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CLASSICS

POULENC

Works for Piano Solo and Duo

Lucille Chung
Alessio Bax

FRANCIS POULENC (1899-1963)

WORKS FOR PIANO SOLO & DUO

15 Improvisations

[1] No. 1 in B minor	[1.35]
[2] No. 2 in A-Flat Major	[1.37]
[3] No. 3 in B minor	[1.36]
[4] No. 4 in A-Flat Major	[1.30]
[5] No. 5 in A Minor	[1.45]
[6] No. 6 in B-Flat Major	[1.35]
[7] No. 7 in C Major	[2.44]
[8] No. 8 in A Minor	[1.36]
[9] No. 9 in D Major	[1.29]
[10] No. 10 in F Major, "Eloge des gammes"	[2.11]
[11] No. 11 in G Minor	[0.51]
[12] No. 12 in E-Flat Major, "Hommage à Schubert"	[2.10]
[13] No. 13 in A Minor	[2.23]
[14] No. 14 in D-Flat Major	[1.28]
[15] No. 15 in C Minor, "Hommage à Edith Piaf"	[3.23]

3 Novelettes

[16] Novelette in C Major	[2.43]
[17] Novelette in B-Flat Minor	[2.01]
[18] Novelette sur un thème de Manuel de Falla	[2.40]

Sonata for Four Hands *

[19] I. Prelude	[2.01]
[20] II. Rustique	[1.48]
[21] III. Final	[1.58]
[22] L'embarquement pour Cythère *	[2.16]

Concerto in D Minor for Two Pianos *

[23] I. Allegro ma non troppo	[7.31]
[24] II. Larghetto	[5.24]
[25] III. Finale	[5.55]

Total timings: [62.14]

LUCILLE CHUNG PIANO
* WITH ALESSIO BAX PIANO

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Since I was a little girl, the music of Francis Poulenc has always fascinated me; being born to devout Roman Catholic Korean parents in Montréal, I was raised within multiple backgrounds. I attended a French private school for girls and fully embraced the fact that I happened to be born in a francophone milieu. To add to the mix, my parents had met while studying in Germany and I spoke to my brother in English. Religion and secularity always coexisted in my world.

Although Poulenc clearly has no Korean connections, his music thrives in the dichotomy of the sacred and profane, spirituality and light-heartedness, often switching from one to the other quickly and seamlessly while at the same time retaining an unmistakably French idiom and a clarity that speaks directly to everyone's heart.

The two sides of Poulenc's music are startlingly obvious, yet they have to be taken as a whole, because together they make a stronger statement. His music, always identifiable yet original, is so beautifully crafted that it seems to flow naturally from the composer's mind to our ears. Music writer Jessica Duchen beautifully pinpoints Poulenc as "a fizzing, bubbling

mass of Gallic energy who can move you to both laughter and tears within seconds. His language speaks clearly, directly and humanely to every generation."

Making this album was a dream come true. From the irresistible charm of the *15 Improvisations* to the irrepressible bursts of energy in the *Concerto for Two Pianos*, the range of Poulenc's music and beauty had a wonderfully infectious effect for everyone involved in this project!

Lucille Chung

FRANCIS POULENC

Born Paris, 7 January 1899; died Paris, 30 January 1963

The piano provided an engine well-suited to Francis Poulenc's musical imagination. His directly expressive compositional style, free of the thorny complexity that characterized the work of his more overtly avant-garde contemporaries, found a sympathetic voice in the instrument's pure, crystalline timbre. Poulenc moreover possessed an ear for melody that distinguished him as France's finest song composer since Fauré; the same penchant for

intimacy and emotive immediacy for which he stood unexcelled in the composition of *mélodie* likewise permeates his piano music.

Poulenc was himself a skilled pianist, cultivating a style of playing characterized by colorfulness, clarity, and, more specifically notable, sensitive use of the sustain pedal. All of these come to bear in his writing for the instrument. As much as Poulenc's close understanding of the piano inevitably aided him, it seems also to have somewhat confounded him and complicated his approach to it as a composer. "Many of my pieces have failed," he once confessed, "because I know too well how to write for the piano ... [A]s soon as I begin writing piano accompaniments in my songs, I begin to innovate. Similarly, my piano writing with orchestra or chamber ensemble is of a different order. It is the solo piano that somehow escapes me. With it I am a victim of false pretenses."

