

Observations regarding the Perception of Dynamic Aspects in the "Nocturnes" of Francis Poulenc (I.Nocturnes no. I-IV)

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Abstract: *Through this foray in the world of the four Nocturnes of Francis Poulenc, I have highlighted in particular the importance of the study of expressivity and of musical dynamics as analytic observations regarding the usage of the dynamic parameter. The perception of the dynamic aspects, the deciphering of the meanings and their interpretation determines the correct rendering and conveyance of the artistic expressivity. The value of the emotional message is brought forth only through a performance that can reflect the compositional desires and the emotions of the composer. The correspondence between the dynamic indications present in a musical work and the other parameters involved in the musical whole (the melody, the harmony, the rhythm etc.) endow uniqueness to the compositional language – they become defining when it comes to rendering the affective intensity of the musical discourse and they therefore enhance the sonorous expressive effect. The task of the performer, other than to master their instrument, is to unveil these "connections", to find their corresponding expression.*

Keywords: *dynamics, sonority, performance*

1. Introduction

French composer of the 20th century and a member of the *Les Six* (Georges Auric, Louis Durey, Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, Germaine Tailleferre), Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) debuted in music as an early pianist. Alfred Cortot considered him "*one of the most gifted musicians of his generation*".²

"This penchant for the piano is self-explanatory through his virtuous dedication to study, that has made Poulenc be the most qualified performer to carry out his light improvisations; and his taste and aptitudes during his student days can be seen in his work – this is what would drive him to perform cheerful and transparent

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² Cortot Alfred, *French music for piano*, Musical Publishing House of the Composers' Union in the Socialist Republic of Romania, Bucharest, 1966, p. 357

*music in particular, with examples ranging from Scarlatti's creation to that of Haydn or even Mozart."*³

Unlike Honegger or Milhaud, Poulenc appears to be more modest through his creation; he is no inventor, a discoverer of new compositional processes, "*he is not the man of great abstract constructions*"⁴, but rather a composer with an inborn sense of the melody, having a personal nuance, a refinement typical of French music, in which imagination and sensibility are the main guides.

George Keck said that "*his melody is simple and pleasant, easy to remember and most of the times expressive from an emotional perspective*".⁵

Francis Poulenc's music has its particular charm, its expression is simple, direct, his inspiration stems from the Parisian climate, *a spiritual synthesis of his birth town*. His originality is manifested both in the use of the piano as a translator of feelings and in the aspects that regard his notation and his expressivity, which are characteristic of his musical language.

*"Poulenc amplifies his manner, he fuels his music with a more expressive and expressive substance. But that which constitutes the essence of his talent can be found in these notations of kind elegance as well as in the personal accent that will later on distinguish him from his other five friends, regardless of the compositional type he approaches."*⁶

2. Nocturnes

During 1929 and 1938, he writes the eight Nocturnes, a succession of compositions for the piano that are engrained with personal writing and that are usually performed as a cycle, but which can also be performed separately.

2.1. Nocturne no. 1 – C Major – brings forth a lyrical theme through a meditative nature; it is original, with a refinement specific to French music, in which the arpeggio accompaniment *très estompé et régulier* plays a fundamental role in establishing the affective background. The arpeggio formulas – expressions of continuous melodic flows – follow the diatonic functional relationships marked by a personal harmonic imprint.

³ Cortot Alfred, *French music for piano*, Musical Publishing House of the Composers' Union in the Socialist Republic of Romania, Bucharest, 1966, p. 351.

⁴ Goléa Antoine (coord.), Vignal Marc coord., *A dictionary of great musicians*, Encyclopedic Universe Publishing House, Bucharest, 2006, p. 373.

⁵ Keck, George Russell -*Francis Poulenc – A Bio-bibliography*, New York Greenwood Press.

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

Sans traîner (♩ = 80)

l'accompagnement très estompé et régulier

Ex. 1.

In this first section (measures 1-27), the dynamic range is centred around two sonorous identities: *mf* (in measures 1-8 and in measures 19-27) and *p* (measures 9-12 and in measures 16-18); a sonorous duality that is only interrupted by a faint intensification – *f* – (measures 14-15).

