

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) Gloria (1959)

Much has been made about the French composer Francis Poulenc's perceived contradictions: personal, musical, and spiritual. As a composer, he wrote works of great solemnity, as well as works with the sole purpose seeming to be to delight and amuse. Sometimes his compositions embrace both these elements at once, as does the *Gloria*. The work juxtaposes musical influences from both high and low sources, from both the sacred and the profane. A close friend, the singer Pierre Bernac, described Poulenc's personality as "half monk and half rascal," and the composer Ned Rorem remarked that "he was deeply devout and uncontrollably sensual." In some ways, his music mirrored his personal life: He was a devout Catholic, but he also lived openly as a gay man. After he finished his composition *Les Ténèbres* for Holy Week, he wrote to Bernac: "I think it is beautiful. With the Gloria and Stabat Mater, I think I have three good religious works. May they spare me a few days in Purgatory, if I narrowly avoid going to hell." This wry sense of humor and a general sense of *joie de vivre* permeate the *Gloria*. As inspiration for the piece, Poulenc said: "I had in mind those frescoes by Gozzoli where the angels stick out their tongues; and also some serious Benedictine monks I had once seen reveling in a game of football."

Musically, Poulenc followed the formal plan of Antonio Vivaldi's famous baroque work, *Gloria* in D Major, and, from the start, it feels quite neo-baroque in its fanfare-like opening. Nonetheless, it is also very modern in its treatment of harmony and rhythm. One hears the influence of Stravinsky in particular; and, in fact, there's a lot of thematic similarity between the opening of Poulenc's *Gloria* and Stravinsky's *Serenade in A*. One wonders if this itself was a sly reference to Vivaldi's compositional technique, as Vivaldi's *Gloria* also borrowed extensively from the music of one of his contemporaries, Giovanni Maria Ruggieri. The playful rhythms that pervade Poulenc's *Gloria* are often the result of his eccentric approach to text setting. Listen particularly for accents placed on the wrong syllable accompanied by unusual melodic inflections. These result in surprisingly fun phrases—"lau-da-mus **TE**" ("we praise **YOU**") and "Gloria in excelsis De-**O**"—which punctuate the joyful mood of the work.