He was equally frank in assessing specific works. "I tolerate the *Mouvements perpétuels*, my old *Suite en ut*, and the *Trois pièces*. I like very much my two collections of *Improvisations*, an Intermezzo in A-flat, and certain Nocturnes. I condemn *Napoli* and the *Soirées de Nazelles* without reprieve."

The lion's share of Poulenc's oeuvre for the piano comprises miniatures – the singular delectability of his language found a more natural home in bonbons than in larger, headier courses – and the *Improvisations* are among these: fifteen short works, none lasting more than three and a half minutes, and most not even half that length. They seem, on cursory listening, mere ephemera – an impression that echoes popular criticism in Poulenc's day that, among the young Parisian rabble-rousers known as Les Six, Poulenc was to be taken the least seriously, an amateur next to the more sophisticated Honegger and Milhaud. But just as historical perspective has recognized the startling originality of Poulenc's voice, so does closer examination of the *Improvisations* reveal their impeccable technique and graceful touch, both on the part of the composer and in their demands of the performer. And however one regards them, they are undeniably irresistible works, grander aspirations be damned.

The first six *Improvisations* date from 1932. The first, in B minor, starts off as an impish *Presto ritmico* with volatile sixteenth-note gestures played *très sec*. (Indeed, the set as a whole unapologetically eschews the lush

Romantic textures of, say, Brahms's *Intermezzi*.) The fluidity with which this rakish music passes into the legato B section is itself a mark of mischief. The disarming tenderness of the second *Improvisation*, in A-flat major, shows another side of Poulenc – though the devil on his left shoulder has the last word, ending the piece with a non sequitur in C major. Such sly harmonic winks recur throughout the set. The fifth – dedicated to Georges Auric, one of Poulenc's conspirators among Les Six – is ostensibly set in a minor, but richly colored with twisting chromatic lines.

The frank melodic sensibility of *Improvisation* no. 7, composed in 1933, contains a whisper of Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte*. The following three of the set were completed the following year. No. 9 in D Major reflects the playfulness of much of Poulenc's chamber music. No. 10 bears the subtitle "Éloge des gammes." After a sly opening section, dominated by a recurring chromatic scale, this *Improvisation* turns, without warning, into one of the most ravishingly textured of the set, surrounding lyrical melodies with a luxuriously flowing sixteenth-note accompaniment.

Poulenc composed *Improvisations* nos. 11 and 12 in 1941. The latter, an *Hommage à Schubert*, is an affable waltz. This music honors the Schubert of the drawing room Schubertiades – the composer of lieder and keyboard miniatures, designed to delight intimate gatherings of friends rather than the majestic Schubert of the Great C Major Symphony, or the profound Schubert of *Winterreise*.

Improvisation no. 13 in A minor, composed in 1958, is a seductive number, owing largely to *une beaucoup de pédale*, setting the darkly mysterious melody and sultry harmony in a smoky film noir. The final *Improvisation* is Poulenc's *Hommage à Edith Piaf*, and likewise has a dusky quality, befitting the cabaret chanteuse.

Poulenc's three **Novelettes** constitute another collection of miniatures. The first, in C Major, composed in 1927, is a thing of beguiling sincerity, devoid of the mischief that pervades the *Improvisations*. By contrast, the spirited second Novelette in B-flat Major (1928), *Très rapide et rythmé*, is rife with circus charm. Poulenc returned to the form three decades later to compose his **Novelette sur un thème de Manuel de Falla**. Said theme comes from

Falla's *El amor brujo*: presented at the outset in the right hand melody, *Andantino tranquillo*, this could serve easily as the love theme for a Golden Age Hollywood romance.

The **Sonata for Piano, Four Hands**, composed in 1918 (subsequently revised in 1939) can likewise be classified as a miniature, despite its "sonata" tag. Comprising three movements and lasting under six minutes in total, it fits, at best, a quite liberal definition of a sonata in the classical sense; more likely, Poulenc gave it this designation with tongue enscorced firmly in cheek. The Sonata's rambunctious *Prelude*, naïve and sentimental *Rustique*, and *Final* bounding with joie de vivre betray the influence of Stravinsky, Satie, and even Emmanuel Chabrier. (Stravinsky nurtured the work in more ways than one. "It was Stravinsky who got me published in London by Chester, my first publisher," Poulenc recounted, "the publisher ... of the *Sonata for two clarinets*, of my *Duet Sonata*; all those little beginner's works, rather faltering, were published thanks to the kindness of Stravinsky, who was very much a father to me.") Like much of the four-hand repertoire, the Sonata requires deft coordination and navigation of the keyboard between the two players. Poulenc

is rumored to have composed the work as an excuse to wrap fingers with a certain prepossessing student.

