In the Parisian world of musical composition between World War I and World War II, Francis Poulenc was not deemed a first-tier composer. Foremost at that level were Igor Stravinsky and Darius Milhaud. By 1958, however, when Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic wanted to commission a work for the prestigious 1962 opening of Lincoln Center, they turned to Poulenc, for in the postwar era serious listeners had at last discovered in a significant number of Poulenc’s works the impressive transcendent qualities that make him a great composer. To be sure, he is not always that, but even those compositions that do not rise to the level of greatness are still music that profoundly enriches and embellishes civilized life. The “American” Stravinsky on one occasion wrote to Poulenc: “You are truly good, and that is what I find again and again and again in your music.”

Perhaps no two works illustrate Poulenc’s artistic span so well as his operas Les Mamelles de Tiresias and Dialogues des Carmelites. Frequently commentators try to explain the distinctions between these two musico-dramatic expressions by setting up polarities: satire versus romance, comedy versus tragedy, word versus music,
sensation versus intellect, naturalism versus ceremony, all of which ultimately, they suggest, intimate a confrontment of the ridiculous and the sublime. Since, however, Poulenc’s two operas will not easily reside within the confines of categories, any of these qualifying terms prove to be more confounding than clarifying.

The words that best reveal these two works are “profane” and “sacred.” In our context added to the generally accepted meaning of “profane”—secular, common, unhallowed—is the notion that the profane interprets given characters and their actions. Sacred’s immediately recognized definition—dedicated, set apart, consecrated—is expanded to include a mode of dramatization. Ethan Mordden in *Opera in the Twentieth Century, Sacred, Profane, Godot* says in this regard: “Doubtless the best example of the sacred is Wagnerian music drama (whether Christian, pagan, or, as in *Die Meistersinger*, middle class), with its mesmerization of the spectator through the sheer power of its music.” The italics are mine. How Poulenc’s *Les Mamelles* and *Dialogues* fit here will take some telling.

In June 1917, Guillaume Apollinaire’s drama *Les Mamelles de Tiresias* (The Breasts of Tiresias) premiered in Montmartre to an audience that included Picasso, Cocteau, Satie, Matisse, and Poulenc. These conspicuous attendees were artistic soul mates of Apollinaire, a leader in the restless period of technical innovation and experiments in the arts, the writer of bizarre poems and art criticism that advanced the cause of Cubism, and the coiner of the term surrealism. With Picasso he applied himself to the task of defining the principles of a Cubist aesthetic in literature as well as in painting, a task they never completed. Cocteau in this group became the primary spokesman for surrealism. Satie reacted against the lush and the sensuous in music until his simplified style for years relegated his music in the eyes and ears of “traditionalist” critics to children’s pieces. The same was true for Poulenc’s early works that lived and breathed childhood but that were never childish. Matisse was kin as the outstanding representative of Fauvism with its bold distortions. They all had gathered to witness the absurd drama Apollinaire had crafted.
This remnant of early-middle Dadaism is a tale of Therese, a discontented wife who grows a beard, sends her breasts in the forms of balloons into the air to explode them, rechristens herself Tiresias, and then vanishes. Her cast-off husband decides to have children without his wife’s help—it is his patriotic duty—and within a few hours has given birth to 40,049 infants. Tiresias in the end returns, now an advocate for family life and child bearing. She and her husband urge all who can hear them to have offspring and are so convincing that A Fat Lady and A Bearded Man, displaced from the circus to the audience, chime in as two more voices to convince their fellow viewers to follow suit.

Initially Poulenc was merely though thoroughly amused by this gender-swapping story and confessed that he had no idea that the farce would hold a significant position in his oeuvre. By 1930, however, when he decided to compose his opera and then by 1947 when he had completed and produced *Les Mamelles*, he had identified so intensely with Apollinaire’s surrealist drama that it was second-nature for him “to see in it all the symbols [anyone wishes] and to tease out a thousand meanings as though it were a Delphic oracle,” the dramatist’s exhortation in the play’s preface.

