

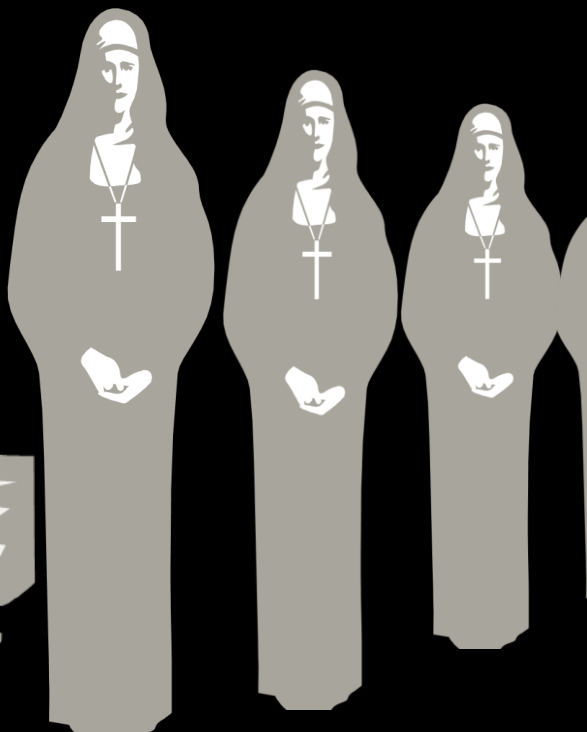
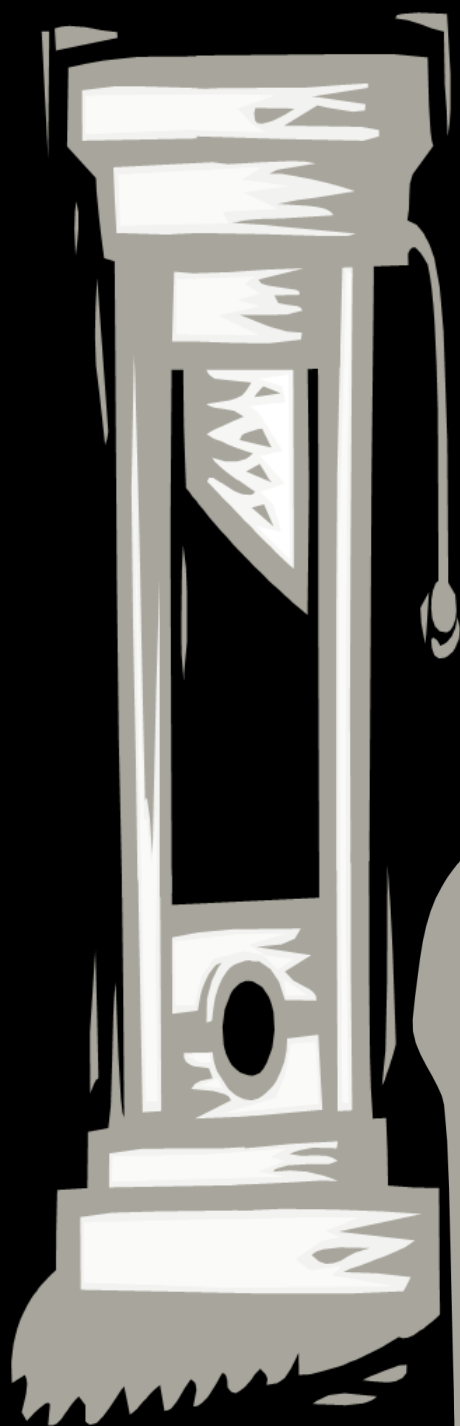
Audience Guide (#44) for:

FRANCIS POULENC'S

DIALOGUES OF THE CARMELITES

PREMIERE: 1. 23. 57
LA SCALA

AS POULENC REQUESTED, THE OPERA IS SUNG
IN THE LANGUAGE OF THE AUDIENCE.



Des Moines Metro Opera

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Greetings!

For the fourth year, the Des Moines Metro Opera is pleased to partner with J.P. and Sondra Cooney in offering offbeat, but informative roadmaps to the operas of our Summer Festival Season! For the three great operas of the 2011 Season, the Cooneys have captured the essence of these works in a way that educates, enlightens and entertains.

Many people are involved with the creation of an opera production, from the conductor to the singers to the backstage technicians, all “teamed” to create a magical experience for you in the theatre. A great deal of thought and consideration has gone into each of the elements you will see and hear on the stage. It is our hope that this Guide will help you to appreciate and enjoy these works of art, and make your experience with us this summer even more memorable.

Thank you for showing your interest in these Operaphobic Guides for Enjoying the Festival’s productions. Please pass them on to family or friends who might also enjoy and be encouraged to join our Des Moines Metro Opera annual audience.

As always, thank you for your continued support of Des Moines Metro Opera.

Sincerely yours,

Michael Egel

Michael Egel

Artistic Director

Starting in 2008, J.P. and Sondra Cooney annually create **Guides** for the Des Moines Metro Opera Festival productions. They are gifted to the company's Foundation for education and/or fund-raising programs. During the season, the **Guides** are posted on the DMMO website.

Acknowledgements

Greatly appreciated and effective in the development of the **Guide** series for Des Moines Metro Opera (DMMO) are the continual support, encouragement, constructive comments and just plain, patient tolerance of:

- Dr. Robert L. Larsen, Artistic Director Emeritus, DMMO;
- Michael Egel, Artistic Director, DMMO.

JP Cooney

AN OVERVIEW OF THE
COMMONALITIES AND NOT-SO COMMONALITIES
AMONG
THE FESTIVAL'S 39TH SEASON PRODUCTIONS.

LA BOHÈME DIALOGUES OF THE Don Pasquale
CARMÉLITES

As cultural art forms mature, they also tend to evolve new patterns, variations on a central theme, if you will. Opera is no exception to such diversification. The three productions of Des Moines Metro Opera's (DMMO) 39th Festival Season offer an intriguing comparative study of such change and compositional evolution.

THREE DIFFERENT COMPOSITIONAL STYLES AND MUSICAL ERAS.

Each production this season represents a different stage of operatic evolution. From start to finish, the three works encompass slightly more than 1/4th of opera's 400+ year historical time span. However despite that brevity, comparatively it was a period of highly accelerated change.

In chronological sequence, *Don Pasquale's* debut in the operatic world was first (1843). It was almost the last of Donizetti's seventy-five¹ operatic works. His compositional catalogue is frequently cited as marking the end to the bel canto era and the beginning of Verdian operatic transformations. In both libretto construction and musical sound, *Don Pasquale* reflects the stylistic template for operas of a bel canto bent. The work is considered Donizetti at the top of his comic opera "game," (a.k.a. a "masterpiece").

Of the three DMMO 2011 production's, Puccini's *La Bohème* was the second to be introduced to the world, first appearing in 1896, a half century removed from *Don Pasquale*. Stylistically and in sound, *Bohème* came from another musical world than that of the

¹ As with too many things operatic, the absolute number our composer produced varies, depending on who is counting. Let us just conclude that it

curmudgeonly Pasquale. As frequently observed in our Guides, opera of the 18th and early 19th century was very much a meal of white fish and white wine, whereas that art form in the bulk of the 19th and early 20th century was red wine and red meat! Comparatively, it is musically muscular in sound, Rubenesque in subject and frequently, as close to real life as the opera stage will permit. *La Bohème* fills that bill to a "t(ittle)."²

The third DMMO 2011 production, Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites* was first performed in 1957, fifty+ years after *La Bohème*. Although created in an era of "dreaded" atonal sounds, *Dialogues* is very much a musical step into the past.³ Its composer with some humor, observed that his *Carmelites* could only sing tonal music! The opera's sound though is comparatively unique in that it contains very few arias or ensembles. The musical dialogue is largely in a recitative style with heavy orchestral support. Such sounds very much reflect the opera's title "*Dialogues*."

MUSICAL DIVERSITY AND OPERATIC PRODUCTIVITY

Poulenc's musical catalogue is large and varied. However, it contains only three operas. The first was very much in the style of the French opera-comique and slightly bawdy. His second was *Dialogues*, considered his musical "masterpiece." The final work he scored for only one voice and full orchestra. A fourth was in development when he died. Poulenc came to opera sparsely and late in his very successful compositional career. However, *Dialogues* is having an increasing impact.⁴ Perhaps its subject and sound resonate more, as our awareness of the world's problems increases.

² One is not foolish enough to characterize *Bohème* as Puccini's "masterpiece." La Scala audiences have rioted over lesser affirmations. However, the work is one of the most popular (as in, frequently performed) works in western operatic repertoire. FYI: Tittle = a very small quantity!

