

WMCT October 4th 2018
Poulenc Trio

When a group of instrumentalists get together as a chamber ensemble and decide to take a collective name, it represents a public acknowledgement of the chamber music ideal: individual players collaborating in a united interpretation. And when they take the name of a well-known composer they are inevitably identifying with some of the qualities of his music – perhaps in this case thinking of Claude Rostand’s description of Poulenc as half monk, half rascal? When pressed on this, the composer managed to turn these supposed personal qualities into more general ones: "you will find sobriety and heartache in French music ... but the French ... realize that somberness and good humor are not mutually exclusive. Our composers, too, write profound music, but when they do, it is leavened with that lightness of spirit without which life would be unendurable." Listening to today’s programme, you will soon be aware that the performers have chosen music that has a good deal of that particular leaven, and that it is not exclusively French.

The music by Schnittke, Viet Cuong, and Shostakovich is all related to film in one way or another. Alfred Schnittke, one of the most important Russian composers in the generation after Shostakovich, wrote in a dizzying variety of styles, which eventually became a personal hallmark that he called polystylism. In a country where musical styles had strong ideological significance, and where composers were not entirely free to make choices among them, he seems to have used this approach often to suggest subtle layers of irony and alienation, although even then not always escaping official censure. The music of the Suite in Old Style, originally written for violin and piano, however, is straightforward in using a pastiche baroque style to accompany mostly comic or cartoon images. In notes supplied by today’s performers we learn that “‘Pastorale’ and ‘Balletto’ are from a comedy film about a dentist’s amorous adventures, ‘Pantomima’ and ‘Minuetto’ are from scores for animated children’s films, and ‘Fuga’ comes from a documentary about a sportsman’s double life.”

Trains of Thought by the young American composer Viet Cuong exists in two forms. The Poulenc Trio, who commissioned the work, has recorded the music as a stand-alone piece, but the artists Elizabeth and Alden Phelps, with the collaboration of the trio and the composer, have produced a stop-motion animated film – *Trains of Thought: Animated* - that interprets and accompanies this score, the result being an expanded, multi-media work. The composer has said of the music that the trains of the title “aren’t actually locomotives, yet still evoke the feeling of a moving train ... The piece basically has a consistent tempo for the entire duration, but the colors, registers, and even harmonies vary widely. My goal was to unify these different elements ... and at the same time to touch on the concept of a ‘train of thought’. Ideas often meander aimlessly in one’s mind, and one’s stream of consciousness can end up somewhere very unexpected. However, different thoughts are usually connected through some sort of common thread.”

The first of the two works by Shostakovich also has its origins in a film score. ‘Romance’ is the first movement of *The Gadfly Suite*, a concert piece that was compiled by Levon Atovmian from Shostakovich’s film score for *The Gadfly*. This film, which was incredibly popular in Russia, was based on a novel of the same name by the Irish writer Ethel Voynich, and tells a story set in Italy during the Risorgimento. The second Shostakovich piece, ‘A Spin Through Moscow,’ is the first of the four dance-like movements of the orchestral suite from the comic operetta, ‘Moscow, Cheryomushki.’ The Poulenc Trio’s notes say that “the satirical plot deals with ... the chronic housing shortage and the difficulties of securing livable conditions.

‘Cheryomushki’ translates to ‘bird-cherry trees,’ the name of a real housing estate in southwest Moscow.”

If there is one work on today’s programme that stands outside the Poulenc-inspired theme, it is Glinka’s *Trio Pathétique*, but even this is not quite what one might expect from the “Father of Russian Music” writing a work with that particular title. This composition, originally for clarinet, bassoon and piano was written in 1832 when the 28 year old composer was on an extended tour of Italy, and well before his move towards a more Russian-based style. The tour was ostensibly for the benefit of his health, which was indeed poor, but exacerbated by hypochondria. Glinka wrote on the score, “I have known love only by the pain it brings,” and some writers have speculated that this refers to an actual affair that ended badly; it seems just as likely to have been a typical romantic trope that the young artist felt he ought to experience. Whatever the strength of his personal feelings, Glinka used the musical language he had been steeped in most recently to express them, the operatic world of Bellini and Donizetti. The result is an approachable, tuneful piece, and if there is any touch of the *pathétique* about it, it seems more play-acting than anything very traumatic.

Today’s performers have supplied the following notes about the Poulenc composition. “The *Trio* is in the spirit of an eighteenth century *divertissement*, light and witty, yet spiced with dissonances. It is eminently logical, combining and contrasting the two members of the double reed family with the percussive quality of the piano. Poulenc took the advice of Ravel and based the opening *Presto* on a Haydn *Allegro*, and the closing *Rondo*’s refrain begins as a near perfect quote of a well-known Beethoven melody until it makes a surprising turn into the fresh vocabulary of Poulenc’s own distinctive language. Poulenc hinted that he patterned this movement after a piano concerto by Saint-Saëns. The *Andante* is gracefully Mozartian, though any suggestion of parody is dispelled by alluring shifts of tonality and chromaticism. The work is dedicated to Manuel de Falla.”

Andre Previn’s *Trio for Piano, Oboe and Bassoon* was composed in 1994 and, according to today’s performers “shows in some ways virtues that might be thought typically French: clarity, careful attention to the character of the individual instruments, and a sense of play and fun, but with an American accent. The third movement, ‘Jaunty’, “changes meter with almost every measure. Near the end the tempo speeds ahead as Previn specifies that the music should be played with ‘Jazz phrasing’: these riffs alternate with brief piano interludes marked ‘simply.’”