



Opéra  
McGill

*Patrick Hansen*  
*Directeur artistique / Artistic director*

*Stephen Hargreaves*  
*Répétiteur principal / Principal coach*

# Dialogues des Carmélites

**Francis Poulenc**



**McGill**



Schulich School of Music  
École de musique Schulich

Le samedi 24 mars 2018  
à 14 h

Saturday, March 24, 2018  
2:00 p.m.

# *Opéra McGill*

**Patrick Hansen**, Directeur artistique / Artistic director  
**Stephen Hargreaves**, Répétiteur principal / Principal coach

# Dialogues des Carmélites

Francis Poulenc  
(1899-1963)

**Patrick Hansen**, pianiste et metteur en scène / pianist & stage director  
**Ginette Grenier**, costumes / costume design  
**Serge Filiatrault**, éclairages / lighting design

## Distribution / Cast

<b>Marquis de la Force</b>	Bryan De Parsia
<b>Blanche de la Force</b>	Anna-Sophie Neher
<b>Chevalier de la Force</b>	Diego Valdez
<b>Madame de Croissy, la vieille prieure</b>	Olivia Barnes
<b>Madame Lidoine, la nouvelle prieure</b>	Jaclyn Grossman
<b>Mère Marie de l'Incarnation</b>	Charlotte Siegel
<b>Sœur Constance, un novice</b>	Elisabeth Boudreault
<b>Mère Jeanne</b>	Amelia Lubrano
<b>Sœur Mathilde</b>	Leah Johns
<b>Mère Gerald</b>	*Haley Meth
<b>Sœur Claire</b>	*Stéphanie Turcotte
<b>Sœur Antoine</b>	*Talia Fuchs
<b>Sœur Catherine</b>	*Celine Cascanette
<b>Sœur Felicity</b>	Allegra Johnston
<b>Sœur Gertrude</b>	*Ana Stieu
<b>Sœur Alice</b>	*Elizabeth Egan
<b>Sœur Martha</b>	*Madeleine Wendling
<b>Sœur St. Charles</b>	*Julia Surette
<b>Mère Ginette</b>	Caroline Reynolds
<b>Mère Florence</b>	Stephanie Sedlbauer
<b>L'aumônier</b>	Marcel d'Entremont
<b>1<sup>er</sup> Commissaire</b>	Alexander Cappeluzzo
<b>2<sup>ème</sup> Commissaire</b>	Jean-Philippe Lupien
<b>1<sup>er</sup> Officier</b>	Jean-Philippe Lupien
<b>Geôlier</b>	Jonah Spungin
<b>Thierry, un majordome</b>	Eric Epp
<b>Dr. Javelinot</b>	Reed McDonald
<b>Une voix</b>	Brittany Rae
<b>Coro</b>	Membres d' / Members of Opéra McGill

### *doublures / covers*

Caroline Reynolds (Blanche de la Force), **Stephanie Sedlbauer** (Madame de Croissy, la vieille prieure),  
Amelia Lubrano (Mère Marie de l'Incarnation), **Allegra Johnston** (Sœur Constance, un novice)

\*membres de MUEN554, Extraits d'opéra /  
members of MUEN554, Opera Excerpts

## Notes du metteur en scène

Il suffit de voir et d'entendre une seule fois *Dialogues des Carmélites* de Poulenc pour en être marqué au plus profond de son âme. C'est en 1984, durant le premier été où j'ai travaillé au *Des Moines Metro Opera*, que j'ai été mis en contact avec ce chef-d'œuvre du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, composé dans les quelques années qui ont vu naître *Candide* de Bernstein, *The Ballad of Baby Doe* de Moore, *The Turn of the Screw* de Britten, *The Tender Land* de Copland et *Susannah* de Floyd (imaginez!).

Je n'oublierai jamais l'expérience bouleversante – un véritable choc – que m'a fait vivre le troisième acte. En réalité, je n'avais aucune idée du sujet de l'œuvre ni de son dénouement. Parfois, la meilleure façon de faire l'expérience de l'opéra consiste simplement à se rendre disponible et à se laisser porter par la musique. Encore maintenant, j'ai des frissons à l'écoute de l'aria du Geôlier et je demeure stupéfait quand j'entends les monologues de Madame Lidoine en prison. Quant à la conclusion de l'opéra... j'en ai assez dit.

Cette partition de Poulenc, de ces partitions brillantes, exigeantes et d'une grande transparence, s'est donc imprimée dans mon imaginaire il y a presque 35 ans. J'ai eu la chance de participer comme pianiste à de nombreuses scènes des Carmélites pendant mes années d'études, puis d'accompagner les répétitions des *Mamelles de Tirésias* et de *La voix humaine* du même compositeur pendant que j'étais à la *Juilliard School*. Quand je dirigeais le programme pour jeunes artistes américains du *Glimmerglass Opera*, nous présentions une série de récitals où chaque chanteur offrait une prestation. Au cours de mes 8 années là-bas, j'ai dû faire répéter presque toutes les mélodies de Poulenc en plus d'avoir accompagné ses principaux cycles de mélodies. Inutile de le cacher : j'adore la musique de Poulenc!

La présente production a d'abord été créée à l'*Ithaca College* il y a près de 20 ans. Il s'agissait d'une de mes premières incursions dans l'univers de la mise en scène et j'ai beaucoup appris en produisant un opéra en version concert. Il y a 10 ans, j'ai monté de nouveau *Dialogues des Carmélites* à Schulich avec une excellente distribution qui comprenait Rihab Chaieb – aujourd'hui artiste du *Metropolitan Opera* – dans le rôle de Sœur Mathilde. Il y a environ 5 ans, j'ai poussé plus loin ma mise en scène pour des représentations à la *Janiec Opera Company*, en Caroline du Nord. J'ai aussi joué la partie de piano dans chacune de ces productions.

