

CHAPTER 2

Years of Improvement (1930-1935)

The Amis de l'Orgue competition - Lessons with Tournemire

Fresh from the Conservatory, 23 years old, Jean Langlais had no idea that he would participate in a great movement to renew the twentieth century French School of the organ. To be sure, the pioneers (Franck, Widor, Guilmant, Dupré, Vierne, Tournemire, Marchal) had fought to change a 19th century situation compromised by the mediocrity of its taste and its organ technique.

By the quality of their compositions, improvisations, and performances, these pioneers won over a public until then sparse and lukewarm, for whom the organ was too often synonymous with the noise at the end of the Mass. The main task remained: to release the organ from the circles in which it was confined, which meant first of all, from the closed circle of the church.

In 1930, the French School of the organ already shone and the young generation, that of Duruflé, Messiaen, Alain, Langlais, and Litaize, supported by their elders, was soon to play a leading role. This road to success was facilitated by the 1927 formation of the organization called “Les Amis de l’Orgue” (Friends of the Organ), founded by Count Bérenger de Miramon Fitz-James and the young organist-musicologist Norbert Dufourcq, with the encouragement and support of musicians such as Widor, d’Indy, Pierné, Vierne, Tournemire, Dupré, and Marchal.

Its goals were to bring together and assist organists, particularly the youngest ones. Already in 1924, the musicologist Jean Huré, who had started a monthly journal named *L’Orgue et les organistes*, was complaining both about the public and musicians in fairly strong language:

The organ is little known by our composers; it is little known to the musical public. One rarely hears it except in church. The organist is generally ignored by the masses unless he was fortunate enough to call attention to himself with theatrical works or symphonic ones. César Franck is thus better known for his *Symphony* for orchestra than for his admirable organ works, unfamiliar to many musicians. It wasn’t always like this. From the end of the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth, every composer was an organist, and it was above all by his talent for improvisation that he was judged by his

colleagues and the public. A competition for the position for a parish organ post had more impact than a boxing match does today.¹

But because of insufficient funds, *L'Orgue et les organistes* ceased publication two years later, in 1926, after 33 issues.² The idea of a journal was taken up a little later by Bérenger de Miramon Fitz-James and Norbert Dufourcq. In June 1929 the first issue of the *Bulletin semestriel des Amis de l'Orgue* appeared: four pages devoted to the world of the organ in France. In December of 1930, it went from being biannual to quarterly and increased from four to eight pages, and this time it included articles, a format intended to make it of comparable importance as Jean Huré's defunct journal. But very soon the "Amis de l'Orgue" added other activities, to support the organ and its players, such as organizing organ recitals, organ crawls, and competitions in performance, improvisation, and composition which revived the taste for the celebrated organ jousts of Bach's time.

Today, we're used to the proliferation of organ competitions, national and international, but in 1930 it was truly a new idea, allowing young artists to prove their mettle and gain a reputation.

The organizers wisely decided to alternate competitions for performance and improvisation with those for composition. Maurice Duruflé was the first double winner of this modern tournament, taking the prize for performance and improvisation in 1929, and for composition in 1930 with his triptych *Prélude, Adagio et Choral varié sur le thème du "Veni Creator,"* destined to become a classic of the organ literature.

Once he received his first prize in organ at the Conservatory in June 1930, Jean Langlais decided to try the adventure of this competition, which was next scheduled for June 21, 1931 in the category of performance and improvisation. Bernard Gavoty describes the details:

The competition in performance and improvisation created by the Society of the Amis de l'Orgue is based on a model similar to the one at the Conservatory but it involves still greater difficulties. That is to say that it is open only to those who have completed Conservatory. The competition includes:

1. Improvisation of a chorale on a plainchant theme, then a more developed symphonic paraphrase on the same theme.
2. Improvisation of a prelude and fugue on a submitted theme.
3. Improvisation of a true symphonic allegro on two submitted themes.
4. Performance, by memory, of four required works from various eras and in various styles.
5. Performance of three modern works, one by memory, chosen by the jury.

One can easily imagine the talent and technique needed to attempt a competition so perilous. We hasten to say that *in no foreign country* does organ instruction involve such tests, and it is France's privilege to produce organists who can lay claim to such a comprehensive and high level training.³

¹ Jean Huré, "Essai sur l'art de l'orgue," in *L'Orgue et les organistes* n°3, 1^{ère} année, 15 juin 1924, p.29.

² It published from April 1924 to December 15, 1926. See *Les Amis de l'Orgue* [François Sabatier], "Préambule," *L'Orgue* 300 (2012:4). 3.

³ Bernard Gavoty, "La Jeune École d'Orgue Française," in "Dix Années au service de l'orgue français (1927–1937)," *Bulletin trimestriel des Amis de l'Orgue* 30/31 (June–Sept., 1937). 114.

As capable as he was, Jean Langlais didn't judge himself ready to confront such tests. To be sure, he had studied improvisation on a free theme and fugue with André Marchal and Marcel Dupré. He was less familiar with the symphonic allegro, but his biggest weakness was the paraphrase on a plainchant, the first test on the competition's agenda, and he absolutely had to have a master teacher to guide him.

With no hesitation he chose Charles Tournemire, at the time working on his life-work, *L'Orgue Mystique*, composed between 1927 and 1932, consisting of more than 1,000 pages freely paraphrasing Gregorian Chant in 51 volumes covering the whole liturgical year. Tournemire was an exceptional improviser, as the composer-organist Daniel-Lesur relates:

Having been, over the years, the constant witness to what Tournemire called his “chats” that is, his incomparable improvisations, I can attest that serene or not, they were always inspired, always exultant.

He himself described the trajectory of his thought during spontaneous musical creation: “All preparation is the opposite of this art,” he said. “In a person with this strength, from the moment when the sensitivity awakens, the creative element gradually develops with logic and fantasy at the same time, to the point of giving the illusion of something written along with, in the sublime moments, the ‘lightening flashes’... Thus you have the singular impression of listening to someone other than yourself. The subconscious takes over...”

And he acknowledged that being able to play with the technical prowess that is required by a written work at the same time that he was improvising, had demanded a lot of work.

The “*Cinq Improvisations*” that he recorded on 78 rpm disks in 1930 and 1931 on the organ at Ste Clotilde are vivid testimony to Tournemire’s inspiration and virtuosity.⁴

Daniel-Lesur, who was present for these recordings, recalls them:

One night in the darkness of the organ loft overlooking the deserted church, I was privileged to attend this recording session. In that era recordings were made on enormous circular wax discs, and only four minutes at a time.

Tournemire was on his organ bench, concentrating, withdrawn into himself, waiting until the fateful clock had prayed its Rosary with its clangs, peals, and grinding.

For the improvisations which, because they were more developed, would have to be reproduced on two sides of a record, he knew that he would have to interrupt himself for the time needed to change and warm the wax.

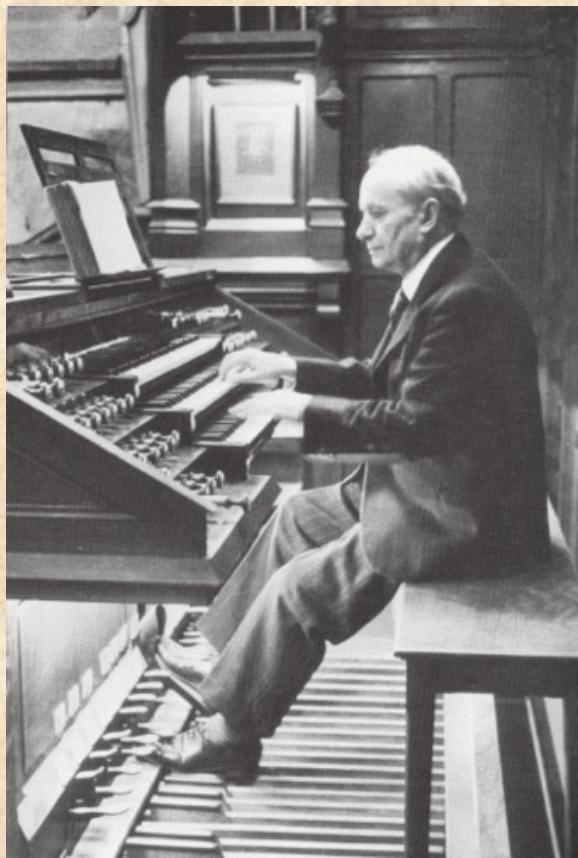
Not to mention a police patrol who, seeing the light in the church at such an hour and thinking to have discovered burglars, questioned the technicians who were moving their equipment.

I was worried, knowing the nervousness and impatience of the master. In these conditions would he find the spontaneity, the prodigious presence of reflexes that stirred our enthusiasm every Sunday?

I was wrong to doubt. At the signal, the flow was immediate, and none of the constraints that were imposed could contain the freedom, the continuity, and the splendor of the musical discourse.⁵

⁴ Recorded by Polydor (Polydor 561048, 561050, 561058, 566058, 566060) at Sainte-Clotilde on April 30, 1930 (*Cantilène, Choral- Improvisation sur le « Victime Paschali », Fantaisie sur « Ave maris stella »*) ; in March 1931(*Improvisation sur le « Te Deum »*) and in November 1931 (*Petite Rhapsodie*).

⁵ Daniel-Lesur, “Une tribune d’orgue Franco-Belge,” *Bulletin de la classe des Beaux-Arts*, 5^e série, tome 66, Bruxelles, 1984.



