

# Applying a Mad Studies Framework to Opera: Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites*

Colette Simonot-Maiello

Volume 40, Number 1, 2020

Pour des musicologies alternatives

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1096477ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1096477ar>

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## Publisher(s)

Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes

## ISSN

1911-0146 (print)

1918-512X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

## Cite this article

Simonot-Maiello, C. (2020). Applying a Mad Studies Framework to Opera: Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites*. *Intersections*, 40(1), 9–25.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1096477ar>

## Article abstract

Multiple readings of madness are examined in Poulenc's opera *Dialogues des Carmélites* (1957) through the framework of mad studies. Several layers of madness can be found in this work: individual lived experiences of madness, the history of mental illness in France during and after the French Revolution, and the cultural metaphor of hysteria as social degeneration, as articulated by Micalé. Close readings of two scenes with a discussion of their musical features are included: the first prioress's death (act 1, scene 4) and the final scene at the guillotine (act 3, scene 4).

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## APPLYING A MAD STUDIES FRAMEWORK TO OPERA: POULENC'S *DIALOGUES DES CARMÉLITES*

Colette Simonot-Maiello

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### INTRODUCTION

In *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity*, La Marr Jurelle Bruce notes that, in the framework of mad studies, “madness” is a floating signifier, a dynamic social construction, and a lived reality that demands attention (2021, 6). Mad studies is an interdisciplinary field of scholarship and activism that emerged from the mad pride movement in the 1990s (which itself grew from anti-psychiatry movements) and is characterized by the reclamation of the word “mad” as a positive signifier. Despite its origins, mad studies does not reject psychiatry or the medicalization of extreme emotional distress or emotional excess. Rather, it acts as an umbrella under which the medical model can dwell as one of many interpretations of emotional distress. An emerging interdisciplinary field of study, mad studies gives voice to a variety of lived experiences that might fall under the rubric of madness, but also addresses histories, cultures, representations, and politics of those who may identify as mad.<sup>1</sup> Because of the dynamic usage of the terms “mad” and “madness” in mad studies, medical and cultural discourses on synonymic terms, such as hysteria, which plays a prominent role in this article, are part of the history of madness.

While a mad studies framework has not yet been embraced by musicologists, madness has been discussed in music scholarship in, for example, the discourses of disability (Bassler 2016; Deaville 2016) and in connection with metal (McKinnon, Scott, and Sollee 2011; Walser 1993). As a genre famous for emotional excess, opera seems ideally suited to examination via mad studies. Several scholars have written about the operatic mad scene with a focus on cataloguing conventional traits of this scene type (Fabbri 1995; Rosand 1992; McClary 1991; Döhring 1976). Except for McClary, these authors avoid discussing the meaning or interpretation of the mad scene, but focus on how madness might be conveyed via music. McClary develops a robust cultural and historical context for the mad scene and links it to a structural feature—a musical

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, see LeFrançois, Menzies, and Reaume (2013).

framing mechanism that acts as a metaphor of the asylum, demarcating the sane and insane musical material. The mad studies framework invites broader musical readings of operatic madness, going beyond the binary readings that these authors suggest, in which a mad character is marked musically in contrast to unmarked musical norms. Ultimately, applying a mad studies framework to mad scenes in opera or to operatic madness, more generally defined, will generate rich interpretations of operatic stories and characters.

In this article I examine layered readings of madness in Poulenc's 1957 opera, *Dialogues des Carmélites*. This opera narrates the events leading to the execution of sixteen Carmelite nuns during the Terror of the French Revolution, centering on young Blanche de la Force, a devout aristocrat who is psychologically and spiritually unstable. Mental illness became a major public health concern during the French Revolution, so the broader context of this opera already suggests a link to madness.<sup>2</sup> According to medical historian Mark Micale, in the late eighteenth century, catastrophic political events were theorized as potential causes of mental disturbance, while an alternate hypothesis emerged in the nineteenth century—that violent political activity was the manifestation of a latent state of individual or collective insanity (Micale 1995). Hysteria emerged as a master metaphor in French cultural history in tandem with the increase of mental illness. In addition to the opera itself, I explore Poulenc's articulation of his own experience of madness while composing this work, including his ruminations on physical ailments, anxieties about religion and death, legal challenges, difficulties in relationships, and ultimately his articulation of madness as a creative struggle. The framework of mad studies is useful in understanding the meaning of experiences like Poulenc's and the opera, because it allows for ambiguity and simultaneous interpretations. Using two key scenes from *Dialogues*, I will show how Poulenc traced the metaphor of hysteria as social degeneration with passages of musical madness in the opera. Against the backdrop of this overarching metaphor, act 1, scene 4 presents the individual experience of a prioress in spiritual distress on her deathbed. This scene bears the closest resemblance to a typical operatic mad scene because the subject herself bears musical markers of madness, which suggests the medical model of disability. Unusually, Poulenc opens the scene with diegetic sounds that trigger musical degeneration. My interpretation intertwines madness, mysticism, and death. Act 3, scene 4, the final scene at the guillotine, suggests a musical manifestation of the collective insanity of the Reign of Terror, though it bears little resemblance to a traditional operatic mad scene. In this scene, Poulenc relies only on the diegetic sound of the guillotine to disrupt the music and cause chaos. In other words, the presentation of metaphorical madness here is articulated as part of the musical environment, not in connection with a mad character. The characters themselves are not marked musically with madness, but instead are affected by an element in their environment, which suggests the social model of disability.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about mental illness and the French Revolution, see sources referred to later in this article: Bonfils (1819), Bottex (1839), Jacob and Beveridge (1995), and Taine (1877).