Ma conception de la mise en scène est simple : le couvent n'est pas une maison. Le couvent, ce ne sont pas des murs, des portes, ni des fenêtres. Le couvent, ce sont les religieuses elles-mêmes. Elles sont le couvent. Même après que la Révolution française les eut sorties de leur maison, elles incarnent toujours le couvent. Même lorsqu'elles sont condamnées à mort, elles sont toujours le couvent. À l'heure d'affronter leur destin, elles ne font qu'une dans le chant jusqu'à ce que leurs voix, tour à tour, soient réduites au silence par l'instrument ultime de la mort, la guillotine.

Sur la scène, on ne trouvera ni murs, ni maison, ni portes ou fenêtres, ni pierres tombales. On ne verra que des religieuses. Tout au long de l'opéra, seule une table subira des métamorphoses : la table d'une salle à manger d'aristocrates deviendra une table de cuisine au couvent, puis un lit de mort, enfin, un autel.

Merci de votre présence. J'espère que chacun de vous repartira fasciné par la puissance de la partition et par cette histoire inspirante d'une foi qui transcende la peur.

— Patrick Hansen

## **Synopsis**

*Lieu : Paris et Compiègne, 1789 à 1794, durant la Révolution française*

### **Acte I**

#### **1<sup>er</sup> tableau**

Après avoir été effrayée par une foule agitée, Blanche rentre tard à la maison. Son frère, le Chevalier de la Force, est soulagé. Blanche annonce ensuite à son père, le Marquis de la Force, sa décision d'entrer au couvent des Carmélites.

#### **2<sup>e</sup> tableau**

Au cours de son entretien avec Blanche, la Mère Prieure la prévient que le couvent n'est pas un refuge et que la vie y sera difficile. Blanche maintient sa décision et déclare qu'elle s'appellera Sœur Blanche de l'Agonie du Christ.

#### **3<sup>e</sup> tableau**

En préparant le repas, Blanche, d'un caractère timide, rencontre la jeune et insouciante Sœur Constance qui lui raconte son rêve : ensemble, elles connaîtront une mort précoce. Blanche est troublée de ces propos.

#### **4<sup>e</sup> tableau**

À l'heure où la prieure souffre une terrible agonie, Blanche et Mère Marie sont témoins de ses gémissements et de ses visions effroyables de l'avenir pour ses filles. Elle fait promettre à Mère Marie de prendre soin de Blanche, puis s'éteint dans les douleurs les plus atroces après avoir formulé que Dieu l'avait abandonnée. Blanche et Mère Marie sont toutes deux complètement perturbées.

### *entracte*

### **Acte II**

#### **1<sup>er</sup> tableau**

Tandis que dans une sombre chapelle, les religieuses se recueillent sur la dépouille de leur prieure, Sœur Constance se retire, laissant seule derrière elle une Blanche effrayée. Résolue à quitter son service, elle rencontre mère Marie qui l'exhorte au courage et à la persévérance dans la prière.

#### **Interlude 1**

Constance et Blanche déposent des gerbes sur la tombe de la prieure. Constance réfléchit sur la longue et pénible agonie de sa supérieure : peut-être Dieu en a-t-il décidé ainsi pour que le reste de la communauté connaisse une mort rapide et sans douleur. Cette idée qui veut qu'on meure non pas chacun pour soi mais les uns pour les autres produit sur Blanche un effet dévastateur.

#### **2<sup>e</sup> tableau**

Les religieuses rencontrent leur nouvelle mère supérieure, Madame Lidoine.

#### **Interlude 2**

Un mystérieux homme sonne à la porte du couvent. Il demande à voir sa sœur, Blanche de la Force. Après avoir consulté Mère Marie, la nouvelle prieure décide de lui accorder cette rencontre en présence de Mère Marie, qui sert de chaperon.

#### **3<sup>e</sup> tableau**

Affolé, le Chevalier tente de convaincre sa sœur de fuir avec lui et de quitter la France pour toujours. Il repart sans elle, la laissant dans un état d'épuisement émotionnel. Elle s'effondre et avoue à mère Marie que c'est réellement la peur (plus précisément la peur de la peur) qui la garde au couvent. Mère Marie l'invite à être forte pour mieux affronter les défis à venir.

#### **4<sup>e</sup> tableau**

Le père confesseur du couvent entre et annonce qu'il a reçu l'ordre des révolutionnaires de ne plus prêcher et de fuir le pays. Les Sœurs sont bouleversées et se demandent ouvertement pourquoi il ne se trouve personne en France pour

défendre les prêtres. Madame Lidoine fait remarquer que de telles conjonctures engendrent une abondance de martyrs. Mère Marie, qui pense que les sœurs devraient réclamer pour elles-mêmes la mort des martyrs, se méprend sur le sens de ces propos. Elle croit que Madame Lidoine l'appuie, mais celle-ci la reprend en affirmant que Dieu seul désigne les martyrs. Après une prière commune, le Père Confesseur sort, puis se bute à une foule en colère qui exige l'ouverture des portes. Apeuré, il rentre en courant pour se cacher. Des commissaires de la Révolution se présentent et informent les religieuses qu'en vertu d'un ordre de l'Assemblée législative, leur couvent est désormais propriété publique et qu'elles doivent partir en renonçant à leur habit pour réintégrer la société française. À la suite de ces événements, dominée par la peur, Blanche échappe une statue de l'Enfant Jésus qui se brise sous l'impact.

### *entracte*

#### ***Acte III***

##### **1<sup>er</sup> tableau**

En l'absence de leur mère supérieure, Mère Marie propose à ses consœurs de prononcer le vœu de martyrs. Ce vœu doit être unanime. Un vote secret révèle qu'une voix s'oppose. Toutes suspectent Blanche, mais Constance s'accuse et se ravise aussitôt. Le père confesseur recueille les vœux et Blanche s'enfuit du couvent.

##### **2<sup>e</sup> tableau**

Mère Marie part à la recherche de Blanche et la trouve dans la maison paternelle où elle agit comme servante pour les nouveaux occupants, son père ayant été guillotiné. Marie lui remet une adresse et lui fait promettre de s'y rendre pour rejoindre les autres religieuses. Blanche s'y engage.

##### **3<sup>e</sup> tableau**

Toutes les sœurs sauf Blanche et Mère Marie ont été arrêtées. Appelant chacune par leur nom, le Geôlier proclame leur condamnation à mort. Madame Lidoine les reconforte au moment où elles commencent à désespérer.

