

Concerto in D minor for Two Pianos and Orchestra  
Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

Francis Poulenc described this concerto as “blithely bravura”—on the one hand a happy and carefree jaunt but on the other a showpiece of flair and technical skill. Rather than one or the other, Poulenc always wanted both. He was one of the great composers of French religious music but he was also a witty and mischievous entertainer. His friends described him as a monk and a rascal—equal parts devout and hedonistic. His Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra is definitely more rascal than monk.

In post-World War I Paris, musical innovation was the name of the game. While Poulenc admired cutting edge composers such as Stravinsky and Ravel, he found his own place by sticking to traditional, tonal melodies. He was a key member of the “Group of Six”—six French composers united mostly by what they didn’t want to be: impressionists, overblown Romantics, murky intellectuals, boring. For Poulenc this shows up as a love of straightforward melody, aural mosaics of musical influences, and a special desire to entertain.

During the early 1930s Poulenc was focusing primarily on composing for the instrument of his own mastery, the piano. While that might seem like an easy choice, for Poulenc, familiarity with the piano and its repertoire made unique composition more difficult. Influences were ample and found everywhere. Turning a roadblock into an asset, the music we most associate as “pure Poulenc” is the creative juxtaposition of musical ideas and multiple influences.

Poulenc was the wealthy son of a major industrialist (the family business is still flourishing today as the pharmaceutical giant Rhone-Poulenc) and his privileged upbringing eased his way into the society of Paris’s wealthy patrons. His Concerto for Two Pianos was commissioned in 1932 by his friend and benefactor Princesse Edmond de Polignac. A piece of unapologetic entertainment, Poulenc manages to work in some passages of Balinese temple music, a homage to Mozart, and lighthearted musical nods to the impish music hall tunes popular during that time.

The work is in the traditional three-movement form. The slow, middle movement resurrects a bit of Mozart then wanders off on his own—a move the British newspaper *The Guardian* called “the great Mozart robbery”. The first and last movements are romping and saucy—“pure Poulenc” in the mixing of the fun-loving music hall and trendy non-Western flavors. At the end of the first movement, a kiss of the castanets brings out strains of Balinese temple music as the two pianos launch into an exotic and reverent passage spun out of the same themes used work’s opening and closing. Entertainment was the Concerto’s purpose and it does it well. What it creates is a fantastic montage of images—a soundtrack to a surrealist fable that places fun above all else. The rich visual and aural interplay between two accomplished pianists brings the fable—and the fun—to life.

*Le Tombeau de Couperin*  
Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Dismissed from the Paris Conservatory when he was 20 after failing to achieve any real success as a pianist, Ravel returned as a student in the composition program two years later. Failing again to reach the top of the class, he was kicked out of that program after three years. The next five years were spent attempting to win the Prix de Rome—the highest honor for young French composers. He never won, but by now Ravel's failure was judged to be less about musical skill and more about upsetting the musical establishment apple cart. For Ravel, as is so often the case, early years riddled with disappointment only meant he was on his way to becoming something strikingly new and marvelously accomplished.

Ravel absorbed any musical influence that came his way. As it turned out, the Paris Conservatory was not the only education available. There was a new openness in Europe at the time that brought a reevaluation of all things non-Western and exotic. When music became embroiled in nationalistic debates, Ravel publicly supported the performance of non-French music. And yet, he was also devoted to French tradition and culture. With The Great War nearing, looking back to the majesties of the court of Louis XIV became something of a popular escape. In *Tombeau*, Ravel takes some of his era's musical innovations, such as the frequent use of the major 7<sup>th</sup> (to our ears a fullness of tones more than a dissonance), and applies it to 18<sup>th</sup> century musical forms.

The idea of *Tombeau* (or “tombstones”) dates back to the Renaissance when French poets would compose short collections of poems to mark the death of someone of importance. Ravel's *Tombeau* is nominally a tribute to the French Baroque composer Francois Couperin but in musical style it is homage to the golden age of French music 18<sup>th</sup> century. Couperin was a developer of the French keyboard music that really took in the refinement and charm of that time—Ravel's concept of an ideal glory of French musical past.

