

### 3. MUSIC CALLING FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: SOME REFLECTIONS ON POULENC'S SURREALIST WORK *LE BAL MASQUÉ*

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**Abstract:** *Grounding on Marx's and Freud's theories, Surrealists sought the liberation of the individual and the transformation of society. With this aim they brought together usual objects in unusual combinations, surprising the audience and giving them the opportunity to perceive reality with different eyes. This study reflects on a character of Jacob's and Poulenc's *Le bal masqué*, *Mademoiselle Malvina*, presented as epitome of the bourgeoisie and described in both text and music as duplicitous and superficial.*

**Key words:** *Surrealism, Breton, revolution, Mademoiselle Malvina, cantata*

#### 1. Surrealism as an artistic movement

Some years after the start of the Dada movement in 1915, which refused traditional Western values and organized “antiartistic”, shocking and provoking representations, André Breton and other intellectuals criticized Dada events as futile, and lacking revolutionary efficacy, being about to become institutionalized. Instead, these critics suggested to organize different, more incisive forms of socio-political and artistic dissent. The new movement was launched in 1924: Breton wrote and published the first *Manifeste du surrealisme*, which engaged in a critical and even polemical history of Dadaism, proclaiming Surrealism to be Dadaism's legitimate successor (Puchner 2006). In his 1924 *Manifeste*, Breton outlined Surrealism's commitment in the following way: “I believe in the future resolution of these two states of dream and reality, seemingly contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality” (Breton 1924). Combining Rimbaud's recommendation to “change life,” Marx's solicitation to “transform the world,” and Freud's interest in the unconscious, Surrealism sought the liberation of the individual and the transformation of society.

In 1929 Walter Benjamin so evaluated the movement: “Since Bakunin, Europe has lacked a radical concept of freedom. The Surrealists have one. They are the first to liquidate the sclerotic liberal-moral-humanistic ideal of freedom, because they are convinced that [here Benjamin quotes André Breton] “mankind's struggle for liberation in its simplest revolutionary form (which is, nevertheless, liberation in every aspect) remains the only cause worth serving” (Benjamin 1999, 215) The definitions of Surrealism and its followers given by some artists capture the core characteristics of the movement: the Czech surrealist painter Toyen described Surrealists as “a community of ethical views”,

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putting in relief that the participants in this movement shared a common moral basis refusing to conform to traditional standards; another surrealist painter, André Masson, called Surrealism “the collective experience of individualism”, and poet Antonin Artaud defined it “a new kind of magic” (Rosemont and Kelley 2009, 2). In 1929 Breton qualified Surrealism as the quest for “a certain mental point where life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the uncommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictory” (*La Révolution Surréaliste* 1929).

Grounding on this definition, David Gascoyne, the cofounder of the Surrealist Group in England in 1936, put in relief that: “It is the avowed aim of the surrealist movement to reduce and finally to dispose altogether of the flagrant contradictions that exist between dream and waking life, the ‘unreal’ and the ‘real’, the unconscious and the conscious, and thus to make what has hitherto been regarded as the special domain of poets, the acknowledged common property of all. So far as the Surrealists themselves are either writers or painters, it is also at the same time their aim to extend indefinitely the limits of ‘literature’ and ‘art’ by continually tending to do away with the barrier that separates the contents of the printed page or of the picture-frame from the world of real life and of action. (...) Surrealism, profiting from the discoveries of Freud, has conceived poetry as being, (...) a perpetual functioning of the psyche, a perpetual flow of irrational thought in the form of images taking place in every human mind and a universally valid attitude to experience, a possible mode of living. (...) When it is said that the aim of Surrealism is to break down the barrier separating dream (“poetry”) from reality, the irrational from the rational that is also to say that its aim is to make this ‘sole fact of specialists’ familiar to everyone.” (Gascoyne 1970, x-xi)

Gascoyne’s view highlights that an important social aim of Surrealism was to make the masses leading their own life and making autonomous choices, experiencing reality in an active way, enjoying its diverse aspects also from an artistic and not just functional point of view. Surrealism proposed a unconventional concept of beauty: in his work *Chants de Maldoror* the French poet Lautréamont explained Surrealism’s aesthetics by means of the following comparison, “Beautiful (...) as the chance encounter on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella” (Lautréamont 1953, 327), implying that the principle of surrealist art was to enhance the audience’s awareness of the fragmentation of reality, by juxtaposing heterogeneous elements, as collage artists usually do.

