

Catherine Urner, Charles Koechlin and *The Bride of God* Catherine Urner, Charles Koechlin et *The Bride of God*

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Résumé de l'article

Prenant appui sur des travaux récents de Barbara Urner Johnson et de Robert Orledge, cet article se propose d'examiner la relation pédagogique et les collaborations musicales entre le compositeur français Charles Koechlin et son élève et amante américaine, Catherine Urner. Se concentrant sur les manuscrits inédits de l'une de leurs plus substantielles collaborations musicales, le poème symphonique *The Bride of God* (1924-1929), cet article trace la chronologie de la composition de l'oeuvre, décrit sa structure narrative, et suggère que l'apport d'Urner a été plus important que ce qui a été proposé jusqu'à présent. Cet article décrit aussi des éléments du style compositionnel d'Urner et montre que même si elle avait été influencée par Koechlin durant les années 1920, elle a exploré d'autres pistes compositionnelles après leur rupture. En somme, cet article offre une esquisse préliminaire de la trajectoire musicale d'Urner durant les années 1920 et 1930 ainsi que du rôle important de Koechlin dans le développement de celle-ci.

**Catherine Urner,
Charles Koechlin and
*The Bride of God***

Christopher Moore (University of Ottawa)

In many written accounts of French musical life during the 1920s, the influence of America looms large. And rightly so. Varèse's emigration to New York City, Milhaud and Auric's aesthetic and compositional interest in jazz, Ravel's integration of American popular music idioms in works like *L'enfant et les sortilèges* (1919-1925) and the *Sonate pour violon* (1922-1927), Cocteau's posing as a jazz drummer at the Boeuf sur le Toit, and the presence of Americans like Gerswhin, Copland, Antheil (or Josephine Baker and Sidney Bechet) within Parisian musical life all speak to the reconfiguration of cultural borders and the reconceptualization of a 1920s transatlantic space that was increasingly marked by a commerce in musical sounds and ideas (Nichols 2002; Guerpin 2015; Fry 2014). The name of French composer Charles Koechlin does not often emerge in this narrative. Koechlin, of an older generation and born only five years after Debussy, was, throughout the 1920s, much less sympathetic to America's most conspicuous musical import—jazz—and denounced those American aesthetic and cultural impulses (citing mechanization, bourgeois conformity, and commercialism) which he felt were at odds with the humanist ideals that would continue to guide him throughout his long career (Moore 2014, 89-101).

Unlike many of his French colleagues, however, Koechlin was intimately familiar with America during the interwar period, having visited the U.S. for considerable stretches of time on four separate occasions. His first visit took place in 1918 as a member of an official delegation headed by Theodore Reinach and sponsored by the French State with the mandate to counter German propaganda and vouch for the moral, intellectual and artistic strength of the French in the wake of the First World War. Koechlin was a thoughtful observer of American life during this and subsequent visits, commenting in diaries and sketchbooks on everything from immigration procedures to billboards to the general

availability of central heating. His reactions to this and much more were not always positive: he generally frowned upon American cultural life and its music, denouncing both American popular music as well as what he knew of its avant-garde. It was thus not to American modernism (skyscrapers, utilitarianism, commercial values and the like) that Koechlin was drawn during these visits, but rather to the beauty of American libraries and university campuses, as well as the architecture of American homes, especially in California, where he photographed an entire series of houses in and around Berkeley. Koechlin viewed these structures and institutions as tangible signs and safeguards that European aesthetic and intellectual ideals had a foothold on American soil. Indeed, Koechlin favoured in America precisely that which resembled the things he cherished at home. France remained the focal point through which his gaze evaluated the rest of the world. Although he was certainly critical of certain social, aesthetic and political realities in his own country, his view of America and the other countries he visited was couched in the unspoken certitude that France was a nation superior to all others in terms of its musical, artistic and literary culture.¹

Only one aspect of American life seems to have truly competed with French superiority, and it was not a negligible one: the beauty of American women. As early as 1918 Koechlin had fallen under their spell. Following a visit to Tulane University in New Orleans, he penned a small portrait entitled "The Amazons of Newcomb College" and upon returning to France in early 1919 he planned an essay entitled "American Silhouettes." Reflecting on this, Koechlin confided to his diary:

To see the women of a country is like seeing the country itself. Here especially they are the one and only charm. In the past people thought I was a puritan and (due to unfamiliarity with the subject) I blushed if I was asked about the women of a particular country. Today I have

¹ See Koechlin's "Étude sur l'Amérique," Fonds Charles Koechlin, Médiathèque musicale Mahler, Paris.

lost the ability to blush; I share my impressions of my trip.²

This interest would have important consequences for the composer. During his first American tour, Koechlin met William J. McCoy, professor of harmony at the University of California at Berkeley. On McCoy's recommendation, in 1921 Koechlin began giving lessons to Catherine Urner, a former student of McCoy's who had been awarded the inaugural George Ladd Prix de Paris administered by the University.³ Koechlin and Urner's complex relationship has been described in detail by Barbara Urner Johnson, who, through an examination of their correspondence, has revealed that by 1927 the two had become romantically entangled in a love affair that brought them back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean. It was thanks to Urner's organizational initiatives, fuelled by their deeply felt bond, that Koechlin travelled again to America in 1927, 1929 and 1937 where he primarily taught and gave lectures in the Berkeley area. Urner, on the other hand, returned to France for further instruction with Koechlin between 1924 and 1925 and then again between 1929 and 1933 when she lived with the Koechlin family in Paris in what was, judging from the letters between her, Koechlin and Koechlin's wife, Suzanne, a loving yet at times complicated arrangement (Urner Johnson 2003).

