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«beyond all this folly»

Autore(i): Federica Marsico

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Les Mamelles de Tirésias by Francis Poulenc: the authenticity of desire «beyond all this folly»*

«Qui dira jamais assez le secret de certaines œuvres?»
(«Who will ever know all that lies at the secret heart of certain works?») [Poulenc 1995, 831; Eng. trans., 236]

«J'ai entendu ce matin les *Mamelles* à la radio. Que j'étais heureux alors! C'est de *toutes* mes œuvres celle que je chéris le plus; celle que j'aimerais entendre à mon lit de mort» («I listened to the *Mamelles* on the radio this morning. I was so happy! Of *all* my works, this is the one I cherish the most; the one I would like to hear on my deathbed») [Poulenc 1995, 898–899].¹ With these words, in 1958, Francis Poulenc confided to his close friend Simone Girard that he saw himself passing away to the tune of his opera *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*. Poulenc's predilection for this work within his theatrical production is often reiterated in his correspondence. In 1953, he wrote to his bosom friend Pierre Bernac: «J'ai pour cette œuvre une tendresse folle. C'est une des rares choses de moi où je ne changerais pas une ♪» («I have an inordinate fondness for this work. It is one of the few things I've done in which I wouldn't change a single ♪») [*ibid.*, 772]. A few days later, in a letter to the critic Henri Hell,² Poulenc restated his affection for this opera: «Certainement c'est l'œuvre la plus près de mon cœur, celle que dans le fond je préfère à tout» («It is certainly the work that is closest to my heart, the one which, deep down, I prefer to anything else») [*ibid.*, 776].

Among the musical theatre performances that premiered in Europe in the years 1945–1947, this *opéra-bouffe* in two acts and a prologue (3 June 1947, Opéra

* This research has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement no. 887530. Partial results were showcased during the 21st Quinquennial International Musicological Society Congress (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, 2022). I would like to thank Lloyd Whitesell for his enlightening suggestions.

1. In all the quotations from Poulenc's letters, the italics are the composer's. Unless otherwise indicated, all the English translations are mine.
2. He was the author of Hell 1958.

Comique, Paris) stands out as a successful and bubbly musical adaptation of Guillaume Apollinaire's surrealist drama. Along with Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes* (1945), *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946) and *Albert Herring* (1947), it achieved a success that is far superior to contemporary pieces such as *L'oro* by Ildebrando Pizzetti and *La collina* by Mario Peragallo, both staged in 1947 in two of the main Italian theatres, or to Carl Orff's clumsy experiment *Die Bernauerin*, a "Bavarian piece" that went on stage in Stuttgart in the same year. Leonard Bernstein loved the score and was eager to direct the English translation of the opera in the United States: «*Les Mamelles* sont merveilleuses [...]. Tout le monde adore cette œuvre» («*The Mamelles* is wonderful [...]. Everybody loves this work»), he wrote to Poulenc in 1953 [*ibid.*, 756]. The opera also caught the attention of Britten, who scheduled a performance of its arrangement for two pianos at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1958 [*ibid.*, 876]. Poulenc, who was supposed to accompany the English composer at the piano, eventually cancelled due to health reasons and out of fear of travelling by sea [*ibid.*, 893]; the opera was performed nevertheless, under the stage direction of John Cranko and the musical direction of Charles Mackerras, with Peter Pears in the role of the Husband (arranged for tenor voice especially for him) [*ibid.*, 876] and Viola Tunnard at the second piano [*ibid.*, 893].

Les Mamelles de Tirésias brings together a variety of reflections on proper gender roles [Lacombe 2013, 559–603]. Poulenc had attended the premiere of Apollinaire's play on 24 June 1917 [Read 2000, 91–103] and had witnessed the ensuing scandal around the character of Thérèse, who refuses to serve her husband, foregoes her female attributes and acquires the male traits of general Tirésias (named after the mythical prophet who experienced both male and female pleasure) [Burton 2002, 132]. The role of the Husband, who is not given a proper name in the play, is just as counter-normative: abandoned by his wife, he takes on the task of procreating and single-handedly generates forty thousand and forty-four children in one day. Although Apollinaire was addressing the Parisian audience of 1917 and Poulenc that of thirty years later, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* tells a story about the female condition that is far from remote from our contemporary world. The feminist theme is as evident in the opera as it was in the play and becomes powerfully apparent, right from the first act, in Thérèse's famous soprano aria *Non, Monsieur mon mari* (*No, my husband*), masterfully performed by Denise Duval at the premiere. The protagonist of *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* challenges her social role of subordination to the male. Within Poulenc's production, her attitude is diametrically opposed to that of the young submissive maid in *Cinq poèmes de Max Jacob* for voice and piano (1932), who only wishes for a husband who does not drink too much and is not a brute, as stated in the last words of the song: «Faites que je grandisse vite | et donnez-moi un bon mari | qui ne soit pas