The final miniature on this recording is *L'embarquement pour Cythère* for two pianos (1951). The music for this brisk vignette comes from Poulenc's film score to the French comedy *Le voyage en Amérique*. The title is taken from a Watteau painting, in which Cupid beckons a coterie of young lovers to Cythera, the island of Aphrodite, Goddess of Love. Poulenc's music is fittingly bright and optimistic.

The **Concerto in D minor for two pianos**, composed in the summer of 1932, ranks alongside the Concerto for Organ, Strings, and Timpani (1938) as Poulenc's finest works in the arena of orchestral music. (The Concerto appears on the present recording in the composer's own reduction for two pianos, sans orchestra.) Poulenc – whom we have already established as a candid self-critic – recognized what he had accomplished upon the work's completion; he wrote to a friend, "You will see what an enormous step forward it is from my previous work and that I am really entering my great period." Poulenc premiered the Concerto in September

1932 with pianist and childhood friend Jacques Février, at the Fifth International Music Festival in Venice, with the La Scala Orchestra, conducted by Désire Defauw.

The Concerto betrays various influences. The composer acknowledged as much in a letter to the composer Igor Markevitch: "Would you like to know what I had on my piano during the two months gestation of the Concerto? The concertos of Mozart, those of Liszt, that of Ravel, and your Partita." Along with these, the sound of Balinese gamelan, which Poulenc had encountered at the 1931 Exposition Coloniale de Paris, was evidently in the composer's ear. Following its declamatory opening chords, the first movement launches into a motoric sixteenth-note passage, *fortissimo, très brillant*, which evokes gamelan's exotic harmonies. The tempo soon picks up, conjuring images of leaping aerialists. Later, the music slows to a romantic lugubriousness – maudlin, perhaps, in the hands of another composer, but cut along Poulenc's razor-sharp wit, such schmaltz is perfectly self-aware, and gleefully so. Gamelan harmonies surface again near the movement's end, now *très calme*.

"In the Larghetto of this Concerto," Poulenc wrote, "I permitted myself, for the first theme, to return to Mozart, because I have a fondness for the melodic line and I prefer Mozart to all other musicians. If the movement begins alla Mozart, it quickly diverges at the entrance of the second piano, toward a style that was familiar to me at the time." The soft lullaby that begins the Larghetto might specifically call the mind the Romance from Mozart's Piano Concerto in D minor, K. 466. As the music becomes more turbulent, it nevertheless gives little impression of turmoil befalling the idyllic scene; rather, it suggests only a distant threat – perhaps the dark turn in a fairy tale, told in the nursery before bedtime, which will effortlessly find its way to a serene conclusion.

The Concerto's vivacious Allegro molto finale is paced by a fleet repartee between the two pianists. The music passes through various episodes of contrasting character, but Poulenc's irrepressibly devilish humor prevails throughout. A brief remembrance of the first movement's gamelan passage colors the final moments of this fetching Concerto.

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LUCILLE CHUNG

Born in Montréal, Canadian pianist Lucille Chung has been acclaimed for her “stylish and refined performances” by *Gramophone* magazine, “combining vigour and suppleness with natural eloquence and elegance” (*Le Soir*).

She made her debut at the age of ten with the Montréal Symphony Orchestra and Charles Dutoit subsequently invited her to be a featured soloist during the MSO Asian Tour in 1989. Since then, she has performed an extensive concerto repertoire with over 65 leading orchestras such as the Philadelphia Orchestra, Moscow Virtuosi, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Flemish Radio Orchestra, Orquesta Sinfónica de Tenerife, Orquesta Sinfónica de Bilbao, Staatskapelle Weimar, Philharmonie de Lorraine, Orchestra Sinfonica Siciliana, Belgrade Philharmonic, the Seoul Philharmonic, KBS Orchestra, New Jersey Symphony, Dallas Symphony, UNAM Philharmonic (Mexico), Israel Chamber Orchestra as well as all the major Canadian orchestras, including Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver, National Arts Centre (Ottawa), Calgary, Winnipeg and Métropolitain, among others. She has appeared with conductors such as Krzysztof Penderecki,

Vladimir Spivakov, Vasily Petrenko, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Peter Oundjian, Gerd Albrecht and Charles Dutoit.