The decryption and the interpretation of some sonorities as a dynamic-emotional attribute will be differentiated; and the association with the other parameters that are involved in the musical whole are endowed with great importance. Starting with this idea, a "flowing" *mf* is characterised by the presence of the arpeggios that are conducted in an ample register and by the grave sounds that play an important expressive role through the underlining of the *legato* nature of the moment. The syncopes present on the superior level offer brief moments of tension that should be highlighted during performance through a light expressive accent.

The movement of the bass arpeggios is replaced by dotted apparitions of the same instrument (measures 19-21). The pauses create a moment of respite, necessary for the execution of a sudden shift between the sonorous registers. The performance of the leaps on the lower level while taking into consideration the pauses livens the melodic line and defines a more intense, but balanced *mf*, due to the presence of the expression *legato* on the higher level.

The *p* sonority will also be differentiated: it will be more active in measures 9-12 (the intermittent progression and pauses of the bass), and then less active in measures 16-18 (due both to the sudden loss of tension – *piano subito* – from the preceding measures, but also due to the return of the arpeggio formulas). We notice that the bass sounds are not endowed with dynamic accents, but the attached pauses create the sensation of expressive impulses (measures 9-11). However, the presence of the dynamic accent on a higher rhythmic value on the high voice (measure 9) supports the first melodic cell in an interrogatory cycle.

The second section will be preceded by a "sectioned" measure - 1/2 - (measure 27) where a light *rubato* might be necessary to prepare the *pp* sonority. The grave sounds of the arpeggios will implicitly be endowed with a sonorous marking, with the justification being technical in nature when creating the intervallic leap (measure 28 and measure 30).

Ex. 2.

The central section (measures 44-55) brings a dynamic intensification –*crescendo*, which tenses up the musical discourse to the powerful sonorities –*f* and *ff*.

The tonal conflict, the unpredictable modulations, the dialogue between the harmonic verticality and horizontality – chords and arpeggios – all contribute to the definition of these sonorities. The dynamic accents mark the sonorous peaks and highlight their sober nature – *pressez un peu* – and the grave sounds on the background will mark the metric accent.

The dynamic profile (measures 47-49) follows the "in ascensio" melodic line, and once the dynamic climax is reached–*ff*–a *decrescendo* is required (measure 50).

Ex. 3

The quiet sonorities – *pp* and *p* – will "polarize" the final section (measures 56-86). The *Le double plus lent* coda brings on a quiet *E Major*, followed by a frail melodic-rhythmic dynamization and by a musical weave concluded up to the silence of the *pp* sonority.

2.2. Nocturne no. 2 – *Bal de jeunes filles*⁷ – in the A Major tonality, where we find an explosion of rhythm and dance; "a detailed portrayal, in its vivid impetus of hasty notes, of small talk of some young girls; he proves through the successful details of his pianistic rendering a sort of epidermal pleasure that cannot be contested".⁸

The composer's inclination towards the tripartite structure is highlighted in this Nocturne: in the first section (measures 1-13) the quiet sonorities dominate – *p* and *pp*; we then see a median section (measures 14-23) where the melodic substance will acquire more personal valences – *avec passion* – and the sonorities gain intensity – *mf* and *f*; we then see a third section (measures 24-30) which reminds us of the mood of the first one.

The constructive process of the melodic line – the main character – starts with the repetition of a rhythmical formula  in various melodic situations. Its expressive support is offered by the interior pulsation of the *contretemps* formulas – the secondary character – as the performer is obliged to keep the equality of the rhythm. These sonorous characters complement each other, and the piano sonority offers the scene of this expressive dialogue. The section has to be thought of as a continuity, as each melodic arc generates the subsequent one, and the tempo – *Très animé* – denotes the exuberant joy specific to youth.

