

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY OPERA

PRESENTS

SATURDAY, JANUARY 27TH AT 8PM

SUNDAY, JANUARY 28TH AT 3PM

ALEXANDER KASSER THEATER

DIALOGUES DES CARMELITES

Music & Libretto by Francis Poulenc

Premiere: Teatro alla Scala, January 26, 1957

Sung in French with English supertitles

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY OPERA

Malena Dayen, *Stage Director*

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Kyle Ritenauer, *Conductor*

Daniel Gurskis

Dean, College of the Arts

Anthony Mazzocchi

Director

John J. Cali School of Music

John J. Cali
School of Music

MONTCLAIR
STATE UNIVERSITY



MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY
OPERA GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGES

Martin Jeiven, Sponsor

MUSICAL PREPARATION

Victoria Schwartzman, Music Director and Repetiteur

William Hobbs, Assistant Conductor and Repetiteur

ROLE COACHES

Peiwen Chen

William Hobbs

Mory Ortman

LeAnn Overton

Mary Pinto

Victoria Schwartzman

Grant Wenaus

PRODUCTION TEAM

Stage Director: Malena Dayen

Head of Artistic Operations/Opera: Karen Driscoll

Production Manager: Phil Clifford

Scenic & Costume Design: Kaye Voyce

Lighting Design: Benjamin Weill

Projections Design: Sangmin Chae

Choreographer: Troy Ogilvie

Poster Art: Lupe Marín Burgin

Production Stage Manager: Brianna Guillen

Assistant Stage Manager: Samara Lee

Surtitle Caller: LeAnn Overton

Surtitle Writer: Celeste Alexander

Opera Department Graduate Assistant: Olivia Gasper

The nuns' attire was sourced from Manifattue Mario Bianchiatti, Milano.

PROGRAM

Total running time: 3 hours, with two intermissions

CHARACTER	SATURDAY CAST	SUNDAY CAST
Marquis de la Force	Jairo Santana	Deiniol McGovern
Chevalier de la Force	Ho jung Choi	Eric Šebek
Blanche de la Force	Clara Luz Iranzo	So Yeon Kim
Thierry	Julio Santiago	Omar Abdallah
Madame de Croissy (cover)	Barbara Dever <i>Lisa Bremer</i>	Barbara Dever
Sœur Constance (cover)	Hanbyeol Min <i>Sonia Fortezza</i>	Abby Brodnick
Mere Marie de l'Incarnation (cover)	Gabrielle Guida <i>Olivia Gasper</i>	Inhye Choi
Monsieur Javelinot	Tyler Kriney	Tyler Kriney
Madame Lidoine*	Jacklynn Wick	Helena Waterous
Mere Jeanne*	Hyunjung Choi	Maya Henry
Sœur Mathilde*	Olivia Gasper	Sonia Fortezza
Chaplain of the Monastery	Mitchell Hernandez	Doohyun Yoon
First Officer	Doohyun Yoon	Mitchell Hernandez
Second Officer	Rashaun Ashley	Marcello Fois
Jailer	Omar Abdallah	Ben Silvesti

Carmélite Ensemble

Eliza Arnone, Lisa Bremer, Runyu Feng, Jenna Ferrera, Emma Mason,
Natasha McFarland Rhoads, Churan Qiu, Thalia Suleymanov

*This role will perform in the Carmélite ensemble on the opposite day

Mob Chorus Members

Sopranos: Hannah Bogard, Caitlin Caulfield, Cristina Clare, Victoria Mango, Maeve Marron,
Steph Stone, Christine Tanko

Altos: Gabrielle Cintrón, Taylor Kitzman, Sabina Kunze, Izzy Ortiz, Taryn Spoto

Tenors: Rashaun Ashley, Jeffrey Castellano, Ho jung Choi, Mitchell Hernandez, Nate Robin,
Eric Šebek, Doohyun Yoon

Basses: Omar Abdallah, Michael Alworth, Marcello Fois, Sean Johnson, Tyler Kriney, Aaron Kurtz,
Deiniol McGovern, Jairo Santana, Julio Santiago, Ben Silvesti

