

Francis
POULENC

Piano Concerto
Concert champêtre
Trio for Piano, Oboe & Bassoon
Sonata for Oboe & Piano

MARK BEBBINGTON
piano

**ROYAL PHILHARMONIC
ORCHESTRA**

JAN LATHAM-KOENIG
conductor



Francis Poulenc (1899–1963)

Piano Concerto, Concert champêtre
& other works for piano

Mark Bebbington *piano*

John Roberts *oboe*

Jonathan Davies *bassoon*

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

Jan Latham-Koenig *conductor*

About Mark Bebbington:

'His beautifully cultivated sound at the instrument is especially striking'
Gramophone

'Bebbington's playing is immaculately clear and accomplished at every point'
BBC Music Magazine

Concerto for Piano & Orchestra, FP 146

- | | |
|---------------------------|---------|
| 1. Allegretto | [10:18] |
| 2. Andante con moto | [5:11] |
| 3. Rondeau à la Française | [4:06] |

Trio for Piano, Oboe & Bassoon, FP 43

- | | |
|------------|--------|
| 4. Presto | [5:47] |
| 5. Andante | [4:02] |
| 6. Rondo | [3:39] |

Concert champêtre, FP 49

- | | |
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| 7. Allegro Molto | [10:24] |
| 8. Andante | [6:32] |
| 9. Finale | [8:22] |

Sonata for Oboe & Piano, FP 185

- | | |
|-----------------|--------|
| 10. Élégie | [5:39] |
| 11. Scherzo | [3:50] |
| 12. Déploration | [4:33] |

Total playing time [72:32]



Francis Poulenc: Piano Concerto, Concert champêtre & other works for piano

Poulenc composed five works for solo instruments with orchestra, all of them featuring the keyboard: the *Concert champêtre* for harpsichord or piano, the *Aubade* for piano and orchestra, the Concerto for Two Pianos, the Organ Concerto and the Piano Concerto. They span a period of just over twenty years in Poulenc's career, from the 1920s to the years after World War Two.

In June 1923, Poulenc attended the stage premiere of Manuel de Falla's *Master Peter's Puppet Show (El retablo de maese Pedro)* given privately at the home of the Princesse de Polignac. One unusual feature of its instrumentation was Falla's use of a harpsichord, played by Wanda Landowska. Poulenc met her after the performance and she asked him to write a new concerto for the harpsichord. They quickly struck up a warm friendship and Poulenc became a regular visitor to Landowska's home at Saint-Leu-la-Forêt. According to the dates on the manuscript, Poulenc composed the *Concert champêtre* between April 1927 and August 1928. Following a private performance at Landowska's home (with Poulenc

supplying the orchestral part on a piano), the premiere was given at the Salle Pleyel in Paris on 3 May 1929, with Landowska accompanied by the Orchestre Symphonique de Paris conducted by Pierre Monteux. She went on to perform the work on many occasions in its harpsichord version, while Poulenc himself often played the solo part on the piano: aside from a two-piano performance in February 1930, his earliest known public performance of the piano version was given by Poulenc at the Concerts Colonne, conducted by Paul Paray, on 10 January 1937. Poulenc himself was later uneasy about the piano version, describing it to Claude Rostand in 1954 as a makeshift or stopgap (his phrase was 'un pis aller'), but his apparent disapproval was contradicted by the numerous performances he gave, including a series of concerts with the New York Philharmonic in November 1948 conducted by Dimitri Mitropoulos. It ended the first half of a programme that also included Mahler's Seventh Symphony. Reviewing the concert in the *New York Times* (12 November 1948), Olin Downes wrote about his dislike of Mahler's music and contrasted this with Poulenc: 'As the Mahler symphony went on and on from one dreary platitude and outworn euphemism