Also according to the French poet Louis Aragon the *merveilleux*, the *insolite*, can be found even in a familiar environment, and therefore each experience may combine or alternate the familiar and the strange, the here and the elsewhere (Aragon 1987). In this way Surrealists proposed an aesthetics alluding to or provoking doubt and anxiety, at odds with the conventions of the traditional Western aesthetics. In these artists’ view, bringing together usual

objects in unusual combinations can surprise the public, stimulating it to see reality with different eyes. In a similar way, Surrealists aspired to persuade the audience to become aware of their socio-political conditions by considering the contradictions of the society they lived in with more far-seeing eyes. Through their works, Surrealists intended to reconcile artistic freedom and ideological commitment aimed at the revolutionary transformation of both, the individual and society at large, as alluded to in Artaud's sentence "We are the specialists of revolt" (Artaud 1925).

In 1938 Breton and Diego Rivera, with the collaboration of Lev Trotsky, published the manifesto titled *Pour un art révolutionnaire indépendant*, severely criticizing bourgeois ideology and vice-versa fighting for the freedom of artistic activity, which they considered as being inextricably connected to social equity and political freedom: "What we want: the independence of art—for the revolution; the revolution—for the definitive liberation of art" (Breton and Rivera 2014). In sum, through all their philosophical, political, and artistic activities Surrealists endeavored to propitiate a radical transformation of both the individual and society.

## **2. Surrealism in music**

Initially, Surrealists believed that their innovative artistic theories could be applied only to poetry, visual arts, and films, neglecting music. Instead, since they referred to Freud's studies, they could have applied his theory also to music from the beginning: in fact, music pieces lack an objective meaning, can be linked to a variety of feelings, words and mental pictures, depending on the values, mood and past experiences of the listeners, and can therefore lead the latter to combine consciousness and the unconscious, surpassing the distinctions between the real and the imaginary. Moreover, both in music and in poetry and visual arts, the autor can use improvisation and unexpected juxtapositions. In fact Max Paddison describes surrealist music as "juxtapos[ing] its historically devalued fragments in a montage-like manner which enables them to yield up new meanings within a new aesthetic unity" (Paddison 1993, 90) According to Lloyd Whitesell, "surrealist composing makes use of devalued means, it uses these *as* devalued means, and wins its form from the 'scandal' produced when the dead suddenly spring up among the living" (Whitesell 2004, 107). In the 1920s several composers were influenced by artists belonging to the surrealist movement: among them were Erik Satie, who composed the score for the ballet *Parade*, leading Guillaume Apollinaire to coin the term *surrealism* (Calkins 2010), and George Antheil.

## **3. Surrealist traits in Poulenc's Cantata *Le Bal Masqué***

Francis Poulenc demonstrated a profound interest in twentieth century art, where Surrealism was establishing itself. Being an enthusiastic estimator of painting, he composed *Le travail du peintre*, setting seven poems by Eluard,

each of which is dedicated to a different painter incorporating surrealist ideas into his work: Pablo Picasso, Marc Chagall, Georges Braque, Juan Gris, Paul Klee, Joan Miro, and Jacques Villon. Referring to this work, Poulenc affirmed that he was convinced it would stimulate him to “paint musically” (Poulenc 1985, 101). Furthermore, Poulenc’s link to the Surrealists’ views became even more intense as he set a number of surrealist poems in music, composing the opera *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, based on a play by Apollinaire, three choral works, many songs and the Cantate profane *Le bal masqué*. It is interesting to notice that Poulenc commented the connection between surrealist texts and his music with these words “One thing that is for certain is that if you like Apollinaire, Eluard, Aragon, Loulou etc... you will inevitably find me” (Poulenc 1985, 571)