## HYSTERIA AS METAPHOR

Susan Sontag argues that any disease “whose causality is murky, and for which treatment is ineffectual, tends to be awash in significance.... The disease itself becomes a metaphor” (1977, 57). Linda and Michael Hutcheon agree, emphasizing the important relationship between medical knowledge and social and cultural meanings of diseases (Hutcheon and Hutcheon 1996, 227, 18). In lay terms, hysteria could be defined today simply as emotionally out of control, but it has a long and complex medical history and is rich with metaphorical possibilities.<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Bronfen states that hysteria is “precisely not this syndrome, not that disorder, and perhaps not even a sickness in the strict sense” (1998, 103), while Micale waxes poetic about the “extreme, almost obscene interpretability” of hysteria (1995, 285). Micale suggests that, because medical observers have characterized hysteria in various and contradictory ways over the years, its history should be conceptualized as an evolving textual tradition of behaviours that physicians have designated as hysterical (2008, xiv). As previously stated, hysteria has been master metaphor throughout French cultural history. It stood for a host of unsettling developments, especially at the *fin de siècle*, including social reform, foreign nationalism, and political violence. It characterized socialists, alcoholics, prostitutes, crowds, and even the French themselves. “On the eve of psychoanalysis,” Micale asserts, “hysteria was as likely to appear in novels, social science textbooks, and newspaper editorials as in the sickroom, the medical lecture hall, or the physician’s study, and with a spectrum of meanings that was every bit as multifarious” (1995, 219).

A consideration of Poulenc’s distress while writing *Dialogues* is an instructive example of hysteria as an ambiguous, dynamic, and polysemous experience, as the framework of mad studies suggests. Jeremy Sams has commented that Poulenc was “one of the great hypochondriacs of the century” (1999, 516), a claim that has the underlying charge of hysteria, according to Micale (2008).<sup>4</sup> In November 1954, shortly after beginning a tour in Germany with singer Pierre

<sup>3</sup> Writings on hysteria over centuries reveal different ideas about the disease’s cause, symptomatology, and treatment. In the medieval period, for example, it was thought to be a manifestation of evil and its demonological cause required a religious cure. In the Renaissance, it was defined as a neurological problem. By the nineteenth century, hysteria was redefined as a gynaecological condition, and by the late nineteenth century, neurological and psychological models were popular. The work of French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–93), although highly problematic today, was foundational in medical and cultural understandings of hysteria, especially as they developed in France. Throughout the history of hysteria, a wide array of symptoms has been connected to it, but some of the most common included convulsions, hallucinations, loss of consciousness, and paralyses. Hysteria had disappeared from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* by 1980 (Micale 1995; Bronfen 1998; Tasca et al. 2012). For an extensive discussion of hysteria as background context to Poulenc’s work, see Simonot 2010, especially 106–24.

<sup>4</sup> Hysteria and hypochondria were grouped under the diagnostic umbrella of melancholia in the 1600s; however, since hysterical symptoms were attributed to the uterus, hysteria was considered a female issue and the same symptoms in men were labelled hypochondria. Micale points out that “the first medical intellectuals explicitly to reject the womb theory also defended the possibility—in fact the undeniability—of hysterical breakdown in men” (2008, 18). By the late 1800s, the hysteric, or hypochondriac, male was ever-present in literature, with vague, quasi-clinical nervous symptoms, like exhaustion, insomnia, and hypersensitivity (208–10). By the twentieth century, hypochondria and hysteria were used almost interchangeably. The diagnosis of hypochondria or hysteria could also

Bernac, Francis Poulenc collapsed and was taken to a clinic at L'Haÿ-les-Roses and placed under the care of Dr. Maillard-Verger (Schmidt 2001, 297). In the months leading to his collapse, Poulenc had been suffering from severe anxiety. He had learned the previous December that Emmet Lavery, an American playwright and screenwriter, held the performing rights for Georges Bernanos's stage play *Dialogues des Carmélites* and could prevent Poulenc's operatic version from being staged (Gendre 1999, 274, 289).<sup>5</sup> Additionally, for several years Poulenc had been in an obsessive, difficult relationship with Lucien Roubert, a travelling salesman, while still with his long-time lover Raymond Destouches. Combined with the metaphysical anguish in which he was immersed while composing *Dialogues*, these stressors were taking a toll on his health. What began as insomnia in August 1953 was escalating into a full-fledged breakdown. As Poulenc's stress mounted, his physical ailments became more acute, further exacerbating his anxiety. In the summer of 1954, he corresponded with Father Griffin, a Carmelite priest in Dallas, Texas, asking him to rally his community in prayer. Poulenc wrote, "God knows if I shall ever complete *Dialogues des Carmélites* because I am very ill. It is my stomach. Cancer. In spite of my doctors' reassurances that there is nothing wrong with me, I fear that I will never be able to work again. Will you ask the Carmelite Fathers of Dallas to make a novena that I recover my health and that I may be able to glorify God and the blessed martyrs of Compiègne with my music? I am in terrible fear" (Schmidt 2001, 395).

