano

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