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Kyle Ritenauer, *conductor*

Violin I

Daniella Renteria
Gabriel Anker
Zachary Wood
Dana Ryan
Briana Almonte

Violin II

Liana Branscome
Jonathan Frelix
Chelsea Xuereb
Jaiden Smith

Viola

Rachel O'Connor
Jacob Seabrook
Noah Stevens

Cello

India Enter
Alonso Restrepo
Cecilia Grossman

Bass

JP Bernabe
Ryan Chamberlain

Flute

Jacob Medina-Cintron
Michelle Zarco

Oboe

Quintin Hansen
David Reinstein

Clarinet

Anthony Kalanick
Colin Merkovsky

Bassoon

Jonathan Hart
Darren Butler

Horn

Annie Ross
Jeison Campoverde
Shanyse Strickland

Trumpet

Ryan Branco
Bryce Grier

Tuba

JT Adinolfi

Timpani

Hannah D'elia

Percussion

Zach Doberentz
Domingo Hernandez

Harp

Andre Tarantiles
Diane Michaels

Piano

Victoria Schwartzman

Act I

The French Revolution is gaining pace, and the Marquis and Chevalier de la Force discuss how every day the streets of Paris become less safe. Young aristocrat Blanche de la Force announces to her father and brother her intention to join the Carmelites, a strictly cloistered religious nun order. Once in the convent, the Prioress Madame de Croissy, welcomes Blanche and makes it clear that the order is a place of prayer, not a refuge.

Blanche and sister Constance talk while they perform their chores. Both are worried by the Prioress's health and the conversation turns to the fear of death. Constance says she believes that Blanche and her will both die young and on the same day.

In the infirmary, the Prioress lies on her deathbed, as she fearfully and angrily struggles to keep her faith. Before she dies she entrusts Blanche, the newest member of the order, to the care of Mother Marie.

Act II

Blanche and Constance keep vigil over the body of the Prioress. When they talk about her death, Constance shares her theory that Madame de Croissy's painful death was not her own but belonged to another. Someone else, she speculates, may find their own death unexpectedly easy as a consequence.

The new prioress, Madame Lidoine, gathers the nuns together to reassure them as the revolution expands and threatens public display of religion. Blanche's brother, the Chevalier de la Force arrives to try to bring his sister home, but Blanche is steadfast and will not leave the order.

The Chaplain, stripped of his office by the revolutionaries, performs one final mass in the convent. The nuns discuss their fate, and Mother Marie wonders whether they should vow to become martyrs of the Church. The conversation is interrupted by the arrival of the revolutionary soldiers. All religious houses have been dissolved, and the nuns must immediately put aside their habits and leave the convent.

Act III

Out in the streets and led by Mother Marie against the Prioress' wish, the nuns take a vote to decide whether they will resist the orders of the revolution and offer their lives as martyrs. After a false start the vote is unanimous, but Blanche flees.

The nuns are arrested.

Blanche has returned to her family home. Her father was executed and the house is occupied by revolutionaries, whom she serves. Mother Marie urges her to rejoin her sisters.

The nuns are sentenced to death and the Prioress vows to take care of them. Mother Marie is spared.

Singing the Salve Regina, they walk to the guillotine one by one.

PROGRAM NOTES

by David Rosenmeyer

*"To the memory of my Mother,
who revealed music to me"*

Poulenc's foremost dedication for his
Dialogues des Carmélites

Francis Poulenc's masterwork, *Dialogues des Carmélites*, came about almost by chance. In his fifties, still suffering from periodic depression and hypochondria, though continuing to maintain a highly productive performance and composition schedule, Poulenc yearned for a project that would allow him to showcase his greatness in a large-scale work.

In 1952, he considered composing a ballet based on a sacred theme for La Scala, but was unable to find the right scenario. Guido Valcarengi, then director of the Ricordi publishing firm, proposed he write an opera instead. Margarita Wallmann, Valcarengi's wife and La Scala's Director of Ballets at that time, suggested Georges Bernanos' play, *Dialogues des Carmélites*. Poulenc in fact had seen the play twice, a fact that Wallmann knew — he'd been that impressed — and was immediately persuaded, though he had some doubts regarding his ability to set it to music. He wrote to a friend:

"Then, two days later, right in the middle of a bookseller's window in Rome, I saw [Les] Dialogues which seemed to be waiting for me ... I bought the book and decided to read it again ... It was 10 in the morning.... At half past noon I was drunk with enthusiasm, but there remained the acid test: could I find the music for such a text?"

