The Characteristic of Popular Music in Francis Poulenc’s “Nocturnes”

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Abstract
After World War I, a significant change for the concept of culture and art occurred in France, which eventually causes a cultural revolution. Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) experienced such a transformation and become one of the most important French composers and pianists in the twentieth century. He was a member of the French group “Les Six”, his music was therefore often considered informal. However, those who had ever listened to his music were impressed deeply by the graceful melodies and rich harmonies presented in his work.

Poulenc was prolific, producing a total number of 34 pieces for piano. In particular, he finished most of his outstanding works in the 1930s, of which Nocturnes is representative. Nocturnes is characterized by two main elements generally found in Poulenc’s work, referred to as “Neo-classicism” and “Popular Music”, from which the characteristics of his piano music can be realized comprehensively.

The primary purpose of this thesis is to thoroughly discuss Poulenc’s famous piano pieces Nocturnes. The thesis is organized as follows. Firstly, the development of French cultures in the early twentieth century is introduced particularly with historical perspective. Secondarily, Poulenc’s life and his composition style are presented, followed by an emphasis of the unique characteristics of his piano music. Thirdly, describes the background when Poulenc composed Nocturnes, and the characteristic of popular music in Nocturnes. It is anticipated that this study is capable of offering the understanding of Poulenc’s piano music.