³ Not necessarily a bad thing!

⁴ A criticism of a recent performance observed the piece, "--- was the most admired French opera in the last 100 years." Considering its Parisian competition in that time continuum, that is not "damning with faint praise!"

In terms of compositional diversity, Donizetti did successfully create a range of musical works, however, his largest output and his fame rests with his sixty+ operas, both comic and tragic.

Puccini made an early commitment to opera composition, and with a few exceptions, stuck to it. Consequently, Donizetti's operatic catalogue's was at least, six times longer than Puccini's output of ten such works. However, Puccini's creation of works of lasting critical and public acclaim occurred much earlier in his career than Donizetti's. Once such a level of recognition was reached by Puccini, it appears to hold for the most part and over the long haul. It seems he had a much keener understanding of what would work for his musical style more so than many other composers did, and he stuck to it!⁵

VARIABLE ORIGINS.

A large number of operatic libretti emerge from already written sources including novels, Biblical tales, documented mythology, other operas, plays, an occasional ballet and so forth.⁶

In the case of the three 2011 productions' textual journeys into music, all of them appeared at some point in written sources, often with multiple iterations. *Pasquale* first trod the boards in 1609 as Ben Jonson's play *Epicene* or *The Silent Woman*.⁷ It then became an

⁵ His tenacity in operatic development though, frequently made life hell for his librettists, producers and publisher.

⁶ Especially in the period before the existence of international copyright laws, since the concept of "plagiarism" as an ethical and/or legal wrong, is a comparatively modern taboo. Until Verdi gained enough clout to enforce performance of his works as he intended, post-premiere operas were pretty much "cut and paste" musically, dependent on whims of singers and impresarios. Libretti concepts were even more up for grabs, not to mention their line for line borrowing from others, on a piratical scale.

⁷ As far as known, the play's concept did not emerge from real-life, it was purely fictional. One does hope so!

opera, *Ser Marc' Antonio* in 1810.⁸ The libretto from that opera seems to have served as the basis for Pasquale's musical misery.⁹

Bohème began literary life as a series of fictionalized literary sketches based on their author's (Henri Murger) real life experiences among the Parisian Bohemian community. The subject became better known when translated into play form and then, wildly popular when restructured by the original author into a novel.

Dialogues began from a true, tragic episode of the French Revolution's Reign of Terror. That episode as documented by witnesses was subsequently fictionalized into a novella. That text served as the basis for a play that served as both the inspiration and libretto design for Poulenc's opera.

LANGUAGE

At their beginning (1597) the original language of operas was either French or Italian irrespective of the composer/librettist's country of origin.¹⁰ Things did become more democratic as time passed. Today, the language of the composer's country (by birth or adoption) usually forms the base for the on-stage musical words.

Commentary

In a comparative sense **DIALOGUES** is compositionally contemporary. It first appeared in its musical form in the mid-1950's. Given the four hundred plus history of opera, **DIALOGUES** is a mere child!

Its basic storyline does originate from the past. The narrative framework is built around a horrifyingly true incident of more than two hundred years ago: the guillotining of all sixteen members of a Carmelite convent during the height of the French Revolution's Reign of Terror.

Unfortunately, the tale will not seem foreign to our times; it should in fact resonate. Too many similar incidents too frequently occur in our "modern" world. Therefore, the tragic simplicity of the libretto's events, unlike those of many operas' subjects (true or imagined), should communicate to the audience without confounding.

Despite the initial foreignness of the **DIALOGUES** sounds to those of us accustomed to more traditional opera, it will win you over. *Guaranteed!*

Apart from its on-stage differences from many operas, **DIALOGUES** also departs in its off-stage development. A great number of operas and their composers went through horrendous periods of Sturm und Drang to get their works on-stage and keep them there. Not so in this case. With the exception of a vague copyright dispute, the opera from contract through concept and composition, sailed rather smoothly to the stage.

Once staged, it was critically well-received. Possibly due to the strong subject matter and its sound, it has been slow to build an audience sufficient to move it into permanent operatic repertoire. However, especially in recent years, there are optimistic signs of increasing popularity and repetitive performances.

We hope the following material adds to your understanding of **DIALOGUES** and appreciation of the Des Moines Metro Opera's 2011 production.

**Recitative.* In opera, a type of vocal writing usually for a single voice. The vocal line is composed to follow the natural rhythms and accentuation of speech and its pitch contours



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Factual Context of the Opera



DIALOGUES begins in the weeks immediately before the onset of the French Revolution in 1789. It reaches its tragic climax some five years later; ironically, a matter of days before the end of the Reign of Terror. Consequently, revolutionary fervor and forces drive the action of the opera and its people.

The following was developed to provide a reference framework, albeit brief, of Revolutionary events, the Reign of Terror and the Carmelite Nuns of Compiègne as they impact on the operatic actions.

*Events of the Revolution Affecting the Clergy.*¹¹ History has shown that multiple factors contributed to the onset of the French Revolution, all of which coalesced in 1789 most visibly in the storming of the Bastille. That event initiated a more than a decade-long period of French political unrest and bloody excess. It only began to abate with the Napoleonic coup of 1799.

¹¹ Obviously, the Revolution affected all of French society. However, the opera largely focuses on those events that affected one Catholic order of nuns. Consequently, this material selectively summarizes only Revolutionary episodes that primarily affected the Church and its clergy.

Until the Revolution, French society was divided into three Estates:¹² the First was the clergy;¹³ the Second, the nobility; and the Third, by definition, everyone else (a.k.a. commoners) however, as a socio-political fact, the Third Estate usually was limited to the bourgeoisie.¹⁴

Apart from the King himself,¹⁵ the clergy (largely Catholic) was the most powerful in that they owned 10-15 percent of the land¹⁶ and it was exempted from tax. They collected a tithe from the other Estates, operated schools, hospitals, generally cared for the poor, and acted as the moral police for the State. Their power, but also their abuses of power, made them a major target of the Revolution and its excesses.

In a matter of months after the Revolution's onset, legislative actions were initiated to shift the powers and property of the Church to the State. In 1790, the Church's authority to tax was revoked, as were special privileges of the clergy. Church property was confiscated,¹⁷ and monastic vows were abolished. Under the Civil Constitution of

¹² A considerable number of years after the French Revolution, the Fourth Estate (a.k.a the press) first appears in an 1841 work by Thomas Carlyle in which he credits Edmund Burke for the following, "There were Three Estates in (British) Parliament, but in the Reporters' Gallery there sat a Fourth Estate far more important than them all."

¹³ The First Estate was divided into the Higher Clergy (high church officials who were members of the families of the Second Estate); and the Lower Clergy (parish priests, monks and nuns). At the onset of the Revolution it is estimated the Upper Clergy numbered approximately 10,000; the Lower, 90,000.

¹⁴ The concept of Estates had existed in Europe since the Middle Ages. In the sociological sense, they denoted social class. However, they also had a legal-political dimension related to the governance of the State.

¹⁵ Who was a member of no Estate, but presided over them all.

¹⁶ Making the Church the largest landowner in France.

¹⁷ This measure was instituted to reduce the national financial crisis precipitated by both the fiscal excesses of the Ancien Regime and the onset of the Revolution.

the Clergy (1790), the clergy became employees of the State and were required to take an oath of loyalty to the French constitution. In effect, the Church was removed from papal oversight and became a Department of the French State.¹⁸ The State actions of 1790 signaled the initiation of growing violent repression of the Church and its clergy that reached an apogee in the 1793-1794 Reign of Terror.

The Reign of Terror. The "Terror" began slightly more than four years after the Revolution's onset and lasted less than a year, but it was a year of incredible violence and bloodshed--- even by today's unfortunate standards.

Prompted by increasing tumult in the on-going French Civil War, incursions into the country by foreign armies and growing rivalry between two powerful Revolutionary political parties, the government established in September of 1793 the Committee of Public Safety, a tribunal headed by Maximilien Robespierre. Its alleged functions were to suppress counter-revolutionary activities and raise additional French military forces. However, the tribunal rapidly assumed broad dictatorial powers and used them to instigate mass executions and political purges. The number executed during that period is estimated between 20,000 to 40,000.¹⁹ The guillotine, as the most popular form of execution, was quite democratic; it cut across all Estate classes.²⁰ However, the

¹⁸ The Pope, Pius VI, refused to accept the new French order of things Catholic. This led to a schism among the French clergy: those who swore the required Revolutionary oath became known as "constitutional clergy;" those who refused were labeled "refractory priests."

¹⁹ There are archival records that indicate at least 16,594 people were guillotined or otherwise executed.

²⁰ Pun not intended.