Urner and Koechlin's relationship offers a fascinating example of 1920s transatlantic musical communication, and one situated outside of the familiar Paris – New York – Boston – Chicago cultural axis. Centered around Berkeley and Paris, Urner and Koechlin's transatlantic travels and encounters prompted them both to confront alternate cultural realities that impacted their work and professional trajectories in unique and substantial ways. For Koechlin, America was viewed as a land that could benefit from the importation of European and specifically French cultural influence. His visits to America allowed him to pursue that mandate and to proselytize in favour of the French musical school and its traditions. Although contact with Urner would profoundly affect his personal life, Koechlin's exposure to America did not fundamentally alter his aesthetic commitments; rather, if anything, it solidified and confirmed his attachment to French artistic traditions.

For Urner, during her mentorship under Koechlin, she became a colonized subject, readily adopting his lessons and yielding to his influence while all the same struggling

to impose a cultural model based on them in her homeland. Her contact with Koechlin also encouraged her to tacitly defy American expectations with regards to the involvement of women in modernist composition. As Carol Oja has described, within East Coast circles, women's engagement with modern music was most frequently articulated through their promotion efforts, whether as commissioning patrons or organizers of musical events. In an attempt to downplay cultural constructs of effeminacy that had been attached to music making in the United States, many modernist composers (including most famously Charles Ives) sought to assert a hyper-masculine aesthetics (Oja 1997, 237-265). Urner's path confounds these social and cultural tendencies in interesting ways: the stylistic profile of her interwar compositions and her professional and intimate associations with Koechlin all place her within a steadfastly modernist compositional trajectory, albeit one couched in an aesthetic project defined by French fin-de-siècle (and concomitantly "feminine") conceptions of musical beauty.

To date, the literature has concentrated primarily on Urner's role within Koechlin's musical universe. Both Urner Johnson (2003) and Orledge (1989) have effectively revealed her place within Koechlin's creative and intimate world in her roles as muse, lover, organizer and companion. Whereas aspects of their intimate relationship could certainly be probed further, in this paper it is primarily to questions of cultural transfer, especially those concerning musical language and style, to which I will attend.⁴ Indeed, Urner and Koechlin's relationship exhibits a cross-fertilization of musical ideas that mutually influenced their works throughout the 1920s and 30s. Although Urner, as a student of one of France's preeminent musical theoreticians and composers, clearly derived the most musical benefit from this relationship, Koechlin too found inspiration from his student's musical voice. Most conspicuous in this regard are a number of cases of creative co-composition—works both large and small—that derived from this unlikely relationship and which were developed on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

Following a brief exposition of Koechlin and Urner's pedagogical relationship, this article examines one of the most important examples of their creative collaboration: a symphonic poem based on a Hindu legend entitled *The Bride of God*.⁵ Drawing on the two extant manuscripts of the composition as well as upon unpublished correspondence, I trace the chronology and nature of their collaboration,

² See Charles Koechlin, "Éphéméride," 13 January 1919, Fonds Charles Koechlin, Médiathèque musicale Mahler, Paris, p. 883: "Voir les femmes du pays, c'est voir le pays. Ici spécialement elles en sont le charme (le seul) — Autrefois on me croyait puritain et (manque d'habitude du sujet) je rougissais si on me demandait comment sont les femmes d'un tel pays. Aujourd'hui j'ai perdu la faculté de rougir; je donne mes impressions de voyage." All translations by the author unless stated otherwise.

³ The scholarship provided sufficient funds for two years of study in Paris. It still exists today.

⁴ On the idea of cultural transfer as it may apply to music, see Fauser and Everist (eds) 2009.

⁵ Orledge lists this work as Koechlin's op. 106 (Orledge 1989, 364).

outline the work's narrative structure, and problematize questions of authorship.⁶ A curious instance of compositional collaboration in a modernist musical culture otherwise dominated by the idea of inalienable individual expression, *The Bride of God* raises issues about power and gender, while also opening a musical window on a relationship defined by admiration and a shared quest for beauty.

The Apprentice

When Koechlin first met Urner he would have encountered a student who was sympathetic to his own interests in the musical exotic. Although not yet examined in any substantial depth, Koechlin was notably drawn to foreign stimuli in his music.⁷ His cycle *Le Livre de la jungle* (1899-1939), based on the collection of stories by Rudyard Kipling, his ambitious piano suite *Les Heures persanes* (1913-1919), his setting of Tristan Klingsor's *Shéhérazade* (1914-1923), or smaller works like his *Suite javanaise* (1910) all attest Koechlin's exotic interests. Urner revealed a similar penchant from the outset of her compositional studies. While still a student at Berkeley (between 1916 and 1918) she attracted attention for incidental music that she composed for a pageant entitled *Aranyani of the Jasmine Vine* (c. 1916), a score that was used to accompany a retelling of the life of the Hindu Goddess of the forest and animals. Composed to a text by her close friend Maude Meagher (1895-1977), the work was performed as part of "The Partheneia," a series of open-air pageants inaugurated in 1912 that incorporated music, mime, dance and singing and which were designed to highlight the creative work of women on campus and for which no other outlet previously existed.⁸ Urner's music for *Aranyani* was described by the *Berkeley Daily Gazette* as being "very oriental in character" for those scenes which took place in the Indian forest, and of "unusual beauty" with regard to dance music inspired by the four seasons (*Berkeley Daily Gazette* 1916).

