

Pierre Villette and the Twentieth-Century French Choral Tradition: An Interview with Stephen Layton

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The page is framed by a collage of abstract, textured squares in various shades of blue, purple, and green. The central text is set against a white background.

In 2025, artists around the world marked the centennial of Pierre Boulez's birth with retrospectives and concert series devoted to the musical maverick. While these events celebrated Boulez's legacy, they also provided opportunities to reexamine his influence through a contemporary perspective. For example, *The New York Times* published two articles that provided clear-eyed assessments of Boulez's impact.¹ *Times* music critic Joshua Barone praised this musical "titan" for his contributions to twentieth-century music, while acknowledging that "his music, like that of his peers from the post-World War II generation of high modernists, like Karlheinz Stockhausen and Luigi Nono, is brilliant but out of fashion, and difficult to program."²

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Boulez's repute as Europe's musical *l'enfant-étoile* cast an imposing shadow on more traditional, conservative composers during the mid-twentieth century, particularly in France. As scholars and critics reexamined the impact of Boulez and his avant-garde contemporaries during his centenary, the contributions of lesser-known French composers were recognized, and an accurate image of twentieth-century French music emerged through this critical reassessment.

Pierre Villette (1926–1998) is one such benefactor from this reexamination. Born one year after Boulez, Villette enjoyed a prestigious musical pedigree. Both studied harmony with Olivier Messiaen at the Paris Conservatoire, but their careers diverged as Boulez quickly gained notoriety as the champion of serialism and the avant-garde. Simultaneously, Villette's compositions were considered too traditional and *passé* for post-World War II Europe. Just as 2025 saw a reexamination of Boulez and his "titanic" musical standing, 2026—Villette's centenary—offers scholars and musicians a chance to rediscover the brilliance of this forgotten composer and examine his music within the lineage of French choral music.

Given Villette's penchant for religious compositions, it should be of no surprise that his motets found favor in the English choral tradition. The celebrated English conductor Donald Hunt championed Villette's music in the 1970s, and Villette's motet *Hymne à la Vierge* frequently appears in the Choir of King's College Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols. This English admiration of Villette's music is further illustrated with the Holst Singers's 2006 recording of Villette's choral music under the direction of Stephen Layton.

Layton's proclivity for Villette and the twentieth-century French choral canon stems from his training within the English Choir School tradition. During these formative years, Layton not only performed Villette's works but studied under teachers who promoted Villette's music. The following interview with Layton revisits the music of Villette and places it within a broader French lineage of choral excellence. This interview from July 16, 2025, was recorded and transcribed using the AI-powered transcription service TurboScribe and reviewed by the author for accuracy. In addition, the interview is edited for clarity and brevity.

Can you tell us about your musical beginnings? What were some of your earliest memories and influential mentors?

My earliest mentors were in Winchester Cathedral, where I was a choir boy with Martin Neary and James Lancelot. It was an amazing period in the history of British choral music in cathedrals. We're talking mid-seventies to early eighties. I came from a humble home in Derbyshire and went 150 miles to the school at Winchester Cathedral. That was quite a big change for me. And I felt, after arriving and living there, that the world had changed for me.

Another important influence was when we went on tour to the United States in 1979. It was no ordinary tour. It included the Kennedy Center and the National Cathedral in Washington, and Carnegie Hall and St. John the Divine in New York. We also did quite a few broadcasts. There was an NBC documentary about this tour, which I vaguely appear in as a little kid singing with my little glasses on.³

My other great influence was James Lancelot, who was the organist at Winchester. At the end of my time with Martin, he received a bicentennial Fulbright fellowship to the United States to study for six months, and Lancelot ran the Winchester choir. I remember he encouraged me to play J. S. Bach's *Fantasia in C minor* in the cathedral after service, and he just let me run wild on Sunday nights playing the organ to my heart's content and making a lot of noise!

