

Koechlin - The Seven Stars Symphony, Ballade pour piano et orchestra (1992)

Written by bluesever

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1. *Ballade For Piano And Orchestra, Op. 50 (1919) 20:47* The Seven Stars Symphony, Op. 132 (1933) 2. *I. Douglas Fairbanks 6:15* 3. *II. Lilian Harvey 2:07* 4. *III. Greta Garbo 4:00* 5. *IV. Clara Bow 5:23* 6. *V. Marlene Dietrich 5:34* 7. *VI. Emil Jannings 4:12* 8. *VII. Charlie Chaplin 15:57*
Bruno Rigutto – piano (track 1) Françoise Pellié - ondes Martenot (track 4) Monte-Carlo Philharmonic Orchestra Alexandre Myrat – conductor

It was in 1933 that Charles Koechlin saw his first film, *The Blue Angel*, starring Marlene Dietrich and Emil Jannings. The 65-year-old composer was at once totally bowled over by “the formidable realm of the cinema” and immediately embarked on his extraordinary *Seven Stars’ Symphony*. Completed within the space of a few weeks, each of its seven movements portrays (and bears a dedication to) an individual movie star of the day. The work is a curiosity, certainly, but what unexpected, weirdly beguiling and often haunting invention is encountered along the way!

Take the opening portrait of Douglas Fairbanks: no swashbuckling antics here, rather (in Koechlin’s own description) “a little oriental improvisation” of exquisite delicacy and exotic capriciousness. Elsewhere, a “pagan hymn” to Greta Garbo is entrusted to an ondes martinot: the effect is other-worldly, icy radiance allied to a ravishing luminosity. Clara Bow inspires a scherzo of flashing brilliance, Marlene Dietrich a tender meditation on a bewitching melody derived from the letters of her name (“What luck that the theme... should be as beautiful as she herself!”). The last movement is the most ambitious of all, however: a complex 15-minute character study of Charlie Chaplin which is by turns witty, affectionate, provocative and (ultimately) deeply compassionate; it represents one of Koechlin’s finest achievements.

And what of the couplings? Well, Otfried Nies (the excellent annotator here and head of the

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Koechlin archive) supplied the expert orchestrations of the Quatre Interludes. When the Opera Comique of Paris commissioned a half-hour ballet from Koechlin in 1947, the result was to have been a work entitled Voyages. Not only did the score draw on five movements from the Seven Stars' Symphony, but Koechlin also sketched out four brief episodes that were intended to link the action. Unfortunately, the 1948 premiere never materialized, so it was left to Nies to orchestrate the epigrammatic Quatre Episodes for the much-belated first airing of Voyages in December 1986. A similar misfortune befell L'Andalouse dans Barcelone, an utterly charming "little fantasie espagnole" designed to accompany a sequence of a dancing Andalusian gipsy (part of a documentary by the name of Croisieres avec l'escadre or "Cruises with the Fleet"). Alas, when Koechlin went to see the film for himself in 1934, he was crestfallen to discover that his music had been discarded altogether.

The performances are very good indeed. The admirable James Judd draws a stylish, secure response from his Berlin-based band; certainly, the strings of the Deutsches Symphony Orchestra produce an altogether more sumptuously refined sonority than do those of the Monte-Carlo PO under Alexandre Myrat on a rival EMI reissue (although Koechlin's occasionally terrifyingly vertiginous writing would surely tax any group in the world). The recording is both rich and refined. Moreover, RCA's copious documentation could hardly be more helpful. An intriguing, extremely well-realized issue.' --- Andrew Achenbach, gramophone.co.uk

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