to another, one regarded Poulenc with ever-increasing esteem. A composer who does not strut and roar and groan in moods of psychiatric conceit! A musician who sports wittily with an idea till he has used it for what it is worth, and then turns to other engaging matters, and who has precision and style, expresses what he desires to express with skill and without mannerism. Mr. Poulenc added materially to the effect of his music by his finished performance as a virtuoso and the competence and modesty of his achievement. The audience welcomed him warmly.' A recording survives of the performance on 14 November which confirms Downes's view of Poulenc's stylish and confident playing, making a thoroughly convincing case for the work as a piano concerto, despite his own reservations about losing the distinctive timbre of the harpsichord for which he conceived the work. Poulenc's biographer Henri Hell wrote that the music of the *Concert champêtre* followed the French tradition 'of an earlier age in which certain rustic associations were discreetly hidden behind a characteristic façade of elegance.' He also made an important point

about the work's musical style, noting that while an allegiance to French harpsichord composers such as Couperin and Rameau was immediately apparent, 'the work is conceived as a homage to the composer's musical ancestors, but not as a pastiche of their works. Poulenc's distinctive features invariably emerge in much the same way as the features of Ravel are firmly stamped on *Le Tombeau de Couperin*.' The *Concert champêtre* is in three movements. In the first, after a short introduction, Poulenc's pungent instrumentation gives a sharp edge to its main theme, and the whole movement seems propelled by a kind of bucolic energy. Subtitled 'mouvement de sicilienne', the central *Andante* is a nostalgic, bitter-sweet look back to an earlier age, but from a decidedly twentieth-century perspective. Poulenc himself talked about the finale to Stéphane Audel in a collection of interviews first published in 1963: 'A sharp-tongued critic thought to upset me by writing: "In the last movement of this *Concert champêtre* we suddenly hear, Heaven knows why, the echoes of barrack trumpet calls. A pretty sort of countryside!" He was absolutely right! For a townsman like me it was a pretty sort of countryside, that Parisian suburb where so many eighteenth-century

houses drowse among the market gardens the supply Les Halles in Paris.'

The *Piano Concerto* dates from 1949. It was a commission from the Boston Symphony Orchestra written at the request of the conductor Charles Munch as a piece for Poulenc to play with the orchestra during his second American tour in 1950. Writing to Darius Milhaud on 25 July 1949, Poulenc wrote that 'I have made some progress with my Concerto for Boston (first movement completed, second all planned). This work fills me with anguish as it would not be particularly fortuitous to begin my second tour with a flop.' By September he was feeling more confident about the piece, telling Pierre Bernac that 'I only hope I make a success of the finale. At any rate the orchestration is very good.' He left with Bernac for the USA on 27 December 1949 and on 3 January he wrote from Boston to his niece, Brigitte Manceaux: 'This morning we played through the Concerto for the first time. The orchestration is excellent and Charloton [Charles Munch] is *delighted, delighted*. So am I. Of course I played like a pig – my attention being mainly on the orchestration – but I will rectify that

in the morning. [...]the *Andante* is as I had expected, the *Finale* very *amusing*. The whole bang lot is stunning. The orchestra was delighted – thirty Frenchmen among them.' The first performance was given three days later, at Symphony Hall Boston, on 6 January, and the same performers repeated the work in New York on 14 January. The reception in both cities was polite but cool: while the American public was certainly charmed by the new concerto, they were perhaps hoping for something more obviously written in the grand virtuoso tradition. As Poulenc noted in his diary after the premiere, 'five curtain calls, but more friendliness on the part of the audience than genuine enthusiasm.' Poulenc's concerto may be unassuming but has moments of extraordinary beauty – the opening theme of the first movement (presented in quiet octaves in a mischievous homage to the start of Rachmaninov's Third Piano Concerto), and the gentle serenity of the slow movement – and others of knock-about humour, not least the Creole rhythms in the finale, where Poulenc introduces a melody (derived from an old French folk tune) that has much in common with 'Way down upon the Swanee river'. He had hoped that this 'musical picture of Paris – the Paris of La Bastille rather than of

Passy – would amuse them. In fact they were disappointed.’ Poulenc wrote to Munch in February: ‘I want to say once again, thank you, thank you for the Concerto. I’d like to have given you an unclouded success as that would reflect that admiration and affection I have for you.’ Still, it wasn’t the flop Poulenc had feared while working on the piece. The European premiere at the Aix-en-Provence Festival in July (again played by Poulenc and Munch) was not well received, but any critical hostility was largely eclipsed by the premiere the following day of Messiaen’s *Turangalila-Symphonie*. Poulenc’s Piano Concerto is no longer seen as a problematic piece, but as one notable for its richness of melodic ideas and its delicate handling of orchestral colours. As Henri Hell remarked in his 1958 biography, ‘it is a concerto of tunes rather than themes, which is one of its main merits.’