It was as a result of the visibility of this production and the success of her music that Urner was awarded the George Ladd Prize. Her first Parisian encounter with Koechlin took place on October 28, 1919 when he invited her to his family home for lunch and to look at some of her compositions.

Weekly lessons continued from that point onward with some interruptions during the summer months. From Koechlin's diary we learn that Urner, as was the case with Francis Poulenc who would also soon become Koechlin's student, worked primarily on contrapuntal exercises and fugue (with subjects by Auber, Théodore Dubois, and André Gedalge) (Orledge 1999, 9-47). We also learn that Urner was working on a sextet and a trio, and that by the end of her stay in Paris in 1921 a friendly relationship had developed between the young American and Koechlin's wife and family.⁹

Annotations to Urner's exercises from this period show us that Koechlin was a supportive teacher albeit one who maintained that his student still needed to work on perfecting her craft. Two fugues from 1921 in Urner's hand contain numerous corrections and comments by her teacher. In the "Divertissement" of a fugue on a theme by Dubois, Koechlin writes: "all of this *divertissement* is written in quickly changing tonalities, and the repetition of the themes is not done with the same harmonies (which undermines their clarity in terms of imitations), yet altogether this is musical..."¹⁰ Concerning a fugue on a theme by Gedalge, Koechlin reacts to Urner's use of lombard rhythms in 6/8 time: "this rhythm is not the result of awkwardness...it is wanted by the student who is very fond of it in her own compositions."¹¹ From these annotations we may learn something of Koechlin's pedagogical style. As a student of Fauré who famously encouraged his students to follow and develop their musical instincts, Koechlin appears to have adopted a similar nurturing approach. As Phillippe Cathé has examined, Koechlin faithfully exposed in his musical treatises of the 1920s traditional compositional "rules," but also provided examples of how composers had bent or broken these rules for expressive purposes (Cathé 2010, 351-364). His instruction to Urner seems to be inspired by a similar strategy, one that sought to weed out obvious errors while at the same time recognizing and encouraging certain "mistakes" which Koechlin ostensibly viewed as distinctive traits of his pupil's budding musical personality.

In March 1925 Koechlin actively assisted Urner at the rehearsal of her String Quartet in anticipation of its performance by the Krettly Quartet at a concert featuring

⁶ These manuscripts (MS 15482 and MS 15483) are held at the Département de la Musique, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

⁷ For studies of Koechlin's music and aesthetics see Orledge 1989; and Cathé, Douche and Duchesneau (eds) 2010.

⁸ Meagher's work habitually drew on exotic stimuli. For a study, see Waters 1996.

⁹ In the inventory of the Catherine Urner collection, housed at the Music Library of the University of California—Berkeley (Online Archives of California 1997), there is mention of a *Chant Funèbre for String Sextet (With Optional Bass)* dated 24 June, 1920. Urner composed at least five trios; the earliest dated in that collection is from 1929. However, the collection also contains an undated *Trio in B minor for Piano, Violin and Violoncello* in four movements.

¹⁰ "Fugue de Miss Urner sur un sujet d'A. Thomas (avec quelques corrections de Charles Koechlin)" (MS 16956—Fugues entières, divers exemples), Fonds Charles Koechlin, Département de la musique, Bibliothèque nationale de France : "tout ce *divertissement* est de tonalités fort changeantes, et les reprises des thèmes n'y sont pas traités avec les mêmes harmonies, — (ce qui nuit à sa compréhension en tant qu'imitations), mais l'ensemble est musical..."

¹¹ "Fugue de Miss Urner. Sujet de Gedalge (avec des corrections de Charles Koechlin)" (MS 16956), *ibid.* : "ce rythme n'est pas le résultat d'une gaucherie... il est voulu par cette élève, qui l'affectionne aussi dans ces compositions."

Urner's works organized at the Salle Pleyel. Koechlin had recommended the Krettly Quartet to Urner (Urner Johnson 2003, 31), no doubt as a result of this young ensemble's interest in new music, and of the reputation of violinist Robert Krettly who had participated in the premiere of Fauré's Piano Trio in D minor, opus 120, in 1923. As Urner Johnson has reported, this concert occupied most of Catherine Urner's time throughout the early months of 1925, and along with the premiere of the quartet, it featured Urner singing a selection of songs by Koechlin, Debussy, Brahms and Schubert. Reception of the concert was mixed. Louis Vuillemin called the string quartet a "piece of serious writing" (cited in Urner Johnson 2003, 36), however Paul Le Flem, writing for *Comoedia*, felt that "it did not always impress for the originality of its ideas nor for the value of its procedures" (Le Flem, 1925). A review in *Artistes d'aujourd'hui* did remark, however, that Urner's work showed a "remarkable sense of modern harmony" (cited in Urner Johnson 2003, 38), thus suggesting that the influence of Koechlin's musical language was palpable.¹²