Catholic clergy accounted for the largest number of victims proportionally.

As the intensity and scope of the Terror increased, Robespierre personally acquired broader dictatorial powers. He especially targeted the Church and Christian religions in general with a national campaign of de-Christianization. In addition to execution or deportation of clergy, actions included: closing of churches, development of revolutionary and civil cults, destruction of religious monuments, forced marriage of clergy, outlawing of public and private worship, shut-down of religious education, and forcing of priests to abjure their religious offices and acts.

In June of 1794, the French Revolutionary Army won a major victory over the Austrians. That triumph and a public weary of the endless and increasing pointless Terror bloodshed facilitated a conspiracy leading to Robespierre's arrest on July 27 and his execution a day later.

Historians note that the Robespierre execution marked the end of the Terror and the radical phase of the Revolution; governmental control moved into moderate and reasoning hands. Freedom of worship was restored six months later.

The Carmelite Nuns of Compiègne. The Compiègne²¹ convent was established in 1641 and was one of almost sixty throughout

²¹ Compiègne is a small town a short distance, northeast of Paris. Apart from the Carmelite convent, it is noteworthy as the site of the railroad car where the French and Germans signed the armistice ending World War I. Subsequently, it was at this same place that the French signed their surrender to the Germans in 1940 and where Hitler was photographed doing his infamous victory dance.

France. Carmelite nuns in general were referred to as a discalced order, which is in the tradition of monks, barefoot or sandal-shod. They were cloistered and largely spent their days in contemplative prayer.

In 1790 after the onset of the Revolution, the Compiègne convent was raided by a mob, the property was seized by the government and the nuns were forced to discard their habits and leave the convent. The nuns divided into four groups and took up residence near their Compiègne church; however, they continued to practice their religious life in secret.

On Easter of 1792, their Prioress, Madame Lidoine,²² confided to the sixteen nuns cloistered with her, that 17th century records of the Order documented a premonition that their community would be martyred. She suggested that as a group the nuns consecrate themselves for such a sacrifice to “appease God’s anger and return peace to the Church and the State.” The nuns²³ eventually were unanimous in their consecration to martyrdom.

In June of 1794, their convent²⁴ was again invaded by a revolutionary mob. Their religious articles etc. were destroyed and the nuns were arrested for living in a religious community. They were transported²⁵ by tumbrel to Paris where they were imprisoned²⁶ to

²² The Prioress is a real historical figure as are the on-stage Carmelite nuns with the exception of Blanche de la Force. The on-stage events affecting the nuns and depicting their behavior are in general, historically factual.

²³ As in the opera, two of the nuns initially refused but subsequently agreed.

²⁴ They were told their place of worship would be turned into a dog kennel.

²⁵ The nuns, as other “high-order” prisoners of the Revolution such as Marie Antoinette, were held at La Conciergerie. Located on the Ile de la Cite a short distance from Notre Dame cathedral, the detention site was part of a larger complex known as the Palais de Justice. It still exists today, largely as a museum.

face judgment by a Robespierre tribunal. The nuns were formally accused of receiving arms for forces still loyal to the nobility and charged with having an altar-cloth honoring the old monarchy.²⁷ As foreordained, they were all condemned.

The Carmelites were imprisoned with an order of English nuns, one of whom, Dame Ann Teresa, wrote an account of the trial and fate of the French nuns.²⁸ While in prison, the French nuns requested permission to wash their lay clothes. To do that, they changed into their religious habits. That day they were taken for execution. Since their civilian clothes were still wet, they were wearing religious habits at their execution. The English nuns, exiled back to their country, needed lay clothes to make their journey safely through France to the coast. They used the abandoned lay clothes washed by the Carmelites.

The Carmelites' tumbrel journey to the guillotine took an hour and along the way they sang religious hymns. When they arrived at the execution site, it is said the normally raucous and jeering crowd fell silent and remained so throughout their executions. The nuns renewed their vows and as a group began singing the *Veni Creator Spiritus*.²⁹ Their singing continued albeit diminished, throughout their executions.

²⁶ While in prison, the nuns composed a canticle to their martyrdom. Ironically, it was to be sung to the tune of the Marseillaise. They gave the original to an imprisoned laywoman. She survived as did the original copy of the canticle.

²⁷ The offending symbol if there was one, was probably the fleur-de-lis.

²⁸ This account is thought to be one of the sources used by the Baroness Le Fort in developing her novella.

²⁹ In the opera, the nuns sing the *Salve Regina* as they one by one advance to their deaths. When Blanche joins them, she sings the *Veni Creator Spiritus*.

The first to be executed was the youngest, Sister Constance; the last was the Prioress who went to her death holding a small religious statue. History records the guillotining of the sixteen nuns was efficiently accomplished in slightly more than half an hour. At the conclusion, the crowd allegedly, quietly disbanded. Ten days later Robespierre was arrested, quickly executed and the Terror came to an end.

In 1906, the Pope beatified the sixteen nuns.

The Opera's Creative Forces



Francis Poulenc, (1899-1963). There is little commonality between the musical footprints of Charles Gounod and that of Poulenc, the composer of *Dialogues*. However, both their life styles were conflicted between the religious and the secular. Their compositional output also represented a dichotomy between the secular and the religious. Both produced numerous major pieces in both arenas. Gounod was labeled by those who knew him best, the “philandering monk.”³⁰ Poulenc's appellation was “half bad boy, half monk.” For Poulenc, this conflict between the sacred and the secular was very much evident in his musical catalogue.

Born into a wealthy Parisian, Roman Catholic family, a gentle dichotomy was introduced early into Poulenc's life. His Parisian³¹

³⁰ For the reasoning behind this label, see *Operaphobics Guide # 17, Romeo et Juliette*.

³¹ Paris, for good or ill, had long been considered the center in which all-French culture and art was created. Contrary to other European countries where artistic success could be accomplished

mother was an accomplished amateur musician and strong supporter of the "arts scene." His father, raised in a French province, was of the mercantile bent of mind, less "Parisian" in outlook, but quite successful in business. Many of Poulenc's compositions reflect these differences-- especially into the early 1930's-- by combining folksong-like melodies typical of the provinces with Parisian-boulevard, sophisticated rhythms.

His mother introduced him early to the musical scene, and while in his pre-teens, he began to be schooled on the piano by the best teachers in the capitol. It was in this environment that he became friends with Darius Milhaud and Eric Satie, both of whom were cutting a wide musical swathe in Paris arts.

Poulenc became quite an accomplished pianist, but he decided by age fourteen to become a composer. He began to generate pieces for the piano that were well received in private hearings. Unfortunately, both his parents died during this early compositional period. However, encouraged by family and his teachers, he began to create larger pieces. By age eighteen, his works were being performed publically with increasing critical success. His music began to attract serious attention from among others, Igor Stravinsky and Sergey Diaghilev, the ballet impresario.³²

In 1920 Poulenc was named as a member of "Les Groupe des Six" a band of innovative young Parisian composers. Jean Cocteau, best described as a true Renaissance man in the international arts scene,

in multiple geographic locales, in France the opportunity for artistic success was thought to only exist in Paris.

³² Poulenc's most successful ballet, *Les Biches* (The Little Darlings) was commissioned by Diaghilev in 1924.

was their spokesperson and promoter; Satie was their mentor. The six men were to be the avant-garde that would lead French music "away from the grand gestures of 19th century romanticism." To a great extent, they did.

Poulenc's music throughout the '20's and early '30's achieved continuing popular and critical appeal. However, in the mid-30's his family fortune was significantly reduced, and a close friend was killed in an automobile accident. Related to these, he returned to the Catholic faith he had abandoned in his late teens. His music then took a serious turn away from the secular towards the religious in sound and in subject.³³

While he had frequently composed for the voice, it was not until the 1940's and 50's that Poulenc turned to operatic works. His first was a surrealist opera bouffe for the Opera-Comique, *Les Mamelies de Tiresias*. *Dialogues* followed in 1956/57, and is generally considered his masterpiece. Subsequently (1959) he produced what he termed a lyric tragedy; a tour de force for one soprano voice, *La Voix Humaine*. At the time of his death, he was working on an operatic treatment of Jean Cocteau's 1934 play *La Machine Infernale*.

The following individuals are credited with influence on the development of the *Dialogues* libretto.

³³ As examples, both his *Stabat Mater* and *Gloria* were produced in this later period.

