

## CHAPTER 4

### *World War II (1939-1945)*

#### **Sainte-Clotilde: the appointment that did not happen (1941-1944)**

Jean Langlais was 32 when France and Great Britain declared war against Germany on September 3, 1939, marking the beginning of the World War II. Most of the young French musicians were immediately mobilized, including Jehan Alain, who was assigned as a “second class” in the eighth motorized armored unit, and Olivier Messiaen, whose letter to Jean Langlais expresses his distress:

November 2, 1939

From: Soldier Messiaen Olivier.

620th R.I. Pioneers, 2nd Battalion, 5th Company, postal sector 42

Dear Friend,

I am deeply touched by your letter. The slightest evidence of affection goes straight to my heart at this time; and letter-time is such a lovely time! Certainly civilian life—though less painful than the military—must suffer fairly disagreeable transformations during war time. The composer’s task: some beautiful pages between your piano and your sack of beans. For me: my skinned and blackened hands, the swinging of the pickax, the flies, the carrying of the most improbable loads (from tree trunks to lithographic stones) keep me from having a very intimate relationship with music.

Nevertheless, I try to read some orchestral scores—tucked into my bag on top of my rations—when I have a free moment, so as not to lose contact. I left an unfinished work when mobilized. Every day, or almost, I get a letter from my wife, which is a consolation beyond words for me. But I cannot help my dear little boy grow up!... a terrible regret!

Pray for peace and also for your old friend

With all my best,

Olivier Messiaen<sup>1</sup>

As for Jean Langlais, he was exempt because of blindness. Upon the declaration of war, the National Institute for the Young Blind was immediately closed, and its facilities were requisitioned by the War Ministry. The classes were moved to 5 rue Duroc, to the Valentin Haüy Association.

---

<sup>1</sup> Collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

There, somehow, Langlais continued his teaching. The school orchestra couldn't function for lack of basic equipment. Its last concert was held in June 1939, and it was not heard again thereafter. Finally, on December 1, 1939, classes resumed at the National Institute for the Young Blind on the Boulevard des Invalides for the few students who could attend. Little by little, as anxiety took root in hearts and spirits, musical life was gradually put on hold. The Société Nationale, the great sponsor of concerts devoted to young composers, had stopped all activity in 1939. The radio broadcasts of organ recitals, particularly numerous in 1937 and 1938, had become rare.

The premiere of Francis Poulenc's *Concerto pour orgue, cordes et timbales* had taken place in the Gaveau hall on June 21, 1939, and the critic Michel-Léon Hirsch, the one who had vehemently criticized Langlais' *Mouvement perpétuel* for piano, had written:

We think that Francis Poulenc, for whom we have old and charming feelings, has taken the wrong road and is out of breath from pursuing a genre that doesn't suit him.<sup>2</sup>

No comment needed.

Like everyone else, Charles Tournemire was caught up in the whirlwind of this nascent war, and he closed his *Mémoires* with these words:

Hitler, this monster, has brought fire and blood to Europe.  
God won't fail to punish him.  
We must wait! Meanwhile, day by day, deaths by the thousands speak to his cruelty.  
We are hiding at my sister's in Arcachon. We are staying here, presumably for a long time because this cursed war threatens to widen considerably.<sup>3</sup>

A few weeks later, on November 4, 1939, he was found dead in the Arcachon pond, drowned under suspicious circumstances. This death meant that the position of titular organist at Sainte-Clotilde was open. The two recent examples of succession, at Notre Dame in Paris and at the basilica of Saint-Denis, had been deemed disastrous by the Amis de l'Orgue, and especially by its president, Béranger de Maramon Fitz-James, and its general secretary, Norbert Dufourcq.<sup>4</sup>

They hoped that the principle of a competition, supported by the Amis de l'Orgue, would finally be observed by the clergy. Béranger de Maramon didn't restrain himself from exerting pressure in this direction, as we read in a letter that he sent to Norbert Dufourcq on December 7, 1939, a month after Tournemire's death:

