

MINNESOTA ORCHESTRA

Thomas Søndergård, conductor
 Francesco Piemontesi, piano

Thursday, June 20, 2024, 11AM
 Friday, June 21, 2024, 8PM
 Saturday, June 22, 2024, 7PM

Orchestra Hall

Dame Ethel Smyth *On the Cliffs of Cornwall, from The Wreckers* CA. 10'

Karol Szymanowski *Symphony No. 4 (Symphonie concertante)
 for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 60* CA. 25'
 Moderato (Tempo commodo)
 Andante molto sostenuto
 Allegro non troppo, ma agitato ad ausioso
Francesco Piemontesi, piano

I N T E R M I S S I O N CA. 20'

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky *Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Opus 36* CA. 44'
 Andante sostenuto – Moderato con anima
 Andantino in modo di canzona
 Scherzo: pizzicato ostinato
 Finale: Allegro con fuoco

PRE-CONCERT

Concert Preview with Nadine Hubbs

Thursday, June 20, 10:15am, Target Atrium | Friday, June 21, 7:15pm, Target Atrium

Drag Performers from Flip Phone

Friday, June 21, pre-concert and intermission, Roberta Mann Grand Foyer

THANK YOU

The 2023–24 Classical Season is presented by Ameriprise Financial.

Minnesota Orchestra concerts are broadcast live on Friday evenings on stations of [YourClassical Minnesota Public Radio](#), including KSJN 99.5 FM in the Twin Cities.



THOMAS SØNDERGÅRD,
CONDUCTOR

Profile appears on page 10.

Thomas Søndergård shared the following comments on this week's program and how it came together: "Being gay myself, this program is really important to me. When I saw that we had an opportunity to repeat a program that I did on the WorldPride celebration in Copenhagen a few years ago, which was a real success—people loved it—I knew we had to share the pairing of these beautiful pieces here in Minnesota. Ethel Smyth's *On the Cliffs of Cornwall* is the opening of the second act of her opera *The Wreckers*. It's really beautiful, but also dramatically written. Szymanowski's *Symphonie concertante* is a piece that I absolutely love but is not often done. And then Tchaikovsky's *Fourth Symphony* to round out a really beautiful program."



FRANCESCO PIEMONTESE,
PIANO

Swiss-Italian pianist Francesco Piemontesi has over the years gained a reputation as one of the leading interpreters of the German Classical and Romantic repertoire. He appears as a regular guest with many of the world's leading orchestras in concert halls and at music festivals around the globe, while still being firmly anchored on the shores of Lago Maggiore as artistic director of the music festival *Settimane Musicali di Ascona*. Highlights of his 2023-24 season include appearances with the Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich, New York Philharmonic, NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchester and Danish National Symphony Orchestra, among numerous other ensembles, as well as tours with both the Dresden Philharmonic and Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen, in addition to recitals at several major venues. His artistry is documented on numerous acclaimed recordings, most recently a release on Pentatone dedicated to Liszt's *Transcendental Études* and the B-minor Sonata. Recently he has been artist in residence with the *Orchestre de la Suisse Romande*, Dresden Philharmonic and *Gstaad Menuhin Festival*. His regular chamber music partners include Renaud Capuçon, Leonidas Kavakos, Martha Argerich, Janine Jansen, Daniel Müller-Schott, Augustin Hadelich and Jörg Widmann. In his February 2020 Minnesota Orchestra debut, he performed Ravel's G-major Piano Concerto. More: harrisonparrott.com.



ARIANA KIM,
BROADCAST HOST

For the concert on June 21, Ariana Kim serves as host and writer of the Twin Cities PBS broadcast and online livestream *This Is Minnesota Orchestra*. A Grammy Award-nominated violinist, Kim made her New York recital debut at Carnegie's Weill Hall during her doctoral studies at Juilliard and is now a tenured professor at Cornell University. At age 16, she made her debut with the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, and at 24 was appointed acting concertmaster of the Louisiana Philharmonic in New Orleans. She now shares her homebase between Ithaca, New York—where she performs faculty recitals and with her bluegrass band *String Theory*—and New York City, where she is in her 18th season with *The Knights*. A champion of new music, Kim was a member of New York City's contemporary improvisation ensemble *Ne(x)tworks* for 10 seasons and has recently toured to both London and Asia, where she premiered Piyawat Louilarpprasert's *Violin Concerto* in Bangkok, Thailand. She spent 2021 living and working in South Korea. A Minnesota native, she returns to the Twin Cities often for appearances with the Chamber Music Society of Minnesota. She has authored a new essay that begins on page 22 of this issue. More: arianakim.com.