Gertrude von Le Fort, (1876-1971). A German baroness and noted author of poems, novels and short stories.³⁴ A convert to Catholicism early in life, her most famous work is *Die Letzte am Schafott*.³⁵ Published in 1931, it clearly serves as the basis for *Dialogues of the Carmelites*. Blanche de la Force, heroine of the novella and opera is a fictional creation; however, the other Carmelite nuns are historical figures. As noted, Le Fort's novella was based on the record of the actual events.³⁶ The name similarity between the author's fictional creation (de la Force) and her own name (von le Fort) is no coincidence. At the time she was writing the novella, von le Fort sensed the decline of Germany towards Nazism. She became an ardent anti-Nazi during World War II. Although created in the early years of Hitler's rise to power (1929+), the novella does provide an underscoring of parallels between the emerging Nazi era and Reign of Terror. Le Fort stated, "Born in the profound horror of a time darkened by the signs of destiny, this figure (her heroine, Blanche) arose before me in some way as the embodiment of the mortal agony of an era going totally to its ruin."

Georges Bernanos (1888 - 1948). A French author, strong nationalist (a vocal supporter of the Free French Forces and Charles de Gaulle during World War II)³⁷ and Roman Catholic. One of his best known works is the novel, *Diary of a Country Priest*. His role in the operatic libretto development is somewhat muddy, but it appears he wrote the dialogue for a movie version of the Le Fort

³⁴ Herman Hesse proposed her as a candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

³⁵ Various translated as *The Last at (on) the Scaffold* or *Song at the Scaffold*.

³⁶ There is some ambiguity as to what Le Fort's actual source was as there are two possibilities: a memoir of the only surviving Carmelite nun from the Compiègne convent, or a memoir of the English nun imprisoned with the Carmelites.

³⁷ When de Gaulle was elected French President, he invited Bernanos to serve in his cabinet.

(see above) novella about the martyred Carmelites. The movie was not filmed until 1960 using only part of Bernanos's dialogue. However, his work was posthumously published in 1949 and staged as a play in 1951.³⁸ It was this play that inspired Poulenc to create the opera.³⁹

Philippe Agnostini (1910-2001) and the Reverend Father Raymond Bruckberger (1907-1998) as a team, are generally credited for developing the scenario⁴⁰ of the opera:

Agnostino was a well-known French cinematographer, director and screenwriter. In his career he worked with among others, Robert Bresson, Max Ophuls and Jules Dassin. He is credited with directing the 1960 film of *Dialogues* and as the screenwriter for its 1984 TV production

Bruckberger was a DoMimican monk and ordained priest. He was also a member of the French Resistance and a screenwriter! He is credited as a writer on the 1960 film and 1984 TV production of *Dialogues*; he also carries directorial credits for the 1960 film.

³⁸ Bernanos was suffering from a terminal illness as he was completing his efforts on *Dialogues*.

³⁹ The great operatic soprano Regine Crespin related the story of Poulenc's play-inspiration. She tells of the composer visiting her backstage after a performance and characterizing her as Madame Lidoine in his yet-to-be operatic version. When he indicated he was turning the play into an opera, she said that would be impossible! She later played the role in the opera's Paris premiere and the Pierre Dervaux recording.

⁴⁰ In the creation of an opera or ballet, a scenario is developed initially to indicate how the original source, if any, is to be adapted and to summarize the aspects of character, staging, plot, etc. that can be expanded later in a fully developed libretto, or script. This sketch also can be helpful in "pitching" the idea to a prospective producer, director or composer.

Emmet Lavery, (1902-1986). American playwright (*Yankee from Olympus*). Some sources credit him with writing (or co-writing with Poulenc) the operatic libretto based on the Bernados work,⁴¹ other production credits simply say "produced with the permission of Emmett Lavery." Some doubt is thrown on his authorship contributions to *Dialogues* by the fact he owned the theatrical rights to the story and held a legal judgment over the copyright that required his name be credited in all staged performances.

Developing the Opera



By the 1950's, Poulenc had an established international compositional reputation. He had also rejoined the Catholic faith of his youth and that action had motivated him towards religious composition.

His first such effort was in honor of a friend who had recently died. He opted not to do a more traditional requiem in favor of the medieval text of the *Stabat Mater Dolorosa*. (The Grieving Mother was Standing)⁴² The work for soprano, chorus and orchestra premiered in 1951 to great international acclaim.⁴³

Shortly afterwards, Poulenc was approached by a senior officer⁴⁴ of Ricordi, the famed Italian music publishers, with a request to

⁴¹ Among his playwright credits is *Song at the Scaffold* based on the le Fort novella.

⁴² This is a meditation on the sorrows of Christ's mother Mary as she stands at the foot of the cross.

⁴³ It won the New York Music Critics' Circle Award for Best Choral Work of 1951.

⁴⁴ The officer was Guido Vicarengi, who later became CEO of Ricordi.

compose a ballet for La Scala based on the life of St. Catherine of Sienna. However, Poulenc preferred an opera. Vicarengi suggested *Dialogues*, which at the time was appearing in play form in Paris. Poulenc saw the play, was immediately captivated by the subject and began work almost immediately (1953).

In the middle of the composition of the opera, Poulenc was made aware of a legal issue. After Bernanos's death in 1948 when it became clear that the proposed movie was far in the future, a dramatic version of Bernanos's work was suggested. Lavery through an earlier agreement with the Baroness Le Fort, developed his own version of the play.

When word of a proposed Bernardos play emerged, Lavery took the issue to arbitration arguing he had previously been assigned exclusive theatrical production rights as a result of his agreement with the Baroness. Poulenc was compositionally stymied while arbitration was under way.⁴⁵

Arbitration ruled in favor of Lavery. However, both sides of the dispute quickly resolved their differences post-arbitration;⁴⁶ Poulenc proceeded without further complication.

Apart from the legal issue, Poulenc's creative process was affected also by health issues. The composer was a hypochondriac, but also

⁴⁵ When word of Poulenc's conundrum became public, a Carmelite Father in the US wrote to the composer assuring him that all the Carmelite clergy in the US were beginning a novena on his behalf for a successful outcome of the arbitration.

⁴⁶ The resolution basically required that Lavery's name be included in all future stage productions of *Dialogues*. It appears despite the production credit, both the play and operatic sources were Bernardos's movie script, not Lavery's play, which differs in numerous respects from the Bernardos work.

had some real chronic illness problems. Both of these surfaced periodically as the opera's score was being created. More serious during this period (1953-54), his lover was in a terminal stage of illness and died shortly after Poulenc completed the work.

In 1957, the opera premiered at La Scala, Paris, San Francisco and on American television via the NBC Opera Theater; its Covent Garden and Vienna debuts were in 1958; in 1966 it reached the stage of the NYC Opera and in 1977, the Metropolitan Opera. In line with Poulenc's wish that the language of the opera match the language of its audience, it is usually heard in the native language of the country in which it is presented.

The opera was greeted internationally with positive critical acclaim during its various debuts. As noted, its value is growing through appreciation over these fifty + years since its first production.

Poulenc's inscription of his original score gives interesting insight to the man himself and his sources of inspiration: "To memory of my mother, who revealed music to me; of Claude Debussy who gave me the taste to write some; and of Claudio Monteverdi, Giuseppe Verdi and Modest Mussorgsky who served as my models."



Persons of the Opera



In the opera, the fictional de la Force family symbolize a long-established aristocratic lineage and members of the Royal Court. Their daughter serves as the opera's keystone. The family members include:

- Marquis de la Force, the father (Baritone).
- Chevalier de la Force, the son (Tenor).
- Blanche de la Force, the daughter and later known as Sister Blanche of the Agony of Christ (Soprano).
- Thierry, a family retainer (Baritone).

The opera's Carmelite Nuns of Compiègne are all historical figures and include:

- Madame de Croissy, Prioress of the Convent; also known as Mother Henriette of Jesus (Contralto).
- Madame Lidoine, the new Prioress of the Convent after the death of Madame de Croissy. She is also known as Mother Marie of St. Augustine. (Soprano).
- Mother Marie of the Incarnation, the Assistant Prioress, is the only member of the Convent that survived The Terror. She later wrote an account of the fate of the Nuns.⁴⁷ (Mezzo Soprano).⁴⁸

⁴⁷ The account was probably used by the Baroness de la Fort in creating her novella.

⁴⁸ There are two of the nuns (both historical figures) that have the same religious name of Mother Marie, the new Prioress and the Assistant Prioress. Since both contribute heavily to the action of the opera, the new Prioress will be referred to as Madame Lidoine and the Assistant Prioress will be referred to as Mother Marie to avoid confusion.

- Sister Constance of Saint-Denis, the youngest nun. (Light Soprano).
- Mother Jeanne of the Child Jesus, Dean of the Community. (Contralto).
- Sister Mathilde (Mezzo Soprano).

Elderly nuns (members of the Ensemble/ Choisters):

- Mother Gerald.
- Sister Claire.
- Sister Antoine (Portress).

