Synopsis

France, April 1789 to July 1794.

Act I

The first signs of the French Revolution are beginning to shake the country. In his library, the Marquis de la Force and his son, the Chevalier, are worried about Blanche, the Chevalier's fearful, nervous sister, whose carriage has been held up by a mob on her way home. When Blanche arrives, she makes light of the incident, but her anxiety is revealed when a servant's shadow frightens her as she leaves the room. Shaken, she returns to tell her father that she has made up her mind to become a nun.

Weeks later at the Carmelite convent in Compiègne, the aged and ailing prioress Madame de Croissy interviews Blanche and makes it clear to the girl that the convent is a house of prayer, not a refuge. Nevertheless, the prioress is touched by Blanche's resolve to embrace her new life.

In the workroom of the convent, Blanche and the young Sister Constance discuss their fear of death, which Constance claims to have overcome. Blanche admits her envy of her companion's straightforward and easygoing nature. Constance shocks Blanche by telling her that she knows that they will both die young and on the same day.

In the infirmary, Madame de Croissy is lying on her deathbed, struggling to appear calm. She blesses Blanche and consigns her, as the youngest member of the order, to the care of the loyal Mother Marie. The prioress confesses her terror in the hour of death, then falls lifeless.

Act II

That night in the chapel, Constance and Blanche keep vigil by the prioress's bier. Blanche is overcome by fear and is about to run off when Mother Marie appears. Realizing that Blanche is genuinely afraid, she tries to calm her. Constance hopes that Mother Marie will be the new prioress. She tells Blanche that she wonders why a God-fearing person like Madame de Croissy had to die such an agonizing death. Perhaps, she says, people don't die for themselves but for others. Someone else will be surprised one day to find death easy.

Madame Lidoine has been appointed the new prioress. In the chapter room, she addresses the convent, counseling patience and humility.

Act II (CONTINUED)

A visitor is announced—it is Blanche's brother, who is about to flee the country. He urges Blanche to leave the convent and return to their father. Blanche replies that her duty is to her sisters.

In the sacristy, the chaplain, forbidden to perform his duties, celebrates his last Mass. The nuns discuss the fear that has grabbed the country, and Mother Marie wonders if self-sacrifice will be their destiny. Madame Lidoine reminds them that martyrs are not chosen by their own will, only by God's. Two commissioners enter and tell the sisters that they have been expelled from the convent. One of them, speaking quietly to Mother Marie, adds that he will do what he can to help them get away safely. One of the sisters gives Blanche a figurine of the Christ Child. When revolutionary cries are heard from outside, Blanche nervously drops the figure, breaking it. She is horrified by this omen.

Act III

In the devastated chapel, Mother Marie suggests, in Madame Lidoine's absence, that they all take a vow of martyrdom by unanimous decision. Noting Blanche's reaction, the others suspect that she will vote against it. When the secret ballot reveals one dissenter, Constance claims it was she and asks to reverse her vote so that the vow can proceed. Blanche, afraid to live or to die, runs away. Soldiers lead the sisters from the convent.

Blanche is forced to work as a servant in the ransacked mansion of her father, who has been sent to the guillotine. Mother Marie finds her there and tries to persuade her to return to the sisters.

The nuns have been arrested. At the Conciergerie prison, Madame Lidoine joins the sisters in their vow of martyrdom. Constance says that she has dreamed of Blanche's return. A jailer enters and reads the death sentence. Madame Lidoine blesses the sisters. When Mother Marie learns from the chaplain that the nuns will die, she resolves to join them, but the chaplain reminds her that it is for God to decide whether or not she will be a martyr.

A crowd has gathered on the Place de la Révolution. The Carmelites walk toward the guillotine, led by Madame Lidoine and singing the "Salve Regina." With each stroke of the blade, their voices are silenced, one by one, finally leaving only Constance. On her way to the scaffold, she sees Blanche step up from the crowd, take up the chant, and follow her to her death.

