

Observations regarding the perception of dynamic aspects in the "Nocturnes" of Francis Poulenc (II. Nocturnes no. V-VIII)

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Abstract: *The study at hand represents the continuation of an analysis that was started and presented in a previous editorial number of this publication regarding the dynamic aspects of Francis Poulenc's Nocturnes. The work aims to be a warning signal regarding the dynamic aspects seen through the subjective perception of the performer and on the means in which these creations of the composer need to be approached. Even though they are not that challenging from an execution technique point of view, as far as the elements of expressivity are concerned we can say that the works require a high degree of implication from the performer in order for them to be able to understand and to perform the works according to the "prescription" of the composer.*

Key-words: *dynamics, sonority, performance*

1. Introduction

Wilfrid Mellers has stated about Poulenc's eight nocturnes that they are the "most subtly representative piano works of the 1930. These nocturnes are not romantic tone-poems like Chopin's or Fauré's, but are rather night-scenes, sounds- images of both public and private events."²

Created as a cycle, Poulenc stated about nocturne 8 that it represents a coda to the whole cycle „*pour servir de Coda au Cycle*".³

2. Nocturnes

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² Mellers Wilfrid Howard, *Francis Poulenc*, Oxford University Press, New Ed Edition 1993, pg. 40

³ Francis Poulenc, *Nocturnes pour Piano*, A Paris Chez Heugel au Ménestrel, 2^{bis}, rue Vivienne, p. 28

2.1. Nocturne no. 5 – D minor – represents a breaking point when it comes to the richness of the dynamic range, a synthesis of the means of expression seen beforehand.

Presto misterioso brings forth a first theme (measures 1-2) characterized by an expressive tandem between two sonorous levels: a *très lié* melodic line on the superior voice and an incisive *sec et très rythmé* on the inferior one; the peculiarity of the performance is therefore conditioned by the contract created through the combination of the two techniques, *legato* and *non-legato*.

The interpretation of the emphasized sounds in the debut of each measure must be adapted to the dynamics – *piano* – as their role is rather to support the intervallic leap. The exaggerated emphasis would imply the interruption of the fluent leap, at which point the presence of the expression *legato* would be useless.

Presto misterioso (♩ = 112)

très lié

p

sec et très rythmé

The performative aspect is aimed at the sonorous intensities that are in a continuous state of progression and permanent contrast, that "control" and personalize almost each measure. The appropriate interpretation must be conditioned by the content of the musical text. Following this path, we can talk of a differentiation between the two *piano* dynamic notations (measure 1 and measure 5). Keeping in mind that the second *p* appears as a result of the cancellation of the evolution of the sounds to *staccato* (the *legato* nature is present in the two sonorous levels), its sonority should be warmer when compared to the first *p*, which is quieter in appearance. In measure 6, there is an *mf* that brings back the notation of the markings present in the first measure of the Nocturne (present on the inferior level), but this time they are focused on each group of eighths. In this context where the half note measures the metric gauge, the markings of each group of eighths follow each other rapidly and lead the melody to a new sonorous loop – *f* (measure 9). The emphasized sounds at the beginning of each descending melodic gesture (on the inferior level) become more pregnant and allow for the

development of the chromatic movement. The melodic line performed through a single musical breath in *legato* (on the superior level) will support the powerful sonority (measures 9-10). The consecutive presence of two *p* and *pp* sonorities does not allow for a clear separation from the intensity because of the rapid tempo. The only helpful indication that the composer points out is *très sec* and it relates to the movement of the eighths in *staccato* that should be interpreted in a "cadent" manner, through a delicate touch.

The succession of the alternating measures, the alternation of the sonorous registers, the fluctuations in intensity all lead the musical thread towards a new theme – measure 17. We can distinguish the basic, essential sounds of the melodic line with the help of which the melody is built, as well as "filler" harmonies meant to provide the moment with support and precision.

reprendre exactement le Tempo

The musical score for measures 17-19 is presented in a grand staff. Measure 17 begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and an *express.* marking. The right hand features a melodic line with eighth notes and slurs, while the left hand provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and eighth notes. Measures 18 and 19 continue this pattern, with a forte (*f*) dynamic marking in measure 19. The tempo instruction "reprendre exactement le Tempo" is placed above the staff.