Charles Tournemire improvising on plainchant at the console of Sainte-Clotilde

Figure 14. (photograph in the collection of Odile Weber)

It was during this time that Jean Langlais went to ask Tournemire for lessons in improvisation. Tournemire had few private students at the time since he was very particular about the quality of his acolytes and only accepted students already equipped with well established artistry, such as Maurice Duruflé, Daniel-Lesur, Henriette Roget and Gaston Litaize.

Langlais remembered:

Throughout the year I worked on modal improvisation, which is to say Gregorian improvisation, with Tournemire. Generally, he gave his lessons at his home on rue Milne-Edwards in the evening, and they might last more than an hour, but what an hour! Instead of giving you technical advice, he said things like this: When you want to do a Gregorian paraphrase, these should be your preoccupations: first, create an atmosphere; second, impose it on your audience. You get it? Go ahead!

I went to the organ. At the end of 30 seconds, he pushed me over to take my place on the bench and showed me an example on the manuals. When he did this, since I had a pile of Bach's organ works on my right, the scores fell off. I picked them up and put them back next to me; the lesson resumed, and once again Tournemire—losing complete control of himself—jumped up to push me, and the scores fell down again without him even noticing...

"You didn't understand a thing," he told me. "Impose your ambiance, so that your center is rich. Rise, rise, your audience will follow you. It started to pant, could no longer breathe. Then, play them two brief dissonant chords on full organ... leave a long silence... the audience is dead... then open the heavens to them with a poetic conclusion on an eight-foot bourdon and a voix celeste... Believe me, they deserved it!"

But this was an eminent artist and a great pedagogue, and when he taught he was inspired, and it was extraordinary.

One day he said this to me, “All music that doesn’t have the glorification of God as its basis is useless!” I responded, “Well then, what do you do about Debussy, Stravinsky, Bartok, Ravel?” And he responded coldly, “USELESS!” Which is obviously debatable. I left these lessons exhausted, drained, sometimes discouraged. I was wrong, however, since after manhandling me a bit during the course, he always left me on his doorstep with these words, “It was very good this evening, my young friend, you are making progress!”⁶

On June 21, 1931, after several months of this incomparable teaching, Langlais faced the competition of the Amis de l’Orgue, finding himself competing against a single candidate, the blind organist Gustave Noël.

The tests took place on the organ of the Eglise Réformée de l’Etoile, a protestant church, before a jury impressive in both in size and quality, presided over by Vincent d’Indy. The other members were Bonnet, Bret, Noël-Gallon, Jacob, de La Presle, Letocart, Marchal, Sergent, Tournemire, and Vierne.

Several newspaper articles at the time reviewed this musical event. Here are some typical passages:

Identified by numbers, the candidates are invisible to the jury and to the audience. They were given all the guarantees of scrupulous impartiality.

When the unanimous prize was decided for No. 2, we saw a young man escorted to the table, whose name we learned, Mr. Jean Langlais, along with his credentials: first prize in organ at the Conservatory last year, and teacher at the National Institute for the Young Blind.

It is moving to think that this is an artist whose eyes are closed, someone whose playing and whose improvisations testify so lively and delicate a sense of sonic color. From the first measures of his paraphrase on the beautiful liturgical theme of “Ave maris stella,” Mr. Jean Langlais showed a rare musical personality. In him, a clear, even joyful imagination is harmoniously combined with a serene gravity that is, at least to us, the right temperament for an organist....

—Gustave Bret⁷

Another more detailed newspaper excerpt:

The second competition in performance and improvisation took place on the 21st of June in front of a jury headed by Mr. Vincent d’Indy. To assess the difficulty of this tournament: the improvisation test included: a contrapuntal chorale on “Ave maris stella” followed by a symphonic paraphrase on the same theme; a prelude and fugue on a theme by Mr. Noël-Gallon, and a sonata movement on two themes by Mr. Vincent d’Indy.

For performance, they required the *Prelude and Fugue in D Major* by Bach [BWV 532], the *choral prelude* “O Lamm Gottes” by the same composer [BWV 656], one of the Three *Chorals* by Franck, the organist’s choice, and finally a modern work chosen from a list of three pieces offered by the contestant.

This is far from those competitions in which a single piece, all too often more pianistic than organistic, makes it impossible to judge the complex aspects of the technique and style needed for the organ! Here, the dominant role given to Bach works, the master of

⁶ Langlais, “Souvenirs.”

⁷ *L’Intransigeant*, July 28, 1931. Review in the collection of Marie-Louise Langlais.

masters, the choice of the chorale-prelude “O Lamm Gottes,” whose polyphony shows up the organist’s legato and phrasing (a quality so rare and so important), and the obligatory performance of a *Choral* by Franck, touchstone for an understanding and sensitive performer, taken together fully illuminated the strengths or weaknesses of the player.

Just two contestants faced these formidable tests: Messrs. Noël and Langlais.

Mr. Jean Langlais triumphed easily, in great measure because of his delicious paraphrase of “Ave maris stella.” From the first notes of this successful improvisation, the jury and the audience were conquered, and the spell was not broken until the last chord. The prelude of his fugue was also very appealing. The performance of the Fugue in D and of the finale of the Fourth Symphony by Mr. Vierne revealed a crisp and incisive touch and an excellent sense of rhythm....

The jury has unanimously awarded the “Prix des Amis de l’Orgue” to Mr. Jean Langlais.

—Maurice Sergent⁸

Jean Langlais remembers that day:

At the end of the contest, the president of the jury, Vincent d’Indy, announced: “We would like to see Number 2.”

It was me, the Number 2. I was absolutely convinced that they had criticisms of me. I very timidly approached, and Vincent d’Indy said:

“The jury has unanimously awarded you the Prize for Les Amis d’Orgue competition.” This happened at the organ of Alexandre Cellier, a charming man, who was organist at the Étoile protestant church; my students came, grabbed me and carried me in triumph along the Avenue de la Grande Armée, but before doing that, Tournemire came to embrace me and said: “I’m happy for you. You were wonderful, marvelous ...”

And I said to him what I was thinking: “My dear Master, I know to WHOM I owe this prize!” He understood perfectly that I was referring to him and afterwards he repeated to anyone who would listen: “I have given lessons to all these ungrateful students but one. This one has publicly acknowledged what I have done for him.

The audience that day was struck by the impressive manner in which Jean Langlais managed his Gregorian improvisation on the theme of “Ave Maris Stella,” the determining factor in his ultimate success. We see the stamp of Tournemire, who knew how to complete the pedagogical work of his predecessors; Marchal had instilled in Jean Langlais the taste for color and poetry of the organ as well as a very “French” elegance; and Dupré had then given the young man an assured technique. It was Tournemire, however, with his powerful originality, who could develop his student in the infinitely rich and varied domain of the “Gregorian paraphrase,” a genre that Jean Langlais was to cultivate with joy his whole life.

To get an idea of the personality of the young composer at the threshold of his adult life, we turn to the poet Anatole Le Braz’s comments about Bretons in general:

Above all, the Breton is testy and impressionable. His proverbial stubbornness ... makes him seem willful, but his dominant characteristic is sensitivity—a Celtic sensitivity, trembling, worried, overcast, and which overstimulates a tireless imagination that is always at work. It is rare that he doesn’t let himself be guided by it and usually he is at its mercy. Curious about the new, avid about change, open to the call of adventure, no one is more respectful of rules, no one is more impatient.

⁸ “Le Concours des Amis de l’Orgue,” *Le Courrier musical*, July 13, 1931. 436.

Yesterday a royalist, tomorrow an anarchist, endlessly in violent reaction to something or someone... He would not be able to give up believing any more than breathing. Even the features of the countryside seem to have contributed to keeping the Bretons in a certain mental state... It is undeniable that there is a gravity, a melancholy indigenous to this region. The indecisiveness of the light, the frequency of fog, the often singular distortions to which objects are subjected, the phantom-like and mysterious silhouettes that they lend, for example, to rocks or tree trunks, the wail of the wind that reigns here as master, ... all contribute to the innate penchant of the Breton imagination for the fantastic and supernatural.⁹

It seems to us that every aspect of this description applies to Jean Langlais, who in spite of his ten years at the National Institute for the Young Blind, remained deeply marked by his Celtic roots. For in him, as with his compatriots, sensitivity, imagination, and nonconformity coexisted with melancholy and a taste for the supernatural. Guided by a rock solid faith, he did not know doubt, and his work ethic had its source in the ancestral tenacity that his family always demonstrated in order to survive the hardships of life.

Marriage - First concerts - Early teaching career

In 1929, when he had completed his studies in Dupré's class, Jean Langlais began to give private lessons on a little nine-stop Mutin organ made available to him by the Valentin Haüy Association. One of Dupré's students from outside Paris, Théodore Basset, a regular auditor of Dupré's organ classes at the Conservatory, asked Jean Langlais to come down to his native Toulouse to give a concert. The young man accepted and played one of the first recitals of his long career as a concert organist on August 10, 1930 at the Church of the Sacred Heart. On this occasion he met Jeanne Sartre, his student's neighbor and like him originally from Escalquens, a little village of 300 inhabitants about twelve miles from Toulouse.

The two young people took to each other very quickly. Clever, intelligent, and artistic, Jeanne Sartre had a genuine talent for painting. Her father, who moved to work in the Parisian postal system, lived with his wife and daughter in a little suburban house in Maisons-Alfort, near Paris; Jean Langlais soon became a regular visitor, and eventually a marriage was agreed upon. The date was set for December 3, 1931 in the church at Maisons-Alfort. Olivier Messiaen attended, as well as André Marchal, who played the organ for the occasion, playing, while they exited the "Chant héraudique," the last of Langlais' *Six Preludes*, dedicated to Gaston Litaize.

