

VOX IMAGO

FRANCIS POULENC
DIALOGUES DES CARMÉLITES

RICCARDO MUTI
TEATRO ALLA SCALA



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DIALOGUES DES CARMÉLITES: LISTENING GUIDE Philip Gossett

When beginning his draft of the *Dialogues des Carmélites* in August 1953, Francis Poulenc dedicated his work “to the memory of my mother, who awakened me to music, of Debussy, who gave me the desire to write it, of Monteverdi, Verdi, and Mussorgsky, who served me here as mentors.” What draws these four composers together is their ability to respect both text and music in their operas: “recitar cantando,” in the famous phrase that describes Monteverdi’s art. Their styles are very different, to be sure, as is the style of Poulenc himself, but in all their music emerges the conviction that text must be declaimed in a way that makes it comprehensible, while music must interpret the text and give continuity to the drama. Most of all, music must provide the emotional underpinning of the work, leading from one set of feelings to another, revealing to us the passions and fears of each character, and—in the case of Poulenc’s opera—placing the public alongside the Carmelite nuns of Compiègne as they go to their death blessed by the grace of God.

Poulenc originally planned his opera in two acts, the first covering action that takes place before the French revolution impinges directly on the convent, the second showing the destruction of the community and the martyrdom of its nuns. As a dedicated man of the theater, however, he recognized that each of these two acts would be quite long. He also realized that they failed to give sufficient structural importance to two extraordinary moments: the death of the first Prioress and the scene in which the nuns are told they must leave the convent (which concludes with the Christmas eve celebration during which Blanche inadvertently destroys the small statue of the infant Jesus). By modifying his more abstract original plan, then, Poulenc brought each of the new three acts to an emotional and theatrical climax.

Each act consists of four principal scenes, with a series of interludes, some dramatic (played before a drop curtain), some purely musical. The purely musical interludes were added for performances in Paris in 1957, but were intended by Poulenc to form part of the definitive score. While on paper these musical interludes may seem simple, even superfluous, they are exquisitely crafted with superb orchestral touches (such as the English Horn solo between the last two scenes of the first act), and their emotional effect is profound within the context of the opera.

Act I

The first scene throws us immediately into the world of Paris in 1789, where the threat of revolutionary violence is everywhere and an aristocratic family, such as that of the Marquis de la Force (with his two children, the Chevalier and Blanche), faces a grim future. Poulenc’s task in this scene was to lay the groundwork for the entire drama, to present and contrast the characters, and to make convincing Blanche’s decision to join the Carmelite order. So much in the scene is characteristic of the entire opera. The text of Bernanos is declaimed with an extraordinary attention to shades of meaning, and with the conviction in Poulenc’s memorable phrase, that “at all costs it is necessary to make the words comprehensible.” Often the orchestra all but disappears, so that every word can indeed emerge clearly. At moments of great emotion, though, the singers intone their phrases with a profound lyricism, as in the climax of the scene, where Blanche tells her father of her intention to become a nun. Even in these moments, however, Poulenc does not allow the text to be “smothered [...] under an orchestral avalanche,” in another of the composer’s memorable phrases. In the best French tradition the words of Bernanos are both emotional and philosophical, and Poulenc, the quintessential French composer, refuses to sacrifice one element to the other.

Defining the role of the orchestra in *Dialogues des Carmélites* is not simple. Some critics have sought to identify an elaborate series of motives, Wagnerian in conception, if not in realization, but I am not convinced this is a useful way to consider the score. Some themes tend to become identified with particular characters, to be sure, but Poulenc continually transforms them internally, manipulates their intervals, alters their tempo, modifies their orchestration, until their ‘meaning’ is no longer self-evident. Take the very first theme we hear in the opera, an *Allegro giocoso* as the curtain rises with the Marquis de la Force napping in his chair. Should we associate the melody with him personally? with the *ancien régime*