**DAME ETHEL SMYTH**

B: April 22, 1858
London, England

D: May 8, 1944
Woking, England

On the Cliffs of Cornwall,
from *The Wreckers*

PREMIERED: November 11, 1906
(complete opera)

Dame Ethel Smyth was a trailblazer in a remarkable combination of ways. One of the first British women to earn wide recognition in the field of classical music composition, she was also a notable figure in the women's suffrage movement and a challenger of societal norms in her personal life—specifically, her non-conformist sexual orientation, which has been described as either lesbian or bisexual—to name a few key facets of her biography. Music Director Thomas Søndergård has selected *On the Cliffs of Cornwall*, an interlude from her 1906 opera *The Wreckers*, to open this week's season-ending program of music by composers from the LGBTQ+ community.

A SINGULAR LIFE

Born in London in 1856, Smyth had a musical career that, on a surface level, would be typical of an accomplished male classical composer in Europe of the day. Such a path included formal conservatory training—at Germany's Leipzig Conservatory—encounters with prominent composers and conductors, and the creation of new works in the major forms of operas, orchestral music, chamber music, songs and choral compositions. However, many of her works had a limited reach due to bias against her

gender and presumptions about the type of music a woman might be expected to compose at the time: most often, informal parlor works rather than compositions for the concert hall and opera stage.

Smyth's musical career had a number of peaks—notably, she was the first female composer to have an opera staged at the Metropolitan Opera in New York—but her works fell out of favor after her death in 1944 until a revival in recent years. The Minnesota Orchestra, for instance, played Smyth's music for the first time just six years ago, when the overture to her 1914 opera *The Boatswain's Mate* was included at an Inside the Classics concert conducted by Sarah Hicks.

In the early 1910s, when Smyth's attention turned to the women's suffrage movement, her composing reflected this shift in focus, most memorably through her suffragette anthem *The March of the Women*. Although her involvement in the cause resulted in a two-month jail sentence in 1912, her stature shifted dramatically a decade later when, in recognition of her activism and contributions to music, she was made a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire. Late in her career, Smyth became a prolific writer, producing 10 books primarily in the autobiography genre.

Smyth's romantic and emotional relationships with men and women in artistic and political circles—including writer Virginia Woolf and suffragette leader Emmeline Pankhurst—further set Smyth apart from social expectations of the day, when most people weren't supportive of LGBTQ+ individuals and rights. Smyth carried out these relationships relatively openly, which presented her with some personal and professional challenges, but her status as a respected artistic and activist figure inured her from the worst discrimination. (Worth noting is that gay and bisexual men faced a greater degree of persecution

ONE-MINUTE NOTES**Smyth: *On the Cliffs of Cornwall***

Sweeping melodies and a tragic undercurrent run throughout this interlude from Smyth's 1906 opera *The Wreckers*, which concerns the malicious 18th-century practice of shipwreck plunder in a Cornish village.

Szymanowski: Symphony No. 4 (Symphonie concertante) for Piano and Orchestra

Szymanowski's 1932 *Symphonie concertante*, which blends symphony and concerto elements, sprang from the rhythmic patterns of Polish folk music. A piano soloist is integrated with the orchestra in surprising ways, showcasing vibrant, kaleidoscopic interplay among soloistic orchestral instruments.

Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 4

Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony, like Beethoven's Fifth, presents a Fate motif at the outset. This is an adventurous work carrying us through lyrical episodes as well as high drama on the way to the exuberant conclusion.

in the eyes of the law. Male same-sex relations were illegal in all of Britain until 1967, when they were decriminalized in England and Wales, followed in the early 1980s by legalization in Scotland and Northern Ireland.)

MUSIC FROM THE COAST

Smyth's opera *The Wreckers*, which received its premiere in Leipzig in November 1906, is considered by many critics and musicologists to be among her most important works due to its scope and command of musical vocabulary. Set in an 18th-century Cornish community, the opera's story centers on wrecking—the practice by which villagers interfered with coastal beacons to cause ships to crash on the rocks, then looted the wreckage. Increased attention has been paid to *The Wreckers* in recent years, including a high-profile performance by the Glyndebourne Festival Opera in a concert at the 2022 BBC Proms in London.

