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# The So-Called “Feminine” in *Fiançailles*

Allison Abbott

As one of Francis Poulenc’s most cherished personal and professional acquaintances, Pierre Bernac still reigns supreme in the interpretation of this composer’s arts songs and cycles. In his book *Francis Poulenc: The Man & His Songs*, Bernac discusses a number of Poulenc’s songs, including those from 1936 to 1950, which was an important period of Poulenc’s compositional output. During these years Poulenc set to music the texts of primarily three poets: Paul Eluard, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Louise de Vilmorin.

To the reader’s surprise, however, Bernac—the famous baritone, inspiration, and collaborator for many of Poulenc’s cycles—dismisses the poetry of the Vilmorin songs as inconsequential, preferring to focus his remarks on the Eluard and Apollinaire cycles. Bernac’s comparison of the Vilmorin cycle *Fiançailles pour rire* (1939) and the Eluard cycle *Tel jour telle nuit* (1937) is typical of his treatment of Vilmorin’s poetry. Unlike *Tel jour telle nuit*, the 1939 Vilmorin settings “do not constitute a real cycle, but [are] a well-balanced group of melodies.”<sup>1</sup> That is to say that each song is not specifically linked to the next, but provides an alternation of mood that may be pleasing for the listener. Additionally, Bernac comments on the decreased complexity of the Vilmorin settings, as they feature less rhythmic diversity and more regular phrases than those found in *Tel jour telle nuit*. Furthermore, and strikingly, Bernac goes on to suggest a link between these formal shortcomings and the gendered nature of the texts.<sup>2</sup>

In *Francis Poulenc: The Man & His Songs*, Bernac first sets up a critical masculine/feminine dichotomy between the two works in question: “In composing these songs Poulenc had in mind the writing of a work for a woman’s voice that would be akin to

*Tel jour telle nuit*.”<sup>3</sup> Placing *Fiançailles* opposite this successful cycle deemed masculine by contemporary critics ultimately attaches a feminine gender connotation to the cycle’s speaker and the work as a whole. He continues, “It must be added that these charming and elegant poems are not comparable in richness and substance to the admirable poems of Eluard—a comparison reflected in the music.”<sup>4</sup> Here Bernac not only connects these Vilmorin poems to the superficial feminine qualities “charming” and “elegant,” he also implies that Poulenc was forced to limit his creativity and style in rendering such a text. Without citing specific examples for these beliefs, Bernac inadvertently informs the future reception of the Poulenc-Vilmorin collaboration.

Bernac’s dismissal of the Vilmorin settings is perhaps surprising given Poulenc’s personal admiration for the poet. When looking in detail at the collaboration between Vilmorin and Poulenc, it is evident that this relationship rendered artistically sensitive material that lay close to the composer’s heart. Poulenc was the driving force behind Vilmorin’s career as a poet, encouraging her to venture away from writing novels towards the genre of poetry. In a letter to the composer, Vilmorin explicitly underlines this fact in writing: “It is you, Francis, it is you who first had the idea of ‘commanding’ some poems to put to music. Therefore it is you who decreed that I was a poet!”<sup>5</sup> Poulenc too took this relationship beyond the professional, considering Vilmorin as one of his friends, often referring to her affectionately as “Loulou.” He was even compelled to set this selection of poetry from her collection of poetry *Fiançailles pour rire* during her detainment in Nazi-occupied Hungary in order to think of her often.<sup>6</sup> His song cycle of the

1 Pierre Bernac, *The Interpretation of French Song* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978), 305.

2 Ibid.

3 Pierre Bernac, *Francis Poulenc: The Man & His Songs* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1977), 137.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., 130.

6 Ibid., 137.

same name serves as a testament to this deep-seated friendship.

Yet Poulenc's admiration for Vilmorin notwithstanding, Bernac's dismissal is typical of the contemporary reception of Vilmorin's texts. Moreover, Bernac's criticism reflects the particularly gendered nature of Vilmorin's reception at this time, revealing critical linkages between notions of gender, musical style, and poetic genre. In particular, feminine literature and song were considered harmonically weak, formally unstructured, and poetically lacking. A number of musicologists have traced the historical development of these gendered categories often relied upon for music criticism, emphasizing their socially constructed and genre-specific nature. For instance, Susan McClary argues that in dealing with music criticism, "The concept of 'construction' is important here, for while the sex of an individual is a biological given, gender and sexuality are socially organized: their forms (ranges of proper behavior, appearances, duties) differ significantly in accordance with time, place, and class."<sup>7</sup>

In analyzing the gender connotations associated with *Fiançailles*, then, we must look through the lens of the early twentieth-century French conception of gender. During this time period, both politicians and war veterans emphasized the reinstitution of the traditional gender binary after women's involvement in previously male-dominated spheres during the First World War. This initiative supported the image of the woman as mother and wife, severely reducing women's rights in both political and economic sectors. The collapse incited by the Great Depression provided further ammunition to those advocating for the exclusion of women from these sectors to protect male jobs.<sup>8</sup>

Following McClary's lead, Jeff Kallberg suggests an intimate connection between gender and genre. In studying the reception of Chopin's work in relation to gender, Kallberg found that the connection between gender and music exists innately in the French tradition of music, due to the double meaning of the

corresponding French terminology. The word *genre* in French not only signifies genre of art or music, but also refers to the English word "gender."<sup>9</sup> In writing on musical genre, then, French *musicologues* inherently suggest the idea of gender quality in each piece of music that they analyze. Kallberg's book *Chopin at the Boundaries* chronicles the troubling use of the term *genre* and how both listener and composer may interpret it, stating: "This formulation properly locates genre as a communicative concept, one that actively informs the experience of a musical work."<sup>10</sup> The linkage of this concept of communication to the word *genre* as defined by the French, then, both communicates the gender-specific aspects of a musical work and perpetuates the gender association of such musical characteristics in the future.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, as Kallberg argues with respect to Chopin's music, many musical features are often construed or misconstrued in terms of gender. For example, certain piano genres, such as Chopin's nocturnes, were deemed "feminine"—i.e., appropriate for feminine consumption, domestic performance, etc.<sup>12</sup> This is a feature not just of musical genres in France, but literary genres as well, including poetry. Against the backdrop of this history, Bernac's remarks concerning the generic features/failures of *Fiançailles* as a song cycle, as well as his particularly gendered take on it, acquire an added significance.