In another letter, this time to Bernac on 28 July 1954, Poulenc expanded on his concerns: "Delmas [Poulenc's doctor] follows my progress with extraordinary vigilance. He has done a series of medical tests in an attempt to get to the bottom of the intestinal problems troubling me over the past two years.... Obviously, six weeks of near mad anxiety have seriously wrecked my nerves, and what this has done to the level of my uric acid is unimaginable.... You may be right; perhaps I will always suffer from the same little problems and persist in believing they are serious illnesses. Let's hope that's all it is" (Poulenc 1991, 219–21).<sup>6</sup>

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be applied to librettist Georges Bernanos, who suffered ill health his entire life, encouraging his obsession with the mystery of Christ's agony and death. He was terminally ill while writing *Dialogues*.

<sup>5</sup> Although it masquerades as historical fact, Poulenc's opera is, as Jeremy Sams writes, "the result of a series of accretions, different glosses of the truth, applied by a series of creative artists, each with a slightly different story to tell" (Sams 1999, 512). In 1931, German writer Gertrud von Le Fort published her novella *Die Letzte am Schafott*, based on the historical event in which sixteen Carmelite nuns were executed during the Terror of the French Revolution. Georges Bernanos subsequently based his 1949 stage play, *Dialogues des Carmélites* on Le Fort's novella, as did Emmet Lavery, who had acquired rights to any stage production based on Le Fort's work when he wrote his own stage version, *The Last on the Scaffold*, in 1949. Lavery subsequently prohibited the production of Bernanos's play and Poulenc's 1957 opera, based on Bernanos's work, without his own authorization. Although Bernanos's heirs would have willingly granted Poulenc the rights to perform his opera, they could not do so without Lavery's permission. A legal battle ensued, and finally permission was granted, with the provision that Poulenc had to add to all programs, publicity, and printed libretti that Lavery had granted permission for the opera adaptation (Gendre 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Delmas me suit avec une vigilance extraordinaire. Il a fait faire un examen clinique de mes urines et mes matières voulant lutter contre cette flore intestinale qui me fleurit depuis deux ans.... Evidemment six semaines de quasi-folie anxieuse m'ont profondément détraqué et ce que je fais

When the same letter ended, Poulenc rejected going to a mental clinic and instead asked Bernac if he would come to his country home in Noizay to help him resume work on the opera and see his cure through to completion. Unfortunately working from Noizay did not help; Poulenc wrote to Henri Hell on 10 September 1954 that the climate and solitude was killing him (Poulenc 1994, 805–6). Since his doctor could find nothing wrong, Poulenc finally returned to Paris and consulted Jean Lhermitte, a neurologist at the Salpêtrière (Poulenc 1994, 806). By October 1954, Poulenc admitted he was having a breakdown. He wrote, “No doubt my Sacred Ladies have wanted to purify me by fire.... I think these Nuns, before losing their heads, have wanted me to sacrifice mine” (Poulenc 1991, 224–5).<sup>7</sup>

As I have recounted here, throughout 1954, Poulenc medicalized his distress, downplaying its emotional and spiritual elements. However, when he first began his downward spiral in 1953, Poulenc described himself as “crazy” or a “madman.” He wrote to Stéphane Audel on 31 August 1953, “Just a brief line as Mother Marie will not allow me the slightest distraction. I am working like a madman, I do not go out, do not see anyone.... I am crazy about my subject, to the point of believing that I have actually known these women” (Poulenc 1991, 206).<sup>8</sup> In September 1953, Poulenc wrote to his friend Doda Conrad, “This whole venture is making me completely crazy. I can think of nothing else, I live for nothing else” (211–12).<sup>9</sup> Ultimately Poulenc stayed in the clinic at L’Haÿ-les-Roses fewer than three weeks, then continued his convalescence at home. The following month, on 18 December 1954, he wrote to his friend Simone Girard, assuring her that he was feeling better, but still having trouble sleeping (228–9; 1994, 811). In the meantime, while he had nothing in writing from Lavery, Poulenc was assured that the playwright would not prevent *Dialogues* from being staged. In addition, Poulenc had been avoiding his sometime lover Lucien Roubert, who had added to his stress considerably. However, Roubert suddenly became ill, they resumed their relationship, and Poulenc took care of Roubert until his death.<sup>10</sup> Reminded of the death of the prioress, Poulenc cultivated an intense personal identification with the nuns, interpreting his own experiences through the lens of the opera. Having almost fully regained his health near the end of the summer of 1955, Poulenc was ready to complete the final scenes of *Dialogues des Carmélites*. He explained to his friend Rose Dercourt-Plaut in a letter from July 1955, “I have become so much my old self again—of years

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d’acide urique par neuro-arthritisme est inimaginable.... Peut-être avez-vous raison et trainerai-je toujours les mêmes petites misères que je prends pour des maladies graves. Souhaitons-le (Poulenc 1994, 797).

