

Visualizing Sound: Interdisciplinary Collaboration as Artistic Correspondence at Bilkent University

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Abstract

Artistic innovation often begins with dialogue, whether between sound and image, movement and word, past and present. French composer Charles Koechlin envisioned many of his piano miniatures as inherently cinematic, composing them in the early 20th century to accompany imagined films. Although this vision was never realized during his lifetime, it reflects a rich tradition of intermedial exchange in which music engages directly with visual narrative. This project reimagines Koechlin's vision through a contemporary lens, situating his work within a broader lineage of cross-disciplinary artistic correspondence, continuing the dialogue of Alexander Scriabin's synesthetic compositions and the visual music of Hans Richter, Walther Ruttmann, and Oskar Fischinger. *Portrait of Daisy Hamilton for Piano and Animation* is an academic project that revisits and reimagines these inter-artistic dialogues. Developed at Bilkent University, the collaboration brought together faculty and students from the Music and Performing Arts Faculty and the Faculty of Fine Arts, Design and Architecture. The project paired live piano performance with original animations created specifically for the music, effectively realizing Koechlin's cinematic vision from the 1930s through contemporary digital tools. Through mutual artistic interpretation, the project foregrounded questions of authorship, visual language, and musical narrative. It also served as a pedagogical experiment in collaborative creation, asking students to work outside their disciplinary silos to co-produce a multimedia work. In revisiting Koechlin's unfulfilled cinematic vision through a contemporary multimedia project, this work contributes to ongoing conversations about how music can function as a form of visual narrative and artistic correspondence within film-inspired contexts.

Keywords: music and visual arts, Charles Koechlin, Daisy Hamilton, interdisciplinary collaboration

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Introduction

Artistic innovation often begins with dialogue. When artists converse across mediums, whether it be between sound and image, or between movement and word, entirely new forms of expression can emerge. This isn't a novel idea, as history is full of examples of artists who found inspiration not within their own field, but across its borders. French Impressionist composer Claude Debussy, for instance, always considered himself a Symbolist before anything else; in other words, he was a composer who thought like a poet. The novelist and poet Thomas Hardy, on the other hand, was a passionate musician at heart, and his musicality influenced both his prose as well as his narratives. This paper traces the lineage of these intermedial connections, specifically moments where music and visual art have intersected, and then situate our project at Bilkent University, *Portrait of Daisy Hamilton for Piano and Animation*, within that lineage, showing how it revisits and reimagines the inter-artistic dialogues manifested in the works of Alexander Scriabin, Hans Richter, Walther Ruttmann, Oskar Fischinger.

Music and the Visual Arts

The relationship between sound and image, between hearing and seeing, goes back centuries. One of the earliest examples is something known as the “ocular harpsichord,” supposedly imagined by the French Jesuit Louis-Bertrand Castel in the eighteenth century. The idea was that each pitch on the keyboard corresponded to one of the seven colors of the rainbow. When a key was pressed, a small panel of that color would lift, illuminated by candlelight. Castel believed he had found a way to make music visible (Arfini, 2013). In other words, he imagined a kind of proto-multimedia instrument. Though it's uncertain whether the ocular harpsichord ever actually worked, the concept is remarkable. It reminds us that artists have long been drawn to the dream of translating one sensory language into another.

Fast forward to the early twentieth century, and that fascination with sound-color correspondence became central to many avant-garde movements. In Russia, Alexander Scriabin's *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire*, which premiered in 1911, called for a “color organ” that would project light in coordination with harmonic shifts in the score. Scriabin envisioned an audience bathed in light and sound, both unfolding in real time (Powell, 2011). The result was not a literal painting of the music, but a sensory correspondence, a mutual illumination between what was heard and what was seen.