Did I tell you that the priest-in-charge of Sainte-Clotilde won't do anything before the end of the war? Duruflé can't make up his mind. He is doing a tour in Spain with the boys choir. He is trying to decide between Sainte-Clotilde and Saint-Étienne-du-Mont, where he has waited four years for the renovation that was begun and then suspended. Langlais wrote me. He's considering it and asks my advice. I told him to apply, but in specifying that he is to compete when, at the end of the war, the priest-in-charge will

---

<sup>2</sup> Hirsch, Michel-Léon. *Le Ménestrel* (June 30, 1939). 179. It was the twenty-first concert in the "Sérénade" series, with the Orchestre Philharmonique de Paris under the direction of Roger Désormière, and with Maurice Duruflé at the organ.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Tournemire, "Mémoires," typescript: 194 (collection of Marie-Louise Langlais) and Langlais, Marie-Louise, *Charles Tournemire, Eclats de Mémoire*. Website ml-langlais.com. 168.

<sup>4</sup> In 1937, Léonce de Saint-Martin had succeeded Vierne at Notre-Dame, and Henri Heurtel was named Henri Libert's successor at Saint-Denis.

declare the post to be officially vacant. I wonder if I should write to the priest, who has always listened to me and who, I think, is open to a friendly process. I'll word this in such a way that I can not be accused of meddling in something that isn't my business. In any case, we have to keep an eye on the situation, so that after St-Denis and Notre-Dame we don't have a third failure.<sup>5</sup>

A week later, Jean received the following letter from Charles Tournemire's widow, Alice, in reply to his letter of condolence:

11-27-39

Dear Sir,

I thank you very sincerely for the expression of sympathy you sent me on this sad occasion. I know the deep affection that the Master had for you, and that's why I am fully prepared to tell the priest-in-charge at Sainte-Clotilde of his strong desire to see you replace him at his organ. But it would be necessary for you to write to me asking me to do it, reminding me of last June's conversation.

Armed with this letter, I would make the request, following your wishes as specified in your letter.

Please give my best wishes to your wife, and with kind regards to you,  
Alice Ch. Tournemire<sup>6</sup>

But even though Madame Tournemire did tell Canon Verdrie, the priest-in-charge at Sainte-Clotilde, of Tournemire's wish to see Langlais succeed him, the status quo was to continue: on the one hand, the Canon didn't want to make an appointment before the end of the war, and on the other, Béranger de Miramon wanted to invoke the tradition of a competition.



**Canon Verdrie, curé of Sainte-Clotilde (1914-1946)**

Figure 23. (photograph by Maurice Joublin, collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

As Canon Verdrie explained to Jean Langlais on November 12, 1940:

---

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in François Sabatier, "Regards sur l'orgue français des années 1930 à travers les lettres de Béranger de Miramon Fitz-James à Norbert Dufourcq," *L'Orgue* 295–296 (2011: 3–4), 36.

<sup>6</sup> Collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

Dear Sir,

Everything suggests that we wait until the end of the war to replace Monsieur Tournemire. At the moment, our resources are too diminished to allow ourselves the luxury of two organists. The choir organist goes up to the main organ when necessary—very rarely—for the preludes and postludes.

It is not out of the question, however, that we might have need of you in an exceptional situation, and I thank you for the offer that you made to me. Madame Tournemire did indeed confirm that the Master had said several times that he intended to have you as his successor. It's maddening that he didn't leave anything to that effect in writing.

Very sincerely yours,  
P. Verdrie<sup>7</sup>

Although a fair number of families in the Sainte-Clotilde parish had stayed at their country properties during the winter of 1939–1940, everyone returned to Paris in September of 1940 because of the signing of the armistice between France and Germany, which divided France into an occupation zone (in the north) and a “free” zone (Vichy, in the south). With Tournemire dead and choir director Jules Meunier retired, the only musician left at Sainte-Clotilde was the choir organist, Pierre Besson, as Canon Verdrie's letter implies.

However, this war that one had hoped would be short went on and on, and the Canon, following the wishes of the Amis de l'Orgue and the diocesan authorities, announced December 20, 1941 as the date of the competition for the post of official organist for the main organ. Jean Langlais immediately applied. The competition's announcement, in which one can easily see the firm hand of the Amis de l'Orgue, was worded as follows:

A competition has been established for the naming of an organist at the basilica Sainte-Clotilde. The organist so named will be the official (“titulaire”) organist of the grand orgue.

