



Ralph van Raat



Photo: Annelies van der Vegt

Pianist and musicologist Ralph van Raat studied the piano with Ton Hartsuiker and Willem Brons at the Conservatory of Amsterdam and Musicology at the University of Amsterdam. He concluded both studies with distinction in 2002 and 2003. Van Raat also studied with Claude Helffer (Paris), Liisa Pohjola (Helsinki), Ursula Oppens at Chicago's Northwestern University and Pierre-Laurent Aimard at the Musikhochschule in Cologne. He has won, among other awards, Second Prize and Donemus-Prize (for Contemporary Music) of the Princess Christina Competition (1995); Stipend-Prize Darmstadt during the Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik in Darmstadt (1998); First Prize of the International Gaudeamus Interpreters Competition (1999); Philip Morris Arts Award (2003); Elisabeth Everts Prize (2005); a Borletti-Buitoni Fellowship (2005); VSCD Classical Music Prize (2005), the Fortis MeesPierson Award of the Concertgebouw, Amsterdam (2006) and the Classics Prize of the Dutch radio and television broadcaster NTR (2010). He appears as a recitalist and as a soloist with orchestras in Europe, the Middle-East, Asia and in the United States. Ralph van Raat has been a Steinway Artist since 2003.

Charles KOECHLIN

Les heures persanes

Ralph van Raat, Piano



Charles Koechlin (1867-1950)

Les heures persanes

During the night he was trying to unravel the mysteries of the universe, gazing at the stars through his telescope. By day he not only composed fanatically, but also taught composition and orchestration to his pupils, including Francis Poulenc, Germaine Tailleferre and Cole Porter. He wrote books on music theory and biographies of other composers, carefully studying their works, and he admired that new technical miracle, the cinema. Last but not least, during both day and night, he was reading avidly, with a preference for books of mythology and travel diaries, particularly those of unknown and distant lands. It was all this that laid the foundations for Charles Koechlin's masterpiece, *Les heures persanes*, Op. 65 (The Persian Hours) (1916-1919).

Koechlin enrolled as a student at the Paris Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique in 1890, where his most notable teachers were Jules Massenet and Gabriel Fauré, the latter, in his own words, to whom he owed everything. Koechlin quickly attracted notice for his talent in orchestration, and was asked by Fauré to orchestrate several of his works, including parts of *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Between 1890 and 1908, during and after completing his studies, Koechlin wrote mainly vocal and symphonic music, some of which already exhibited impressionistic tendencies. After 1908, however, things changed: '...but from the day when I said to myself: *eh bien, tant pis! I'll write what I want to, and modulate as I like, provided I don't end in the original key – the day on which I found my own way, everything was all right.*' Inspired greatly by literature and mythology, Koechlin felt that musical form should not be dictated solely through tradition only, but that each musical scenario demanded its own appropriate form. The same was true for his harmonic approach: depending on the desired expressive qualities of the music, Koechlin felt the need to expand his traditional harmonic language to create the evocative sound world he wished for. As a result of this insight, his musical language soon started eclectically to embody traditional functional harmony, impressionism, free atonality and even quasi-twelve-tone writing.

An exceptionally large number of chamber and orchestral works followed, to the great admiration of his fellow-composers such as Duparc, Fauré, Roussel, Satie, Debussy, Milhaud and Ravel, but with less understanding from his audiences. Arguably, the greatest and most typical of Koechlin's achievements as a composer are his large-scale orchestral cycle *Le livre de la jungle* and *Les heures persanes*.

The inspiration for *Les heures persanes* came mainly from the book *Vers Ispahan*, a diary by Pierre Loti of a long journey through the former Iran. This evocative literary work immediately fired Koechlin's vivid imagination, and he set out to reproduce the atmosphere of the blazing sun, ornamental architecture, starry nights and fragrant incense through this piano cycle in sixteen movements. It was not his objective to copy oriental music literally, but he sought merely to convey general aspects of oriental culture.

