

### **Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)**

French composer Francis (Jean Marcel) Poulenc was born into a wealthy family of pharmaceutical manufacturers. His mother, an amateur pianist, taught him to play, and music formed a part of family life. At 16, he began taking formal piano lessons with Ricardo Viñes.

A decisive turn in his development as a composer occurred when Francis Poulenc attracted the attention of Erik Satie, the arbiter elegantiarum of the arts and social amenities in Paris. Deeply impressed by Satie's fruitful eccentricities in Dadaism, Poulenc joined an ostentatiously self-descriptive musical group called the "New Youths" that was later labeled Les Six.

Francis Poulenc embraced the Dada movement's techniques, creating melodies that would have been appropriate for Parisian music halls. From 1918 to 1921 he served in the French army, and then began taking lessons in composition with Koechlin (1921-1924). An excellent pianist, Poulenc became in 1935 an accompanist to the French baritone Pierre Bernac, for whom he wrote numerous songs.

Compared with his fortuitous comrades-in-six, Francis Poulenc appears a classicist. Futuristic projections had little interest for him; he was content to follow the gentle neo-Classical formation of Ravel's piano music and songs. Among his other important artistic contacts was the ballet impresario Diaghilev, who commissioned him to write music for his Ballets Russes. He also, throughout his career, borrowed from his own compositions as well as those of Mozart and Saint-Saëns.

Later in his life, the loss of some close friends, coupled with a pilgrimage to the Black Madonna of Rocamadour, led Poulenc to rediscovery of the Catholic faith and resulted in compositions of a more sombre, austere tone. Of his choral works *Stabat Mater* and *Gloria* are notable. He also wrote remarkable music for the organ, including a concerto that is considered among the most beautiful concertos organists have in their repertoire. A master of artificial simplicity, he pleases even sophisticated listeners by his bland triadic tonalities, spiced with quickly passing diaphonous discords. Among his last series of major works is a series of works for wind instruments and piano. He was particularly fond of woodwinds, and planned a set of sonatas for all of them, yet only lived to complete four: sonatas for flute, oboe, clarinet, and the *Elegie* for horn.