He needn't have worried. In another letter, he wrote that upon opening the book at random to the First Prioress' speech at the beginning of Act I, he had found, "incredibly," the melodic curve for that long speech. He immediately telegraphed Valcarengi that he would write *Carmélites*.

During the next few years, the 'nuns,' as he would refer to it, would occupy the center of his creative attention, though he continued to tour and compose other works. Wallmann, a dancer and choreographer who'd fled her native Berlin with the rise of Nazism, became Poulenc's main consultant and dramaturg, directing its world premiere at La Scala, as well as many subsequent productions throughout Europe.

Francis Poulenc was a man of lively contradictions, many of which are expressed in his music. Born into a well-to-do Parisian family, he inherited a deep religious faith from his father's devout Catholic side, and a love for the worldly cosmopolitan and artistic life from his mother. His friend, music critic Claude Rostand coined a description that Poulenc himself approved and personally adopted: *"There will always be inside me the 'moine' (the monk) and the 'voyou' (the rogue)."*

Loving music from an early age, Poulenc showed talent as both a pianist and a composer. He was well-read, well-educated, and even published a meaningful review of *Tosca* when only twelve years old. Yet he did not become a prodigy or achieve unusually early success. Ever the dandy, he enjoyed the pleasures of Paris following WWI, while beginning to gain some renown as a pianist and composer. He was a member of *Les Six*, a group of six young composers including Poulenc's good friends Georges Auric, Darius Milhaud, and Arthur Honegger, who all collaborated in organizing concerts and promoting one another's careers. While *Les Six* may not have had a unifying vision, they were agreed on two things: their shared love of Eric Satie, and their near contempt for any show of musical sentimentality, which was the great shadow of late 19th and early 20th century post-Romanticism. Their aim was to be modern and direct, thoroughly streamlined rather than overly decorated.

Poulenc's early successes focused on combining music from the countryside, his father's family origins, with the sophisticated Parisian sounds. Yet his true love, both as a composer and a performer, was the *chanson*.

He wrote more than 150 songs throughout his career, being very rigorous in his choice of poets, and writing mostly for specific singers, including long-lasting collaborations with his friends, baritone Pierre Bernac and soprano Denise Duval, who would create the main role of *Carmélites* in its French premiere. Poulenc also composed piano music, ballet scores, orchestral works, as well as chamber and choral music, always returning to vocal compositions as his preferred mode of expression.

In the mid-1930s, two events shattered Poulenc's world. The first was the death of his close friend and fellow composer Pierre-Octave Ferroud in a horrific car crash. Afterwards, Poulenc visited the sanctuary of Rocamadour, and wrote of his experience there:

... As I meditated on the fragility of our human frame, I was drawn once more to the life of the spirit. Rocamadour had the effect of restoring me to the faith of my childhood ... The same evening ..., I began my *Litanies à la Vierge noire* for female voices and organ. In that work I tried to get across the atmosphere of "peasant devotion" that had struck me so forcibly in that lofty chapel.

The second was the rise of fascism and the threat of war all across Europe. Poulenc, extremely sensitive to global politics, suffered at the indifference to this upsurge shown by many of his friends and colleagues. It was during this period that he began to struggle with depression and anxiety, which would trouble him throughout his life. Two works from this era prefigure the music of *Carmélites*, written eighteen years later: the *a cappella* *Mass in G*, his first large scale religious work, and the *Deux marches et une intermède*.

In 1941, Poulenc composed an *a cappella* setting of the Catholic hymn *Salve Regina*, which he would later re-use for the climactic final scene of *Carmélites*. Towards the end of the war, Poulenc composed a larger choral work, *Figure Humaine*, premiered in a London radio broadcast when France was already completely under Nazi control. This work ends

with a long series of repeated low Es that underline the ending syllable of the piece's last word: *Liberté*. He would repeat this passage in *Carmélites* at the end of Act I, when the agonized Prioress desperately asks for stronger painkillers.

Right after the war, Poulenc composed his first large-scale choral/orchestral work, *Stabat Mater*. This piece braided together his diverse personae: the chansonnier, the dramatic composer, and the renewed religion-themed composer. This progression leads quite naturally to the creation of what is arguably his magnum opus, *Dialogues of the Carmelites*.