The day after the wedding, the couple moved into 160 rue de la Convention, and, shortly after, to 22 rue Duroc, the same building where André Marchal lived and just a few hundred yards from the Institute for the Young Blind. From then on, aside from moving from 22 to 26 rue Duroc in 1936, a move necessitated by the arrival of little Janine, Jean Langlais was never to leave this address in the shadow of the Invalides dome.

His appointment as aspiring-teacher of organ at the Institute for the Young Blind in April of 1930 came at just the right moment to allow the young couple to look to the future with tranquility, but on the other hand it involved a major time commitment. In addition to

⁹ Anatole le Braz, *La Bretagne : choix de textes précédés d'une étude* (Paris Renouard-Laurens, 1948. 49–51.

teaching organ, he was charged with the direction of the choir inherited from Marty, which on top of the rehearsals hour Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, meant providing the music for the chapel Masses (at 8:30 am Thursdays and Sundays) and at Vespers (at 1:30 pm).

The composer remembers his life as choirmaster:

At the time of Marty's retirement, the mixed choir was large, and I was only 24 years old. Well, specifically I was supposed to conduct the girls who were about the same age as I. Marty forewarned me: "You'll run into formidable opposition." And in fact, one of the supervisors of the girls, who was part of the choir, decreed that she didn't "want to be directed by a kid." To which Marchal remarked, "A kid, maybe, but a kid who knows a lot." Fortunately, it worked out, and soon I found the work entralling.

I began by having them sing two or three choruses by Debussy, "Dieu qu'il fait bon regarder" and "Yver, vous n'estes qu'un villain," and suddenly my 59 choristers became enthusiastic... Together we prepared great works from the Renaissance, like the Mass "Le Bien que j'ay" by Guillaume Dufay, the six-voiced *Pope Marcellus Mass* by Palestrina, and excerpts of Bach's *Actus tragicus*. That taught me a lot about vocal writing.

Moreover, it was for my choir that I composed my first work for four-part mixed voices, *Deux Chansons de Clément Marot* ("Je suis aymé de la plus belle" and "Aux damoyselles paresseuses d'escrire à leurs amis") premiered under my direction on June 10, 1931 at the National Institute for the Young Blind.

This became my first published work in 1933. That's why I called it "opus 1." In addition to works from the choral repertory, I also rehearsed my choristers in plainchant in view of the religious services in the chapel. Exciting work, especially since I had studied fairly seriously at the Gregorian Institute in Paris, on the advice of Blazy and Tournemire.

For Easter of 1931, the chaplain of the Institute asked me to compose a motet for the Blessed Virgin, which I did with pleasure. I wrote a short piece for two voices and organ, very simple, that I titled *Ave mundi gloria*, and which was published in 1933 by Hérelle. My career as choirmaster was for me, for 34 years, a way of perfecting the art of writing for voices, and the students always attended, even when we had to have extra rehearsals, something that happened often!¹⁰

But the centerpiece of his work at the Institute was of course organ instruction, six hours a day, to students (often at the beginning, old friends of his own age or even older) who immediately pledged him affection and admiration. They proved it to him by carrying him in triumph the whole length of the avenue de la Grande Armée after his victory at the competition of the "Amis de l'Orgue" in June of 1931.

Aside from these principal activities, the young teacher substituted regularly in the major Parisian churches (Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Saint-Antoine-des-Quinze-Vingts, Saint-Étienne-du-Mont), feeling too busy to accept an organ post of his own. That is why he refused an offer from his friend Malherbe to take over the loft at Notre-Dame-de-la-Croix in Ménilmontant (in the 20th arrondissement) where he himself was choirmaster; Langlais suggested his friend Gaston Litaize instead.

Since finishing at the Conservatory in 1930, Jean Langlais made it a point of honor to play the works of his friends in concerts.

¹⁰ Langlais, "Souvenirs."

Thus on December 28, 1930, he gave the second performance (the premiere having been by the composer himself) of Messiaen's newly composed *Diptyque* in a recital held at Saint-Antoine-des-Quinze-Vingts and sponsored by the "Amis de l'Orgue" for the first prize awarded in the organ class of the Conservatory.

He was therefore extremely surprised to receive the following note from Olivier Messiaen:¹¹

Fuligny, July 22, 1931

Dear Friend,

Since poor Mr. Quef has died, the organ post at La Trinité is vacant. You know that for two years I was the only substitute for Mr. Quef. Therefore I applied for the position. They told me that you were one of the candidates for this post.

I don't blame you at all, but that really surprises me.

I congratulate you on the prize at the Amis de l'Orgue.

Trust in my unwavering friendship,

Olivier Messiaen

Jean Langlais' response to Messiaen must have been vehement, judging by the following:

Fuligny, August 3, 1931

My Dear Friend,

Thank you for your letter, which moved me. I have changed a lot and I have buried the few illusions about men that I still had. If I had doubted your friendship, I would not have written to you.

Your sweet fury against my lack of trust delights me, and I see to what extent you are a loyal friend. Friendship is a very pure song that should not be tarnished by dissonances. I will not forget you and I know you will do the same for me. You wrote so frankly and so kindly that I would embrace you if I saw you.

Thank you for sending your consolation about the competition in Rome without sharing your opinion. My cantata was good music and less good theater: the judgment was very fair. As for La Trinité, I wait, I would like it a little, but I don't have much hope. The future seems to me funereal. Is this an effect of my fanciful and vexatious temperament, because, in fact, the sun is shining and there are flowers?

Goodbye dear friend, trust in my affectionately devoted feelings.

Olivier Messiaen

A month later, Messiaen informed Langlais of his appointment as official organist at La Trinité, becoming—at the age of 23—the youngest organist to hold such a post in France:

Fuligny, September 17, 1931

Dear Friend,

I have been appointed organist at La Trinité. I'm telling you this good news immediately. I remember your extreme kindness in this matter: you are a faithful friend, really too faithful and I fear being unworthy of you.

During the course of next year, come to my place from time to time if you aren't too busy; I'd be very happy to spend some evenings with you.

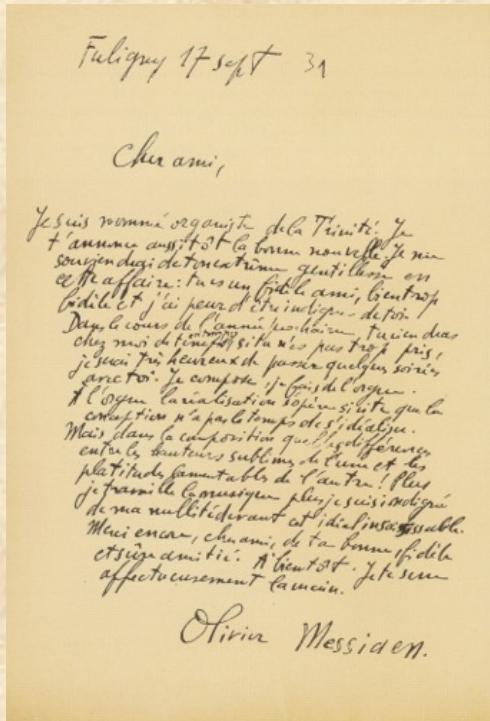
I'm composing, I'm playing the organ. At the organ, the realization happens so fast that the concept doesn't have time to be idealized.

But in composition, what a difference between the sublime heights of one and the lamentable platitudes of another! The more I work on music, the more I am indignant at my nothingness before that elusive ideal.

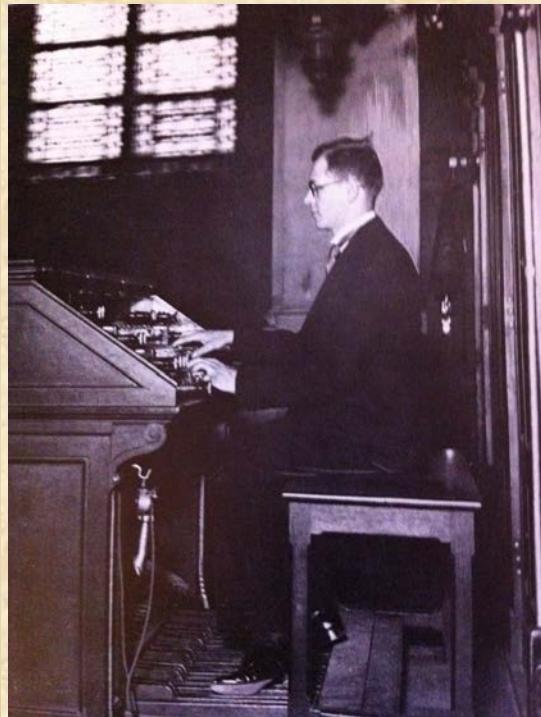
¹¹ This letter, as the followings, is part of a collection of 65 letters sent by Olivier Messiaen to Jean Langlais between 1931 and 1990 (collection Marie-Louise Langlais).

Thank you again, dear friend, for your good, faithful, and certain friendship. Until next time.

