EXPLORE & LEARN
CANADIAN OPERA COMPANY

Study Guides
2012-2013 SEASON

Dialogues des Carmélites

FRANCIS POULENC (1899 – 1963)

2012-2013 SEASON

STUDY GUIDE

coc.ca/Explore

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Cover and above: A scene from Lyric Opera of Chicago's production of Dialogues des Carmélites, *2007. Photos: Robert Kusel*

Welcome

The Canadian Opera Company returns in 2012/2013 with the ultimate season of drama, mischief, love, horror and sacrifice. This spring, hear Lucia hit the high notes of madness with Donizetti's luscious cascading melodies in the dark and Gothic *Lucia di Lammermoor*; explore the biblical story of *Salome* in a celebrated production by Canadian film director Atom Egoyan; and witness the ultimate sacrifice by an order of Carmelite nuns during the French Revolution in director Robert Carsen's staging of Francis Poulenc's riveting *Dialogues des Carmélites*. The season is sure to inspire, shock and ignite the creativity of your students!

An evening at the opera is more than a night of entertainment. Opera provides many avenues for thought-provoking discussions and can be explored through many subjects beyond the arts, including history, social studies, media literacy, and yes, even science (think acoustics and sound!). The COC's Study Guides help enhance your students' visit to the COC by giving them a glimpse into the history, music, themes and the stories of the operas, while suggesting ways of putting their learning into practice.

Thank you for choosing to introduce your students to the thrilling and vibrant world of opera. It takes a creative and courageous educator to expose students to innovative subjects beyond the traditional curriculum, and I hope that the COC's Study Guides become a valuable educational resource for your efforts.

Katherine Semcesen
Associate Director, Education and Outreach

New this season:
Careers in Opera Spotlight
This season each Study Guide features a spotlight on an individual working at the COC. Learn about the many careers in opera and discover how the COC connects to Canada's cultural landscape.

Opera
at any stage of life!
The COC runs over 20 programs for school groups, children, youth and adults. Discover more at **coc.ca/Explore**

Opera 101

WHAT IS OPERA?

The term "opera" comes from the Italian word for "work" or "piece," and it is usually applied to the European tradition of grand opera. Opera is a form of storytelling which incorporates music, drama and design.

Though its origins date back to ancient Greece, the form of opera we are familiar with today started in the late 16th century in Florence, Italy. Count Giovanni de' Bardi was a patron and host to a group of intellectuals, poets, artists, scientists and humanists including Giulio Caccini and Vincenzo Galilei (father to the astronomer and scientist, Galileo Galilei, who was most famous for his improvements to the telescope). These individuals explored trends in the arts, focusing on music and drama in particular. They were unified in their belief that the arts had become over-embellished and that returning to the transparency of the music of the ancient Greeks, which incorporated both speech and song, and a chorus to further the plot and provide commentary on the action, would present a more pure, natural and powerful way to tell stories and express emotions.

The first opera, *Dafne*, about a nymph who fled from Apollo and was subsequently transformed by the gods into a laurel tree, was composed by Jacopo Peri in 1597. From then on the early operas recreated Greek tragedies with mythological themes. During the 17th and 18th centuries, topics expanded to include stories about royalty, and everyday or common people. Some operas were of serious nature (called *opera seria*) and some light-hearted (called *opera buffa*). Since then operas have been written on a wide variety of topics such as cultural clashes (*Madama Butterfly*), comedic farce (*The Barber of Seville*), politicians on foreign visits (*Nixon in China*), the celebration of Canadian heroes (*Louis Riel*), and children's stories (*The Little Prince*), to name a few.

The COC presents works in the western European tradition but musical equivalents to European opera can be found in Japan, at the Peking Opera in China, and in Africa where it is called Epic Storytelling.

What are the differences between operas, musicals and plays?

Traditionally operas are through-sung, meaning they are sung from beginning to end with no dialogue in between. Singers must have powerful voices in order to be heard over the orchestra (the ensemble of instrumental musicians that accompanies the dramatic action on stage during an opera). Remember: opera singers don't use microphones!

Musicals are a combination of dialogue and sung pieces and often include choreographed numbers. The singers often use microphones and are accompanied by a pit band which includes more modern instruments like a drum kit, guitar and electronic instruments.

Plays are primarily spoken works of theatre with minimal singing or music.

There are always exceptions to the rule: though *Les Misérables* is through-sung it is still classified as a piece of musical theatre because of its style of music. By the same token, some operas, like Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, have spoken dialogue in addition to singing.

What does opera feel like?
Take five minutes out of the school day and instead of using regular voices to converse, ask the class to commit to singing ***everything***. Make an agreement with the students that it's not about judging people's voices but about freeing our natural sounds. Make up the melodies on the spot and don't worry about singing "correctly." Did the musical lines help express or emphasize certain emotions? If so, how?

Attending the Opera: Make the most of your experience

WELCOME TO THE FOUR SEASONS CENTRE FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

Photo: Sam Javanrouh

So you're headed to the opera, and there are a few questions on your mind. What do I wear? Can I take photos of the performance? How will I understand it – isn't opera in another language?! Relax! Here are a few tips on how to get the most out of your opera experience.

First, there's the question of **what to wear**. Some people think of the opera and imagine the entire audience decked out in ballgowns and tuxes, but that's just not the case! People wear all sorts of things to the opera – jeans, dress pants, cocktail dresses, suits, etc. The important thing is to be comfortable and show personal flair. Wear something that makes you feel good, whether it be jeans or your nicest tie, and grab a sweater before you leave home – the air conditioning can be a bit chilly! Additionally, skip that spritz of perfume or cologne before you go out; the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts is scent-free. Many fellow patrons are allergic to strong scents.

Once you're dressed, it's important to **arrive on time** for the show. Late patrons cannot be admitted to the theatre, and you may have to watch the first act from a screen in the lobby rather than your seat. If you need to buy or pick up a ticket, arrive as early as possible, as sometimes the line-up for the box office can be quite long before a performance! The main doors open one hour before the performance starts. Line up there and have your ticket ready to present to the usher. If you have any questions about the performance, drop by the Welcome Desk to ask a member of the COC staff, who are full of useful information not only about the opera, but about COC programs in general. A **pre-performance chat** takes place in the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre (Ring 3 of the lobby) about 45 minutes before the show. These chats, given by members of our **COC Volunteer Speakers Bureau**, offer valuable insight into both the opera and the specific production that you'll be seeing.