trop ivrogne | et qui ne me batte pas tous les soirs» («Let me grow up quickly | and give me a good husband | who isn't too much of a drunkard | and doesn't beat me every night») [Poulenc 1932, 11; Schmidt 1995, 184–187].

Due to the topic's obvious connection to gender issues, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* has been studied within the field of queer musicology [Allred 2013]. Since the 2000s, several hermeneutical readings of Poulenc's production have been pointing to the author's ambivalent stance on his own homosexuality (which was an open secret in the public sphere) [Burton 2002] as a possible interpretive key to his aesthetics [Clifton 2002]. The most recent studies focus on the expression of camp [Sontag 1963; Cleto 1999]. According to this approach, Poulenc is expressing the theme of queerness (i.e. gender and sexual non-normative identities) behind a series of linguistic conventions that have no explicit connection to the queer dimension but evoke the categories of the bombastic, artificial and unnatural, often with an ironic intent [Moore 2012; 2016; 2018; Purvis 2018]. Even when there is no queer thematic content, the style expresses a perspective shaped by queer experience. A paradigmatic case is that of the one-act ballet *Les Biches* (1924) [Moore 2012]. Here the celebration of heterosexual love is constantly reinforced through the overabundant use of the dramatic, gestural and musical conventions of Romanticism, evocative of a rigid heteronormativity that the composer is covertly criticising through exaggeration. By referring to the typical expressive categories of camp, Poulenc established a channel of communication with the members of the audience who could recognise the subversive components of this insider language; they were thus able to secretly share an experience of resistance to the oppression and marginalisation of queer identity while remaining in the closet. Christopher Moore effectively summarises the essence of “camp” expression as follows:

Though camp is indeed a “deviant” form of expression, it largely expresses itself within the folds of dominant and heterosexual artistic discourses. By articulating itself within established modes of artistic representation, camp functioned as an “unseen queer culture”, one that was communicated through codes and specialized knowledge based in shared experiences and anxiously concealed sexual practices [Moore 2012, 302].

My own reading of *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* does not follow a camp interpretation. Instead of queer irony, I will explore style as a vehicle for queer desire. I plan to show how the music hints at the intensity of homosexual desire, concealed behind the comical mask of the mistaken identity caused by the female attire of the Husband (baritone). I will therefore analyse the scenes of his first encounter with the Gendarme (baritone), in the first act, and with the Journalist (tenor),

in the second. While the libretto creates a comical effect through the back-and-forth between the two male roles, the music at times underscores the comedy and at other times conveys great emotional depth. My approach to these two scenes will show how Poulenc tells the story of queer desire “through” the music, which gives expression to an authentic feeling permeated with eroticism and nostalgia.

Beyond laughter

The character of the Gendarme enters in the sixth scene of the first act. Upon discovering the Husband dressed as a woman, he starts courting him. During the scene, the Husband, although aware of the misunderstanding, takes advantage of the impression he has made to get the Gendarme to free him from the ropes with which he was tied up by his wife. Eventually, pressed by the Gendarme’s advances, the Husband sheds his female clothes and reveals his identity to the suitor. The scene is undoubtedly comical, being built around a misunderstanding about the identity of the Husband. The original text by Apollinaire already allowed two possible interpretations of the Gendarme’s courtship. From a normative perspective, the comical effect is induced by the sight of a man courting another man whom he has mistaken for a woman and with whom he would like to initiate a heterosexual relationship. The same scene, however, can also be read as the representation of a man courting someone with ambiguous gender markers and pursuing, therefore, a queer relationship. Poulenc exploits the ambiguity of the desire that underlies the courtship to express queerness through music.