Francis Poulenc

Dialogues of the Carmelites

Premiere: Teatro alla Scala, Milan, 1957

One of the most successful operas of the 20th century, *Dialogues des Carmélites* is a rare case of a modern work that is equally esteemed by audiences and experts. The drama unfolds in a gripping and straightforward narrative framework of 12 scenes with musical interludes, relating a tragic story based on real events from the French Revolution: A community of Carmelite nuns decides to face death at the guillotine rather than renounce their vows. The opera focuses on a young member of the order, the aristocratic Blanche de la Force, who must overcome a pathological timidity in order to answer her life's calling. The score reflects two key aspects of its composer's personality: Francis Poulenc was an urbane Parisian with a profound mystical dimension, and the opera addresses both the characters' internal lives and their external realities—it is in equal measure historical, psychological, and spiritual.

The Creators

French composer Francis Poulenc (1899–1963) is known for a wide variety of works in many genres, including piano and chamber music, songs, ballets, three operas, and religious music that successfully combines mysticism with modern sensibilities. Poulenc wrote the *Carmélites* libretto himself, based on an unproduced screenplay (that was then turned into a stage play) by Georges Bernanos (1888–1948), a French author with an interest in politics and religion. This, in turn, was based on the 1931 novella *Die Letzte am Schafott* (*The Last Woman on the Scaffold*, known in English as *The Song at the Scaffold*) by German writer Gertrud von Le Fort (1876–1971). Le Fort's work spanned the realms of spirituality, religious history, and psychology. Her identification with the fictional lead character of Blanche can be seen in the surname that she chose for her, "de la Force."

The Setting

The opera takes place between 1789 and 1794, in Paris and in the town of Compiègne in northeastern France—the site of the Carmelite nuns' convent. Its historical basis is the martyrdom of a group of 16 Carmelite nuns and lay sisters from Compiègne, who chose to offer themselves as victims for the restoration of peace to France during the Revolution. They were guillotined on July 17, 1794. Their gesture was regarded by many as crucial in swaying public opinion and bringing about the fall of the rule of Robespierre and the Reign of Terror, which

in fact ended days later. The execution and the circumstances leading to it were described in a memoir by one of the nuns who survived, Sister Marie of the Incarnation (who appears as a character in the opera).

The Music

Poulenc's genius with the setting of text is apparent throughout the opera, much of which consists of recitative that closely follows speech patterns. Subtle yet distinct modulations in the orchestra often cue changes of mind and heart. While there is an abundance of creative harmonic invention, the score is fundamentally tonal—a fact for which, in the "experimental" 1950s, Poulenc felt it necessary to apologize with his trademark wit: "You must forgive my Carmelites—it appears they can only sing tonal music." Musical motifs reveal both character traits and the circumstances that formed them: Sister Constance is introduced with sprightly music suited to her optimistic (yet perceptive) personality. A nervous passage marked "allegro" accompanies Blanche's father's recollection of the panic that caused his wife's death while giving premature birth to Blanche. It later becomes symbolic of Blanche's fearful nature. Poulenc's interest in religious music is apparent in moments that range from the austere (the Requiem for the Prioress at the beginning of Act II) to the dramatic (the priest leading the nuns in their final public prayer later in the same act). The most arresting combination of the internal, spiritual, and dramatic musical worlds occurs in the celebrated finale: The fervent prayer of the "Salve Regina" is sung over a repeating figure in the orchestra, as each of the nuns meets her fate and their voices are silenced one by one.

Met History

The opera premiered at the Met on February 5, 1977, in the present production by John Dexter, sung in English. The cast included Maria Ewing as Blanche, Régine Crespin (who had sung Madame Lidoine in the June 1957 premiere of the original French version at the Paris Opera) as Madame de Croissy, Shirley Verrett as Madame Lidoine, and Mignon Dunn as Mother Marie. Michel Plasson, making his Met debut, conducted. Later revivals featured Frederica von Stade (1983), Dawn Upshaw (1994), Patricia Racette (2002–03), and Isabel Leonard (2013) as Blanche; Leona Mitchell (1978–81), Jessye Norman (1987), Teresa Stratas (1994), Christine Goerke (2002–03), and Racette (2013) as Madame Lidoine; Florence Quivar (1983–94) and Stephanie Blythe (2002–03) as Mother Marie; and Dunn (1983–87) and Dame Felicity Palmer (2002–13) as Madame de Croissy.

Program Note

"I am working like a *madman*, I do not go out, I do not see anyone," wrote Francis Poulenc soon after he'd begun composing *Dialogues des Carmélites* in 1953. "I do not want to think of anything else … I am crazy about my subject, to the point of believing that I have actually known these women."