Before the opera starts, take the opportunity to **explore the lobby**, known as the Isadore and Rosalie Sharp City Room. The Four Seasons Centre is Canada's first purpose-built opera house, engineered with state-of-the-art design and technology for the best possible acoustics. Notice that the sound of traffic, streetcars and the general bustle of the city barely reaches the lobby, even though an airy glass wall looks out onto one of the busiest intersections in Toronto.

Stop by one of the bars and **order a beverage for intermission or purchase a snack**. Browse the **Opera Shop** to pick up a memento of your experience at the opera. (Note: the Opera Shop is not open at dress rehearsals.) Walk up the stairs, passing a sculpture as you go, and note the floating glass staircase – the longest free-standing glass staircase in the world! On the third floor, you'll see the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre, home to our Free Concert Series. You'll also see a mobile by artist Alexander Calder, adding some colour and whimsy to the space.

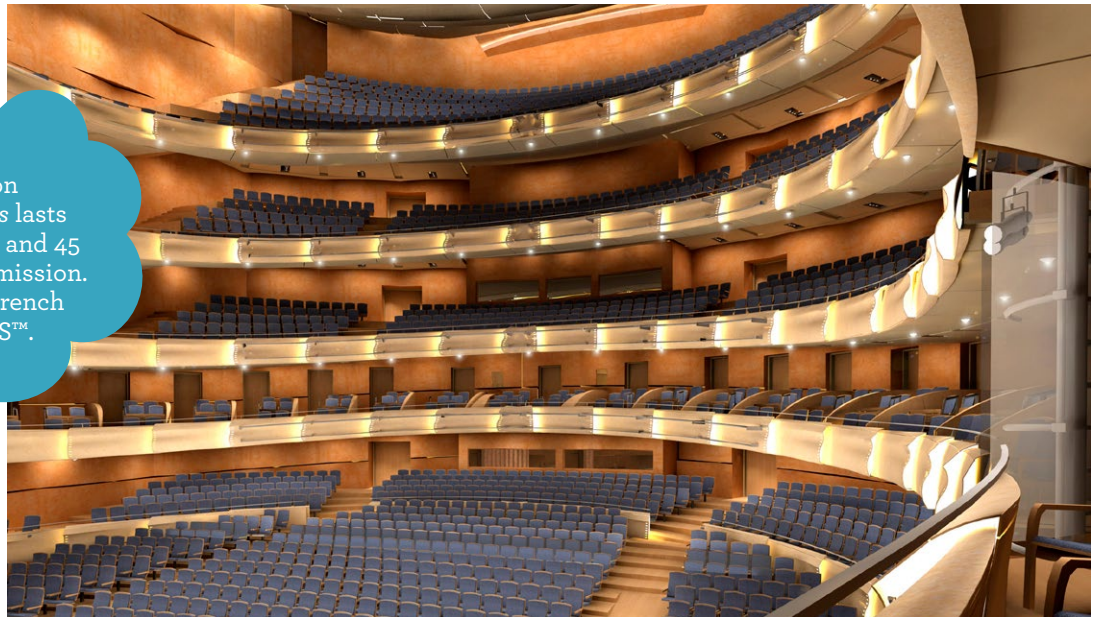
Chimes ring throughout the lobby starting **ten minutes** before the performance, reminding everyone to get to their seats. Head towards the door noted on your ticket, get a program from the usher, and find your designated seat. It's best to use this time to open any candies or cough drops you might have and turn off your cell phone – the hall is built to carry sound, so small sounds travel further than you may think! If you'd like to get a picture of you and your friends at the opera, do so now – **photography is not permitted** once the performance begins. A camera flash is very distracting to the performers, who are working hard to stay focused and in character.

As the lights go down and the audience quiets, **listen carefully**. Whatever little bit of outdoor sound you might have heard in the lobby (a siren passing, a rumbling streetcar) has been virtually eliminated here. Not a peep! That's because the auditorium is physically separated from the outside and the ground below, making for the best acoustic experience possible.

Now it's time to sit back and **enjoy the opera**! But wait – you forgot your French-to-English translator! Don't worry about it. **SURTITLES™** are projected on a horizontal screen above the stage. SURTITLES™ originate from the idea of "subtitles," which are most commonly used in foreign films to make them more accessible outside of their country of origin. The COC was the first opera company to adapt this concept for the operatic stage. Slides containing the English translation of the *libretto* (text for the opera) are projected in a more visible place for the audience: *above* the stage. SURTITLES™ were first used by the COC at the premiere of the opera *Elektra* in 1983. Only the name could be trademarked, as the technology for the projections was already in existence. Opera companies from around the world have adopted this audience initiative under different names, and it has revolutionized opera stages around the world.

Make sure to show your **appreciation to the performers** by laughing at humorous bits or applauding after a well-performed aria. If a performer has pulled off some particularly impressive vocal fireworks, it's absolutely acceptable to yell out your appreciation in addition to applause. You may hear your fellow audience members shouting "bravo!" for a man, "brava!" for a woman, or "bravi!" for a group of performers. Feel free to join in!

The riveting production of *Dialogues des Carmélites* lasts for approximately two hours and 45 minutes, including one intermission. The opera will be sung in French with English SURTITLES™.



