

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963): Overview of Writings

When Francis Poulenc took up the pen he did so with gusto, whether to answer letters or to intervene in public debates, such that the corpus of his private and public writings is rather voluminous. This corpus, heterogeneous in genre and attesting to the cultivated mind of its author, can be divided into four main categories: 1) the private writings, comprising the composer's abundant correspondence and private journals; 2) the only two works properly speaking that Poulenc published, namely his [biography of Emmanuel Chabrier](#) (Éditions La Palatine, 1961) and his [Journal de mes mélodies](#), published posthumously in 1964; 3) the writings of oral character, including lectures but also texts written or co-written by Poulenc for radio broadcast, and subsequently published; 4) finally, contributions to the press or to large-scale editorial projects (prefaces for monographs, articles for dictionaries and encyclopaedias, etc.).

Several collections of Poulenc's writings have appeared since the 1960s. The correspondence was first to attract attention, with an edition of the letters selected by [Hélène de Wendel](#) and prefaced by Poulenc's friend Darius Milhaud (Éditions du Seuil, 1967). In the 1990s there appeared a selection of the composer's letters translated into English and edited by [Sidney Buckland](#) (Gollancz, 1991), as well as a critical edition of the letters in French by [Myriam Chimènes](#) (Fayard, 1994), the latter presently the definitive work with some 767 richly documented letters from Poulenc to his family, friends, and professional associates, to which are added 251 addressed to himself. Finally, [Pierre Miscevic](#) has recently published (Orizons, 2019) the 192 surviving letters from Poulenc to his niece Brigitte Manceaux, fifteen years younger, with whom he was very close. This publication supplemented the ten letters from this unique correspondence already published by Myriam Chimènes. In 1999, under the title [À bâtons rompus](#) (Actes Sud), Lucie Kayas gathered together the 32 radio broadcasts written by Poulenc between the autumn of 1947 and the summer of 1949, which treat of diverse subjects close to his heart (Maurice Chevalier, folklore, sacred music, Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky, Gounod, Satie...). This edition also brings to light the two private journals of Poulenc to have come down to us: "Journal de Vacances" kept during the summers of 1911 and 1912, and the "Feuilles américaines", in reality commissioned by Georges Poupet, an editor with the publisher Plon, on the occasion of Poulenc's sojourn in the United States between 1949 and 1950. The composer destroyed two other private journals in emotional outbursts. Finally, in 2011, [Nicolas Southon](#) collected and commentated more than 120 of Poulenc's writings, including press articles, interviews, and lectures, to which was added the book on Chabrier, the [Entretiens avec Claude Rostand](#) broadcast and published in 1954, and [Moi et mes Amis](#), consisting of "confessions recorded" by Stéphane Audel that were broadcast beginning in 1943 and published posthumously in 1963. As for *Chabrier* and the *Journal de mes mélodies*, they were translated into English in the 1980s (*Chabrier*: Dobson, 1981; *Journal*: [Gollancz](#), 1985 and [Kahn & Averill](#), 2006).

As Nicolas Southon signals in his overview of the composer's public works, "Poulenc writes with no desire to wield power or occupy a position, but he knows perfectly well that making himself heard is to the advantage of his career" (*J'écris ce qui me chante*, pg. 9). Thus Poulenc gave numerous lectures and maintained a presence in the press with a broad portfolio of genres: specialist studies, reviews, interviews, reports, responses to surveys, homages, open letters... Thanks especially to his contacts, he contributed to various literary and artistic magazines including *Les Feuilles libres*, *Le Figaro littéraire*, *Le Ménestrel*, *Comœdia*, *Contrepoints*, *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, *Les Lettres françaises*, *L'Opéra de Paris*, and *Harper's Bazaar*. Poulenc cultivated a free, spontaneous style, echoing the wit and laughter of his manner of speaking; as the composer himself says, he availed himself of a "familiar tone" and abhorred technical jargon. The "I" is also regularly met with, activated by the recounting of memories. Continually prey to doubt, Poulenc loved and felt a need to

tell stories, insert himself into the artistic history of his times, situate himself in a place and moment alongside the names that made that history: “I am hardly ever surprised, belonging as I do to a generation whose manifestos were virulent. I went through a lot with Breton, Éluard, Aragon, with the surrealists, with René Crevel, who wrote those sorts of things” (Reply to a questionnaire by Bernard Gavoty and Daniel-Lesur, *Pour ou contre la musique moderne*, Paris: Flammarion, 1957, pp. 270–2, in *J’écris ce qui me chante*, pg. 454). In parallel, the interviews with Claude Rostand and [Stéphane Audel](#), produced in the 1950s, ultimately have no other goal than to retell and establish the “myth” of Poulenc, who was then suffering an existential and artistic crisis, brought on by the loss of several of his intimates, the rise of a new generation of composers that threatened to definitively relegate him to the rearguard, and the frustration of seeing his name constantly reduced to a byword for frivolity despite his efforts to consolidate his ethos as a “serious” composer.