The scene opens with the Gendarme entering on a hobby horse (*Très modéré*, bb. 56₁–56₆);³ the Husband immediately identifies him as an «agent de l’autorité zanzibarienne» («agent of the Zanzibari authorities») [Poulenc 1963, 112] who can help him. While this is the Gendarme’s first appearance in the opera, the Husband has already sung in previous scenes. In the opening of the first act, he intersperses the aria of Thérèse with the very concise words «Donne moi du lard, je te dis» («Give me some bacon, I’m telling you»; bb. 23₇–23₁₀, then bb. 26₁–26₄), coldly restating his right to be attended to by his wife. The Husband also makes brief appearances in the second and third scenes, in which he witnesses in disbelief Thérèse’s transformation into Tirésias, and in the fifth scene, where he joins the choir that bids an ironic farewell to the departed Presto (baritone) and Lacouf (tenor). When, at the beginning of the sixth scene, we hear his voice again as, to his relief, he sees the Gendarme, the music to which his words are

3. The references to the score are drawn from Poulenc [1963]. The rehearsal number is preceded or followed by a number in subscript indicating the previous or following bars.

Clarinettes en Sib

Bassons

Cors en Fa

Trompettes en Ut

Le Mari

Violons II

Altos

Violoncelle solo

Violoncelles

Contrebasses

rien - ne *p* je vais, l'in - ter - pel - ler — je vais, l'in - ter - pel - ler —

doux

p

très doux

pp

p

doux et lié

p

pizz.

arco

p

Ex. 1. F. Poulenc, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, score, bb. 574–578.

set has nothing to do with the detached comedy of his previous appearances. Poulenc takes us into an atmosphere of great tenderness, particularly evident in a motif that is sung twice to a delicate orchestral accompaniment: the melody that attacks with a rising fourth and lingers on the high note, the cello solo *doux et lié*, and the chromatic descending octaves of the brass *doux* and *très doux* particularly contribute to create the atmosphere of sweetness (Ex. 1). The tenderness of the motif is echoed, a few bars later, by the voice of the Gendarme who sings it one semitone below in the conclusion of the *Très modéré*, as he admires the

The image displays a page of a musical score for F. Poulenc's *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*. The score is arranged in a standard orchestral format with multiple staves. The instruments listed on the left are: Hautbois (Oboe), Clar. basse en Sib (Bass Clarinet in B-flat), Bassons (Bassoons), Cors en Fa (French Horns), Trompettes en Ut (Trumpets in C), Le Gendarme (The Gendarme), Violons I (Violins I), Violons II (Violins II), Altos (Violas), Violoncelle solo (Solo Cello), Violoncelles (Cellos), and Contrebasses (Double Basses). The music is in 3/4 time. The vocal part for 'Le Gendarme' includes the lyrics: "La main sur le cœur, il s'approche du mari et s'aperçoit qu'il a les mains liées. Ah la belle fil - le div. le". Dynamics include *mf* (mezzo-forte) and *p* (piano). The score shows two measures of music, with the first measure starting with a *mf* dynamic and the second measure ending with a *p* dynamic.

Ex. 2. F. Poulenc, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, score, bb. 458–58.

beauty of the figure that he just met and sings «Ah la belle fille» («What a beautiful girl»); Ex. 2).

In this passage the musical echo of the Husband's motif, included in the part of the Gendarme, can be explained by the latter's passionate attraction, be it

of a straight or queer nature, for the person he just met. The musical ‘transfer’ between the characters is a traditional symbol of erotic and identificatory connection in opera. The melody introduced by the Husband at the beginning of the scene, however, is surprisingly seductive and radically different from what we previously heard from the character. Let us try to consider the exceptional nature of the moment as a sign of interpretive significance and propose the experience of surprise as a queer experience. If we assume that Poulenc’s intent was to covertly refer to queer desire in the score, the eighteen bars that comprise the Husband’s aria and its musical echo by the Gendarme (bb. 57₁–57₁₈) would perfectly fit the depiction of a love at first sight between two baritones. A listener positioned outside normative thought can catch a covert message, condensed in the music, that goes beyond the semantic content of the libretto and expresses the erotic passion between two men through the sentimentalism of the musical tone and orchestration. The hidden message is all the more easy to identify as the scene opens with the Husband being tied up before the Gendarme comes to set him free, a situation reminiscent of the common operatic *topos* of the saviour-lover.