I warmly shake your hand.
Olivier Messiaen



Original letter from Olivier Messiaen to
Jean Langlais, September 17, 1931
Figure 15. (collection Marie-Louise Langlais)



First photograph of Messiaen at the organ of
La Trinité, Paris, 1931
Figure 16. (photo Roger Viollet)

For his part, Messiaen invited Jean Langlais regularly to the premieres of his works, evidenced by the following excerpt from a letter written two months after his appointment to the organ post at La Trinité:

Paris, November 29, 1931
Dear Friend,
They're playing my symphonic poem *Les Offrandes oubliées* on Sunday, December 6, at three o'clock at the Société des Concerts.
There's an open rehearsal (10 francs for all the seats) Saturday, December 5, at 9 am.
The rehearsal is more important than the concert. It would give me great pleasure if you could come.
Thanks in advance! Excuse me for not sending you an invitation. There is none.
Your old friend,
Olivier Messiaen

The Amis de l'Orgue Composition Competition - The *Poèmes évangéliques* (1932)

His many activities didn't deter Jean Langlais, however, from trying to achieve a goal he had set for himself the day after his success at the performance and improvisation competition sponsored by the "Amis de l'Orgue" in 1931: to win, as well, that organization's composition competition in May of 1932, and in so doing to equal the remarkable record of Duruflé, who, let us remember, won the successive competitions in 1929 (performance and improvisation) and 1930 (composition).

In an interesting and quite unknown document¹², Maurice Duruflé confided his desire also to participate in this contest, before giving it up out of caution:

Paris, May 3, 1932

Dear Master,

I saw Monsieur de Miramon who told me that according to the rules of the competition, I had every right to participate again, and that in these conditions it was difficult for him to give me personal advice.

Despite the fact that my three pieces are finished¹³, I prefer not to be a candidate again, having already won the prize two years ago; this could certainly prejudice them against me.

Who knows? If he had presented this now famous *Suite*, Duruflé would probably have won the competition again ...

The rules in 1932 called for the composition of a suite for organ comprised of three movements, the whole not to exceed 15 minutes. Jean Langlais set to work at the beginning of 1932 and finished very quickly (with rare exceptions, he always composed quickly) a triptych titled *Poèmes évangéliques d'après les textes sacrés*: "L'Annonciation," "La Nativité," and "Les Rameaux." The composer chose the form stipulated by the competition, with religious inspiration derived from reading the Gospels in the New Testament. The central figure is Jesus Christ, but with him is his mother Mary, one of principal sources of inspiration for Jean Langlais. That is why the Annunciation and Christmas are the subjects of two of the three movements.

1. "L'Annonciation"

As a preface, Langlais paraphrases Luke 1:30–31, 29, 38, and 46–55:

The angel Gabriel, messenger from God, having respectfully greeted the Virgin Mary, spoke to her in these words: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God, and you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus." Mary's heart was greatly troubled, then said to the angel, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it be according to your word..." And in serene joy, the Virgin enunciated her "Magnificat."

This text, placed under the title of the work, serves as the point of departure, featuring three "people" who will be commented on in three distinct sections:

¹² Handwritten letter from Maurice Duruflé to Charles Tournemire, manuscript to the National Library, NLA-337 (11)

¹³ This is the *Suite* opus 5 (Prélude, Sicilienne, Toccata).

l'Ange (the angel), la Vierge (the Virgin), and le Cœur de la Vierge (the Virgin's heart).

The first section, the angel, enters unequivocally in Messiaen's world when it borrows the scale of the "second mode of limited transposition" for its theme (for convenience we shall refer to this as "second mode"), which alternates steps and half-steps regularly.

The borrowing is fleeting, since from the second measure of the theme, the initial mode is altered with an augmented interval (G sharp-F), then with the whole-tone scale familiar from the works of Debussy.

With this mode established, more instinctively than intentionally, with the juxtaposition of elements lacking real connections to each other, Langlais displays his characteristic independence, as we shall verify later.

Another procedure that he uses here willingly is the alternation of counterpoint and harmony, which follows the first section (the angel), written in two- and then three-voiced counterpoint; a second section (the Virgin) that is completely harmonic, where a series of seventh, ninth, and eleventh chords support the theme of the Virgin—using tritones, very characteristic of the melodic language of Messiaen.

In the third section (the Virgin's heart), the composer uses one of his favorite improvisational techniques, very Franck-like, in which an ostinato motive harmonized with modulations grows increasingly tight, generally ascending, here reflecting the Virgin Mary's growing anxiety following the angel's revelations.

At the end of the piece, after a trio section with the Gregorian Magnificat in long pedal notes, a series of fourth and sixth chords unfold, recalling the atmosphere of Messiaen's first pages.

In short, a religious program music influenced by Messiaen, about which Langlais would later say, "I had great difficulty separating myself from his influence, especially in my first steps as a composer."¹⁴

2. "La Nativité"

This second component of the *Poèmes évangéliques* was programmed by André Marchal in his American concert tour in 1938, thus popularizing the name and work of Langlais on the other side of the Atlantic before the Second World War. It begins with another verbal introduction by the composer:

In a humble manger, on a calm night, Mary and Joseph await the birth of Christ the Lord. After the baby is born, the celestial guardians, in a gracious apparition, announce the event in Bethlehem to the shepherds. Coming to the crèche, they offer their tender melodies to the infant Jesus as a symbol of adoration. Then the holy family finds calmness in the Peace of the Lord.

Rather than quoting or paraphrasing one of the Gospels, as in the preceding "L'Annonciation," Langlais offers a summary, and "sets the stage" for the four images that he will successively describe in music: the manger, les Anges (the angels), les Bergers (the shepherds), and la Sainte Famille (the holy family). Some of the characteristics of "L'Annonciation" reappear in "La Nativité," such as the conciseness of the descriptions (15 measures for the manger, 14 for the shepherds) and the modality, here on G, then A. But in the "Bergers," we see as well a technique new to Langlais: accompanying a modal melody (the

¹⁴ Langlais, "Souvenirs."

old Breton song “Salut, ô sainte crèche”) with chromatic harmonies. Finally, for the holy family, one admires the combination of the previous sections with a registration that would become characteristic of Langlais’ music: gamba and voix céleste in the manuals and four-foot flute in the pedals for the melody. With this architectural language, never chatty but instead whittled down and concise—or “complex more than complicated” as Paul Dukas advised his composition students, Jean Langlais moves with ease and makes a natural mixture of such opposing systems as modality and chromaticism, counterpoint and harmony.

3. “*Les Rameaux*”

The third and final section of the *Poèmes évangéliques* departs entirely from the two preceding ones. While they were in short contrasting sections, this one adopts a totally unified construction and ambiance, concentrating on a central theme: JOY.

Jean Langlais explained:

It’s the only episode in Christ’s life that was joyful and triumphant, and I just had to use it to conclude this triptych, evoking the rare happy moments in Christ’s life. Therefore I captioned “*Les Rameaux*” with these words: “Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem,” and I added in the score: Jesus, in all his majesty, returns to Jerusalem, where the enthusiastic crowds welcomed him, crying “Hosanna to the son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, the king of Israel! Hosanna in the highest.”¹⁵

The genre chosen here is that of a big toccata based on the Palm Sunday antiphon, “Hosanna filio David.” The entries of the voices follow the classic pattern of the scholastic fugue (*fugue d’école*), with an exposition of the principal motive in the order of soprano-alto-tenor-bass in short note values, while the same theme makes a majestic entry, fortissimo, in the pedals in long notes. This was an exercise that was much practiced in Marcel Dupré’s improvisation class, and undoubtedly Langlais remembered it at just this moment. Then the composer uses multiple techniques: superimposition of motives, strettos more or less tight, modulations, movement of the theme from one voice to another, making contrapuntal fireworks that give way to a powerful coda with sixteenth-note octaves between the manuals and pedals, a style frequently used by French improvisers since Widor. It concludes over a long pedal tone in C major with the ostinato presence of F-sharp (a tritone), once again one of the signatures dear to Messiaen.

As much as one could label his first works (*Prelude and Fugue*, *Six Preludes*) as youthful works, or school assignments, here in the *Poèmes évangéliques* we can equally see the composer demonstrating a masterful personal style, technique, and aesthetic. Jean Langlais, though influenced by Messiaen, has found his language; when you hear this music, you say, “That’s by Langlais.”

Having perfectly assimilated the characteristics of the composers who preceded him, he had already chosen his path, refusing simple tonality as well as atonality, preferring modality, Gregorian or not, which would become his favored language, often accompanied by

¹⁵ Ibid.

chromaticism, a marvelous expressive tool in his understanding of it. Further, his predilections were for religious music, especially that which was Marian inspired, and the powerful heritage of his childhood in La Fontenelle.

It was, then, with peace of mind that in 1932 he presented his *Poèmes évangéliques* to the jury of the Amis de l'Orgue, chaired by Gabriel Pierné and including the following members: Alexandre Cellier, Chanoine Mathias, Maurice Emmanuel, Arthur Honegger, Paul Le Flem, Henri Mulet, Henri Nibelle, Achille Philip, Gustave Samazeuilh, Florent Schmitt, a mixture of composers, organists and musicologists, a jury whose number, quality, and diversity guaranteed complete fairness.

Alas, the disappointment was as great as his hopes had been: the *Poèmes évangéliques* were eliminated in the first round of the competition along with Litaize's *Lied, intermezzo pastoral et final*, later published by Leduc. Three candidates remained for the final round: Joseph Ermend-Bonnal, first prize for his *Symphonie sur le repos “Media vita”*; André Fleury, first mention for *Prélude, andante et toccata*; and Daniel-Lesur, honorable mention for *La Vie intérieure*.

It should be noted in any case that this competition took place in conditions that were at least odd, since the contestants' works were played by Georges Ibos, not on the organ but on a piano! Obviously the variety of sonic plans and the contrast of timbres required for the organ were lost.

This setback, fortunately, didn't discourage the young composer, especially since his former teacher, Marcel Dupré, wrote (at his request) the following letter to the publisher Hérelle:

Meudon, July 8, 1932

Dear Sir,

My excellent student, Mr. Jean Langlais, brilliant first-prize winner in organ at the Conservatory, organ teacher at the Institute for the Young Blind, and organist at Saint-Antoine church, asked me for a letter of introduction to you to have you hear a new work which he has just composed and which is titled *Poèmes évangéliques* (*l'Annonciation, la Nativité, les Rameaux*).