<sup>7</sup> Sans doute mes Saintes Dames me voulaient-elles purifier par le feu [...] Je pense que ces terribles dames avant de perdre le tête ont voulu que je leur en sacrifie une (Poulenc 1994, 809).

<sup>8</sup> Deux mots seulement car Mère Marie m’interdit la moindre distraction. Je travaille comme un fou, ne sors pas, ne vois personne.... Je suis fou de mon sujet au point de croire que j’ai connu ces dames (Poulenc 1994, 759).

<sup>9</sup> Cette aventure me rend complètement dingo. Je ne pense qu’à cela, je ne vis que pour cela (Poulenc 1994, 766).

<sup>10</sup> Roubert’s illness—variously identified as tuberculosis, pleurisy, or cancer—began suddenly and developed quickly.

ago—that I am seeing everything in a new light.... Sometimes these ordeals are necessary. No doubt my Carmelites have required this of me” (230–1).<sup>11</sup>

The opera's French Revolutionary context (in addition to Poulenc's personal experience) links *Dialogues* directly to the discourse of hysteria. Underlying the metaphor of hysteria as social degeneration was France's own historical links between revolutionary violence and madness. While many citizens welcomed the fall of the *ancien régime*, others responded to the upheaval with signs of mental illness. Hysteria became such a significant public health concern in the late 1700s that French alienists theorized that catastrophic political events caused mental disturbance. Soon after, Jacob and Beveridge identified a new type of patient, a violent “maniac” who was dangerous and impulsive, like the *sans culottes* (1995, 422). Bonfils believed there were more “lunatics” in France than anywhere else as the result of patriotism, deep regrets of the *ancien régime*, and the anguish of the Terror (1819, 7). While alienists generally agreed that revolutionary violence could *cause* hysteria, an alternate hypothesis emerged as the nineteenth century wore on: that violent political activity was a *manifestation* of a latent state of individual or collective insanity. Bottex, for example, suggested that madmen should stay away from rebellion as “it excited them and they in turn excited the people,” leading to a “madness of imitation” (1839, 26). This counter-revolutionary historiography was retroactively applied to the French Revolution by writers like Hippolyte Taine, who used terms like “group hysteria,” “collective madness,” “mass suicide,” and “political paroxysm” to describe the actions of the *sans culottes* and the Terror of the Revolution (1877).

*Dialogues des Carmélites* is based on a historical event in which sixteen Carmelite nuns were executed during the French Revolution. The protagonist, Blanche, is a fictitious addition created by Gertrud von Le Fort in her 1931 novella about the incident, *Die Letzte am Schafott*. Georges Bernanos kept the character for his stageplay, *Dialogues des Carmélites*, upon which Poulenc's opera is based. While the opera ostensibly charts Blanche's journey from fear to faith, calling her afraid does not tell the full story. Poulenc himself described Blanche as “mad,” not just fearful (Southon 2011, 638). A tone of hysteria pervades the work from the opening, set in 1789. In the first scene, Blanche's father and brother, the Marquis and Chevalier de la Force, worry because she is late returning from a prayer service. They are justifiably concerned, as her carriage has been delayed by a peasant mob. When Blanche finally returns home, shaken, she announces her intention to become a Carmelite nun to escape the noise and stress of the world. Ultimately, the convent is not the refuge Blanche hopes it will be and she is forced to face her own execution.

## ACT 1, SCENE 4: THE DYING PRIORESS AND THE BELLS

After the opening scene, Blanche seeks permission to enter the Carmelite order. She meets with the sickly Prioress de Croissy, who warns her that the convent

<sup>11</sup> “Je suis tellement redevenu moi-même comme il y a plusieurs années que je juge tout sous un angle différent.... Il y a parfois des épreuves nécessaires. Sans doute mes Carmélites exigeaient tout cela” (Poulenc 1994, 821–2).



is a place of prayer, not a refuge. In act 1, scene 4, the scene bearing the closest resemblance to a traditional mad scene, the prioress suffers a painful death accompanied by a heart-breaking loss of faith. This scene opens at the prioress's bedside in the convent infirmary. As the scene progresses, the reality of her imminent death becomes increasingly apparent, to the prioress herself and to those around her. She struggles to stay lucid but cannot fend off the relentless mental disintegration accompanying her physical decline. At the climactic moment, the prioress sees the nuns' chapel, empty and desecrated, the altar split in two with straw and blood on the ground, portending the revolutionaries plundering the convent. This is an excellent example of simultaneous interpretations when read through the mad studies framework: the prioress experiences what might be described as both a hysterical hallucination and a mystical vision. In addition, while the scene can be interpreted as the prioress's personal crisis of faith in a literal sense, it also represents a metaphorical reading of hysteria as social degeneration caused by political violence, specifically the disintegration of *ancien régime* society at the hands of the revolutionaries—perhaps a crisis of faith writ large?