The hypothesis that Poulenc may have intended to create a double semantic channel in the scene, one evident and conveyed through the literary text, the other addressed to initiates and concentrated in the music, becomes more plausible when we observe what happens between the two characters during the scene. The whole encounter is structured by the juxtaposition of short episodes associated with two radically different sound atmospheres, whose diversity lies especially in the rhythmic intensity of the music writing and the agogic (Tab. 1). The former, particularly upbeat (*Allegro subito*), is characterised by a predominantly 4-beat measure and by a very lively accompaniment; the second is far more sentimental and melancholy as it corresponds to a change of tempo (*Très lent*). When we look at the overall structure of the scene as a sequence of episodes with contrasting musical character, the idea that Poulenc may be addressing two levels of reception becomes more plausible. To the listeners who interpret the scene as the mere representation of the Gendarme’s awkward attempt at seduction, the sentimentalism of the music enhances the ridiculous effect of the mistaken identity. Those who see instead, in the artifice of the disguise, a means to conceal the representation of queer desire as such, perceive the deep emotional charge hidden in the more sentimental musical passages. As a consequence, the comical effect of the sung text is undermined for that part of the audience who empathises with the queer drive that is being secretly hinted at by the pathos of the music.

Poulenc does not expose himself too much, and the alternation between the two musical atmospheres is interrupted once and for all by the off-stage choir (bb. 66₁–66₇) praising the general Tirésias and launching the final *Allegro subito*

| TEMPO | CONTENT | REFERENCES TO THE SCORE |
|---|--|---------------------------------------|
| <i>Très modéré</i> | The Gendarme enters on a hobby horse. | bb. 56 ₁ –56 ₆ |
| | First encounter between the Husband and the Gendarme, who is ecstatic at the sight of the «beautiful girl» («belle fille»). | bb. 57 ₁ –57 ₁₈ |
| <i>Allegro subito</i> | The Gendarme tries to establish a physical contact with the Husband, who initially mocks him, then plays along in order to be untied. | bb. 58–62 ₇ |
| <i>Très lent.</i> <i>Allegro subito.</i> <i>Très lent</i> | The Husband declares that he is «a honest woman» («une honnête femme»), while the Gendarme evokes the seductive lure of the swan's song. | bb. 63 ₁ –65 ₅ |
| <i>Allegro subito</i> | The choir off-stage praises general Tirésias and calls for a birth rate increase. | bb. 66 ₁ –66 ₇ |
| | The Gendarme offers a pipe to the Husband, who accepts. | bb. 67 ₁ –67 ₁₁ |
| | The Gendarme proposes to the Husband, but the latter takes off his women's clothes and shows his true identity. | bb. 68 ₁ –68 ₉ |
| | The choir enters, praising general Tirésias. | bb. 69 ₁ –69 ₈ |

Tab. 1. Summary of the sixth scene of the first act.

Tirant une pipe de sa poche et l'offrant au mari

Le Gendarme

the Husband and the Gendarme, who sings almost exactly the same motif at the upper fourth (Ex. 4). In this final exchange, the relationship between the two baritones, still ambiguous, is enhanced by the sung text.

A similar construction can be found in the second scene of the next act, featuring the Husband, «vêtu d'une longue blouse d'infirmier» («dressed in a long nurse's coat») [Poulenc 1963, 195], and the Journalist (tenor) who decided to interview him after reading his story in the Parisian press. In the scene, the first words that the Husband addresses to the visitor are characterised by the *très aimable* melody of the voice, supported by the strings, in radical contrast with the *staccato* accompaniment of the bassoon *solo* in the previous bars (Ex. 5). Even when the Husband confirms to the Journalist that he has found a way to generate children without a woman, his speech is full of sentimentalism: the voice enters, repeating, at the lower third, the ascending fifth interval of its previous intervention (F_2-C_3 instead of A_2-E_3), accompanied by the warm timbres of the strings and woodwinds (bb. 218–18). The rest of the scene temporarily abandons its pathetic tone (*Exactement le double plus vite*, bb. 181–20) as the orchestra brings out a quaver-based rhythmic *ostinato* performed by various instruments (see, in Ex. 6, the first occurrence in the horn part).