Bernac's gendered reception of Poulenc's composition thus suggests a complex web of relationships. Here, I will try to untangle and decipher some of these complex ideas in both the text and the music. In this paper, I will explore these connections in Poulenc's *Fiançailles pour rire*, arguing that the poems of this cycle come from a clearly feminine point of view, and the musical setting of these texts observes the same musical conventions as the rest of Poulenc's repertoire. I will do this by considering the contemporary reception and analysis of Louise de Vilmorin's literary works, the history of feminine music in France up to the 1930s, and the musical analysis of the songs that comprise this cycle.

9 *Dictionnaire français-anglais, anglais-français* = French-English, English-French dictionary, rev. ed., s.v. "genre."

10 Jeffrey Kallberg, *Chopin at the Boundaries: Sex, History, and Musical Genre* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996), 5.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., 124.

7 Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 36.

8 Susan Foley, *Women in France Since 1789* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 185-209.

## RECEPTION OF VILMORIN AND LA LITTÉRATURE FÉMININE

Louise de Vilmorin, both in her person and her poetry, was widely received as feminine by her contemporaries. Born of aristocratic parentage and widely notorious for her tumultuous personal relationships, Vilmorin's work was often dismissed as the product of luxurious boredom rather than the efforts of a true artist. She was referred to as "un navire en détresse [a ship in distress]"<sup>13</sup> or sometimes "Notre Dame des Orages [Our Lady of Storms],"<sup>14</sup> subtly mocking her as a damsel in distress and poking fun at her mercurial personality. Indeed, her sometimes unpleasant moods and "the most hectic love life of the century"<sup>15</sup> inhibited the public from getting to know the supposed saint that her friends claimed her to be.

Poulenc himself very much adored the poetess for these allegedly feminine qualities. In his personal diary, Poulenc presents an enchanting portrait of Louise de Vilmorin from his own perspective:

Few people love me as much as Louise de Vilmorin: because she is beautiful, because she is lame, because she writes innately immaculate French, because her name evokes flowers and vegetables, because she loves her brothers like a lover and her lovers like a sister. Her beautiful face recalls the seventeenth century, as does the sound of her name. I can imagine her as a friend of "Madame," or painted by Ph. de Champaigne as an abbess, a rosary in her long hands. Louise always escapes childishness despite her country house where they play on the lawns.

Love, desire, illness, exile, and money difficulties were at the root of her genuineness.<sup>16</sup>

Poulenc's description of her echoes notions found in a number of her biographical texts, citing her as a

13 Jean Chalon, *Florence et Louise Les Magnifiques* (Châtillon-Sous-Bagneux, France: Rocher), 99. Chalon was a late companion of the poet who chronicled their personal telephone conversations in this book published posthumously.

14 Ibid., 132.

15 Ibid., 144.

16 Bernac, *Francis Poulenc*, 131.

true mixture between an overgrown aristocratic child and a highly intelligent and emotional seductress. He comments on her paradoxical traits, acquiring both modern and antiquated feminine characteristics.

Louise de Vilmorin indeed existed in a state of feminine transition, embodying aspects of both the nineteenth-century and the modern liberated woman. This paradox, according to her intimate friend Jean Chalon during her later life, helped to define the remarkable attractive quality of her personality. In his book *Florence et Louise Les Magnifiques*, Chalon outlines her contradictory feminine nature in detail for the reader.

Elle pleurait avec une facilité, une abondance qui laissaient pantois... Louise appartenait à une époque où les larmes des femmes étaient sacrées et venaient à bout des refus. Elle ignorait que les larmes n'avaient plus ce pouvoir et pleurait consciemment ses amours mortes, la fuite du temps, les contretemps, les tuiles arrachées par l'équinoxe à la toiture de sa demeure, les ratages, les "peines de paradis."

[She would cry with such ease, such abundance that she left one stunned... Louise belonged to a period when a woman's tears were sacred and came after a refusal. She ignored that tears no longer held this power and would consciously weep for her dead lovers, the passage of time, mishaps, roof tiles fallen off her residence, failures, "peines de paradis."]<sup>17</sup>

On the one hand, Louise retained many feminine beliefs and mannerisms of her aristocratic upbringing in the early part of the century, specifically in regard to emotion. Her frequent tears over many different events in her life, however, no longer influenced the public in the same way as they did before the Great War. Both individuals and the country itself had experienced previously unimaginable tragedy, and Vilmorin's sentimental sobs seemed, therefore, self-indulgent. The poetess paid no mind to public

17 Ibid., 130.

interpretation of her grief, however, and continued to express her deeply rooted feelings through tears. Evidence of her deep-seated emotion readily presented itself in her poetry through her exaggerated sentimentality, her melancholy subject matter, and morbid metaphors.

