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## Poulenc, Francis

### 6. Choral music.

Several minor secular works such as the *Chansons françaises* (1945–6) continue the French tradition of Janequin and Sermisy, but Poulenc's early study of Bach chorales also left its mark. His masterpiece in the genre, *Figure humaine* (1943), is a highly complex setting of words by Eluard; although instrumental support would have reduced the performers' troubles, the composer wanted a pure choral tone in order to capture the mood of supplication.

After his return to Roman Catholicism in 1936, Poulenc produced a steady flow of religious choral works. Stretching over a quarter of a century they display a remarkable unity of tone as well as an increasing complexity in language and resources. The *Litanies à la vierge noire* (1936), written in the week after his visit to Rocamadour, are for a three-part female chorus in a conventionally modal style that avoids conventional cadences, the organ punctuating the discourse with fervently chromatic chords. The Mass in G (1937) is 'more sober, more Romanesque' than his next major work in the genre, the *Stabat mater* (1950–51) for soprano, mixed chorus and orchestra, a powerful and profoundly moving work whose choral writing enlarges on the serious implications in that of *Les mamelles*. In the *Gloria* (1959–60) the choral writing is unsanctimonious to the point of wilfulness, as in the stressing of the phrase 'Gloria in excelsis Deo', while the ostinatos, the soaring soprano and the matchless tunes proclaim Poulenc a believer who had, in Tippett's phrase, 'contracted in to abundance'. Finally, the *Sept répons des ténèbres* (1961–2) pursue the same lush orchestral path but with a new concentration of thought, epitomized in the minute but spine-chilling codetta to 'Caligaverunt oculi mei' where Poulenc showed that his recognition of Webern was neither a matter of distant respect nor a piece of time-serving diplomacy.

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