

Gloria

Francis Poulenc (1899 – 1963)

Gloria in excelsis Deo
Laudamus te
Domine Deus, Rex caelestis
Domine fili unigenite
Domine Deus, agnus Dei
Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris

Francis Poulenc was one of a somewhat notorious group of young French composers who became known as 'Les Six', an epithet clearly derived from the earlier 'Russian Five'. The aims of the French group were to break away from the twin influences of Germanic formality and French impressionism, and to employ a direct and simple style in their own music. Of the six, Poulenc was by far the most successful.

Although Poulenc saw himself as primarily a composer of religious music, it was not in fact until 1936, following his return to Catholicism, that he produced his first sacred work. A steady stream of religious pieces then flowed from his pen, including a Mass and a series of motets. His first large-scale choral work, the *Stabat Mater*, appeared in 1950, and the *Gloria* in 1959, only four years before his death. Both employ the same forces - chorus, soprano solo and large orchestra - and both enjoyed immediate acclaim. They have remained firm favourites with performers and audiences ever since.

Poulenc's very distinctive style relies principally on strong musical contrasts. The harmony moves between Stravinskian dissonance and lush, sensuous chord progressions; vigorous counterpoint in clipped, angular phrases alternates with lyrical melodic writing; dynamics frequently range from a hushed *piano* to an emphatic *forte* within the space of a bar or two. Poulenc skilfully uses this colourful musical palette to express a wide range of emotions, from lyrical serenity to unashamed glee.

The *Gloria* was commissioned by the Koussevitsky Foundation of America. The words from the Mass are set to music of an unmistakable freshness and vivacity. Some critics at the time suggested that it bordered on the sacrilegious; Poulenc replied, *'While writing it I had in mind those Crozzoli frescoes with angels sticking out their tongues, and also some solemn-looking Benedictine monks that I saw playing football one day.'*

The work is divided into six short movements. After a brief introduction, the chorus enters with a prominent dotted figure to the word 'Gloria', which forms the basis of this movement. The animated second movement, 'Laudamus Te', reveals Poulenc in playful mood, with the chorus for the most part divided into pairs of voices - sopranos and tenors; altos and basses - exchanging a series of short, pithy phrases. In the expressive third section, 'Domine Deus', the soprano soloist is heard for the first time with a typically yearning melody, whilst the chorus is allocated a supporting role. We are then abruptly whisked back to the playground for the brief and chirpy 'Domine Fili Unigenite'. The soprano soloist returns for the exquisite 'Dominus Deus, Agnus Dei', with soloist and chorus sometimes combining and sometimes exchanging lyrical phrases. In the sixth movement a short, majestic opening soon gives way to an animated section at the words 'Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris'. Peace and serenity suffuses the radiant closing pages of the work but, characteristically, Poulenc cannot resist a last, loud interjection at the first 'Amen', where he briefly recalls the dotted 'Gloria' figure of the very opening, before calm is restored for the final 'Amen'.

Poulenc's sense of humour and love of life shine through all his music, however solemn the text might be. One of his friends said of him, *'There is in him something of the monk and the street urchin.'* The *Gloria* brilliantly expresses these characteristics, with its captivating mixture of solemnity and mischievous exuberance.

programme notes by John Bawden

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