

Sonata for Horn, Trumpet and Trombone: 1st mvt. - Francis Poulenc

Background information and performance circumstances

Poulenc (1899-1963) was a French composer who belonged to a group of composers known as *Les Six*, who shared a similar musical outlook. They found inspiration in the popular music of Paris street musicians, music halls and the circus. Poulenc was also influenced by the Russian composer Stravinsky and this piece, written in 1922 shares stylistic elements with pieces like the *Vivo* from Stravinsky's ballet *Pulcinella*, which was completed only two years earlier (see Anthology p154). Both composers wrote for Diaghilev's ballet company, the *Ballets Russes*. The sonata has many of the characteristics of the neo-classical style:

- **Movements** in this new style were often **short** - unlike the large scale movements of the late Romantic composers.
- **Structures** were based on simple traditional forms, such as *rondo* and simple binary and ternary forms.
- Harmonies were similar to those of 18th Century composers but were often 'spiced up' with **added note discords**.
- **Rhythms** often reflected the influence of jazz, especially its **syncopated** style. **Time signatures** tended to **change** frequently.
- Pieces used a much wider **variety of instrumentation and instrumental techniques** than would be found in 18th Century music.
- Melodies were often broadly **tonal and diatonic**.

Poulenc's piece is light-hearted and makes no attempt at producing a profound emotional effect.

Performing Forces and their Handling

- Poulenc was unhappy writing for solo strings and even went to the extent of throwing away a recently written string quartet in 1947.
- He preferred to write for piano (his own instrument) and/or wind instruments. His sonatas for clarinet and piano and flute and piano are widely performed today.
- Despite suggestions of 18th Century style in some aspects of this music, no 18th Century composer would have written for this instrumental combination.
- The modern trumpet with **valves** could play **chromatic** music as in bar 39, which would have been impossible on the 18th Century instrument.
- The trumpet part is **wide ranging**, with some particularly **wide leaps**, e.g. **two octaves and a tone** from its lowest note in the piece (G below middle C, bar 36) to its highest (A bar 37).
- The **trumpet is the main solo instrument**, though the horn takes over the principal tune **occasionally** (e.g. bar 30).
- The trumpet has a **virtuoso flourish** in bar 39.

- The trombone and trumpet have a comic, 'oom-pah' accompaniment from bar 40 to 45.
- The trombone has many awkward leaps, e.g. bar 30.
- The horn has some very low notes in bar 74 (sounding bottom G).

Texture

- There is a simple melody dominated homophony texture at the beginning. The trumpet here has the tune, the trombone plays a simple bass line, and the horn has alternating chordal notes.
- Sometimes the top two instruments join forces in two part texture, e.g. bar 12, here in 6ths. Note that the Horn in F sounds a perfect 5th below.
- There is a curious section from bars 22-5, where there is a monophonic effect, with the tune shared between the instruments, producing a comical tone-colour melody.
- There are various three part textures, including bar 26 where the trumpet and trombone move together in two part counterpoint, while the horn has wide ranging broken chords.
- The 'oom-pah' accompaniment from bar 40 to 45 has already been mentioned.
- In the last bar all the instruments move together in octaves, in homorhythm.

Structure

- The structure is a very loose ternary form containing several short themes
- The first section, for instance has three separate thematic ideas

A (bars 1-25) - G major	B (bars 26-57)	A (58-end) including 4 bar Coda
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Main theme (1-8). ○ Faster subsidiary pair of themes (9-17 and 18-21). ○ Return of opening idea (bar 22) but slower and with suggestions of tonic minor (Gm). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ New slower theme in E flat, played by the trumpet, then horn then trumpet again. ○ A four bar linking section includes a miniature trumpet cadenza (bar 39). ○ A varied version of the main theme in B flat is then heard (bar 40), followed by more material, based partly on the subsidiary ideas in the A section. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Return of the main theme in the tonic key (G). ○ The music from the end of the B section (from bar 46) is then interpolated (= added in) before the subsidiary ideas return in bar 73. ○ A short chromatic coda begins in bar 86.

Tonality

- The music is fundamentally tonal.
- There are frequent discords, which reduce the strength of the keys.
- Frequent chromatic notes also lessen the sense of key. The coda (bar 86) includes a chromatic scalar phrase in the trombone.

- Poulenc tends to **modulate to remote keys** instead of closely related ones.
 - The beginning is in **G major**
 - The middle section is in the unrelated key of **E flat** (bar 26), though there are a number of chromatic notes, including the A and B naturals in the trombone (bars 26-28).
 - The varied version of the main theme at bar 40 is in **B flat**.

Harmony

- As there are only three instruments, with no chordal instrument like a piano, harmonies are often quite **bare**. The last bar is all in **octaves** with no chordal notes at all.
- What appear to be simple **perfect cadences** (e.g. bar 4) are often transformed by **discord**. In bar 4 the trumpet and trombone suggest a cadence of **Ic-V-I**. The horn, however introduces a **minor 2nd** clash of a C against the trumpet's B. The final chord is a simple **root position tonic chord**.
- Harmony is often outlined by **broken chords**. At the beginning of the middle section (bar 26) there is a **first inversion** chord of E flat, with the horn outlining the root and fifth of the chord.
- In bars 86-7 there is a **pedal B flat** on the trumpet, sounding underneath the trombone's chromatic phrase.

Melody

- Frequently the melodies are simple **diatonic** tunes, e.g. main theme in G, bars 1-4.
- Often the tune outlines **broken chords**, e.g. the first three notes of the trumpet music.
- Simple **balanced phrase** structure can be found (e.g. bars 1-8), even if the cadences sometimes occur on the 'wrong' beats.
- There are occasional **large leaps**, e.g. the **octave** on bar 2.
- There are leaps of **two octaves** in the trumpet part in bar 36.
- **Conjunct** music is also often found, e.g. trumpet bar 4.
- This sometimes extends to more **scalic** music e.g. bar 9.
- The trumpet scale bar 39 contains **chromatic** notes.
- Tunes often feature **repeated notes**, e.g. trumpet melody bar 18.
- There are occasional ornamental phrases e.g. the **grace notes** in bar 12.

Rhythm and Metre

- The principal melody contains mainly **quavers** and **semiquavers**, with crotchets for the cadence.
- Tunes often begin on the **anacrusis** (up-beat), e.g. the first phrase.
- There is a **semiquaver** scale in free rhythm, bar 39.
- **Ornaments** occasionally break up the rhythm, e.g. **grace notes** bar 86.
- There is **syncopation** in the two upper parts in bars 13-14.

- Rhythm is sometimes broken up by rests (e.g. bar 40).
- **Time signatures change** frequently.
- The music begins in **quadruple time**, but bars with three and four beats alternate from bars 9 to 11.
- The miniature trumpet cadenza is in **compound time** and contains a **pause** and silent break.
- There is a bar in **quintuple time** (bar 65).
- **Speeds change** frequently and are often used to differentiate sections.