Lancelot was the organ scholar at King's College Cambridge, where I ended up. That's where I first heard Villette. During the 1986 [Lessons and Carols] service at King's College Cambridge, we sang the *Hymn à la Vierge* of Villette. I think that was probably the first time it had been sung to a large audience.

At Cambridge, my influence was Stephen Cleobury. It was there that I reconnected with choral music more than I had as a boy. I discovered a wider repertoire, especially early music, as we sang plenty of Tallis, Byrd, Lassus, Gibbons, Schütz, Palestrina, and Vittoria.

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Villette's centenary offers a chance to rediscover the brilliance of this forgotten composer.

What particularities of French choral music present challenges to conductors and choirs? Are there specific aspects about the French Choral tradition that are particularly challenging for an English-speaking choir?

I think if the music is in French, that's going to be more of a challenge, obviously. Let's just look at Poulenc as our best example, because it's easier for an American or an English choir to sing Poulenc when he writes his motets in Latin—the ones for Lent or the ones for Christmas—or indeed the wider orchestral choral pieces, like the *Gloria* and *Stabat Mater*. Once we move into some of Poulenc's secular works and the poetry of Paul Éluard, we've got difficulties. It's much easier to sing in Italian and Latin for Americans and English people.

Other than that, I think it depends on what French music we're considering. If we're looking at the early Baroque, Lully, etc., there's a way of pronouncing early French just as there is with early English. Or whether we're looking at the later, contemporary French music of Poulenc, Duruflé, and Fauré. I guess that's where Villette comes in.

This is a centenary year for Pierre Villette. Your recording of Villette's motets is recognized as the gold standard for his works. When examining his compositions and comparing them to other twentieth-century French composers, they can be described stylistically as conservative. Within this lineage of French choral music, where do you think Villette fits in?

That's a very good question, and it's not a quick answer. The first thing to say regards Boulez. Villette

studied at the Paris Conservatoire between about '41 and '49, while Boulez was at the [Paris] Conservatoire between '43 and '44. Boulez was in Olivier Messiaen's composition/advanced harmony class, and Villette studied not officially with Messiaen, but with Noël Jean-Charles André. However, it seems clear that Messiaen was the overall composition guy at the time. It seems beyond any doubt that Villette and Boulez shared classes [at the Conservatoire].

Your question, though, was where does Villette stand? Well, he obviously doesn't stand so proudly as Messiaen or Boulez, for all sorts of reasons. Messiaen created his own compositional technique, and Boulez absorbed some of that and also absorbed the technique of twelve tone and Schoenberg. But I think what's interesting is that Villette still managed to do something of his own, specifically that he's writing primarily for the glory of God.

That's the similarity with Messiaen, of course, but probably not with Boulez. And Villette manages to write a variety of repertoire for choir specifically. Repertoire that is easier to sing, for sure, and a few pieces that are highly complex, such as the later *Inviolata, Attende Domine*, or *O sacrum convivium*. These are tricky pieces by any standards. Whereas some of the other motets, such as *Panis angelicus*...are quite simple. Although it's his own voice, you can still point to Messiaen, whom he admired. Where do you hear that the most in Villette's *oeuvre*? Probably in his *O sacrum convivium*, which, of course, Messiaen wrote a version of.

Villette was clearly just not interested in twelve-tone music but quite interested in Messiaen. I think you see the link with Messiaen is also strong because of his religious devotion. Toward the end of his life, Villette stated that he was writing *à la gloire de Dieu*. Of course that was Messiaen's entire existence as well.

There's Villette's *Strophes polyphoniques pour le Vénéré Créateur* that the Holst Singers recorded. This shows the strong influence of the Roman Catholic Church and chant on Villette in a way that was a million miles from Boulez's influences, which were Berg and Schoenberg and a little bit of Stravinsky. I suppose you could say Villette's influences were more from Fauré and Duruflé.