While he learned, and appreciated, the modern and even avant-garde techniques of his contemporaries, he made the conscious choice in his own work to stay within the realm of tonality and formal clarity. From his letters, one can see how much he resented that during his youth, he was never considered "one of the greats" because of the provocative brevity, the deceiving directness, and straightforward simplicity of his work. Yet now, in the post WWII era, he continued to be dismissed: for being too musically *conservative*. It seems believable that Poulenc would be looking for a grand work to cement his reputation, and found it in Bernanos' play.

Based on a true story, the play chronicles the trial and subsequent public guillotining of sixteen nuns from a convent in Compiègne during the French Revolution's Reign of Terror, which actually ended just a few days later. The world became aware of the story through the 1832 memoirs of the convent's sub-prioress, Sister Marie of the Incarnation, who escaped martyrdom because she'd been delayed in her travels. In 1931, a Catholic convert, Gertrud von le Fort, published her novella based on the story: *Die Letzte am Schafott* (*The Last to the Scaffold*). While closely adhering to the original material, von le Fort introduced the fictional character Blanche de la Fort (a variant of her own name), a young woman who enters the convent, hoping to connect her life to the Agony of Christ. Immediately after the WWII, plans were made to produce a film, for which Bernanos provided the script. He died shortly

thereafter, though, and the film wasn't made. The script, however, was published to great acclaim and later turned into a play, which is how Poulenc found it.

Musically, *Carmélites* is an interesting display of contrasts. Poulenc mentions Monteverdi, Debussy, Verdi, and Mussorgsky in his dedication as compositional influences. Monteverdi and Debussy are present in the 'stile rappresentativo,' eschewing all conventional arias or duets, and exploring instead recitative and arioso sections. While not adopting musical motifs as obviously or consistently as Wagner does, Poulenc *does* fill his piece with motivic and instrumental themes for characters, brilliantly deploying the score as a dramaturgical tool anticipating mood, foreshadowing action, and resolving complex emotional scenes.

The opera starts with a series of disjunctive rhythms and intervals combined with surprising silences in the orchestra. The first text is notably: "*Where is Blanche?*" This question lingers throughout the work, both in a literal sense — as she joins the convent, then leaves, and then re-joins her sisters, at the very last minute, to be martyred, and as a metaphor, in a philosophical and theological sense. Blanche's self-examination of faith and sacrifice, and her role in a community, are both the main plot theme and also a distillation of the complete work. Blanche's first entrance is over a musical motif of fear and danger. The Prioress' first line, the first line Poulenc set to music, refers to her as 'a soldier in Christ's army'; the novice Sister Constance's music is lighthearted, but the darker harmonies foreshadow the notion that Blanche and Constance will die together, and at the end of the Act II interlude, the orchestral score begins to answer the question: whose death will be added to the first prioress's agonized passing?

Poulenc packed the final act with most of the musical symbolism and intertextual references to other works. Starting with a Sarabande taken from his own *Stabat Mater*, and reminiscent of the final chorus in Bach's

Saint Matthew Passion, it brings a sense of elegant determination to the upcoming events. The jailer reads the official edict in a sardonic and fast-paced patter song; the orchestra fades to a pianissimo on the word 'mort'. Poulenc builds up the whole opera to its tragic and paradox-filled conclusion, the single longest lyrical passage of the whole work, in which all the nuns join together to sing 'Salve Regina' (based on his 1941 hymn) as they walk up the ramp to their executions. The chorus of sixteen voices is reduced by one voice at a time, underscoring the elegant symmetry of the hymn with the cruel asymmetry of their deaths. In liturgy, one of the most common uses of a hymn was to close the ordinary mass, and was so commonly known that in a performance of the play in Zürich, the audience stood up after the curtain fell and sang the hymn. Poulenc, in an era of open and ambiguous avant-garde endings, gives us the most musically and dramatically satisfying resolution together with the most tragic of conclusions.

As a devout Catholic, Poulenc struggled with profound theological questions stemming from his life as an openly gay man, along with questions regarding the role of faith and the Church during the two world wars. He concludes the opera with a beneficent hope: a moment from the end of his 1937 *Mass in G*, and hidden in the opera's opening, repeating the notes that conclude the Agnus Dei: *Dona nobis pacem*. Grant us peace.



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