##### **Interlude 1**

Le père confesseur informe Mère Marie que les sœurs ont été condamnées à la guillotine. Elle en a le cœur brisé et ne comprend pas pourquoi Dieu a choisi d'épargner sa propre personne, elle qui avait convaincu toutes ses consœurs de faire le vœu de martyr.

##### **4<sup>e</sup> tableau**

Les sœurs arrivent sur le lieu de l'exécution. Tour à tour, elles montent sur l'échafaud en chantant le « Salve Regina ». Enfin, il ne reste plus que Constance : avant de subir le couperet, pour sa plus grande joie, elle voit Blanche émerger de la foule. Cette dernière, ayant assisté à la mort de toutes ses consœurs, entonne courageusement la strophe finale du « Veni Creator Spiritus » et fait à Dieu l'offrande de sa vie.

## Director's Notes

This Poulenc opera, once seen and heard for the first time, tends to sear itself into your heart. I first came to this masterpiece of 20<sup>th</sup>-century opera (composed during the same few years as Bernstein's *Candide*, Moore's *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, Britten's *The Turn of the Screw*, Copland's *The Tender Land*, and Floyd's *Susannah* – imagine!!) during my first summer working at Des Moines Metro Opera in 1984.

I will never forget the visceral experience, and the shock, of the third act. For you see, I had no idea what the opera was about or how it ended. The best way to sometimes experience opera is to just open yourself up to it and let it wash over you. The Jailor's aria still sends shivers up my spine. Madame Lidoine's monologues in the jail still amaze me. The end... Well, enough said.

This score, Poulenc's magical translucent beast of a score, has been in my imagination for almost 35 years now. I was lucky to do many scenes from *Carmélites* during my student years, and lucky again to play rehearsals for *Les mamelles de Tirésias* and *La voix humaine* while at The Juilliard School. During my tenure running Glimmerglass Opera's Young American Artist Program, there was a recital series that each of our singers would perform in. Over the course of 8 years, I believe I coached most every song Poulenc wrote and performed all his major song cycles. Needless to say, I love Poulenc's music!

The production this afternoon was first created at Ithaca College almost 20 years ago. It was one of my first forays into stage directing and I learned quite a lot producing an opera with no set. 10 years ago, I remounted it here at Schulich with a delightful cast that included Rihab Chaieb as Sister Mathilde (now an artist with the Metropolitan Opera). About 5 years ago, I evolved the staging a bit further for performances at the Janiec Opera Company in North Carolina. For each of these productions I also was the pianist.

My staging concept is simple: The convent isn't a building. The convent isn't the walls, the doorways, the windows. The convent is the sisters themselves. They are their convent. Even after the French Revolution throws them out of the building, they are still a convent. Even when they are condemned to death, they are still a convent. In death, they sing as one until, one-by-one, their voices are silenced by that ultimate instrument of death, the guillotine.

On our stage there will be no walls, no buildings, no doors, no windows, no gravestones. You will see only nuns. One table metamorphoses throughout the opera, from an aristocrats dining table, to a nun's kitchen table, to a deathbed, and finally to an altar.

Thank you for coming to this performance, I hope each of you takes away the power of Poulenc's score, and the inspiring story of faith transcending fear.

— Patrick Hansen

## **Synopsis**

*Place: Paris and Compiègne, 1789 – 1794 during the French Revolution*

### **Act I**

#### **1<sup>st</sup> Tableau**

After being scared by a crowd, Blanche arrives late to the house. Her brother, the Chevalier is relieved. Later, Blanche tells her father, the Marquise, that she has decided to become a Carmélite nun.

#### **2<sup>nd</sup> Tableau**

During her interview with the Old Prioress, Blanche is told that the convent is not a refuge and that life will be difficult. Blanche is determined and declares her name to be Sister Blanche of the Agony of Christ.

#### **3<sup>rd</sup> Tableau**

While preparing dinner, Blanche meets the young, carefree Sister Constance who tells the timid Blanche that she has had a dream that both of them will die young. Blanche is upset at this idea.

#### **4<sup>th</sup> Tableau**

As the Old Prioress dies a terribly painful death, Blanche and Mother Marie witness her outpouring of pain and her visions regarding the terrible future of her daughters. She makes Mother Marie promise to look after Blanche and then passes away in terrible pain after declaring that God has abandoned her. Both Blanche and Mother Marie are traumatized.

### ***entracte***

### **Act II**

#### **1<sup>st</sup> Tableau**

Praying in a darkened chapel over the body of the Old Prioress, Sister Constance departs leaving an extremely frightened Blanche alone. Deciding to leave her duties, she runs into Mother Marie, who advises her to have more courage and to continue to pray.

#### **Interlude 1**

As Constance and Blanche lay a wreath on the tombstone of the Old Prioress, Constance reflects that perhaps God gave a long painful death to their Mother Superior so that the rest of them would die quickly and without pain. Once again, Blanche is undone by Constance's idea that perhaps we die not for ourselves, but for others.

#### **2<sup>nd</sup> Tableau**

The nuns of the convent meet their new Mother Superior, Madame Lidoine.

#### **Interlude 2**

There is a mysterious man ringing the bell to get into the convent. He demands to see his sister, Blanche de la Force. After consulting with Mother Marie, the new Prioress decides to allow him a visit with Mother Marie attending as chaperrone.

#### **3<sup>rd</sup> Tableau**

A distraught Chevalier tries to convince his sister to depart with him and leave France forever. He departs after leaving Blanche emotionally spent. She collapses and tells Mother Marie that it is really fear (more precisely, the fear of fear) that keeps her in the convent. Mother Marie tells her she must be strong in order to meet the challenges of the future.

