

Charles Munch Born: September 26, 1891 - Strasbourg, Alsace, France
Died: November 6, 1968 - Richmond, Virginia, USA



The eminent Alsatian-born French conductor, Charles Munch (originally, Münch), was the son of the Alsatian organist and choral conductor Ernst Münch (1859-1928). His elder brother was the choir-master and professor of music, Fritz Münch. Charles studied violin at the Strasbourg Conservatory and with Lucien Capet in Paris. At the outbreak of World War I (1914), he enlisted in the German army; made a sergeant of artillery, he was gassed at Peronne and wounded at Verdun; after the end of the war (1918) and his return to Alsace-Lorraine (1919), he became a naturalised French citizen.

Having received further violin training from Flesch in Berlin, Charles Munch pursued a career as a soloist; was also professor of violin at the Leipzig Conservatory and concert-master of the Gewandhaus Orchestra there. In November 1932, he made his professional conducting debut in Paris with the Straram Orchestra. He studied conducting with Szendrei in Paris from 1933 to 1940. He quickly rose to prominence; was conductor of Paris's Orchestra de la Société Philharmonique from 1935 to 1938, and in 1936 became a professor at the École Normale de Musique. In 1938 he became music director of the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire de Paris, remaining in that post during the years of the German occupation during World War II; refusing to collaborate with the Nazis, he gave his support to the Resistance, being awarded the Légion d'honneur in 1945.

Charles Munch made his USA debut as a guest conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in December 1946; a trans-continental tour of the USA with the French National Radio Orchestra followed in 1948. In 1949 he was appointed music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, which he and Monteux took on its first European tour in 1952; they took it again to Europe in 1956, also touring in the Soviet Union, making it the first USA orchestra to do so. After retiring from his Boston post in 1962, he made appearances as a guest conductor; also helped to launch the Orchestre de Paris in 1967.

Charles Munch acquired an outstanding reputation as an interpreter of the French repertoire, his performances being marked by spontaneity, colour, and elegance. French music of the 20th century also occupied a prominent place on his programs; he brought out new works by Roussel, Milhaud, Arthur Honegger, and others. He wrote *Je suis chef d'orchestre* (1954).

Facts about this Recording

Recorded by RCA 1961

Producer: Richard Mohr. Engineer: Lewis Layton

Transferred from a 4-track tape Oistrakh Recordings

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HIGH DEFINITION TAPE TRANSFERS

POULENC

Concerto for Organ, Strings and Timpani in G minor

Berj Zamkochian, organ

Chausson Poeme

Saint-Saens Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso

David Oistrakh, violin

Charles Munch

Boston Symphony Orchestra

Francis Poulenc, (born Jan. 7, 1899, Paris, France—died Jan. 30, 1963, Paris), composer who made an important contribution to French music in the decades after World War I and whose songs are considered among the best composed during the 20th century. Poulenc was largely self-taught. His first compositions—*Rapsodie Nègre* (1917), *Trois Mouvements Perpétuels*, for piano, and *Sonata for Piano Duet* (1918) and his settings of Guillaume Apollinaire's poem *Le Bestiaire* and Jean Cocteau's *Cocardes* (1919)—were witty pieces with streaks of impudent parody. Humour remained an important characteristic of his music, as in the Surrealistic comic opera *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* (1947; *The Breasts of Tiresias*), based on a farce by Apollinaire.

In 1920 the critic Henri Collet grouped Poulenc with five other young French composers, calling them "Les Six." The others were Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, Georges Auric, Germaine Tailleferre, and Louis Durey; although they reacted in the same way to the emotionalism of 19th-century Romantic music and the Impressionism of Claude Debussy, they were in fact united by friendship more than by aesthetic ideals. Poulenc studied with the composer and teacher Charles Koechlin from 1921 to 1924. His ballet *Les Biches* (English title *The Houseparty*) was produced by Serge Diaghilev in 1924. He composed his song cycles *Poèmes de Ronsard* and *Chansons gaillardes* in 1924 and 1926. There followed more than 100 songs, chiefly on poems by Apollinaire (e.g., "Banalités," 1940), and Paul Éluard (e.g., "Tel jour, telle nuit," 1937). In 1934 Poulenc appeared as piano accompanist to the baritone Pierre Bernac in the first of many recitals over several years, an experience that deepened his understanding of the song as an art form. His songs, which range from parody to tragedy, are admired for their lyricism and for their sensitive integration of vocal line and accompaniment. His *Concert champêtre* for harpsichord (or piano) and orchestra (1928) was written at the suggestion of harpsichordist Wanda Landowska. Like many of his keyboard works, it mingles the light, urbane character of 18th-century French keyboard music with 20th-century harmonies.



During the 1930s Poulenc wrote many religious works, including *Litanies à la Vierge Noire de Rocamadour* (1936), *Mass in G Major* (1937), and *Stabat Mater* (1951). He participated in the French resistance movement during World War II. *Figure humaine* (performed 1945), a cantata based on poems by Éluard, voiced the spirit of the resistance and was secretly printed during the Nazi occupation. His opera *Les dialogues des Carmélites* (1953–56, libretto by Georges Bernanos) is considered one of the finest operas of the 20th century. Other widely performed works by Poulenc were the *Sextet for piano and wind quintet* (1930–32), *Organ Concerto* (1938), and *Oboe Sonata* (1962).

Chausson wrote his *Poème* for Eugene Ysaÿe, "perhaps the last great representative of the truly grand manner of violin-playing," according to Joseph Szigeti, who knew a thing or two about the violin himself. Ysaÿe made a few records, but of trivial pieces and at a point when he was ill and far beyond his prime. He is one of those artists whose playing is most effectively recorded, so to speak, in the music written for him, or by him. Szigeti suggests that Ysaÿe's own sonatas for unaccompanied violin, inventive and highly cultivated pieces, were "a subconscious attempt on [the composer's] part to perpetuate his own elusive playing style." But the *Poème* and César Franck's ardent *Sonata*, a wedding present to the twenty-eight-year-old violinist, are the two truly glowing monuments to Ysaÿe's vibrant art.

Saint-Saëns *The Introduction and Rondo capriccioso* was conceived as an independent piece, and it has been consistently popular. The great violinist Pablo de Sarasate (1844–1908) discovered how well the Saint-Saëns *Violin Concerto No. 1* and this work go together, the latter virtually functioning as the finale of the former. But whether heard alone or in the wake of the concerto, it is a delicious occasion for nonchalant virtuosity and charm.

POULENC

Concerto for Organ, Strings and Timpani in G minor

Charles Munch Boston Symphony Orchestra

Zamkochian, organist Firth, timpanist

Chausson Poeme

Saint-Saens Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso

David Oistrakh, violin

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