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Poulenc Trio for Oboe, Bassoon and Piano, Movement II (1926)

These notes supplement the annotated scores on Moodle and are designed to be used in conjunction with them.

What should I revise?

- Spend lots of time making sure you understand the overall structure and the details of the analysis, using the scores on Moodle and these notes. Make sure your score is heavily annotated - listening to the music with the score will help you to remember, especially as in this question you hear the extract that you have to discuss.
- Practice comparing different sections of the work with each other
- Practice listing aspects of harmony, orchestration for short sections for the 5-mark question

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

Poulenc was a key member of a group of young French composers known as *Les Six* (the others were Durey, Honegger, Milhaud, Auric and Tailleferre), whose music was promoted by the older maverick composer Erik Satie and also the novelist, playwright and filmmaker Cocteau. Their music was in part a reaction against the influence of what they saw as the excesses of German music represented by Wagner and the high seriousness of 1920s modernism (like the serial music of Schoenberg and his pupils). They aimed to write in a more straightforward and direct way than Debussy and other older French composers. The group did not last much past the mid-twenties but Poulenc and Auric continued to write at least some of their music in the light-hearted style with which *Les Six* are associated.

Poulenc himself was born into a well-to-do family in Paris in 1899. His father was a director of a chemical company, while his mother, an amateur pianist, gave Poulenc his first lessons. She also instilled in him a love for Mozart, Chopin, Schumann, Scarlatti and Couperin, encouraging him to keep an open mind to every kind of music, particularly that of contemporary composers. Intending their son to be a business man, however, his parents did not allow Poulenc to attend a music conservatory, meaning that he was mostly self-educated musically. He often

Poulenc's output is usually divided into four stylistic periods:

- The works of the first period (1917-22) reflect the influence of Satie and Les Six, with their bare, linear simplicity, polytonality and "wrong note" dissonances. Melodies are often simple and diatonic, accompaniments repetitively chordal. The atmosphere often resembles the circus, the café-concert or the music hall.
- Poulenc's second period (1923-35) is his "Stravinsky or neoclassical period", with its return to earlier composers (including 18th century *clavecinistes*, Mozart and Chopin), generally thin textures, "wrong note" dissonance, ostinato, a use of Classical structures and modest instrumental resources.
- The music of the third period (1936-52) is more lyrical and emotional; it also became more serious and works tended to last longer. The music of this period has been termed "neoromantic".
- The fourth period (1953-63) was concerned exclusively with serious, sacred works, songs and piano pieces, serene chamber works and two operas. Harmony became richer – sometimes much more chromatic.

Poulenc and Debussy

Despite an attack of anti-Debussyism in 1917, Debussy has always remained my favourite composer after Mozart. I could not do without his music. It is my oxygen.

It was without doubt Debussy who awakened me to music, but it was Stravinsky who later served as my guide. On the harmonic plane I owe much to Ravel, enormously to Satie, but more aesthetically than musically. And Chabrier is my grandfather!

The Trio and Poulenc's Musical Style

- Form.** Form in Poulenc's music is often based on Classical models, but the relationship can be very loose, with various twists and modifications along the way. The Andante from the *Trio* is in loose ternary form but, as discussed in the Eduqas notes, this rough division of the movement into three parts does not really do justice to the way the music works. However, it is still a good way of getting to grips with the overall shape.

| | | | | | |
|----------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|-------------|-----------|
| 1 | 15 (20) | 23 (33) | 35 (37) | 45 (51) | 52 |
| Bb | Db V of B (octatonic) | Bm V of B (octatonic) | B(maj) V of C (then chromatic) | C ii-V in F | F maj/min |
| A | (A) | B1 | (B2 – climax of movement) | | A' |

As shown in the notes, another way of understanding the form is as a transition between the A major of the first movement and the Db major of the last. This is not without its problems either, in particular the way it minimizes the role of F major at the end of the second movement.

Mov. I Mov. II Mov. III
 A – [Bb – B – C] – Db

- Melody and motif.** Poulenc (in some respects like Stravinsky and Debussy) tends not to develop his melodies in the usual Classical way – often repeating them before moving on to a new idea without much attempt at transition. However, the music is rich with correspondences between motivic ideas, rhythmic ideas and melodic shapes. The following example traces some ways in which two ideas from the opening re-appear elsewhere in the movement:

The image shows four musical excerpts from Poulenc's Trio, illustrating how motifs and rhythms from the opening reappear elsewhere:

- Excerpt 1 (b.1):** Shows a falling triad motif (1) in the treble clef. A note marked 'X' is shown as being filled in. A rhythmic pattern (X) is also indicated.
- Excerpt 2 (b.5):** Shows the same rhythmic pattern (X) in the Bassoon part, with a note marked 'X'.
- Excerpt 3 (b.9):** Shows the falling triad motif (1) in the Oboe part, with a note marked 'X'.
- Excerpt 4 (b.24):** Shows the rhythmic pattern (X) in the Bassoon part, with a note marked 'X'.