Thus, not far beneath the surface of Poulenc’s opera are manifestations of his homosexuality that profoundly complicated his life with liaisons and "breakups" across a range of social strata; his having fathered a daughter, whose mother Freddy is the dedicatee of one of the songs in his cycle *Tel jour, telle nuit*; his own emphasizing of role reversals also apparent in another song “Berceuse” in which a teenaged girl babysits an infant while the father is at Mass and the mother is at a cabaret; his acknowledgment of feminism, evident elsewhere as in his numbering a woman, Louise de Vilmorin, among his list of empathetic poets, a recognition that “bears on the ambivalence of imagination and gender that conditioned his art to climax, in 1958, in his one-woman, one-act opera on Cocteau’s *La voix humaine*;” his exploration of the interior dimension of love so poignantly presented in the final song of *Tel jour, telle nuit* in which
the woman, at once lover and stranger, stresses that not belonging is requisite to maturated love; and of the absurdity of life, particularly with the abasement of France by the German occupation during the war years in which Les Mamelles was written. Melancholy, discontent, and fear simmer beneath the work’s ludicrous surface elements. Every one of these suggested meanings springing from specific aspects of the opera could be developed into a full essay outside the parameters of my purpose here, but within my confines they work together to make clear the profane nature of the opera and in so doing fulfill Poulenc’s most cherished dream: “If my tomb could be inscribed: ‘Here lies Francis Poulenc, the musician of Apollinaire and Eluard,’ I would consider that my greatest claim to fame.”5 Apollinaire died young—just one year after his drama had been mounted in Montmartre—and Eluard, the foremost French surrealist poet of World War II, then became Poulenc’s principal source of song texts. It was Eluard’s surrealist poems that directed Poulenc to the darker depths of the human psyche that theretofore had been the most secret part of himself.

The death of Apollinaire was the first of four deaths that had a momentous impact on Poulenc’s life. The second was that of Raymonde Linossier, Poulenc’s childhood friend who had taken Francis to Adrienne Monnier’s bookshop in the rue de l’Odeon where he met Apollinaire and Eluard as well as Gide, Claudel, and other gifted artists. Raymonde was, as Poulenc confessed in his letters, the only woman he ever wanted to marry, so understandably her death in 1930 left indelible scars on his emotional life already controlled by manic-depressive cycles. It is the third death, though, that bears most directly on the topic at hand. That was the death of Pierre-Octave Ferroud. Ferroud was a sensitive impressionistic composer, a critic for various periodicals, himself the creator of a ballet and a comic opera Chirurgie, but most of all a close and trusted friend of Poulenc. Ferroud was decapitated in an automobile accident. Already hovering on the brink of another nervous breakdown, Poulenc slipped toward insanity when he learned of this “decollation
“atroce,” as he referred to it. To emerge from the “Slough of Despond” where he had sunk, Poulenc made a pilgrimage to Notre Dame de Rocamadour. What occurred there is variously interpreted by commentators; some say Poulenc had a mystical experience; others say only that his Catholic faith was revived. For Claude Rostand who said that in Poulenc there was something of the monk and something of the rascal at Rocamadour the monk assumed preeminence. Poulenc himself, speaking in a like vein but with more directness, pronounced a self-judgment when he said of Max Jacob, the poet whom he had set in his first song cycle of the 1930s, Cing poemes de Max Jacob, that he vacillated between God and the devil. In Poulenc’s case that was before Rocamadour, for whatever the nature of his experience was there, it seems to have established a steadfastness in his religious faith for the rest of his life. Artistically that steadfastness culminated in several major sacred compositions, among them, at least ostensibly, Dialogues des Carmelites, often considered Poulenc’s masterpiece.

To finish my point about the critical-impact deaths in Poulenc’s life, I note briefly here the fourth in the quartet of deaths that I referred to earlier. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Poulenc was entangled in a six-year relationship with the traveling salesman Lucien Roubert. This liaison concluded bitterly in 1954, driving Poulenc to a complete nervous breakdown. These were the final years of his composing Dialogues and the extended periods of psychological treatment with the months of not composing they induced, added to, and intensified his mental burdens. Then, in 1955 Roubert became seriously ill with cancer and died in two months’ time. In the final stages of Lucien’s illness, Poulenc was his constant caregiver, but despite his complex of problems he finished writing Dialogues des Carmelites in August 1955. That he could scarcely differentiate between his art and his life became evident in September of 1955 when he wrote to the Carmelite Sisters at Compiegne asking for prayers for the dying Lucien. In his mind he knew these nuns well and could turn to them for help because he had “lived”
with them unceasingly and intimately in composition over many months.