he represents? with authority in all its manifestations? The next time the melodic idea recurs, the Marquis is commenting to his son about how each generation must follow its own instincts, but now the intervals in the melody are different, even if the accompaniment is similar. The melody becomes less recognizable, as fragments from it punctuate the Marquis' description of what it was like to be surrounded by a swarming crowd fifteen years earlier, the night Blanche was born and her mother died in childbirth, but it reconstructs itself, again with different intervals, quieter and slower, as he refers to his old head and its tendency to get over-excited. Most of the rest of the scene will be constructed around themes associated with Blanche and her fears, but at the end one of the quieter forms of the opening idea will be heard, "infinitely calm," as the Marquis cradles his beloved daughter. That is the form the melody will assume in the final moments of the opera, after the nuns, including Blanche, have gone to their deaths.

The orchestra quietly, subtly, performs these amazing transformations, and they are an integral part of what we hear in Poulenc's score, but supplying them with identifying labels, making their message ever more explicit is a frustrating endeavor. Ultimately these transformations constitute Poulenc's way of drawing connections in Bernanos' text: our analysis can never be more than an approximate interpretation of what is *already* an interpretation, the composer's music.

Each scene of the opera has its distinct musical qualities, while also drawing on the vocabulary of previous scenes and on a series of musical ideas already rich in meaning. The second scene, a dialogue between Blanche, who seeks to be admitted to the order, and the first Prioress, begins with a lengthy passage that has the character of an eighteenth-century French dance, a *Sarabande*, accompanied with a constant stream of triplets. Over this background the Prioress presses Blanche, tries to understand her motivation, refers to her own illness, discusses the life of a Carmelite nun. As the dialogue grows more pointed, the accompaniment fades away, so that every nuance of the text can be heard, but the moments of intense, even solemn lyricism, stand out ever more. Blanche speaks of the life of the convents as a "heroic life," but the Prioress stops her, impressively intoning the words "we are houses of prayer." And as she sings of the nature of prayer, the music gains warmth and intensity. Their final interchanges return to a quieter, more declamatory style, with the orchestra suggesting a series of themes we have already come to associate with Blanche and her fears. Nowhere is this more striking than in the moment in which she announces the name she has chosen to assume, Sister Blanche "of the Agony of Christ," a name the Prioress herself had wished to take when she was young but lacked sufficient courage. She sends Blanche quietly away, and the orchestra concludes the scene by citing again the opening *Sarabande*.

In symphonic terms, the third scene serves as the 'scherzo' of *Dialogues des Carmélites*. We are introduced to Sister Constance, vivacious and spirited, but also touched by a strain of mysticism: it is she who predicts to Blanche that both of them will die young, on the same day. As she recalls joyously the marriage of her brother a few weeks before she joined the convent, Poulenc's music dances to the strains of the *contredanses* she eloquently and lovingly describes. It is enough to scandalize Blanche, who cannot yet accept such gaiety at a moment when the community is faced with the impending death of the Prioress. The music takes a solemn, more declamatory turn as they contemplate death, but the orchestra reminds us, by invoking her music, that Sister Constance's joy in the presence of life remains unchanged in the face of death. Listen, in particular, to the orchestral bass as they speak: when the subject turns to death, a melody appears in the lower instruments that will color their musing on the subject and will later accompany the nuns as they ascend the scaffold. It is particularly prominent in the scene when Constance speaks of the impending death of the Prioress.

That death is the subject of the final scene of the act, perhaps the most terrifying representation of death ever attempted in music. The scene begins with an orchestral passage that resembles a peal of bells, with short, repeated motivic ideas, bringing to mind the technique of Stravinsky; it will conclude with a single bell, against a similar orchestral sonority, announcing the death of the Prioress to the congregation. Between these poles, though, the scene traces the various states of mind of the dying Prioress. We hear her in conversation with Mère Marie de l'Incarnation, the latter characterized by a new musical motive, cold and analytic, that develops very little in the course of the opera. The Prioress, in words that are double-edged, praises her to that same motive for her "great firmness of judgment," leaving unsaid the emotional vacuum Mère Marie communicates. Through the early part of their dialogue, Poulenc accompanies the Prioress' words by obsessively repeating a single pitch in part of the orchestra while the harmony slowly changes around it. But when Blanche enters to bid farewell to the Prioress the music turns radiant and warm. While the melodic line assigned to the Prioress remains simple and declamatory, the orchestral fabric, *dolcissimo* and often legato, expresses the emotions she feels when addressing the last nun she has introduced into the convent, the "child of old age." Only after Blanche exits does the Prioress enter her death agonies. Repeated notes return in the orchestra, together with highly dissonant chords, and in bitter declamation, some of it almost spoken, the Prioress accuses God of having abandoned her. In her agony she envisions the bleak future of the convent, the altar destroyed, blood everywhere, and