Whatever the case, Koechlin's admiration for his protégée remained constant, and following Urner's departure to the United States at the end of 1926 the composer began collecting fugal subjects written by her. As he explained in his autobiographical sketch, "Étude sur Charles Koechlin par lui-même," written in 1939 and revised in 1947, Koechlin's pedagogical activities, rendered necessary due to strained financial circumstances during the 1920s, made him all the more attentive to the work of his pupils. As he writes,

even while he was correcting the chorals and fugues of his pupils, he often came to rewrite his own versions, both for pleasure and to express his own thoughts. As a result of this, the tuition given by Charles Koechlin aided his own progress until he could *genuinely express himself* in these difficult forms (cited in Orledge 1989, 310).¹³

A series of fugal expositions by Urner dating from between August 1926 and October 1927 are conserved in Koechlin's papers. The composer provided annotations to these melodies, and ranked them according to difficulty for fugal elaboration, noting that one of them was "a good subject, quite difficult because of its Gregorian character," while another was "not easy—a good exercise in tonalities and modulations and even quite difficult."¹⁴

This type of engagement with his student's materials continued well into the 1930s. In his list of works, numerous

are those in which Urner was involved. Beginning with his op. 74 of 1920 (*Diverses réalisations de chorals*) which contain themes by other composers, including Urner, Koechlin also draws on Urner's music for op. 102, 103, 105bis, 107, 108, 109, 111, 113, 114, 130, 131, 133 and 137. Despite the fact that many of these "works" were written "for the drawer" (and as preparatory material for Koechlin's published treatises on fugue and the chorale), the composer noted that "he included these 'realisations' in the list of his compositions, believing that a good number of them are *pieces of music* that can be played as well as any other composition."¹⁵

In the manuscripts of these largely unpublished works, Koechlin is quite fastidious about indicating the provenance of his musical materials.

In his *32 réalisations de divers chants*, op. 102, as well as in the *13 Chorals*, op. 103, Koechlin carefully indicates at which places he is "borrowing" from Urner, whether the material is independent melodic lines within a contrapuntal fabric, or complete harmonic realisations (see Ex. 1).

The Bride of God

Such examples of musical borrowing and co-composition also influenced Urner's work, the most important example being that of *The Bride of God*, a project first conceived by Urner in 1925 and which was based on a short story by L. Adams Beck, entitled "A Hindu Legend, The Bride of God" which Urner had read in the *Atlantic Monthly* in May 1924 (Beck 1924, 648-658). Set in a "Hindu village," Beck's narrative centers around a young girl named Radha who hears and is drawn to the "faint clear notes of the God Krishna," which has "inspired her with fanatic, religious fervour" (Urner Johnson 2003, 209). In the spring of every year a Brahman priest from the Temple in a nearby city searches for a young beautiful maiden to become the Bride of the God, Krishna. Radha is selected for this purpose by a cunning priest but when she is led to the Temple it becomes apparent that his intentions are less than noble. The obscenity of his designs revealed, Radha imagines the pure song of Krishna as she had heard it back in her village. Amidst the clamour of the priests, who had come together for this "false consecrative service," Radha, brought to a spiritual paroxysm, falls lifeless at the feet of the icon representing Krishna, thus transforming herself into a true "bride of a god."¹⁶

¹² On Urner's singing career see Urner Johnson 2003.

¹³ Note that the "Study" is written in the third-person.

¹⁴ MS 15451, Département de la musique, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

¹⁵ This note accompanies Koechlin's *Leçons d'harmonie*, op. 89 (1922-1924), but could equally apply to the chorales and fugues in which he habitually incorporated Urner's music. Emphasis in original. Koechlin published his *Étude sur le choral d'école* in 1929 and his *Étude sur l'écriture de la fugue d'école* in 1934. For more details about these compositions, see the work list in Orledge 1989.

¹⁶ See the synopsis by Catherine Urner, cited in Urner Johnson 2003, 209.

Example 1: Charles Koechlin, "Choral n° 2", 13 Chorals, op. 103.

(1) (2)

var.

basses de C. Urner

ou

basses de C. Urner

(3)

basses de C. Urner

basses de C. Urner

basses de C. Urner

(4)

bien

basses de C. Urner

29 août 1928

*

- 1) les 7 premières notes du thème sont de C. Urner
- 2) d'après l'harmonie de C. Urner
- 3) idem.
- 4) Toute cette mesure réalisation de Miss C. Urner

It is certainly tempting to read Koechlin's influence on his student's choice of literary inspiration as well as on the musical materials she used to illustrate it. Apart from a common interest in exotic subjects, Koechlin sympathized with the figure of the "naïve" artist who seeks out beauty through contact with the life force of Nature. Such is the case in Koechlin's symphonic poem, *La Course de printemps*, op. 95 (composed between 1923-1925), in which the composer depicts Kipling's Mowgli and his awakening to the sentiment of beauty through his immersion into the intoxicating soundscape of the jungle at nighttime. Urner's Rhada may be viewed as a feminine version of this literary archetype. In her Hindu village she meditates on the purity of Krishna's flute, the same "magic charm of 'the flute of Krishna'" that Koechlin evokes in the third part ("La course") of *La Course de printemps*.¹⁷ Just as Mowgli, "the 'little man' raised in the forest by a she-wolf," is a "free and joyous child who knows no master," so too does Urner's Radha's naïve intimation of beauty derive from the sounds of the forest in springtime and her devotion to the life-spirit of Krishna.

The first mention of *The Bride of God* appears in Urner's correspondence in 1925. In May of that year she wrote that

Maude (Meagher) is working now on a poem to go with a ballet I've written and which I shall orchestrate this summer. It is the Krishna legend of India, a dramatic story which I read in last May's *Atlantic Monthly* called, "The Bride of a God." Maude is crazy about the music for it and I think she is going to work out an excellent ballet for it (Urner Johnson 2003, 37).