I present Mr. Langlais to you with so much pleasure because he came to play his work for me, and it greatly pleased me. These pieces have a poetry and charming new style, brilliant without being difficult, and I think they are destined for success. That is why I permit myself with this letter to ask you to accept Mr. Langlais' request for an appointment.

Thanking you warmly in advance for what you are able to do for him, I ask you, dear sir, to accept my best wishes,

All the best,
Marcel Dupré¹⁶

This was a very important letter for the future of the young composer, not only because Henri Hérelle met with Jean Langlais, but also because he agreed to publish, in addition to the *Poèmes évangéliques*, the *Deux Chansons de Clément Marot*, composed for his mixed choir at the Institute for the Young Blind, and the motet *Ave mundi gloria* for equal voices

¹⁶ Copy of the original typed letter in the collection of Marie-Louise Langlais.

and organ—that is, almost everything he had written in 1931–1932. Sweet revenge for the jury’s decision at the Amis de l’Orgue!

Henri Hérelle had his shop at 16 rue de l’Odéon, in the middle of the Latin Quarter in Paris, under the sign “Librairie Musicale et Religieuse” (Musical and Religious Bookstore). Pierre Denis was a young pharmacist and a brilliant private student of Jean Langlais who would later become his regular substitute at Sainte-Clotilde (1945–1975) and also become his first biographer. He gives this portrait of the music publisher:

He was a character, with his little goatee, his beret, and his big grey shirt. Very idiosyncratic, he wasn’t completely uneducated in music, although most of what he published was the most banal church music of the era. He published numerous magazines, all dedicated to the organ or religious vocal music, and no doubt the sacred aesthetic of Langlais’ works could only captivate him.¹⁷

On June 22, 1932, Jean Langlais attended the wedding of his friend Messiaen to the violinist Claire Delbos, daughter of the Sorbonne professor Victor Delbos. But a personal drama cast a shadow on this period of his life: at the beginning of July Jeanne Langlais suffered a still-birth in the most difficult of circumstances. She owed her own life to the enlightened care of her physician, Dr. Ravina, to whom Jean Langlais dedicated his *Poèmes évangéliques* in the version published by Hérelle in 1936. The composer came out of this ordeal battered, and for the summer vacation period of 1932 he decided to take his wife for an extended visit with her family in Escalquens. There he found, in addition to the gentle climate, the extremely warm simplicity of his new inlaws. Although he didn’t understand much of the patois commonly spoken in this part of southern France, he-felt with gratitude the kindness and gentleness that they showed him.

Concerts in Paris - Organ appointment at Saint-Pierre-de-Montrouge

In early 1932, Jean Langlais and his friends in the “1930’s generation” shared an historic moment in the history of French organ concerts, a collective recital to present excerpts from Charles Tournemire’s *L’Orgue Mystique*. Tournemire had completed this work on February 5, 1932 with the composition of number 51 for the twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost. It was Daniel-Lesur who had the idea for this concert, as we see in the following letter from Tournemire to Langlais:

January 5, 1932
My dear friend, Daniel-Lesur, told me that he had thought of gathering a few of the best organists under 30 (you’re nowhere near 30!) to perform pieces from *L’Orgue Mystique*. He’s told me of your warm acceptance. Believe me that I am absolutely delighted since I know that you interpret me divinely. Thank you, my dear friend, you are so kind and this brings me great joy. Let me know what you choose: an offertory and a big piece are needed. (Perhaps the two pieces from the Epiphany?)
Trust in my deep friendship and my affectionate devotion,
Charles Tournemire¹⁸

¹⁷ Conversation with Pierre Denis recorded on tape by the author in 1988.

¹⁸ Collection Marie-Louise Langlais

This collective concert took place on April 25, 1932, and it featured seven young organist-composers in the following order: Daniel-Lesur, Gaston Litaize, Jean Langlais, Olivier Messiaen, Noëlie Pierront, Maurice Duruflé, and André Fleury. Each played an Offertory and a concluding movement from the various Feasts (*Epiphany* for Langlais, following Tournemire's wishes) on the Sainte-Clotilde organ. The concert lasted about an hour and 45 minutes! A weighty program for an organ that was on its last legs, and whose restoration was to begin almost immediately after the concert, at the beginning of summer 1932. At this time, Jean Langlais participated actively in Parisian musical life, attending many concerts, and responding in particular to this comical invitation that Olivier Messiaen sent him:

Paris, November 20, 1932

Dear Friend,

Inserted into the program on 22 November, after no. 4 (*Cinq Mélodies* by Claude Arrieu), I will play, with my wife, as a premiere, my Thème et variations for violin and piano.

Please be kind enough to make a lot of noise and make us repeat this work, which is one of my best, unless you prefer to boo, which would also make a lot of noise.

Thank you in either case, and trust in my best friendship,

Olivier Messiaen¹⁹

In this era, organ recitals were still rare. Some concert halls had organs, such as the Trocadéro or the Pleyel and Gaveau halls, but often in poor condition. On the other hand, there were many organs in the homes of rich patrons (Mmes Dujarric de la Rivière, Schildge-Bianchini, Flersheim, and the count de Bertier), and they were happy to sponsor concerts at their homes for an invited audience. Thus is was that Jean Langlais closed a recital by the students of André Marchal on the organ in the home of Mme Flersheim, by performing two of his three *Poèmes évangéliques*, "La Nativité" and "Les Rameaux".



Concert at the home of Suzanne Flersheim, June 29, 1933

First row: Jean Langlais, Jean-Pierre Hennebains, Madeleine Lasalle, Elisabeth de Véricourt, Marianne Dreyfus, Marie-Thérèse Génou.

Second row: Michel Blin, Noëlie Pierront, André Marchal, Suzanne Flersheim, Xavier Mayaud.

Figure 17. (photograph by Studio Waroline. Collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

¹⁹ Ibid.

For its part, the Amis de l'Orgue sponsored five recitals annually in various Parisian churches, and some parishes gave permissions to their organists to perform after the sacred services, which allowed Jean Langlais, as substitute organist for the count de Bertier at Saint-Antoine-des-Quinze-Vingts, to play four services followed by organ recitals on the four Sundays in May. In the last one (May 29, 1933), which was dedicated to works by young composers, he played the public premiere of his *Poèmes évangéliques* as well as certain recent pieces by his colleagues: *Intermezzo pastoral* by Litaize, *L'Apparition de l'église éternelle* by Messiaen, and the *Scherzo* by Duruflé. During the preceding service the parish choir sang his *Ave mundi gloria*.

Three months later, he received a letter from Messiaen that included the following comments:

August 1933

My dear friend,

... I worked during my short vacation. A lot, in fact. I've undertaken my longest work, *L'Ascension* for orchestra. It will obviously be superior to the others (in length). But religious music is a difficult art.

I feel myself hopelessly little and incapable. The decision not to compose any more came to me—then it left. This piece will be finished in a month, which is not my doing: I'm leaving for the army. This forces me to do endless errands, and it's unimaginably annoying. In addition, I'm playing both the main and choir organs at La Trinité....

I shake your hand affectionately,

Olivier Messiaen.

PS: I am adding a word to tell you how much I liked your concert at Saint-Antoine. Impeccable playing, exquisite registrations, well paced, inventive. Wonderful improvisation, breathtaking. I won't repeat myself about your works; you know how much I like your *Poèmes évangéliques* and your motet *Ave mundi gloria*: it is real music. I don't think one can give a greater compliment²⁰.

At the same time, Gaston Litaize accepted an appointment in Nancy, leaving vacant his position in Paris at Notre-Dame-de-la-Croix de Ménilmontant. In this case, René Malherbe knew how to be persuasive in convincing Langlais to succeed Litaize.

Thus for the first time in his life, Jean Langlais became, at age 26, the official organist (*titulaire*) of the main organ at a church in Paris. He remembers this period with much pleasure:

Notre-Dame-de-la-Croix de Ménilmontant, where I had the joy of being appointed organist in 1933, was entrusted to a highly worthy priest, Canon Touzard. He was a very cultured man, having written a Hebrew grammar book. This parish had 84,000 souls! The organ, never completed, had foundation and reed stops of great beauty. In this typically Parisian milieu, you enriched your soul through contact with the parishioners, some of whom were very picturesque... There was joy in hearing some of the sermons. For example, "Spiritualism doesn't exist, my brothers, because the church condemns it," or better, "The parish has to return to the hilltop so that one no longer hears children say in catechism, 'Last night, Father, mommy had three different daddies.'"²¹

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Langlais, "Souvenirs."

At the end of 1933, the young artist performed, as part of a recital he was to give on December 17 at Notre-Dame-de-la-Croix, one of the *Sei Fioretti* that Charles Tournemire had dedicated to him, getting the following immediate reaction in the mail:

Paris, October 15, 1933

Ah, little bandit!

You're playing my "Petite Fleur" n° 2 on Sunday, December 17 at ND-de- la-Croix. I thought I would be the first to display my six little children the 19th of the same month at Sainte-Clotilde.

But you've done the right thing, and I am very aware of that. Enclosed are two invitations to my concert. Next year, I'll ask you to play a solo recital at Sainte-Clotilde.

