

Poulenc, Francis : Emmanuel Chabrier (1961)

In 1943, Francis Poulenc, a great admirer of Emmanuel Chabrier, encouraged Roland-Manuel, already author of several works on Ravel, to write a study of the composer of *Gwendoline*: “What we’re missing is a good *Chabrier*. Only you would be able to do it. Have a think about it” (*Correspondance*, p. 547). At the time, as Southon points out, “existing studies of Chabrier [were] still rare and already dated” (*J’écris ce qui me chante*, p. 41); these included a *Chabrier* by Joseph Desaymard (1908), who would also publish the correspondence in 1934, and biographies by René Martineau (1910) and Georges Servières (1912). Poulenc’s initial exhortation was followed by an exchange between himself, Roland-Manuel, and Georges Poupet, an editor at Plon and friend of Poulenc, but led to nothing concrete. In 1959—despite having already made several contributions of his own, including a panegyric in the *NRF* (1 July 1941) on the occasion of Chabrier’s centenary—Poulenc declared to his friend Suzanne Peignot that “There are so many things that have never been said about this remarkable man” (*Correspondance*, p. 933). He then made up his mind to start writing this missing piece in the historiography of French music.

Poulenc’s *Chabrier* appeared two years later (1961) with La Palatine, a branch of the Plon publishing house, at a total of 187 pages. It is worth noting that Poulenc had at first envisaged publishing with Éditions du Seuil, hoping to secure a place in the collection “Solfèges”, part of the “Microcosme” series, which already boasted studies of Couperin, Ravel, and Schubert, among others. This initial choice of a paperback series aimed at a general readership is particularly revealing of the author’s intentions: Poulenc hoped that his work would reach a public of amateurs as well as specialists. “I wrote it for the music-loving public that follows the collection Solfège [*sic*] . . . Technicians won’t be wasting their time either since the examples are relevant” (letter to Geneviève Sienkiewicz, 21 Dec. 1959, in *Correspondance*, pg. 937). Poulenc was therefore hoping to restore Chabrier to his rightful place (as he saw it) in the history of French music: “I would like to finally convince technicians and laypersons that Chabrier represents the best of French music since 1880, along with Fauré, Debussy, Ravel, and Satie” (pg. 8).

The work was well received, in part “thanks to Poulenc’s well-placed friends in the press”, Southon tell us (*J’écris ce qui me chante*, p. 44). Most critics agreed on Poulenc’s “plume gourmande”, as Henri Hell put it, and its oral character: “Our musician discloses the life, character, and work of Chabrier in a flavourful style, one in which those who know M. Poulenc will recognise his mordant wit and conversational tone” (Marcel Schneider, “Chabrier par Poulenc”, quoted in *J’écris ce qui me chante*, p. 44). [The first English translation](#) was published only in 1981 by Dobson (London).

The work is divided into four parts: the first and longest is devoted to Chabrier's life and works (pp 9-124); the second, "In Memoriam", reproduces a selection of testimonies by artistic and literary figures, taken from a limited edition of Chabrier's *Briseïs* published in the composer's honour by Enoch in 1897 (pp 125-44); the third is composed of "unpublished letters" from Chabrier, some of which Poulenc had acquired (pp 145-179); the fourth, "The Collector", presents Chabrier's art collection as presented in the catalogue of its sale, of which Poulenc had acquired a copy showing the prices for which each piece went (pp 181-7). Thus, while following the classic plan of all critical biographies of artists in approaching the life and works chronologically, Poulenc gives his study a special touch by supplying unpublished documents meant to reveal other sides of Chabrier—"a matchless husband and father" (pg. 147), a writer by virtue of his correspondence, an connoisseur of art.

The text is written in the deliberately "familiar" style (pg. 7) customary with Poulenc, who abhorred technical discourse. This includes the first person and, by extension, parallels drawn between Chabrier's career and Poulenc's own. In addition, by highlighting the similarities between them and insisting on Chabrier's French nationality—at the expense of Wagnerian influence—Poulenc tries to situate himself within a lineage of national musicians that includes, besides Chabrier, Fauré, Debussy, Ravel, Satie, and Roussel. And indeed, as Duguay rightly points out, various of Poulenc's own biographers have taken him at his word on this question of ancestry. Poulenc was therefore participating in the critical discourse concerning himself, for which reason his *Chabrier* is all the more significant.

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Further reading:

Francis Poulenc, *Emmanuel Chabrier*, Paris-Genève, La Palatine, 1961.

Francis Poulenc, *Correspondance 1910-1963*, réunie, choisie, présentée et annotée par Myriam Chimènes, Paris, Fayard, 1994.

Francis Poulenc, *J'écris ce qui me chante*, textes et entretiens réunis, présentés et annotés par Nicolas Southon, Paris, Fayard, 2011.

Michèle Duguay, « *Emmanuel Chabrier* de Francis Poulenc », *Nota Bene, Canadian Undergraduate Journal of Musicology*, vol. 17, Iss. 1 (2014).

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