However, the current financial difficulties force the priest-in-charge of Sainte-Clotilde not to make an appointment of the new titulaire organist *until the end of the hostilities*. Until then, the designated organist will have complete latitude to keep the paid position which he might presently occupy. Fees for extra services at Sainte-Clotilde's will be put aside for him, starting now. He will have every opportunity to use the Sainte-Clotilde organ in the services in which he sees it fit to participate.

If the priest-in-charge, to elevate the effect of particular ceremonies, wants an organist to play the grand orgue, the official organist agrees to come himself or to designate a high-quality substitute.

Candidates who wish to take part in the competition should register before 25 November with Mr. Norbert Dufourcq, General Secretary of the Amis de l'Orgue, 37 avenue de Lowendal, XV<sup>e</sup>, who has been delegated by Canon Verdrie to organize this examination. The competition will take place on December 20, 1941 at 1:30 p.m. as a public event.

The contestants will be scheduled to practice on the Sainte-Clotilde organ, which will be made available to each of them beforehand for a maximum of four hours.

The jury, consisting of eminent organists and musicians, will be chaired by Canon Labourt, Vicar General, President of the Diocesan Commission on Sacred Art and Liturgy.<sup>8</sup>

The demanding requirements for the competition, run by the Amis de l'Orgue, were as follows:

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

I. Improvisation

- a. Prelude and fugue
- b. Hymn versets in differing styles, the last being a large paraphrase

II. Performance (from memory)

- a. Three pieces by Bach, including a large prelude and fugue, an allegro from a trio sonata, and a large chorale-prelude
- b. Three pieces by César Franck, including one of the Three Chorals.
- c. Three pieces by Charles Tournemire, including a concluding piece from one of the services in *L'Orgue Mystique*.

In each of these categories, the jury will select one of the three pieces that are proposed.

III. Oral questions on the liturgy, the unfolding of sacred services, the role of the liturgical organist, the history of organ building, organ music, performance, registration.<sup>9</sup>

Since Jean Langlais had applied, his friends Litaize, Duruflé, and Fleury—whom he had told about Tournemire's last wishes—declined to compete. Daniel-Lesur and Antoine Reboulot remained. The practicing began at Sainte-Clotilde until Langlais received this letter from Norbert Dufourcq:

Sunday, December 14, 1941

Dear Friend,

Last night Daniel-Lesur told me that he has decided not to participate in the competition for Sainte-Clotilde (his entry permission expiring on the 15th), and Reboulot let me know this morning that he is withdrawing from the competition "because his chances seemed to be zero"; I found the priest-in-charge of Sainte-Clotilde. He decided that since there was only one candidate that there was no need of a competition, and that it would be moved to a later date. Don't bother with practicing for it.

I'm so sorry about this stalemate, and I tried to do everything that I could for two months for the art of the organ, for young organists...and for you.

Very cordially,  
Norbert Dufourcq<sup>10</sup>

To say that Jean Langlais was plagued by bad luck in this matter is an understatement, although the worst was yet to come in the form of the following letter from the priest-in-charge of Sainte-Clotilde, barely two-and-a-half months after the cancellation of the competition:

Paris, March 2, 1942

Dear Sir,

I did receive your letter. I was just about to write you. Unfortunately, I am forced to cause you a great disappointment. I like you very much and my recognition of your high standing, which no one would deny, remains constant. But I never thought that the appointment of a "youth," as you are, could be done other than by a competition: everyone came to me to say this, including the archbishop, and even Madame Tournemire agreed that Monsieur Tournemire, in spite of his preference for you, understood full well that his successor would be determined by a competition.

The competition was arranged: you know that at the last minute it couldn't take place, since you ended up being the only one who wished to participate. We then imagined that it could be re-opened: then it turned out not to be so easy: I got a letter from Mr.

---

<sup>9</sup> Langlais, "Souvenirs."