#### **4<sup>th</sup> Tableau**

The Chaplain arrives and tells the order that he is no longer allowed to preach and must flee the country. The sisters are greatly upset and wonder aloud why there are no men in France to defend priests. After Madame Lidoine comments that during times like this there are martyrs aplenty, Mother Marie mistakes this for support of her idea that the sisters should ask to become martyrs. Madame Lidoine corrects her saying that only God can decide who becomes a martyr. After praying together, the Chaplain departs, but meets up with an angry crowd demanding that the sisters open their

doors. Frightened, the Chaplain runs back in and hides. Commissioners of the Revolution arrive and inform the order that by legislative assembly, their convent is now public property and they will have to leave and give up their habits in order to join the rest of France's society as citizens. Afterwards, a frightened Blanche drops and breaks the statue of the baby Jesus.

### *entracte*

### **Act III**

#### **1<sup>st</sup> Tableau**

While their Mother Superior is away, Mother Marie proposes to the rest of the sisters that they take a vow of martyrdom. All must agree to it, but after a secret vote there is one dissenting. All suspect Blanche, but Constance confesses that it was she. However now she has changed her mind. The Chaplain agrees. Blanche flees the convent.

#### **2<sup>nd</sup> Tableau**

Mother Marie goes in search of Blanche and finds her now living as a servant in her father's house after he was killed at the guillotine. She informs Blanche of an address and makes her promise to reunite with the rest of the sisters. Blanche is too fulfill such a promise.

#### **3<sup>rd</sup> Tableau**

All the sisters, except Blanche and Mother Marie, have been arrested. As their names are read, one by one, each is condemned to death. As they begin to despair, Lidoine comforts them.

#### **Interlude 1**

The Chaplain informs Mother Marie that the sisters have been condemned to die at the guillotine. She is broken-hearted and does not understand why God would choose for her to live, after convincing them all to take the vow of martyrdom.

#### **4<sup>th</sup> Tableau**

At the place of execution, the sisters arrive. One by one, the nuns mount the scaffold singing "Salve Regina" and are executed. Eventually, none are left except for Constance. Blanche steps out of the crowd, to Constance's joy as she is executed. Having seen all of her sisters killed, Blanche courageously sings the final stanza of "Veni Creator Spiritus" and offers up her life to God.

## Opéra McGill

**Olivia Barnes**, mezzo-soprano (Madame de Croissy)

de / from: Charlottetown, PEI

Récemment / Recent: Sorceress, *Dido and Æneas*, Opéra de l'Université de Montréal

Prochainement / Upcoming: Paquette, *Candide*, Opéra McGill

**Elisabeth Boudreault**, soprano (Sœur Constance)

de / from: St. Ambroise, QC

Récemment / Recent: Frasquitta, *Carmen*, Société d'Art Lyrique du Saguenay

Prochainement / Upcoming: Königin der Nacht, *Die Zauberflöte*, Opera Nuova

**Alexander Cappellazzo**, ténor / tenor (1<sup>er</sup> Commissaire)

de / from: Scarborough, ON

Récemment / Recent: Squire, *Thomas & Sally*, Opéra McGill Horizons Project

Prochainement / Upcoming: Sātyavan, *Sāvitrī*, Schulich School of Music

**Celine Cascanette**, mezzo-soprano (Sœur Catherine)

de / from: Parry Sound, ON

Récemment / Recent: Dorcas, *Thomas & Sally*, Opéra McGill Horizons Project

Prochainement / Upcoming: Soloist, *Riversongs Music Festival*, Whispering River Music Studio

**Marcel d'Entremont**, ténor / tenor (L'aumônier)

de / from: Merigomish, NS

Récemment / Recent: Edgardo, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Opéra McGill

Prochainement / Upcoming: Rodolfo, *La bohème*, Saskatoon Opera

**Bryan De Parsia**, baryton / baritone (Marquis de la Force)

de / from: Stockton, CA, USA

Récemment / Recent: Enrico, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Opéra McGill

**Elizabeth Egan**, soprano (Sœur Alice)

de / from: Toronto, ON

Récemment / Recent: Nora, *Riders to the Sea*, Opéra McGill Horizons Project; Suor Genovieffa, *Suor Angelica*, University of Cincinnati Opera Bootcamp

Prochainement / Upcoming: Susanna, *Le nozze di Figaro*, Opera Excerpts, Schulich School of Music

**Eric Epp**, baryton / baritone (Thierry)

de / from: Edmonton, AB

Récemment / Recent: Mr. Webb, *Our Town*, Opera NUOVA

**Talia Fuchs**, soprano (Sœur Antoine)

de / from: Brooklyn, NY, USA

Récemment / Recent: Isabel, *The Pirates of Penzance*, The McGill Savoy Society

Prochainement / Upcoming: Bachelor's Recital, Schulich School of Music

**Jaclyn Grossman**, soprano (Madame Lidoine)

de / from: Niagara Falls, ON

Récemment / Recent: Pigeonneau, *Une demoiselle en Lotèrie*, Opéra McGill Horizons Project

Prochainement / Upcoming: Mahler's *Rückert Lieder*, Schulich School of Music, Song Interpretation Class

**Leah Johns**, mezzo-soprano (Sœur Mathilde)

de / from: Raleigh, NC, USA

Récemment / Recent: Maurya, *Riders to the Sea*, Opéra McGill Horizons Project

Prochainement / Upcoming: Elizabeth Proctor, *The Crucible*, Chicago Summer Opera

**Allegra Johnston**, soprano (Sœur Constance, doublure / cover)

de / from: Potomac, MD, USA

Récemment / Recent: Valenciennes, *The Merry Widow*, McGill Savoy Society

Prochainement / Upcoming: Susanna, *Le nozze di Figaro* (excerpts), MGSS Opera Scenes Extravaganza

**Amelia Lubrano**, soprano (Mère Jeanne & Mère Marie, doublure / cover)

de / from: Islip, NY, USA

Récemment / Recent: Alisa, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Opéra McGill

Prochainement / Upcoming: Soloist, *Maiden Voyages*, Association of Music Producers NYC

**Jean-Philippe Lupien**, baryton-basse / bass-baritone (1<sup>er</sup> Officier & 2<sup>ème</sup> Commissaire)

de / from: Sherbrooke, QC

Récemment / Recent: Soloist, *La bal masqué*, Musical Chairs Chamber Music Festival, Schulich School of Music