Poulenc's passionate involvement with his characters suggests a romantic creative sensibility that had become unfashionable by the mid-20th century. Certainly, it's a far cry from the playful irony and easy-going, flippant modernism that the composer had made his trademark when he emerged in the years immediately following the First World War. Earning a reputation as an enfant terrible and a disciple of Satie and Stravinsky (he performed one of the keyboard parts in the world premiere of the latter's *Les Noces*), Poulenc became one of the more engagingly colorful artistic personalities of his native Paris during the era between the wars.

Yet, the glittering surfaces and detached poses typical of many of those early scores only partially conceal a longing for "old-fashioned" expressiveness. In a similar vein, Poulenc continued to spice the sacred music that came later in his career, after he experienced a religious conversion, with playful touches; he once likened his treatment of the Gloria, written in 1959, to Benozzo Gozzoli's festive Renaissance frescoes of angels "with their tongues sticking out." And before Poulenc was ready to take on the spiritual and psychological challenges posed by *Carmélites*, he made his inaugural foray into opera with *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* (1947), a setting of Apollinaire's gender-bender surrealist farce that culminates in a paean to sexuality.

Carmélites is the second of the composer's three operas and the single most ambitious work of his entire career. While Poulenc's other two operas—*Les Mamelles* and the single-character *La Voix Humaine* (1959)—are modest in scale, *Carmélites* represents his contribution to the grand opera tradition and reveals the artist's most sustained exploration of serious themes. At the same time, it notably lacks many of the traditional operatic ingredients: a passionate love story, readily identifiable arias, and the full spectrum of vocal types, featuring instead a mostly female cast with just a few brief roles for male voices.

In the story's overriding focus on the fear of death and redemptive grace, Poulenc found a compelling mirror of his own experience. In 1936, the composer had been shaken to his core by the sudden death in a freak accident of a close friend, who was struck and decapitated by a passing car. Making a pilgrimage to the historic shrine of the wooden Black Madonna in Rocamadour in southwestern France, Poulenc underwent an epiphany and returned to the Catholic faith of his ancestors. Soon after, he began writing sacred choral music.

In the wake of World War II—and particularly of his experiences with the Nazi occupation of France, during which he composed the defiant, profoundly humanist cantata *La Figure Humaine*—Poulenc must have sensed

a newfound resonance in the historically based scenario of *Carmélites*. But the impetus to attempt an operatic treatment of this material came about by chance, thanks to a suggestion from his Italian publisher. After turning down a commission by La Scala to write a ballet on a religious topic, Poulenc announced his desire to write a large-scale opera for the company instead. The publisher immediately proposed adapting *Dialogues des Carmélites*, a play by the recently deceased French writer Georges Bernanos that was making the rounds in the early 1950s.

Poulenc was in fact familiar with the story, having seen the play. It originated as a screenplay—the "dialogues" to be spoken by the characters—for a film based on German writer Gertrud von Le Fort's 1931 novella *Die Letzte am Schafott* (*The Last Woman on the Scaffold*). This, in turn, was a treatment of an actual event that occurred in the purges during the final weeks of the Reign of Terror in 1794 France. Le Fort drew on the memoir of a nun who had survived after the other sisters under her charge at a Carmelite convent in Compiègne were summarily guillotined as counterrevolutionaries. (In 1906, Pope Pius X beatified the entire group of nuns.)

The chain of authorship would end up causing a serious headache for Poulenc, since he wasn't able to secure unequivocal rights to the story until composition was well underway, worrying all along that the whole project would be scuttled. Further complicating progress on the opera was the composer's "abominable state of nerves"—the result of his own underlying anxieties, near-breakdowns, and anguish over the demise of a relationship. His lover Lucien Roubert had become fatally ill with cancer and died just as Poulenc completed the score. All told, he composed *Carmélites* between 1953 and 1955, finishing the orchestration by April 1956—a lavish investment of time compared to his usual working speed.