On the Cliffs of Cornwall is the instrumental interlude that opens the opera's second act. It paints a vivid picture of the majestic Cornwall coast while also emphasizing the opera's tragic side. Scored for a mostly standard orchestra—though darkened by lower-toned additions to the woodwind section—the music is characterized by sweeping melodic lines that evoke powerful, relentless waves and stark, imposing cliffs.

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, tenor drum, bass drum, cymbals, suspended cymbal, tamtam, triangle, chimes, harp and strings

PROGRAM NOTE BY CARL SCHROEDER.



KAROL SZYMANOWSKI

B: October 3, 1882
Tymoszkówka, Poland
(now Tymoshivka, Ukraine)

D: March 29, 1937
Lausanne, Switzerland

**Symphony No. 4
(Symphonie concertante)
for Piano and Orchestra,
Opus 60**

PREMIERED: October 9, 1932

— Karol Szymanowski, who was born four months after Igor Stravinsky, belongs to a generation that delivered powerful figures for 20th-century music. Long before his death from tuberculosis in 1937 at just 54 years old, he emerged as one of the central figures in Polish music,

and he was hailed early on for his innovations. Less often mentioned is that he was gay, as we know from his letters and diaries referencing feelings for and relationships with men. However, he lived in a time when open discussion about homosexuality was not common, and thus, he was relatively discreet about his personal life. Emerging from the world of Richard Wagner and Richard Strauss, Szymanowski's music went through a long evolution, from German dominance to Russian influence before veering towards a French Impressionism that incorporated elements from the Far East. By the mid-1920s, however, the composer gravitated towards nationalism, showing in his ballet-pantomime *Harnasie* how to use Polish elements in a thoroughly original way.

Following soon after, his *Symphonie concertante* of 1932 (also identified as *Symphony No. 4*, his last) similarly sprang from the rhythmic patterns of folk music. The composer wrote it for his own use, giving the premiere in Poznan on October 9, 1932, and soon performing it in several Polish cities. As a 10-year-old boy who was already studying symphonic scores, Stanislaw Skrowaczewski—who in 1960 became the sixth music director of the Minnesota Orchestra, then known as the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra—attended a concert in Lwow at which he heard the composer play this work.

A SINGULAR COMPOSITION

This bracing composition is neither a piano concerto nor a symphony but something in between, as the title announces. For all its scintillating virtuosity, the piano remains part and parcel of the orchestra, here and there dropping out of the texture completely, as elements of orchestras are apt to do. Szymanowski delivered a genuinely concertante work (a piece containing one or more solo parts) in the 18th-century tradition, for not only the piano but many orchestral instruments participate soloistically, guaranteeing a work of vibrant color and rotating interaction. To focus on this non-stop interplay is as mesmerizing as watching the fragments of a kaleidoscope shift into new patterns.

MODERATO (TEMPO COMMODO). The opening is designated *Moderato*, setting forth at a comfortable pace established in the bass by timpani and low strings. But there are numerous changes of tempo and turns of mood, both merry and serene, in the congenial first movement. Requiring a piece that he himself could play in the effort to support himself, and taking care that it would satisfy his orchestral collaborators as well, Szymanowski produced prevailingly blue-sky music. By the fifth bar, piano octaves present the chief idea, very sweet in its appeal, and easy to recognize and welcome back when it recurs, not only in this movement but before the close of the second. A solo bassoon tags along with an equally agreeable strain, and soon the horn gives it echo.

To go on: the crisply rhythmic music soon animates the theme with livelier action, its charge revealing a strongly Slavic profile. Soon a diminuendo rumbling softly in the nether regions of the piano shifts the scene to a more tranquil landscape. The music is highly impressionistic in the winds, trumpets and muted violins, as the keyboard temporarily drops by the wayside. As soon as Szymanowski has restored the exuberant mood, he plunges his ideas into a development. The reprise could not be more clear, as two violins restore the expressive theme of the beginning, while the piano offers a rich chordal accompaniment. A scherzo-like romp makes way for a piano cadenza, whose substance brings up the matter of dissonance in this thoroughly 20th-century work: the harmonic abrasion will be tolerable even to lily-pad ears, for it is never more jolting than a plunge into a cool lake on a steamy July day.