As a recitalist, she has performed in over 35 countries in prestigious venues such as the Wigmore Hall in London, New York’s Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center, the Kennedy Center and Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., the Dame Myra Hess Series in Chicago, the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, Madrid’s Auditorio Nacional, the Great Hall of the Franz Liszt Academy in Budapest, and the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. Festival appearances include the Verbier Festival in Switzerland, MDR Sommer Festival in Dresden, Lübecker Kammermusikfest, Santander International Festival in Spain, Felicja Blumental Festival in Israel, Music@Menlo, Montreal International Festival, Ottawa Chamber Festival, Bard Music Festival in NY, International Keyboard Institute and Festival in NYC, ChangChun Festival in China, and the Bravissimo Festival in Guatemala.

In 1989, she was recognized on the international scene as the First Prize winner at the Stravinsky International Piano Competition. She won Second Prize at the 1992 Montreal



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International Music Competition, at which she also won a Special Prize for the best interpretation of the unpublished work. In 1993, she received the Outstanding Achievement Award from the Governor General of Canada and in 1994 won the Second Prize at the First International Franz Liszt Competition in Weimar. In 1999, she was awarded the prestigious Virginia Parker Prize by the Canada Council for the Arts.

She graduated from both the Curtis Institute of Music and the Juilliard School before she turned twenty. She decided to further her studies in London with Maria Curcio-Diamand, Schnabel's protégée, at the "Mozarteum" in Salzburg with Karl-Heinz Kämmerling and received the Konzertexam Diplom from the Hochschule "Franz Liszt" in Weimar, where she worked with the late Lazar Berman. She also graduated from the Accademia Pianistica in Imola, Italy with the honorary title of "Master" and from Southern Methodist University under Joaquín Achúcarro where she is now a Johnson-Prothro Artist-in-Residence. Ms. Chung is the recipient of the prestigious Honors Diploma at the Accademia Chigiana in Siena, Italy.

Lucille Chung has been hailed as "a considerable artist, admirable for her bold choice of music" by *The Sunday Times* for her recordings of the complete piano works by György Ligeti on the Dynamic label. The first volume was released in 2001 to great critical acclaim, receiving the maximum R10 from *Classica-Répertoire* in France, 5 Stars from the BBC Music Magazine, and 5 Stars on Fono Forum in Germany. The final volume, which also contains works for two pianos, was recorded with her husband, Alessio Bax and once again received the prestigious R10 from *Classica-Répertoire*. Her all-Scriabin CD won the "Best Instrumental Recording" prize at the 2003 Prelude Classical Awards in Holland as well as the coveted R10 from *Classica-Répertoire* in France. She also recorded the two Mendelssohn Piano Concerti on the Richelieu/Radio-Canada label, which was nominated for the Prix Opus in Canada. In August 2005, Bax and Chung recorded Saint-Saëns' *Carnival of the Animals* with the Fort Worth Symphony under Maestro Miguel Harth-Bedoya, which was released in 2006. In 2007 she released a solo album for the Fazioli Concert Hall Series and recently, Lucille embarked on an exclusive contract with Disques XXI/Universal. So far, she has released two CDs, *Piano Transcriptions of*

Camille Saint-Saëns and *Mozart & Me*. Both CDs continue earning critical praise and have been broadcast internationally. 2013 marked the release of a piano duo disc with Alessio Bax, presenting Stravinsky's original four-hand version of the ballet *Petrouchka* as well as music by Brahms and Piazzolla for Signum Records.

Lucille is fluent in French, English, Korean, Italian, German, and Russian. She and husband, pianist Alessio Bax make their home in New York City with their daughter, Mila, and are artistic co-directors of the Dallas-based Joaquín Achúcarro Foundation.

www.lucillechung.com

ALESSIO BAX

Pianist Alessio Bax creates "a ravishing listening experience" with his lyrical playing, insightful interpretations, and dazzling facility. "His playing quivers with an almost hypnotic intensity," says *Gramophone*, leading to what *Dallas Morning News* calls "an out-of-body experience." First Prize-winner at the Leeds and Hamamatsu international piano competitions—and a 2009 Avery Fisher Career Grant recipient—he has appeared

as soloist with over 100 orchestras, including the London and Royal Philharmonic Orchestras, the Dallas and Houston Symphonies, the NHK Symphony in Japan, the St. Petersburg Philharmonic with Yuri Temirkanov, and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra with Sir Simon Rattle.