Operatic madness can be challenging to recognize. According to Paolo Fabbri, early operatic mad scenes had a nonsensical conjunction of ideas that comprised illogical text fragments from a variety of sources, so the mad character constantly shifted moods and identities (1995, 164). Ellen Rosand points out that music and text have their own own rules and conventions and potential for rational and irrational expression, so operatic madness can be conveyed with music or text or a combination of the two. Madness can rely on text, abusing the conventions of verbal logic, syntax, and the rhetorical order, or music can be independently mad, subverting its own laws of structure and syntax. Music can intensify, compound, or substitute the irrationality of the text with its own irrationality. The combination of music and text, where each keeps its own internal order, can convey madness if they make no sense together (Rosand 1992, 243). As operatic discourse became more formulaic, composers were more likely to portray madness with unexpected alterations to operatic structures, such as by exploiting the middle ground between aria and recitative. According to Sieghart Döhring, by the nineteenth century, the mad scene typically had innovative structural alterations, but also featured virtuosic singing and recalled themes (1976). McClary postulates that madness must be framed by normative musical constructions against which the mad scene provides a contrast. McClary references the culture of the madhouse, in which madness was a spectacle, simultaneously confined and on display. In her feminist reading of mad scenes, madness represents feminine sexual excess, and the frame of normative musical construction is the masculine force of control. In this interpretation, the madwoman could escape the normative musical structure with virtuosity so extravagant that the structure is distorted (McClary 1991). These authors articulate operatic madness as a subversion of operatic conventions (textual and musical), suggesting a binary model of madness, like the medical or functional models of disability that mark a subject as healthy or ill, functional or impaired. A binary model of



operatic madness suggests that sanity and insanity are mapped onto text or music features that fall into dual categories like control/excess, logical/illogical, rational/irrational, and normative/non-normative. A mad studies framework aims to push beyond binary models.

Like many other twentieth-century operas, *Dialogues* does not follow norms of earlier opera and lacks overall harmonic coherence (although it is tonal), so subversions of formal and harmonic conventions do not play a big role in conveying madness. In this example, the prioress's madness is foreshadowed via musical disintegration signalled or started by disruptive diegetic sounds—in this case, convent bells. Simultaneously, musical deterioration underscores the cultural metaphor of hysteria as social degeneration, as proposed by Micale. A social model of disability, in which a subject is limited or affected by the environment, might be suggested here because musical chaos is started by an environmental element. The cloche, or bell, theme incorporates bells into its instrumentation, while the forceful articulation of all instruments mimics the pealing of bells (see figure 1). The opening phrase is altered with each repetition, ultimately leading to its disintegration. Statement A, dominated by opening repeated quarter notes on B and D, is shortened and metrically altered with each repetition, as shown by shifting metres. While statement A could be interpreted as B phrygian, statement B's harmony is clouded by F-natural and G-sharp, while statement C's increased chromaticism thickens and muddies the harmonic texture further. Finally, the melody is inverted in statement C while the lower voices are transformed into plodding eighth notes that represent the death motive.

Bells are symbolically significant. Not only did Shakespeare's Ophelia link bells to madness, but bells also have a notable history in France.<sup>12</sup> Bells were "markers of a community's spatio-temporal boundaries" in pre-revolutionary France (Boutin 2002, 268; in reference to Corbin 1998, 34–5). By ringing at certain times of day and on feast days and Sunday offices, bells marked out time aurally. They defined a community spatially as those within hearing range. They served as a warning system for fire, storm, or attack and observed beginnings and endings of war. The practical and symbolic uses of bells changed during the Revolution. In 1791, they were surrendered to make coins; in 1793, they were confiscated and recast as cannons; and finally, in 1795, the religious use of bells was banned altogether. In 1802, the right to ring bells was restored, but the sound of bells had taken on different meanings. According to Aimée Boutin, bells had become acoustic symbols of lost identity. They might reflect the break "between pre- and post-revolutionary culture, or between the pastoral nostalgia of Romanticism and the urban alienation of modernists like Baudelaire" (Boutin 2002, 267). Baudelaire anthropomorphized bells, endowing them with souls, comparing their peals to human sounds of distress. In his poem "La Cloche fêlée," bells symbolize an "existential crisis related to the lost sense of time, routine, or history," similar to madness (Boutin 2002, 271,

<sup>12</sup> In reference to Hamlet's madness, Ophelia states, "Now see that noble and most sovereign reason, Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh" (*Hamlet*, act 3, scene 1).

Figure 1: Bell theme (act 1, scene 4, beginning)

273). Poulenc's bells prefigure the stripping away of the nuns' identities; they are both a nostalgic symbol and a marker of existential crisis.

After the introductory cloche theme, Poulenc reverts to a binary musical model of madness, creating two contrasting moods. Prominent strings, consonant harmonies, and regular or static rhythms signify serenity and lucidity; while prominent winds (especially brass), dissonance, and an irregular or active rhythmic profile indicate the prioress's growing agitation. Initially lucid, she admits her crisis of faith to Mère Marie. As she becomes more agitated and fearful, her range widens and her vocal line gets more angular and shrill, above faster harmonic rhythm. Marie counters the prioress's mounting hysteria with placid dynamics and static harmony. Blanche enters briefly to say a quiet goodbye to the prioress, and it contrasts with this sedate farewell that the next section seems especially chaotic.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Certain productions of this scene have been influential in my interpretation. Most notable is La Scala's 2004 production with Riccardo Muti conducting, directed by Robert Carsen. Carsen's minimalist staging keeps the focus on Madame de Croissy (played by Anja Silja), with little more than a bed on stage for this scene and a "room" delineated by nuns lying face-down in a wide rectangle around it. Under Carsen's direction, Silja dramatically conveys the alternation between lucidity and madness by placidly remaining in her bed during her lucid moments, but trying to escape the confines of the bed, and even the rectangular "room," as her madness intensifies. Carsen's production has been used by other companies, including Nederlandse Opera, Lyric Opera Chicago, and the Canadian Opera Company. Another notable minimalist staging is the 1999 Opéra du Rhin production, conducted by Jan Latham-Koenig and directed by Marthe Keller.