ANDANTE MOLTO SOSTENUTO. The slow movement is the most beguiling of all. In his own brand of impressionism, Szymanowski evokes a landscape, opening like a misty morning in the Tatra mountains, observed Skrowaczewski, whose youthful figure, sporting alpine boots, can be found in a classic Polish mountaineering book. Like the solitary figure of a shepherd on a high slope, the solo flute gives out a theme whose beauty is matched by the exquisite backdrop of keyboard figurations. These continue through a violin solo of equal poignance. All is hushed until the movement begins to plot a massive crescendo, weighted with mighty piano octaves and chords. After a thinning of the atmosphere and textures, a single flute retrieves the theme upon which the *Symphonie concertante* had embarked. Its luminous appearance is like the lighting of a familiar peak when the clouds part.

ALLEGRO NON TROPPO, MA AGITATO AD AUSIOSO. Gossamer piano filigree takes the *Andante* to its enchanting close, but there is no break before the drum, with harp and a pair of basses, launches the triple-beat tramping of the finale. The relentless ostinato pattern, squarely planted in C, is reminiscent of Stravinsky, and out of its energy spins a brilliant dance-inflected finale incorporating a kind of Polish mazurek, somewhat more relaxed. Ecstatic in nature, the music is spellbinding to its final liberating shouts.

Instrumentation: solo piano with orchestra comprising 2 flutes (1 doubling piccolo), 2 oboes (1 doubling English horn), 2 clarinets (1 doubling E-flat clarinet), 2 bassoons (1 doubling contrabassoon), 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, tamtams, triangle, harp and strings

PROGRAM NOTE BY MARY ANN FELDMAN.



PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

B: May 7, 1840
Votkinsk, Russia

D: November 6, 1893
Saint Petersburg, Russia

Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Opus 36

PREMIERED: February 22, 1878

The Fourth Symphony dates from the most tumultuous period in Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky's difficult life. In July 1877, Tchaikovsky married one of his students at the Moscow Conservatory, Antonina Ivanovna Milyukova. The marriage was an instant disaster—due to the relationship's volatility, and because Tchaikovsky was gay. In Russia of the 19th century (as well as today), societal norms and laws regarding homosexuality were oppressive, leading Tchaikovsky to be relatively private about this aspect of his life—but his correspondence and diaries suggest romantic and emotional involvements with men. Tchaikovsky abandoned his bride, tried to return, but retreated again. He fled to Western Europe, finding relief in the quiet of Clarens in Switzerland and San Remo in Italy. It was in San Remo—on the sunny shores of the Mediterranean and far from the chaos of his life in Moscow—that he completed the Fourth Symphony in January 1878.

The Fourth Symphony has all of Tchaikovsky's considerable virtues—great melodies, primary colors and soaring climaxes—in this case fused with a superheated emotional content. Tchaikovsky said that the model for his Fourth Symphony had been Beethoven's Fifth, specifically in the way both symphonies are structured around a recurring motif, though perhaps also in the sense that the two symphonies begin in emotional turmoil and eventually win their way to release and triumph in the finale.

THE MUSIC: A DUEL WITH FATE

ANDANTE SOSTENUTO–MODERATO CON ANIMA. The symphony opens with a powerful brass fanfare, which Tchaikovsky described as “Fate, the inexorable power that hampers our search for happiness. This power hangs over our heads like the sword of Damocles, leaving us no option but to submit.” The principal subject of this movement, however, is a dark, stumbling waltz in 9/8 introduced by the violins. Like inescapable fate, the opening motto-theme returns at key points in this dramatic music, and it finally drives the movement to a furious close.

ANDANTINO IN MODO CANZONA. The two middle movements bring much-needed relief. The *Andantino*, in ternary-

form, opens with a plaintive oboe solo and features a more animated middle section. Tchaikovsky described it: "Here is the melancholy feeling that overcomes us when we sit weary and alone at the end of the day. The book we pick up slips from our fingers, and a procession of memories passes in review..."

SCHERZO PIZZICATO OSTINATO. The scherzo has deservedly become one of Tchaikovsky's most popular movements. It is a *tour de force* for strings, which play pizzicato (plucked) throughout, with crisp interjections first from the woodwinds and then from brass. The composer noted: "Here are only the capricious arabesques and indeterminate shapes that come into one's mind with a little wine..."