Poulenc completed his **Trio for oboe, bassoon and piano** in 1926, written with advice from one friend, Igor Stravinsky, and dedicated to another, Manuel de Falla. Of all his earlier chamber music, this is the piece that most completely demonstrates the

range of Poulenc’s musical language at the time, from the astringent harmonies of the opening bars (a deliberate recollection of the Baroque French Overture, lightly spiced à la Stravinsky) to the song-like elegance and lyrical restraint of the slow movement and the high spirits of the finale. Poulenc spent several years worrying over the Trio (his earliest plans go back to 1921), and in 1924 he gave a description of it to his friend Paul Collaer: ‘I’ve worked on it a lot. It’s in a style new to me yet at the same time it’s very Poulenc.’ This neatly summarises the work’s significance in Poulenc’s output, as one of the first pieces to reveal the stylistic diversity that later earned him the description of being both ‘monk and vagabond’: seriousness, tenderness and raw good humour are to be found side by side here. Poulenc gave the premiere of the Trio at the Salle des Agriculteurs in Paris on 2 May 1926 with Roger Lamorlette (oboe) and Gustave Dhérin (bassoon). In 1928, the same artists recorded the work for French Columbia – one of Poulenc’s earliest records.

The Oboe Sonata was Poulenc’s last major work, written in the summer of 1962. The composer himself described the work



as follows: 'the first movement is elegiac, the second scherzando and the third a kind of liturgical chant.' The form of the Sonata is slow-fast-slow: the first movement entitled 'Élégie' marked 'paisiblement', the second a 'Scherzo' and the third a deeply-felt 'Déploration'. This eloquent musical tribute was inscribed 'to the memory of Serge Prokofiev' and was first performed at the Strasbourg Festival on 8 June 1963, by Pierre Perlot and Jacques Février, as a memorial to Poulenc himself: he had died on 30 January 1963.

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Mark Bebbington (piano)

Mark Bebbington is fast gaining a reputation as one of today's most strikingly individual British pianists. His thirty discs of British music for Somm have met with international acclaim and notably, his recent cycles of Frank Bridge, John Ireland and Vaughan Williams have attracted nine consecutive sets of five-star reviews in *BBC Music Magazine*.

Over recent seasons, Mark has toured extensively throughout Central and Northern Europe, the Far East and North America and has performed at major UK venues with the London Philharmonic, Philharmonia and Royal Philharmonic orchestras and the London Mozart Players. As a recitalist, he makes regular appearances at major UK and international festivals.

Recently, Mark made his highly successful Carnegie Hall debut with Leon Botstein and the American Symphony Orchestra in the US premiere of Richard Strauss's *Parergon*.

Upcoming projects include continuing releases for the Resonus and Somm labels, performances with the South Florida Symphony and Royal Philharmonic Orchestras during 2020 and appearances at major Concert Series and Festivals both in the UK and throughout Europe.

www.markbebbington.co.uk





Jan Latham-Koenig (conductor)

Jan Latham-Koenig was born in 1953 in England. He was educated at the Royal College of Music in London, where he won numerous prizes as conductor and pianist. Since 1981 he has concentrated on conducting, and conducted most of the major English orchestras, including the Royal Philharmonic, the London Philharmonic, and all the BBC ensembles as well as his own Koenig Ensemble, which he founded in 1976. Jan Latham-Koenig is frequently employed as guest conductor by leading international orchestras all over the world. His great interest in opera has taken him to the Vienna State Opera, the English National Opera, the Bavarian State Opera, La Fenice (Venice), Deutsche Oper, Berlin, the opera in Verona, the Danish Royal Theatre, and to the opera in Rome, where he was appointed Principal Guest Conductor. To this may be added opera festivals and radio transmissions for the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, West Deutsche Rundfunk and others. Jan Latham-Koenig's recordings include a Weill cycle comprising, *Mahagonny*, *Der Zar läßt sich photographieren*, *Der Lindberghflug*, *Magna Carta*, *Der Silbersee*, *Happy End* and *Der Kuhhandel*;

William Walton's violin and viola concertos; Donizetti's *Poliuto* and *Elisabetta al castello de Kenilworth*; Catalani's *Dejanice*; Henze's *La cubana*; and Leoncavallo's *La Bohème*.