Other nuns (members of the Ensemble/ Choisters)
and persons serving the Convent:

- Sister Catherine.
- Sister Felicity.
- Sister Gertrude.
- Sister Alice.
- Sister Valentine.
- Sister Anne of the Cross.
- Sister Martha
- Sister St. Charles.
- The Chaplain of the Convent. (Tenor)
- M. Javelinot, a physician serving the Convent. (Baritone)

Members of the Revolutionary Government:

- 1st Commissioner (Tenor).
 - 2nd Commissioner (Baritone).
 - Officer (Baritone).
 - Jailer (Baritone).
- Officers, Prisoners, Guards, Townspeople (Chorus).

The Opera's Historical References: Events and Artifacts



As any conscientious portrait from or about times past, both the play and operatic forms of *Dialogues* are appropriately seeded with references to events and/or artifacts related to France's revolutionary period. Over the passage of time though, the relevance of these references to the plot may have become obscure.

Therefore in the following discussion of the opera, we have integrated additional material developed to assist contemporary *Dialogues'* audiences to understand such historical events and artifacts, in terms of relevance to that revolutionary time and place.

Analyses of references to historical events and artifacts precede each act and scene in which they occur. The analyses are distinguished from the opera discussion of those acts and scenes by being contained in a grey text box—

The Opera



Time: April, 1789, a late afternoon. Pre-revolutionary unrest is beginning to engulf France. The Estates General is scheduled to meet in May, its first meeting since 1614. The Bastille will be stormed in July of '89, the first major event symbolizing the onset of the Revolution.

Act I, Scene 1: References

Roger de Damas. When the Chevalier de la Force enters in Scene 1, he is concerned about the whereabouts of his sister. He has been alerted by Roger de Damas that there is a peasant mob in the area. The libretto posits that de Damas is a member of the nobility, the Chevalier's friend and probably owns property in the same area of Paris as the de la Force's.

As opposed to the Chevalier, de Damas is an historical figure, most probably the Earl of Damascus (1765-1823), a member of a long-standing aristocratic family and a dedicated supporter of the monarchy before, during and after the Revolution. He was an accomplished military tactician at an early age and served with distinction in the French army of the monarchy and the army of the Russian Tsar. He fought against the French Revolutionary army as a member of the King of Naples' forces. Damas returned to France with the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy and served with distinction in its government.

Reveillon. In expressing his concerns about his sister's whereabouts, the Chevalier indicates he has heard that, "They (the peasant mob) will burn an effigy of Reveillon in front of his palace (Reveillon's)." [continued next page]

Jean-Baptiste Reveillon (1725-1811), was a wealthy, self-made businessman. He had perfected the manufacture of wallpaper into a fine art⁴⁹ and become a “purveyor to the Royal family” as well as other members of the nobility. Unfortunately, he became a target of pre-Revolution marauding mobs because he advocated deregulation of controls on the price of bread and the lowering of wages.

A mob stormed his palace on April 28, 1789, shortly after the date of Scene 1. The palace was burned to the ground,⁵⁰ but the family escaped to the safety of the Bastille. It has been reported that some 900 people were killed in the riots of that day. The Reveillon family prudently moved to England and successfully continued their wallpaper manufacture.

A proposed burning of a Reveillon effigy was clearly designed to threaten the family. It was shortly converted into reality, despite the Marquis de la Force's rejection of the mob as a problem.

Wedding of the Dauphin. The Marquis reflecting on the birth of his daughter and the related death of his wife indicates the tragic incident began at the “wedding of the Dauphin.” That Dauphin was the current King, Louis XVI. The wedding in question would have been to Marie Antoinette on May 16, 1770. ⁵¹

Act I

In the orchestra, there is a brief agitated introduction and then *Scene 1*⁵² opens in the library of the Marquis de la Force's Paris

⁴⁹ One of his more notable creations was a special wallpaper to cover the first hot-air balloon in 1783. The balloon was launched from the gardens of his mansion.

⁵⁰ Allegedly the only items to survive were 2,000 bottles of wine!

⁵¹ For those who keep track of such things, that date would establish Blanche de la Force, the opera's heroine as almost 19 when the opera opens and 24 when she is executed.

⁵² Throughout this scene and subsequently, the conversations among the singers will be in recitative style with strong musical support from the orchestra. There will be only two principal

mansion. The Marquis's nap is interrupted by the abrupt entrance of his son, the Chevalier de la Force. The concerned young man is looking for his sister Blanche. Her carriage was reported stopped and surrounded by a peasant mob. There have been other reports of impending violence in the area.

The Marquis expresses no major concern about the general unrest. ("It is spring. It will pass.") However, the rumor about his daughter's carriage does trigger a haunting memory. Years earlier while attending the wedding of the then Dauphin to Marie Antoinette, there was an uncontrolled explosion of some fireworks, causing the crowd to panic. The carriage of the Marquis and his wife was trapped in the middle of an out-of-control mob, but were rescued by soldiers. Later that night, his pregnant wife delivered Blanche but died in childbirth. Despite the tragic memory, the Marquis expresses confidence in his daughter's current safety.

The Chevalier then turns the musical conversation to more general concerns about Blanche. She is "high-strung and morbid." The brother expands on his worries about his sister's mental health. However, the father appears not to recognize a potential problem.

To the relief of the two men, Blanche suddenly enters. She is complimented on her reported calmness amid the mob. Her response in essence is, "Looks can be deceiving." She then pleads fatigue and the need for rest before dinner. She exits commenting, "Every night of life is like the night of Christ's agony," and, "it seems

ensembles in the opera. However, there will be several aria-like periods of reflection. The style throughout the opera is, in fact, largely musical dialogues as its title asserts.

to be growing dark more quickly." The Marquis prophetically observes that it looks like a storm is coming!

After Blanche's departure, both men express concerns about the girl's health and her gloomy non-sequiturs. The Chevalier then leaves to attend to duties, while the Marquis resumes his nap. It is quickly interrupted by an off-stage scream from Blanche. An entering servant explains the girl was startled by the servant's shadow thrown on the wall as he was lighting the candles.

The girl reenters and almost immediately tells the father she wants to become a nun. She finds the world an alien place, and she cannot continue to bear her fear of it. The Marquis attempts to both reason with and console the girl. However, in a moving aria-like reflection, she implores him to let her "cure the dreadful torment that makes her life so unhappy."

The Scene ends with both principals lost in reflective thought.

- ***Orchestral Interlude.*** This musical sequence between scenes is quietly majestic although punctuated with ominous undertones. These become more threatening and musically jagged but then return to harmonies of peace and quiet.

- ***Scene 2.*** Several weeks after Scene 1, it takes place in a communal room of the Carmelite Convent at Compiègne--- a short distance northeast of Paris. The orchestra introduces the action with a peaceful melody repetitively reminiscent of bells chiming. That gradually transforms into more labored tones. Madame de Croissy, Prioress of the Convent, is questioning Blanche about her desire to join the Carmelite Order. The two women are separated by a grill

that partially masks them from each other. The Prioress is quite elderly and seriously ill.

In her initial dialogue with Blanche, the Prioress reflects at length and somewhat harshly on her personal illness. Subsequently, their dialogue becomes neutral and polite. Then the Prioress asks Blanche what draws her to the Carmelites. Blanche naively responds that she seeks a heroic life. The Prioress disabuses Blanche rather harshly of such an illusion. Under the Prioress's attack, Blanche begins to cry and admits she is seeking a refuge from the world. Again, the Prioress corrects Blanche on her illusion that the convent will serve as a refuge. Then, in a rapid shift, the Prioress asks if the girl has chosen a name in case they decide to admit her to the Order. She responds, "Sister Blanche of the Agony of Christ." That name seems to momentarily startle the Prioress. Then, she tells the girl to go in peace as the scene ends

- ***Orchestral Interlude.*** The orchestral sequence begins with bell-like chiming. Soon ominous chords softly intrude. Then a chant-like melody takes over and is quickly joined by music that appears to respond to the chant. Ominous chords intrude again but softly. That music quietly fades as a brisk melody opens the next scene.
- ***Scene 3.*** Several weeks after Scene 2, Blanche has been admitted to the Carmelite Order. She and Sister Constance are performing various daily tasks and chattering in the convent's workroom. The gathering revolution outside is largely absent apart from a comment by Blanche that "they say" the merchants are hoarding grain, and Paris is without bread.

Constance finds a “lost” iron. That launches her into a happy, reflective aria about the wedding of her brother shortly before she entered the convent.