Around the same time, painters were beginning to think musically as well. Wassily Kandinsky, František Kupka, and Adolf Hölzel each used musical structures as compositional frameworks for their paintings. Kandinsky's *Fuga* from 1914, for instance, is organized like a musical fugue, with visual “voices” entering one after another, imitating and developing each other (Arfini, 2013). These artists weren't simply inspired by music; they were trying to paint according to musical logic. They were asking: what would it mean to think of color as timbre, or of form as rhythm?

Then, with the invention of cinema, something entirely new became possible. For the first time, time itself, which is the fundamental dimension of music, could be applied to the visual image. Early filmmakers recognized this immediately. The Italian Futurists, for example, tried to make “painted films” that would unfold like musical compositions. Sadly, many of these experiments are lost, but they paved the way for the abstract films of the 1920s by Hans Richter, Walter Ruttmann, and Oskar Fischinger (Arfini, 2013).

Hans Richter, who was originally trained as a painter, studied counterpoint with the composer Ferruccio Busoni. He wanted to understand how to construct visual counterpoint, how to make lines and forms interact the way melodies do in music. His 1919 *Präludium* is a ten-page picture roll in which visual themes develop and transform across the pages, much like musical motifs.

Walter Ruttmann, also a painter trained in music, took this idea further. His *Lichtspiel Opus I*, created in 1921, paired moving abstract shapes with a live musical performance by composer Max Butting. The result was a true audiovisual dialogue: color and form behaving musically, and sound behaving visually. Then came Oskar Fischinger, perhaps the most famous of these visual music pioneers. Fischinger was a painter and violinist who used the new technology of the synchronized soundtrack to bind image and music together more tightly than ever before. His *Studie No. 7* from 1931 visualizes Brahms's *Hungarian Dance No. 5*, every rhythmic accent and phrase mirrored by pulsating geometric shapes. Later, in *An Optical Poem* (1938), Fischinger worked with Liszt's *Second Hungarian Rhapsody*, creating a dazzling world of moving circles and lines that dance exactly in step with the music, and make a visual representation of Liszt's motivic development and thematic transformations. These early works, sometimes called "viewable music," established an entire genre where music and visual art became partners in motion (Arfini, 2013).

All the above experiments, from Castel's ocular harpsichord to Fischinger's animated abstractions, belong to a long tradition of *artistic correspondence*: artists reaching across the boundaries of their own medium to engage in conversation with another. It's a conversation that continues to evolve, even today.

Portrait of Daisy Hamilton for Piano and Animation

This brings our paper to the central figure of our project: the French composer Charles Koechlin. Koechlin, who lived from 1867 to 1950, is a fascinating and somewhat eccentric figure in the landscape of French music. He studied composition with both Massenet and Fauré, and later taught some of the greats of twentieth-century French music, including Darius Milhaud and Francis Poulenc. His music is deeply atmospheric and often cinematic in nature, though he was writing before cinema had become a dominant art form. Possessing an extraordinary imagination, he would compose hundreds of short pieces in a single sitting, each one filled with unique harmonic color and emotional nuance. Perhaps what's most endearing about Koechlin is his lifelong devotion to movie stars. He wrote entire cycles of music inspired by actresses such as Lilian Harvey, Gladys Cooper, and Jean Harlow. Among these works is a set called *Portrait of Daisy Hamilton*, a scenario for an imagined film in which the leading roles were to be played by Koechlin himself and Lilian Harvey (Ash, 1991). It was never made, of course, but the idea of composing for an imaginary film says a lot about Koechlin's creative world. He was composing not just sound, but implied image. In other words, he was writing music that already contained within it a cinematic sensibility.

Our project at Bilkent University set out to realize that cinematic vision. We (Belinda Chen, pianist; Mehveş Topçuoğlu, animator; Fulten Larlar, advisor) asked: what if we could bring to life the film Koechlin imagined but never made? Could we create a modern-day "Portrait of Daisy Hamilton" through a collaboration between live music and animation? The project, titled *Portrait of Daisy Hamilton for Piano and Animation*, was developed as an interdisciplinary collaboration between the Faculty of Music and Performing Arts and the Faculty of Fine Arts, Design, and Architecture. It brought together musicians, animators, and designers, faculty and students working side by side to interpret Koechlin's music through moving images. The idea

was not to illustrate the music literally, but to create an interpretive dialogue, much like the collaborations between Richter and his composers a century earlier.