In these works Poulenc displays an extraordinary sensibility to the subtleties of complex surrealist poems, so that the French music critic Claude Rostand even suggested that Poulenc's settings could help in explaining their cryptic metaphors: "Those who have never completely understood the poetry of Max Jacob, Jean Cocteau, Louise de Vilmorin, Guillaume Apollinaire and Paul Eluard should turn to Poulenc: it is in his mélodies that they will solve all the mysteries” (Deeter and Peavler 2014, 9). *Le bal masqué* is a *cantate profane* for baritone or mezzo-soprano and a chamber orchestra ensemble comprising oboe, clarinet, bassoon, cornet, percussion, piano, violin, and cello. The lyrics are taken from Max Jacob’s anthology *Laboratoire Central*, published in 1921, and Poulenc remembered “I was spoiled for choice in all Max Jacob's clownish works” (Machart 1995, 78)

The work was dedicated to the Vicomte and Vicomtesse de Noailles, and its premiere as *spectacle concert* at the Hyères theater on 20 April 1932 was conducted by Roger Désormière, with Poulenc at the piano and the baritone Gilbert-Moryn as vocalist (Schmidt 2001). During the period spanning from the nineteenth to the early twentieth century famous French composers usually did not write Cantatas, one of the reasons perhaps being linked to the Prix de Rome competition. In the final stage of this competition, the selected musicians were expected to compose an operatic scene or a cantata, and, in order to meet the strict criteria of the examination board, the candidates very often wrote works of uninspired academicism. For this reason, when composers could choose autonomously the music genre they wanted, they abstained from writing cantatas, considering this genre as limiting their artistic freedom (Marco 1980, 63). However, adhering to surrealist principles, Poulenc’s Cantata is surprisingly anti-academic.

The title of the work alludes to a masquerade ball, an event associated with the tradition of the Venetian Carnival, which the participants attend in costume wearing a mask. The purpose of costumes and masks was to hide the identity of the participants, allowing them to voice their opinions and emotions without fearing social disapproval. For this reason, masquerade balls could be

considered as opportunities for social experimentation, where elites could experience a temporary liberty from strict social rules (Kates 1995). Moreover, as the inclusion of a masquerade ball in the plot stimulated the story-teller's creativity, it became a favourite topic in literary, theatrical and music theatre's works, as shown, among others, in Jean Paul's novel *Flegeljahre*, Hermann Hesse's novel *Der Steppenwolf*, William Shakespeare's tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*, and Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Un ballo in maschera*. In *Le bal masqué* Poulenc selected both texts and music with great attention. He chose poems featuring remarkable visual imagery and combining perturbing and farcical elements, and set them to music applying surrealist techniques: he used familiar constructs, but presented them in completely unusual contexts, disconcerting the listeners and making them laugh. In effect, Poulenc wrote about this work "Above all Jacob and I wanted the listener to laugh from surprise, perhaps even from shock, rather to smile ironically, tight-lipped, or even with an air of 'superiority', a gesture so characteristic of lovers of refined art" (Poulenc 1935, 25).

#### 4. *Mademoiselle Malvina*

This character appears in the third movement of the Cantata, and is described as follows:

*Voilà qui j'espère vous effraie*  
*Mademoiselle Malvina ne quitte plus son éventail*  
*Depuis qu'elle est morte.*  
*Son gant gris perle est étoilé d'or.*  
*Elle se tirebouchonne comme une valse tzigane*  
*Elle vient mourir d'amour à ta porte*  
*Près du grès où l'on met les cannes.*  
*Disons qu'elle est morte du diabète*  
*Morte du gros parfum qui lui penchait le cou.*  
*Oh! l'honnête animal! si chaste et si peu fou!*  
*Moins gourmet que gourmande elle était de sang-lourd*  
*Agrégé ès lettres et chargée de cours*  
*C'était en chapeau haut qu'on lui faisait la cour*  
*Or, on ne l'aurait eue qu'à la méthode hussarde*  
*Malvina, ô fantôme, que Dieu te garde!*

After a fanfare-like beginning, which leaves the listener in suspense due to the lack of a clear sense of tonality, the vocalist sings the first line of the poem twice, while the chamber orchestra comments with percussive Stravinskian string gestures.