Blanche chides the girl for chattering on about such a frivolity while the Prioress is seriously ill in a nearby room. That comment opens a discussion between the two women about death. Constance indicates she would offer her life if it would save that of the Prioress. She then indicates that she, unlike Blanche does not fear death. She finds life so amusing that death must be the same. She adds that she has great lively pleasure in serving the Lord.

Blanche again reprimands the girl for her happy attitude--- too much humor. Constance takes issue with that and then repents, suggesting the two women kneel and offer their lives for that of the Prioress. Blanche rejects the idea as “childish.” Constance persists, however, confessing she believes she will die young and that Blanche will die with her. Blanche reacts angrily to that idea and demands Constance stop such thoughts. The scene ends with Constance apologizing to Blanche for having caused her such “pain.”

- ***Orchestral Interlude.*** The sequence begins with a reflective melody. Shortly, ominous chords again softly intrude and then the melody returns. Quickly, there is a sharp intrusion of chiming bells with the full orchestra that builds to a climax and then returns to a quiet, reflective mood.

- ***Scene 4.*** The convent cell of the Prioress a short time after Scene 3. The Prioress, in bed, is obviously in the final stage of her life. Mother Marie, the Assistant Prioress is her companion. This scene is

largely focused on the reflections and deliriums of the Prioress as she approaches death. The orchestral support generally echoes her wandering thoughts and alarmed concerns.

The two nuns discuss the Prioress's condition and how much longer she may have to live. The Prioress implies that God has forsaken her, but then her thoughts turn to Blanche who has not yet arrived to sit with her.

The Prioress commends the oversight of Blanche to the Assistant Prioress as that girl lacks, "Firmness and clarity of judgment." Those two attributes the Assistant Prioress has in "abundance." Blanche enters, and she and the Prioress say a reflective goodbye with the girl being admonished to never lose her simplicity.

Blanche leaves as the Doctor enters. He indicates there is nothing he can do further for the Prioress as the woman begins to slip into a final delirium. She suddenly confides to the Assistant Prioress that in a delusion she has seen the Convent destroyed and filled with bloody straw. She then sinks further into delirium as Blanche enters. The Prioress tries to give her a final message, "To beg forgiveness for--." However, the Prioress falls dead with her message unfinished as the scene and act end.

Act II

The death of the Prioress at the end of the previous act, appears to mark a point in the opera where the events of the revolution begin their violent intrusion into the convent. By the end of Act II, revolutionary excess will have destroyed the nuns' cloistered life of prayer.

A brief orchestral introduction begins the act with an agitated melody in the strings. It subsequently turns quite melancholy as Scene 1 begins.

- ***Scene 1.*** The Chapel of the Nuns. It is the evening of the Prioress's death. She is lying in state surrounded by candles.

Blanche and Constance are kneeling in Latin prayer, alternatively chanting the lines. At the prayer's conclusion, their voices join in an "Amen." A clock strikes and Constance leaves to bring back the next pair of nuns for the vigil. Left alone, Blanche becomes frightened. She tries to leave the chapel but is interrupted by Mother Marie. The nun initially rebukes Blanche, but then in a gentle aria forgives her, excuses her from evening prayers and sends her to rest. The scene ends with a chiming of bells.

- ***Interlude before the Curtain 1.*** Constance and Blanche enter. They have their arms full of flowers and are going to decorate the grave of the Prioress. Her grave is small, and they fear they have too many flowers. Those that they cannot use, they will give to whoever is elected as the new Prioress. Constance expresses hope Mother Marie will be named.

Their conversation turns to the disturbed death of the Prioress. Constance feels the woman was given the wrong death, perhaps one that belonged to someone else. She compares that "mistake" to being given the wrong coat at a cloakroom. As the two nuns leave, Constance ends her somewhat disjointed death-related philosophy with the observation that we die for each other or, perhaps in place of each other.

- *Scene 2* begins with an almost pastoral melody in the orchestra. It continues as the action opens in the chapter room of the convent. It is a few days later, a new Prioress (Madame Lidoine) has been named, and the nuns are in a ceremony professing obedience to her. As the ceremony ends, Madame Lidoine, in a thoughtful aria, expresses her view on appropriate life in the convent and the centrality of prayer in that life. She observes significantly, for later developments, "Prayer is a duty—martyrdom is a reward."

Madame Lidoine asks Mother Marie to offer words ending the ceremony. The Assistant Prioress echoes the theme of the importance of prayer and then begins to sing an *Ave Maria*. This sequence is one of the few ensembles in the opera; it blends the voices of Madame Lidoine, Mother Marie and the assembled nuns. As their lovely, lyrical prayer concludes, the orchestra softly continues the melody as the nuns exit in procession, ending the scene.

- *Interlude before the Curtain.* There is a very brief, but almost violent orchestral introduction. A bell rings noisily and repetitively as the action begins. Madame Lidoine and Mother Marie enter rapidly as does Constance. The young nun informs the other two that there is a man outside insisting on seeing Madame Lidoine. The Prioress sends Mother Marie and Constance to meet with him.

As she waits for the two to return, Madame Lidoine seems lost in prayer and the orchestra reflects her meditation. She is soon informed that the man is the Chevalier, Blanche's brother. He wishes to see Blanche as he must leave the country.

Madame Lidoine sends Mother Marie to get Blanche even though such a meeting will be contrary to the rules of the cloister. However, she also requests Mother Marie to be present during their meeting.

- ***Prelude.*** The Prelude begins with the curtain up. Its music is quietly lugubrious and occasionally punctuated with discordant sounds.

Act II, Scene 3: Reference.

“---Army of Our Prince.” The Chevalier comes to the Convent to persuade Blanche to return home. His initial reason is that their father will be left alone as the young man is leaving to “join the army of our prince.” The “prince” is in fact the King, Louis XVI. There was an on-going civil war, and a Royalist army of sorts, aided by foreign troops,⁵³ was attempting to seize back the French government from the Revolutionary army.

The Chevalier’s statement and his general concerns indicate that the time of the scene is some point in the late summer of 1792 when the Revolutionary government abandoned all pretenses at some ruling participation by the King. Louis XVI was soon to be executed in the winter of 1793.

The Chevalier had to be aware that the immediate post-Revolution semblance of civil order was beginning to degenerate rapidly. The clergy was being added along with the nobility as Revolutionary targets. While all the nuns were at risk, Blanche was doubly so as both a noblewoman and a nun. In quietly providing protective care for their father in the shelter of their home, she might be less obvious, the brother reasoned. Later events proved him tragically wrong in reference to both individuals.

⁵³ Other royal houses throughout Europe realizing finally the peril posed to them by the revolt of the French, did declare war on that country in 1792.

- **Scene 3.** The parlor of the convent, Blanche and her brother are engaged in conversation. Mother Marie is present, but veiled and usually invisible to the audience for a majority of the scene.

The message from the Chevalier is that their father no longer feels Blanche is safe in the convent and should return home. She refuses gently as she feels safe in the convent, and she honors her vows. The brother rebukes her, she will be leaving the father all alone among the servants. She again refuses because she is now a nun and not the "little lamb" of her family.

As the Chevalier leaves, Mother Marie comes forward and counsels Blanche to have courage as the scene ends.

- **Prelude.** After a very short and abrupt orchestral introduction, the Scene begins.

Act II, Scene 4: References

"Forbidden to perform my duties." In July of 1790, the National Assembly enacted the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, which in effect made all clergy employees of the state. A part of this Constitution required the clergy to swear an oath of loyalty to the new French constitution. As noted earlier, a schism developed between clerics who accepted the oath and those who did not. From his comments, position and general behavior, we suspect the Carmelite nuns' Chaplain did not swear loyalty and is therefore under surveillance by his "friends and neighbors."

Subsequent to the Civil Constitution, further repressive laws were enacted against the clergy. Many were forbidden to perform their religious offices. The Chaplain was one of those as he indicated to the Carmelite nuns. He was also at risk of death if observed in convent or performing religious offices. The nuns ran the same risk.

“---Legislative Assembly, in session the 17th of August, 1792,”

On August 10, 1792 the Tuileries was stormed, the royal family imprisoned and the French monarchy was finally overthrown. The Legislative Assembly voted for the creation of a new French constitution. A week later, an Extraordinary Tribunal was created to deal with counter revolutionaries. It was the actions of this Tribunal that initiated some of the more extreme ---repressive moves against the Church, some of which are (continued commented on in this and subsequent scenes of the opera.