All the best,

Charles Tournemire²²

At this time one can see a strong interest developing in the new organ music. The young played their own works, as well as those of their teachers and friends; and it wasn't unusual to hear, on the other hand, the teachers performing the music of their students, following the example of André Marchal, the first to introduce "La Nativité" by Jean Langlais to North America. A little before Christmas of 1933, just as Langlais was getting used to his new post at the organ in Ménilmontant, he learned of the tragic death of his first piano teacher, Maurice Blazy, who was hit by a truck on the very eve of his retirement while he was on his way to a concert at the Valentin Haüy Association. Organist at the main organ of Saint-Pierre de-Montrouge from 1901, he had succeeded another blind man, Albert Mahaut, Jean Langlais' beloved first teacher at the School for the Blind.

Out of respect for the continuing tradition of blind organists, Jean Langlais was appointed to this positionat Ménilmontant, which he held for eleven years (1934–1945) before being named to the Sainte-Clotilde post. Langlais was very happy at the Montrouge church, savoring the neighborhood; he developed the habit of walking, alone, to the church, taking the boulevard Montparnasse and the avenue du Maine, which meant almost two miles each way! He enjoyed also the remarkable personality of his new priest, Canon Aubert:

Tactfulness is a rare thing, but it exists. I was assured of this manifold times at Saint-Pierre-de-Montrouge, parish of 64,000 souls; there, for eight years, I had as a priest a Hellenist, an historian, and also a big heart. "I don't understand anything about what you do, my young friend, but I have confidence in you," he had the habit of saying to me. One Sunday, I was improvising (just for myself) a long postlude after Vespers. The next Sunday I met my dear priest: "Ah, dear friend, last Sunday your Vespers postlude was interminable; I was waiting for you to finish so that I could have a meeting of the Ladies of the Sacred Heart in the Mary chapel. You would never finish. For the first five minutes, you annoyed me—and then I found the rest delicious.

How times have changed! When it was time for an evaluation, this dear man said to me, "I don't want you to do more since I think that you already do too much." My beloved priest, you published a very interesting book about the Saint-Pierre church. Naturally you mentioned your organ. Unfortunately, you misread the documents about the manual stops on the Great, and you wrote: Bourdon 16 notes, Salicional 8 notes, Prestant 4 notes, etc. It's only post mortem that I show you your mistake, because during your lifetime I would never have dared to do it!²³

²² Collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

²³ Ibid.

When Jean Langlais was appointed to Saint-Pierre-de-Montrouge in 1934, the 1868 Barker-Merklin organ (36 stops, 56-note manuals, and 30-note pedal), the second organ in Paris (after Saint-Augustin) to have electric action, was in such bad condition that it needed a complete reworking immediately, a redoing of the action and wind supply.



The Barker-Merklin Organ at Saint-Pierre-de-Montrouge

Figure 18. (photograph Sylvie Mallet, collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

Since the company selected, Guttschenritter, needed an entire year of work to complete the task, Jean Langlais--an organist without organ-- had the time to make a crucial connexion, one that would be important to the rest of his career: Paul Dukas, composer of the famous *L'Apprenti sorcier*, but also professor of composition at the Paris Conservatory.

Paul Dukas' composition class at the Paris Conservatory -*Trois Paraphrases grégoriennes* - The 1934 Amis de l'Orgue Composition Competition

At this stage in his life, Jean Langlais really had no need to return to study at the Conservatory. He was armed with enough diplomas, was the official organist of a main organ in Paris, and taught at the National Institute for the Young Blind. Nevertheless, his failure at the Amis de l'Orgue's composition competition in 1932 had disappointed him, and he wanted to try his luck again with this competition, which was to be held next in May 1934. The assignment, a triptych based on three important liturgical moments, was particularly well suited to him. The candidates were to compose:

- A prelude or postlude inspired by the Requiem Mass
- A slow movement or antiphon appropriate for the Feast of the Virgin Mary
- A concluding piece inspired by the Te Deum

This triptych came to him very easily between the end of 1933 and the beginning of 1934. He began with the piece inspired by the Requiem Mass and composed “Mors et resurrectio” then he built the second piece on two Gregorian themes in praise of the Virgin Mary, the antiphon “Ave Maria” and the hymn “Ave maris stella”; finally he concluded by affirming the praise of God with his “Hymne d’action de grâces, Te Deum.”

To have an even stronger position, Jean Langlais decided to return to the Conservatory as an auditor to get the advice of one of the most prestigious composers in the French school, Paul Dukas, especially since he had received a commission for a piece for choir, soprano, and orchestra which he was to premiere at Saint-Germain in Rennes on November 15, 1934.

This ten-minute work was his first for orchestra, and he conceived it for strings, woodwinds, trumpets, four-voiced mixed chorus, and solo soprano.²⁴ He wanted, however, to assure himself that he was on the right track by asking the opinion of Dukas, known as a great orchestrator. The details of his first interview remained forever engraved on his memory:

Dupré had given me a letter of introduction for Paul Dukas. My plan was not to attend the class as a student, but just to audit it. I was presented to Dukas, who asked me, “Do you have something to show me?”

I complied and gave him the manuscript of my new organ piece, “Mors et resurrectio” which we played together on the piano. When we had finished, he said, “You are a born composer! I have nothing to teach you except orchestration. But just come to class the day after the examination of admittance.”

I replied “It doesn’t matter, dear master, as I have no need to be a student. The one thing I ask of you is the permission to attend your class as an auditor.”

To which he said, “One more diploma would not hurt you.” And he went immediately to the Director to explain my situation. He returned to me saying, “My friend, from this moment you are enrolled in the composition class.”²⁵

For Jean Langlais, this statement marked the beginning of unforgettable years spent in Paul Dukas’s class, from January 1934 to May 17, 1935, the day of the sudden death of the composer, felled by a heart attack.

In Dukas’ class, Langlais’ main concern was orchestration, and in February and March he worked hard on the score of his hymn *La Voix du vent*, slated for a premiere in Rennes in the fall. Dukas said he was satisfied. A newspaper review published on November 15, 1934, right after the concert, indicates the public’s reaction to this new score:

A first-rate performer, Jean Langlais is also a composer already well known. Recently he had a musical poem performed in Rennes which so enthused the audience that it was repeated. He himself conducted the orchestra, solo soprano and chorus (an ensemble of 80 musicians), something obviously difficult for a blind person.

²⁴ Unpublished, 24 pages in manuscript (collection Marie-Louise Langlais). Starting with his marriage in 1931, Jean Langlais always dictated his music, note by note, to his wife, an extremely difficult process, especially for orchestra scores and parts. The manuscripts from this period are therefore all in the hand of Jeannette Langlais.

²⁵ Langlais, “Souvenirs.”

After the piece's premiere, still as part of this sacred concert in Rennes, he gave an organ recital which had such a full house that the artist's father and uncle, who had arrived separately, couldn't find each other at its conclusion.²⁶

Pushed by Dukas to start a new work, Jean Langlais came up with the idea of taking his “Te Deum” for organ, composed for the Amis de l'Orgue competition, and making a version for full orchestra and organ.

He remembers:

Each measure had 24 staves; I even used contrabassoon in my orchestra. Dukas didn't leave a line, not even half a measure, untouched. Everything was demolished with solid explanations.

On the subject of contrabassoon, he said, “You don't hear it in such a powerful orchestra. You wouldn't even know if it's playing or not!”

As a result, I started again from the beginning with the orchestration of the “Te Deum,” but also of “La Nativité” from the *Poèmes évangéliques*, which I retitled *Essai sur l'Evangile de Noël* for the version for full orchestra and organ; and I brought Dukas only four measures of orchestrated music each week. He took forever to read them, looking for the slightest weakness.

But he didn't change anything further, as I had understood what he wanted. Once completed, these two pieces for orchestra and organ have remained in manuscript: I have never tried to publish them.²⁷



Paul Dukas' composition class, 1934

Jean Langlais and Jehan Alain are in the second row, second and fourth from the left

Figure 19. (photograph by Louis Roosen. Conservatoire national de musique. Paris. Collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

²⁶ M. Dehillotte, “L'Activité d'un Jeune,” *Le Valentin Haüy* 1935:1 (March-April, 1935), 38–39.

²⁷ Langlais, “Souvenirs.” In fact these two pieces for orchestra and organ are just to be published in 2016 by edition Bon(n)orgue, n°15.102 and 16.104 (Germany), due to the interest of German organist and publisher Otto Depenheuer.

In Dukas' class, he met another organist, Jehan Alain, who had written an *Intermezzo* for two pianos and bassoon for the composition competition at the Conservatory in June 1934, and Langlais recalled this anecdote:

When Paul Dukas heard this piece in class, he said to Alain, "Your piece is too long, Alain, extend it."

And since no one understood what he was trying to say, he explained, "The piece is unbalanced, but as music it is excellent; extend it so that it has good proportions."

That was Dukas's flamboyant spirit. Outside the class, Jehan Alain immediately transcribed his *Intermezzo* for solo organ, and it's a superb piece.

Another anecdote comes back to me: I showed him the first edition of "Mors et resurrectio" for organ, published by Hérelle in 1935 in the series "Le Grand Orgue,"²⁸ and as the two of us played it on the piano, he pointed out a typographical error. "Thank you for calling it to my attention," I said, "I'll have it corrected in the second edition."

And he, who was very sarcastic, said "What? A second edition of organ music? My dear friend, that's unheard of!"

Let us look more closely now at the *Trois Paraphrases grégoriennes* at the time when Jean Langlais was preparing to enter them in the Amis de l'Orgue competition:

1. "Mors et resurrectio"²⁹

Langlais himself offered a brief analysis of the piece in a letter to his friend and colleague, Henri Cabié, dedicatee of the work:

Paris, January 25, 1939

Dear Friend,

A thousand thanks for playing my piece; when will it be heard and where?