On the other hand, there was a multitude of scandal surrounding Vilmorin's love life. In fact, her love life provided plenty of gossip for the wealthy circles of Paris to chat about. She survived a broken engagement to author and pilot Antoine Saint-Exupéry, as well as two failed marriages. The first was at a young age to an American mobster in Las Vegas and the second to an adulterous Hungarian noble. Chalon remarks on her feminine wiles in the following quote:

Louise avait aussi des yeux superbes, bleu-vert piquetés d'or, et était aussi "excessivement" femme. Excessivement? Non. C'était une femme qui connaissait son métier de femme: faire marcher les hommes. Elle savait que les hommes ont des faiblesses qu'il suffit d'exploiter. Ils ont des peurs et des hontes que l'on croit uniquement réservés aux femmes... [Elle n'avait] honte de rien... Comme tout était facile avec Louise, elle épluchait les fruits, les cœurs avec la même [dextérité, habile] à lire les lignes du cœur...

[Louise also had superb eyes, green-blue dotted with gold, and was also "excessively" feminine, as she put it. Excessively? I don't think so. She knew that men have weaknesses that she could easily exploit. They have fears and shame that many believe to be reserved only for women... [She was] not ashamed of anything. As everything was easy for Louise, she peeled fruits and heart with the same ease, skilled at reading the lines of the heart...]<sup>18</sup>

Despite her infamous reputation, or perhaps aided by it, Vilmorin consistently attracted high-profile men to her disastrous love trysts. The flirtatious diction and clever plays on words that appear in much

of her poetry can be easily linked back to her innate seductive powers.

Conscious of the negative public opinion surrounding his sister's person and works, André de Vilmorin, in his biographical essay on Vilmorin, attempts to rehabilitate her image for the reader. He prefaces his *Essai* with an "avertissement," defined as a warning or short forward, about his intimate relationship with the subject at hand. For the sake of the credibility of his work, he refuses to engage in the gossip surrounding his sister, only recounting the facts of her life as he personally and truthfully knew them to occur. Citing the popular French saying, "Ceux qui veulent flatter feront d'un diable un ange [Those who flatter make devils into angels],"<sup>19</sup> André assures the reader that he will not fall victim to this common mistake. He tells the reader that he approaches this biography with as objective a perspective as possible, only including events of which he had personal knowledge during her lifetime and refusing to cross the line of his own experience. He wants to allow the reader to take his statements at face value instead of viewing them as a more positive spin on the real facts of his sister's life. In this way, he is trying to remove her tarnished image from the public's memory, allowing them to see the real and loving person that Vilmorin was. By stripping this negative connotation, André perhaps also endeavored to inspire a wave of legitimate analysis and criticism of Vilmorin's body of work, which for so long had been pushed aside.<sup>20</sup>

Much of this criticism and contemporary reception treated Vilmorin's femininity in a pejorative manner. We can see these feminine aspects in her poetry; however, these aspects have literary significance within the broader context of the history of French literature and within the broader context of *la littérature féminine*. This poetry, then, could be considered the latest installment in the genre at the time it was published. Indeed the poetry of Louise de Vilmorin shares many characteristics with the French tradition of *la littérature féminine*. This genre began with the introduction of female troubadours in the Middle Ages, reached its height of public attention during the reign of Louis XIV through the works of *les précieuses*, and is still created and studied today. Bea-

<sup>19</sup> André de Vilmorin, *Essai sur Louise de Vilmorin* (Austria: Editions Pierre Seghers), 13.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 13-14.

<sup>18</sup> Chalon, *Florence et Louise Les Magnifiques*, 123-124.

trice Slama endeavors to help liberate modern female French authors from the constraints of this feminine genre by exposing the historical prejudices and societal constructs that have supported discrimination against them. She begins by thoroughly outlining the characteristics of this genre in order to refute them in a later section. She writes:

La "littérature féminine" est alors définie comme une littérature du manque et de l'excès. Manque d'imagination, de logique, d'objectivité, de pensée métaphysique; manque de composition, d'harmonie, de perfection formelle. Trop de facilité, trop de facticité, trop de mots, trop de phrases, de mièvrerie, de sentimentalité, de désir de plaire, trop de ton moralisateur, trop de narcissisme. Littérature du "moi" enfermée dans ses limites, à l'écoute de ses sentiments, de ses impressions, de ses rêves: sans doute est-ce ce qui lui donne cet "odor difemina" (sic) que Barbey flairait avec une répulsion fascinée et cette couleur particulière que prennent les thèmes qu'elle met en scène.

Le style "féminine" est, selon la critique, fluide, gracieux, fleuri, floral. Mais parfois aussi inspiré, violent, surgi de forces profondes et incontrôlées. A l'image en somme de "l'éternel féminin." Les femmes écrivains sont mal à l'aise dans les règles, les contraintes, le travail.

["Feminine literature" is defined as a literature of shortages and excesses. Shortages of imagination, of logic, of objectivity, of metaphysical thought; a lack of composition, of harmony, of formal perfection. Too much ease, too much artifice, too many words, too many sentences, too much mushiness and sentimentality, too much of the desire to please, too much of a moralizing tone, too much narcissism. Literature of "me" enclosed in its own limits, listening only to its own emotion, impressions, dreams: this is without a doubt the reason for this "odor di femina" (sic) that Barbey sensed

with a fascinated repulsion and the reason for the particular manner in which Barbey directs her scenes.

The "feminine" style is, according to critics, fluid, slender, gracious, embellished, flowery. But sometime also it is inspired, violent, arising from deep and uncontrollable forces. These characteristics help to create the image of "the feminine eternal." Female writers are uncomfortable with rules, with constraints, with work.]<sup>21</sup>

This sort of reception has long surrounded works of feminine texts. Recent scholarship has tried to reestablish la littérature féminine as playing a particular role in its particular social context.