<sup>10</sup> Collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

Litaize alerting me that we would have great difficulties starting it again because almost all your contemporaries and fellow organists likely to participate have decided not to compete against you. To tell the truth, since I had always said that I would willingly wait until the end of the war to resolve the matter, I took a stance in the situation that was thus created. However, little by little, seeing peace so slow in coming, I wondered if I was right to wait so long.

In the meantime, the candidacy of Mr. Ermend-Bonnal, whose new functions brought him to Paris, came to my attention and I was told that this musician's reputation and quality were such that everyone—or almost—was in favor of his being named successor to Mr. Tournemire.

I consulted various competent people who convinced me that Mr. Ermend-Bonnal was the right person, and without a competition. Mr. Labourt, from the archbishop's office, spoke to me himself in these terms.

In your letter, you speak of Monsieur de Maramon's expertise. I'll quote the card that he wrote to me: "In my exile, I have heard that you may be taken by Mr. Ermend-Bonnal's candidacy for Mr. Tournemire's succession. I call your attention especially to this candidate's great titles: great musician, great Christian, generally thought to be highly worthy of your organ loft."

And so, given all of this, what else could I do but accept Mr. Ermend-Bonnal's candidacy? I therefore decided, with much regret, to cause you great disappointment once again.

Let me say that I wouldn't have taken this decision if I hadn't thought that given your age, the possibility of your one day accepting César Franck's organ loft was only delayed: Mr. Ermend-Bonnal himself is not a young man, and he will probably retire in a few years.

Respectfully yours,

P. Verdrie, priest-in-charge of Sainte-Clotilde<sup>11</sup>

Jean Langlais was absolutely devastated by this shameful decision. Everything and everyone seemed lined up against him, led by the Amis de l'Orgue, Béranger de Miramon and Norbert Dufourcq, not to mention the archbishop, who cancelled the competition on the grounds that there was *only one candidate* left in the running, and then two months later turned around and gave the appointment, without competition, to Joseph Ermend-Bonnal.

Unlike the public outcry that the succession to Vierne at Notre-Dame caused, the appointment of Ermend-Bonnal, then aged 62, stirred no protest, which further embittered Jean Langlais. Years later, at the height of his fame, known world-wide as the organist of Sainte-Clotilde, Langlais never missed an opportunity to bring up, publicly, this terrible episode in his career during which he felt deeply humiliated and betrayed.

## First organ symphony

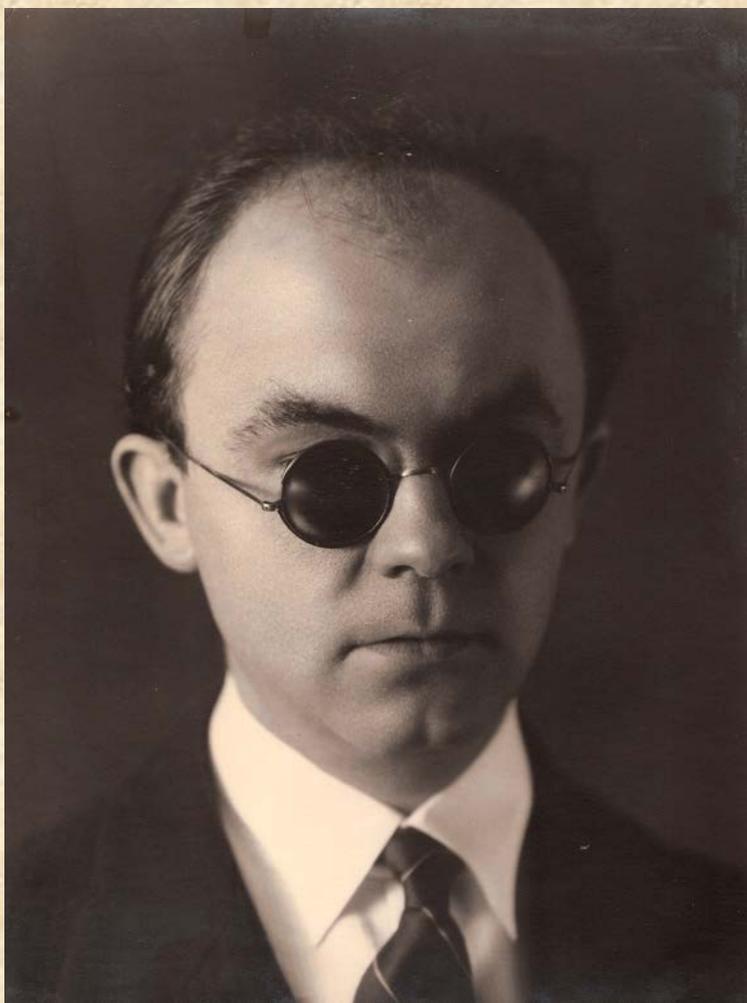
As always with Langlais, his reaction to failure took the form of a new work, in this case the creation of his monumental *Première Symphonie* for organ. As we have seen, in the period immediately before the war the young composer tried to diversify his output by writing for voice, orchestra, and piano, neglecting the organ except for the installments of the *Vingt-Quatre Pièces pour harmonium ou orgue*.