It is unclear, of course, how advanced Urner's ideas about the work were at this stage, and it is impossible to know what exactly she played for Meagher. At the very least, however, it would have been the primary melodic ideas upon which she hoped Meagher would fashion her ballet. But given that

Urner already had used Beck's story as a narrative model, it seems unlikely that the work would not have included the primary musical episodes corresponding to the story's narrative structure (see Ex. 2).

It appears that when Urner left France to return to California at the end of 1926 she left her materials for *The Bride of God* in the care of Koechlin in Paris. In a letter from 2 April 1928, she wrote to her teacher to ask him to bring the score for *The Bride of God* with him on his upcoming trip to California, adding, "perhaps next year I will have the possibility to get it played, but if it is too inconvenient don't worry, because one day, I don't know when, I will come to Paris!"¹⁸ This suggests that the work had already developed to a point where a performance was possible.

Clearly, Koechlin complied with Urner's request, noting in his diary while in California that he had "reviewed *The Bride of God*."¹⁹ This was his first noted engagement with score, and his interest for it increased along with the growing intensity of their relationship, which developed into a full-fledged romance during the summer of 1928. In March 1929 Koechlin continued "reviewing" *The Bride of God*. Urner returned to America in April, and received a letter from Koechlin containing the following information:

the little time I've had... I've spent it on looking over *The Bride of a God* [*sic*], work that brought me closer to you and through which (better than anything else) I remained in contact with you... I will make a copy of the sketch of this dear symphonic poem, following which I will look more closely at the orchestration, about which I have a lot of ideas. I would so much like for it to be entirely successful.²⁰

Koechlin here refers to three different stages of composition; a sketch, its copy, and a future orchestration. Two of these now constitute the sole extant manuscripts of

Example 2: Catherine Urner, "Krishna's theme" for *The Bride of God*.

¹⁷ Koechlin's reference to Krishna is indicated in the manuscript orchestral score, and is cited in Orledge 1989, 146.

¹⁸ Letter from Catherine Urner to Charles Koechlin, 2 April 1928, Fonds Charles Koechlin, Médiathèque musicale Mahler, Paris.

¹⁹ Charles Koechlin, "Éphéméride", 21 September 1928, Fonds Charles Koechlin, Médiathèque musicale Mahler, Paris.

²⁰ Letter from Charles Koechlin to Catherine Urner, April 1929, Fonds Charles Koechlin, Médiathèque musicale Mahler, Paris: "Le peu de temps que j'ai eu... je l'ai consacré à finir de revoir *The Bride of a God* [*sic*], travail qui me rapprochait de toi, et par lequel (mieux que par n'importe quoi) je gardais contact avec toi... je recopierai le brouillon de ce cher poème symphonique, puis j'étudierai de plus près l'orchestration, au sujet de laquelle j'ai déjà bien des idées. Je voudrais tant que cela fut tout à fait réussi."

The Bride of God: the pre-orchestral draft MS 15482 (“copy of the sketch”) dated 18-20 April, 1929, and the orchestrated version MS 15483 dated 26 May-1 June, 1929. To what initial “sketch” (*brouillon*) Koechlin is referring is unclear: was this Urner’s material, or a different draft already in Koechlin’s hand?

Koechlin’s diary (“*Éphéméride*,”) though short on details, partly clarifies some of the issues of dating and sources. It indicates that he copied the score into his own hand between 13-20 March 1929, thus revealing that he had indeed produced a version (now lost) between having received Urner’s materials in 1926 and the production of MS15482. The “*Éphéméride*” also states that he worked out “different developments” and ideas about orchestration throughout the remainder of March and part of April 1929.²¹ We also know, thanks to a letter from Koechlin to Urner, that before the end of April 1929 he gave a private audition of the *The Bride of God* for Maude Meagher in Paris:

I played *The Bride of God* for her and it gave me an idea of the entire work; I believe it will be good as it is right now, and that it does not betray your idea. The orchestration will be difficult but I will do my best to stay the course.²²

This statement is curious as it suggests that Koechlin lacked familiarity with the score (“it gave me an idea of the entire work”). It seems unlikely that he would have written this if he had been heavily engaged in composing new material for it. Indeed, it is probable that Koechlin’s performance of the score was based on MS 15482, and that his suggestion that it was “good as it is right now” implies that the few “developments,” or transitional sections that he had amended were at once beneficial to the work while not betraying Urner’s “idea.”

MS 15482 is essentially a draft in preparation for the orchestration. It also includes these new “developments” to which Koechlin alludes to in his annotations. For example, the manuscript proposes a new two-measure introduction to the piece which Koechlin notes “would be calmer and better set up the beginning.” Interestingly, MS 15482 also includes programmatic descriptions and titles derived from Beck’s story: the themes (or leitmotifs) of Krishna, Rhada and the priests are labelled, and the work’s episodic structure is

outlined in English in Koechlin’s handwriting, thus strongly suggesting that it had been copied from Urner’s original materials.

Figure 1: *The Bride of God*: episodic structure (MS 15482).