bitterly concludes: “God abandons us, God renounces us.” When the musical motive from the beginning of the scene now returns, it resembles a ferocious “*Dies iræ*.” Only the reappearance of Blanche, who enters “almost like a sleep-walker,” momentarily restores calm and warmth to the music, after which the Prioress exhales “death... fear... fear of death,” and falls dead. The final emotional state communicated in the first act, though, is that of Blanche, who—over a calm orchestral background—tries to come to grips with the terrible scene she has just witnessed.

Act II

The first two scenes of Act II and the interlude that separates them constitute the final moments of regularity, though hardly tranquility, in the life of the convent at Compiègne. With the ensuing arrival of Blanche’s brother, the Chevalier (announced in the interlude following these scenes), the world of the French revolution begins to overwhelm the community of nuns. In these first scenes, however, Poulenc contrasts the formality of prayer and obligation with signs of inner struggle. The act begins with a contrapuntal passage, largely for strings, its craggy rhythmic figures evoking the style of a “French overture,” another standard Baroque musical device (recall the *Sarabande* in the first act). This is contrasted to a sustained passage for the entire orchestra, then elaborated with a Latin text for Blanche and Constance, who are praying over the coffin of the Prioress. It is the first of many passages in the second and third acts in which Poulenc gives musical resonance to prayer in a style that invokes—without quotation—plainchant and ecclesiastical counterpoint. But the most troubling music follows, the rhythmic fragments underlining Blanche’s fear, as Constance, looking for other nuns to take their place in prayer, leaves her alone momentarily. Blanche rises, stares at the corpse, and moves toward the door, only to be interrupted by Mère Marie, whose harsh, unfeeling reaction to Blanche’s temerity leaves the young nun speechless.

It is in the following interlude for Blanche and Constance, though, that Poulenc addresses one of Bernanos’ most difficult ideas: we do not die, Constance says, for ourselves, but for each other and—sometimes—in place of one another. Poulenc underscores this discussion with figuration in the lower strings that already accompanied references to death in the third scene of the first act. The orchestra intones one of Blanche’s most prominent themes (a striking series of chords), as Constance suggests that the difficult death of the Prioress may assure another person an easy death. By musical means of this kind, Poulenc personalizes and gives emotional life to what might otherwise seem abstract ideas.

In the second scene we learn that the new Prioress is not Mère Marie, as might have been expected, but Madame Lidoine, a peasant woman. She chatters away in a conversational *perpetuum mobile*, a style invoking yet another French eighteenth-century dance. They are simple folk, she asserts, assembled to pray, who should not aspire to martyrdom, and she accompanies her thoughts with homey images (rabbits cooked with thyme and marjoram, servants dusting the furniture). Poulenc keeps the tone of the orchestra relatively uniform throughout the scene, and the expressions of the second Prioress are embedded within the accompaniment. Only when she turns to Mère Marie and asks her to explain these thoughts to the other nuns does the mood change, and in her more direct manner Mère Marie tells the nuns that their first duty is prayer. Obeying this charge, the nuns sing a touching “*Ave Maria*” to bring the scene to a close (although the orchestra cannot resist invoking the music of Madame Lidoine as the curtain falls).

