

Plucky chicken

Sensual, witty and unfairly dismissed as lightweight. Jessica Duchen sings the praises of composer Francis Poulenc on the eve of his centenary

Friday January 1, 1999
[The Guardian](#)

Wind Mozart forward by 150 years, give him plenty of absinthe and the results might well resemble the music of Francis Poulenc. Poulenc, whose centenary falls on January 7, is a fizzing, bubbling mass of Gallic energy who can move you to both laughter and tears within seconds. His language speaks clearly, directly and humanely to every generation so his centenary has drawn much attention from record companies and concert halls, not least the Wigmore Hall in London where the Poulenc celebratory series includes a gala on the centenary evening. Popular he may be, but now the time is ripe for a reassessment of his significance - certainly he is greater than previously recognised.

Born into a wealthy family famous for its part in founding the pharmaceutical giant Rhone Poulenc, Poulenc never had to earn his living and so had the enviable luxury of being able to devote his time to music. But his forefathers had been peasants in Aveyron in the Midi-Pyrenees, and it is their earthy, thick-set, twinkle-in-the-eye aspect that was clearest on Poulenc's face. He loved his busy social life and the wild parties of the 1920s. Yet the witty, extrovert 'Poulet' (chicken), as he sometimes signed his letters, was also a sensitive, insecure hypochondriac; and he suffered intense personal crises over both his homosexuality and his religious faith. The death of his lover Lucien Roubert, just as Poulenc penned the last bars of the tragic opera *Dialogues Des Carmelites* was a particularly terrible blow. Also, he harboured some sorrow over his lack of a family: his affection for children shines through his use of nursery-like tunes and works such as his setting of *L'Histoire De Babar, Petit Elephant*.

'Enough of clouds, of waves, of aquariums, of water-nymphs, of nocturnal perfumes, we need an earthbound music, AN EVERYDAY MUSIC. . .' The writer, in 1919, was Jean Cocteau - poet, artist and mentor for the young composers known as 'Les Six', of whom Poulenc has proved the most enduring. Under the influence of Cocteau and Satie, Poulenc and his friends reinvented French music, dissociating themselves from the hitherto pervasive influence of Wagner.

Poulenc's personal gods were Debussy, Stravinsky, Mussorgsky and Chopin, a diverse collection whose impact on his music helped to form a potent cocktail of clarity, poise, sensual hedonism, earthiness, rhythmic vitality and great melodic richness. In line with the post-first world war vogue for 'neo-classicism', Poulenc never wrote huge symphonies for huge orchestras: his idioms are often similar to Mozart's, the textures lucid and the required forces modest. But the comparison with Mozart runs deeper: both possess an exceptional melodic expressiveness intimately related to the singing voice.