R. Fraser Elliott Hall. Photo: Tim Griffith

Characters and Synopsis

MAIN CHARACTERS (in order of vocal appearance)

Name	Description	Voice Type	Pronunciation
Blanche de la Force	A young girl, fearful of life, who enters the Carmelite order	Soprano	BLAHNSH duh lah FORCE
Chevalier de la Force	Blanche's brother, aristocrat	Tenor	Sheh-val-YAY duh lah FORCE
Marquis de la Force	Blanche's father, aristocrat	Baritone	mar-KEE duh lah FORCE
Mme. de Croissy	Old prioress	Contralto	ma-DAM duh krwas-SEE
Soeur Constance	Carmelite nun	Soprano	kon-STAHNS
Mère Marie	Assistant prioress	Mezzo-Soprano	ma-REE
Mme. Lidoine	New prioress	Soprano	ma-DAM lee-DWAHN
Mère Jeanne	Carmelite nun	Contralto	jay-ANNE
Soeur Mathilde	Carmelite nun	Mezzo-Soprano	ma-TEELD
Chaplain	Priest	Tenor	
1st Commissioner		Tenor	
2nd Commissioner		Baritone	
Officer		Bartione	
Jailer		Baitone	
M. Javelinot	A doctor	Baritone	ja-veh-lee-NOH

SYNOPSIS

ACT I

Scene i: *1789, the chateau of the Marquis de la Force, just before the French Revolution*
The Chevalier de la Force fears for the safety of his sister, Blanche, whose carriage has been seen surrounded by an angry mob. The Chevalier's anxiety is not without cause. Blanche's father, the Marquis de la Force, recalls the horrific events surrounding Blanche's birth that left her with a significant fear of life. Blanche arrives home safely and, though putting on a brave face and trying to make light of the situation, retires to her room to rest. Her frayed nerves are betrayed when a servant's shadow terrifies her: she runs back to her father and brother. Seeking protection from a world that frightens her, Blanche confesses her desire to become a nun.

Scene ii*: Parlour of the Carmelite convent*
Weeks later, Blanche arrives at the Carmelite convent and is interviewed by the Old Prioress, Mme. de Croissy, who is visibly ill. The Old Prioress tells her that a convent is not a place for refuge but a place for prayer. God will test her weaknesses, not her strengths.

Scene iii: *Inside the convent*
Accepted into the order, Blanche meets the lively and chatty Soeur Constance. Blanche is afraid that such informal chatter while the Old Prioress lies dying will lead to punishment from God. As the conversation turns to death, Blanche reveals that she has always wished to die young. Constance confesses that she has a premonition that they will die together some day.

Scene iv: *The infirmary*
The Old Prioress lies on her deathbed. She tells the assistant Prioress, Mère Marie, that she worries about Blanche, the newest of their order, and entrusts Mère Marie with nurturing Blanche's spiritual development. Blanche is brought to the Prioress who has a vision of their chapel desecrated and expresses the belief that God has forsaken their order. Delirious and in pain, the Old Prioress dies.

ACT II

Scene i: *The chapel*
Blanche and Soeur Constance keep vigil over the Old Prioress's body. Soeur Constance departs to look for their

replacements. Left alone, Blanche becomes frightened and tries to run away. At the door she is confronted by Mère Marie, who initially reprimands her but quickly takes pity on the distraught girl and excuses her from all other prayers that day.

Interlude
Soeur Constance and Blanche discuss the Old Prioress's death. Soeur Constance remarks to Blanche that the death of the Prioress was surprisingly small, intimate and painful, for one so strong, pious, and with such a high position in the convent. Perhaps she died a death that was meant for another, a weaker person, who in turn will die a death that is more profound.

Scene ii: *The chapter room*
The nuns assemble with the New Prioress, Mme. Lidoine, who preaches the importance of prayer and advises the nuns that their future is uncertain. Mère Marie invites the nuns to join in prayer in obedience.

Interlude
A ring at the door startles the nuns. Mère Marie announces the Chevalier who, as he is going abroad, has come to see Blanche. The Prioress makes an exception to the rule forbidding outside visitors to the convent, but orders Mère Marie to remain present while Blanche meets with her brother.

Scene iii: *The parlour*
Knowing the dangers of being associated with the church at this time, Blanche's brother tries to persuade her to return to the safety of the family home, but she refuses.

Above: A scene from Lyric Opera of Chicago's production of Dialogues des Carmélites*, 2007. Photo: Robert Kusel*

*Sacristy:
A room in which a priest prepares for a service and where various objects used for worship are stored.

Scene iv: *The sacristy*, autumn 1792*
Having held his last mass, the Chaplain addresses the nuns, informing them that he must go into hiding. The nuns discuss the state of France and question whose responsibility it is to defend the priests and the sanctity of their faith. The Chaplain returns seeking shelter as he was blocked from leaving. The crowd of revolutionaries gathers at the main entrance to the convent and two officials of the Revolutionary Government arrive with a decree that the convent must disband.

The hostile situation puts Blanche in great distress and Mère Jeanne offers her a figurine of the Christ Child as comfort. The menacing crowd chants "Ça ira!" ("We will win!") and out of nervousness Blanche drops the Christ Child and it breaks, plunging her further into terror.

ACT III

Scene i: *The chapel*
Mère Marie addresses the nuns in the absence of Mme. Lidoine, who has fled to Paris to seek guidance from her superiors. She proposes that together they take the vow of martyrdom for the sake of their order and the salvation of their country. A secret vote is taken. There is one dissenting ballot, which the sisters suspect belongs to Blanche. Soeur Constance claims that the opposing vote was hers and asks to change her decision, so that the proposal can be unanimously accepted by the nuns. The sisters approach the Chaplain to take their vow. Overcome by fear, Blanche flees from the convent.

The revolutionaries seize the convent. An officer informs them that they will continue to lead a free life if they do not associate with anyone from the clergy. Having returned from Paris, the Prioress shows her opposition to Mère Marie's decision to encourage the nuns to choose a vow of martyrdom.

Interlude
The Carmelites are divested of their religious clothing and leave the convent.

Scene ii: *The library of the Marquis de la Force*
Mère Marie visits Blanche, who is living disguised as a servant in her family's home. Her father has been executed by revolutionaries who have taken over the house. Mère Marie urges her to return to her sisters, but she refuses. Blanche confesses that she is still plagued by fear and she agonizes over her situation. Mère Marie orders her to report to a house where she will be safe until it is time to act on their vow. Blanche learns that the Carmélite nuns have been arrested.

Scene iii: *In a prison in Compiègne*
After their first night in prison, the Prioress agrees to observe the vow of martyrdom. The nuns take comfort in her pledge. Soeur Constance is curious about what has happened to Blanche but believes that Blanche will return. The Carmelites are found guilty of unlawfully meeting and conspiring against the government, and are sentenced to death.

Interlude: *In the street*
Mère Marie finds the Chaplain, who informs her that the Carmelites have been condemned to death. Marie despairs that she is not following through on the vow with her sisters, but the Chaplain reminds her that it's not her will that decides martyrdom, but God's.