The Carmelite nuns that come to life as they go to their deaths in Poulenc’s opera were introduced to the literary world in 1931 by Gertrud von Le Fort, author of Die Letzte am Schafotl (The Last at the Scaffold). This novella was set in the French Revolution shortly after Louis XVI in 1789 had formed the States-General, a weak governmental assembly intended to represent clergy, nobility, and common people. The impoverished commoners, however, felt that their share of power was not proportionate to their great numbers so they formed the “National Assembly” and rather quickly dominated the government. The National Assembly had its own factions, though, and as they liquidated the French nobles they purged many Revolutionists who were deemed too conservative. Once this bloodletting began it escalated until in the period from June 1793 to July 1794 more than 10,000 persons were executed. This was the Reign of Terror. Because the Catholic Church was closely identified with the monarchy, priests and nuns were prime targets in the revolt against authority, and since the Carmelite Convent at Compiegne had received particular favors from the King they were singularly selected as victims for radical retribution.

The true story that emerged from this background to become the basis for Gertrud von Le Fort’s novella was in time adapted as a screenplay by George Bernanos. It also was the source of Emmet Lavery’s play Song at the Scaffold. Poulenc used Bernanos’s poetically luminous text as the foundation of his libretto and with his superb skill as a songwriter created a vocal and prosodic masterpiece. The plot centers around Blanche la Force, whose life is and always has been controlled by fear. No longer wishing to struggle with a world in which she feels herself a stranger, she seeks admission to the convent as a novice. The Mother Superior explains that the Order is not an escape from life and that Blanche can only find peace through self-mastery. That advice is ironic for the Mother Superior who herself is fatally ill; as she approaches death she is appallingly fearful.
Blanche’s witnessing of her harrowing death only exacerbates her own fears. Before dying, the Mother Superior entrusts Blanche to the care of Mother Marie of the Incarnation, a subprioress who repeatedly had argued that Blanche, whom she had adjudged incapable—even unworthy—of a vocation, should be dismissed. Then amidst these internal contentions Blanche’s brother, a Chevalier who is forced to leave France, visits the convent to take leave of his sister as well as to urge her to return to her father, the Marquis, who is at this point alone. She makes clear that she now has a higher loyalty and cannot accede to her brother’s urgings. Mother Marie, who had anticipated becoming the new prioress, finds herself with keen disappointment still the subprioress, but she is now under a new superior, Mme. Lidoine, who is a plain spoken woman of humble birth and by all outward signs Marie’s inferior. These private concerns are quickly displaced as the Revolution reaches the convent and a mob at the gate demands entrance. An official accompanying the mob reads the decree of the Legislative Assembly dissolving all religious orders.

In a last desperate move the Bishop has summoned the prioress to Paris, perhaps to work out a plan of action, and in her absence Mother Marie takes charge of the convent. Marie proposes that the nuns take a vow of martyrdom, her own most cherished dream. They accept the proposal and go to the chapel to consecrate their vow. Divested of their religious garb, as the decree commanded, they leave the convent, but Blanche is not with them. She has returned to the mansion of her ancestors to work as a servant. Mother Marie, having reevaluated her earlier thoughts about Blanche comes looking for her in an effort to persuade her to rejoin the nuns with whom she thinks she will be safer. Blanche refuses and here we learn that in the past week the Marquis has been guillotined.

In a street near the Bastille, Blanche hears that the Carmelites of Compiegne have been arrested. Even more serious news is that the imprisoned nuns have been sentenced to execution; as Mother Marie learns of the sentence she feels that she should join them in
death. The chaplain reminds Mother Marie that God decides who shall live and who shall die. The Carmelites, led by the Mother Superior who has returned from Paris, go to the guillotine singing the *Salve Regina*, but the fullness of musical sound decreases as the chant is diminished one voice at a time with the fall of the guillotine. When only one voice remains at the scaffold Blanche makes her way through the crowd, takes up the hymn, and mounts the scaffold to meet death with no trace of fear. (A historical note: just ten days after the execution of the sixteen Carmelite nuns, the Reign of Terror collapsed.)