In trying to assess Villette now, I think he was one

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of those cases where he was “not a prophet in his own land.” Messiaen and Boulez were absolutely respected in their own country. Particularly Boulez, whom we know as a master composer, educator, conductor, world-traveling musical messiah.

But Villette, even to this day, is little known. A few years ago I did a whole raft of Villette pieces with Accentus, a French choir in Paris. Nobody in the organization knew about his music. Why is that? Well, I don’t know. The “prophet in his own land” sentiment could be part of this. I think there’s also another issue in the three virtuoso pieces of which I’ve mentioned earlier; I mean, look, they’re incredibly difficult!

Although I stressed that the three difficult pieces are not for the faint hearted, everything else is for everybody. It’s very approachable without sounding patronizing. It’s very tuneful. It’s easy on the ear and has some glorious Parisian harmonies, which most of us really love and enjoy.

One thing I might just say that’s quite interesting about Villette and Boulez. I met Josette Villette [Pierre’s wife] in Aix-en-Provence, where she lived. We talked about her husband and about his music. Amongst the interesting things she said was that her husband didn’t really get on very well with Pierre Boulez. Villette stated there was some encounter where he was sitting on the street at the café, and Boulez passed by and seemingly ignored him.⁴

Now, I don’t know when this was, but his widow said this with a slight sadness. I think Boulez saw Villette as a bit of an “also-ran.” Villette had that view of himself as well. Villette had gone to Besançon to be a professor. He’d not gone to Paris like Boulez. He then went to Aix-en-Provence, which is a good place to work. But again, it’s not Paris, which was the big job.

We can certainly hear the influences of Messiaen and religious mysticism in Villette’s choral works. But I also hear influences of Poulenc and Milhaud in Villette’s harmonic language: his very disjunct, yet lyrical, melodies, and with jazz stylistic traits; there are added ninths and thirteenth chords, especially at ending cadences. Can you speak more about those types of influences and how they specifically serve the text of each motet?

Oh my goodness, yes. Villette pieces are famous for never ending on a consonant chord. His most famous piece, *Hymne à la Vierge*, ends with an F major with added just about everything! And *Inviolata* ends with two harmonies. Messiaen used a lot of bitonality. It’s possible that this bitonality in Villette comes from Messiaen.

These additive harmonies—where you’ve got two harmonies in the last chord—are found throughout his works, not just in *O sacrum convivium*. This [harmonic inventiveness] probably came out of the experimental environment and ideas of *Les Six*, which included Milhaud and Poulenc. But where I think Villette didn’t go in a way that Poulenc and Milhaud went was in the comedy, the theatre, the radical changes of dynamic, and of course the sort of sheer rhythmic drive that you can find in something like *Le Bœuf sur le toit* (Milhaud) or in Poulenc’s Organ Concerto or *Gloria*. Villette is just not into that same rhythmic drive. He’s much more into the harmonies—the jazzy harmonies—for their sensuality and giving time for them to vibrate, be heard, and to enjoy the luxuriance of those harmonies. As opposed to using those harmonies for rhythmic, violent, ecstatic clashes at great tempo.

I really hear that in Villette’s *Attende, Domine* with its affinities to Poulenc’s Lenten motets. It has a very short and disjunct melodic cell at the beginning that’s repeated, yet there is that Poulenc lyricism to it. Can you speak a bit more about that?

Poulenc, as you know, is an enormous great French god of a composer. The Lenten motets are late thirties from Poulenc. *Attende, Domine* is nearly fifty years later. Without any shadow of a doubt, Villette would have known every work of Poulenc. At the beginning of *At-*

tende, Domine... Villette uses a quasi-plain song with the devil's interval between G and C[♯]. I'd say [there are the hints] of the Poulenc that you've mentioned of his motets.