Scene iv: *At the scaffold*
Led by the Prioress, the Carmelites proceed to the guillotine chanting the hymn "Salve Regina" ("Hail holy Queen"). The voices grow quieter as the sisters, one by one, are silenced by the guillotine. Eventually only Soeur Constance remains. At this moment, Blanche makes her way through the crowd. With resolute conviction and free of any vestige of fear, Blanche mounts the scaffold to her death, singing the final verse of the chant "Veni creator spiritus" ("Come holy spirit").

Patricia Racette as Madame Lidoine (centre) in Lyric Opera of Chicago's production of Dialogues des Carmélites, *2007. Photo: Robert Kusel*

Genesis of the Opera

A COMPLICATED PAST

Poulenc's exquisite opera has an unusually complicated past. The sister who survived the French Revolution, Mother Marie, first told the story of the Carmelite nuns in her memoirs. Over a hundred years later, in 1931, a German novelist, Gertrude von Le Fort, was inspired to share the tale of martyrdom in a novel called *Die Letzte am Schafott* (*The Last on the Scaffold*) which recounts the complexities of religion and the horror of living in a totalitarian state during the Revolution. Le Fort created the character of Blanche de la Force and even gave the protagonist her own name, to reflect the author's own struggles with faith and fear.

Painting of Camelite nuns by unknown artist.

There were numerous attempts to turn the novel into a play, and then a film. In 1947, a French priest, Father Bruckberger, and cinematographer and screenwriter Philippe Agostini, adapted the novel for the screen, adding a new character to the story: Blanche's protective brother, Chevalier de la Force. This treatment landed in the hands of Catholic novelist Georges Bernanos, a well-regarded French writer with 25 published titles to his name, who further adapted the screenplay, adding more characters and personal details, such as the Prioress being exactly 59 years old, just like him. Dying from cancer, Bernanos finished the screenplay the day he became bedridden. His screenplay for *Dialogues des Carmélites* was published posthumously in 1949 and was performed as a stage play.

Poulenc joined the long list of "adaptors" of the Carmelite story when the music publishing company Ricordi commissioned an opera about it for La Scala in Milan. Poulenc chose to use Bernanos's text as the libretto, making only a few cuts for length. He composed *Dialogues des Carmélites*, his second opera, between 1953 and 1956. He suffered a nervous breakdown during the years of its composition, reportedly because he empathized so deeply with the nuns' plight. Adding to his emotional distress, his partner Lucien Roubert became mortally ill during the opera's composition and passed away in 1955.

After several years of legal and financial complications over the rights to the piece, the opera finally premiered on January 26, 1957 and was first performed in an Italian-language version at La Scala. Later that year, some orchestral music was added for the French premiere to accommodate the staging.

Many productions of the work quickly followed upon its premiere, including the Covent Garden premiere the following year as well as a televised production.

WHO WAS FRANCIS POULENC?

Francis Poulenc was born on January 7, 1899 in Paris, France into a wealthy family very well connected to Parisian social and music circles. His mother was a well-known Parisian socialite and a gifted amateur musician who began teaching her son the piano at age five. When he was 15 years old, his musical education was then transferred into the hands of the Spanish pianist Ricardo Viñes. Poulenc's father, though more "provincial" and less sophisticated than Poulenc's mother, was an affluent and successful businessman heading a pharmaceuticals firm, Rhone-Poulenc.

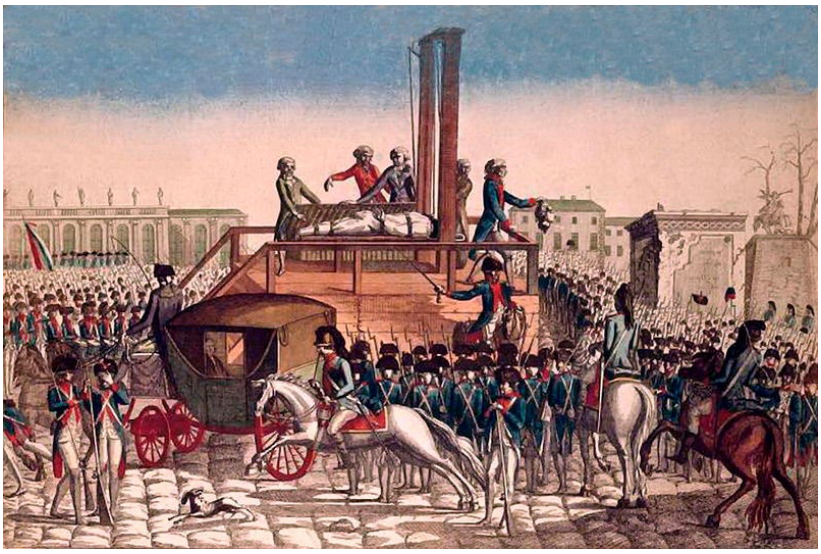
Poulenc began his career as composer directly following the First World War, a period of two decades in which Paris enjoyed a cultural and artistic euphoria that allowed the *avant-garde* to flourish. He was a member of "Les Six," a French group of composers championed by filmmaker and novelist Jean Cocteau. In addition to Poulenc, the group also included Darius Milhaud, Germaine Tailleferre, Arthur Honegger, Louis Durey and Georges Auric. Poulenc's early career was marked by a hedonistic enthusiasm that he attributed to his maternal Parisian ancestry.

Avant-garde: new and unusual or experimental art

It was the rediscovery of his Catholic faith that brought a more spiritual tone to his work. Under this new spiritual framework he refined his musical language into a melding of the sombre and the sensual.

He had a great love for the human voice and a desire to stage texts that were compelling in their literary and poetic qualities, which led him to write only three operas over the span of his career: *Les mamelles de Tirésias* (*The Breasts of Tiresias*, 1947), *Dialogues des Carmélites* (1957), and *La voix humaine* (*The Human Voice*, 1959).

Poulenc died suddenly of heart failure in Paris on January 30, 1963.



Above: Execution of Louis XIV *by unknown artist.*

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

The story of the opera begins before the onset of the Revolution and ends on July 17, 1794, right around the end of the Reign of Terror (see next section). The historical events of the Revolution, and their effects on the clergy and the church in particular, drive the story of the opera and magnify the horror of the totalitarian state.