Bax's celebrated discography for Signum Classics includes Beethoven's "Hammerklavier" and "Moonlight" Sonatas (a *Gramophone* "Editor's Choice" and one of the magazine's "Top Ten recent Beethoven recordings"); *Alessio Bax plays Scriabin and Mussorgsky* (named "Recording of the Month ... and quite possibly my recording of the year" by *MusicWeb International*); *Bax & Chung*, a duo disc with Lucille Chung, presenting Stravinsky's original four-hand version of the ballet *Pétrouchka* as well as music by Brahms and Piazzolla; *Alessio Bax plays Mozart*, comprising Piano Concertos K. 491 and K. 595 with London's Southbank Sinfonia led by Simon Over; *Alessio Bax plays Brahms* (*Gramophone* "Critic's Choice" and *Pianist* "Editor's Choice"); *Rachmaninov: Preludes and Melodies* (*American Record Guide* "Critics' Choice 2011"); *Bach Transcribed*; recently released *Lullabies for Mila*; and for Warner

Classics, *Baroque Reflections* (Gramophone “Editor’s Choice”).

He performed Beethoven’s “Hammerklavier” Sonata for maestro Daniel Barenboim in the PBS-TV documentary *Barenboim on Beethoven: Masterclass*, available as a DVD box set on the EMI label. His performances have been broadcast live on the BBC (UK); CBC (Canada); RAI (Italy); RTVE (Spain); NHK (Japan); WDR, NDR, and Bayerischer Rundfunk (Germany); American Public Media’s “Performance Today”; WQXR (New York); WGBH (Boston); WETA (Washington, DC); and Sirius-XM satellite radio, among many others.

Hailed by *International Piano* as “a pianist of refreshing depth,” Bax’s extensive concerto repertoire has led to performances with such esteemed conductors as Vladimir Ashkenazy, Marin Alsop, Sergiu Commissiona, Vernon Handley, Pietari Inkinen, Hannu Lintu, Andrew Litton, Jonathan Nott, Vasily Petrenko, Sir Simon Rattle, Alexander Shelley, Yuri Temirkanov, and Jaap van Zweden. Besides giving concerts at London’s Wigmore Hall, L.A.’s Disney Hall, Washington’s Kennedy Center, and New York’s Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall, he has appeared at

international festivals including London’s International Piano Series; the Verbier Festival in Switzerland; the Risør Festival in Norway; England’s Aldeburgh and Bath festivals; and the Ruhr Klavier-Festival and Beethovenfest Bonn in Germany. He has also appeared many times at such U.S. festivals as Bravo! Vail, Bard Music Festival, Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, Great Lakes Festival, and Music@Menlo, and has given recitals in major music halls around the world, including in Rome, Milan, Madrid, Mexico City, Paris, London, Tel Aviv, Tokyo, Seoul, Hong Kong, New York, and Washington, DC.

An accomplished chamber musician, Bax has collaborated with Emanuel Ax, Sol Gabetta, Steven Isserlis, Nicholas Phan, Paul Watkins, Jörg Widmann, and the Emerson String Quartet, among others, besides touring with Joshua Bell in Europe, Asia, and North and South America; Berlin Philharmonic Concertmaster Daishin Kashimoto in Asia; and regularly with Lucille Chung. In 2013, he received the Andrew Wolf Chamber Music Award and Lincoln Center’s Martin E. Segal Award, which recognizes young artists of exceptional accomplishment.

Bax graduated with top honors at the record age of 14 from the conservatory of his hometown in Bari, Italy, where his teacher was Angela Montemurro. He studied in France with François-Joël Thiollier and attended the Chigiana Academy in Siena under Joaquín Achúcarro. In 1994 he moved to Dallas to continue his studies with Achúcarro at SMU’s Meadows School of the Arts, where, with Lucille Chung, he is now the Johnson-Prothro Artist-in-Residence. He also serves with Chung as co-artistic director of Dallas’s Joaquín Achúcarro Foundation, created to cultivate the legacy of the Basque pianist and to support young pianists’ careers.

Alessio Bax’s antecedents are Dutch, German, Belgian, and British, and include English composer Sir Arnold Bax. A Steinway artist, and an avid blogger, tweeter (@alessiobaxpiano), and self-professed food, photography and AAdvantage Miles addict, he lives in New York City with his wife, pianist Lucille Chung, and their young daughter.

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