Prochainement / Upcoming: divers / various, *Candide*, Opéra McGill

**Hayley Meth**, mezzo-soprano (Mère Gerald)

de / from: Nanuet, NY, USA

Récemment / Recent: Fidalma, *Il matrimonio segreto* (excerpts), Oberlin in Italy

**Reed McDonald**, baryton / baritone (Dr. Javelinot)

de / from: Brockville, ON

Récemment / Recent: Shrek, *Shrek the Musical*, St. Mary's Catholic High School

**Anna-Sophie Neher**, soprano (Blanche de la Force)

de / from: Gatineau, QC

Récemment / Recent: Cupid, *Venus and Adonis*, Plaisirs du Clavecin

Prochainement / Upcoming: Ensemble Member, Canadian Opera Company

**Brittany Rae**, soprano (Une voix)

de / from: Calgary, AB

Récemment / Recent: Lucia, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Opéra McGill

Prochainement / Upcoming: Soloist, *Mahler's Symphony No. 4*, Timepoint Ensemble

**Caroline Reynolds**, soprano (Blanche de la Force, doublure / cover)

de / from: Toronto, ON

Récemment / Recent: Démêloir, *Une demoiselle en Lotèrie*, Opéra McGill Horizons Project

Prochainement / Upcoming: Mavis, *City Workers in Love*, Opera NUOVA

**Stephanie Sedlbauer**, soprano (Madame Lidoine, doublure / cover)

de / from: Burlington, ON

Récemment / Recent: Suor Angelica, *Suor Angelica*, Centre for Opera Studies in Italy

Prochainement / Upcoming: Countess Almaviva, *Le nozze di Figaro*, Centre for Opera Studies in Italy

**Charlotte Siegel**, soprano (Mère Marie)

de / from: Toronto, ON

Récemment / Recent: Micaëla, *Carmen*, Summer Opera Lyric Theatre

Prochainement / Upcoming: Soloist, *Elijah*, McGill Symphony Orchestra

**Jonah Spungin**, baryton / baritone (Geôlier)

de / from: Ottawa, ON

Récemment / Recent: Eisenstein, *Die Fledermaus*, Opéra McGill

Prochainement / Upcoming: Elijah, *Elijah*, McGill Symphony Orchestra

**Ana Stieu**, soprano (Sœur Gertrude)

de / from: Toronto, ON

Prochainement / Upcoming: Opera Excerpts, Schulich School of Music

**Julia Surette**, soprano (Sœur St. Charles)

de / from: Brantford, ON

Récemment / Recent: Sally, *Thomas & Sally*, Opéra McGill Horizons Project

Prochainement / Upcoming: Atalanta, *Serse*, Accademia Europea Dell'Opera

**Stéphanie Turcotte**, soprano (Sœur Claire)

de / from: Montréal, QC

Prochainement / Upcoming: Opera Excerpts, Schulich School of Music

**Diego Valdez**, ténor / tenor (Chevalier de la Force)

de / from: El Paso, TX, USA

Récemment / Recent: Edgardo, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Opéra McGill

Prochainement / Upcoming: Tamino, *Die Zauberflöte*, Opéra Café Concert

**Madeleine Wendling**, soprano (Sœur Martha)

de / from: Vancouver, BC

Prochainement / Upcoming: Opera Excerpts, Schulich School of Music

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## **Discovering Madame Lidoine in Poulenc's Dialogues des Carmélites**

Date du récital/Date of recital: March 24, 2018

Nom/Name: insert your name: Jaclyn Grossman

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Dialogues des Carmélites, Francis Poulenc's second opera, was first performed in 1957 at La Scala. Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) was a French composer and pianist whose compositions included piano and chamber music, songs, ballets, three operas, and religious music. Many of his interests come together in the Dialogues des Carmélites' score, especially his love of opera, song, and religious music. Poulenc was a lover of Italian opera and appreciated bel canto (beautiful) singing. He was against the parlando style (singing in a speech-like fashion), and said he wanted his larger works to be sung like one would sing an Italian opera like Tosca or Otello. We see this strong Italian influence in many of the vocal lines throughout his Carmélites' score. As well as composing, Poulenc was an accomplished pianist. He was celebrated for his collaborative work, especially with baritone Pierre Bernac.

In 1953 Ricordi introduced Poulenc to the Carmélites story, inspiring the composition of his opera. The opera's libretto was written by Poulenc and is based on the unproduced screenplay by George Bernanos. The original text takes inspiration from Gertrud von Le Fort's short story "Die Letzte am Schaffold," written in 1931. Le Fort's work depicts the story of the fictional character Blanche de le Force and the nuns of the Carmélites order in Compiègne, France who were guillotined during the French Revolution for their religious beliefs. Poulenc felt a strong duty to tell this story in an effective and honourable way. In 1953 he said, "I am working like a madman, I do not go out, I do not see anyone... 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."

Le Fort based her short story on the memoir written by Mère Marie, the only Carmélite nun to survive from the Compiègne convent. The memoir tells the story of the sixteen Carmélite nuns who offered themselves as martyrs, falling victim to the restoration of peace during the Reign of Terror. On October 28, 1789, three months after the fall of the Bastille, a law was passed suspending religious practice in France. This disallowed the nuns from practicing their religion and barred novices from entering religious communities. Between 1789 and 1792 church property was confiscated, religious garments were forbidden, and the ban on religious practice

became permanent. The Carmélite nuns separated into small groups and prayed in private, finally making a pact of martyrdom, which was proposed by their Prioress, Madame Lidoine. They hoped that with their sacrifice they would revive Catholicism in France. On June 22, 1794 the sixteen Carmélite nuns were arrested and taken to La Conciergerie prison in Paris, where they were finally guillotined on July 17, 1794. It is said that their actions were crucial in swaying the public opinion and bringing about the fall of the rule of the Robespierre and the Reign of Terror, which ended days later.