We can similarly try to reclaim some of the feminine qualities Bernac believes are supposedly degrading Vilморin's writing. For instance, the use of natural and domestic imagery as a means of metaphorical expression pervades the poems of the song cycle *Fiançailles pour rire*. Vilморin invokes the duality of the societal usage of flowers, using these images to represent inherent meaning in their contexts. On the one hand, flowers are attributed with positive meaning in the giving of a token of affection, the celebration of life, and the holy consecration of a marriage. The presence of a lush garden in "La Dame d'André" implies the budding of a questionable romance. On the other hand, however, flowers may also be used in mourning the death of a loved one. "Mon cadavre..." depicts the formality of flowers in the context of mourning and release. It is also interesting to note that the flower representing the monarchy and aristocracy of France, of which Vilморin is a part, is also the flower most closely associated with making up funeral arrangements. Additionally, the poet makes use of the ephemeral nature of the flower's beauty in her pictorial representation of relationships—while one may enjoy its bloom while it lasts, the flower eventually will wither away. While the promise that flowers represented in "Fleurs" may have been sincere at the start, they have all but turned to sand with the passage of time. In the poem "Il Vole," Vilморin sets the scene for the reader with a medley of household

21 Béatrice Slama, "De la 'Littérature Feminine' à 'L'écriture Feminine': Différence et Institution," *Littérature* 44 (1981): 53.

objects. Through this domestic sphere she is able to create the first allusion to La Fontaine's "Le Corbeau et Le Renard," as the sun and knife on her kitchen table momentarily resemble cheese in a bird's beak. She is then able to further develop this metaphor throughout the rest of the poem, likening her lover to the fleeing bird. While these objects, along with the sewing needles referenced in the second stanza, set the stage for Vilmorin's literary cleverness, they also translate to the reader that the speaker is irrefutably female.

Vilmorin's themes expand upon this feminine imagery, using these images to discreetly intertwine the ideas of contract and law into the six poems. The melancholy speaker is frequently betrayed and her social contracts broken. For instance, a lover's unfaithfulness directly prompts the feeling of hysteria in "Il Vole." The speaker appears to only desire the reinstatement of the relationship contract as it was before, in insisting, "Ramenez moi, mon amant volage... Je veux que mon voleur me vole [Bring me back my adulterous/flighty lover... I want my lover to love me]"<sup>22</sup> In these two texts, Vilmorin references "la Loi" (the Law), specifically notated with a capital L. The contract implied by the giving of flowers in the sixth song, "Fleurs," dissolved with the withering of these blooms and left the speaker with a heavy heart. The literal sense of Law and propriety extends further to the songs "Dans l'Herbe" and "Violon." Whether this references political or religious law is ambiguous for the reader; however, the result of breaking such a Law is very clear—death by hanging. The young man in "Dans l'Herbe" dies under "l'arbre de la Loi," which signifies a lynching tree in French idiom, connoted with the idea of being hanged. The reference to hanging in the verse "Aux accords sur les cordes des pendus" may become obscured in its English translation, incorrectly translated as "in the chords on the suspended cords," invoking the idea of sounds hanging in the heavy, smoky air of a Hungarian nightclub. Instead, though, this translation should read, "In the chords on the cords of the hanged," which is closely followed by talk about the quieting of the Law late at night. This connection also occurs in Vilmorin's "Le Garçon de Liège," a poem used in Poulenc's first song

cycle setting her texts, *Trois Chansons de Louise de Vilmorin* (1937). The recurrence of the hanged figures in her poems, closely aligned with the breaking of social contracts, shows her personally indoctrinated connection between love and death. In addition, the focus on these themes through the lens of the domestic sphere and the eyes of a woman give this pessimistic view a feminine twist.

The form of Louise de Vilmorin's poetry also takes on feminine qualities. Traditionally, feminine verse is structured in a more formal manner, making use of the normative figures established during the Classical period of French literature. When looking at "Mon cadavre..." for example, the influence of these classical practices is certainly evident. This poem contains five stanzas of four octo-syllabic verses featuring an ABBA rhyme scheme, termed "rimes embrasées" by the Académie Française, which is as classically formed as possible. Her classical approach to this poem serves the gravity of the subject well, giving a certain formality to her own metaphorical funeral that would no doubt be present at her physical one years later. Through the structure provided, Vilmorin cultivates a more serious tone than is represented in the other selected poems of *Fiançailles*. The parallel poem in the song cycle "Dans l'Herbe" does not present itself through the rules of academic writing, but instead forms a free verse poem. While this seems to be inconsistent with the very structured idea of femininity that Vilmorin presents in the other song texts, "Dans l'Herbe" simply interprets this femininity in a different way. In contrast to the depiction of her own death in "Mon cadavre..." this second song describes the unexpected death of a loved one and the speaker's visceral and emotional reaction to it. The form here, then, represents this outpouring of emotion, typical of the form of the female lament presented in early operatic libretto.

Last, the frequently biographical nature of Vilmorin's poems reinforces the feminine gender of the poems' speaker. For example, "La Dame d'André" ruminates on the relationship between her older brother André and his girlfriend of the late 1930s, of which the poet does not particularly approve. The most obvious biographical insertion into this cycle, though, may be found in the third song, "Il Vole," referencing her flighty fiancé from her youth, Antoine de Saint Exupéry, who left her to fly planes in the French military.

<sup>22</sup> Francis Poulenc, *Fiançailles Pour Rire: Six Mélodies sur des Poèmes de Louise de Vilmorin* (New York: Salabert, 1940): 7-11.

