

FAMILLE CHARLES KOECHLIN



Charles Koechlin— unknown master of the unaccompanied flute

by JEMIMA BARNES

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A complex, fascinating, independent spirit. For all his unevenness he was truly one of the most fiercely original musical thinkers of the twentieth century.

FENWICK SMITH (1949–2017)

Principal Flute, Boston Symphony Orchestra

Charles Koechlin was a French composer who has largely been forgotten by musical society, despite creating some of the most beautiful and creative music of the early 20th century. According to the late Professor Wilfred Mellor, “He was among the very select number of contemporary composers who really matter.” His work spans a range of styles and instruments, and his copious writings for the flute are some of the most varied and ingenious available to flautists. Although much of his work remains unpublished and recordings are few and far between, there is an unprecedented amount of extraordinary unaccompanied flute music, as well as a variety of unique and beautiful chamber music featuring the instrument. If his music is played, discussed and recorded, this neglected genius will emerge from obscurity and finally get the recognition he deserves.

LIFE AND WORK

Born in 1867 into a prominent Alsatian family, Charles Koechlin was never intended to be a composer. Despite his interest in music, his family wanted him to become an engineer, so, in 1887, he enrolled in the prestigious *École Polytechnique*, although his time there was disrupted by a bout of tuberculosis and recovery time spent in North Africa. After repeating his first year, he graduated 127th in his class and convinced his family to let him study at the Paris Conservatoire. There he discovered his calling as a composer, studying with many prominent contemporary musicians and composers, including Fauré, Massenet, and Taudou, and their influences can clearly be seen in some of his early works such as *Au Loin* and *En Rêve*, which are Romantic and Impressionist in style.

Koechlin married Suzanne Pierrard in 1903, and they had five children. He took freelance work as a composer and teacher, and throughout his life taught and influenced composers like Poulenc, Sauguet and Darius Milhaud; the latter stated that he learned more from Koechlin than any other teacher.

He travelled to the US for the first time in 1918 as part of a group of creatives and intellectuals. Koechlin was captivated by America, particularly Hollywood, and returned three more times in 1928, 1929, and 1937. Here he first met his student Katherine

Murphy Uner, and they shared a lifelong bond and their correspondence gives much insight into his personality and life. They collaborated on several compositions, like *The Bride of a God*, and she helped publicise his music in the US.

Throughout his life, Koechlin was a mystical, spiritual figure. Music critic Adrian Corleoni describes his appearance and personality, “His noble and handsome face, surrounded by that flowing beard which caught everyone’s eye, crowned by hair which enveloped him like celestial clouds—these are characteristics that are generally attributed to sages. These exterior signs reflected the interior man well. He was a wise man; in reality, a profoundly human sage—passionate (but the master of his passions), radiant, frank, fiercely in love with freedom and independence, but at the same time enamoured of discipline and strictness.” A self-identifying pan-theist, Koechlin was interested in the Greek gods, Hinduism, and the spiritual nature of religion as opposed to the liturgical aspects. His other hobbies and interests were incredibly varied, including mountaineering, astronomy, photography, the sciences, socialism, cinematography and literature.

Although a respected member of the French musical scene, Koechlin was unable to secure a permanent salaried teaching post at a conservatoire, and as the years went on, retreated further into composition. He allegedly once said, “The artist needs an ivory tower, not as an escape from the world, but as a place where he can view the world and be himself. This tower is for the artist like a lighthouse shining out across the world.”

Despite all his worldly wisdom and awareness of science and technology, Koechlin was extremely absent-minded, and this only increased as he got older and retreated from society. Madeleine Milhaud, wife of his friend and mentee Darius Milhaud, said “Nothing practical occurred to Koechlin—he didn’t understand the organisation of things”. This may explain why his music was hardly published or performed in his lifetime, as he was more concerned with composition than promotion.

Koechlin died in 1950, aged 83, in his home in the Southeast of France. He had been composing and teaching for most of his life and left an imprint on music through his impact on other composers, even if the majority of his own work was unpublished.

MUSICAL STYLE

Koechlin’s music features a delightfully eclectic blend of musical styles and was clearly influenced by changing trends in contemporary music throughout his long career as a composer. In his early works, inspiration from Fauré and the popular “Impressionistic” style can be clearly seen. Other pieces draw on Baroque and Romantic styles as well as neoclassicism and serialism.

He also composed for more unusual instruments, such as the *ondes Martenot* (an early electronic instrument invented in 1928), and hunting horn, which he played himself, often combining them with more common instruments in unexpected but beautiful ways. Not bound by the traditional rules of arrangement, he was able to unlock rare potential and beauty. »



Le Bruissement des Feuilles from the second book of *Les Chants de Nectaire*.