The opera is set largely in a recitative style, meaning the music is written in a declamatory fashion that mimics normal speech-like patterns. That being said, one must remember to take care to sing this declamatory music in a *bel canto* style like one would with an Italian opera. Poulenc consciously shows changes in the mind and heart through subtle yet distinct modulations or changes in the orchestra. The opera is mostly tonal, providing a strong musical centre for the listener. This works against Poulenc's typical compositional style, leading him to say, "You must forgive my Carmélites – it appears they can only sing tonal music." Poulenc also employs the musical concept of motifs; musical themes that represent specific people or ideas. Many of the characters in the operas have their own musical themes or colours. A significant example of this is Sister Constance's light and spirited music which matches her youthful and vibrant personality.

The role that I am singing in the opera is Madame Lidoine, the New Prioress of the Carmélite convent. She enters the opera in Act Two after the death of the Old Prioress, Madame de Croissy. In the opera, while Mère Marie, the sub-prioress, is eager to take a vow of martyrdom, Madame Lidoine urges patience and humility. She reminds the nuns that God chooses his martyrs, and it is not the decision of the individual. However, when Madame Lidoine is away Mère Marie persuades the nuns to take the vow of martyrdom. Lidoine joins them when they are arrested in the third act, and is the first nun to die by guillotine. Contrary to Poulenc's opera, the memoir written by Mère Marie states that Madame Lidoine is the one who convinces the nuns to take a vow of martyrdom. Furthermore in the opera Madame Lidoine is the first nun to die, however, in real life Lidoine was the last. She blessed each nun as they went to their death, ensuring their comfort.

Poulenc based the vocal line of Madame Lidoine (the New Prioress) on Desdemona in Verdi's *Otello* written in 1887 (Semcesen, 2013). Both roles are sopranos that require voices which can sing with sweet tenderness, but also deliver strong and powerful vocal lines. Lidoine

delivers long and noble speeches in both acts two and three, which are considered to be the only “arias” in the opera. In the opera, Lidoine is a righteous woman who persistently stresses right and wrong. Her music is more restrained and lyric than the Old Prioress, which represents her maternal qualities. We see this especially in her Act Three speech, when she comforts the other nuns after they’ve been arrested. In her music, Poulenc carefully ensures that the text is set effectively to music both in terms of the meanings and syllabic emphasis.

In the culminating scene of the opera, Poulenc employs the intensity of the full orchestra, chorus, and soloists. In this scene the nuns begin their journey to the scaffold while singing the prayer “Salve Regina” (“Hail holy Queen” to the Virgin Mary). The prayer is sung in a simple chant-like rhythm in unison, creating a similar quality to a Gregorian chant (sacred vocal music from the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries). The orchestra provides repeating figures, relentless ostinato (repeating figures) in the low strings, and a pulsing minor third motion, contrasting the nun’s prayer. Throughout the piece the audience can hear the vicious sound of the guillotine at irregular intervals so one is never prepared for it. With each slashing of the blade another voice from the nun’s chorus drops out until the listener is left with only the voice of Sister Constance. She is then joined by her friend Blanche de la Force who alone sings the prayer “Veni Creator Spiritus” (“Come Holy Spirit”), devoting herself and her life to God.

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Upgrading the Role of Women in Opera: Poulenc's *Les Dialogues des Carmelites*

Throughout the evolution of European opera, male composers and librettists have often portrayed women as objects to be fought for, won, and had. Francis Poulenc found an interesting way to combat the overarching sexism in the operatic literature by portraying the lives and deaths of respected women of great social and political power: nuns. Poulenc's three-act opera, *Les Dialogues des Carmelites*, composed in 1956, explores the lives of the sixteen Carmelites of Compiègne, who during the French Revolution, martyred themselves in the face of the murderous wave that was the bloodthirsty mob of the new Republic of France.

The portrayal of nuns in opera up to this point had been tainted by scandal – they were either mothers of illegitimate children who were banished to a convent in disgrace, such as in Puccini's *Suor Angelica*, women who were toying with the idea of taking the veil because were tired of being used and abused by men such as Elvira in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, or nubile young women, held captive by religious tyranny such as in Berton's *Les Rigueurs du Clotre*. *Les Dialogues des Carmelites* stands alone as the only opera about nuns in which the women, especially the main character, take the veil for the glorification of God and for their own personal fulfillment.

During the Enlightenment (1685–1815), scientific thinking challenged the role of God, and the role of the state challenged the authority of the church. The backlash of Enlightenment ideas, which included anti-aristocrat, anti-Catholic, and anti-clerical notions, coupled with European misogyny, was a great threat to the Catholic Church and especially to its least protected order, the nuns. During the French Revolution of 1789-1799, the Assemblée nationale issued many decrees in order to suppress the practice of Catholicism, until the eventual order for the governmental redistribution of all ecclesiastical property in 1790. In 1791, the wearing of religious garments was banned.<sup>1</sup> In contemporaneous printed and performed public satire, male religious figures were often portrayed as unsavory, devilish, untrustworthy villainous characters, whereas nuns were portrayed insatiably hypersexual figures in amatory literature and were socially mocked by incendiary and lewd cartoons, performances, and writings.<sup>2</sup>

The Carmelites of Compiègne were especially vulnerable to the wrath of the new Republic as they were female, Catholic, royalist, papist, and had strong monetary and social ties to the aristocracy, having been given stipends, gifts, and occasionally wards by wealthy families, including gifts from the Dauphine, Marie Antoinette<sup>3</sup>. Although their convent was confiscated in 1792, they continued to practice their devotions in secret for two years before being arrested.

The martyrdom of The Carmelites of Compiègne occurred during the year-long Reign of Terror (1793-1794), a gruesome period of public executions that left more than 1,300 people who were undesirable to the new Republic beheaded by guillotine. The sisters were arrested in 1794 and charged with treason and conspiracy among other crimes. At their trial, they refused to

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Herrold, "Francis Poulenc's Dialogues des Carmélites: an historical, literary, textual, musical analysis." (Rochester, 1975), 29.

<sup>2</sup> Corrinne Harol, *Enlightened Virginity in Eighteenth-Century Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 22.