Night Scene à Hindoe Village [*sic*]
 Rhada’s meditation
 Morning pastorale
 Krishna’s Call
 The Sleeping Village
 Gong announcing Buddhist Priest [*sic*]
 Priest’s visit and dialogue with Rhada’s father
 Persuasive theme of Priest
 Rhada hears call of Krishna’s flute
 Rhada’s contemplation
 Pastorale. Village theme as Rhada departs for Temple
 Choral in the Temple
 Rhada’s rapture in Temple
 Pomp in Temple to receive Rhada and approach of Priest
 Priest’s theme
 Rhada’s theme
 Krishna’s theme in counterpoint with Priest’s theme
 Krishna’s theme

The orchestrated version, MS 15483, was completed during Koechlin’s Atlantic crossing aboard the *De la Salle*. Writing to Urner, he announced that the orchestration was complete:

I am not tired from my orchestrating work—it was a real pleasure for me—pleasure to be back at orchestrating, like a swimmer who ventures back into water to discover that he *still knows how* to swim,—pleasure also, and more than anything, to *complete your work*, to live this way with your feelings and to gain access to your heart,—and to think that this work will be performed in the near future. In Berkeley we will look at the orchestration together and I will get the parts copied once I return to Paris. [...] And, as I write to you with this memory of fragrant and tender poetry,—atrocious music, jazz and dance music, can be heard coming all the way from the dining hall where people are dancing to the quiet smoking room from where I am writing you and where I orchestrated *The Bride of a God* [*sic*]. Alas, the vulgarity of this music—accentuated by the timbre of the accordion and uncouth percussion, fills me with sadness.²³

²¹ In Orledge’s catalogue of Koechlin’s works (Orledge 1989, 364), he quotes from Koechlin’s work-list, where the composer mentions having written a number of “developments” for *The Bride of God*.

²² Letter from Charles Koechlin to Catherine Urner, 29 April 1929, Fonds Charles Koechlin, Médiathèque musicale Mahler, Paris: “Je lui [Maude Meagher] ai joué (tant bien que mal !) *The Bride of God*, et cela m’a donné, à moi-même, une idée de l’ensemble de l’œuvre ; je crois que ce sera bien tel que c’est à présent, et que cela ne trahit pas ton idée. L’orchestration ne sera pas facile mais je tacherai de m’en tenir [*sic*].”

²³ Letter from Charles Koechlin to Catherine Urner, 2 June 1929, Fonds Charles Koechlin, Médiathèque musicale Mahler, Paris: “Je ne suis pas fatigué de mon travail d’orchestration — ce fut une joie pour moi — Joie de me remettre à orchestrer, comme un nageur qui se retrempe dans l’eau et constate qu’il *sait encore* nager, — joie aussi, et surtout, de *réaliser ton œuvre*, de vivre ainsi avec tes sentiments de pénétrer ton cœur, — et de penser que l’œuvre sera jouée dans un avenir pas trop lointain. Nous verrons ensemble cette orchestration à Berkeley, et je donnerai les parties à copier dès mon retour à Paris. [...] Et, tandis que je t’écris avec ce souvenir de poésie embaumée et tendre, — une musique atroce, musique de danse et de jazz, monte jusqu’ici de la salle à manger où les gens dansent, jusqu’au fumoir tranquille où je t’écris, et où j’ai orchestré *The Bride of a God* [*sic*]. Hélas, la vulgarité de cette musique, — accrue encore par le timbre de l’accordéon et la batterie grossière, me remplit de tristesse.” Emphasis in original.

MS 15483 integrates the “developments” proposed in MS 15482 as well as providing Koechlin’s full orchestration, which, for the most part, remains faithful to the ideas already outlined in the earlier manuscript. For example, Krishna is identified by the solo flute; Rhada’s meditation by a solo viola; and the Choral in the Temple employs muted trumpets, trombones, tubas and double-basses. Curiously, however, Koechlin’s orchestrated version does away with labelling the various themes, and the episodic structure proposed in the previous manuscript is here absent thus rendering the work a symphonic poem that lacks an articulated program.

Although Koechlin clearly contributed to the work, it is nevertheless extremely problematic that he signed the title page of MS 15483 as the work’s principal author and submitted it as such to the Société des auteurs, compositeurs et éditeurs de musique (SACEM) in 1933.²⁴ As the various authorial inscriptions in the two manuscripts attest, throughout 1929 Koechlin had consistently maintained that Urner was the principal author and that he had only “collaborated” or “reviewed and touched up” the score.

Figure 2: *The Bride of God*: authorial inscriptions.

MS 15482—Title page

The Bride of God/poème symphonique/d’après une légende hindoue/Cath. Urner/(en collaboration avec Ch. Koechlin)/à orchestrer d’après cette version/Ch. Koechlin/30 Villa Molitor/Paris 16^e

MS 15483—Last page

Réalisation de C. Urner revue et retouchée par Ch. K. 26 Mai-1^e juin 1929 à bord du “De la Salle”

MS 15483—Title page

Ch. Koechlin, *The Bride of A God, La Fiancée d’un Dieu*, poème symphonique en collaboration avec Miss Catherine Urner op. 106 (includes a SACEM stamp “13 Dec 1933 No. 420255”)

According to the “Éphéméride,” the title page of MS 15483 was written by the composer on 5 December 1933, the same day that he was occupied with copying the poem “Dissolution” by Paul Claudel. The writing of the title page and the content of the poem appear to be intrinsically linked. “Dissolution” is a poem that Koechlin associated with *Sur les flots lointains*, op. 130, one of his last musical “collaborations” with Urner. The main theme of *Sur les flots lointains* was written by Urner aboard the *City of*