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

With the *Première Symphonie*, the grand organ returns in full majesty. Reviving a tradition outlined by César Franck in 1863 in his “Grande Pièce Symphonique” and continued by Guilmant, Widor, and Vierne, Jean Langlais threw all of his compositional knowledge into the enterprise. It took him four months, from the end of 1941 to the beginning of 1942--the exact period of time between the two letters about Sainte-Clotilde just quoted above—to compose a symphony in four movements (Allegro, Églogue, Choral, Finale) in a harsh and dissonant language, as if the simultaneous trials of the war and the Sainte-Clotilde affair had increased tenfold his potential for aggressiveness.

Dedicated to Gaston Litaize, this long work (over a half hour) remains probably the most technically difficult work in Langlais’ whole catalogue. The composer sets aside plainchant and modality, which had contributed so much to his success, and puts a blast of fresh air into a genre in which Widor and Vierne seemed to have said everything.



**Jean Langlais, 1941**

Figure 24. (collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

For this symphony, it is notable that Langlais adopted the shape for improvising a symphony that Dupré had imposed on his students: four movements, following the model of the last organ symphonies by Widor, the “Gothic” and “Roman,” whereas in his previous symphonies Widor had vascillated between five and seven movements. As for Vierne, after

his *Première Symphonie* in six movements, he structured the following five in five movements each.

Note with what extreme care Langlais structured his four movements: The initial **Allegro** (17 of the Symphony's 44 pages) uses a Beethoven-like sonata form, the whole being governed by developmental techniques, melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, by expansion and its opposite, elimination, and last, superimposition.

Langlais cleanly contrasts the characters of his themes, A and B, above all rhythmically. The A appears as dynamic and strong, and B as melodic and calm; although B has a narrower ambitus than A, both use a free modal scale, A more chromatic than B's closeness to Messiaen's second mode (step, half-step); but the composer refuses to be confined within strict scales.

From the sixth measure he repeats A, modifying the interval patters, juxtaposing the second mode with a chromatic one.

Just as the composer juggles modal scales, he plays with rhythms; he leaves the fairly conventional world of his first works, here multiplying the metric changes, alternating within a short span (the first two pages of the Allegro) fragments in 2/4, 7/16, 5/8, 2/4, 6/8, 2/4, and 3/4, emphasizing off-beats, giving weight to weak meters and other ruptures, succeeding in achieving a sense of continuous instability and anguish. In terms of texture, harmony and counterpoint (particularly canonic passages) mix constantly; the coda to the Allegro offers a significant example: canon at the octave and quarter note between soprano and bass.

Another technique used with abundance is the superimposition of the two themes at the beginning of the coda: first theme A is in the manuals and theme B, transposed to D, is in the pedal; seven measures later, A is put in the pedal and B in the manuals, both themes having been transposed to F-sharp, an example of a rising third-relation that was customary with César Franck, and which Langlais often used both in his written works and improvisations.

From a purely harmonic point of view, this Allegro is characterized by the constant use of chromaticism and passing notes or chords that accentuate the breathless, unstable aspect of the work, just as the parallel 7th, 9th, and 11th chords do, never resolved, which are the backbone of these 17 pages of music.