Très animé (♩ = 104)



Dans un halo de pédale

Ex. 4

The dynamic dimming – *pp* – appears along with the ending of the first section, and the corona pause seems to "suspend" the whole musical construction in a certain immobility (measure 13). A contrast is therefore created against the following section *Strictelement au même mouv.*

The sonorous background is created through melodic curves in order to maintain the canorous nature of the melodic design and in order to put a halt to

⁷ Young Girls' Ball

⁸ Cortot Alfred, *French music for piano*, Musical Publishing House of the Composers' Union in the Socialist Republic of Romania, Bucharest, 1966, p. 355

the haste of the sixteenths; everything has to be performed *très souple et très allant*.

The incursion in the world of dynamics reaches a fundamental point with the setting up of a dynamic maximum – *f* – (measures 19-20). The colour reflected by the depressive alterations along with the *avec passion* indication of the composer contribute to the rise in energetic potential and require a subjective input from the performer. Even though the composer only notes the desired *f* sonority, there still is a subtle dynamic intensification needed to suggest the direction of the ascending melodic line.

The lack of the caesura specific to the delimitation of the sections and the return of the piano sonority brings back the beginning mood of the Nocturne, assuring the continuity of the musical discourse (measures 24-27).

The corona signals the *Très lent* ending, where the slow pace towards the extreme sonorous registers imprints a conclusive mood, as the *p très expressif* sonority becomes necessary. The musical weave gradually gets lost through the last sounds of an *arpeggio*.

Ex. 5.

2.3. Nocturne no.3, *Les cloches de Malines* in the *F Major* tonality; "it might be inferred, if there would only be the brief interlude of violently unleashed strings, that it finds inspiration in a very picturesque manner in the Islamic rhythms and melodies; in reality however, it renders the obsessive chime of a bell in Malines, that has once been, to Poulenc's great dismay, an insurmountable obstacle on his path to proper sleep."⁹

The first section (measures 1-42) arrives to mitigate the impetus of the preceding Nocturne. The physiognomy of the theme, the "simple" rhythm that endows the melody with individuality and with its objective tempo – *Modéré mais sans lenteur*, both easily lead our imagination towards the sound of bells chiming.

⁹ Cortot Alfred, *French music for piano*, Musical Publishing House of the Composers' Union in the Socialist Republic of Romania, Bucharest, 1966, p. 355

The 4p interval will complement this expressive canvas and assume its role of sonorous leader. The writing does not demand virtue, as the role of the two sounds of the interval is to maintain the auditory sensation of the bells. In order to keep the quiet sonority—*p doux et mélancolique*—the *mettre beaucoup de pédale* indication is suggestive.

Modéré mais sans lenteur (♩ = 98)

p doux et mélancolique

mf clair

mettre beaucoup de pédale

Ex. 6.

Poulenc finds it important to place dynamic accents throughout the musical whole. Their placement on the first beat of each measure offers precision to the alternating measures – 3/4 and 4/4 –but their placement on unaccentuated beats determines an auditory detachment of the measure by one beat (measures 6, 7, 11, 12, 15). I believe that their role is rather to bring a sonorous highlight and not a proper "intensity", as the assertion is not just pure theoretical speculation, but merely the composer's wish to hint at the effect of bells chiming.

The dynamic suggestion of the pendulum of sounds must not be abandoned, even if the dissonances disrupt the new *pp* presence in measures 18-24. The counter-parallel movement of the harmonic intervals of sevenths and ninths require an expressive emphasis and prepare the increase of the *mf* intensity by one more step (measure 25).

Long silence, the musical "cuts" present in measure 42 and in measure 67, create the bond between sections, intervals that aim to change the metre and the tempo. Riemann considers that the musical silence has a great expressive power, that "we have to feel them, if they expire or inspire, if they represent a conclusion or if they do not form the hollow space between the two pylons that support the melodic arc".¹⁰

In the median section (measures 43-67) – *Agité et mystérieux* – the metronomic indication noted by the composer is the quarter note= 138 that comes to contradict the unit of time of the alternating measures—the eighth. The metronomic indication is rather an objective guide, and its correspondence with the other parameters involved

¹⁰ Fischer Edwin – *Beethoven's Sonatas for the piano*, Musical Publishing House of the Composers' Union in the Socialist Republic of Romania, Bucharest, 1966, p. 17.

in the musical context will decide the correct performance. Therefore, the quick tempo, the "obsessive" placement of the dynamic accents on each chord, the auxiliary expressive indications –*bref*, *Pédale sur chaque temps*, *sec*–and the strong sonorities *f* and *ff* bring vitality to the moment.