Any opera aficionado who reads this libretto even cursorily is immediately struck by the absence of the plot elements that have become standard fare in grand opera. There is no captivating love story as in Smetana’s *The Bartered Bride* or Puccini’s *The Girl of the Golden West*. No dishonorable family feud lurks in the background as in Gounod’s *Romeo and Juliet* or Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*. No unlikely instances of mistaken identity occur as in Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro*, with the intrigues of Cherubino dressing as Suzanna and the Countess and Suzanna exchanging costumes. Nor are there the stabbings of lovers or finally discovered manipulators of situation and/or characters found in opera after opera. Our supposed aficionado, if only half attentive to the score, also recognizes the absence of the high-flown arias that traditionally interrupt the action so that the star soprano might set herself to deliver high C’s. I shall return to this point shortly.

If *Dialogues des Carmelites* is not traditionally “operatic,” neither is it traditionally “sacred.” I hinted at this earlier when I said that *Dialogues* was ostensibly sacred. The fact, for example, that the opera’s characters are nuns who accept martyrdom, or that Mother Marie of the Incarnation softens her attitude toward Blanche, who can indeed be trying, or that Blanche overcomes her neurotic fear may suggest with some merit that such elements are indications of an influence beyond the bounds of human cognition or thought. Poulenc, though, does not create the encompassing aura of transcendence, of
attributes above or independent of the universe requisite for the conventional classification of sacred. The chaplain does tell Mother Marie that it is God who decides who shall live or die, but that is hardly sufficient to create an overriding recognition of people’s destinies being controlled by a higher unseen power, especially when one recalls the Mother Superior’s telling Blanche that self-mastery, not divine intervention, will provide peace. When the prioress dies, Sister Constance, Blanche’s very young and light-hearted companion, the child-nun, if you will, postulates that God does give each individual the death that fits him or her but that sometimes a mistake is made as in a cloakroom when the wrong garment is handed out. That certainly is not infallible divine control. So with Poulenc’s teetering between world and spirit and a consequent hedging of the customary thinking concerning sacred, one turns with a bit more confidence to Mordden’s definition that says sacred is a distinct mode of dramatization.

Fundamental to that mode in this instance is that the story is structured in dialogue. The opera begins not with a crowd scene—which in the hands of a lesser artist would almost certainly have commanded the stage as the curtain rose—but with the dialogue between the Marquis and the Chevalier, primarily concerning Blanche’s fear. Then follow the dialogues between the prioress and Blanche, between Blanche and Constance, of the Sisters among themselves, and on and on until they reach the most heart-wrenching dialogue in the final scene when all of the Carmelites sing the Salve Regina, their dialogue with the Virgin Mary.

The inexorable movement of these dialogues through the opera’s acts, scenes, and interludes makes the libretto unrelentingly dramatic even though the opera has nothing even close to a DeMillean pageantry like that in an Aida production. Further, Poulenc’s extraordinary skill in creating a fitting musical environment in which characters move and talk easily and convincingly evidences Nietzsche’s point that the Hexaclean power of music can invest a story with a new and most profound significance. Poulenc achieves
that significance in a musical fabric woven from a myriad of figures, patterns, keys, and chords. For instance, there are themes like the Old World theme of the introduction, pompously rhythmmed and grandly dissonant, that reappears often in various guises both positive and negative. Motifs like the fluctuation of sequential sevenths and diatonic concords create a double aural image appropriate for the dualistic character arising from the emotional ambiguities that pervade the opera. Open sevenths and nervously repeated thirds along with “wide ranging lines” with syncopated rhythmic figures and “flatward-tending modulations,” Mellers’s terms, accompany both anxiety and fortitude. Foreboding minor thirds or the dark key of B-flat minor house and surround the darkness of the old prioress, while elsewhere at appropriate moments the key of G, traditionally a key of benediction, consoles. In toto scores and scores of additional components are brought together to assert themselves beautifully in the opera from beginning to end. Such careful Poulencian wedding of music and theater makes *Dialogues des Carmelites* unique in the grand opera canon, and this distinct mode of dramatization makes it sacred in that the form reaches out to draw the viewer/hearer in. I suggest that all that is sacred has a like reaching out and drawing in.