- **Harmony and tonality.** Poulenc uses a harmonic language that incorporates some more recent innovations (e.g. plenty of ‘wrong note’ dissonances and some use of the octatonic scale) but that is recognisably based on that of the Western Classical Tradition. There are plenty of surprising twists in terms of modulations and the tonal structure is a long way from what you might expect in a ‘real’ Classical piece, particularly in this movement
 - The overall tonal shape of the music (shown on the last page of this booklet) is very strange from a Classical point of view, starting in Bb, ending in F and focussing on both B and C in between.
 - The middle of the piece in particular avoids strong tonal resolution and the only really emphatic tonal arrival in this section is in the rather distant B minor in bar 35, which quickly gives way in any case to C.
 - The focus on B and C seems to be echoed in way that the dominant of B (F#) is frequently combined with C major to create hints of the octatonic scale (there is also an octatonic flavour at the very end of the movement)
 - The music has lots of surface quirks. In bars 3-4 notice the use of the flattened submediant with quite a lot of irregular dissonances, for example in the second half of the first bar where the semiquaver A produces an unexpected and unresolved dissonance with the bass Bb.

The image shows a musical score for piano, consisting of two measures. The first measure is in B-flat major (labeled bVI^6) and the second measure is in C major (labeled I). The score features a complex melodic line in the right hand with a triplet of eighth notes and a semiquaver A in the second half of the first bar, which creates a dissonance with the bass B-flat.

- **Instrumentation.** Both the choices and uses of instruments in Poulenc are usually fairly traditional. In this piece, as in many of his chamber works, he includes the piano, on which he was very proficient, frequently performing his own music.
- **Rhythm.** Poulenc’s rhythmic writing is reasonably traditional, but he often throws the rhythm off balance with unexpected changes of meter such as the change to 3/8 in bar 8 for just one bar.

Form

| | | | |
|----|----|--|--|
| 1 | A1 | Bb major F major (b. 5) Db (b. 12) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bar 3 borrows chord VI (Gb in first inversion) from Bb minor • End of phrase is cut short by the insertion of a 3/8 at bar 8 • Perfect cadence in F in bars 7-8 • Tonicisation of Eb in 11 then into Db at 12 • Bar 13 borrows VI (Bbb) from Db minor which becomes bII to Ab again before returning to Db in bar 14 |
| 15 | A2 | Db major | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As bar 1 but in Db • This time borrowed VI (Bbb) in bar 17 become bar IV in E minor • Diminished seventh in bar 19 onto 6/4 in B at 20 • Bar 21 is octatonic C against F# - tinged V of B minor |
| 23 | B1 | B minor | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very weak resolution of V onto first inversion • End of bar 28 there is a secondary dominant tonicisation of Neapolitan. C major in 29 then V in B in bar 30 again with octatonic twinges • Bar 31 as bar 23 with some slight changes becomes extended dominant (again octatonically tinged) to B minor |
| 35 | B2 | B minor | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proper perfect cadence resolution onto B with a TDP and a new(ish) thematic idea • Quickly changes to V of C which resolves via an interrupted cadence onto bVI in first inversion, which starts a chain of chromatically rising first inversions to arrive properly on C in bar 45 • C in 45, however is a first inversion and quickly morphs into a dominant to the final F of the piece • The chord ii in bar 51 borrowed from the minor again |
| 52 | A' | F major | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As the beginning but in F major • All over an F pedal save bars 59 and 61 • From bar 61 all from the octatonic scale (Poulenc misses out the Cs from all but the very last chord – this note not in the octatonic scale) |

① ②
 1a 1b 2a
 b.1 >
 Piano
 X (rhythm) X

⑤ ⑥ 2a
 b.23
 Oboe Bassoon

③ 2a
 b.5
 Bassoon
 X

⑦ 1a'
 b.35

④ 4a 4a 4a 4a 4a 1a 2a
 b.9 >
 Oboe Bassoon Oboe
 X 6

⑧ 1a
 b.45
 Oboe Bassoon Oboe

A1

A2

B1

B2

A'

1 7 8 9 12 15 17 18 20 23 25 31 33 35 38 41 43 45 47 51 52
 ①②③ ④ ①② ⑤⑥ ⑤⑥ ⑦ ① ⑧ ①②

B \flat : I V I IV
(F: V $\frac{4}{2}$ I $\frac{6}{4}$ V I)
D \flat : I V I \flat VI $\frac{6}{4}$
b: IV V I $\frac{6}{4}$ V I $\frac{6}{4}$ V I
C: V \flat VI I $\frac{6}{4}$ V $\frac{6}{4}$ I
F: VIII $\frac{5}{3}$ V I IV I(\flat)
(F: IV) V I