After such an intense climax, the listener as well as the performer needs some rest, and this is where the **Églogue** intervenes as the second movement of the Symphony. According to dictionaries, an églogue is a small pastoral poem, a definition that the composer follows to the letter in a true country scene. In the first measure, a first pastoral theme is introduced in the mode on F (Lydian, F major without B-flat), harmonized by a sort of polymodal harmonic carillon.

At measure 45, the beginning of a new component of the "pastoral poem," -the second theme- is presented in the form of an unaccompanied melody played on the Swell Oboe, a sort of nostalgic tune spun out by some imaginary shepherd. Right after this solo a third melody appears, a cousin to the second, once again using a harmonic carillon as accompaniment (this time more complex, using a superimposition of an assortment of unrelated gestures). Once the three themes have been introduced separately, Langlais creates all sorts of intricate combinations before bringing in a fourth theme, unexpected in such a calm movement, a quick scherzando which moves ahead virtuosically for 21 measures in irregular meters. The composer then recalls all the themes (1 and 2 together, 1 and 3, then a bit of each of the four themes), before concluding with a dissonance (F, C, A, C-sharp, F), which seems oddly consonant.

About this last chord, Jean Langlais explains:

I really tried to end on a consonant chord of F, but because of the texture of the movement, it seemed dissonant. So I did the opposite and concluded by adding a C# to the consonant chord of F.

The unexpected eruption of the quick scherzando in the *Églogue* (m. 80) allows the composer to assign the role of the symphony's slow movement to the following **Choral**. The word "choral" has no liturgical implication here. Rather, in Langlais' mind, it is a standard musical form in which each of four thematic sections is massive and square, punctuated by rests at the ends of phrases, typical of Lutheran chorales. But Jean Langlais departs from chorale tradition in harmonizing his theme with a series of cluster chords placed systematically on the off-beat, following a scheme already adopted by Messiaen in "Les Mages," the eighth movement of *La Nativité du Seigneur*. As surprising as the harmony is the registration for this movement, which calls for five different sonorities on four manuals and pedals:

Right Hand:

Manual IV: flute 8

Manual III: cornet (presents the theme)

Left Hand:

Manual II: soft foundations 8 and 4

Manual I: soft cromorne (for the theme in canon)

Pedal: flute 8

This layout is unique as far as we know. At the most, it is possible to cite it in the "quartet" of Louis Marchand (1700), which staggers four voices on three manuals and pedal, about which the renowned organ builder Dom Bédos de Celles wrote:

This manner of making a quartet on four keyboards (three manuals plus pedal flute) is difficult to perform: one can hardly make the two top parts sing because they have to be played by the one right hand on two different manuals; or in the second possibility, one has to play the two inner parts with a single left hand on two different manuals.<sup>12</sup>

What would he have thought of a distribution on *four* manuals and pedal!

The opening *Allegro* of the *Première Symphonie* was faithful to the formal approach of a Beethoven sonata. In the same way the **Finale**, the fourth movement, espouses the classic rondo form, but as a type of sonata-rondo that, with its size, has the dimensions of an independent work, with three contrasting sections juxtaposed:

1. Alternation of refrain and episodes (AABACA), mm. 1–130. Pure rondo form.
2. Short andante (mm. 131–177).
3. Finale (*allegro*), starting with a free fugue which is quickly transformed into a toccata, which has at its climax the combination of the main theme from the first movement and the refrain of the rondo (mm. 142 to the end).

Langlais introduces some idiosyncrasies within the classic form: first, contrary to standard form, he repeats the refrain at the outset so that, according to him, "the D-major tonality is understood to be a vision of future sunlight, that is, the end of the war."<sup>13</sup> Second, the *allegro* of the finale begins with a fugue (whose theme is a transformed version of the

<sup>12</sup> Bédos de Celles, François [Dom Bédos], *L'Art du facteur d'orgues*. 4 vols. Paris: Louis-François Delatour, 1766–1778. Vol. 3. 528.

<sup>13</sup> Langlais, "Souvenirs."

refrain), and it evolves imperceptibly into a virtuosic toccata in which the composer creates a cyclic form by superimposing the refrain of this movement on the first theme of the first movement. The work ends with a virtuosic display unequivocally in D major, even though the Symphony had begun in a free mode on D. In any case, it is clear that Jean Langlais put all of his energy, all of his musical knowledge into this piece that remains without equal in terms of complexity and technical difficulty in all his work.

