

Suite from L'invitation au Château

Francis Poulenc

The play *l'invitation au Château* by Jean Anouilh centers around a ball hosted by a young man who disapproves of the engagement of his twin brother. He schemes to introduce a charming young mystery woman incognito (a beautiful professional dancer) who will upstage all the other women at the ball. The relationships between the characters are revealed to be ridiculously complex and superficial. For instance, one character is the acknowledged mistress of a rich patron, the lover of another man, but secretly in love with the host. Anouilh pokes fun at this society of aristocrats, where people are measured primarily by their lineage and wealth, secondly by their physical attributes, while their actual character is almost irrelevant.

Since the setting is a ball, dancing to music is the background for the action, gossiping, and plotting that unfolds. Poulenc provides short character movements to set the various moods for the scenes, as well as longer ballroom dance movements, including several waltzes, a tango, a two-step, and a short tarantella.

With this score, Poulenc echoes the frivolity and light-hearted spirit of the play, but rises above superficiality by virtue of his unique and at times piquant melodic and harmonic writing. The suite was arranged by the Verdehr Trio.

Francis Poulenc (1899–1963) had his first major successes as an eighteen-year-old composer, and despite some study with Charles Koechlin, remained largely self-taught. By 1921, he had already become identified with *Les Six*, an informal confederation of French composers who wanted to eliminate Impressionism and Germanicism from French music in favor of the influences of Stravinsky, Eric Satie, and more popular forms. These six composers, including Honegger, Auric and Milhaud, allied themselves with Cubism in art and with the French surrealists Cocteau, Eluard, and Apollinaire in literature. Poulenc's works around this time include the brilliant *Rapsodie nègre* (flute, clarinet, string quartet, and baritone), *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* (surrealist opera), *Les Biches* (a classic ballet for Diaghilev), and the *Concert champêtre* (harpsichord).

In the thirties, after the death of a friend, Poulenc became one of the great religious (and choral) composers of the century. This period included among its masterpieces the organ concerto *Litanies à la Vierge Noire*, the *Mass in G*, and the *Quatre Motets pour le temps de Pénitence*. In his final period of composition, Poulenc produced the *Stabat Mater* and *Gloria*.

Poulenc's concerti are twentieth-century landmarks. In addition to the ones for organ and harpsichord, they include a piano concertino (*Aubade*), a piano concerto, and a two-piano concerto. His influence was particularly strong in chamber music compositions: a sonata for two pianos; a series of wind sonatas (flute, clarinet, oboe, brass trio); a trio for oboe, bassoon and piano; and a *Sextuor* for winds and piano, all of which are repertory classics. Poulenc also wrote three operas, and as a French songwriter, some consider him the successor to Fauré.