In the following interlude, Constance informs the new Prioress and Mère Marie of the arrival of the Chevalier de la Force, who is leaving France and wishes to speak with his sister Blanche. The music is strikingly different, violent and changeable at first, until the reference to Blanche’s family brings back—in a particularly expressive form—the melody that concluded the first scene of the opera (and will be heard at the end of the opera). The dialogue between Blanche and her brother, which begins with a sense of their estrangement and concludes with a reaffirmation of their love, is one of the most exquisite passages in the opera. Poulenc is unusually parsimonious in his choice of musical material here, and much of the scene revolves around a melody and a harmonic pattern first heard when Blanche responds to the fears of her father and brother for her safety: “Perhaps I am not [safe], but I feel safe; and that is enough for me.” By reorchestrating the short phrase, imposing somewhat different vocal lines, modifying its tempo and dynamics (from agitated and *forte* to calm and *pianissimo*), and adding different accompanimental figures, Poulenc both gives unity to the dialogue and allows it to follow a complex dramaturgical course. This phrase, of course, is not the only musical idea in the scene. References to themes associated with Blanche’s fears, her father (whom the Chevalier describes as being alone, surrounded only by servants), and Blanche herself are found throughout the dialogue. In a final brief conversation with Blanche, Mère Marie tries to reimpose external order (“Be proud,” she tells her), but our thoughts are with the sadness of Blanche’s leave-taking from her brother.

Set in the sacristy of the convent on Christmas Eve, the final scene of the second act is the most varied of the opera. Within it Poulenc combines a wide range of dramatic activity and music. We are introduced to the chaplain of the convent, who—relieved of his duties and banished by the Revolution (we are now in 1792)—celebrates his final Mass for the nuns, leading them in the “Ave verum corpus.” Its passionate musical setting (featuring harp glissandos) is a measure of their growing despair. Conversation among Blanche, the chaplain, Constance, the new Prioress, and Mère Marie establishes that for Mère Marie the only future for the nuns lies in their aspiring to martyrdom, but the new Prioress rejects this interpretation of her words. Their conversation is abruptly interrupted by the sound of the bell of the convent and the arrival of a mob and four commissioners. They inform the nuns that the legislative assembly has decreed that all inhabitants of convents or monasteries must abandon their homes, which will be sold for the common good. The striking orchestral chords that accompany the entrance of the commissioners were heard before when the first Prioress, near to death, insists on obedience from Mère Marie. In the interaction between the nuns and the commissioners, it is in fact Mère Marie whose *sangfroid* allows her to speak with authority (the second Prioress is offstage). As the commissioners and mob move away, the nuns bring forth a “little King of Glory,” an infant Jesus, which they have traditionally passed around on Christmas Eve. A violent “Ah! ça ira” from offstage (the words of a French revolutionary song), however, frightens Blanche, who so drops the Jesus, which shatters. All that remains to us now, she sings accompanied only by two clarinets, is “the Lamb of God,” and with renewed, terrifying “Ah! ça ira” from offstage, the curtain falls on the second act.

Act III

The ruined chapel at Compiègne is the setting for the first scene of the final act. In it, instigated by Mère Marie and in the presence of the chaplain, the nuns vow to accept martyrdom. In the opening “Tempo di *Sarabande*” Poulenc draws on orchestral melodies and rhythms associated with the community: the “French overture” from the beginning of Act II, the dotted rhythm associated with Mère Marie, even the striking orchestral chords—which function as strokes of fate—already heard on multiple occasions. Here they signal the decisive moments as the nuns determine to take the vow of martyrdom; later they bring the scene to a close. Perhaps because Poulenc does not seem to have had much sympathy with Mère Marie, this scene emerges as somewhat formal, except when Sister Constance (acting as a surrogate for the still timorous Blanche) admits that she did not originally agree to share the vow, but has since changed her mind. In the following interlude, the nuns are forced to leave the convent. A brief interchange between the second Prioress and Mère Marie underlines their different attitudes to martyrdom, the latter welcoming it, the former hoping still to preserve her charges before God. The stark differences in their musical language, here set one beside the other, is most striking.

