

CD Review

By Dean Frick
San Francisco, California

Charles Koechlin *Works for Bassoon*

Eckart Hubner, Bassoon

Inge-Susann Romhild, Piano

SWF-Sinfonieorchester, Roland Bader, conductor
CPO 999 434-2 Made in Germany

Charles Koechlin and the bassoon have a lot in common. Both have been misunderstood and neglected throughout their histories. In fact, many of Koechlin's works including those represented here remained unpublished for many years.

The major work on this disc is Koechlin's *Silhouettes de Comedie*, op. 193, twelve pieces for bassoon and orchestra reflect Koechlin's inspiration in the theatre and literature. Characters from a number of different works by Moliere (Geronte, Clitandre, Arnolphe Agnes), from the *Commedia dell' Arte* (Colombine Arlequin), and from popular dramas (Monsieur Prud'home after Henri Montier's famous *Bourgeois Gentlemen* and *Les deux Orphelins* by Adolphe d'Ennery and Eugene Cormon) appear in twelve short movements of one to five minutes each. The most important literary reference here is to Theophile Gautier's *Le Capitaine Fracasse*.

It is not known whether Koechlin intended the pieces forming *Silhouettes* to be performed together since he did not leave behind any written notes to his work. Koechlin demonstrates a remarkable knowledge of the bassoon. *Silhouettes* exploits the tonal character of every register of the instrument and places the highest demands on the soloist. Some of what he composed even borders on the limits of playability. The unusually high tessitura is a challenge in its own right.

Bassoonist **Eckart Hubner** whizzes his way through this endurance test of a score lasting slightly over 36 minutes and makes it sound like the magic it is intended to represent. Hubner makes what seems nearly impossible sound effortless.

Silhouettes demonstrates Koechlin's amazing skills as an orchestrator. He wrote his comprehensive *Traite de l' Orchestration* (1935/43). Famous composers of his time such as Faure (*Pelleas et Melisande Suite*), Debussy (*Khamma Ballet*), and Cole Porter (*Within the Quota Ballet*) had him orchestrate their works.

His treatment of the gigantic orchestra using instruments such as contrabass clarinet, oboe d'amore, saxophones and a full battery of percussion is worthy of admiration and wonder. Every movement has a different instrumentation.

One might think that placing a solo bassoonist before such large orchestrations would create major balance problems, but the instrumentation is generally of such transparency that the soloist is given free rein for the demonstration of his talent.

The SWF-Sinfonieorchester under the direction of Roland Bader provide backup to Hubner. In spite of its complexities, *Silhouettes* is a joy to hear. Few works in the bassoon and orchestra literature showcase the bassoon in so many different settings.

A lot of what he wrote is lyric poetry, offset by whimsical boisterousness. *Silhouettes* deserves an honorable place in the bassoon and orchestra literature, but I fear the obstacles of its technical demands and large orchestrations will prevent it from often being performed in its entirety as twelve pieces.

The premiere of *Silhouettes de Comedie* took place on February 18, 1998 in a concert by the Bern Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Peter Gulke and with the soloist **Klaus Thunemann**.

Hubner is joined by pianist Inge-Susann Romhild in the sombre *Trois Pieces* Op. 34, composed between 1898 and 1907 and thus stands at the beginning of Koechlin's contributions to chamber music. Another early piece, and probably the most well known on the disc is the 1919 *Sonata*, op. 71 in three movements. Its early composition date reflects its diatonic lyricism.

These two pieces receive solid performances by both artists, although I would have preferred that Hubner take a little more time with the opening cantabile theme in the first movement of the sonata.

It is refreshing to hear these under exploited bassoon works by a true master so well performed. The engineering and sound quality are also first rate. I highly recommend this disc.

Rating: 3 crows



About the Author ...

Dean Frick earned BA, BME, and MA degrees from Michigan State University where he studied bassoon with **Dr. Edgar L. Kirk** and clarinet with Frank Ell. He currently free lances in the San Francisco Bay area.