As soon as the Husband introduces his son Joseph, a very precocious writer, to the Parisian Journalist, the musical atmosphere abruptly changes again with the return of the strings and woodwinds (bb. 201–21). Compared to the beginning of the scene, the sentimentalism is given more space through the introduction of a *très doux* motif played by high-pitched strings, whose tenderness is enhanced by an orchestration that includes the *glissando* of the harp, the *très arpégé et doux* of the piano and the *pianissimo* syncopated accompaniment of the wind instruments (Ex. 7). Parallel to the inception of the motif, reiterated shortly after (bb. 201–204), the Journalist repeats the ending of the Husband's previous phrase one octave above and expands the third minor interval to an octave (A_3-A_4 instead of A_2-C_3) on «Quell' chance» («What luck»). The comical tone returns as soon as the Journalist reads the incipit of the novel written by Joseph (*Très lent*, bb. 211–212) and cannot repress his laughter, which is put into lively music on different syllables (first «ah!», then «eh!» and finally «uh!») with which he retorts to the Husband's continued praise of his son (*Allegro subito*, bb. 213–ff.). A few bars later, the viola repeats the syncopated rhythmic pattern, indicating the return to a sentimental atmosphere (bb. 222–ff.), while the orchestration becomes increasingly seductive (prominence of woodwind instruments, arpeggios of the harps, entrance of the glockenspiel).

Bassons *solo*
p *suivez le chant*

Timbales
p *pp*

Le Journaliste
 Bon-jour Mon-sieur le ma-ri je suis cores-pon-dant d'un journal de Pa-ris. [...]

Le Mari
 (très aimable) *p*
 De Pa-ris, soyez le bienvenu!

Violons I
p *mf* *pp*

Violons II
p *mf* *pp*

Altos
p *mf* *pp*

Violoncelles
p *mf* *pp*

Contrebasses
pizz. *p*

Ex. 5. F. Poulenc, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, score, bb. 17₃-17₃.

Cors en Fa
sf *p* *simile*

Ex. 6. F. Poulenc, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, score, bb. 18₁-18₂, horns.

The musical score is for the string section of *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*. It is written in 4/4 time. The Violon I and II parts have melodic lines with slurs and accents, starting with a *pp* *très doux* dynamic and transitioning to *ppp* with a *port.* (portamento) marking. The Alto, Violoncelle, and Contrebasse parts are primarily sustained notes, marked with *pp*.

Ex. 7. F. Poulenc, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, score, bb. 20₇-20₁₀, strings.

The alternation of pathos and comedy in the musical episodes that constitute the scene creates, once more, two levels of reception by the audience. The sentimentalism can be perceived as a musical artifice that enhances the drollery of the dialogue between the two characters, or as a means to voice the queer attraction concealed behind an openly frivolous literary text. In this case, the channel of communication with the initiates is far more secret than in the sixth scene of the first act, as no reference is made in the text to the Journalist's desire for the Husband, whereas the words of the Gendarme leave no room for doubt. However, those who have already caught the emotional drive in the music of the previously examined scene will be able to catch also the one that permeates the encounter with the Journalist.

The secrecy of a “vice”

Fred E. Maus, in his study of the ambivalent expression of queerness in the songs of the Pet Shop Boys, describes the category of ambiguity in artistic expression as follows: «Generally, ambiguity or ambivalence involves setting out an opposition, along with an unclear or undecidable relation between the terms of the opposition» [Maus 2001, 386]. The musical construction of the two scenes examined above fits this definition, as it involves the juxtaposition of episodes with a contrasting character whose interrelation remains ambiguous, because the contrast concerns only the music and not the content of the sung text. In two letters

written at the end of 1953, Poulenc explicitly refers to the ambiguity of the message in his opera.

