

## hitchcock in a different key: the post-selznick experiments

The only murderer is the orchestra leader.

—Marlene Dietrich, in *Stage Fright*

### POULENC AND THE RHYTHM OF GUILT: *ROPE*

Having liberated himself from David Selznick's demands and diatribes, Hitchcock sailed into dangerous—some would say stagnant—waters. His next three films were an indulgence in experimentation; in them he tried out everything Selznick would not have permitted, especially the manipulation of music, and many things he himself would not have countenanced, including the sabotaging of montage and suspense.

In *Rope*, the iciest and most fascinating of these experiments, music went the way of montage. The camera roaming through a single claustrophobic apartment in unrelieved long takes has no score to cushion its anxious movements or humanize the chilly partiers speaking Arthur Laurents's cynical lines. Franz Waxman's moody score for his unhappy finale with Hitchcock and Selznick, *The Paradine Case*, gave the audience something to latch onto, even with unsympathetic characters, but Hitchcock was determined to move as far as possible from *Paradine* and the Selznick universe of omnimusic.

This is not to say that *Rope* has no music, just that it is exceptionally spare and incisive. This is a modernist film, cool and ruthlessly objective, with music by a renowned modern composer, Francis Poulenc, who, like Hitchcock, created enduring art from popular culture (in his case, tunes from music halls). As with his use of Walter Benjamin, Johann Strauss, and Cole Porter, Hitchcock veered toward classical composers who based their art on popular motifs. Their definition of modernism, like his, fit Baudelaire's: a conjunction of the ephemeral and the eternal. Laurents thought Poulenc was a good match for his script, and Hitchcock ratcheted up its effectiveness by making it part of the narrative.<sup>1</sup> Virtually every Laurents line is spiced with irony or double entendre, and the music works the same way; both the language and the score are turned against themselves.

The warm "Pastorale" that opens the main title (with Hitchcock appearing in a cameo for the first time in color) is a deviously deceptive overture to the shocking killing in the first scene. What follows in the title, Poulenc's "Mouvement Perpetuel No. 1," is not what it appears to be either. This is a fully orchestrated Hollywood bloating of an early-minimalist piano solo from 1918.<sup>2</sup> Poulenc's relentless circling and recapitulation of a single idea parallels the mesmeric repetitiveness of *Rope*'s ten-minute takes and obsessive dollying through one small apartment. At the beginning of the film, however, the tune's cool insouciance is slowed down and drenched in syrup, making the original all the more piquant when the tune reappears in the nervous piano performance of Farley Granger's Phillip.

A tense, sixteen-second cue called "Mood," a suspenseful buildup to the victim's scream, is an abrupt mood swing indeed. The scream silences the music; a brief, terrifying image of David's face a split second after death is silent as well. Suddenly, we are in the Hitchcock sound world of musical irony and pure cinema.

Poulenc appears again under Phillip's fingers as a piano fanfare announcing the entrance into the party of Rupert, their amoral mentor in the art of murder. Played against type by James Stewart, ruthless Rupert uncovers the crime he unwittingly helped them conceive. "Your touch has improved," he tells Phillip, who has just been told by a palm reader at the party that he will have "famous hands." Rupert thinks he has merely made a witty remark; he can't yet see the grim irony. But later, he begins to suspect something is seriously awry, and Phillip's increasingly agitated and perpetual playing of the "Mouvement Perpetuel" melody helps plant his suspicion. Like the music, Phillip's guilt-ridden mind is traveling in futile circles, falling back on itself; Rupert, speaking in code (as does everyone in Laurents's insidious script), tells him, "You're very fond of that little tune, aren't you?" This is only the beginning. Again in a Hitchcock picture, an out-of-control performance reveals more than words possibly could. But we get words as well, a convoluted, Jamesian interaction between two characters who imply more than they say as the music adds the crucial meanings. Rupert's initial assessment that Phillip's playing has improved is soon reversed, and the revision is the catalyst for his suspicions.

Hitchcock required Farley Granger to learn the musical piece his character performs, as he did Henry Fonda in

*The Wrong Man* and Tippi Hedren in *The Birds*. Granger plays it just well enough at the beginning to make its collapse convincing. Rupert suspects something is out of kilter when Janet says nervously that the missing David is “never this late” and when Mrs. Wilson, the maid, comments on the oddity of serving the party food on a chest. Phillip harshly chastises her for stepping out of her servant’s role— “Don’t lecture!”—then begins playing to cover up his anxiety. When Rupert leans over the keyboard and sharply asks, “What’s going on, Phillip?” he just keeps playing.

As Rupert persists in his interrogation, Phillip performs over his questions, as if he hasn’t heard them, but his stop-go phrasing and jerky rubato betray his nervousness as distant police sirens blend with Poulenc’s bittersweet chords. Unable to deal with the anxiety, Phillip jolts to a complete stop, but Rupert brings him a drink, asks him to continue, and turns on a lamp, seeking enlightenment on what Mrs. Wilson has called a “peculiar party.” After Phillip demands that he turn off the lamp, Rupert turns on a metronome to control Phillip’s increasingly frantic fingers.

To no avail. Indeed, the clacking metronome increases the extraordinary tension of the scene. Rupert doesn’t quite know which questions to ask to get Phillip to blurt out what’s happening; “I wish I could come straight out... I merely suspect,” he says in frustration, but Phillip’s botched performance tells Rupert his suspicions are well founded. At one point, the music collapses under Phillip’s nervous, relieved laughter as Rupert seems to go off track, but he quickly gets back on, demanding to know why Phillip lied about his adroitness at strangling chickens, a question too close to the mark. Phillip has played his last perpetual motion; the piece crashes to a halt.

This is a superb example of a Hitchcockian musical performance acting as a barometer of guilt and anxiety.<sup>3</sup> The other party music in *Rope* also bristles with irony and unintended resonance: Mack David’s “Candlelight Cafe” playing warmly on the radio as Janet and Kenneth, the estranged couple, bitterly discuss “that grim day at Harvard” when they broke up; and “I’m Looking over a Four Leaf Clover” as they become increasingly nervous about the whereabouts of David and demand that Brandon, Phillip’s co-conspirator, explain why he lied to them. This conversation plants more dark seeds in Rupert’s mind that “something’s gone wrong,” or as the song has it, there’s something “I’ve overlooked before.”



*Rope*. Farley Granger plays Poulenc: the “Perpetual Movement” of guilt.

What he’s overlooked is the possibility of his young mentees enacting his own heartless theory, a debauched distortion of Nietzsche, of murder as a fine art to be practiced by superior beings on the inferior. This aesthetic version of fascism is his own creation: the strangled chickens have come home to roost. In the unforgettable final scene, the three principal players sit down wearily as darkness gathers and New York street sounds—crowds, sirens, agitated conversations—pour in the window in a haunting crescendo, an eerie premonition of the sonic landscape in *Rear Window*. “They’re coming,” is the final line. It’s the end of the party, and the end of the young men’s experiment in violence as the ultimate thrill.

Perfect for a Hitchcock movie, Poulenc’s early piano music is all about charm turning sour, or, as Poulenc’s inscription for another piano work, “Badinage,” puts it, “orangeade growing warm in glasses.” In the final shot, Brandon pours himself a last drink as Phillip plays bleak, drooping intervals on the piano, the dying remains of “Perpetual Movement.” The police are on the way; the conspirators’ lives are about to end. As the pianist Paul Crossley points out, Poulenc’s music is “redolent of parties, festivals, carnivals,” but the real message is, “The party’s over.”<sup>4</sup>