The process began with a conversation. Belinda performed the pieces for the animation team on the piano, explaining how her choices in tempo, phrasing, and dynamics reflected the emotional narrative she sensed in the score. In response, Mehveş began to sketch visual sequences that echoed those musical gestures. Mehveş didn't simply follow the rhythm or melody; instead, they responded emotionally and conceptually to what they heard. Over time, the music and animation developed in parallel, each informing and reshaping the other. The result was a dialogue of interpretation, not merely between artist and score, but between sound and image, performer and animator, emotion and structure. Both sides contributed equally to shaping the final work.

In total, we selected six short piano pieces from Koechlin's *Portrait of Daisy Hamilton: Hymne à Daisy, Coquetterie, Souvenir d'anciens jours lumineux dans des heures sombres, Gaîté, Pastorale, and Jeux de lumière*. Each movement carries a distinct emotional tone, and together they trace a subtle narrative arc from idealized love to self-reflection, and finally, to acceptance and peace.

The first, *Hymne à Daisy*, was our point of departure. Knowing that "Daisy" was a character meant to be played by Lilian Harvey, we approached this piece as a musical act of devotion that was almost sacred in tone. Koechlin's harmonies here are reverent, suspended, and full of light. Belinda kept the tempos deliberately slow, with a gentle attack into each chord, to preserve that sense of awe. Mehveş's animation responded with natural imagery, delicate movements of hair, the shimmer of reflected light, all of which evoke the purity and idealism of early love. It's a hymn in both name and character. The hand drawn organic forms and the blinking of the eyes evoke a sense of aliveness. Yet expressed in a black and white scheme, they suggest the feeling of being supra-human.

The second piece, *Coquetterie*, shifts the atmosphere completely. It's lively, flirtatious, even slightly nervous, and full of spark and tension. Belinda's interpretation emphasized that sense of excitement and uncertainty, with quick articulations and sudden dynamic changes. Mehveş's animation mirrored this with bright colors and rapid motion, almost like the fluttering of wings. Together, they wanted to capture that thrilling yet unstable moment when attraction first begins: exhilarating, but already shadowed by the possibility of dissonance. The animation piece starts in black and white, then introduces lively colors one by one, gradually enriching the color palette.

The third movement, *Souvenir d'anciens jours lumineux dans des heures sombres* ("Memory of old bright days in dark hours"), is the emotional center of the set. It's a deeply introspective piece, haunted by regret. In playing it, Belinda focused on Koechlin's dissonances, allowing them to ring with as much rawness as possible. Mehveş's animation contributed to this mood with the monochromatic, repetitive and looped nature of it. The image is the face of a young woman distorted by capture within a translucent object, a glass. This is where the dialogue between our mediums became most intense, as both music and image seemed to ask the same question: how do we process loss and still find beauty within it?

Then comes *Gaîté*, ("Gaiety"), which acts as a kind of release. In our discussions, we talked a lot about what happiness means, how fleeting and mysterious it can be. When joy arrives, we often don't quite trust it, and when it fades, we're left grasping for its echo. In performance,

Belinda kept the phrasing light and transparent, using pauses and silences almost as characters themselves. The animation embraces the chasing of an elusive object by an abstract human-like figure through fluid movements of organic forms. The gentle dissolves suggest memory and the act of letting go. It became a meditation on forgiveness, both of the self and of the past.