This work very closely follows its title: two themes are used, first, Life is introduced by a theme of my own, then Death, using as a theme the first part of the gradual from the Requiem Mass.

After the development of these two ideas, the theme for Life takes over with radiance and thus symbolizes that in Death there is the true Life.

Do as you wish, I trust your skill.

Faithfully as always,

Jean Langlais³⁰

It is noteworthy that Henri Cabié is the only dedicatee in the *Trois Paraphrases grégoriennes*, the other two movements being undedicated.

But even more interesting is the fact that, when one looks at Langlais' *Six Preludes* (1929),³¹ one finds that each was dedicated to one of his friends in Dupré's class (Henriette Roget, Rachel Brunswig, Olivier Messiaen, Gaston Litaize, Henri Cabié, and Joseph Gilles). In composing *Mors et resurrectio* in 1932, Langlais reused (note for note) all of the first 23 measures of the Fifth Prelude ("Lamentation"), dedicated to Joseph Gilles. The composition diverges from the original with the introduction of the Gregorian Requiem.

²⁸ A collection of modern music comprised of works published in the quarterly *Le Grand Orgue* and published as offprints.

²⁹ Number 51 in the collection "Le Grand Orgue," published by Hérelle in 1935

³⁰ Letter returned to Jean Langlais by Cabié's widow (collection Marie-Louise Langlais).

³¹ Unpublished, at Jean Langlais' request. Collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

Thus, a work dating from 1929 and dedicated to Gilles becomes the point of departure for a new work from 1934 dedicated to Cabié!

To return to the work itself: under the title is an epigraph from a letter from Saint Paul to the Corinthians, “Ubi est mors victoria tua?” (Death, where is thy victory?)³² Langlais considers this enigmatic question and gives it a strong Christian answer in music: Death isn’t the end of Life, Death is Eternal Life.

For the composer, Life, the first section of the piece, is darkly colored, using a two-to-five-voiced fugato with entries staggered at regular four-measure intervals, from low to high, in a chromatic and dramatic harmonization. In contrast, Eternal Life, which makes its appearance in enunciating the gradual from the Requiem Mass monophonically on the positive trumpet, leads the listener towards the limbo of Eternal Life. After reintroducing the first theme at the interval of a second, Langlais delivers a superimposition of the themes, particularly emphasizing the first four notes of the gradual from the Requiem Mass, repeated in the style of an ostinato in a gradual crescendo with foundation and reed stops; then, he closes with full organ: yes, Eternal Life vanquished Death.

2. *Ave María, Ave maris stella*

This is the slow movement or antiphon fitting for the Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary stipulated as the second piece for the Amis de l’Orgue’s competition.

Here is Olivier Messiaen’s analysis:

The “Ave María, Ave maris stella” by Jean Langlais (published by Hérelle) is based on an antiphon and a chant-like hymn for the Feasts of the Blessed Virgin, as its title suggests. After a polytonal augmentation canon on the antiphon’s theme, comes a modal passage in 5/8 that has a Hindu-like harmonization of the litanies of the Virgin, and is combined with the theme of the hymn. A stretto episode brings us with no conflict to the very calm conclusion, where “Pourquoi tremblez-vous?” from *Ariane* floats.³³ This is a very pretty organ piece, very poetic, well written for the instrument, and easy to play; it should take its place in the repertory of all organists.³⁴

For his part, Langlais analyzes the piece a little differently, less technically, in a manuscript note for the program of the premiere that he gave it on June 29, 1934, at the organ in the home of Mme Flersheim:

“Ave María, Ave maris stella”: this work is built on themes borrowed from the Office of the Holy Virgin. The first theme, “Ave María,” is introduced in F-sharp in the hands and simultaneously in the pedals in A in long note values. This “Ave María” symbolizes the angelic greeting. The middle section brings the “Sancta María,” a tormented and variable prayer from humankind (the “Sancta María” is the second part of the antiphon “Ave María”). In the middle of this human prayer appears, as if it were a granted wish, the “Ave maris stella,” which brings a conclusion full of peace and confidence to this short mystical poem.³⁵

³² First Corinthians 15 :55.

³³ A reference to the opera *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue* by Paul Dukas, premiered in 1907 and revived in 1935 at the Paris Opera.

³⁴ Olivier Messiaen, “L’Orgue,” *Le Monde musical*, 31 March 1938, p. 84.

³⁵ Collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

3. *Hymne d'action de grâces*, «*Te Deum*»³⁶

This concluding piece in the triptych became the “star” of *Trois Paraphrases grégoriennes* and undoubtedly the composer’s most famous piece. The rules of the Amis de l’Orgue’s competition required a piece inspired by the Te Deum. Jean Langlais followed this rule scrupulously.

The chosen hymn melody in all its simplicity is one of the most solemn in all plain chant, the composer chose several fragments from it. It is in his manner of setting these fragments that he shows himself to be the most innovative: dispensing with a classic chorale-like setting, he immediately contrasts short unaccompanied Gregorian fragments in octaves in the manuals, with direct commentary in heavy clusters of fortissimo seventh and ninth chords resolving into great consonant chords.

In the second part of the piece, the composer, radically changing his approach, replaces the contrasts between horizontal modality and vertical tonality with a chromatic and modulatory treatment that develops the last phrase of the hymn, “in te Domine speravi” (Lord, in thee have I trusted). This phrase inspired him to create a section with rising modulations by thirds paired with a sonorous crescendo that ends with a consonant chord on A for full organ.

The third section returns to the vocabulary of the first, with its contrasting components, and after some virtuosic gestures concludes once again with an A-major chord, very distant from the third mode of the Gregorian Te Deum. Once again, Jean Langlais mixes modality, tonality, and chromaticism in a sort of kaleidoscope of languages that will be embedded in his works.

Confident of the originality and strength of his *Trois Paraphrases grégoriennes*, Jean Langlais presented the triptych to the Amis de l’Orgue competition.

The elimination round took place on May 6, 1934 at the home of count Miramon-Fitz-James, the organization’s president. The jury consisted of Guy Ropartz (president) and some very notable musicians, such as Nadia Boulanger, Paul Le Flem, Louis Vierne, Achille Philip, and Joseph Bonnet. The presence of two Bretons in the jury (Guy Ropartz and Paul Le Flem) seemed to augur well for Jean Langlais. Nothing could have been further from the truth: the jury rejected all of scores and the competition was annulled! This was an unbelievable decision that had no precedent.

Clearly Jean Langlais had expected a better outcome for his *Trois Paraphrases grégoriennes*. The publisher Hérelle offered a fine consolation by publishing the three pieces separately the next year, 1935, in his series “Le Grand Orgue” then in a collection with the triptych’s original title in 1938.

In 1934, the end-of-year competition in the Conservatory’s composition class provided some balm for his spirit. He was awarded a second prize, the only prize given in the class that year (no first prize was awarded), for his *Évangile de Noël* (the Christmas Gospel) and

³⁶ In the first edition by Hérelle (Febr.1935), it appears as “actions de grâces,” but in Philippo-Combre reprint (1957) it is written: “action de grâce”.

Hymne d'action de grâces, Te Deum for orchestra and organ, played by the composer and Gaston Litaize in a version for two pianos. In addition, he offered a required vocal piece, a song with piano accompaniment, *Une Dentelle s'abolit* (A Lace Vanishes), composed in June 1934 on a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé.³⁷ Langlais later commented, “I remember that the singer, whose name I intentionally forgot, sang my song as if it were by Massenet!”

Jehan Alain, who didn't win any prize in this same competition, acknowledged that he didn't know about the requirement for a vocal work.³⁸

At this time, Jean Langlais was overflowing with projects, as one reads in two lovely and long letters that Paul Dukas wrote to him in the summer of 1934:

Paris, July 23, 1934

My Dear Friend,

I am happy to know that you are getting some respite and are breathing the air of your birthplace, which should repair the effects of overworking in the winter: weddings, burials, lessons, etc.

And I hope that Madame Langlais, to whom you should give my best wishes, is -- as well as yourself -- in excellent health.

While waiting to go to the Midi and the monastic life that you told me about, take full advantage of a complete vacation, which you richly deserve. Such pauses are necessary. Soon enough, you'll be back with the flutes, oboes, bassoons, cornets, and trumpets!

*L'Annonce faite à Marie*³⁹ seems to me a more important project which demands much meditation, but the subject seems absolutely perfect for you, and I entirely agree with you that you should undertake this project, albeit difficult, with the conviction that you will find in it great themes of musical exaltation.

Trust in my affectionate best wishes,

Paul Dukas⁴⁰

In the end, Jean Langlais never worked on this project, which was undoubtedly too ambitious. Paul Dukas sent the second letter from his summer home:

Royan, September 7, 1934

My Dear Friend,

I am touched by the misgivings that you show in writing to me, but rest assured, and put them aside! 24 pieces for harmonium! That seems an inalterable number, like a dozen oysters. Not 22, nor 25, nor 23 or the whole edifice will collapse. Franck already covered this territory, admittedly a bit on the fly. You'll reach the finish line, dear friend, and I hope brilliantly, in terms of royalties that could, in my opinion, inspire composing from the heart and spirit for this bizarre instrument whose prolonged timbre could have strange repercussions for the spinal column. I'm sure you'll find a way to ennable it to the extent that it's possible given its too easy mysticism...

It goes without saying that I share your unbounded admiration for Bach's organ partitas. This prodigious man has a unique way of endlessly renewing what was thought to be well known... The Bach that we loved at twenty is different from the one we admire at thirty, at forty, at fifty, etc.... And if one were to live to be a hundred, I

³⁷ Unpublished; collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

³⁸ He wrote in a letter to Denise Billard, July 2, 1934, “You may have noticed that I didn't win anything in composition. In addition to everything else I didn't enter a vocal work, being ill-informed.” Quoted by Aurélie Decourt in *Jehan Alain: biographie, correspondance, dessins, essais* (Chambéry: Comp'Act, 2005). 167.