Until the Revolution, the monarchy dominated French society, which was divided into three Estates: the clergy, the nobility and the commoners. The clergy owned the most land (second to the King) and generated wealth by imposing taxes on those who used the Church's real estate and property.

There is much disagreement amongst historians about the exact cause of the Revolution but there are some contributing factors which most scholars acknowledge as having led to serious unrest in French society:

- upper class citizens such as merchants, businessmen, manufacturers, and other professionals wanted to gain political power; the lower class was aware of this and did not want their wealthier counterparts to consolidate economic and political strength further;
- ideas of social and political reform were spreading rapidly throughout the country as a result of King Louis XVI's granting of freedom of the press;
- France's participation in the American Revolution had nearly bankrupted the government;
- crop failures in 1788 shook the economy and made citizens anxious.

The disputes regarding social and economic reforms and each Estate's struggle for power reached a turning point on July 14, 1789 when a Parisian crowd stormed the Bastille, a symbol of royal tyranny, and power shifted from the King and clergy to the State (the people). In a matter of months, the Church's taxation rights were revoked, its clerical privileges were overturned, its property was confiscated and many of its practices abolished. There was a growing violent repression of the Church in the years that followed.

THE REVOLUTIONARY TRIBUNAL AND THE REIGN OF TERROR

The Revolution reached its climax during the period known as the Reign of Terror, lasting roughly from 1793 to 1794. Though it amounted to less than a year, the violence and bloodshed was extreme.

In September 1793, the Revolutionary government established the Committee of Public Safety. Headed by an influential politician named Maximilien Robespierre, the committee suppressed counter-revolutionary activities through its Revolutionary Tribunal (a court for political offenders) and an explicit policy of state terror: executing those who opposed the Revolutionary government's agenda and philosophy. The guillotine was the most popular form of execution and tens of thousands died at the drop of its blade.

As part of these efforts, Robespierre was committed to eradicating the power of the Church and abolishing its presence in civil society. Individuals involved in, or practicing, Christian rites were executed; churches were closed and destroyed; religious educational institutions were shut down; public and private worship was banned; and, priests and nuns were forbidden from performing religious rites.

The end of the Terror began in June 1794, when France won a major battle at Fleurus (in modern day Belgium) against a coalition army of British, Dutch, German and Austrian troops. By proving that France had a strong military, the victory at Fleurus undermined the Revolutionary government's rationale that a policy of terror was necessary to safeguard against direct or indirect foreign intervention in the State's ostensibly democratic order. This created a political backlash against the government in France. Robespierre – as the foremost representative of the Terror, which was now seen as excessive – was arrested on July 27, 1794. He was executed a day later without trial. Government control was handed over to more moderate groups, and efforts were made to restore order to French society.

THE CARMELITES

The origins of the order can be traced to a religious community on Mount Carmel (modern day Northern Israel), first documented in the latter half of the 12th century. There have been numerous reforms to the order over the centuries and the daily life of a Carmelite nun varied depending on the branch of the order to which she belonged.

In 1641, a Carmelite convent was established in a small town northeast of Paris called Compiègne. At that time, there were almost 60 Carmelite convents in France. The Carmelites were of a discalced order, meaning they lived in the tradition of monks: barefoot and cloistered in the protective walls of a monastery. They spent their days in contemplative prayer.

Historically the Carmelite order attracted women from the upper classes, making it even more susceptible to persecution during the Reign of Terror because its ranks were more likely to include members of the aristocracy.

During the Revolution all the communities were dissolved. Only the convent in Compiègne remained strident in their beliefs and actively opposed the Reign of Terror by practicing their religious life in secret. In June 1794 their convent was raided by a mob of revolutionaries and the nuns disbanded into four groups, taking shelter in different parts of Compiègne. Before they left the convent, they took a vow of martyrdom as a sacrifice to God in order to restore peace in France. They were discovered, arrested, and imprisoned together, and eventually condemned to death by the Revolutionary Tribunal on July 17, 1794.

Historically, the nuns were transported to the guillotine by a tumbrel*. The journey is said to have taken over an hour and the usually raucous crowd was abnormally silent during their executions. The nuns, wearing their religious robes and habits, ascended the scaffold, one by one, from the youngest to the oldest, singing hymns, ending with the "Veni Creator Spiritus" (traditionally sung at high liturgical celebrations and events).

They were beatified by Pope Pius X in 1906. In Roman Catholicism, beatification is the first step towards sainthood.

A tumbrel is visible in this illustration by A.A. Dixon from Charles Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities. *London: Collins, 1905*

*A tumbrel is a two-wheeled carriage pulled by a horse. It was originally designed for use on the French farm to transport manure and other waste to the garbage pit. The rear wall would open so the contents could be easily dumped out. The tumbrel has often been associated with the French Revolution as it was the vehicle of choice for transporting the condemned to the guillotine.

Modern-day Carmelites
The Carmelite order still exists and there are many practicing Carmelites in Canada. Discover what a typical day is like for a Carmelite nun, explore the types of activities required of them, and learn more about Hermine Fermont, Canada's first Carmelite nun!

Below: Photo of nun and novice discalced Carmelites in Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. Photo: Eugenio Hansen (2010)

Above: A Carmelite nun sits in her cell to pray and meditate on the Bible (2009).

Themes
It doesn't have the light-hearted, melodramatic story and catchy tunes of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, but the accessible music and universal themes of *Dialogues des Carmélites* ensure that every operagoer, be they a novice or experienced opera fan, will be moved by the nuns' profound strength and tragic end.

Explore and discuss these themes with your students:

- Inhibiting limitations of fear, and the freedom achieved when overcoming it
- Death
- Personal Terror vs. State Terror
- Restraint
- Inner and Outer Turmoil
- Sacrifice

Listening Guide

Poulenc's compositional style is tonal – it follows the rules set down by traditional Western music theory. For most listeners this simply means that his music follows melodic paths that the ear expects. Although sometimes criticized for his musical conservatism, it's useful to remember that at the time of *Dialogues des Carmélites*' premiere in 1957, other newly-composed, contemporary stage works included Samuel Barber's *Vanessa* (1958), Bohuslav Martinu's *The Greek Passion* (1961) and Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* (1957), all three written in a similarly lyrical, melodic vein. In other words, he was not so much the odd man out; the 20th century accommodated many different styles of composition ranging from Poulenc's brand of lyricism, derived directly from the rich history of the French *mélodie* (song), through to the more experimental atonality (a style of composition which broke the traditional rules of Western music theory) championed by composers like Arnold Schoenberg.