42 *long* **Agité et mystérieux** (♩ = 138)
silence
f *sec* *m. g.* *sec* *f*
bref
Pédale sur chaque temps

Ex. 7.

The appoggiatura becomes a mobile vehicle that Poulenc uses in order to support his chords. The silent measures (measure 49 and measure 56) delimit the sonorities –*f* and *ff*, and the last corona break (measure 60) has a much stronger effect –*silence*–that seems to be a mediator in order to subdue the sudden change in sonorous intensity –*ppp mystérieux* (measure 61).

The restoration of the initial tempo will take place after the *très long* corona (measure 67). For the successful rendering of the quiet, melancholic mood, the composer adds the *les 2 pédales* indication that will fade out on the last *laissez vibrer* chord.

2.4. Nocturne no.4 –*Bal fantôme* – appears "as a far-away echo of dull sonorities¹¹ in "C minor, one would say, even though no previous key signature confirms the fantasy tonal reassurance offered by its title; it sensibly paraphrases, on an idle mazurka tempo, a nostalgic quote from Lucien Green¹², to whom the work is dedicated".¹³

¹¹Cortot Alfred, *French music for piano*, Musical Publishing House of the Composers' Union in the Socialist Republic of Romania, Bucharest, 1966, p. 355

¹²Green Julien, *Le Visionnaire* -, „Pas une note des valse ou des scottishes ne se perdait dans tout les maison, s'ibie que la malade eut sa part de la fête et put rever sur son grabat aux bonnes années de sa jeunesse" – le visionnaire"- Not a note of the waltzes or the schottisches was lost in the whole house, so that the sick man shared in the festival had his share of the party and could dream on his death-bed of the good years of his youth - *Francis Poulenc – Nocturnes pour Piano – A Paris Chez Heugel au Ménestrel*, 2^{bis}, rue Vivienne, p. 12

¹³Cortot Alfred, *French music for piano*, Musical Publishing House of the Composers' Union in the Socialist Republic of Romania, Bucharest, 1966, p. 355

The first measures create the vision of a charming waltz, an irresistible urge that pushes towards movement; the innovative, personal harmony, that has a coloristic refinement rendered by the chromatics used, anchors towards a world full of colour and sonority.

A theme that is harmonically enriched and exposed in a larger register builds up the framework of this Nocturne. In the first eight measures the *pp* sonority is the only noted dynamic indication, but the presence of the dotted rhythm in the debut of each melodic arc creates a slight tension. Therefore, certain personal expression gestures are required, as the performer discreetly highlights the dotted sound.

Lent, très las et piano (♩ = 96)



Ex. 8

The expressive potential of the melodic intervals varies proportionally with their size: the melodic *8p* leap colligated with its placement in the acute register forces a warm *ppp* performance (measure 9).



The *arpeggio* indication present in measures 10, 11 and 12 "opens" the chords. Their performance needs to take into consideration the quiet nature and the tempo of the Nocturne –*Lent, très las et piano*.

Nothing is exaggerated, even the *sf* in measure 20 must be naturally performed without any agogic exaggeration, as this Nocturne falls into a restricted *mp, p, pp, ppp* dynamic sphere.

The ethereal alternations –the high and profound register –the low register – together with the light sonorous increases and decreases prepare the final corona in a transparent *ppp* sonority.

3. Conclusion

The awareness, the performance and the conveyance of the significance of the expressive-dynamic language of a work represents perhaps the most important step in correctly decoding the dynamic terms, specific expressions present in a piece, that should reflect the understanding of the feelings and emotions of the composer.

I must highlight the fact that during this analysis of the first four Nocturnes (having a follow-up study of the other works in this cycle), I only followed some of the guiding lines regarding the expressivity and dynamic aspects; subjects such as the reception of the dynamic pallet, the performance and the style are far from being exhausted.

Scores

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

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