Additionally, "Fleurs" subtly suggests the broken promises of Vilmorin's first marriage to Henry Leigh Hunt. Promising to keep her in the lap of luxury, Hunt's big talk fell through when he all but abandoned her and their children in the Nevada desert to take care of business affairs abroad. Left alone to care of family, the promises of grandeur made to the poet

eventually disintegrated into the hot sand. This places a strong connection between the extreme femininity of Louise de Vilmorin herself and the femininity represented in her works, a link that perhaps was not easily broken when critics looked at these poems in the context of Poulenc's song cycle.

## POULENC AND GENDERED MUSIC

Poulenc's own treatment of Vilmorin's texts proves the wrinkle in regards to the normative contemporary interpretation of her poems. Many of Poulenc's original intentions for his compositions reflect a gendered quality, which are evident in published anthologies of his letters and diary entries. In searching for further understanding of this idea, it suffices to peruse through Poulenc's *Journal de Mes Mélodies*, where he has offered a most thought-provoking statement on the matter:

J'avoue que lorsqu'une dame (bien intentionnée, je n'en doute pas) attaque "j'aime tes yeux, j'aime ta bouche... O ma rebelle, o ma farouche"...en dépit de la musique de Fauré, je ne suis pas convaincu par crainte de l'être trop. Les poèmes de Louise de Vilmorin donnent matière à de véritables mélodies féminines. C'est ce qui m'enchant.

[I admit that when a lady (with the best intentions no doubt) begins..."I love your eyes, I love your mouth...O my rebellious one, O my shy one"...in spite of Fauré's music, I am not convinced, for fear of being too convinced. The poems of Louise de Vilmorin provide material for truly feminine songs. That is what delights me.]<sup>23</sup>

Scholars insist he was as specific about the gender specification of his songs as he was about his scrupulously indicated tempo markings. Poulenc blatantly rejected the age-old practice of gendering non-specific text and the idea that masculine subject mat-

ter should be deemed normative and appropriate for all singers.<sup>24</sup> In composing the song cycle *Fiançailles pour rire* for soprano Denise Duval, Poulenc is able to create melodies that he feels are appropriate for the female singer, as their texts come from the female perspective and feature feminine literary characteristics.

An interest in the feminine, in fact, started early in Poulenc's compositional career, utilizing many characteristically feminine musical gestures as a means of establishing a recognizable style. As a member of the French group of composers *Les six*, Poulenc consistently felt the need to challenge the conventional use of tonal material and to defy the aesthetic characteristics presented by Debussy and other Expressionist composers. Indeed, these composers acted in direct reaction to French Expressionism, turning to popular music halls, jazz composition, and Parisian nightlife for their inspiration.<sup>25</sup> Poulenc's specific interpretation of these new sources of inspiration veered towards those musical characteristics historically attributed with a feminine connotation. In arguing for Poulenc's interest in femininity, Clifton cites:

Poulenc's interest in the feminine extends beyond isolated examples into the realm of an *idée fixe* that I have termed the Poulencian archetype of femininity. By this I mean Poulenc's systematic avoidance of formal clarity for its own sake, as well as a harmonic language that celebrates the beauty of sound often far removed from traditional tonal relationships, a gesture sometimes viewed as feminine and thus

23 Francis Poulenc, *Diary of my Songs [Journal de mes Mélodies]*, trans. Winifred Radford (London: V. Gollancz), 36-39.

24 McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 36.

25 Barbara L. Kelly, *Music and Ultra-Modernism in France: A Fragile Consensus, 1913-1939* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: The Boydell Press), 37-66.



inferior (especially by German critics). Poulenc will often eschew convention for the sake of expression, and such gestures have colored the reception of the composer...<sup>26</sup>

In making this distinctive statement, Clifton argues that not only was the musical setting of the text considered feminine in *Fiançailles pour rire*, but so too were his whole repertoire of songs, and by extension, all of his compositions that used these qualities. It is then evident that the femininity that Bernac refers to in this cycle is characteristic of Poulenc's compositional style.

In recent scholarship, critics have traced Poulenc's interest in the feminine further, connecting it to the expression of his homosexual identity. For instance, Christopher Moore has argued that Poulenc used camp in his early ballets *Les Biches* and *Aubade*, a network of rhetorical and stylistic devices. Referencing Susan Sontag's examination in her article "Notes on Camp," Moore cites the composer's admiration for popular music, his choice of frivolous subject matter, his attraction to contemporary modernist and surrealist movements, his tonal ambiguity, and "the general autobiographical theatricalization of experience" as typical of camp aesthetics.<sup>27</sup> The ballet dancers' ambiguous relationships, exaggerated playful atmosphere, and off-beat stress of the Hostess's "Rag-Mazurka" in *Les Biches* provide provocative and irresolvable contradictions that cause the audience to question the underlying meaning of such artificiality. In this way, the seemingly innocent female-female play may be interpreted as legitimate lesbian interaction. Additionally, the contradiction between the Hostess's feminine stance and the simultaneously aggressive and logical character of the music that accompanies her subtly suggests gender ambiguity in the character, implying that the Hostess is a drag queen or transgender. *Aubade's* expression of its protagonist's conflicted emotional state and the musical juxtaposition of Mozart-inspired passages and semi-tonal friction allude to Poulenc's conflicted feeling

about his own homosexuality.<sup>28</sup> In this way, Poulenc's use of camp served as a "cultivated [reaction] to the oppression, silencing, and marginalization of [his] gay desire."<sup>29</sup>