In the final section—the heart of the mad scene—Poulenc uses the fear and the death motives to help convey the prioress’s madness. He also uses other characters as rational reference points, creating a dramatic frame of reason, if not a musical one. Like McClary’s framing of the madhouse, the prioress is confined to a cell in the infirmary inside a cloistered convent. This segment begins when Blanche exits and Marie and the doctor enter. Underscored by an ostinato, the prioress pleads for more medication, but the doctor, interrupting the ostinato, dispassionately refuses. The mood shifts as the prioress redirects her pleas to Marie, who tries to calm her with rocking string harmonies, encouraging her to attend to God and the act of dying. The prioress succumbs to despair, shrieking in fast, biting vocal rhythms, underlaid by unstable harmonies, “Who am I, wretched as I am at this moment, to concern myself with Him? Let Him first concern Himself with me!”<sup>14</sup> The fear motive, characterized by a downward seesawing melody, appears at the end of this phrase. Unlike many other madwomen, whose soprano voices soar with virtuosic musical excess, seeking liberation from confinement as their madness intensifies, the prioress’s contralto deteriorates, emphasizing the metaphor of hysteria as degeneration. The prioress struggles to sit up in bed and repeatedly calls Marie’s name, trying to exert self-control and exercise her authority.<sup>15</sup> Motives pile atop one another in an effusion of meaning, highlighting this point as the scene’s climax. Trancelike, in a raspy voice accompanied by the plodding death motive, the prioress describes her vision of the chapel, “empty and desecrated—the altar split in two with straw and blood on the ground.”<sup>16</sup> Her vision simultaneously indicates the prioress’s spiritual agony in being forsaken by God and foreshadows the convent’s fate in the Revolution. The prioress’s voice then ascends out of control to the top of her range while descending scales in the orchestra herald her falling body. The bells reappear as the prioress tries to rise from her deathbed, but she falls back, exhausted, emitting only a death rattle. The scene ends with the final isolating sound of a single bell.

### ACT 3, SCENE 4, THE NUNS’ CHORUS AND THE GUILLOTINE

In *Dialogues des Carmélites*, the chorus is divided into opposing groups onto which the drama’s conflict is mapped; the nuns’ chorus and the crowd chorus represent the power struggle between pro-Catholic royalists and anticlerical republicans.<sup>17</sup> Although the crowd chorus is in the background for most of the opera, Poulenc hints at the mob’s increasing violence throughout. They do not appear in act 1, but a violent, frenzied mob blocking Blanche’s way home

<sup>14</sup> Que suis-je à cette heure, moi misérable, pour m’inquiéter de Lui? Qu’Il s’inquiète donc d’abord de moi!

<sup>15</sup> Rosand posits that repetitions are common in mad scenes, and serve to isolate a word or phrase, causing it to shed semantic meaning, turning it into an object embodied in a musical shape and increasing its psychological resonance (1992, 262–3).

<sup>16</sup> vide et profanée—l’autel fendu en deux, de la paille et du sang sur les dalles

<sup>17</sup> Separating the chorus into opposing groups was a strategy common to nineteenth-century French grand opera and Verdi’s *Risorgimento* works (Gerhard 1998, 82, 84).

is described in the opening scene.<sup>18</sup> In act 2, after the prioress's death, the new prioress warns her sisters of adversity ahead and Blanche's brother tries to convince her to escape France. The audience finally hears the crowd chorus in act 2, scene 4, when the nuns cower in their convent while the crowd menacingly demands to be let in. Commissioners enter and read a decree of expulsion while the crowd sings the revolutionary tune, "Ah! Ça ira." In act 3, Blanche flees in terror after the Carmelites take a vow of martyrdom. The nuns are jailed and sentenced to death as enemies of the Revolution. The crowd chorus is not heard again until act 3, scene 4, at the Place de la Révolution in Paris during the Terror. In this, the final scene of the opera, the two choruses finally intersect.

While I argued in the previous section that the prioress's mad scene depicts hysteria as a metaphor for social degeneration caused by revolutionary violence, the final scene at the guillotine better fits the counter-revolutionary view in which violent political activity is a manifestation of collective hysteria. Like the previous example, this scene is also an excellent example of musical chaos started by a diegetic sound in the environment, suggesting that a traumatic or toxic environment is at the root of the characters' madness. While the audience expects a violent clash between the two choruses in the final scene, Poulenec funnels the destructive energy of the crowd chorus into the guillotine.<sup>19</sup> The Carmelites march one after another to their deaths, singing *Salve regina* as they climb the scaffold. The crowd chorus looks on as each nun is beheaded and silenced until only the two novices, Constance and Blanche, remain. After Constance dies, Blanche sings alone, replacing *Salve regina* with the *Veni creator*, until she too is guillotined. The crowd disperses quietly, marking the end of the opera.