The greater influence on Villette, in my view, is Debussy and Ravel with their whole-tone scales and chromaticism [which Poulenc would later use.] Let's consider the most obvious piece of Debussy, *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. Villette and Debussy are inhabiting a similar sound; they're inhabiting that pre-Messiaen world of whole-tone scales of Debussy and Ravel. Boulez goes somewhere completely AWOL, toward Schoenberg. Villette looks back over this tradition, which is really Duruflé, Debussy, Ravel, and Poulenc.

Let's move on to another of Villette's motets, *O Magnum mysterium*. It is a great example of how a composer understands the theology and mystery of the nativity. It is also very similar to Poulenc's motet of the same name. Can you speak more about how Villette espouses this Catholic theology/mysticism within his works, especially this particular motet?

It's interesting in how it starts out—simply, as if it's almost a homage to the Poulenc. [The Villette motet] starts off with one voice, very simply. It's a similar tempo to Poulenc at the beginning, with the same sort of feel. But here's the difference. Somebody once said that Poulenc was Stravinsky with sugar. I would say Villette was more Fauré and Duruflé with added sugar. Poulenc's *O magnum mysterium* has an austerity about it. Yes, there's a lovely melody, but it's pretty much unrelenting four-part harmony. It's very economical; it's just three parts at the beginning before the sopranos come in, etc. And the Poulenc is much more a bass harmony, say, at the start with something floating over the top, which keeps coming back. The Poulenc is more concise.

What we hear with the Villette is that he's wearing his heart on his sleeve and just letting it all pour out. There's less discipline [than in the Poulenc]. It's much more fluid and freer in the way he's trying to get the spiritual effect out of this text.

I believe at this point, you're the only person to have recorded Villette's *Inviolata*, which is a very expansive, highly chromatic double choir motet (see Figure 1 on the next page). This piece represents Villette at his most experimental. Beyond the obvious technical challenges, were there other aspects of this motet that provided a specific challenge to you and your group?

Yes, the number of singers is quite critical to make it work. But I tell you what was really the hardest thing. Although this is music composed for choruses, it's definitely music conceived at the keyboard. You could imagine Villette playing a G major chord with a sustaining pedal, holding the G major chord in the left hand. And then the right hand, with the left-hand chord sustained with the pedal, he dabbed around with other chords. I'm pretty sure that he was trying to get these bitonal ideas together on a keyboard.

It's just simply hard to get the intonation sorted. What's happening is that the vertical is being created all the time by these piano chords. It's blisteringly difficult to sing it and to know at any given moment what your role is in the chord as a singer. In other words, when you're moving every harmony on a quaver, on an eighth, and a new vertical harmony is created. Does it just work if everybody sings the same dynamic for their whole phrase? No, it doesn't. Because sometimes you might be arriving at a G major chord with all those additives, and somebody might have an E, and somebody might have an F[♯], and somebody may have a D.

Now, where is the E? Where's the F[♯]? Where is the A? Where are they in the chord? Where's the spacing? You know, it's the oldest thing in the hills in terms of how you balance the technical perfection of any chord, whether it be in an orchestra or a choir.

So, the specific challenges of *Inviolata* are how you create these vertical harmonies where it all “zings.” And the answer is the balance of different parts. Of course, this is getting into the technical questions of everybody singing the same vowels, and the turning of the vowels, and the diphthongs, and all of that technical stuff that makes a chord zing.

Now, to talk about that in relation Poulenc, which is similar to Villette. I talk about Poulenc intonation—Poulenc tuning—how Poulenc sat at the keyboard and

Inviolata

Source: 6^e av

Largo (♩.: 48/52 av)

