

LOU KOSTER

(1889-1973)

Lou Koster was born on 7th May 1889 in Luxembourg-City. It was her grandfather Franz Ferdinand Bernard Hoebich (1813-1900), himself born in Silesia, who taught her musical theory, the violin and the piano. Hoebich had worked as the head conductor of music corps at the Luxembourg grand-ducal court, as well as having been the very first conductor of the Luxembourg military music. Widowed in 1882, he spent his old days in the house of his daughter Emma, dedicating himself to the musical education of his five grandchildren.

It was thanks to him that Lou Koster benefited from a musical education from a very young age onwards, a privilege restricted to a very limited number of young girls in Luxembourg. At that time, the Luxembourg Music Conservatoire hadn't been founded yet and the municipal musical school, founded by Henri-Joseph Cornély (1786-1866) in 1823 and open to girls too, didn't exist anymore as it had definitively closed its doors in 1882. It was only on 1st May 1906 that the *Conservatoire de Musique Fondation Eugénie Pescatore-Dutreux* was officially inaugurated in Lux-

embourg-City thanks to its generous patron. Lou Koster, aged 17 at the time, went there to perfect her knowledge and skill of the violin, the piano, musical theory and theory of harmony.

As far as composition and orchestration are concerned, she had to teach herself as an autodidact. For many years, the composition class only existed on paper and it was only in 1943 that a first student of that class took an exam at the Conservatoire, managed by the Nazi occupant at that time.

In the Koster family, however, music was not solely a means of entertainment. The three young sisters Lou, Lina and Laure also learnt, early on, to use their music to secure an income. They played music for the silent films screened at the cinema, and performed at café concerts, as well as at wedding ceremonies or celebrations organised by the *Freidenkerbund/Libre Pensée* association, where the members of the Koster family were apparently very involved.

During the academic year 1908/09, Lou Koster became «student-tutor» for piano and violin: at the Conservatoire, talented students could indeed sometimes be invited by the director to teach classes as auxiliary teachers. Auxiliary teachers had to be officially appointed after four years but, with this regulation not being respected, Lou Koster remained in the position of tutor for thirteen years before any official appointment. It was rather badly paid work and it was not until 1922 that the young musician was nomi-

nated as a piano teacher. She taught at the Conservatoire until 1954. During all those years, she was also part of the Conservatoire orchestra, which seems, however, never to have played any of her works.

Lou Koster claimed to have felt attracted to the art of composition from childhood onwards. Her first compositions were songs. According to family tradition, the young woman worked as a performer as well as a composer both in the art of «serious music» and «light music», and this at least until the end of the 1930s. In addition to her songs, her oeuvre includes a whole series of light pieces for the piano, mainly valse suites, but also marches and a number of dances. Before and after the Great War, she published a selection of 14 of these works in Germany (Edition Aurora, Weinböhl near Dresden) and in Belgium (Maison Musicale Moderne, Brussels).

In 1922, she wrote her operetta in one act called *An der Schwemm* (At the baths) to a booklet written by the well-known Luxembourg writer and journalist Batty Weber (1860-1940). The reviews published in the Luxembourg daily papers testify the public appeal and success of her work. A longer version of this operetta in German with the title *Amor im Bade* was performed five years later, sung by German singers, amongst which the very young Kurt Seifert (1903-1950).

In the 1920s, Lou Koster started to write twenty-odd light orchestra pieces (valses, marches, fantasies, overtures, suites, etc.). She creat-

ed the first pieces with her own ensemble: the swimming feasts of the «Swimming Club Luxembourg» gave the young musician - herself an accomplished swimmer and sportswoman - the opportunity to show and prove her talent as a composer and conductor. The musical entertainment during the breaks between the swimming competitions was provided by an orchestra playing from the roof of the shower cabins and conducted by Lou Koster, possibly from the piano. It was under these conditions that she created, for example, her *Swimming March* on 25th June 1922.

From 1933 onwards, major European broadcasting station Radio-Luxembourg became interested in the composer and from 1933 to 1939, no less than 111 radio programmes with her name featured in the radio records. It was the radio's own orchestra, conducted by Henri Pensis (1900-1958), who performed her works the most often.