“Ah, We’ll win, we’ll win!” (Ah! Ça Ira.) This song was a major anthem of the Revolution. Its melody was a popular dance air in pre-Revolution times. Benjamin Franklin our Revolution’s envoy to the French court is credited with the title and the piece’s refrain. When asked about the status of the American Revolution, he would always reply, “Cha Ira!”⁵⁴

While *La Marseillaise* had been composed in 1792, at this temporal point of the French Revolution, it had not achieved its eventual national popularity. The *Cha Ira* was the revolutionary anthem of choice. Its lyrics generally focused on the killing of the aristocrats and the clergy. When Blanche hears that music and lyrics sung off-stage, she well knows what the mob intends. In her fright, she drops and breaks the statue of the Little King which Mother Jeanne has just given to Blanche to inspire her hope and courage.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ This is idiomatically translated both as, “It will be fine” or “We will win.”

⁵⁵ In historical reality, it is this statue Madame Lidoine carried with her to the guillotine.

Phrygian Cap. The cap was first introduced to European and American cultures through ancient Greek sculptures and paintings. In these art works, the subject, usually a resident of Phrygia or Troy, was wearing a soft conical hat, frequently red in color with the tip bent forward. The Cap came to symbolize a quest for freedom. It was extensively used by the revolting colonists in our revolution and was subsequently adapted by the French in theirs. During The Terror, the Cap was not only worn by (con members of the mob, but also by aristocrats and Revolutionary moderates as a symbol of their sympathies with the revolutionaries or as protective coloration from frequently fatal accusations of royalist sympathies.⁵⁶

In productions of the opera, the Cap will frequently appear on members of the ensemble representing revolutionary mobs. In the last scene, the stage directions indicate the Chaplain should be wearing such a cap.

- ***Scene 4 - The Convent Sacristy, probably the late summer of 1792.*** The Chaplain, together with the nuns, is putting away all his religious vessels. He informs the nuns that he has been forbidden to function as a priest by the Revolutionary Council. The Mass he has just said for the convent is his last. He and the nuns join in singing the Eucharistic prayer *Ave Verum Corpus* (Hail True Body.)

The Chaplain reassures the nuns, and especially Blanche, that he will return to the convent in disguise as often as it is safely possible. After he leaves, there is a discussion among the nuns about the fear paralyzing the country like a plague. Madame Lidoine observes that

⁵⁶ It is alleged that the Strasbourg Cathedral was crowned with a Phrygian Cap to prevent its destruction by a revolutionary mob.

when there are not enough priests, there are plenty of martyrs. It is those martyrs that will restore the balance of grace to France.

Mother Marie observes that those remarks are divinely inspired, and the nuns must give their lives so France will be restored to grace. As Madame Lidoine leaves, she corrects the Assistant Prioress by reminding her that they cannot decide if they will be martyrs, only God can.

The convent bell rings violently. It is the Chaplain returning and the sounds of a mob are heard. He was almost caught between the mob and a troop of soldiers. He will endanger the nuns if he remains, so he plans to slip out when the crowd passes. Unfortunately, the mob arrives at the convent demanding to be admitted. The Chaplain escapes out a side door as Mother Marie sends Constance to admit the mob.

Four Revolutionary Commissioners enter, but the mob remains outside held back by the soldiers. A Commissioner informs the nuns they will have to vacate the Convent and their property will be sold by legislative act.

In an exchange between the Commissioner and Mother Marie, she acquiesces to their demands, requesting only time to change from their habits as they have been forbidden to wear them. The Commissioner quietly tells Mother Marie that he has been a Sacristan and a friend of the Church. He has been forced to join the mob.

Mother Marie asks him to prove his devotion. He responds that he will lead the crowd away, leaving only some workers. He advises

though, they should not trust the blacksmith, as he is an informer. The Commissioner leaves with the others following him, only the nuns remain.

The nuns are informed by Mother Jeanne⁵⁷ that Madame Lidoine is coming to say goodbye as she must leave for Paris. Blanche is terrified and to comfort her, Mother Jeanne hands her a little religious statue of the child Jesus. The crowd outside begins to sing the “Ah! Ca ira!” That startles Blanche and she lets the statue drop, breaking it. As the scene ends, she cries out. “The Little King is dead! And, we have nothing left but the Lamb of God.” Outside, the mob continues to sing the revolutionary anthem as the curtain falls.

Act III, Scene 1: Reference

Vow of Martyrdom. In the Catholic Church, there are vows that affirm that the subject(s) will practice the requirements of the faith even at the risk of death, but there is no Vow of Martyrdom per se. Therefore, in the opera, the “Vow” is actually a quite effective use of artistic license.

While the Assistant Prioress (Mother Marie) had taken the Martyrdom Vow with the other Carmelites, she was absent when they are condemned. As the Chaplain informs, despite her wishes otherwise, she cannot return to the community to be executed with them; you cannot volunteer for martyrdom---vows notwithstanding. In the Chaplain's view, God has spared the Assistant Prioress. She must respect His wishes.

⁵⁷ Dean of the Community.

Act III

Scene 1. The Scene opens with a solemn orchestral introduction similar to a trudging, funereal-like procession.

The action begins in the *Chapel of the Convent* which has been devastated. The majority of the Community appears to be present with the exception of Madame Lidoine. The Chaplain is also present, but in disarrayed laypersons' clothing. Mother Marie appears to be calmly but firmly in charge.

Mother Marie has raised again the Vow of Martyrdom she alluded to in Act II and has requested the Chaplain to administer the Vow. He initially demurs, saying it is not one of his "duties." He suggests in the "enforced absence" of Madame Lidoine, Mother Marie address the community on the issue.

Mother Marie proposes to the assembled nuns that they take the Vow of Martyrdom so that, "The (Carmelite) Order may be preserved and saved from harm." The assemblage is not enthusiastic about the proposal. However, Mother Marie persists despite an overt objection from one of the nuns.

To alleviate the growing concern of the community, the Assistant proposes that if only one member of the community opposes the Vow it will not be taken. The Chaplain will hear in secret the wish of each nun. One of the nuns quietly comments that Blanche will be against it.

Individually, the nuns go behind the altar to speak with the Chaplain. He then reports to Mother Marie, the result of the vote:

one has voted no! That is enough to nullify the proposal. Against the claim of one of the nuns that they know who the nay-sayer is, Constance says it was she. However, she has changed her mind and is now in full agreement with the community. She would like to take the Vow. At Constance's announcement, Blanche begins to weep.

The Chaplain affirms the now unanimous vote and requests the nuns to take the Vow two by two in order of age (youngest to oldest). Blanche and Constance as the youngest are the first. As the other nuns advance, Blanche runs from the Chapel. The Scene ends with sharp discordant notes in the orchestra.

Act III, Interlude before the Curtain: Reference.

Lay persons' clothing. One of the Revolutionary Tribunal's actions against the clergy was to forbid them to wear their religious clothing. Hence, as the nuns leave their shuttered convent, they appear in lay clothing for the first time within the opera.

Interlude before the Curtain. Dirge-like processional music opens the *Interlude*. With Madame Lidoine in attendance, the nuns appear dressed in laypersons clothing and carrying their possessions in small bundles; members of the Revolutionary Guard are escorting them from the convent.

The Officer-in-Charge congratulates the nuns on their obedience to civil law and their public spirit in vacating the convent. They are warned not to live in a religious community, nor can they associate with enemies of the State, such as priests. Shortly, the nuns should

appear one by one, before the Revolutionary Court where they will be issued a card awarding privileges of citizenship.

When the officers leave, Madame Lidoine requests one of the nuns to warn the Chaplain not to come to the convent to say Mass as they had previously agreed. It is now too dangerous for the priest and the nuns.

Madame Lidoine pointedly asks Mother Marie if she agrees. The response indicates that Mother Marie has been called to task by Madame Lidoine for her previous actions related to the Vow. The Assistant Prioress acknowledges she must be fully obedient to the Prioress. However, the Vow cannot now be undone.

Mother Marie leaves, but questions the Prioress' request to warn the priest; it may go against the intent of the Vow. As the scene ends, the Prioress tells the nuns, "To each her own conscience."

Prelude. The orchestral prelude begins quietly with a lovely flowing melody that is almost languid. It very shortly becomes much heavier and agitated. For the remainder of the prelude, the music vacillates between the gentle melody and its more raucous partnering theme. The prelude gently ends. ***Scene 2*** begins with a series of agitated and intrusive chords.

Scene 2. Library of the Marquis de la Force. The Marquis's elegant library of Act I now, like the Convent chapel, lies in ruins victimized by the revolutionary mob. The mansion has been taken over by the household's former servants and others; they have turned the library into a communal kitchen and sleeping area. Now

a servant to the former household staff, Blanche is preparing a meal.

The action begins as Mother Marie abruptly enters and announces to the girl that she has come to bring her back to the convent.⁵⁸ The girl indicates that she might return later, but not now. Mother Marie warns her she is not safe outside of the convent.