To enhance the concept of a journey, 'un voyage imaginaire', the individual pieces depict different times of the day, encompassing two and a half days all together. The first three pieces form a half-day. Starting with a siesta in the afternoon in preparation for the long journey ahead, *I. Sieste, avant le départ* (Siesta, before the departure), a dream of the travelling caravan follows, *II. La caravane – rêve, pendant la sieste* (The caravan, dream during the siesta). After the traveller awakens in the dark, the ascent of the dangerous and mysterious hills starts ominously, *III. L'escalade obscure* (The dark ascent). The five following movements describe the first full day: the beautiful sparks of the first rays of sun in the morning, *IV. Matin frais, dans la haute vallée* (Fresh morning, in the high valley); the first glimpses of human presence in a town, *V. En vue de la ville* (In view of the town); arrival at this busy place, characterized by quick-paced transformations of flashing harmony, *VI. A travers les rues* (Through the streets); settling down for an evening song, *VII. Chant du soir* (Evening song), and watching the moonlight on the terraces, *VIII. Clair de lune*

sur les terrasses (Moonlight on the terraces) before going to sleep.

The next day starts with a morning serenade, which is a tribute to Ravel, *IX. Aubade*. This is followed by a moment contemplating the sight of roses in the midday sun, *X. Roses au soleil de midi* (Roses in the midday sun), and sheltering from its heat in the shade near a cooling fountain, *X. À l'Ombre, près de la fontaine de marbre* (In the shade, near a marble fountain); the latter forms a clear classical-romantic tribute to Koechlin's teacher Fauré. The day ends with the peace of sunset behind the hills, *XIII. Les collines, au coucher de soleil* (The hills, at sunset).

The quiet magic of an oriental evening brings the musical journey to a close: the listener experiences the evening peace at a cemetery, *XV. La paix du soir au cimetière* (The peace of evening in the cemetery), a remarkable foreshadowing of Messiaen's *Et expecto resurrectionem mortuorum*, and the excitingly virtuosic but mystical gestures of dervishes in the night, preceding a moonlit, deserted square, *XVI. Derviches dans la nuit* (Dervishes in the night). The two additional movements, the semi-twelve tone structure and perfect symmetries of *XII. Arabesques*, and the Debussyan *Cathédrale Engloutie*-like *XIV. Le conteur* (The storyteller) serve as evocative interludes. The first gives the listener an image of the symmetrical ornamentation of the oriental town buildings; the second is an impression of the traditional fairy-tales from *A Thousand and One Nights*, describing *Le pêcheur et le génie* (The fisherman and the genie), the enchanted palace, a dance of the young boys and moonlight on the gardens.

Since Koechlin had orchestrated Debussy's *Khamma* to the utmost satisfaction of its notoriously critical composer three years before commencing *Les heures persanes*, there are obvious relationships to be heard between this piano cycle and Debussy's works. However, he went much further here harmonically than his French colleague had ever attempted: polytonality (music in different keys at the same time) and atonality (music without a tonal centre) give a strikingly advanced musical expression to the scents and colours of far lands and new

cultures. The piano writing of *Les heures persanes* was also completely new in its time. Koechlin's orchestral approach is obvious with regard to the complexity of its musical layers. Most of the time, the music is notated on three staves. The colouristic chords are often so large and orchestrally conceived that they need careful consideration about how and when to break them, without disturbing the flow or articulation. It is a telling fact that Koechlin decided to orchestrate the original piano work in 1921.

Although there is a common tendency in the rare performances of the work to translate its mystical qualities by the use of very slow and metrically free tempos, it should not be forgotten that Koechlin took Bach and Fauré as his greatest musical inspirations, and thus had developed a keen ear for structure (independent of form) and clarity, which is more classical than impressionist. Quoting Koechlin: 'in spite of my admiration for Debussy, it cannot be said that I am a Debussyist. My style of writing and thought were different. [...] They showed a feeling – a need for rhythm and a contrapuntal style of writing in which the spirit of the fugue is never far away.' As such, the ongoing flow and continuity of both horizontal and vertical melodic lines seems at least as important as the often already notated rhythmical flexibility. The often slow tempo indications merely seem to convey an inner peace of mind, rather than suggesting stretching out in time all the closely related musical elements.

Charles Koechlin always remained a highly respected and admired figure during his lifetime. It was not until a few decades ago, however, that the immense beauty and genius of his music was discovered by a larger audience. Today, one could possibly describe the composer as a post-modernist *avant-la-lettre*, with his mind typically open to every musical style or technique. Nevertheless, despite his eclecticism, the characteristic and genuine sound of Koechlin is found in all his works: the sound of craftsmanship, of artistry, and of the most creative human imagination.

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