Act 3, scene 4 is like my first example, in which the diegetic sound of the bells signals musical degeneration, but here the guillotine is bluntly destructive, generating further musical degeneration with every drop of the blade. This scene has four musical elements: the ostinato death motive, *Salve regina* (an important Marian antiphon in the Carmelite tradition) sung by the nuns'

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<sup>18</sup> This is not just any peasant mob. Blanche's brother is referring to the Réveillons riots of 28 April 1789, an unprecedented show of violence in which over five thousand people protested Jean-Baptiste Réveillon's threat to lower his wallpaper-factory workers' wages. The mob wound its way through several Parisian neighbourhoods, blocking roads and fighting armed troops. Several hundred were killed and many injured (Andress 2004, 95–103; Ferrières 1932, 37–41).

<sup>19</sup> Public executions in operas from the early 1800s typically elicited savagely curious and emotionally volatile reactions from the watching chorus. According to Gerhard, a particularly brutal example is the Catholic chorus in act 5 of Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* (1836). Gerhard describes the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre scene as a manifestation of collective insanity: "All at once the crowd has no need of leaders, it has been let off the leash, and works itself unaided into a frenzy of bloodlust" (1998, 230). The actions of Meyerbeer's chorus are a "calculated blend of solemn consecration and screamed exhortations to murder" (230, also see 226–7, 231). The St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre scene confirmed then-current conceptions of crowd psychology, according to which both St. Bartholomew's Day and the Jacobin Terror of the 1790s were attributed to the collective hysteria of the Parisian mob (Le Bon 1895). After *Les Huguenots*, Meyerbeer's choruses took a less active part in on-stage violence. The composer denounced mass hysteria, depicting later choruses as less bloodthirsty.

chorus, interjections from the crowd chorus, and the guillotine.<sup>20</sup> The death motive's plodding eighth notes supply unrelenting forward momentum. Initially, the nuns sing in unison in a style reminiscent of plainchant. The crowd chorus reinforces the nuns' A minor harmony, exclaiming "oh" and "oi" in reaction to each execution. The first time the blade drops is the most jarring (indicated in figure 2 by downward arrow). The dynamics explode into fortissimo on a G-sharp diminished seventh chord (over an A pedal), the nuns' chorus modulates up a third from A minor to C minor, lending new urgency to the hymn, and the ostinato motive is momentarily interrupted. The subsequent guillotine slices are timed irregularly, sometimes in the middle of a phrase, on an unaccented beat, or in the middle of a word, all of which disrupts the *Salve regina's* phrasing. Each subsequent blade drop marks further deterioration of the nuns' chorus: by signalling increased dissonance, by forcing immediate modulation, with a sudden change in dynamics or an interruption of the ostinato, or in the consistent rearrangement of the remaining voices. The death motive ostinato disintegrates and the tonal stability is compromised. As the melody soars, the chorus breaks into two groups singing in octaves. The nuns' chorus thins, allowing the crowd to emerge with dissonant tone clusters in reaction to the chaos. With only four remaining nuns, the women shift to a four-part texture, and each guillotine slice from this point on marks a radical sonic loss. The ostinato death motive falters as the quartet becomes a trio, then a duo, and finally, Constance intones the final line alone while Blanche emerges from the crowd. Constance is beheaded, the death motive stops, and Blanche climbs the guillotine alone on a serene pedal C. Blanche is cut down in mid-phrase, offering neither final cadence nor Amen to give the opera a sense of closure.

The guillotine is both a decapitating machine and a *musical* instrument of chaos and disintegration in *Dialogues*. It similarly cultivated chaos in French society. As Regina Janes states, while the guillotine was meant as "an instrument of order [it] generated (what seemed to many) disorder" (1993, 242). The guillotine was considered an egalitarian and humanitarian mode of execution when it was adopted in 1792, masking its role as a tool of political oppression and an instrument through which the latent insanity of the revolutionaries could be made manifest.<sup>21</sup> Recognizing its destructive brutality, the French tried to distance the violence of the guillotine from human involvement (251–3). Poulenc's treatment of the crowd is a musical representation of this process. The guillotine assumes the kinetic role of the crowd chorus, letting the mob become spectators. Metaphors were applied to the guillotine to further distance it from violence and to turn the old world of the *ancien régime* on its head. In the new world of the Republic, the guillotine was feminized and beatified. It was christened La Sainte Guillotine and decorated in blue velvet and roses for

<sup>20</sup> Poulenc did not specify how to produce the guillotine's sound, although he indicated entrances with precision. Percussion instruments may have been used in early productions, but many stagings today use a recording.

<sup>21</sup> In 1789, in a step toward equality, the French National Assembly decreed that all capital crimes be punished by beheading. Previously, social status and gender determined mode of execution: nobles and women were beheaded, while commoners were hanged.

[Crowd chorus]  
*pp* Oh! Oh!

