

Composer Biographies



Francis Poulenc wrote "La voix humaine" in 1959 when he was 60 years old and considered a grand old man of French arts and letters. In his youth he had been a member of the famous group of French composers known as "Les six", whose work emphasized simplicity and was inspired, many believe, as a backlash against the heaviness of Richard Wagner's music as well as the "suffocating harmonies" of French Impressionist composers such as Debussy and Ravel.

It is no surprise that "La voix humaine" is a musical setting of a text by Jean Cocteau, for Cocteau was a seminal influence in Poulenc's life. A driving force behind the art and artists of the French avante-garde movement, as well as a formidable filmmaker/poet/artist/novelist in his own right, Cocteau's role in Poulenc's life cannot be overestimated. Cocteau numbered among his friends and artistic collaborators the writers Edith Wharton and Marcel Proust, artists Pablo Picasso and Amadeo Modigliani, and the great Russian choreographer Sergei Diaghilev. Drawn into this heady mixture of the brightest artistic lights of a century, Poulenc was rightfully seduced.

Poulenc distinguished himself a composer who wrote particularly well for the voice. In addition to operas, he wrote important song cycles, many on religious themes, that continue to be performed today. A devout Catholic, in his middle years he strove to combine his love for the Church with his passion for the voice, resulting in several important liturgical works including his *Stabat Mater* (1950) and *Gloria* (1959), and his most famous opera, *Dialogues des Carmélites* (1953-56). Poulenc died of heart failure in Paris in 1963, at the relatively young age of 64.



Ruggero Leoncavallo, composer of *Pagliacci*, was born in Naples, Italy in 1857. The son of wealthy parents, he was educated primarily in Naples at a time when the operas of Richard Wagner were particularly popular. His first opera, *Chatterton*, was written after he heard the Italian premiere of Wagner's "The Flying Dutchman".

Leoncavallo was a bit of a free spirit, and when he did not meet with immediate success as a composer he decided to go to Egypt in the early 1880s to seek his destiny. Unfortunately, war broke out, and he fled to France in

1882. He ended up in Paris, where he supported himself by giving concerts in cafes and teaching private piano students.

While in Paris he became a friend of a famous baritone of the day (Victor Maurel), who persuaded the Italian publisher Ricordi to commission an opera from Leoncavallo. The composer's fortunes turned, and while the commissioned opera (based on the story of the Medici family of Florence) was never successfully performed, he by then had made enough of an impression that he was being taken seriously as a composer.

In 1890, a fellow Italian composer, Pietro Mascagni, had an astonishing success with his opera *Cavalleria rusticana*. After its first performance in Rome, it became a hit in all of the European capitals. *Cavalleria* was a significant departure from the fashion of the day in several ways. First, it was short – only about 90 minutes in length (compared to the three- to four-hour length of most operas written at that time). Second, Mascagni fashioned an opera not from fantasy and fairy tales, but chose instead to set a simple, realistic love story.

In addition to his musical gifts, Leoncavallo was a shrewd businessman. He set out to achieve operatic success by copying the "formula" of *Cavalleria*. He wrote the story of *Pagliacci* as realistic tragedy grown from a love triangle, and kept the opera short – very close in length to Mascagni's. Leoncavallo had not misjudged – his opera, too, became very successful in a very short period of time. To this day, *Pagliacci* is the work of Leoncavallo's that keeps his name in the history books.

After his success with *Pagliacci*, Leoncavallo turned his attentions to writing lighter fare, in the genre typically called "operetta". While he did accept a commission from the Chicago Lyric Opera to create a trilogy of operas based on the story of Oedipus Rex, the project was not completed when Leoncavallo died in 1919.