Along with measure 28, a new theme creates an expressive fusion between the melodic line itself – the median voice – and the rhythmic *très légère et sec* accompaniment; the dialogue between the two extreme sonorous levels, in which the dynamic accents respond to the reverberations of the grave sounds, gives this theme its drive.

The musical score for measures 28-31 is presented in a grand staff. Measure 28 is marked with *m. d.*, *f*, and *p*. The right hand features a melodic line with eighth notes and slurs, while the left hand provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and eighth notes. The tempo instruction "très léger et sec" is placed above the staff. The score concludes with a 5/4 time signature.

An impressive number of contrasting sonorities are present in measure 34: *f*, *p*, *f*, *p*. The dynamic accents "bring up" an energy that highlights each sonority and assigns the moment a new force.

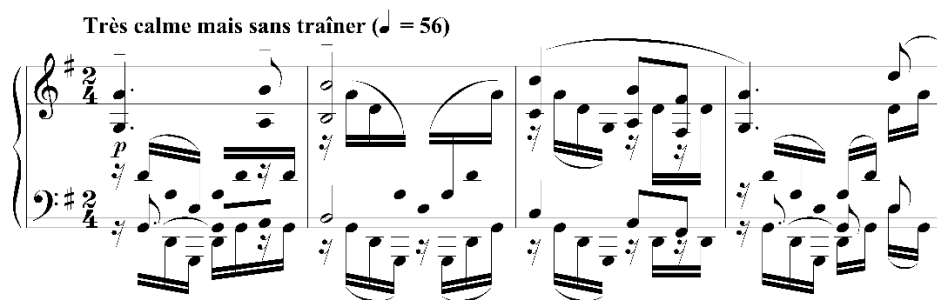
The apparition of a *pp* in measure 48 brings an end to the previous energetic phrensy and the whole melodic substance suddenly loses its vigour. *Sforzato* leads the dynamic parameter up to the silence of the *piano* sonority (measure 55).

There are moments of harmonic and dynamic accumulation, moments of respite as well as moments of rhythmic asymmetry or of apparent liberty in performance – *léger*. The permanently shifting sonorous intensities and the contrasting dynamic dialogues make this Nocturne become the "dynamic generator" of this cycle. Throughout this Nocturne there are as many as 38 contrasting sonorities: 4 *pp* sonorities, 17 *p* sonorities, one *mf* sonority, 12 *f* sonorities and 4 *ff* sonorities.

2.2. Nocturne no. 6 – G major – "grows to a passionate climax in spite of it beginning *Très calme mais sans trainer*." ⁴

The intimacy of the musical framework is suggested at first by the melodic line present in the descant and its harmonization; hidden in a flourish of sounds, the same melody disputes its importance on the lower lever as well.

The first three sounds endowed with energetic (-) potential contour the melodic line and impose a differentiation in performance. The abrupt – almost never-ending – ascending and descending lines of the arpeggio wave are interrupted every now and then by pauses. Even if this peaceful dialogue – piano – is held by these harmonic chains that lead the dynamic track, minor fluctuations in intensity appear to be necessary, supported by these very arpeggio movements that take place in an ample register.



The succession of the dynamic accents enlightens the musical discourse – *crescendo* – (measure 7), defines its hasty pulse – *accelerando* – (measure 8). We

⁴ Stevenson Christine, *Nocturnes – Poulenc*, www.notesfromapianist.wordpress.com, November 23, 2014

must take note of the melodic line which "engulfs" itself in a new expressive appearance, gaining elasticity through the apparition of leaps (7m, 7M, 8p). In order to stimulate the sonorous action, these sounds are endowed with a series of accents that force the performer to clearly pronounce them and to sonorously highlight them. These techniques accumulate a growth in sonorous intensity, which leads to a first apparition of a strong intensity – *ff* – for a short measure (measure 10).