The war years under German occupation were difficult for many Luxembourg composers and in contemporary documents, Lou Koster was reproached her «Francophilia» by the Nazi occupant. It is therefore not surprising that her works do not feature in any kind of concert programmes of that time as musical life was also widely determined by the German occupant. After the war, she - like many other composers at that time - had to work hard to re-establish her reputation. In the last three decades of her life,

she left <light> music behind in order to concentrate mainly on vocal music.

On 22nd November 1959, a music and literature evening dedicated to the composer's songs (in the meantime a septuagenarian) was staged at the municipal theatre under the patronage of the city of Luxembourg. The audience came in crowds and the concert got numerous positive reviews in the regional press. Encouraged by this success, Lou Koster created the song ensemble *Onst Lidd* (Our Song), which she accompanied herself on the piano at the beginning. Officially, the aim of the ensemble was to promote Luxembourgish vocal compositions. However, upon closer study of the many programmes of this very active ensemble, one cannot fail to notice that most of the compositions that were performed were written by Lou Koster.

It was not until the age of eighty-three that Lou Koster was to know her biggest public success. On 9th July 1972, her longest oeuvre, *Der Geiger von Echternach* (The Violonist of Echternach) adapted from a text by Nikolaus Welter, was performed by the RTL Orchestra and the <Chorale Municipale Uelzecht> choir, conducted by Pierre Cao in the Echternach basilica. This time, the Luxembourg press was not only highly positive but downright euphoric in certain papers. The proposal was made to perform this work in the Echternach basilica every summer, or at least every other summer and so, on 27th June 1974, it was performed there a second time.

This time, however, without its composer, as Lou Koster had died on 17th November 1973 in Luxembourg City, aged 84.

LOU KOSTER'S FRENCH SONGS

Lou Koster's oeuvre consists of more than 250 compositions, 170 of which are to texts in either Luxembourgish, French or German. Even though the most famous French and German poets (Paul Verlaine, Alfred de Musset, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Theodor Storm, etc.) feature in her vocal music repertoire, her songs are mainly based on texts by Luxembourg poets and this in all three official languages of the country: Luxembourgish, French and German. "*The poems by Marcel Noppeney, Paul Palgen, Paul Verlaine have inspired me and I hope to be able to continue and to succeed in giving them a musical form equivalent to the generosity, the skill and the fantasy found in the poetry of our great writers.*" (Lou Koster, *Curriculum Vitae*, January 1961).

Even though many of Lou Koster's pieces only exist in manuscript form to this day, the composer actively sought contact with publishers from Luxembourg and its neighbouring countries. Eventually, some of her songs were published by F. Lauweryns in Brussels (*Chanson lunaire* amongst others, 1936), in Luxembourg by B. Schellenberg (*Pluie sur l'eau* et al., 1937), Kief-

fer-Binsfeld and by the Luxembourg folk song publishing house (Lëtzebuenger Volleksslider Verlag) as well as by Editions Schott Frères in Brussels and Paris (*Des cendres encor' chaudes*, and *Quatre mélodies* after poems by M. Noppeney, both in 1959).

One may be wondering if the fact that the Radio Luxembourg orchestra performed Lou Koster's waltzes many times may have encouraged her to write 30-something orchestral versions of her songs (amongst which five out of six songs after texts by Paul Verlaine, the *Quatre mélodies* after poems by M. Noppeney, as well as the *Chanson Lunaire* after a text by Paul Palgen)? More than half of these compositions have, however, been lost and we only know that the orchestra of Radio Luxembourg included six of the 30 orchestral songs in their program (e.g. *Chanson lunaire* in 1935 and *Chanson d'automne* in 1950) and recorded four (*Sérénade à Nina* in 1953, amongst others).