As France's greatest songwriter of the 20th century, Poulenc closely associated himself with some of the most important French poets of the period – Guillaume Apollinaire, Paul Éluard, Louise de Vilmorin and Max Jacob among others. It is therefore not surprising that Poulenc paid the greatest respect to his libretto which he based on a screenplay by Georges Bernanos. Even though the composer employs a large orchestra, it is used with discretion so that the text is completely intelligible; its meaning coloured and amplified by the complex, yet not overwhelming instrumentation.

In *Dialogues*, Poulenc used three main musical forms: choral and orchestral interlude; *recitative* (words which are sung in a way that imitates speech) and *arioso* (singing that is more tied to the rhythm of speech than an aria, but more melodic than recitatives). He also made very clear who were his musical models: Giuseppe Verdi and Modest Mussorgsky whose operas such as *Don Carlos* (1867) and *Boris Godunov* (1874), respectively, inspired the grand, historical background for the work; Claude Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902) and Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (1642) for their spirited recitative; and, J. S. Bach and Igor Stravinsky for the *arioso* monologues.

Poulenc readily acknowledged within himself a certain dual personality: one, the *bon vivant* playboy, the other, a deeply pious Catholic. His religiosity inspired many works throughout his career including *Litanies à la Vierge Noire* (1936) as well as settings of the Roman Catholic *Stabat Mater* (1950) and *Gloria* (1959) texts. *Dialogues des Carmélites* represents the pinnacle of his religious compositions but the other side of his personality also manifested itself with 1947's hilarious absurdist, surreal, cabaret-influenced operetta, *Les mamelles de Tirésias* (*The Breasts of Tirésias*).

His sources of inspiration for this opera are most telling in the inscription of his original score: "To the 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."

Excerpts taken from: *Dialogues des Carmélites*, Arthaus 107135. Orchestra and Chorus of Teatro alla Scala, Milan, Riccardo Muti, conductor. Dagmar Schellenberger, Anja Silja, Barbara Dever, Laura Akin. You can also **experience the Listening Guide online**.

1

MUSICAL EXCERPT
Act I, scene iv, Arioso: "Je viens de voir notre chapelle vide et profanée" ("I just saw our Chapel empty and desecrated")

CONNECTION TO THE STORY
The Old Prioress is dying and babbles of seeing the chapel empty and profaned, the altar rent asunder, and straw and blood on the floor. She tries to speak to Blanche but can only mumble about forgiveness and the fear of death. She falls back dead on her pillow and Blanche weeps.

MUSICAL SIGNIFICANCE
In the original novel on which the opera is based, the Old Prioress (Mme. de Croissy) gets only passing

mention. However, in Georges Bernanos's screenplay, her painful, fear-filled death is given increased prominence; in Poulenc's hands, it becomes the harrowing climax to Act I. In order to differentiate voices in an opera dominated by women, Poulenc based the *tessituras* (the area in a singer's range where the majority of the music lies) of his lead characters on grand operatic models. For example, Blanche's vocal line is based on the title role in Massenet's *Thaïs* (1894) while for the Old Prioress, Poulenc looked to Wagner's Kundry from *Parsifal* (1882). Poulenc chose this model appropriately, since Kundry is a similarly tortured, conflicted character whose jagged, expressive music exploits the high and low extremes of the mezzo soprano voice. At the moment of death the Old Prioress, who has dedicated her life to God, experiences a crisis of faith and cries out, "Who am I at this moment, wretched as I am, to concern myself with Him! Let Him first concern Himself with me!" Poulenc requires that she sing her lines in a very rough manner and even notates a death rattle and bodily sounds of pain in the score. The horror of her difficult death is intensified by the dissonances (musical elements which sound discordant to the ear) in the music.

FURTHER REFLECTION
For what reasons do you think a person like the Old Prioress, who has dedicated her life to religion, would feel abandoned by God at the moment of her death?

Can you think of other types of vocal effects used by singers in any genre which help convey extreme emotions?

Recall other scenes from operas, movies, television shows, books you've read in which a character dies... how do they differ from, or how are they similar to, the Old Prioress's death?

2

MUSICAL EXCERPT
Act II, scene iii, Prélude

CONNECTION TO THE STORY
Orchestral introduction to a scene in which the Chevalier de la Force tries to convince his sister Blanche of the danger she is in as the Revolutionary forces clamp down on religious orders.

MUSICAL SIGNIFICANCE
One major feature of this opera is the numerous orchestral preludes and interludes interspersed throughout. They serve several functions including setting the mood for the upcoming scene as well as an opportunity for set changes. However, their main function is to draw the audience's attention to the fact that indeed, this opera is constructed from a series of "dialogues." The sung scenes are most often a conversation between two or three people, and the real time between them, although chronological, is often broken up over a considerable period. The preludes and interludes help to bridge the gap between disparate locations and time gaps. For example an interlude helps to transition from the convent setting of Act III, scene i to Blanche's family home in Act III, scene ii. The Prelude you're listening to here alternates between lyrical and louder, more dramatic sections, preparing us for a similarly emotional conversation between brother and sister. The Preludes also give Poulenc's bumped-up orchestral forces (which include triple wind sections, two harps and, unusually, a piano) the chance to shine in a way that they don't during the vocal sections, where Poulenc dials back on the orchestra and uses it sparingly so as not to hinder the comprehension of the text.

FURTHER REFLECTION
Both the orchestra and the human voice are capable of creating music which contains lots of emotion.

What are some of the *different* means they use to achieve that impact?

What sorts of considerations do you think composers keep in mind when composing for voice and orchestra as opposed to voice and piano; voice and guitar, etc.?

If you were the stage director, what and who would you put on stage during this Prelude?