As impressive as this fine, careful, inventive working of devices and techniques is, melody is still most important for Poulenc. He creates an unsurpassed vocal idiom by having meter modified by sense and music laid along the words with an unerring feel for natural declamation. This feel explains the prevalence of ariosos and the nearly complete absence of arias in *Dialogues des Carmelites*. Arioso is a form between song and recitative, often described as melodic declamation, while aria, in contrast, is an elaborate melodic composition that accents design, expression, and virtuosity, often at the expense of the text. So, when dialogue is the basic structural unit, understanding the text—not virtuoso display—becomes primary. In arioso Blanche tells her father about submission to God’s will; the prioress tells Blanche of her own infirmities; the chaplain tells
of having said his last Mass. On the other hand, the two solos of the second prioress in act 3, scene 3 in which the prioress talks to “her daughters” in prison are as close to arias as anything found in the opera. These solos, however, as directed by Poulenc’s performance instructions, are “very calm and gentle.”

Here let me sidestep a moment to comment about performance. Nearly thirty-five years ago at the Metropolitan Opera I heard the late Shirley Verrett sing the role of the second prioress. Ms. Verrett and I had sat side by side in English diction class at Juilliard when we were both working toward a diploma in voice. Even in those early years Shirley’s instrument, musicianship, and acting talent were singularly outstanding among a group of extraordinarily capable singers. A few days prior to the Met production I reference here I talked with Shirley about the possibility of my writing her biography and quickly learned that there was no such possibility. She was going to write an autobiography, which she did but not until the year 2003. That topic quickly dismissed, we conversed briefly about the upcoming Poulenc performance. Ms. Verrett left me with the impression—she never said so outrightly—that she insisted on the second prioress role because she, with “star” status, should sing the opera’s only arias. In her autobiography she says that the Met never knew her reasons for wanting to sing the second prioress and explains that she needed that role to “straightjacket” herself on stage. That long-after-the-fact explanation does not mesh with my sense of things from our most limited talk. Then in the performance, Ms. Verrett stood apart in her lush, mahogany-timbered, mezzo-soprano portrayal of a commonsense nun devoid of the passions that characterize both her predecessor and Mother Marie of the Incarnation. Poulenc created these arias for a soprano with a clear wafting sound to sing with delicate calm. Ms. Verrett, even in making the sign of the cross, was dramatically pretentious—not “straightjacketed”—almost as if she were practicing for the role of the druidic priestess in Bellini’s Norma, which she had learned and soon came to perform frequently. The point to stress here is that
merely having star status and the notes within one’s grasp are not sufficient to convey a character’s purpose and meaning in an opera, particularly one with sacred overtones. Poulenc the creator was a master at respecting a performer’s vocal resources vis-à-vis a given character, so in turn the performer of Poulenc roles must have, when required, a self-effacing or even a self-denying attitude in the presence of a character like the second prioress. Perhaps even as a writer of these self-indulgent lines I should heed more carefully my own performance-practice dictates, but these memories have sufficient bearing on my sacred/arioso/aria discussion to merit their recalling.

To this point in my discussion of Dialogues des Carmelites I have focused on the opera’s uniquely sacred dimension, and rightly so. But if I were to stop there the treatment would at best be partial, for this opera also embraces several significant this-worldly concerns. Most apparent, of course, is war. I noted that Les Mamelles was primarily composed (1944) when Allied troops landed in Normandy to do battle for the liberation of France, a crestfallen and physically battered nation, demoralized from being immersed in belligerence for the second time in a mere quarter century. The traumatic memories of those horrific years assert themselves with the Reign-of-Terror setting of Dialogues, and that world’s madness exhibits itself in the frenzied minds of the dying prioress and Blanche. Furthermore, Poulenc makes clear that war has destroyed not only individuals but also an ancestral way of life. The Marquis, the Chevalier, and Blanche’s ancestral home represent the Old World, but as the Marquis is guillotined and the Chevalier is exiled and Blanche returns home to be a mistreated servant rather than mistress of the house, that Old World is wiped away, never to be restored. In Mamelles thoughts of war lie just beneath the surface. In Dialogues, however, those thoughts are overt, for Poulenc wants to make clear, as Mother Marie says, that “to live is nothing when life is thoroughly debased.” In war “life has lost its meaning.”