³⁹ This was a “Mystery” in a prologue and four acts, an emblematic work by the French poet Paul Claudel, premiered on December 22, 1912. The title refers to the Annunciation.

⁴⁰ Manuscript letter in the collection of Marie-Louise Langlais.

think that in performing him for the thousandth time, one would find yet more astonishing themes and make new discoveries.

Le Diable dans le beffroi (The Devil in the Belfry), I think so!⁴¹

I thought of making a symphonic poem from it. But this was after *L'Apprenti sorcier*, and I was worried that a second humorous explosion, too similar to the first, wouldn't be worth much. I therefore suggested it to Debussy who wanted to write a ballet, for which he wrote...only the libretto.

After all that, Ingelbrecht was unafraid to take up the idea of a ballet, which he composed and which was danced. But the symphonic poem genre, which is better in my opinion, is open. If you think you're up to it, go right ahead! But I think to really succeed, there has to be really virtuosic orchestration... We'll see that you more fully acquire it this winter, which we were not able to in these few months. But you can always sketch out the music if it comes in the meantime.⁴²

Please give my best wishes to Madame Langlais.

Happy end of vacation to both of you, and trust, dear friend, in my affection for you.

Paul Dukas⁴³

Of all the projects mentioned in these two letters from Paul Dukas, only one was realized: the *Vingt-Quatre Pièces pour harmonium ou orgue*, obviously easier to accomplish than the others. Even so, completing it took over five years, from 1934 to 1939. Returning from summer vacation in 1934, as he was about to start back in Dukas's class, Jean Langlais asked his friend Olivier Messiaen for some help:

I want to give great homage to my friend Messiaen. I didn't have braille versions of all the scores I needed to study orchestration. When Messiaen found out, he invited me to his home at 77 rue des Plantes every Wednesday from 5:00 to 9:00 p.m. There, he read me scores, from the piccolo to the double bass. But during the summer, in 1934, while he was doing military service, he had already given me helpful information by letter. And recently, 50 years later, he said to me sincerely, "If you want we can start up again"!⁴⁴

At about the same time, now that the Sainte-Clotilde organ had been completely renovated and inaugurated on June 30, 1933, Tournemire thought about organizing a series of concerts, largely joint recitals to showcase young talents, a cause that he himself chose. Thus he wrote to Jean Langlais:

Paris, September 30, 1934

My Dear Friend,

I have to get busy right away with planning my series for the winter and next spring at Sainte-Clotilde. I've decided to put you down for the concert in April 1935.

I assume that you will play your own music. I need 18 to 20 minutes of music. Since, to my great satisfaction, you are drawn to sacred music, the only true music...

I am not worried about you. The big piece published by Hérelle would be wonderful. If you want, you could add another of your pieces, but also religious in spirit. Please be kind enough to send me the precise titles of these two pieces. It would be kind of you also to send me Litaize's address; I wrote to him at Saint-Cloud several weeks ago, but he has not replied, the rascal. I want to know if he can take part as well. Also give me the address of Joly, the recent first prize winner in organ.⁴⁵

⁴¹ A short novel by Edgar Allan Poe.

⁴² Just as with *L'Annonce faite à Marie*, Jean Langlais didn't follow-up with this project.

⁴³ Collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

⁴⁴ Langlais, "Souvenirs."

⁴⁵ Denis Joly, who had won a first prize in Dupré's Conservatory class in 1934.

Trust in my sympathy and friendship for you.
Charles Tournemire⁴⁶

For this concert, on Thursday, April 4, 1935, in addition to Langlais and Litaize, he invited Alexandre Cellier and Olivier Messiaen to perform. Following Tournemire's suggestions, Jean Langlais played his "Annonciation" from the *Poèmes évangéliques* as well as his new *Trois Paraphrases grégoriennes*. As for Messiaen, he played all of his *Ascension*.

To show Jean Langlais his friendship and gratitude, in May 1935, Tournemire gave him a picture of himself with this nice handwritten dedication : "A small friendly souvenir to my friend Jean Langlais".



Photograph of Charles Tournemire dedicated to Jean Langlais, May 1935

Figure 20 (collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

Getting back to Paul Dukas' teaching at the Conservatory, Jean Langlais recalled Dukas's instruction in 1934–1935:

For us, his excellent teaching was the source of unceasing wonderment, and we went to his class as if it were a sanctuary. As a humanist, he was broadly cultured, and he was also a lively man, as evidenced by the following witticisms:

To a classmate who used a lot of major seconds, he said, "These are embroideries made of iron wire."

The same day, "Sometimes it's a good thing for a composer to 'believe' his reputation."

To a beginner, "You do Uniprix orchestration."⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Collection Marie-Louise Langlais

Regarding the literary authors of the cantatas for the Prix de Rome “They are people who abuse the right not have talent.”

To one of our classmates, “You have a telephone?” “Yes, Master.” “One hears it in your triangle part!”⁴⁷

The year 1935 looked good. The reworking of his organ at Saint-Pierre-de-Montrouge being complete, Jean Langlais planned his first recital in this loft for Wednesday, March 6, 1935. The program consisted largely of modern French music, and it drew a response from Messiaen the next day:

Paris, Thursday March 7, 1935

My dear Friend,

Just a couple of words. I am almost filled with remorse for not having congratulated you last night. You played wonderfully. The registrations were very clean and the program well balanced. I was delighted by the Bach chorale-prelude, by Dupré’s “Fileuse,” and Tournemire’s “Fioretta.” The “Fileuse” was particularly well played. Thank you for my *Banquet celeste*. It was very good.

To speak a little bit about your new pieces: I won’t repeat what I think of the “Te Deum,” which I had read with pleasure several days before the concert. You know that I like it a lot, as I do the delicious and fine “Annonciation.” Especially towards the end of your work on the Letter to the Corinthians, “Mors et resurrectio,” there are truly noble and grand gestures. The great St. Paul’s serene challenge, this almost visual certainty of the resurrection: you captured them, bravo! You are in the middle of a stylistic evolution. Your new pieces, ornamented by the Scherzetto⁴⁹ constitute two very different genres that are opposing, well executed, and each well established.

A thousand greetings to you and your wife,

Olivier Messiaen⁵⁰

The young organist could now calmly prepare for the Conservatory’s composition competition, for which he thought he was virtually promised a first prize. But a dramatic event intervened: Paul Dukas died suddenly of a heart attack on May 17, 1935. Langlais remembers:

His last class took place at the Conservatory on May 15, 1935, and it was just as brilliant as the others. Two days later, Paul Dukas left us after a terrible choking fit. His death put everyone for whom music is a reason for being into the ranks of the most sad spiritual orphans.

Two blind pupils had the pleasure of working with him: Joaquin Rodrigo, a very fine Spanish musician who was his student at the École Normale de Musique, and myself. Dukas was especially interested in us, and he took great care in giving us his incomparable instruction in orchestration. Very proud of his library, he had lent me just a month previously a collection of Renaissance choral works so that I could rehearse them at the Institute.

Having written a lot, this great master published little; what an example! He was careful that nothing would become known that he didn’t feel was worthy of it. He found out that Debussy’s *Fantasy* for Piano and Orchestra was published posthumously, even though the composer hadn’t wished to publish it when he was

⁴⁷ The reference is to a chain of inexpensive department stores.

⁴⁸ Langlais, “Souvenirs.”

⁴⁹ From the *Vingt-Quatre Pièces pour harmonium ou orgue*; Olivier Messiaen premiered it on 29 January 1935 at Saint-Antoine-des-Quinze-Vingts.

⁵⁰ Collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

alive; he said to us, “They won’t do that to me.” Thus he destroyed all of his unpublished manuscripts.

So it is to our memory of him and the affection which we will faithfully maintain for him that we must look to soften the profound sadness his death has caused us.⁵¹

This sudden death came just five weeks before the end-of-year competition in composition. Paul Dukas’s students were entrusted to his colleague in composition, Henri Büsser, who charged them with finding singers and instrumentalists to play their works at the competition. Motivated more by sentiment than reality, Jean Langlais programmed his *Voix du vent* for soprano, choir, and orchestra, and “Ave maris stella” (*Trois Paraphrases grégoriennes*), pieces that Paul Dukas particularly liked.

The jury found the selections unbalanced and awarded to Langlais the Georges Hue Prize for the best song, but not the first prize in composition, which went to Henri Challan.

To be sure, the young man could have competed again the following year to get the ultimate prize, but after attending two classes with Dukas’s successor, Roger-Ducasse, he preferred to quit the Conservatory for good, supported in his decision by Tournemire, who wrote:

Paris, June 26, 1935

My Dear Friend,

I just got news today of the results from the composition competition! I was surprised at your not winning, but keep in mind that competitions only have a relative value.

Already last year you deserved the supreme award. So?!

All my best,

Charles Tournemire⁵²

An important chapter in Jean Langlais’ life, with its joys, sorrows, successes, failures, thus closed. At the age of 28, he now faced himself alone, with a fine list of prizes and about 20 works in his catalogue, some of them already published. He now had important choices: To confine himself to sacred music, choral and instrumental, toward which his strong Christian convictions and his double role as organist and choral director might push him, or, strengthened by the education from Paul Dukas, to expand his horizons to symphonic music and secular music.



⁵¹ Langlais, “Souvenirs.”

⁵² Collection Marie-Louise Langlais.