Other Poulenc scholarship has looked closely at the connection between Poulenc's feminine manifestations in his music, his Catholic reassertion at Rocamadour in 1936, and his homosexuality. Poulenc's revival of his Catholic faith falls at the tail end of the "reactionary revolution," a movement of Catholic conversion and conservatism by the intellectual and artistic elite in France during the first quarter of the twentieth century.<sup>30</sup> The most prominent figures in this movement, notably the Maritain family and those who worked out of No. 10 Rue du Parc in Paris, closely aligned themselves with the Fascist Action Française political party. Unfortunately for Poulenc and fellow devotee Max Jacob, the reassertion of traditional gender roles by the Fascist party and the Catholic Church's negative approach to homosexuality caused this movement to heavily crack down on what they deemed to be a perversion of nature.<sup>31</sup> These ideals coincide with Poulenc's public expression of his sexual orientation; while Poulenc was always a well-known homosexual, he decided to take his homosexual identity out of the public sphere after 1936, refraining from both public displays of affection and public drag.<sup>32</sup>

It is interesting, too, that Poulenc began composing songs for voice and piano in earnest in 1936, with his first song cycle, *Quatre Poèmes de Guillaume Apollinaire*, for voice and piano. Scholars like Burton believe Poulenc's feminine approach to his music and turn to vocal works served as an outlet for his personally repressed sexual identity. This idea presents itself in his later work *La Voix Humaine*, as Poulenc puts his own feminine identity into the protagonist. Clifton argues that "when we see [soprano Denise Duval] as Elle, we are really seeing Francis Poulenc himself, emotionally naked in the very public forum of the opera house."<sup>33</sup> He stipulates that Poulenc personally

<sup>26</sup> Keith Clifton, "Mots Cachés: Autobiography in Coc-teau's and Poulenc's *La Voix Humaine*," *Canadian University Music Review* 22, no. 1 (2001): 71.

<sup>27</sup> Christopher Moore, "Camp in Francis Poulenc's Early Ballets," *The Musical Quarterly* 95, no. 2-3 (2012): 5.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Burton, *Francis Poulenc* (Bath, England: Absolute Press, 2002), 43-60.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Clifton, "Mots Cachés," 76.

identifies with this character, not only in her despair at losing a beloved relationship, but also in her feminine way of dealing with the tragedy.<sup>34</sup>

In comparison to Vilmorin, however, Poulenc’s reception did not choose to address the idea of gender connotation for the majority of its history. Similarly, in the first edition of his correspondences, the editor omitted all references to Poulenc’s homosexuality.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

His wealthy lifestyle and the attribution of feminine characteristics to his music did not cause Poulenc to suffer the same kind of derogatory criticism towards his artistic output as his poetess friend. His status as a privileged white male of the upper class did not strip his works of their musical legitimacy in the eyes of the public, but instead allowed him to frequently premiere his music in the fashionable Paris salons of the day to which he may never have gained access otherwise.

## AN ANALYSIS OF THE TECHNIQUES USED IN *FIANÇAILLES POUR RIRE*

Just as we outlined the structure and gendered qualities of Vilmorin’s poems, we can now look at how the music reinforces this structure and the gendered

nature of the texts. In terms of overall form and key relationships, the pieces are structured as follows:

<i>La Dame d’Andre</i>	<i>Dans l’Herbe</i>	<i>Il Vole</i>	<i>Mon Cadavre...</i>	<i>Violon</i>	<i>Fleurs</i>
<i>A minor →</i>	<i>A minor →</i>	<i>E-flat major →</i>	<i>A minor →</i>	<i>A minor →</i>	<i>D-flat major</i>

Poulenc’s harmonic language in setting these poems reflects the influence of jazz and avant-garde music on the composer. Poulenc relies on a few devices in particular to convey the meaning of the text. Straying away from traditional tonal relationships, Poulenc uses coloristic harmonies and chordal progressions to express the color reflected in the text. For example, frequently appearing ninth, eleventh, thirteenth, and minor seventh chords create an ambiguous atmosphere that allows the duality of Vilmorin’s words to be effectively expressed. These added intervals and non-chord tones contribute to the general feeling of tension that marks the thematic contradiction of love and loss. By contrast, the use of uncolored chords (in this case, usually E-flat major and A minor chords) resolves the suspensions created by the added color tones.<sup>35</sup> Taking inspiration from Stravinsky as well, Poulenc inserts instances of bitonality during which the right and left hand of the piano accompaniment

occupy separate keys with the voice floating above this clashing sound.

For instance, we can see how these devices are used in the first song, “La Dame d’André,” to convey the speaker’s lack of confidence in her brother’s rapid match. Poulenc uses his characteristic jazz harmonies and reinterpretations of traditional chordal functions to bring the listener to an unexpected harmonic landscape, instilling the same instability in the music as in the couple’s superficial bond. The first presence of this phenomenon in *Fiançailles*, in “La Dame d’André,” happens in mm. 17–20. The song proceeds in a stylistically inflected but very solid A minor key up until this point, when Poulenc suddenly modulates to the key of E-flat major. Deciding to employ the augmented sixth in a dominant function rather than its usual pre-dominant function, Poulenc is able to smoothly transition between the two distant keys.

<sup>35</sup> Terence Evan Dawson, *Unifying Devices in Poulenc: A Study of the Cycles Banalités and Tel jour Telle Nuit* (Vancouver, Canada: University of British Columbia, 1991), 55.