Baltimore upon leaving France for England in July 1933, a voyage which, as she wrote to Koechlin in a letter, was prompted by “the necessity of physical separation” from Koechlin and his family, and which effectively marked the end of her romance with her teacher (Urner Johnson 2003, 109). Claudel’s poem evokes the pain of departure and must certainly have resonated with both Urner and Koechlin for the way that water had become a symbol of their separation:

Again I am carried over the indifferent liquid sea [...]. Everything is blurred; and all about me I must search in vain for line or form. For a horizon there is nothing but the cessation of colour in darkness. All matter is resolved into water alone, like the tears I feel coursing down my cheeks. All sound is like the murmur of sleep when it breathes to us all that is most crushing to our hopes. I have searched in vain, I shall find nothing more beyond me—neither that country which might have been my home, nor that well-loved face!²⁵ (Claudel 1920, 202).

Perhaps in claiming authorship over *The Bride of God*, Koechlin was asserting that Urner had, compositionally at least, never entirely liberated herself from his musical influence. Writing in his autobiographical *Histoire de ma vie musicale et de mes oeuvres*, which he compiled in 1945, his retrospective assessment of Urner’s abilities was, after all, not entirely positive: “I found that Catherine Urner [...] appeared to be extremely gifted at the creation of melodies, but insufficiently prepared when it came to harmonizing them (she had not studied for that in America)” (cited in Urner Johnson 2003, 61-62). Speaking specifically about *The Bride of God* he claims, “The melodic lines and certain developments were by my pupil and others were by me, including the entire orchestration” (cited in Urner Johnson 2003, 61-62).

Stylistic affinities

Such claims, when placed against Urner’s published body of work, simply do not hold water. Take, for example, Urner’s *Quatre mélodies*, published by the Parisian house Senart in 1928.

Urner’s setting of Verlaine’s “Colloque sentimental,” the fourth of the set, reveals a composer who was more than prepared for the task of harmonizing melodies, and proposes a sophisticated, sensitive, and personal musical rendering. Dedicated “à mon maître Charles Koechlin” the song draws upon many of the stylistic features of Koechlin’s *mélodies*

²⁴ The title page bears the SACEM stamp and date “13 Dec 1933 No. 420255.”

²⁵ “Et je suis de nouveau reporté sur la mer indifférente et liquide. [...] Tu le vois, tout est dissous et je chercherais en vain autour de moi trait ou forme. Rien, pour horizon, que la cessation de la couleur la plus foncée. La matière de tout est rassemblée en une seule eau, pareille à celle de ces larmes que je sens qui coulent sur ma joue. Sa voix, pareille à celle du sommeil quand il souffle de ce qu’il y a de plus sourd à l’espoir en nous. J’aurais beau chercher, je ne trouve plus rien hors de moi, ni ce pays qui fut mon séjour, ni ce visage beaucoup aimé.”

as identified by Robert Orledge (1989, 91-92). Avoiding any easy comparison to Debussy's famous setting of this poem, Urner here appears to be imitating the language of Koechlin who, in works like his songs on texts to Albert Samain, employs wide-ranging textures, often supported by open fifths in the bass atop of which are integrated faster moving chords, often comprising sevenths and ninths. Although Urner does not engage systematically in polytonality, a common feature of Koechlin's style, she does not shy away from placing chords in vertical combinations that derive from different tonal centers, thus moving to the threshold of atonality at important moments in the song. Such occurrences, along with a complete lack of sequential writing thwarts any predictable sense of goal-driven directional movement. The use of pedal points also serves to obscure direction, and in "Colloque sentimental" Urner's use of open fifths in the bass (at measures 8-14, for example) does not provide any long-range structural function. Indeed, the song only contains two moments of clear tonal repose (F# major for one beat at measure 21, and D# minor during the last five measures of the song). Whole tone and pentatonic sonorities are alluded to, but never presented in their pure forms, as in the opening gesture where the use of D-flat is presented in dissonance to a whole-tone collection.

In this particular song, Urner conceives of the setting in terms of four large units, essentially compressing Verlaine's eight stanza poem into four musical strophes. Dovetailed transitions, however, are common, and the poetic form is consequently less clearly delineated. That being said, it would be incorrect to view Urner's setting as one solely preoccupied with harmonic experimentation at the expense of poetic sensitivity. While following Koechlin's ideas about the undesirability of obviously mimetic gestures in the *mélodie*, Urner does underline the poetic meaning in subtle ways. For example, the conversational quality, and difference of emotional engagement of the two protagonists ("Te souvient-il de notre extase ancienne? -Pourquoi voulez-vous donc qu'il m'en souviennne?") is outlined by contrasting registers and the "très effacé" indication of the responding voice. The highest sung note of the song opens the long descending phrase ("Ah! les beaux jours de bonheur indicible où nous joignons nos bouches!") thus creating a moment of lyrical warmth and amplitude to highlight the sentiment expressed. In short, Urner's melodies from this period carefully follow an aesthetic and technical blueprint that she would have discovered not only in Koechlin's work in the genre, but also in his output more generally. They also suggest that she was perfectly capable of conceiving and executing the harmonic and melodic writing found in *The*

Bride of God and that Koechlin's apprehensions about her compositional abilities were entirely misplaced.