FINALE: ALLEGRO CON FUOCO. Out of the quiet close of the third movement, the finale explodes to life. The composer described this movement as "the picture of a folk holiday" and said, "If you find no pleasure in yourself, look about you. Go to the people. See how they can enjoy life and give themselves up entirely to festivity." Marked *Allegro con fuoco*, this movement simply alternates its volcanic opening sequence with a gentle tune that is actually the Russian folk tune "In the field there stood a birch tree."

Given the catastrophic events of his life during this music's composition, Tchaikovsky may well have come to feel that Fate was inescapable, and the reappearance of the opening motto amid the high spirits of the finale represents the climax—musically and emotionally—of the entire symphony. This spectre duly acknowledged, Tchaikovsky rips the symphony to a close guaranteed to set every heart in the hall racing at the same incandescent pace as his music.

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle and strings

PROGRAM NOTE BY ERIC BROMBERGER.

CODA

This week's performances of Dame Ethel Smyth's *On the Cliffs of Cornwall* mark only the second time that the Minnesota Orchestra has performed any of Smyth's works. The previous performance of her music came on July 28, 2018, when Sarah Hicks conducted Smyth's Overture from *The Boatswain's Mate* as part of an Inside the Classics concert titled "Speaking Truth to Power" that featured works by composers who used their music as a form of political protest.

The Minnesota Orchestra, then known as Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, first performed Karol Szymanowski's *Symphony No. 4 (Symphonie concertante)* on March 30, 1945, at Northrop Memorial Auditorium, with Dimitri Mitropoulos conducting and the famed pianist Arthur Rubinstein as soloist. Another notable performance of the work came on February 9, 1966, when the Orchestra shared the work at New York's Carnegie Hall with Stanislaw Skrowaczewski conducting; on that occasion Eugene Istomin was the soloist. It was performed most recently by the Orchestra in September 1997, again with Stanislaw Skrowaczewski on the conductor's podium and this time with Janina Fialkowska at the keyboard.

The Orchestra added Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No. 4* to its repertoire on November 1, 1907, at the Minneapolis Auditorium, under the leadership of founding Music Director Emil Oberhoffer. That concert was the first performance of the young ensemble's fifth season. Tchaikovsky's music has figured prominently in the Orchestra's 2023-24 programming, including his Second and Fifth symphonies, the Fantasy-Overture *The Tempest*, music from the ballet *The Nutcracker* and the Variations on a Rococo Theme for Cello and Orchestra.

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Thomas Søndergård, conductor
Christina Naughton, piano
Michelle Naughton, piano

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Orchestra Hall

Supplement
to Program
June 20

For this week's performances, piano soloists Christina and Michelle Naughton are replacing Francesco Piemontesi, who is recovering from a recent bicycle accident in which he was hit by a car and broke his collarbone. We wish him a speedy recovery.

To conclude the concert's first half, the Naughtons will perform Francis Poulenc's Concerto in D minor for Two Pianos and Orchestra, instead of the previously scheduled Karol Szymanowski Symphony No. 4 (Symphonie concertante) for Piano and Orchestra. The rest of the program remains unchanged.

Francis Poulenc

Concerto in D minor for Two Pianos and Orchestra
Allegro ma non troppo
Larghetto
Finale: Allegro molto

CA. 19'

CHRISTINA AND MICHELLE NAUGHTON, PIANO



Christina and Michelle Naughton have captivated audiences throughout the globe with the unity created by their mystical communication. Their career was launched in 2009 with a recital debut at the Kennedy Center and an orchestral debut with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Other highlights include concerts with the Baltimore, Detroit, Nashville, San Diego and New Zealand symphonies, as well as the Mahler Chamber Orchestra. In recital they have appeared at Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall and Walt Disney Concert Hall, as well as on the Schubert Club, Philharmonic Society of Orange County, Chamber Music San Francisco and Cliburn series, among other venues and presenters. Frequent guests at festivals around the world, the Naughtons have appeared at La Jolla Music Society, Ravinia Festival, the Grand Teton Music Festival and the Virginia Arts Festival, among others. The Naughtons are exclusive Warner Classics artists. Their debut on the label, *Visions*, was chosen as "Editor's Choice" by *Gramophone* magazine. Their 2019 album, *American Postcard*, showcases 20th-century American compositions. The Naughtons' passion for 20th-century American music has led to premieres of commissions by the Los Angeles Philharmonic's Green Umbrella series and the world premiere of John Adams' *Roll Over Beethoven* at New York City's WQXR Greene Space. Born in Princeton, New Jersey to parents of European and Chinese descent, Steinway artists Christina and Michelle are graduates of the Juilliard School and the Curtis Institute of Music, where they were each awarded the Festorazzi Prize. In 2019 they became the first piano duo to receive an Avery Fisher Career Grant. More: opus3artists.com, christinaandmichellenaughton.com.