*“La Dame d’André,” mm. 17–20*

*“La Dame d’André,” mm. (end)*

The most significant usage of unconventional harmony in this song, however, occurs directly at its end. Poulenc refuses to resolve the diminished seventh chord in the final measure, instead allowing the build-up of tension and lingering dissonances to carry the listener over to the next song. Additionally, this musical uncertainty simultaneously reflects the upended inflection of the final question in the poem and leaves this question unanswered, “[giving] this song its particularity and...[successfully creating] a mood of unsurety about André’s relationship.”<sup>36</sup>

Similar to “La Dame d’André,” the third song of this cycle, “Il Vole,” further these devices by continuing the relationship between A minor and E-flat major. While Poulenc uses un-notated key signature changes in the first song in this cycle to denote changes in key—that is to say, Poulenc switches from spell-

ing his harmonies with sharps to spelling them with flats, and vice versa—Poulenc begins the third song with the concrete establishment of the key of E-flat major. It is important to note that this is the first song in the cycle that features a notated key signature and that this key signature is the farthest possible key signature from that of the first two songs (A minor). In choosing the key of E-flat major for this song, Poulenc separates the manic character of “Il Vole” from the calmer mood in the earlier pieces while enhancing the relationship between A minor and E-flat major already established within the measures of “La Dame d’André.” To bring this key relationship even further, Poulenc definitively changes the key signature of “Il Vole” to A minor in m. 24 and then back to E-flat major at m. 34.

<sup>36</sup> Renita Jane Rosser Koehn, “A Study of the Poems and Musical Settings of the Songs of Francis Poulenc on the Texts of Louise de Vilmorin for the Female Singer: A Performer’s Guide” (DMA diss., University of Kentucky, 2003), 69.

*"Il Vole," m. 23 (key change)*

manque à sa paro - le

*"Il Vole," m. 34*

Je pleu - re car je

*très intense*

*mf*

*Ab pedal*

The passage in A minor changes in character from the frantic and frenzied outburst to a lament of self-pity; thus, the key change serves the mood change inherent in the text (Appendix 3.14–17).<sup>37</sup>

The fourth song, "Mon cadavre..." harkens back to the modern or jazz harmonies and coloristic non-chord tones first presented at the top of the cycle, adding the idea of abstraction to the mix. Poulenc's characteristic appoggiatura finds its roots in his jazz-inspired non-chord tones, specifically emphasizing this composition feature in "Mon cadavre..." These added seconds, ninths, and sixths resolving down to a consonant pitch in the accompaniment provide a generative basis for the appoggiaturas in the vocal line. Poulenc makes particular usage of this tactic in his second Vilmorin collaboration. The appoggiatura finds its most deliberate precepts in the piano part at

<sup>37</sup> Appendix referenced to note location of text in question during measure(s) discussed.

m. 14; while the voice features a descending resolution, the real melodic line has transferred to the top line in the right-hand accompaniment.

*"Mon cadavre..." mm. 14–15*

cret Et lourds du poids mort des i - ma - ges.

*f*

*p*

*APP*

*mf*

*p*

*G#*

This motive comes to its full development in the voice on the last page of the song, where an ascending preparation to D5 is followed by a sweeping and beautiful descending pattern, embellished with multiple appoggiaturas. The tension created by the non-chord tones on each beat of m. 29 pull the vocal line, "[providing] harmonic momentum and a propelling motion to the song."<sup>38</sup> Demonstrating his remarkable sensitivity to the poetic inspiration and the French language, Poulenc uses this forward motion to propel the vocal line towards the word "gagent [win]," emphasizing the futile human struggle against time and the morbid nature of the song text as a whole.

*"Mon cadaver," mm. 29–30*

La cour-se que les an-nées ga - gnent.

*APP*

*APP*

*APP*

*p*

*ANT*

*a*

*ol#o*

*E*

In addition, Poulenc strategically places measures of bi-chordal harmony accompanying arbitrary verses

<sup>38</sup> Dawson, *Unifying Devices in Poulenc*, 56.

of the poem, further abstracting the sense of sadness and morbidity from the listener (e.g., m. 13 [Appendix 4.7]).

"Mon cadavre...", mm. 13

The idea of the text's abstraction has been expanded from the interpretation of this song to his entire song repertoire, permeating much of the literature predating the recent revival of Poulenc scholarship. In this school of interpretation, headed by critics like

Bernac, the singer must not read too far into the text of the songs, as these scholars insist that Poulenc intended them to be simply superficial and fun. Such arguments find their roots in the concept of camp as discussed earlier in reference to Christopher Moore, "a network of rhetorical and stylistic devices that simultaneously conceal and creatively exploit the secret of sexual identity."<sup>39</sup> While Poulenc's entire song repertoire falls out of the scope of this analysis, we may assess the validity of this interpretation in regard to *Fiançailles pour rire*. This song cycle treats a different and external subject matter than those works typically analyzed for camp influences, specifically the love and loss of a confident 1930s woman, Louise de Vilmorin. In this sense, Poulenc uses the idea of abstraction as a means to represent the core meaning of the text, in this case the utter emptiness and metaphorical death of the soul after a significant loss. In a final reference to "Mon cadavre...", similar passages of creative E-flat major tonicization occur in mm. 15–25 of "Mon cadavre...", further linking this individual song to the keys of those preceding it.

<sup>39</sup> Moore, "Camp in Francis Poulenc's Early Ballets," 3.