Koechlin's obsessive nature becomes clear in the gargantuan undertaking of his *Jungle Book* cycle of symphonic poems, composed after reading Rudyard Kipling's classic stories, in which he makes use of avant garde ideas like the twelve-tone technique, albeit in a faintly satirical way. This obsessive nature is perhaps best demonstrated in his infatuation with actress Lillian Harvey. He was an avid cinema-goer, and when he encountered Lillian Harvey on screen, he was instantly fascinated. Although they never met, Koechlin wrote hundreds of fan letters and a multitude of pieces dedicated to her, including new music for her films and scores for imaginary scenes starring Harvey and himself! His love of cinema can perhaps be heard best in the *Seven Stars Symphony*, a vast orchestral piece with seven movements, each dedicated to a specific Hollywood star, including Greta Garbo, Charlie Chaplin and, of course, Lillian Harvey. This symphony shows the incredible variation of his musical understanding, as each movement is stylistically distinctive and perfectly captures the on-screen personality of each celebrity.

An intensely prolific composer, Koechlin's complete list of opus numbers totals 225, although he never rejected an idea, meaning that some incomplete works mar the brilliance of more polished pieces. Throughout his catalogue, despite the variations in style and form in his pieces, Koechlin's absolute sincerity and love for music shine through.

KOECHLIN'S WORKS FOR FLUTE

Recently, one of the 14 pieces for flute and piano from opus 157b was included on the ABRSM syllabus, and this marks what is hopefully the start of Koechlin's posthumous journey to recognition. These pieces were originally written for unaccompanied flute as opus 157, with the piano part added later as op. 157b. Another notable opus for unaccompanied flute is op. 184, which contains three Sonatines. Although Koechlin did not personally play the flute, he wrote many pieces for renowned flautist Jan Merry, who became a lifelong friend. His writing for the flute is wonderfully idiomatic and shows a great and nuanced understanding of the instrument, almost as if he played himself.

Koechlin also wrote chamber music featuring the flute, often in atypical groupings. Pieces include the Sonata for flute and piano, a Sonata for 2 flutes, *Divertissement* for 3 flutes (including alto), a trio for flute, clarinet and bassoon, and a *Modal Sonatine* for flute and clarinet. Other works for larger chamber groups

include two quintets, *Primavera* for flute, harp and string trio, *Suite en Quatuors* for flute, piano, violin and viola, and *Sonate à Sept* for flute, oboe, harp and string quartet. Koechlin also wrote an *Epitaph for Jean Harlow* for flute, alto saxophone, and piano, and several waltzes dedicated to Ginger Rogers. More famously, the *Lilian Albums*, two books filled with pieces inspired by his muse Harvey, are some of his best chamber music. In this series, Koechlin wrote for almost every conceivable combination of flute, piccolo, piano, clarinet, soprano, harpsichord and ondes Martenot. These tender and emotional pieces are full of delicate melodies and unusual but exquisite sounds, especially the *Voyage Chimerique* from the *Lilian Albums*, of which Robert Orledge, Koechlin's official biographer, writes "A most extraordinary hallucinatory journey". This piece for flute and piano, written as part of Koechlin's extensive re-scoring of Harvey's films, was designed to accompany a dream sequence where Harvey's character travelled through bizarre fantasy lands and he illustrated this beautifully through unusual harmonies and tonality, combining the sounds and ranges of flute and piano to create an otherworldly, ethereal atmosphere.

Koechlin's love of monody is never clearer than in his works for unaccompanied flute. He creates endless variety with only a single line of melody and employs the full range and dynamic spectrum of the flute effortlessly. He was not limited to the standard flute, as proven in the *Stèle Funéraire*, one of his final pieces from 1950 dedicated to his friend Paul Dommel, which is written for a single player on flute, piccolo and alto flute. Robert Orledge is of the opinion that the *Stèle Funéraire* is "perhaps the zenith of his monodic achievement."

Koechlin's biggest undertaking for the flute is easily the *Chants de Nectaire* (opus 198–200), a series of 96 unaccompanied pieces ranging in length from 40 seconds to around 4 minutes, inspired by the character of the flute player and sage "Nectaire" in Anatole France's novel *La Revolté des Anges*, a character that Koechlin could identify with. Anatole France writes of Nectaire's playing: "rich melodies over which trills shone like diamonds and pearls on velvet. The music was full of grace and audacity, one could hear all at once the sound of nightingales and muses: all of nature and all of mankind", and this encapsulates the brilliance and creativity of this opus.