A new thematic physiognomy (measures 12-17) is contoured predominantly through gradual steps, which mirrors the expressive *murmure* indication of the composer. The thematic is expressively supported by the legato that leads and forms the means of performance, thus gaining a melodious aspect. The right intensity for the interpretation of the sonority is *pp très doux*, but the phrasing can support small sonorous fluctuations.

Gradually conducting the tempo by following the metronomic indications noted is necessary. The performance accelerates, requires an increase to the value of the time unit from quarter =56 to 60 (measure 12) and 66 (measure 18). The moments of respite owed to the presence of the cesura and of the pauses – "formal" breaths placed at the borders between sections – fulfill their expressive role of suspension and also of changing the tempo.

Poulenc extends the dynamic parameter in the following section (measures 18-44) through the dynamic range approached: *p*, *mf*, *f*, *ff*. The abundance of individual dynamic accents as well as the conjunction of two types of accents (measure 21), alternating measures, the dialogue of sonorous registers, the presence of the melodic maximum (measure 38) are just some of the "accessories" that Poulenc employs to "paint" this sonorous work. The accelerando helps with the accumulation of vertiginous tension towards the "dramatic" culmination in *ff*, and in order to keep this energetic ascension going, he gives up the pauses that delimited certain fragments (measures 39-40).

The following cesura suddenly disrupts the strong sonority, offers the minimum time necessary for its changing to *p* and later on to *pp* (measures 42-44).

Starting with measure 45, *p doucement expressif* reiterates the thematic elements from the second section, as the definition of the dynamic profile brings forth a *p* in measures 45-53, a dynamic increase – *mf* – in measure 54 and a brief sonorous culmination – *ff* – in measure 56. The sonorous – *p subito* – fall announces the return of the arpeggio waves present in the first section (measures 64-77).

The concluding moment debuts in a *pp clair* sonority; the *portato* indication sonorously highlights the progression of the parallel octaves, preparing the last chord base.

2.3. Nocturne no. 7 – E major – appears "like a quiet creek, with the even ripple of a transparent melodic contour."⁵

The tripartite structure, specific to the cycle is highlighted in this nocturne as well. A first section (measures 1-16) suggests the *mp*, *p* and *mf* sonorities. The median section (measures 17-24) follows a curve in the *p*, *mf*, *f* intensities. The third section (measures 25-34) is where the *p* sonority becomes a permanent follower of the section.

In the first section, the co-existence of three sonorous levels forms the musical weave: a melodic line with a development that is predominantly gradual, exposed by the higher voice; ample arpeggio movements that make up the lower voice and the tension waves offered by the presence of the syncopations that support the median voice. All three sonorous levels have a substantial input to the musical whole. The expressive anacrusis that characterize and individualize the section guide the fluency of the melodic line with discrete and natural fluctuations in intensity. The development of arpeggios in the inferior level unfold a dilation of the sonorous distance through the alternations between the registers where their wavy pattern renders the image of a "quiet creek".

In the structure of the median voice, the composer makes use of contretemps syncope formulas/syncopated contretemps in order to create the impression of expressive impulses meant to substitute the lack of dynamic accents. In order not to interrupt the continuous and natural development of the melodic line, the dynamic involvement of the bass is important.

⁵ Cortot Alfred, *French music for piano*, Musical Publishing House of the Composers' Union in the Socialist Republic of Romania, Bucharest, 1966, p. 355

Assez allant (♩ = 84)

The sudden changes in registers but also sometimes of the intensities: *p très doux* (measure 9), *mf* (measure 11) and *p* (measure 12) are secured by the apparition of the pauses and/of the cesura which interrupt the melodic fluency.

Surtout sans ralentir brings forth the dynamic accents focused on certain sounds coming out of the weave of arpeggios individualized through higher rhythmic values (measure 13). Their highlight determines a re-contouring of the melodic-rhythmic design.