FRANCIS POULENC

B: January 7, 1899
Paris, France

D: January 30, 1963
Paris, France

**Concerto in D minor for
Two Pianos and Orchestra**
PREMIERED: September 5, 1932

Born and raised in Paris, the home of his maternal family for several generations, Francis Poulenc grew up with two music-loving parents, one of whom, his mother, played the piano “with impeccable musical sensibility and a delightful touch,” according to her son. She recognized the boy’s attraction to the instrument and, when he was 4, began to teach him. By the time he was only 14, Poulenc was in the hands of one of the great piano virtuosos of that era, Ricardo Viñes.

The time with Viñes became even more important in light of the fact that in spite of his extraordinary musical gifts, Poulenc never attended a conservatory. His education was interrupted by World War I and his conscription into the army, and upon his release from that service, Poulenc studied composition from 1921 to 1924 under the influential guidance of Charles Koechlin. And that was the sum total of his formal education in music.

In his personal life, Poulenc navigated conflicted feelings as a gay man. Although he briefly contemplated marriage with a female friend, his life was enriched by several romantic relationships with men, some brief and others more lengthy. Platonic friends, such as his longtime collaborator, the baritone Pierre Bernac, were also a source of fulfillment.

PROFESSIONAL BEGINNINGS

Composing chamber music and spending a great deal of time with the major musicians, poets and artists in Paris in the 1920s, Poulenc became known as an innovative and imaginative composer. The great Russian ballet impresario Serge Diaghilev heard of him and commissioned the young composer to create a ballet for his company. The success of that work, *Les Biches*, first performed in 1923, was a turning point for Poulenc. (Minnesota Orchestra audiences can look forward to hearing a suite from that ballet on July 26 and 27 as part of the 1920s-themed Summer at Orchestra Hall festival.)

Moving in those artistic circles, Poulenc inevitably made the acquaintance of a great patron of the arts, Winnaretta Singer—heir to Singer sewing machine fortune and wife of Prince Edmond de Polignac. The princess was

a gifted painter, pianist and organist herself, and she generously supported and commissioned such composers as Gabriel Fauré, Emmanuel Chabrier, Maurice Ravel, Igor Stravinsky, Erik Satie and Manuel de Falla. Twice she commissioned Poulenc for keyboard works. One was his Concerto for Organ, and the other a Concerto for Two Pianos. Both are dedicated to her.

THE TWO-PIANO CONCERTO

In September 1932, the princess invited Poulenc and many other illustrious guests—including Falla and the pianist Arthur Rubinstein—to her home in Venice, the Palazzo Polignac on the Grand Canal, in order to attend the first performance of Poulenc’s new two-piano concerto. The occasion was the ISCM (International Society for Contemporary Music) Festival, at which Poulenc and the French piano virtuoso Jacques Février performed as soloists with the orchestra of La Scala conducted by Désiré Defauw. Poulenc had written the Concerto for Two Pianos with Février in mind as the second soloist, and the two remarkable pianists swept the audience away with their brilliant performance.

From that moment the concerto has never been out of the public ear, either in concert halls or in the many recordings that have been made over the years. Poulenc himself continued to perform it for the rest of his life. Poulenc’s crystalline writing in this concerto makes analysis superfluous—as the composer himself would have preferred. He once stated: “Above all do not analyze my music—love it!” The many facets and the changeable moods of this concerto are sheer delight.

Instrumentation: solo piano with orchestra comprising flute, piccolo, 2 oboes (1 doubling English horn), 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, shallow snare drum, military drum, bass drum, castanets, cymbals, triangle and strings

PROGRAM NOTE BY SANDRA HYSLOP.