3

MUSICAL EXCERPT
Act III, scene iii, Arioso: "Mes filles, j'ai désiré de tout mon coeur vous sauver" ("My daughters, I wanted to save you with all my heart")

CONNECTION TO THE STORY
The jailer enters bearing an official warrant. He reads out the Tribunal's verdict naming each of the Carmelites. They are condemned to death as seditious counter-revolutionaries. The Prioress puts them under solemn obedience and gives them her blessing.

MUSICAL SIGNIFICANCE
Poulenc based the vocal line of the New Prioress (Mme. Lidoine) on that of Desdemona in Verdi's *Otello* (1887), another lyric soprano role which requires a combination of tenderness together with power of delivery. Lidoine delivers long, noble speeches in Acts II and III which constitute the only real "arias" in the entire opera. Her music is drier and less dramatic than that given to her forbear, the Old Prioress (see Excerpt #1). This more melodic, restrained style suits the new leader of the Order who is a steadfast mother figure for the group; she is the one to whom they turn for comfort after they have been condemned to death. This excerpt demonstrates Poulenc's mastery of a style of vocal writing in which the music follows the contour of the words, deepening their meaning and giving them human resonance. This is very much the tradition of French songwriting which began in the 19th century with composers such as Charles Gounod, Camille Saint-Saëns and Gabriel Fauré and was carried into the 20th century by Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel and Poulenc. Like all of these great French composers who excelled at setting their native language, Poulenc ensured that every syllable was not only audible, but also correctly stressed and comfortably placed in the singer's range. In this excerpt, listen to the expert marriage between text and music as the Prioress sings "vous êtes mon bien" ("you are all I possess") to a vocal line which rises to a climax on the final word, perfectly expressing the character's strong emotional ties and feelings of responsibility for her fellow nuns. The New Prioress's music is full of the same kind of haunting, memorable melody which fills Poulenc's vast song catalogue, albeit beefed up with full orchestration and a more dramatic context.

FURTHER REFLECTION
Can you think of any songs in which the words are more important than the music? How about one in which music is more important than the words? For each, why do you think one element is given greater significance than the other?

Explore the reasons why French Revolutionary forces were in opposition to religious orders like the Carmelites.

Listen to Poulenc's song "C" – are there any aspects of it that remind you of Mme. Lidoine's aria, and if so, what are they?

4

MUSICAL EXCERPT
Act III, scene iv, Chorus: "Salve Regina, mater misericordiae" ("Hail holy Queen, Mother of mercy")

CONNECTION TO THE STORY
Led by the New Prioress, Mme. Lidoine, the fourteen nuns make their way to the scaffold singing the "Salve Regina."

MUSICAL SIGNIFICANCE
For the intensely moving final scene of the opera, Poulenc turns to established religious texts from the Catholic church: the nuns begin their journey to the scaffold singing a prayer to the Virgin Mary, the "Salve Regina" ("Hail holy Queen") which is set to a stirring, rising melody sung in unison, and composed very much in the manner of Gregorian chant (sacred vocal music consisting of a single melodic line). Leaping out of this spare texture is the shocking sound of the guillotine blade, slashing at irregular intervals so that we are always unprepared for it as it cuts across the music. With each of the fourteen thuds of the guillotine, one more voice drops out of the ensemble until at the very end, only the high soprano of Sister Constance can be heard. Just as she too is about to be silenced, she notices Blanche enter the scene, and therefore can die with the knowledge that her friend has decided to rejoin her fellow sisters on the scaffold. Instead of continuing on with the "Salve Regina", Blanche sings the four last lines of another prayer, the "Veni Creator Spiritus" ("Come Holy Spirit"), a text usually sung during the ordination of priests and at holy confirmation. It is not an accident that at this point, Poulenc has her sing a prayer specifically associated with the absolute dedication of one's life to God. Blanche has spent most of the opera living in fear but in these final moments, she reaches a point of resolution, inner calm and acceptance as she rejoins the Carmelites for eternity.

FURTHER REFLECTION
Gregorian chant is one style of music sung in religious services... can you think of any others, and how are they the same/different from the kind of music you hear the nuns sing here as they go to their death?

When Poulenc wrote this opera he was living through the death of his long-time companion Lucien Roubert. Can you think of other artists affected by the death of a loved one?

What are some other examples of martyrdom? Is it ever justifiable to die for your beliefs?

The words "Ah! Ça ira! Ça ira!" ("Ah, we will win! We will win!") are often chanted by the revolutionary mob in the opera. It was the title of a song that became a major anthem of the French Revolution and its lyrics focused on liquidating aristocrats and clergy. It was first heard in 1790 and words can be credited to a former soldier who made a living as a street singer. The music was composed by a violinist of the Théâtre Beaujolais. When Blanche hears the revolutionary mob chant "Ah! Ça ira! Ça ira!" as they approach the convent she would be well aware of their intentions. **Hear** a modern-day recording of the song.

What to Look for: Less is More

Director Robert Carsen returns to the COC with his stunning production of *Dialogues des Carmélites*. His minimalist approach to stage direction and design enables a seamless flow from one scene to another, and leaves the natural progression of the story and the poignancy of the music undisturbed.

Top: Felicity Palmer as Madame de Croissy and Isabel Bayrakdarian as Blanche de la Force. Below: Dale Travis as Marquis de la Force and Isabel Bayrakdarian as Blanche de la Force in Dialogues des Carmélites, *Lyric Opera of Chicago, 2007. Photos: Robert Kusel*

Carsen's direction focuses deeply on the psychological states of the characters. In a review posted on bachtrack.com, a blogger comments that this subtle staging means that "the characters are immediate, their interactions convincing, and the drama totally involving" and the relationships between characters are "vivid and natural." The acting is simple and restrained to express the inner turmoil and complexities of each character.

Even the mad mob of Revolutionaries, consisting of over 100 supernumeraries*, is used very methodically and simplistically to embody the political unrest of France. They often move slowly or stand still and lurk in the background, their constant presence a reminder of the imposing threat to religious orders and the French aristocracy.

In fact, with set designer Michael Levine exercising an emotionally direct minimalism – you won't see ostentatious chateaus or prototypically French cobblestone streets – the large cast of supernumeraries and singers comes to embody the set in many ways, defining and shaping the spaces inhabited by the opera's characters. For example, four waiters stand at the four corners of the room to define the Marquis de la Force's library; the nuns lie in the form of crosses around the Old Prioress's deathbed to outline the walls of her room; and veiled nuns become the outer wall of the convent that separates Blanche from her brother when he comes to convince her to return to her family home.