Refusing all music-critical and analytical discourse, Poulenc never practised music criticism properly speaking. “Rather than true music criticism, one should speak of reports in which friendship, a certain artistic militancy, and the defence of an aesthetic or common interests each plays its harmonious part” (Southon, *J’écris ce qui me chante*, pg. 18). According to Poulenc, “musical composition is too mysterious to lend itself to analysis”, and this applies to his own work as much as that of others. On a Bartók quartet he writes: “Let’s not break this magnificent toy in order to find out how it works. We are in the presence of a masterpiece” (“Écho de Paris – Musique : trois quatuors à cordes”, *Fanfare*, no. 14 [15 November 1921], in *J’écris ce qui me chante*, pp. 225–6). No surprise, then, that Poulenc had but one regular post as a critic, in *Arts phoniques* where he was responsible for the column “Musique instrumentale” between 1928 and 1929. The particularity of these contributions comes from the attention brought to bear on the technical quality of the recordings under review. In this regard, Nicolas Southon notes that “it is interesting to watch [Poulenc] contribute to the definition of recorded-music criticism, a genre destined for a considerable expansion but whose codes and vocabulary were as yet not fixed”.

Falling outside the sphere of music analysis, the [Journal de mes mélodies](#) (Grasset, 1964), begun in 1939 and conserved in manuscript in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, has mainly attracted the attention of performers: “I undertake this Journal in hopes of serving as a guide to such performers as may take an interest in my poor music”. Poulenc enjoins singers to “attentively read the poems before starting work on a song” (pg. 2). Sometimes laconic in style, this *Journal* was intended to explain the genesis of each of the songs written up to that time, and the correct interpretation to be adopted. Additionally, the *Journal*, like the majority of Poulenc’s private and public writings, recalls the intimacy that the composer maintained with the literary milieu of his time and the friendships that linked him to numerous men and women of letters: Jean Cocteau, Paul Éluard, Colette, Louise de Vilморin, Max Jacob, Paul Valéry... His correspondence too bears witness to these numerous literary connections.

Across his whole life and career, therefore, Poulenc took up the pen with relish. He was capable of turning out several letters a day, most often relating to music (his own or that of others), the events marking his professional life as a composer, performer, and speaker, and the ups and downs of his emotional life, often related to various woes. Solicited on various occasions by his network to contribute to one or another periodical, he also gave his time to numerous interviews and conversations, and even took on the guise of biographer with his *Chabrier*, a composer whom he counted among “the best in French music since 1880” (*Chabrier*, pg. 8) and to whom he wished to render homage. In a certain sense, thanks to his cultivated mind and colourful style that painted with verve, humour, or nostalgia the musical and literary life of his times, Poulenc maintained, in parallel to his career as a composer, a career as a man if not of letters, then at least of the pen.

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Further reading

Poulenc Francis, *Journal de mes mélodies*, Paris, La Société des Amis de Francis Poulenc chez Grasset, c1964.

Poulenc Francis, *Correspondance 1910-1963*, réunie, choisie, présentée et annotée par Myriam Chimènes, Paris, Fayard, 1994.

Poulenc Francis, *À bâtons rompus, écrits radiophoniques* : précédé de *Journal de vacances* et suivi de *Feuilles américaines*, textes réunis, présentés et annotés par Lucie Kayas, Arles, Actes Sud, 1999.

Chimènes Myriam, « Francis Poulenc et Geneviève Sienkiewicz : correspondance inédite », in Mas Josiane (éd.), *Centenaire Georges Auric - Francis Poulenc*, Centre d'étude du XX^e siècle, université Paul Valéry, Montpellier III, 2001, p. 239-285.

Poulenc Francis, *J'écris ce qui me chante : écrits et entretiens*, textes et entretiens réunis, présentés et annotés par Nicolas Southon, Paris, Fayard, 2011.

Poulenc Francis, *Lettres inédites à Brigitte Manceaux*, édition de Pierre Miscevic, Paris, Orizons, 2019.

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