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[It's when he uses tape or sampler that Mâche is the most original, intriguing and interesting](https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/RKKZXDND11A4N/ref%3Dcm_cr_srp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B005ZGLABW)

Reviewed in the United States on May 12, 2015

François-Bernard Mâche, born in 1935, is in my opinion one of the most interesting and original French composers from the generation after Xenakis (1922-2001) and Boulez (1925), and one whose recognition isn't up to his compositional originality: he's certainly had his share of commissions and official honors in France, but he's not acknowledged internationally and has relatively limited representation on record. A founder with Pierre Schaeffer of the Groupe de Recherches Musicales (GRM) at the French public radio, he's a pioneer of mixing acoustic instruments (including voice) and tape, and later, with technological progress, sampler. He's also an ethnomusicologist, and his compositions are infused with extra-european influences. One of the most fascinating and appealing aspects of his compositional output is when he models his melodic lines after natural phenomena analyzed and abstracted, whether spoken language or birdsong. Because of that, he's been called (and is called by the liner notes) a "naturalist" composer, for whatever that's worth: but his music is NOT evocative of Schaeffer's or Pierre Henry's "musique concrete": whatever sounds of nature he goes from, they are so metabolized as to become abstract sound-forms. All this makes him an independent, one not enslaved to the rules and strictures of Boulez' serialism and post-serialism, part of no school, which may explain why no school has championed his work.

That said, this Erato CD, published in 1993, may not be the best introduction to his music. It mixes pieces for percussion (Phénix for vibraphone and tom-toms, track 2; Kemit for solo darabukka e.g. Arabian goblet drum, track 7) or solo wind and percussion (Figures for bass clarinet and vibraphone, track 6) and works for voice, alone (in Three Sacred Chants, track the singer occasionally accompanies herself with small strokes of percussion, metal plates or frame drum) or with instruments (Aliunde, track 1). Only two use the sampler or tape, Aliunde and Aulodie.

Kemit, the piece for darabukka, from 1970, sounds very much like something that would have been improvised by an advanced "ethnic" darbuka player. The vibraphone which has the stage alone in Phénix (1982) for almost four minutes is dreamy and atmospheric, but then 4 minutes of dreamy vibraphone, joined, or perhaps challenged, by the toms for another 5 minutes (maybe a musical metaphor of man wooing woman), despite moments of great beauty, don't seem to entirely impose the sense of their necessity. The processes seem to be very sophisticated - the liner notes explain that the rhythms played by the toms are modeled after the meter of the ancient Greek poetry of Pindar - but you don't really hear that in the music. Much the same can be said of Figures (1983): so, you get a contemporary piece for bass clarinet and vibraphone, with the former using plenty of contemporary playing techniques but sounding none-too aggressive, and it may be great for a clarinet-percussion couple frustrated not to be able to play the Brahms Sonatas together. But for an audience, there's nothing revelatory or truly attention-grabbing here.

The interest of Three Sacred Chants (composition date not given, but a check online shows that it is "1982-1990"), is that they are sung - a cappella - in lost languages, Hittite (the oldest surviving Indo-European language, from around 1300 BC), Etruscan, and Celt/Gaulish. Mâche's attraction to these lost or rare languages (in other works he has also used Guayaki, Selk'nam, Xhosa, Eskmo, Kawi, Telugu and Dargwa) is not principally archaeological or ethnological, despite his early training in that area. The liner notes aptly comment that "what matters to him above all else is the revival of utterly different worlds of sound encapsulated in dead or remote languages, an act of resuscitation which succeeds when the audience listens only to the specific phonetic features regardless of any semantic concern". Maybe, but the Three Sacred Chants still sound like a cappella singing, somewhere in between folk and contemporary, ritualistic, somewhat dry, and they could be simply, for all we know, sung in Turkish or Hebrew, and Mâche might just as well have invented a language of phonemes, as Claude Vivier and Georges Aperghis have occasionally done. The third chant, very rhythmic and vehement and accompanied by drum, with the singer using a "coarse" voice reminiscent of some Mediterranean folk traditions, reminded me very much of the music of Carl Orff for Sophocles/Hölderlin's [Antigonae](https://www.amazon.com/Antigonae/dp/B00000E56G/ref%3Dcm_cr_arp_d_rvw_txt?ie=UTF8).

So the two best pieces, the most typical of the most original and intriguing Mâche has to offer, are the two using tape or sampler, Aulodie (1983) and Aliunde (1988). In the former, the "orchestra" provided by the tape is lots of fun, with its stereo tossing of shards of ironic sounds from channel to channel (they often evoke some serious version of R2D2, and sometimes they sound like Reich's In C), and its pointillistic writing for the clarinet, as a voluble babbling dialogue of alien birds.

Aliunde, the longest piece on the CD (19:44), is in many ways a synthesis of the art of Mâche, as it mixes the exotic/ethnic inspiration (it starts with Indian tablas alone and sounds there like little more than "ethnic" music as it would be improvised by a local player, although one admittedly well-versed in contemporary rhythms), the combination of voice, used in a purely instrumental capacity singing wordless chant, and instruments (clarinet and percussion), and the combination of acoustic instruments and sampler. It's mostly soft, dreamy, terse even, and very "-ic": atmospheric, pointillistic, enigmatic, ritualistic, and poetic. It also has moments of playfulness (still in terse and enigmatic mood), with onomatopea and jumps by vocalist over shards of intriguing sounds by clarinet, percussion or sampler, and moments of lush melismata. The end, with long lines of soprano and clarinet against "spatial" waves of sounds by sampler, sounds like Ligeti.

These are the two pieces that truly warrant listening to this CD. But note that Aulodie (together with Phénix) has been reissued, first in 2000 by the label Assai, [François-Bernard Mâche: Kengir - Phénix - Brûlis - Figures - Aulodie](https://www.amazon.com/Fran%C3%A7ois-Bernard-M%C3%A2che-Kengir-Ph-eacute-nix-Br%C3%BBlis-Figures-Aulodie/dp/B000063XPF/ref%3Dcm_cr_arp_d_rvw_txt?ie=UTF8), then later by l'Empreinte Digitale, [François-Bernard Mâche Kengir - Phénix - Brûlis - Figures - Aulodie](https://www.amazon.com/Fran%C3%A7ois-Bernard-M%C3%A2che-Kengir-Ph-eacute-nix-Br%C3%BBlis-Figures-Aulodie/dp/B000WTYQUO/ref%3Dcm_cr_arp_d_rvw_txt?ie=UTF8), together with other pieces of Mâche performe by Ensemble Accroche Note, including a new recording of Figures and a fine piece for voice and sampler, Kengir.

TT 73 minutes, dense and informative liner notes. Accroche-Note, an ensemble formed in 1981 around soprano François Kübler and clarinetist Armand Angster, have enjoyed a long companionship with Mâche, and Aliunde was written for them. Their execution can be considered authoritative.