Blanche, in an emotional aria, recounts her childhood fears of “fear.” She reveals that her father has been executed, and she is now alone.

Mother Marie then gives Blanche the address of a “safe house” where she will meet the girl the next night. Blanche again declines to leave, but Mother Marie states she knows the girl will come. The women are interrupted by an off-stage voice raucously asking if Blanche has done her work. The girl abruptly runs from the room; Mother Marie shortly follows. The scene ends with a series of jarring minor chords.

Interlude. In a soft but sad melodic Interlude, the orchestra introduces Scene 3. As the music progresses, it takes on a rhythm somewhat symbolizing a slow passage of time.

Scene 3. A Prison Cell in the Conciergerie. The action begins with the orchestra echoing a melody similar to that of the ***Interlude.*** All the nuns are confined to a prison cell and are being addressed by the Prioress.

⁵⁸ Blanche fled from the convent to her former home after taking the Vow of Martyrdom.

In a moving aria, the Prioress is attempting to calm the appropriate anxiety of her nuns. She then takes up the subject of the Vow. Whether it was wise or not, God will not allow it to trouble the women's conscience. The Prioress then indicates that she will take up the Vow, and she blesses the nuns.

Constance asks what will become of Blanche. Madame Lidoine indicates she does not know the fate of the girl anymore than the rest. Constance assures them Blanche will return--- she has been told in a dream. The nuns laugh at that pronouncement as their jailer enters with an official document.

The jailer reads the document to the nuns, which is from the Revolutionary Tribunal. It lists the nuns present by their "civilian" names and accuses them, among other things, of being a body of seditious rebels plotting the return of the monarchy. For their crimes, they are condemned to death.

When he leaves, the Prioress expresses her sorrow that she could not have spared the community this end, but confesses her maternal love for the gathered nuns. She then blesses them as the scene ends.

Interlude Before the Curtain. A series of sharp, sinister chords in the orchestra introduces the ***Interlude.*** They are briefly followed musically by a fast moving agitated theme.

The action begins in a street near the Conciergerie The Chaplain enters briskly; Mother Marie who has been waiting, steps out of the shadows. The Chaplain informs her all the nuns have been condemned to death and will be executed "today or tomorrow."

Mother Marie moves to rejoin her sisters in prison to die with them. The Chaplain reminds her that the manner of her death is not her choice, but God's. She was not condemned with the nuns.⁵⁹ She cannot voluntarily submit herself for martyrdom, even if she took the Vow. As the scene ends, he counsels her not to feel dishonored by her absence from the fate of her community, but to think only of God and His decision concerning her.

Prelude. Initially, the lengthy orchestral *Prelude* states a rather majestic, but dirge-like melody. Throughout the remainder of the *Prelude*, multiple variations of the initial theme are heard. They are always followed by a return to the original music before a new variation is introduced.

Act III, Scene 4:References.

Tumbrel. Those of us who have seen pictures or films of the French Revolution are familiar with the crude carts pulled by horses that took the condemned to the guillotine. However, to the mob and the condemned, these devices had a savage symbolic meaning beyond its physical function.

The tumbrel was originally designed for use on French farms to transport manure and other refuse to a garbage pit. The carts were so designed that the rear wall could be opened and the contents dumped into the pit. The French word is the root origin of the English word "tumble."

⁵⁹ She was absent when they were arrested, probably occasioned by her Scene 2 efforts related to Blanche.

“Salve Regina” (“Hail, Holy Queen”). The *Salve Regina* was composed during the Middle Ages and is generally attributed to a German monk. It is one of four antiphons honoring the Virgin Mary that are sung at different Church seasons as dictated by the Catholic liturgical calendar. The season for the *Salve* is between the first Sunday after *(continued)*

Pentecost and the Saturday before the first Sunday of Advent. The Carmelites' execution occurred during this period and therefore, the hymn would have been traditional. Ironically, in Church ritual, the *Salve* is recited as the last prayer of the Rosary.

“Veni Creator Spiritus” (“Come Holy Ghost”). This Catholic hymn, normally sung as a Gregorian chant, was composed in the 9th century. Its use is usually for high ceremonial occasions within the Church (e.g. dedication of churches, entrance of the Cardinals into the Sistine Chapel to elect a new Pope) and for civil high occasions (e.g. coronation of kings). Until Blanche's sudden appearance in Scene 4, Sister Constance is the last nun to be executed. At the point of Constance's off-stage death, Blanche finishes the last line of the *Salve*. Then as she moves forward towards her death, she changes the hymn to the *Veni*. Perhaps in her mind this execution was a high ceremonial occasion for the Carmelite community.

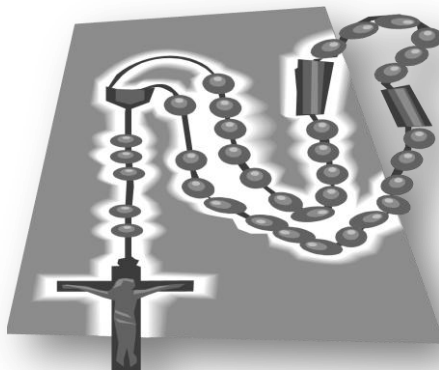
In Latin, Blanche sings only the last verse: “ Now to the Father and the Son, Who rose from death, be glory given, with Thou, O Holy Comforter, henceforth by all in earth and ----.” The last words, “---heaven. Amen,” remain unsung as the opera ends.

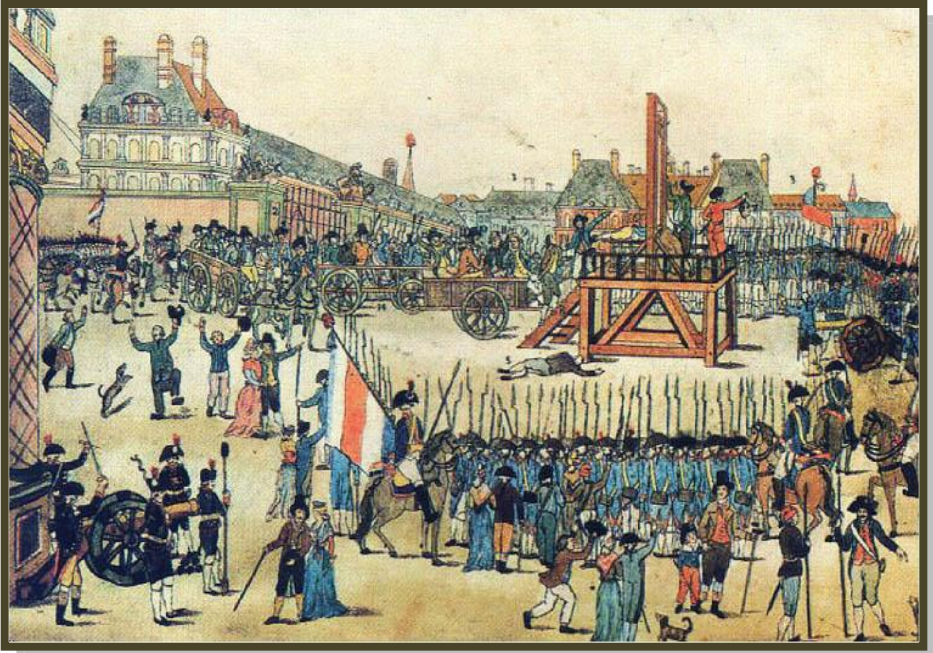
Scene 4. Place de la Revolution. The action begins at the execution site where a large crowd has gathered. The nuns have already arrived in tumbrels. Constance, the last to descend, seems almost elated. The nuns dutifully arrange themselves in a line with the Prioress as the first. In the crowd, wearing a Phrygian cap, the Chaplain circumspectly blesses the condemned nuns and then disappears into the crowd.

En ensemble, the entire community begins to sing the *Salve Regina*. The scaffold is located off-stage and the nuns singly walk off towards it. As each nun mounts the scaffold, the sound of the descending blade is subsequently heard through the orchestra and the ensemble.

As the community's number decreases, the volume of the *Salve* also decreases. Finally, Constance is the only one left singing. As she advances towards the scaffold, Blanche appears out of the crowd clearly and fearlessly intent on also mounting the scaffold. Constance sees her friend and becomes radiantly happy as she moves to her death.

Blanche moves toward and mounts the scaffold singing the *Veni Creator Spiritus*. The sound of the descending blade is heard and then--- total silence. The crowd quietly leaves as a faint melody is heard in the orchestra. The opera then ends with a single faint boom of the tympani.





*The Reign of Terror ends:
Execution of Robespierre.*

AN OPERAPHOBICS GUIDE

The current series thru 1/1/11.

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To be continued!

** Opera Carolina

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