An equally pronounced this-worldly concern is the presence of
a consuming fear. In this regard, of course, Blanche, though not the only exemplar, is front and center. In act 3, scene 2 she says: “I was born in fear, I have lived in fear and I still do. All the world despises fear.” At the same time, though, the whole world experiences and dwells on fear, a fact that brings to mind William Faulkner’s speech of acceptance for the 1950 Nobel Prize for Literature. There he said: “Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown up? . . . He [the writer, the opera composer] must teach himself that the basest of all things is to be afraid . . . leaving no room in his workshop for anything but the verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths . . . love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice.” To apply these words to the opera, one need only observe that if Faulkner had written them ten years later they might have been construed as specific to Poulenc and Dialogues des Carmelites.

Earlier, when noting that Dialogues stands alone in the world of grand opera because of the absence of “stock” plot elements, I began by citing a missing love story. What else, one might ask, should the opera-goer reasonably expect from a work that presents the lives of cloistered nuns? True, but that absence may be better explained by Poulenc’s disillusionment with eros and an intensified valuing of friendship. When Poulenc admitted that Raymonde Linossier was the only woman he ever wanted to marry, he was not talking of a sexual attachment. He was speaking of the bond of friendship that the Greeks held to be the epitome of human happiness. Raymonde’s death intensified his valuing of that relationship built on equity, in contrast to a sexual relationship in which one person basically seeks to wield power over another. Even the language used to express the idea of “romantic” love is that of confrontation and aggression: arrows are shot unerringly, the male pursues and conquers, and the female surrenders. In Dialogues it is the unfolding bond of friendship that explains the care of Sister Constance, the first prioress, and
Mother Marie for Blanche. In act 1, scene 3 Blanche shows herself to be less than likable, chiding Constance as childish, silly, and ridiculous while she laughs unpleasantly and speaks savagely and brusquely. Throughout these verbal assaults, however, Sister Constance, even though she thinks that Blanche “purposely came . . . to do [her] some harm,” never wavers in her gentle friendship. She is true to her name. When the first prioress bluntly and frankly tells Blanche of the severe rules of the Order in words that Blanche finds harsh, she speaks as that friend whom Nietzsche calls “the beautiful enemy,” the friend who speaks with complete candor. When Mother Marie pursues Blanche to urge her return to the Carmelites for her own safety, she does so “firmly but gently,” “with infinite gentleness,” and “nobly but with gentleness.” The firmness and nobleness show the insistence necessary for Aristotle’s friendship of utility, but the gentleness is the personal caring that makes Blanche cry because Mother Marie is “so nice.” In Dialogues such friendships are progressive, their efforts cumulative, and their results transformative. As my plot summary has told, Blanche does rejoin her sisters but as a “different” person—a friend with self-assurance and without fear. She at last exhibits the friendship that La Rouchefoucauldé, cynic though he was, claimed to be the only human bond that breaks the tyrannical cycle of self-love.

These kinds of friendships among the Sisters are also a Poulencian nod toward feminism. Traditionally—in Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and the countless thinkers who focused on their theme and followed in their train—friendship was held to be an attachment through exclusively male bonding. Even in our present decades the belief too often persists, as seen in the writings of social scientists such as Konrad Lorenz and Lionel Tiger, that the ordinary capacity of women to nurture and sustain the ties of friendship is deficient. Through time this bias has elevated the idea of “fraternity,” never “sorority,” to a noble relationship. In the French Revolution, “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” became the watchwords, particularly with the Jacobins, the Parisian name for Dominicans, at a point just
before the Reign of Terror. Such narrow meanings and expansive ramifications of fraternity were long brewing, far reaching, and directly connected with the time and story that Poulenc used for his opera. Consequently, the role of friendship, with its female bonding among the Carmelites, flies in the face of what is usually held to be a male prerogative with an exclusively male provenance.