The manuscripts of her songs are mostly not dated, except for a few: *Chanson lunaire* (September, 1934), *En sourdine* (autumn 1934), *Le piano que baise une main frêle* (September 1935), *Géôle* (1968) and *Nostalgie* (May 1968). Autobiographical and biographical data only rarely reveal information about the creation history of the composer's works: So it is possible to deduce from an autobiographical reference that the songs to the Alfred de Musset texts could be situated to a date briefly before World War I

(1912-1914). Indeed, in a curriculum vitae from January 1961, the composer wrote the following about that period: «I loved the works of Lamartine, Molière but, above all, A. de Musset. Timidly, I formed my songs when reading his poems.» For other works, the publishing date of poetry anthologies give precious clues about composition dates, especially in the form of «terminus post quem»: The young poet Suzon Hedo (1942-1990) published the poetry set to music by Lou Koster in her very first poetry cycle, when she was 20. Consequently, it seems obvious that the songs *Printemps* and *Ma douleur* must have been written after 1962. *Ma douleur* is, unfortunately, one of the pieces that were lost but as the Radio Luxembourg recordings have survived, we were able to re-create that song in order to include it in the present recording. *Nostalgie*, published by the author only after the death of the composer, proves that the composer had had prior access to unpublished texts, or to texts having been previously published in periodicals, journals and anthologies.

Like all the Luxembourg composers of her generation, Lou Koster hardly considered the new avant-garde currents in music which, for many years, seemed to have neither affected nor influenced the works of Luxembourg composers or the national musical environment. What mattered most to Koster was to compose in a clear simple language so as to be understood by «the people», to communicate with them by this

means and make them discover poetry through music. She didn't aim for the extraordinary; what motivated her was the pedagogical aspect and how it could be used to democratise music. And, in order to achieve that aim, she was not afraid to remain a traditional purist, faithful to the tonal language and to let herself mainly be inspired by romantic music. Her favourite composer was and remained Franz Schubert. Lou Koster wished to be a popular composer, who wanted her tunes whistled in the streets. Her aim was to <use music to give pleasure to people>. Her music - which has a certain originality - has charm and elegance and, if one wishes to compare it, from the stylistic point of view, to another composer - reminds listeners of the music of Cécile Chaminade, the most popular - even if not the most progressive - composer of the end of the 19th and the first part of the 20th century. However, being inspired by romanticism and trying simultaneously to reach the <people> used to listening to light music, greatly appreciated in Luxembourg until World War II (i.e. military marches, operettas, and Luxembourg folk songs, which have, in fact, not much in common with musical romanticism), was a nearly impossible task. Lou Koster complained very often that <no-body sings my songs, even though I wrote them for the people to sing along>.

Besides poetry, nature was her main source of inspiration in the composition not only of vocal, but also of instrumental music. When she

went for long walks or excursions, the composer always carried with her the one or the other poetry volume. She made notes of her musical ideas - themes, linking of chords - in the margin of the chosen poem, at times only a quick note, at others, a more detailed outline, to be developed further into music later, back at home (see illustration p. 2).

THE LOU KOSTER ARCHIVE AT CID | FRAEN AN GENDER

Since its creation in 1992, topics such as <women and music> and <music and gender> have been a major concern for Cid | Fraen an Gender (previously Cid-femmes, Centre d'information et de documentation des femmes Thers Bodé). A program to promote music by women composers, named Euterpe (after the name of the muse for music), was created and launched in the first year of the existence of the centre. <Euterpe> has as the objective to promote musical creation by women, to document it in archives and to make it more widely known through concerts, musical and pedagogical projects, as well as publications (CDs, books, musical scores). (For more information, consult www.cid-fg.lu).

Cid-Fraen an Gender also aims at making the oeuvres of Luxembourgish women composers, such as Lou Koster, more widely accessible to

performers, researchers and music lovers. Before the creation of the Lou Koster Archive at Cid-Fraen an Gender (2003), the compositions of Lou Koster were mostly in private collections and hence, almost inaccessible. The Lou Koster Archive currently features 429 musical scores (more than 250 compositions mostly in more than one manuscript version), as well as an important collection of biographical documents.

Text by Danielle Roster
Translation by Hermine Koster

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND SELECT DISCOGRAPHY

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CD Helen Buchholtz et Lou Koster - Mélodies de compositrices luxembourgeoises. Mady Bonert, soprano, Claude Weber, piano. Luxembourg : Cid-Fraen an Gender, 2003.

CD Der Geiger von Echternach. Orchestre Philharmonique du Luxembourg, Chœur national du Luxembourg, Anja Van Engeland (S), Jeff Martin (T), Ekkehard Abele (Bar) Pierre Cao, dir. Dudelange : CNA, 2010.