The image shows a musical score for the vocal line and chamber orchestra. The vocal line is in 2/4 time and features a melodic line with lyrics: "Voi - là qui j'es - pè - re vous ef - fraie. Voi - là qui j'es - pè - re vous ef - fraie." The chamber orchestra part is in 2/4 time and features a percussive string gesture marked "f sec".

Poulenc, *Le bal masqué*, Malvina, measures 5-8

Line 2 of the poem introduces the character of Mademoiselle Malvina, presented by means of a static vocal line which has a contrasting effect towards the pulsating accompaniment.

Poulenc, *Le bal masqué*, Malvina, measures 9-14

The composer seems to allude at a dissociation between how Malvina wishes to appear and how she really is. The dissociation persists in the next lines: some lines allude to an elegant (line 2: *son éventail*, line 4: *son gant gris perle est étoilé d'or*, line 9: *parfum*), lively woman (line 5: *Elle se tirebouchonne comme une valse tzigane*), rich in moral qualities (line 10: *l'honnête, chaste, peu fou*), well-educated and cultured (line 12: *Agrégé ès lettres et chargée de cours*; line 13: *C'était en chapeau haut qu'on lui faisait la cour*). However, the music accompanying these words appears to be inconsistent with the text, and leads to suspect that what has been affirmed does not meet reality. For instance, the music setting line 5 *Elle se tirebouchonne comme une valse tzigane* is not a waltz in a simple triple time, and the vocal line is quite static.

Poulenc, *Le bal masqué*, Malvina, measures 20-23

Moreover, some lines include ridiculous particulars (line 9: *(elle est) Morte du gros parfum qui lui penchait le cou*; line 11: *Moins gourmet que gourmande*), or prosaic details (line 3: *depuis qu'elle est morte*; line 7: *Près du grès où l'on met les cannes*; line 10: *elle est morte du diabète*; line 11: *elle était de sang-lourd*), which are often highlighted by means of harsh chords performed *sff*. The unique passage in which the vocalist's part has a quasi-operatic character is on line 15, setting the exclamation *Malvina oh Fantôme*, which is the culminating moment of this movement. It is interesting to notice that this heavily passionate outburst recalls Des Grieux's aria *Ah fuyez douce image* in the third act of Massenet's *Manon*. However, consistently with the surrealist aesthetics, Poulenc

estranges the passage by prolonging the descending motion and using different rhythmic combinations.

Massenet  
*pp sut. cantabile*  
 Ah! fuy - ez, douce i - mage, à mon à - me trop chè - re,  
*espressivo*

Poulenc  
*mf très expressif*  
 Mal - vi - na oh Fan - tò - me, que Dieu te gar - del

Poulenc, *Le bal masqué*, Malvina, measures 54-56: the passage recalls an aria by Massenet

From the examples above we can deduce that Jacob and Poulenc wished to highlight the contrast between the exterior aspect and the inner reality of the bourgeois Malvina, showing her duplicity and lack of political ideals and social conscience, and leading in this way the audience to assume a critical stance towards the whole bourgeois society. Both text and music show adherence to surrealist aesthetics, expressing the poet's and musician's socio-political views very clearly. In particular, Poulenc follows the principles established by Surrealism also by means of frequent meter changes, and bringing together heterogeneous elements, such as satirical and lyrical fragments either adhering to the text or being at odds with it.

## 5. Conclusions

Surrealism called for revolt against the predetermined rules of the bourgeois society, and used art products to lead the audience to assume a different socio-political perspective. Surrealists conceived works of art as embodying the principle of freedom, helping listeners to regain their independence of judgment by looking at reality with sharper eyes and promote concrete action in the socio-political realm. Under a farcical surface, *Le bal masqué* by Jacob and Poulenc, conveys an important message, inciting listeners to gain socio-political awareness and commit to the transformation of bourgeois society.

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