*pp* [Nun's chorus]  
 Sal - ve Re - gi - na ma - ter mi - se - re - cor - di - æ, vi - ta, dul - ce - do - et

[death motive]

*mf*  
 oï a.

*ff sec*

*P* *mf* moins la Prieure à 14  
 spēs nos - tra, sal - ve et spēs nos - tra sal - ve. *ff* Sal - ve Re - gi - na, Ma -

*ff sec* *ff*

Figure 2: Opening of Guillotine Section (act 3, scene 4, beginning)

Robespierre's Festival of the Supreme Being, matching older iconography associated with the Virgin Mary (254–7). Beatification neutralized the guillotine, as “she” could be placated by continual sacrifice and ritual attendance in the new religion of rationalism. Initially, the guillotine's mechanical self-sufficiency seemed like a technological triumph, but it became deeply threatening. Its reputation for impersonal efficiency was transferred to the revolutionary government itself, which had spun out of control, destroying everyone in its path, including Robespierre, one of the politicians who first argued for the guillotine's implementation (257–9).

## CONCLUSION

The framework of mad studies encourages a broader discussion of madness in opera by uncovering complex layers operating within a work and by ultimately

going beyond discussions of madness that rely on binary musical arrangements. Poulenc's *Dialogues* is an excellent case study because it presents a variety of possible interpretations of madness. In *Dialogues*, the cultural metaphor of hysteria as social degeneration is entwined with the history of mental illness in France during and after the Revolution, and with individual lived experiences of madness. The death of the prioress in act 1, scene 4 exemplifies an individual experience of madness. Poulenc's musical strategy in this scene relies heavily on a contrast between music representing lucidity and music representing the prioress's madness, in addition to creating a frame of reason with other characters who surround the increasingly unsettled prioress. The prioress's experience, however, can support simultaneous interpretations. Her madness might be aggravated or caused by physical decline, it may be connected to a mystical experience—a spiritual crisis—and it may result from the stress of impending revolutionary violence. While act 1, scene 4 may show mental illness caused by the Revolution, act 3, scene 4 is a profound example of the counter-revolutionary view of the violence of the guillotine as a manifestation of the latent madness of the crowd. These two examples also show how Poulenc traced the metaphor of hysteria as social degeneration with passages of musical degeneration in the opera. Act 1, scene 4 opens with a short cloche theme in which diegetic bells disrupt the musical terrain, while in the final scene, the guillotine creates chaos and destroys not only the musical backdrop but also the nuns themselves.

Several points for future study emerge from this article. First, given the proliferation of operas about religion after 1945, as outlined by Siglind Bruhn (2003), perhaps modern opera will prove to be a rich source for case studies on madness brought on by spiritual crisis or mystical experiences. After all, Catherine Clément pointed out that victims of madness are prey to frenzies of love or mysticism (1997, 118). Second, while I briefly connected different expressions of madness in music to medical and social models of disability, the intersection between mad studies and disability studies, especially as it is expressed through music, deserves a thorough examination—one that I cannot provide here. Third, compositional strategies or musical gestures associated with madness have often been identified as irrational, non-normative, or chaotic, implying a type of "otherness" set against a rational, orderly musical norm. What assumptions about musical norms does this uncover and are there musical analogues to madness that do not create this binary? Finally, a mad studies framework challenges us to interrogate madness itself. Do we recognize it as a medical ailment, a cultural metaphor, a spiritual malady, or a mystical experience? Is it a response to trauma or impending death? Is it a pathologization of emotional excess or spiritual experiences? Are we sensitive to culturally specific understandings of madness?

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## ABSTRACT

Multiple readings of madness are examined in Poulenc's opera *Dialogues des Carmélites* (1957) through the framework of mad studies. Several layers of madness can be found in this work: individual lived experiences of madness, the history of mental illness in France during and after the French Revolution, and the cultural metaphor of hysteria as social degeneration, as articulated by Micale. Close readings of two scenes

with a discussion of their musical features are included: the first prioress's death (act 1, scene 4) and the final scene at the guillotine (act 3, scene 4).

**Keywords:** mad studies, madness, opera, hysteria, Poulenc

## RÉSUMÉ

De multiples interprétations du concept de la folie sont examinées dans l'opéra de Poulenc, *Dialogues des Carmélites* (1957) dans le cadre des études de la folie. La folie se retrouve à plusieurs niveaux de cette œuvre : vécus de folie individuelles, histoire des maladies mentales en France pendant et après la Révolution française, et la métaphore culturelle de l'hystérie en tant que dégénérescence sociale, telle qu'articulée par Micalé (1995). L'analyse détaillée de deux scènes sont incluses, complétées par une discussion de leurs caractéristiques musicales: la mort de la Première Prieure (acte 1, scène 4) et la scène finale à la guillotine (acte 3, scène 4).

**Mots-clés:** études de la folie, folie, opéra, hystérie, Poulenc

## BIOGRAPHY

**Colette Simonot-Maiello** is an associate professor of musicology at the Desautels Faculty of Music, University of Manitoba. Her research focuses on gender, politics, religion, and mental health and modern opera. She also writes about Canadian national identity in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and musicology pedagogy. Her scholarship includes numerous conference presentations, public talks, and publications in *University of Toronto Quarterly*, *Intersections*, *Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, and other media.