By the same token, instead of large set pieces and numerous props to set a scene, lighting designer Jean Kalman's vision (re-created for the COC production by Jurgen Kolb) uses lighting and shadow to suggest space. For instance, a bright light barrels down on the nuns as they sit surrounded by darkness indicating their confined space in the jail. Lighting also helps to define the time of day. Notice the wash of warm light that bathes the convent in Act I, scene iii, when the Sisters awake to do their morning chores.

Falk Bauer's costume designs evoke late 18th-century France and Micheal Levine's transformative set pieces and props help to set the opera during the French Revolution.

By removing any excesses on stage, Carsen emphasizes the human drama of the story and draws Poulenc's powerful score to the forefront of the production. The result is a profoundly chilling, moving and emotional experience for the audience.

*Supernumeraries, often referred to as "supers," are non-speaking and non-singing roles in an opera, similar to "extras" in TV shows and movies.

A scene from Lyric Opera of Chicago's production of Dialogues des Carmélites*, 2007. Photo: Robert Kusel*

See how many examples of religious symbols you can spot in the costume, lighting and set designs while watching the opera.

COC Spotlight: Mike Gibbons

Though the main singers, orchestra and chorus tend to get the most accolades at the end of an opera, there are a small number of individuals who play a significant role in telling the story on stage. Meet the unsung heroes (and heroines) of the opera: the supernumeraries. Supernumeraries, or "supers," are volunteers who participate in operas as non-singing "extras," similarly to the non-speaking "extras" in movies or TV shows. They are often used to enhance large chorus scenes, to bring small props on and off stage, or in some cases, through clever staging techniques, to help to define a space.

The supers come from various backgrounds and ages and many often have had no experience with live theatre. They are typically inquisitive individuals who want to get a taste of what it feels like to be on a major stage without the pressure of having to belt out a big solo. In order to be a super, individuals have to fit the costumes and demonstrate a great sense of commitment and responsibility, and must arrive for every rehearsal and performance on time!

Being a super is an exciting diversion from everyday life and offers a chance to work alongside some of the greatest national and international artists.

Meet one of the COC's most sought-after supers, Mike Gibbons!

Mike Gibbons
(Supernumerary)

Position: Supernumerary

Name: Mike Gibbons

Role in the Company: A non-singing, non-speaking role in an opera production.

Hometown: Toronto, ON

Education: Bachelor of Arts Degree in Film & Video Production and Literary Studies (York University)

First became interested in opera: I've always loved opera since I took an interest in music, although my fear of judgment and ridicule forced me to keep it a secret until I entered university.

What made you decide to become a supernumerary? It was my love and passion for the opera that opened the door of opportunity for me to both expand my portfolio and to stay close to my dream of singing and performing.

If someone was interested in becoming a supernumerary, what would you recommend they have in terms of skills or experience? All that anyone needs to have is the passion to pursue their dreams and to have no fear in terms of performing in front of others. Making sure that you are on time for rehearsals and performances, having a positive attitude and being able to take direction from the director and stage management is ideal for becoming a successful and sought-after super.

What do you love most about being a supernumerary? I enjoy working with the COC very much. The entire staff, chorus members, the Ensemble Studio, as well as all of the incredible talent that they have – and will continue to have gracing the stage at the Four Seasons Centre – are all so involving and a pleasure to work with. It is an honour to work alongside all of them and, while on stage, their individual and collective energy helps me perform to the best of my abilities.

What do you enjoy the least? If anything at all, what I enjoy least are the few minor injuries I have sustained over the past few years, but that is a small price to pay for my love of opera.

What surprises you most about being a supernumerary? It's the anticipation of waiting for the phone call: that I've been considered or asked specifically to be involved in an upcoming production, and waiting to find out what role I've been considered for. That surprises me the most and I enjoy the ride for as long as it lasts.

What do you enjoy outside of opera? Funnily enough, I continue to perform outside of opera as a disc jockey. It's safe to say that I was born to be an entertainer. My love of music keeps me interested in all art forms.

How has being a part of the COC impacted your life? All of my closest friends and family members ask me constantly about when I'll perform again with the COC. I am noticed for my talent and my abilities and I've made many new friends.

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Mike Gibbons (far right) and fellow COC supers with soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian (centre) after a performance of Idomeneo *(2010).*

Mike, when he's not working with the COC!

Robert Carsen's concept for *Dialogues des Carmélites* requires just over 100 supers to act as the Revolutionaries and nuns. Most operas use between 5 and 20 supers at most. When you return to see another opera, see if you can spot the supers!

Interested in learning more about how to become a super at the COC? Find out here!

Active Learning

One of the best parts of taking your students to the opera is the discussion and further exploration that live theatre can inspire. Take a deeper look into the themes and story of *Dialogues des Carmélites* with these discussion questions and ideas for further exploration.

DISCUSSION

- Robert Carsen is well-known for being a "minimalist" director. How did this relatively simple and direct staging aid in the telling of this story? Was the action always clear despite the lack of elaborate sets and props? If you were a director, how would you choose to stage this opera?
- This opera requires over 100 supernumeraries. What are some of the challenges involved in working with that many people on stage? Would you want to be a super?
- The Carmelite nuns, in the end, give their lives for their beliefs. Can you think of modern examples of a group believing in something so strongly? If a similar story were to unfold today, do you believe the nuns would have arrived at the same unanimous decision? Why or why not?

FURTHER EXPORATION

- In your studies of the French Revolution and France in the late 18th century, explore the role of the Carmelite nuns and discuss the historical accuracy of the opera.
- Explore other instances of religious prejudice in wartime. How are the events relevant to some of the wars being fought worldwide today?

Did viewing the opera spark some scintillating debates or discussions? Would your students like to share examples of their work with the COC? E-mail us at **education@coc.ca**. We'd love to hear from you!

Isabel Bayrakdarian as Blanche de la Force in Lyric Opera of Chicago's production of Dialogues des Carmélites, *2007. Photo: Robert Kusel*

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Above: Summer Opera Camp. Photo: COC