<sup>3</sup> William Bush. *To Quell the Terror: The Mystery of the Vocation of the Sixteen Carmelites of Compiègne Guillotined July 17, 1794*. (Washington, D.C.: Ics Publications, 2013.), 32

recant and boldly accepted the charges against them, choosing to make themselves an example of Catholic constancy by means of immolation and to die martyrs of the faith. They sang hymns as they gracefully marched to the guillotine on July 17<sup>th</sup>, 1794<sup>4</sup>.

Poulenc took elements from this actual event and incorporated them into his work, including the reported singing of *Salve Regina* as the nuns were lead to their deaths, the fact that the last surviving nun was Marie of the Incarnation,<sup>5</sup> and the period of time after the nuns were evicted from their convent wherein they wore plain clothes and worshipped in secrecy. The main character of the opera is fictional but her character helps knit the nuns and the French Revolution on a personal level. Aristocrat-turned-nun, Blanche de la Force, originated in Gertrude von Le Fort's *The Song at the Scaffold*, a fictional work based on the Carmelites of Compiègne. Georges Bernanos reinterpreted her work for a screenplay of *The Song at the Scaffold* in 1947. The manuscript was ultimately published as play under the title *Dialogues des Carmelites*. Poulenc wrote the libretto for the opera after Bernanos' interpretation.

The female characters in *Dialogues* are multidimensional, fully developed entities. Even the lesser characters are named, giving them identity and complexity beyond their vocation. The emotional complexity of life within the convent is represented by the motives that appear throughout the score representing myriad of emotional states including fear, anxiety, panic, nobility, honor, and divinity<sup>6</sup>. Poulenc's compositional approach to the work relied mostly on the text and Poulenc set the sung lines according to French prosody, giving the work a truly intimate speech-like ambience, this the title *Dialogues* is profoundly fitting.

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<sup>4</sup> William Bush. *To Quell the Terror: The Mystery of the Vocation of the Sixteen Carmelites of Compiègne Guillotined July 17, 1794*. (Washington, D.C.: Ics Publications, 2013.) 12

<sup>5</sup> Gail Elizabeth Lowther, "A Historical, Literary, and Musical Analysis of Francis Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites*," (Bowling Green, 2010), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Gail Elizabeth Lowther, "A Historical, Literary, and Musical Analysis," 47.

Poulenc first explores the mysterious inner sanctum of the women of Carmel with the death of the Old Prioress in Act I, which is incredibly painful and drawn out, and we see the complexity of her personal relationships with the other sisters of varying ranks, with herself, her faith, and her God. The main character, Blanche, is a bit unhinged and fearful of mundane things, yet capable of great strength. Her strength of will is so absolute that she abandons her life of luxury in favor of being part of the convent, and even after floundering with her decision to sacrifice herself, eventually rejects an offer of salvation from her gruesome end in favor of solidarity with her sisters. Sister Constance eerily predicts that she and Blanche will die young, while somehow maintaining her whimsical and foolhardy girlish charm. Mother Marie of the Incarnation proves to be a force to be reckoned with, secondarily commanding the convent with an iron clad constancy, however she disappoints us when we least expect it. Even the tertiary characters are made interesting. Sister Matilde, is given her individuality, portrayed as a sassy, opinionated young woman. Mother Jeanne is the oldest nun, lending strength and wisdom to the convent when it is necessary. The men in this libretto are conversely flat in their personalities. They are merely foils to counterbalance the female characters. Blanche's father and brother are symbols of the defeatism of the bourgeois class of the French Revolution. The Priest is rendered spiritually anemic in the face of the great sacrifice that is made by the nuns.

*Les Dialogues des Carmelites* is not only revolutionary in the portrayal of nuns in opera, but also defies the often poor characterization of women as simply foils for their male operatic counterparts. The work is a milestone for gender equality in operatic character development. Poulenc, a devout Catholic, despite being at odds with the Church due to his homosexuality, took it upon himself to humanize these religious women and sympathetically portray them as artfully constructed characters.

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Date du recital/Date of recital: March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2018

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*Dialogues des Carmélites* Program Notes- A Look at Mère Marie

Francis Poulenc's (1899-1963) opera, *Dialogues des Carmélites*, follows the story of a Carmelite convent's struggle during the height of the French Revolution in Compiègne. It was written for La Scala in 1957 in Italian, and then later translated into French, with a libretto based on Georges Bernanos's screenplay.

The story of the Carmélite nuns has been through many adaptations such as screenplays and novels, but is originally based on the memoir of Mère Marie (Mother Marie of the Incarnation), who was the only surviving nun in the order. The Carmélite Order was established in 1647, comprising more than 60 Carmélite convents all over France. They spent the majority of their time in contemplative prayer. (Carley,8)

The Reign of Terror during the French Revolution sought to destroy the power of the church and overthrow the monarchy in France, which is the circumstance of what led to the beheading of sixteen Carmelite nuns on July 17<sup>th</sup>, 1774.

Individuals involved in, or practicing, Christian rites were executed; churches were closed and destroyed; religious educational institutions were shut down; public and private worship was banned; and, priests and nuns were forbidden from performing religious rites. (Carley, 15)

This history is the basis of *Dialogues des Carmélites*. It is the story of the only convent that survived after all others dissolved in France. In 1774 the Compiègne convent remained to openly oppose the Reign of Terror and practice their religion in secret. They took a vow of martyrdom in the name of God hoping it would restore peace to France. When they were discovered they were raided by revolutionaries, arrested, imprisoned, and finally condemned to death.

Poulenc is known as one of the most influential French composers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His obsession with Italian operatic singing mixed with his love of the French language made his compositions stand apart from his contemporaries. He especially loved writing for voice, and collaborated a lot with his friend, singer Pierre Bernac who even went as far as providing him with advice during his writing of *Dialogues des Carmélites*. It is interesting to note that Poulenc had a mental breakdown in the middle of writing this opera because of his religious background and the struggles the nuns faced regarding belief during the opera. (Carley, 9). Poulenc has a way of setting French text to music that is true to the spoken language, while still amplifying emotion. In *Dialogues*, he enhances the themes of aristocracy, tyranny, and most importantly fear of self, fear of death, and fear of God, that are already present in Bernanos screenplay. He uses a large orchestra in a way that never obscures either text or singer, to ensure that the text can be heard. His reduction for piano that Opera McGill is using is still equally compelling and enchanting because the dialogue and composition expertly speaks for itself, despite the spare accompaniment.