1^{re} sopranos
p In-vi-o-la-ta in-te gra et Cas-ta es ma-ri-a

2^e sopranos
p In-vi-o-la-ta in-te gra et Cas-ta es ma-ri-a

1^{er} altos
p In-vi-o-la-ta in-te gra et Cas-ta es ma-ri-a

2^e altos
p In-vi-o-la-ta in-te gra et Cas-ta es ma-ri-a

1^{er} tenors
p In-vi-o-la-ta in-te gra et Cas-ta es ma-ri-a

2^e tenors
p In-vi-o-la-ta in-te gra et Cas-ta es ma-ri-a

1^{er} Basses
p In-vi-o-la-ta in-te gra et Cas-ta es ma-ri-a

2^e Basses
p In-vi-o-la-ta in-te gra et Cas-ta es ma-ri-a

Deuxième Chœur (ad libitum)
p ma-ri-a, ma-ri-a

Reduction des Vix
p

pour la répétition seulement

Figure 1. *Inviolata* manuscript facsimile.



jammed these fantastic chords. Is it an equal temperament when we're doing them in Villette or Poulenc? Or is it in what I sometimes call Poulenc temperament? Which would then resonate through into Villette temperament. How, without equal temperament, do you make certain harmonies zing by doing various things to different notes? And how do those notes zing out of the context of vowels, with words...how do you tweak it [to make the vertical harmonies zing]?

I always say that Poulenc "sounds" easier than it looks on the page. When we see the score and the melody and harmony on the page, our brains "freeze" rather than just trusting the melodic line.

Yes, you're absolutely right. If you're looking at, for instance, Poulenc's *Figure humaine*, which is ferocious in its angularity, this is true. Come to think of it, in the four Lenten motets, I've done a little bit of judicious swapping of parts in some places, which we're allowed to do as conductors if we're being a bit naughty.

It's all the same notes, but you find that sometimes there could be an alto singing a baritone bit in a certain place, and just by little tweaking [of parts] you can make it slightly easier to sing. I can't remember whether I tweaked anything with Villette's pieces. One does this with great hesitation, but sometimes something keeps bugging you, and you can't get it balanced or in tune. You can slightly reinforce a part or put a few more voices on it. There are ways around it.

What are your top three French language choral works that conductors should be programming more with their choirs?

I mean, do we mention Poulenc or Duruflé? Not really. They are so well known. So, we're probably looking at Villette and Milhaud as two composers worth investigating who are not often performed. There's a rather beautiful piece, *Le deux cites*. There's also *Le Promesse de Dieu*, which Milhaud wrote in America, actually. Obviously, there's André Jolivet and Daniel Jean-Yves Lesur, but that's much more avant-garde; they're not for the faint-hearted. You need a very good choir to do that.

If you said to me, who are my favorites? It's an absolute no-brainer. To me, Poulenc is one of the greatest composers to have walked this earth. And I love virtually every note he wrote. If I had to choose a single piece of Poulenc choral music, I would choose the *Gloria*, which seems to have Poulenc absolutely in a nutshell. And the other composer is Duruflé, whose *Requiem*, for me, is unsurpassed.

You have conducted and recorded a plethora of literature. Are there any pieces that remain on your conductor bucket list?

There are so many, I don't even want to tell you what they are; but whether in this life I have a chance to conduct them, who knows? Just too many things. 

NOTES

¹ Joshua Barone, "Pierre Boulez Was a Titan of 20th-Century Music. What About Now?: Critic's Notebook," *The New York Times*, April 8, 2025; "Did a Single Generation Ruin Modern Music for Everyone Else?: Critic's Notebook," *The New York Times*, October 7, 2025.

² Barone, "Pierre Boulez."

³ "Winchester Sings"—a documentary on the Winchester Cathedral Choir Tour of the USA in 1979," posted December 19, 2024, by Winchester Cathedral, YouTube, 53 min., 25 sec., <http://youtube.com/watch?v=uLv4p6u9wJg>.

⁴ Barone provides a similar anecdote illustrating Boulez's abrasive personality. "Because Boulez was so powerful, his severity could be poison for any artist who didn't adhere to his worldview...[Esa-Pekka] Salonen recalled watching Boulez virtually end the career of a composer after hearing his work..." Barone, "Pierre Boulez."