When Ravel began this composition in 1914, that was how it began, as light patriotic music—a tribute to the glory of French musical heritage. By the time he finished this work, in 1917, it had become something very different. Judged medically unfit to fight, Ravel served as an ambulance driver during the War—a stressful, dangerous, and ultimately heartbreaking assignment. A darkness or bitterness edged into even his lighter compositions of the time, including this one. The suite for solo piano he began, before entering the War, as a bit of patriotism, turned into a suite of remembrance—nostalgic and bittersweet with each of the six original movements dedicated to specific friends killed at the front.

Ravel orchestrated four of those movements in 1919. In the process, he cut the Fugue and Toccata movements, leaving just the Prelude, Forlane, Menuet, and Rigaudon. The orchestration is written for a scaled down orchestra fitting with the idea of 18<sup>th</sup> century presentation. Noted for its agility and depth, it is one of Ravel's greatest orchestrations, probably surpassing the original, unorchestrated version.

Ravel did eventually achieve the official honors that eluded him in his early years. He was offered the Legion of Honor in 1920, but he refused it as he did most French honors. Ironically he was not celebrated or appreciated by the next generation of French composers, including “Group of Six” members Poulenc and Milhaud. They considered him too much a member of the establishment. His acceptance in the Concert Hall and by musicians and listeners alike has proven to have a powerful and lasting part of the standard orchestral fare..

### Symphony No. 3 “Organ Symphony” Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

After the Paris premiere of this symphony, Gounod described Saint-Saëns as ‘the French Beethoven’ not because of his musical style but because of his acclaim and enormous success—as well as his sharp tongue and irascible personality! A fierce defender of French music, his adherence to those style and forms preserved something of his country’s heritage at a time when many French composers were seduced by the influence of Wagner. He too was an early supporter of Wagner and the avant-garde. As he said of himself then, “I am an eclectic spirit. It may be a great defect, but I cannot change it: one cannot make over one’s personality.”

A prolific and long-lived composer (his opus numbers go past 160), relatively few of his compositions are regularly performed today. While greatly respected during his lifetime, his music, generally pleasant and easy to enjoy, has faded somewhat from the repertoire in favor of more groundbreaking composers. This symphony is certainly an exception to this observation and remains one of his great legacies.

A highly-skilled pianist, before his 10<sup>th</sup> birthday Saint-Saëns was offering to play on demand and by memory any of Beethoven’s 32 sonatas. He continued to perform throughout his life—presenting his last concert four months before his death at the age of 86. He was also an accomplished organist (For the record, Liszt called him ‘the world’s greatest’). He held the post of organist at the Church of the Madeleine in Paris for nearly 20 years. Still, he was never primarily an organ composer. His eclecticism kept his attentions in too many other places.

Overall Saint-Saëns’s style might be called conservative with well-defined and carefully structured harmonies—and that is evident in this symphony. But this symphony is also one of Saint-Saëns’s most innovative works, completely different from any other composition for orchestra and organ. The standard four movements of a symphony are split into two pairs—and only the second of each pair contains the organ. Liszt’s style of “thematic transformation” which held quite a sway on many French composers, is used to the utmost here and the same main theme is transformed and recomposed over the course of the work.

As the first ‘adagio’ movement gives way, unbroken, to the second ‘poco adagio’ movement, the organ enters not with the grand bellow the audience might expect, but with a delicate and enchanting melody blended perfectly with the orchestra. The entrance is so unobtrusive it can go unnoticed. As the strings hurry the orchestra into the third ‘allegro moderato’ movement, the organ dies away. A full rollicking orchestra piece—complete with dazzling piano—seems to

leave no room for an organ. In a fabulous exercise in misdirection and suspense, the fourth movement returns the organ to the stage, but with a piano part that now expands to require a second player. The beautiful fugal passages exist because of the organ however—and there is no substitution for its lush voice. Still, the organ never becomes the sole focus., but is rather an integral part of the orchestral fabric--the rest of the conception of the fourth movement is just too powerful. Saint-Saëns manages like no composer before or since to make the organ fully an orchestral partner—a team player on an dream team of musical color.

When it was over, Saint-Saëns said this, “I have given everything that I had to give. What I have done here I shall never do again.” And, in fact, he never wrote another the work for organ to rival this one.