The character I play, Mère Marie is the Assistant Prioress, meaning she is the messenger and communicator between all of the characters, making her essential to propel the drama. Her name, Mother Marie of the Incarnation is significant to her character as she attempts to be a perfect embodiment of Christ. This name choice comes from her upbringing mentioned in *The Song at the Scaffold*, a novel written by Gertrude Von Le Fort in 1931. Mother Marie is of royal blood. She is the illegitimate daughter of a French Prince, and she fought hard to be allowed to join the convent after growing up at court. “She was seized by a burning desire to expiate the sins of court (to which she owed her life)” (Le Fort, 32). As Jesus did before her, she wanted to sacrifice her life to pay for the sins of many, and in her case specifically, the sins of court life. In a plot that centres around questioning God and fearing death, she is the constant reminder of true faith and belief. This idea of her undying belief in God is perhaps reflective of the fact that she is the only surviving nun in the opera and real life. Mère Marie serves as this constant stable hope until the very end. She juxtaposes characters like the Old Prioress, who questions life and God as she dies, and Blanche de la Force (the novice Mère Marie takes under her charge), who is terrified of everything, even fear itself. When the revolutionaries raid their convent Mère Marie is a main force in convincing the nuns to die as martyrs. When Blanche gets scared and runs away, Mère Marie runs after Blanche and convinces her to come back to the convent. Mère

Marie's tragedy is in not making it back to die with the other nuns, because she is trying to find Blanche at the exact time the other nuns are arrested. This short last scene features her most dramatic music in terms of range and emotion. It is the only time her music is not carefully measured and thought out. Her vow to God does not come true for her, and even though the Priest reminds her that it is of God's will, this news is truly devastating. Mère Marie is hard on the outside, and soft on the inside. I have decided to base my character on my mother; a strong Trinidadian woman who knows who she is, what she believes in, and is unstoppable when it comes to getting what she wants. However, she's incredibly gentle on the inside, generous, and ultimately selfless. This is everything Mère Marie should be. This is all shown expertly by the variety of ways she sings. Poulenc uses two main writing styles in Dialogues, recitativo (speech-like), and arioso (sung speech). Mère Marie mainly uses recitativo, and often speaks measuredly with a lot of inflection to get her message across. Mère Marie is the epitome of saintliness. She is strong, selfless, and devoted to her convent and God. One might think she was purposely saved to share this incredibly chilling and heroic story with the world, to acknowledge the efforts fought by strong women throughout "HERstory". Enjoy the show!

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Francis Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites* was commissioned by Teatro alla Scala in Milan and premiered in 1957 with an Italian translation. *Carmélites* would later get its original French debut in Paris later that year, and was met with immediate success and praise despite its rather serious story, taboo topics, and unique harmonic language unique to composers like Poulenc at the time. The opera follows the story of the nuns of the Carmelite order during the last days of bloody Reign of Terror during the French Revolution. The libretto is an adaption of Georges Bernanos' dialogue from the scenario for film of the same name, which was adapted from the novella *Die Letzte am Schafott* by Gertrud von Le Fort. The central, but fictional, character of Blanche de la Force comes from the novella and is followed closely throughout to tell the story of the Martyrs of Compiègne.

The opening scene of the opera introduces the Marquis de la Force and his son the Chevalier de la Force that set the tone of severity of the events surrounding them, and the effects that they are having on those targeted by the bloodlust of the masses. Poulenc's unique and broad orchestration is evident in the aria of the Marquis, with multiple types of percussion

and ever-shifting, cubic, jazz-influenced harmonies to further highlight the haunting flashback to the night Blanche's mother died in childbirth. The score even calls for a real guillotine to fall in the final scene as each nun goes to her fate, reducing the chorus to a progressively smaller ensemble until there is only silence. Poulenc's writing for the voice is more lyric and serious than other vocal work like the playful *La Courte Paille* he is known for. His writing, though at times following the style of jumping harmony and cubic melodies, at times is also reminiscent of the composers, such as Verdi, that he dedicates and mentions as his inspirations in the front of the score. Though we see this inspiration only in a few scenes, like the solo lines of Chevalier and Blanche in their act two duet, the lyrical and majestic writing that could have come from an earlier Verdi opera is clear and unmistakable, giving the singers a chance to shine outside of the difficult maneuvering of harmony.

Throughout the opera Poulenc employs a variety of motifs for the nuns, panic, the Reign of Terror, and themes for characters. One will always know whenever Blanche enters or is about to, or once Mother Marie appears, or when the nuns sing religious motet-like music in church and when marching to the scaffold. The identity of each motif, specifically Blanche's, is always slightly modified to fit the underlying tone of any given moment, whether it be when she is resolute in her faith during a prayer, or when it warps into a lyrical love melody as she wavers in faith because of her taboo romantic love for her brother. The use of motif is so heavily used throughout that the extremely serious and tragic moments, like the disturbingly realistic death of the old prioress, are either completely morphed from the originals, or are hauntingly left suspended above silence in the orchestra. Poulenc uses these techniques masterfully and maximizes the emotional impact of each moment to leave a lasting effect on the listeners.

This opera comes together as a masterfully integrated work with interplay between music and drama. Knowing that Poulenc came from a wealthy and devout catholic family, we

are given insight in to why he had such interest in this story, and why there is so much detail in the score to give the desired effect. We know the result of these tragic events resulted in the beatification of these nuns because their faith in the face of death gave way to what is regarded as a miracle that ended the Reign of Terror days later, which might have particularly struck Mr. Poulenc. This story also highlights the birth of a democratic France, the tragedies of those who lived and died because of it, and the role that the church would play in a time of chaos. The resulting work that captures this tragic tale gives us an insight in to why this struck Poulenc to write such an intricate piece of music, providing a reflection on his upbringing and culture. *Carmélites* is a jewel in the operatic repertoire for its unapologetic realism in both drama and vocal writing, its unique mid 20<sup>th</sup> century musical language, and bold approach to some of the darker parts of human history.

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