Dissolution

It is unclear what Urner may have felt about the fate of *The Bride of God*. It is quite possible that in terms of authorship she was quite content to "share" her voice with her collaborators and was unconcerned with asserting or clarifying her authorial contributions. In fact, the pattern of co-composition initiated with Koechlin continued with the other major love-interest of her life, the organist Charles Shatto, whom she married in 1937. Like Koechlin during the 1920s, Shatto created a number of harmonized chorals based on Urner's melodies in the late 1930s.²⁶ Urner's work, however, was not only created in collaboration; a handful of ambitious scores from the 1930s (including large-scale orchestral works like *Rhapsody of Aimairgin of the Golden Knee* (1936) and *Three Movements for Chamber Orchestra* (1939)) are entirely her own, and show important compositional continuities with works like *The Bride of God* and the series of *mélodies* from the mid-1920s.

Ultimately, following her return to the United States in 1933, the compositional output of Urner—while remaining constant up until her death in 1942—offers a curious mixture of compositional ambition which is counterbalanced by an engagement with more conservative styles. For example, among her published output, her song "Nichts ist dauernd," ("After Parting") written in the 1930s to a poem by Ludwig Börne, was included in a collection entitled *Nineteenth Century American Art Songs* (2001), ostensibly on the basis of its conventional musical style alone. Whether through personal choice, professional strategy, socio-cultural constraints or the absence of Koechlin's stimulus, following her return to the United States Urner's musical language did not follow a stable stylistic and technical trajectory.

The reasons for this are difficult to assess, but Urner's difficulty in carving out a niche for herself as a modernist composer in America following her return to the United States speaks to the ways in which questions of gender could weigh on professional musical ambitions. When hosting Koechlin in California, Urner followed a well-established social model of serving the cause of musical modernism by acting as a behind-the-scenes organiser. Similar to, but on a more modest scale than the organisational work of East Coast women patrons, she endeavoured despite considerable challenges to promote (foreign) modernism in a climate that she believed was fundamentally opposed to it. Writing to Koechlin in 1928 she gave voice to this sentiment:

²⁶ For a list of these works, consult the Inventory of the Catherine Murphy Urner collection, housed at the Music library of the University of California Berkeley (Online Archive of California 1997).

If I had known the indifference of people in general, I would never have had the courage to propose that you come, for outside of a small number who are very devoted and very sincere, I see very little light for the future that I have dreamed of as possible. People have money for cars, for the cinema in great numbers, for teas, but when it is a question of other things, especially of music, they insist on doing it for next to nothing. Their values are completely upside down.²⁷

In this regard, Urner's pessimism about American cultural values echoed those of Koechlin, who, in his "Étude sur l'Amérique"²⁸ of 1929, denounced American consumerism and conformism as impediments to American cultural vitality. Within this cultural context, Koechlin viewed Urner and her activities as an exception; she was proof that America possessed cultural potential that needed, from Koechlin's perspective, to be harnessed and cultivated through contact with French aesthetic values. As he wrote, in his otherwise patronizing portrait of 1945: "Catherine Urner was one of my best pupils. She had an intelligence superior to that of the average American woman, and especially more profound, more European. But by reason of this, it was more difficult for her music to be accepted at home" (cited in Urner Johnson 2003, 62).

Despite Urner's integration into French musical life, whether as a student of Koechlin or in the concerts she organized and performed, it was difficult for her to effectively build upon these experiences upon returning to the American West Coast. Even during Koechlin's trips to Berkeley during the 1920s, at a time when the idea of a visiting foreign professor was still a novelty, his own music came up against considerable resistance. His symphonic poem *La Joie païenne*, which Koechlin believed ideal for outdoor performance, was performed at the Hollywood Bowl in 1929 and greeted, as the composer often recalled, with laughter. *La Joie païenne* was composed in 1910, but clearly the horizon of expectations of the 1929 Hollywood Bowl audience was not yet ready to deal with this music from abroad. For Urner, lacking the prestige and experience associated with Koechlin's name, her own forays into musical modernism must be viewed as particularly courageous in this context, and her frequent recourse to more conventional styles throughout the 1930s may be viewed as the inevitable result of social factors that were beyond her control.

Conclusion

The extant manuscript sources for *The Bride of God* do not entirely clarify the numerous questions that attend to

the work's compositional authorship. Though we can be certain that the orchestration and some transitional passages are by Koechlin, the remaining evidence (as gleaned from letters and diary entries) suggests that Urner's role in the conception and musical rendering of the work was far more important than has been previously stated. Throughout the late 1920s Urner's musical style was clearly indebted to the influence of Koechlin, but the idea that she lacked the necessary skill or ambition to undertake ambitious projects was later overstated by her teacher and deserves to be debunked entirely through a closer examination of her archive and the eventual performance of her large-scale works of the 1930s.

Koechlin and Urner's relationship paints a somewhat lopsided and limited portrait of transatlantic cultural transfer. Whereas Urner's music of the 1920s represents an enthusiastic model of openness and assimilation of French cultural values, Koechlin's rejection of many of the specificities of American life and culture reflects a colonialist attitude that positioned French culture as universal. In sum, whereas their relationship and concomitant cultural differences informed in important ways their work as creative artists, Urner and Koechlin's transatlantic cultural transfer resists hegemonic narratives with regard to French and American musical communication during the 1920s and 30s. Shunning jazz and the obstreperously modern, their intimate and personal musical exchanges remained dominated by shared aesthetic interests, and this despite the size of the ocean that separated them.

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