CD Lou Koster: Valses et oeuvres symphoniques 1920-1930. Orchester Estro Armonico, Jonathan Kaell, dir. NAXOS (8.573330) 2015.

For further information regarding the life and works of less well-known Luxembourgish poets and writers, such as Marcel Gérard, Suzon Hedo, Isabelle Oberweis, Marcel Noppeney, Paul Palgen, please consult Dictionnaire des Auteurs luxembourgeois : www.auteurslexikon.lu/online/www/menu_header/5/FRE/index.html

For further information regarding recent projects around the Lou Koster Archive, please visit www.cid-fg.lu

OUR TAKE ON LOU KOSTER

A large heavy kraft envelope: that was my first contact with the complete collection of Lou Koster's «mélodies».

This was, however, not the first contact I'd had with her: shortly after Danielle Roster first contacted me about the exciting project to study and record the French songs of this famous Luxembourgish woman composer, I received a CD featuring a selection of more than ten songs by Lou Koster. When I expressed my disappointment that the texts by Verlaine had already been published on disc, Danielle told me that «no, everything is to be recorded anew». Hence, the thick kraft paper envelope.

This document contained a collection of 35 songs, with «Ma douleur» still to be reconstructed by Nikolay Temniskov from existing records. Thirty-five pieces of music, mostly in manuscript form. The first, and not the least, task was to become familiar with the notation of the composer. Even if her writing was, for the most part, very clean, her bars perfectly equal on the page, the text was written in such small characters, with certain words even being abbreviated, that I had to ask Danielle for a transcript of the poem alone, in order to understand.

The poems were our main selection criterion for this near integral recording of the French «mélodies». We also decided not to include two «Lieder», based on texts by Allmers and Mörke, which were originally set to music in German and subsequently translated, not because we didn't deem them interesting enough but because we felt their place

was not in a collection of French songs.

Once this out of the way, we could concentrate on what was essential, namely giving life to the music of Lou Koster. Her songs start off very spontaneously and are often cut short: no piece which really gets a chance to develop, which we could just <let be>. On the contrary, Lou Koster seemed to have enjoyed juxtaposing very diverse climates in one and the same piece of music, even if it was only a two-minute piece, most often with a basic transition (if you listen to *Domino*, for instance) and, additionally, without developing a thematic material sometimes exposed and not repeated. The most important task for the performers of Lou Koster's songs was to try to best join these episodes, paying attention not to over-emphasize one part as this could endanger the fragile balance of the piece just as much as under-emphasizing it could make it boring. Every performer of *Lieder*, *mélodies* and songs has to ask themselves these questions; and it seems to me that this is all the more crucial when faced with a whole collection of unknown music.

With this in mind, we worked a lot, taking and leaving songs, coming back to songs previously disregarded, trying to not always return to those that we liked best (in my view, the <mélodies> to Paul Verlaine's poems should be part of the recitalist's repertoire), but also to look deeper into the songs that we did at first not like so much and which sometimes later surprised us with an almost symbolist strangeness.

After this one-year-long journey (in which our respective schedules sometimes forced us to long breaks in-between meetings) with Lou Koster, we were finally ready to go to the studio. This was shortly before Christmas in the premises of the Centre national de l'audiovisuel in Dudelange, this part of Luxembourg as grey and blue as its neighbouring Lorraine. Before going to the recording studio, we had performed in concerts, presented these melodies to an a priori reticent audience which did, however, very much like what we had brought to them and this was for us a great encouragement. We listened to our concerts in sessions where we had to assess our own performance, an exercise which we found particularly difficult but revealing, helping us figure out how much of what we had wanted to put into these <mélodies> really came through. We tried to continue being enthusiastic about what we were doing despite the fatigue and tension that usually comes with work in the studio. We even managed to get discreet lighting in the recording hall, almost as in the ideal music salon (which was quite an achievement for such a massive concert hall) ...

And now, here it is, this long-awaited disc! If we have hereby been pioneers and thus contributed towards enhancing the repertoire of French <mélodies>, we have achieved our goal and that makes us very happy.

Vincent Lièvre-Picard, Emmanuel Olivier