On 4 December, he wrote to Girard: «A vous, à qui je dis tout, je vous avouerai que je préfère peut-être à *tout ce que j'ai écrit* ces chères *Mamelles* où, si l'on regarde bien il y a tout aussi bien de l'émotion que du rire. C'est mon œuvre "Raymond" la plus réussie [...]. On peut dire que je vous confie mes plus grands secrets» («As I always tell you everything, I shall confide to you that I probably prefer the dear *Mamelles* to *anything I have ever written* as they contain, on closer inspection, as much emotion as laughter. It's my most successful "Raymond" work [...]. One could say I am telling you my greatest secrets») [Poulenc 1995, 771–772]. Poulenc brings into play an attentive listener who can perceive the deep emotional message which the opera conveyed beyond the overt ironic element, and which has an autobiographical origin in the author's love for Raymond Destouches, a taxi driver met in Noizay in the early thirties to whom he remained deeply attached throughout his life, even undertaking new romantic relationships in the following years [*ibid.*, 740]. In Poulenc's words to his friend, the recondite content-level of *Les Mamelles* is described as a secret shared by few. The ability to perceive the emotional message underneath the opera's explicit comedy is evoked again in Poulenc's letter to Jacques Leguerney of 9 December, where he describes one of the two scenes we have analysed as paradigmatic of the work's dual message. «J'ai toutes les faiblesses pour cette œuvre que, dans le fond, je préfère à toutes. Si l'on sait bien écouter il y a tant d'humain derrière toutes ces folies. Vous verrez: la scène du journaliste est prodigieuse de tendresse» («I have a strong weakness for this work, which, deep down, I prefer to all others. If one knows how to listen, there is so much human beyond all this folly. You will see: the scene with the Journalist is miraculously tender») [*ibid.*, 775]. In a letter to his friend Bernac, two years later, Poulenc again correlates the feelings for Destouches to the composition of *Les Mamelles*: «Si Raymond reste le secret des *Mamelles* et de *Figure humaine*, Lucien est bien celui du *Stabat* et des *Carmélites*» («If Raymond remains the secret of *Les Mamelles* and *Figure humaine*, Lucien is certainly that of the *Stabat* and *Les Carmélites*») [*ibid.*, 826; Eng. trans., 232].

That the «so much human beyond all this folly» [*ibid.*, 775] has an autobiographical inspiration is precisely what Poulenc seems to suggest in the prologue of the opera, through the voice of the Director. The only moment when the orchestra is silent is when the character declares: «Car la pièce doit être un univers complet avec son créateur» («For the piece must be a complete universe with its creator») (Ex. 8); the author is clearly enhancing these words by entrusting them to a voice rising above the silence of the orchestra.

Ex. 8. F. Poulenc, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, score, bb. 14₁–14₆.

The ambivalence of the message that underlies the musical construction of the two scenes also reflects the way in which the composer lived his own homosexuality throughout his life. In his private life he did not hide it: he loved to dress up when partying with friends and lived out his feelings with great spontaneity. This attitude is celebrated, incidentally, in *La belle jeunesse*, the seventh of his *Chansons gaillardes*, which opens and closes with the rhyming refrain «Il faut s’aimer toujours | et ne s’épouser guère. | Il faut faire l’amour | sans curé ni notaire» («We must always love one another | and never get married. | We must make love | without a priest or a notary»). In the public sphere, however, Poulenc’s homosexuality was an open secret that he covertly dramatised in his art, as did other intellectuals of his time (such as Jean Cocteau) [Kelly 2009].

Within Poulenc’s production, the union between music and text in the scenes that we examined is, so to say, “halfway” between a level of expression in which the musical arrangement enhances the irony of the words (as in the raunchy lyrics of the *Chansons gaillardes*) and the opposite case in which the score adds further sentimentalism to an emotionally charged text (as in *Vers le sud*, the third poem of *Calligrammes*). In *Les Mamelles*, the music’s ambivalent relationship to the sung text points to the ambiguity of the message; it therefore serves as a tool to conceal a deeply serious yet unlawful emotional content whose essence can be caught only by a few. A fitting concept for the expressive mode used by Poulenc in these two scenes could be that of “bifocal rhetoric” that Lloyd Whitesell associates with the semantic-musical ambiguity of Maurice Ravel’s *Valses nobles et sentimentales*. The scholar writes:

On a larger structural level, there is an alternation of ‘noble’ and ‘sentimental’ statements. The dissonant idiom features in both, but takes on a distinct emotional rhetoric depending on the context. In the languid passages, irresolution tends to suggest an expressive intensity or sincerity of some kind: the fifth waltz (*dans un sentiment intime*) is a good example of this. Meanwhile, the second waltz (*avec une*

expression intense) alternates calmer modal phrases with outbursts of anguished dissonant chords. On the other hand, in the brilliant passages, displaced resolution suggests the capricious or derisive manipulation of emotions. In its rhythmic fluctuation between the two attitudes, *Valses nobles* creates a structure of teasing ambivalence, inviting the listener repeatedly to engage in sentiment, and then airily dismissing it [Whitesell 2010, 88].