This feminist undertone, no accident in Dialogues, becomes an overtly stated conviction when the new prioress tells the Carmelites that the courage of simple humble women is in no way inferior to that of kings and princes. Here, one’s immediate understanding of “courage” centers on the perils the nuns face in the Revolution, but a broader intent speaks to their being nuns in the first place. The Carmelites have autonomy and liberating power by constituting a monastic order in which their only vow of obedience is to the Mother Superior, not to a secular male state. These women have the courage to stay celibate and stand against the practice of pre-arranged marriages that would trap them in the cycle of childbearing (echoes of Les Mamelles de Tiresias). When the first prioress tells Blanche that the Order is not a refuge and does not watch over its members she then emphasizes that the members watch over the Order. They fulfill their identities and abandon any sense of powerlessness in sustaining an institution in which the hierarchies of sexual dominance are deliberately overturned. They are the quintessence of nonconfrontational feminism. Gertrude von LeFort, in her seminal novel, notes that the Revolution thought that by abolishing religious orders it was “liberating” nuns from their “imprisonment.” In truth, the ritual tradition that the Carmelites watch over liberates them from the fluctuations of a male-dominated society.  

From time to time, critics and commentators have observed that Dialogues des Carmelites is an opera that happens to be about religion but is not religious music. In arguing that beneath the surface story of martyrdom the opera is also about war, friendship, and feminism, and by noting that without trivializing, Poulenc makes the final atrocity a public testament to the private horror of the decapi-
tation of Ferroud, I show that the opera is about much more than religion. I have also made the point that Poulenc masterfully weds music and textual material so that this opera could not be religious music and still be true to the artistic union he strives to achieve.

In the end, these various subjective thrusts blend into an opera that is its own item. It is a dramatic reproduction of a historical disaster but the material is transformed so that even with the deaths of the sixteen nuns the opera is not bleak. As Blanche learns to love and goes to her death she recognizes the Order’s ethical and spiritual system that contravenes those human urges that are self-destructive if left unchecked. Consequently, once again despite the deaths, *Dialogues des Carmelites* is a celebration of the completeness we all hope to find in the lives given us to lead. This opera was created out of the abundance of Poulenc’s personal need, and perhaps because of that there is something that consoles the opera-goer for his or her own hurts and losses. Great artists are profoundly ambivalent men and women whose works can be interpreted in diverse, even opposing, ways; this is indeed true for Francis Poulenc, causing us difficulty in defining “sacred.” But whatever the selected definition is, in *Dialogues* Poulenc has overridden the profane with the sacred, which I choose to define here as being entitled to a reverence similar to that which attaches to holy things.

In assessing Poulenc’s artistic achievement one must accept from the start that the mythic character of his compositions is related to his personal history. Furthermore, as he relates his personal crises to world events he underscores the fact that the line demarcating music from life is mutable so that life’s emotional ambiguities invade his music with varying degrees of intensity. In similar fashion the line between the earthly and the ecclesiastical is often indistinct, largely because his steadfastness in faith does not mean unquestioned certainty. For example, in the third of the four *Laudes de Saint Antoine de Padoue*—not concert pieces but liturgical offerings—Poulenc pronounces that our sins are washed away, but the laud ends with the final chord unresolved, affixing a veritable
question mark. His faith provides fortitude, not serenity. His faith provides courage, apparent even in his merely writing the religious *Sept Repons des' Tenebrae* on sacred texts for Holy Week to fulfill the commission for the opulent fete of a spectacularly secular opening. Incidentally, Poulenc did not complete the work in time to have it performed at the opening of Lincoln Center, but that missing of the deadline was a result of his work pace, not a diminishing of courage. All in all Poulenc is an established antiestablishmentarian, but most of all he is, as Stravinsky said, a good composer. Truly good.

Notes


5. Ibid., 61.


7. See Mellers, *Francis Poulenc*, 102–28, for a thorough musical analysis of the nuances as well as main structures of *Dialogues des Carmelites*.