13 **surtout sans ralentir**

The daring, ever-moving harmonies, the recurrence of the sonorous intensities – *p*, *mf*, *f*, *mf*, *p* – are just some of the observations that give the second section *Toujours strictement au même mouvement* a particular coloristic hallmark. Melodic cells get embodied in fugitive, inquisitive apparitions, as the motor drive is supported by the dynamic accents but also by the dotted apparitions of the bass – *sec.*

The image shows a musical score for measures 17 to 29. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The time signature is 4/4. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The score is marked with '17' at the beginning. The instruction 'le chant lié' is written above the treble staff. The dynamic marking 'p sec' is placed below the treble staff. The bass staff has a 'sec' marking below it. The music features a series of chords and arpeggios, with some notes marked with accents (>).

Along with the arrival of the piano sonority, small differences go through the reiteration of the first section. The transposal of fragments from the melodic line at a perfectly descending or ascending octave interval (measures 26-27) impress an extension to the sonorous registers, proving the ease with which Poulenc juggles with sonorous registers – rapid shifts from acute to low; the delicate repetition of high sounds (measures 26-29) produce a quiet effect in this vortex of arpeggio movement.

The crown placed on the cesura (measure 31) readies the concluding moment indicated through the *le chant bien marqué*. The pithiness of the sounds is attenuated, the *céder beaucoup* indication leading to the natural quenching of the *pp* sonority. (measure 34)

2.4. Nocturne no. 8 – G major – appears as a coda to the whole nocturne cycle – *pour servir de Coda au Cycle*.

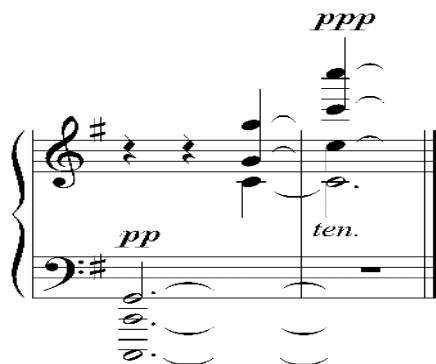
The composer builds the musical discourse starting from only one theme generated by a delicate and expressive melodic line (the higher voice) and by discrete harmonic accompaniment.

Even though the tempo remains unchanged – *Très modéré* – throughout the nocturne, the permanent fluctuations in intensity, the occasional sonorous register changes, the color of the harmonies guide the emotional course and allow for a more nuanced interpretation, with small tempo fluctuations.

The pedal (*Mettre beaucoup de pédale (le chant en dehors, les batteries très discrètes)*) has an expressive cohesion role between the legatos and the apparition of the "pedal" sounds (measures 12-22) make up for the lack of dynamic accents and indicate to the performer certain sonorous "placings".

The dynamics of the melodic phrases delimited through contrasting sonorities that change permanently foreshadow a "coda" of the colors of the sonorities.

The conclusive moment of the nocturne takes us in an expressive way to a state of transparency through the vertical extension of the *do* sound placed on a stretch of three octaves in a *ppp* sonorous echo. The unfinished legato prolongs the moment of dreaming and imagination.



3. Conclusion

After analyzing the aspects of expressivity and dynamics, we can also state that the frequent changes in tempo, the continuous alternation of the measures, the subjective agogic notations, the changes in character and last, but not least, the pendulum of dynamic sonorities offer the works the aspect of a permanent improvisation.

The dynamic palette approached by the *ppp* sonorities towards the *ff* dynamic maximums trace the expressive background of the nocturnes, which thus forces the performer to correctly pick the tempo; Poulenc always indicated the tempo indications or modifications that took place throughout the works.

Poulenc's nocturnes thus represent a succession of varied melodies that impress through the personal piano writing "found in the polite and elegant notation and in the personal accent"⁶ full of substance and expressivity, that tells him apart from the composers of his time.

Scores

Poulenc, Francis. *Nocturnes pour Piano* – A Paris Chez Heugel au Ménestrel. 2^{bis}. rue Vivienne

⁶ Cortot Alfred, *French music for piano*, Musical Publishing House of the Composers' Union in the Socialist Republic of Romania, Bucharest, 1966, p. 341

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