Jonathan Davies (bassoon)

British bassoonist Jonathan Davies made his concerto debut in the Barbican Hall aged 13. Further solo highlights have included Haydn's Sinfonia Concertante alongside Maxim Vengerov, a world premiere by David Fennessy with the London Sinfonietta and Knussen's *Study for Metamorphosis* for solo bassoon in the BBC Proms 2019. Solo recordings include Mozart's Bassoon Concerto and Sinfonia Concertante with the London Philharmonic Orchestra and Vladimir Jurowski and Dutilleux's *Sarabande et Cortège*, orchestrated by Kenneth Hesketh with the Sinfonia of London and John Wilson.

Jonathan was appointed principal bassoon of the London Philharmonic Orchestra in 2016, having previously held the same position with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. He is a bassoon Professor and Associate of the Royal Academy of Music.

John Roberts (Oboe)

Born in Glasgow, John Roberts took up the oboe at the age of eleven under the tutelage of Stephen West. In 2008 he moved to London, enrolling first at the Royal College of Music, and later the Royal Academy of Music, to study with Christopher Cowie, Gareth Hulse, Celia Nicklin and Christine Pendrill.

Since 2011, he has been working in various orchestras around the UK and Ireland, including every symphony orchestra in Glasgow and London. Since 2013, he has been Principal Oboe in the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. As well as orchestral concerts, John Roberts likes to participate in music-making on a smaller scale as much as possible, with projects during the current season with London Winds and London Sinfonietta.

He recently made his debut concert performance of Vaughan Williams' Oboe Concerto at Cadogan Hall with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

For more than seven decades the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (RPO) has been at the forefront of music-making in the UK. Its home base since 2004 at London's Cadogan Hall serves as a springboard for seven principal residencies as well as more than forty-five concerts per year in long-term partnership venues across the country, often in areas where access to live orchestral music is very limited. In London, the Orchestra's regular performances at Cadogan Hall are complemented by a distinguished series at Southbank Centre's Royal Festival Hall and a hugely popular series at the Royal Albert Hall. With a wider reach than any other UK large ensemble, the RPO has truly become Britain's national orchestra.

Alongside its concert series, the RPO embraces twenty-first-century opportunities, including appearances with pop stars and on video game, film and television soundtracks, whilst its artistic priority remains paramount: the making of great music at the highest level for the widest possible audience. This would have been lauded by its Founder and first conductor, Sir Thomas Beecham, who set up the RPO in 1946, leading a vital revival in the UK's

orchestral life after World War II. Since then, the Orchestra's principal conductors have included Rudolf Kempe, Antal Doráti, Walter Weller, André Previn, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Yuri Temirkanov, Daniele Gatti and Charles Dutoit.

The RPO's commitment to working with the finest conductors continues and in July 2018, the RPO announced Vasily Petrenko as the Orchestra's new Music Director, assuming the title of Music Director Designate in August 2020 prior to commencing the full role in August 2021. Vasily Petrenko joins the RPO's roster of titled conductors which includes Pinchas Zukerman (Principal Guest Conductor), Alexander Shelley (Principal Associate Conductor) and Grzegorz Nowak (Permanent Associate Conductor).

The Orchestra maintains a busy schedule of prestigious international touring throughout Europe, the Far East and the USA. It appears regularly at major festivals, including, most recently, events in Poland, Austria and Italy.

As the RPO proudly looks to its future, its versatility and high standards mark it out as one of today's most open-minded, forward-thinking symphony orchestras.

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info@resonusclassics.com

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