The fifth piece, *Pastorale*, offers a sense of renewal. The writing features two distinct melodic voices that often move in contrary motion, sometimes close, sometimes apart. In conversation, Belinda talked about how she imagined them as two lovers walking together: at times converging, at times drifting away, but always connected through the harmony beneath. This was an opportunity to bring out Koechlin's contrapuntal thinking, that sense of independent voices existing in harmony. Visually, Mehveş translated this through fluid, intertwining forms, organic shapes that sometimes separate and sometimes overlap, echoing the natural ebb and flow of relationships. In this piece, the dialogue between sound and image became one of companionship rather than contrast.

Finally, *Jeux de lumière*, ("Light Games"): This piece closes the cycle with serenity and balance. It's inspired by a scene from one of Lilian Harvey's films, *The Girl and the Boy*, where light falls across her shoulders during a comedic burglary scene. Knowing this, we saw the music not as narrative illustration but as a study in radiance, the play of illumination and shadow. In performance, Belinda tried to highlight the harmonic color, allowing Koechlin's subtle modulations to shimmer like shifting light. Mehveş responded by focusing on negative space, the light streaming through, rather than the objects it touches. Forms dissolving into each other over a black background express the contemplative mood of the absent defining the present. Together, these choices give the final piece a sense of resolution, a bittersweet peace that feels both solitary and fulfilled.

Across these six movements, a larger narrative emerged, not just the story of Daisy Hamilton, but of artistic correspondence itself: how two disciplines can learn to speak a shared language without losing their individual voices. The project asked us to think carefully about authorship: who is the "creator" when both sound and image shape meaning? And it pushed our students to step outside their disciplinary boundaries, to engage in creative negotiation rather than unilateral control.

Conclusion

From a pedagogical standpoint, this was one of the most valuable outcomes. In the traditional conservatory model, musicians are often trained in relative isolation: they focus on interpretation, technique, style, but all within the framework of the musical text. Similarly, visual artists may focus on their medium in visual or spatial terms. This project challenged those habits. It asked: what happens when musicians must think visually, and visual artists must think musically? What happens when both must make decisions together, in real time?

The result was not only a successful performance but also a profound learning experience. Students discovered that collaboration is not about compromise in the negative sense; it's about translation, finding equivalences between expressive vocabularies. They also discovered that interdisciplinary work requires vulnerability. One must allow their medium to be affected, to be changed, by another's interpretation, which can be a difficult but ultimately transformative process.

Artistically, what struck us all most was how naturally Koechlin's music lent itself to this form of collaboration. His harmonic language, which is full of shifting colors and atmospheric ambiguity, already invites visualization. It's as if he composed with an eye toward the screen, even though he never had the opportunity to work in film. In realizing *Portrait of Daisy Hamilton* through animation, we were, in a way, fulfilling his unfulfilled dream, turning his imagined cinema into something tangible.

Beyond resurrecting Koechlin's vision, the project also speaks to a larger cultural question: how can academic institutions serve as laboratories for new forms of media art? Universities are uniquely positioned to bring together specialists from different fields who might not otherwise meet: composers and coders, performers and designers, animators and theorists. When those worlds intersect, the results can be startlingly original. Our collaboration at Bilkent is one small example of how that can work in practice: how a classical music department and a design department can join forces to produce something that neither could have achieved alone.

Looking ahead, the project continues to evolve. Mehveş is currently developing a short film that expands on the animation's visual language, drawing on the same themes of light, memory, and transformation.

In revisiting Koechlin's unrealized cinematic vision, we found ourselves part of a larger lineage, one that stretches from the ocular harpsichord and Scriabin's color organ, through the abstract films of Richter and Fischinger, to today's digital multimedia art. Each of these moments represents a renewed attempt to bridge sound and sight, to make one sense visible through another. Our contribution was simply to continue that conversation using the tools of our own time. Ultimately, *Portrait of Daisy Hamilton for Piano and Animation* was not just a performance, but an experiment in how we might think differently about collaboration, not as the merging of mediums, but as a meeting of imaginations.

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