Poulenc devised his own libretto straight from Bernanos's text, which simply involved arranging it into a viable operatic structure and cutting out about two-thirds of the material. Significantly, he did not reorganize the play to align with familiar operatic formulas of recitatives, arias, and ensemble numbers. Preserving the integrity of Bernanos's poetically lucid lines served as the composer's guiding aesthetic principle. "If I am to succeed with this work it will only be because the music identifies completely with the Bernanos *spirit*," Poulenc noted when he was starting out. "Very light orchestration in order to permit the text to be understood."

Indeed, *Dialogues des Carmélites* offers a fresh perspective on the age-old tug-of-war between the claims of music versus words in opera—or rather, a modern reconsideration of what the scholar Wilfrid Mellers describes as "the Monteverdian concept of a play in music, scrupulously faithful to the nuances of the text, which are emotionally intensified, but not radically changed, by the score." Poulenc set himself a test before committing himself to the opera: He

chose a passage to set to music in order to determine whether he could supply a musical dimension for such a libretto. This was Madame de Croissy's speech to Blanche at the start of the second scene in act one. "As unbelievable as this may appear," the composer recalled, "I immediately found the melodic curve of this lengthy speech."

Much of the word-setting throughout *Carmélites* evokes a kind of heightened speech that illuminates the inner lives of the principal characters—whether in moments of contemplation or tormented doubt, as in the scene of Croissy's harrowing death. The composer moreover adds texture and characterization through his use of vocal type and tessitura, as in his individuation of the light soprano in depicting the child-like innocence of Sister Constance. Drawing on his rich experience as a master of the art song and his sensitivity to the warmth of the human voice, Poulenc unfailingly homes in on "the melodic curve" as well as the natural rhythmic momentum of the words.

At times, the contours of familiar operatic rhetoric emerge: the aria-like intensity with which Blanche announces her decision to enter the convent, or of Madame Lidoine, the second prioress, as she consoles the nuns after their first night in prison, and the exchange between Blanche and her brother in the convent, which echoes the ebb and flow of a love duet.

Poulenc meanwhile unifies the score and suggests subtle connections between the characters and their struggles through a series of recurrent motifs and stylistic references—which are, however, much more freely used than Wagnerian leitmotifs. The opening music, for example, presents an open-ended rising figure associated with the ancien régime that returns transformed at the very end, while the moody baroque sarabande introducing the first prioress is reconfigured into the relentless march of the final scene at the scaffold.

It has been frequently observed that Poulenc's score is far-rangingly eclectic. Harmonic progressions or bits of orchestral texture from Stravinsky and similar neoclassical idioms, archaisms reminiscent of Debussy, the austerity of reimagined Renaissance music: All these are part of his musical fabric, along with Poulenc's own past—even including his predilection for popular idioms from the music hall and the like (oddly apparent in the confrontation between the revolutionary commissioners and Mother Marie). The composer himself pointed to Debussy as an inspiration and to Monteverdi, Verdi, and Mussorgsky, "who served here as my models." Still, Poulenc weaves these sources into a coherent music drama in which Blanche's inner pilgrimage is played out against an epic framework of violent upheaval.

As far as Verdi is concerned, Poulenc may have had in mind the remarkable theatrical instinct that animates his sense of pacing, of contrast, of scenic resonance. He came to opera relatively late in his career but had been associated since his early days as a member of Les Six with Jean Cocteau and other leading theatrical spirits. The pièce de résistance in *Carmélites* is of course his treatment

of the final scene. What might have all too easily turned into a cheap climax of Grand Guignol overwhelms through the understated but searing juxtaposition of elements developed throughout the opera. Poulenc composes an eloquent Requiem grotesquely and unpredictably interrupted by the rhythm of slaughter.

Far from the mindless cult bent on martyrdom that Poulenc has sometimes been accused of presenting, *Carmélites* is replete with powerfully realized characters who have attracted leading artists since the work was premiered to great success at La Scala in 1957. Poulenc conceived the role of Blanche for Denise Duval (who appeared in the Paris premiere), and Leontyne Price made her operatic debut singing Madame Lidoine in the U.S. premiere at San Francisco Opera, also in 1957. John Dexter's legendary production, which introduced *Carmélites* to the Met in 1977, has itself become an indelible part of the afterlife of Poulenc's masterpiece. And that afterlife is bound to continue, since, as Wilfrid Mellers remarks, in this opera "a figure humaine speaks through a voix humaine, to which human beings respond with hearts as open as their ears."

—Thomas May

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