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Song Literature II

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Francis Poulenc was the last composer of French *mélodie*, passing away of heart failure in January of 1963. Although he had no formal compositional training, he composed 137 *mélodies*, including “Les Chemins de L’Amour”. The text of this *mélodie* was written by Jean Anouilh and was incidental music for his play *Léocadia* (Time Remembered). Not only was this *mélodie* in Anouilh’s play, it also served as the *leitmotiv* and was central to the plot (Bernac 197). The lyricism of “Les Chemins de L’Amour” in the voice part sets the refrain apart from the verse, making it more memorable as a melody and a *leitmotiv*.

Born in Bordeaux in 1910, Jean Anouilh is one of the most celebrated French playwrights of his time. Although not very successful originally, he produced and published performance works for more than half a century. *Léocadia* was performed in November of 1940 and is one of Anouilh’s *pièces roses* which translate to pink plays. These plays were similar to fairy tales and generally focused on the protagonist seeking a happier existence while being burdened with the past. The text of “Les Chemins de L’Amour” definitely reflects that pattern of Anouilh’s *pièces roses*.

The text of “Les Chemins de L’Amour” consists of two verses and a refrain. The verses each have nine lines and the refrain has eight. In both verse one and the refrain, Anouilh makes use of *rime pauvre*. Lines 1-4 of verse one are *rimes croissés* (a/b/a/b):

Les chemins qui vont à la mer  
 Ont gardé de notre passage,  
 Des fleurs effeuillées  
 Et l'écho sous leurs arbres (Bernac 196).

However, in the same verse, Anouilh makes use of *rimes embrassées* (abba) in lines 6-9:

Hélas! Des jours de bonheur,  
 Radieuses joies envolées,  
 Je vais sans retrouver traces  
 Dans mon cœur (Bernac 196).

These are considered examples of *rime pauvre* because only the tonic vowels match each other. The rhyme pattern of verse two is the same as verse one, except that Anouilh uses *rime suffisante* (tonic vowel plus following consonant) opposed to *rime pauvre*. However, he stays true to the *rimes croissés* followed by *rimes embrassées* pattern. Within the verses, most of the endings are masculine like bonheur [bɔ̃nœʁ] and cœur [kœʁ].

In the refrain, only lines one and two and seven and eight follow any rhyme scheme. They are both examples of *rime pauvre*. Unlike the verses, the endings of the refrain are entirely masculine. Anouilh's text has nice symmetry. He begins and ends the refrain with "chemins de l'amour" or "the paths of love".

Francis Poulenc was born to wealthy parents in January of 1899. Emile Poulenc and Jenny Royer influenced Francis differently. His mother inspired him more musically and his father encouraged him more religiously. The Royers were hedonists and indifferent to religion. Emile Poulenc later discouraged Francis from attending the *Paris Conservatoire* and as a result,

Francis Poulenc did not receive any formal composition training. He wrote “Les Chemins de L’Amour” in 1940 for Anouilh’s play *Léocadia*, dedicating it to the singer Yvonne Printemps, for whom he wrote other songs.

Francis Poulenc labels “Les Chemins de L’Amour” as a *valse chantée*, a waltz song, and rightly so. It’s written in the style of a Viennese waltz. The form of this song is verse, refrain, verse, refrain and coda. This verses of this four minute *mélodie* were written in the key of C# minor and modulate to the enharmonic parallel major key, D flat major, during the refrain. Poulenc uses the enharmonic spelling of the fifth scale degree, G#, to lead into the refrain in measure thirty-six:

(Poulenc 2).

The listener is left with the lingering g# before being swept into the captivating refrain led by the A flat at the end of measure 36 (last measure of the system). This *mélodie* ends in the key of A flat major.

The range of the vocal line is not extreme, but it does call for a bit of mixing (at least when I sing it) in the lower parts of the verses, which are pretty low, in general, with the exception of lines 6-8. Although the range of the refrain is the same as the verses (a minor tenth), the tessitura is higher and opposed to the mostly low, almost recitative-like quality of the

verses, the refrain has the sweeping, memorable melodic contour of “Les Chemins de L’Amour”.