Composed during a four-month burst of activity in 1945 when Koechlin was around 75, the pieces are grouped into three books

of 32 entitled *Après la Revolte des Anges*, *In the Ancient Forest*, and *Prayers, Processions, and Dances for familiar Gods* and showcase solo flute in a way that is not replicated by any other composer.

The *Chants de Nectaire* create beautiful and varying soundscapes, each piece is stylistically individual and evocative of the mood described in the title. Koechlin's inspiration ranges from Greek Mythology, including *Silène, Pour le Cortège de Dionysos, Tityre remercie les Dieux, Jeux de Naiades*; to the sea, with titles such as *Souffles de printemps sur la mer, Clair de lune sur la mer, Brise fraîche du matin sur la mer*; and philosophy with meditations like *Birth of Life, Meditation on Human Suffering, Energy for Life, The tranquil clarity of Intelligence . . . , . . .crippled by the arrows of Ignorance and Stupidity*. In this series, Koechlin also gives a rare emotional depth to the flute, with pieces such as *Tenderness, Love, Pity* and *For Suffering Souls*. He also explores the spiritual side of the instrument through a series of prayers and cortèges, *Prayers: for curing and healing, for children, orphans, for the safe return of a husband from war, for a funeral, for the wise of the forest, to the Gods who protect the home, for the forefathers*, found in the third book.

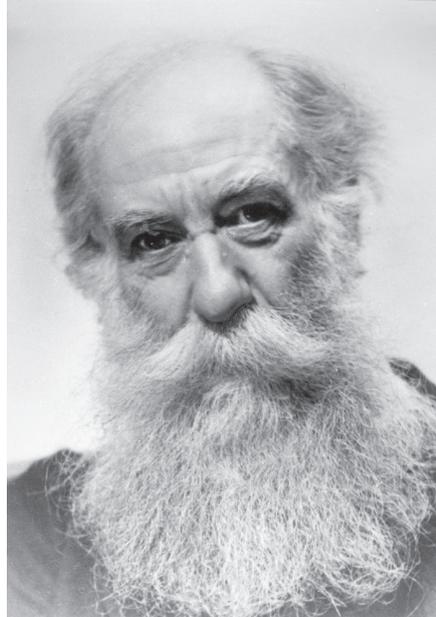
Koechlin was very particular about the performance directions in his work, dictating exactly when to breathe, specifying precise dynamic levels and even quantifying the lengths of pauses. In contrast, the majority of the pieces have no bar lines, meaning that the performer is able to be flexible with the timing, retaining control despite Koechlin's diligent instructions. Nicola Woodward, who has recently recorded the complete *Chants de Nectaire*, says of the series, "It is hard to believe that Koechlin was not himself a flautist. His writing is so natural—although meticulous in every aspect of performance direction there is a wonderful feeling of freedom—as if improvising. With very few exceptions the 96 pieces are structural gems; pastoral, intimate, grand, fantastic, mystical and mythical. Each piece is a unique sound world. Koechlin was unafraid to tackle deep and spiritual themes."

French flautist Pierre-Yves Artaud described the *Chants de Nectaire* as "One of [the] greatest landmarks in terms of quantity—over three hours of music, but above all in quality". Koechlin's personal friend, flautist Jan Merry, wrote to Suzanne Koechlin in 1950, shortly after Koechlin's death, that his writing for flute was full of "This restrained emotion, always dignified, very French; without exaggeration, without affectation—how directly it goes to the heart and to the hearts of those who listen!"



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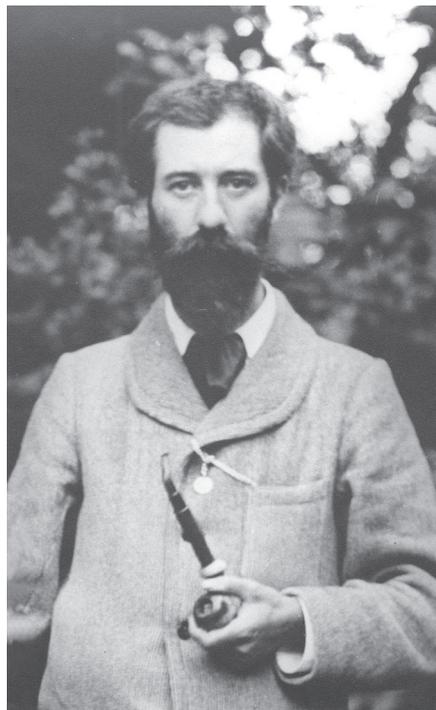
Koechlin's house at Canadel. The view over the sea was one of the sources of inspiration for *Les Chants de Nectaire*.



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