If we consider *Les Mamelles* from a bifocal perspective, in which the music's brief moments of sentimentalism fleetingly tell us about the "human" side of the author "beyond all this folly" to then seamlessly bring the listener back to a flow of detached humour that has nothing illicit in it, even a passage from Thérèse's exhilarating aria can become ambivalent. The part in which the woman gets rid of her breasts is marked by a waltz tempo (from b. 28,) and begins with the catchy line «Envolez-vous, oiseaux de ma faiblesse» («Fly away, birds of my weakness»); the catchiness, however, is progressively lost in the next lines to then clearly return with the words «Le vice est après tout une chose dangereuse | c'est pourquoi il vaut mieux sacrifier une beauté | qui peut être une occasion de péché» («After all, vice is a dangerous thing | which is why it is better to sacrifice a beauty | that might become an opportunity to sin») (bb. 29₁₆–29₄₀). In this last passage, the music seems to "caress" the vice that the text claims to extirpate. If we link this passage with the next two scenes that we have examined, the aria of Thérèse seems to anticipate the author's way of using the tools of musical style to tell us about the lure of the feelings underlying his "vice", i.e. his homosexuality, deemed inappropriate by the French society of his time.

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Abstract

Among the musical theatre performances that premiered in Europe in the years 1945–1947, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* by Francis Poulenc (3 June 1947, Opéra Comique, Paris) stands out as a successful and bubbly musical adaptation of Guillaume Apollinaire's surrealist drama.

Due to the topic's obvious connection to gender issues, this *opéra-bouffe* in two acts and a prologue has been studied within the field of queer musicology [Allred 2013]. Since the 2000s, several hermeneutical readings of Poulenc's production have been pointing to the author's ambivalent stance on his own homosexuality (which was an open secret in the public sphere) as a possible interpretive key to his aesthetics (the first has been Clifton [2002]). The most recent studies focus on the expression of camp [Moore 2012; 2016; 2018; Purvis 2018].

My own reading of *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* does not follow a camp interpretation. I will instead show how the music hints at the intensity of queer desire, concealed behind the comical mask of the mistaken identity caused by the female attire of the Husband (baritone). I will therefore analyse the scenes of his first encounter with the Gendarme (baritone), in the first act, and with the Journalist (tenor), in the second. While the libretto creates a comical effect through the back-and-forth between the two male roles, the music at times underscores the comedy and at other times conveys great emotional depth. My approach to these two scenes will show how Poulenc tells the story of queer desire "through" the music, which gives expression to an authentic feeling permeated with eroticism and nostalgia.

Keywords

Francis Poulenc, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, 20th-century opera, queer musicology, gender studies.

Abstract

Fra i titoli che debuttarono nel triennio 1945–1947 nel panorama del teatro musicale europeo, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* di Francis Poulenc (3 giugno 1947, Opéra

Comique, Parigi) spicca per l'ottima riuscita dell'effervescente messa in musica del dramma surrealista di Guillaume Apollinaire.

Per la natura del suo soggetto, palesemente correlato alle questioni di genere, questa *opéra-bouffe* in due atti e un prologo è stata oggetto di studio nell'ambito della *queer musicology* [Allred 2013]. A partire dagli anni Duemila, si sono proposte letture ermeneutiche della produzione del compositore tese a individuare nel suo atteggiamento ambiguo rispetto alla propria omosessualità, vissuta come un *open secret* nella sfera pubblica, una possibile chiave di lettura della sua estetica (da Clifton [2002]). La prospettiva d'indagine affermata di recente si focalizza sull'espressività *camp* [Moore 2012; 2016; 2018; Purvis 2018].

La mia lettura delle *Mamelles de Tirésias* non va nella direzione di un'interpretazione *camp* dell'opera. Intendo invece dimostrare che la musica allude all'intensità del desiderio *queer* dietro la maschera comica del fraintendimento identitario dato dal travestimento del Marito (baritono). Analizzerò pertanto le scene in cui si rappresentano il primo incontro del personaggio con il Gendarme (baritono), nel primo atto, e quello tra lui e il Giornalista (tenore), nel secondo atto. Mentre il testo cantato produce l'effetto comico mediante gli scambi di battute tra le due parti maschili, la musica ora enfatizza la comicità, ora si fa invece portavoce di una grande profondità emotiva. La prospettiva d'indagine sulle due scene mostrerà come Poulenc racconta il desiderio omosessuale *attraverso* le note, che danno espressione a un sentire autentico carico di eros e nostalgia.

Parole chiave

Francis Poulenc, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, opera del '900, musicologia *queer*, studi di genere.