This song is entirely syllabic; each syllable has its own note with the exception of a grace note at the start of line 7 in both verses. This remains true of the refrain as well. However, the verses are more driven by the big downbeat and two following microbeats than the refrain. This rhythmical difference allows the listener to be swept into the waltz and the love story of the characters. The verses tell the story and give background to the couple. The driving rhythm and scalar vocal line of the verses are like recitative, especially in lines one and two of each respective verse:

**COUPLETS**

7 8 9 10 11

roads which go to the sea  
che - mins qui vont à la mer  
Je dois l'ou - bli - er un jour  
forget one day  
here guarded  
Ont gar - dé de  
La vie ef - fa -  
the life erased

12 13 14 15 16

no more pas - sa - ge  
- çant tou - te cho - se  
all things  
Des fleurs et feuil - les et an - ti -  
Je veux dans mon cœur qu'un sou -  
I in my heart put a

*my little love - piano*

(Poulenc 1).

The vocal line has very simple, repetitive melodic contour throughout most of the verse, but most especially in the first few lines. With the exception of some skips in measures 7, 11, and 12, the vocal line is consistent and forgettable.

The lyricism of the vocal line during the refrain is atypical of Poulenc's predecessors like Debussy, Ravel, etc. who treasured precision over sweeping melodic lines. Immediately in the refrain, the melodic line is extremely different from the verse. It begins with a major sixth interval which is the largest leap in the voice part until that point. The first line of the refrain already indicates to the listener how different this part of the song is from the verses:

**REFRAIN**  
**au Mouvt**

-mins de mon a-mour Je vous cher-che tou-  
*Pathe if my love I look for you always*

-jours Che-mins per dus vous n'e-tes plus Et  
*Pathe lost you are no more and*

(Poulenc 3).

Poulenc also indicates that the tempo should pick up during the refrain (au mouvement). The major fourths and fifths of the first two lines practically guaranteed audience members to leave

humming this piece for hours and simultaneously being reminded of the couple, the story, and ultimately, Anouilh's play because of the function of this song as the *leitmotiv*.

Despite little to no formal composition training, Francis Poulenc's contribution to the *mélodie* art form is irreplaceable. His usage of simple harmonies is exemplified through the simplicity of the texts he chose. Listeners leave "Les Chemins de L'Amour" singing the refrain for days and dreaming that this could be the soundtrack to their life, their love story, too.

## Appendix

Les chemins qui vont à la mer  
 Ont gardé de notre passage,  
 Des fleurs effeuillées  
 Et l'écho sous leurs arbres,  
 De nos deux rires clairs.  
 Hélas! Des jours de bonheur,  
 Radieuses joies envolées,  
 Je vais sans retrouver traces  
 Dans mon coeur.

Chemins de mon amour,  
 Je vous cherche toujours,  
 Chemins perdus, vous n'êtes plus  
 Et vos échos sont sourds  
 Chemins du désespoir,  
 Chemins du souvenir,  
 Chemins du premier jour,  
 Divins, chemins d'amour.

Si je dois l'oublier un jour,  
 La vie effaçant toute chose,  
 Je veux, dans mon cœur,  
 qu'un souvenir repose,  
 Plus fort que l'autre amour.  
 Le souvenir du chemin,  
 Où tremblante et toute éperdue,  
 Un jour, j'ai senti sur moi  
 Brûler tes main.

The paths that lead to the sea  
 have kept from our passing,  
 flowers with fallen petals  
 and the echo beneath their trees  
 Of our clear laughter.  
 Alas! Of our days of happiness,  
 radiant joy now flown,  
 no trace can be found again  
 In my heart.

Paths of my love,  
 I seek you forever,  
 lost paths, you are there no more  
 and your echoes are mute.  
 Paths of despair,  
 paths of memory,  
 paths of the first day,  
 Divine paths of love.

If one day I must forget,  
 life effacing everything,  
 I would, in my heart,  
 that one memory remains,  
 Stronger than the former love.  
 The memory of the path,  
 where trembling and utterly bewildered,  
 one day I felt upon me  
 Your burning hands.

## Works Cited

Bernac, Pierre. *Francis Poulenc, the man and his songs*. New York: Norton, 1977. Print.

Poulenc, Francis. *Les Chemins de L'Amour*.