"Mon cadavre...", mm. 15–25

The songs discussed previously all share common characteristics that may contradict Bernac's negative view of this Vilmorin cycle. Specifically, the standard of tonal closure is perhaps one of the reasons that Bernac did not consider this a true cycle, as he makes a vivid comparison to *Tel jour telle nuit*:

But let it first be said that this collection does not at all constitute a true cycle as does that written on the poems of Eluard. United under the title *Fiançailles pour rire*, which is that of the literary collection and has no bearing on the cycle as a whole, the songs form a well-constructed group for concert performance, nothing more; for there is no poetic or musical link of any kind between these effectively contrasted songs.<sup>40</sup>

In response to this statement, I propose a closer look at the tonal diagram presented at the beginning of this section. At first glance, Poulenc's unconventional approach to the establishment of a key in song cycles in the absence of a key signature obscures the linkages between songs; however, in completing an in-depth analysis of the cycle, we have found that each of the songs, one through five, greatly emphasizes both the keys of A minor and E-flat major, not only through a formal key signature but also through modulatory passages within the measures of each song. On a secondary level, this integration of keys may now further integrate these songs into the "true" cycle Bernac desires. Furthermore, the emphasis of A minor and E-flat major juxtaposes two keys which are the furthest possible interval away from each other, a tritone. This parallels the inherent opposition of the two main themes of this cycle, loss and love, which occupy two completely different but interconnected parts of the human experience.

Interesting, too, are the observances of Terence Evan Dawson in regards to this tritone relationship. In analyzing Poulenc's earlier masculine song cycle *Tel jour telle nuit* (1937) for his dissertation at the University of British Columbia, Dawson remarks that the tritone bass progression in "Une roulotte couverte en tuiles" "gives a peculiar slant...to a standard IV–I plagal cadence."<sup>41</sup> Historically, critics have long noted the notion of subdominant as feminine and dominant as masculine. During the nineteenth century, the intro-

duction and development of programmatic analysis of music furthered the association of specific musical gestures with gender. Theorists during this period characterized musical motives that strayed away from the established norm as "feminine," as they undermined the traditional predominant → dominant → tonic movement. The plagal cadences' omission of the dominant function (which had been defined as a masculine function) represented the most feminine ending to a phrase.<sup>42</sup> Dawson's association of this movement with plagal motion and the historically gendered interpretation of cadences may then be extrapolated to *Fiançailles*. Harkening back to the issue of masculine and feminine musical gestures, this tritone motion lies one half-step above plagal, or feminine harmonic motion, and one half-step below authentic or masculine harmonic motion. Based on Poulenc's history with the queer aesthetics of camp, this relationship may imply that this harmonic emphasis might subtly reflect Poulenc's gender deviation and homosexuality without the cognizance of the listener.

The final song in the cycle, "Fleurs," poses the only inconsistency in this tonal relationship theory. Distinctly written in the key of D-flat major, this song ends the cycle in a completely different key than in which it started, denying the cycle the quality of tonal roundedness so hailed by Bernac in his analysis of *Tel jour telle nuit*. Poulenc, however, strategically uses the absence of tonal roundedness as a specific compositional tool to relate the text of the final song to the rest of the pieces in the song cycle. "Fleurs"'s half-pedaled high-register piano accompaniment places the text in a dream-like world of nostalgia, reflecting the pensive remembering of the singer's text. Poulenc chose the large deviation from the original A minor key to remain true to the text, placing the final song in a separate realm from the previous five.

The final song in Poulenc's cycle also provides material for speculation on the cycle's meaning as a whole to the composer. Poulenc confesses in his *Diary of My Songs* that he writes this cycle as a reminder of Vilmorin during her captivity in Hungary.<sup>43</sup> But what exactly did he want to say about Vilmorin in writing this? This final song presents some of Poulenc's religious influences; the piano notation "in a

<sup>40</sup> Bernac, *Francis Poulenc*, 137.

<sup>41</sup> Dawson, *Unifying Devices in Poulenc*, 59.

<sup>42</sup> McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 60.

<sup>43</sup> Poulenc, *Diary of my Songs*, 55.

halo of pedals”<sup>44</sup> appearing only after the revival of his Catholic faith in 1936.<sup>45</sup> Along with the ethereal orchestration of the piano accompaniment and the otherworldly key separation from the remainder of the work, Poulenc creates an almost heavenly atmosphere around this text.<sup>46</sup> In this song, then, Poulenc

44 Ibid., 47.

45 Wilfrid Mellers, *Francis Poulenc* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 75-76.

46 Poulenc, *Diary of my Songs*, 57.

may be resurrecting the deadened soul of his poetess friend, facilitating the resurrection of Vilmorin in her glorified state. This would serve a dual purpose for the composer: allowing him to think positively about his friend during her absence and presenting a more positive image of her to the public. In this sense, Poulenc may be trying to do the same thing for her reputation that her brother tried to do for her in his biography, showing audiences that she was indeed a capable author and sensitive soul.

## CONCLUSION

While modern Poulenc scholarship has only briefly touched upon the partnership between Louise de Vilmorin and Francis Poulenc, this collaboration proved to be long and fruitful. Vilmorin’s feminine energy and literature helped to further develop Poulenc’s already untraditional style and helped him to explore composition for a differing perspective of speaker.

The Vilmorin collaboration proved to be only the beginning of Poulenc’s career in writing for the female voice. After this original foray into the feminine mindset, Poulenc went on to write two of his most famous and successful works as seen through the eyes of female characters. First, Denise Duval, the same soprano who premiered *Fiançailles pour rire*, played the protagonist in his first opera, *Tireseas*. The French

diva also starred as Elle in Poulenc’s collaboration with Jean Cocteau on the one-woman opera *La Voix Humaine*, discussed earlier. Finally, in the culmination of his late vocal work and religious interest, *Dialogue des Carmelites*, Poulenc features this feminine inspiration and his token soprano in the mis-en-scene of the execution of a Carmelite order of nuns during the Reign of Terror in France. *Fiançailles pour rire* provided Poulenc with a compositional playground with which he could make very important decisions defining his personal interpretation of the feminine text. In keeping with his own personal compositional style, Poulenc used jazz harmony, tension through non-chord tones, bitonality, and key association to affectively reflect the feminine perspective of the speaker in these poems in his music.

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