With the second scene Poulenc sets one of the strongest situations in the opera. Blanche, her father guillotined, has returned home, where the empowered peasants treat *her* as their servant. When Mère Marie urges her to rejoin the community, implicitly to be martyred with her sisters, they speak about different kinds of fear, and particularly the “fear of fear” that has long plagued Blanche. A strong and troubled dotted figuration in the orchestra, new to the opera, unifies the scene, emphasizing Blanche’s discomfort. When she thinks the sauce she is preparing is about to burn, she breaks down: “Why am I reproached? What have I done wrong?” she exclaims “with maximum violence,” as the orchestral hammer strokes ring out. She tenderly remembers her father, and the orchestra (the strings playing with mutes) recalls his music. But the stark orchestral chords again resound as Mère Marie addresses her as “Sister Blanche of the Agony of Christ,” the same gesture the old Prioress used in her death scene when she entrusted Blanche to Mère Marie’s spiritual care. As the scene ends, however, we hear the agitated and dotted orchestral figuration and an internal voice calls Blanche to service.

If the musical style of the second Prioress at first betrayed her humble origins, by the third scene of the final act she has been transformed. The nuns (with the exception of Blanche and Mère Marie) are imprisoned in the Conciergerie. With calm and beauty, over a luminous orchestral accompaniment, the second Prioress accepts responsibility for their vow of martyrdom. As in so many lyrical moments throughout the opera, Poulenc accomplishes his design through repetition and partial repetition, building to a climax with the greatest care: “Well, I assume that vow, I am now responsible, I am and will be, whatever happens, the sole judge of its fulfillment.” Then the orchestra, with pedal tones and sustained chords, communicates her deathly calm as she speaks of Christ’s experience of the fear of death in the Mount of Olives. The jailer enters to the orchestral hammer strokes and reads the sentence of death to a lively accompaniment, almost a caricature, but under which the bass theme of death resonates. The final expression, however, lyrical and touching, is reserved for the second Prioress. In a brief interlude, Mère Marie is informed by the chaplain of the impending death of the nuns. She expresses her despair that they

will look in vain for the person who encouraged them to take the vow, but he advises her to look toward God, not toward man.

The final scene of the opera has now been amply prepared, and—after a beautifully articulated orchestral march—the nuns appear, amidst a crowd standing at the foot of the guillotine. This is the only time in *Dialogues des Carmélites* that Poulenc gives free range to purely musical development. The text is restricted to the “Salve Regina” hymn, sung by the nuns as they go to their death, for the crowd simply hums on vowels (a technique Verdi used in the storm scene near the end of *Rigoletto*). The words are beautifully declaimed by the nuns, at first with fifteen voices in unison. As each successive fall of the guillotine reduces their number, the melody at first continues at the unison or octave, but when only four voices remain, Poulenc breaks them into four-part harmony, then three, then two. Finally we hear Sister Constance alone, until her voice too is silenced. By then, however, she has seen Blanche in the crowd, and she goes to her death knowing that Blanche will follow her. Blanche steps forward, picks up the melody, and continues until she too is silenced by the concluding fall of the guillotine. The words are declaimed to a rhythmically regular melody, and the first victim of the guillotine, the new Prioress, perishes at the end of the first phrase. Afterwards, however, Poulenc—while maintaining a regular melodic rhythm in the voices and orchestra—avoids all regularity in the action of the guillotine. Indeed, part of the eerie effect of the scene results from what seems to be the random placement of its murderous fall.

Each phrase of the hymn is orchestrated in a different manner. Before the nuns begin to sing, Poulenc begins the ensemble with a legato passage for eight violas (divided into four groups) and winds, while lower voices (cellos, double basses, timpani, etc.) intone obsessively the bass theme of death. As the composer moves from phrase to phrase, he modifies the orchestration, which at first becomes ever more intense, then quieter and quieter, as the music (and especially the bass theme) modulates from key to key. After Blanche’s death, the orchestra returns, **ppp**, to the motive that concluded the first scene, with Blanche cradled in the arms of her father. But now she has found salvation and grace in the arms of her God.