As he later explained:

I wrote in a complicated language and style because I felt that I myself was in a complicated, tormented world. Assaulted on all sides by war, injustice, my only way to fight back was to write a work that represented the sum of everything I knew musically.<sup>14</sup>

And he didn't entrust the premiere of this work to anyone else. It took place on June 27, 1943 at the Palais de Chaillot (the Trocadéro Palace). A photograph from the time shows him during the concert on this monumental organ which he had played once before, two years earlier.<sup>15</sup>



**Jean Langlais in concert on the Cavallé-Coll/Gonzalez organ at the Trocadéro, June 27, 1943**

Figure 25. (collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

His daughter Janine, then seven years old, remembers:

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> During the war, major organ recitals were given at the Chaillot Palace (formerly Trocadéro Palace) on the 1878 Cavallé-Coll organ that had been rebuilt by Victor Gonzalez and re-dedicated in 1939. The most famous organists took part from the very beginning of the series in 1940; Jean Langlais played the fourth recital on June 15, 1941, then again, the fifteenth recital on June 27, 1943, November 23, 1944, and later, on December 13, 1945. The last two were also broadcast on the radio.

One of my earliest childhood memories is of the legendary concert at the Chaillot Palace in which Dad premiered his *Première Symphonie*. I can still see myself jumping up and down for joy when I heard the audience cheer. The hall was standing room-only, and I remember that just behind me there were two German soldiers who laughed at my antics!<sup>16</sup>

Olivier Messiaen devoted to this work one of the few articles that he wrote during the occupation, in his inimitable mixture of poetry and deep analysis:

The fifteenth organ recital at the Chaillot Palace was entrusted to Jean Langlais. I won't comment on his virtuosity and prowess in registration, which everyone knows. But an analysis is needed of Langlais' Organ Symphony—played masterfully by the composer—which constituted the *pièce de résistance* as well as the program's premiere. The language—not aggressive, but with a brilliant harmonic palette, sometimes harsh, with a chromaticism that always shimmered—was true to itself, the style never breaking down in the course of its four movements.

The opening Allegro with two themes was openly Beethovenesque. The second part, *Églogue*, had two solos (one for oboe, one for cornet) of a winged melody like a bird's laughter; it was distinguished by its superimpositions—not polytonal, but *polymodal*.

Third part: *Choral*, the best moment of the work. Somber, sad, like a star of lead, its chords enclose the listener in mysterious and black water. A combination of five timbres, one for the pedals, four for the manuals (each hand playing on two manuals at the same time) - the effect is new in organ literature—it was hard to write, to register, and to play; Langlais treated these difficulties as trifles. The *Finale* remains, very brilliant; the “great chorus” sparkled with the organ's sharp-edged joy: a fan of sun in cold water. All of this is well constructed, substantial, serious, and consoles us from the so-called French colour.<sup>17</sup>

Shortly after the concert, Hérelle and Jean Langlais signed a contract to publish the work, and it came out in 1945.

### **Jean Langlais' daily life in occupied Paris - Composition of *Neuf Pièces* for organ.**

Like many French people during the black days of the Occupation, Jean Langlais and his family suffered the rigors of the time, including food rationing, the curfews that were imposed, and the particularly bitter cold weather during these winters of war.<sup>18</sup>

Starting in 1940, food cards with detachable tickets were distributed to Parisians. In 1941, for example, Jean Langlais and his family officially had an allowance of 9 oz. of bread per day; 9 oz. of meat and 3 oz. of cheese per week; and 19 oz. of butter and oil, 17 oz. of sugar, 7 oz. of rice, and 9 oz. of pasta per month. There were similar ration tickets for clothes and coal to heat dwellings.

Jean Langlais long remembered the seven flights of stairs that he had to climb to his newly rented flat at 26 rue Duroc to carry sacks of coal from the cellar in order to heat the

---

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Janine Langlais-Motton, June 1985.

<sup>17</sup> Messiaen, Olivier. “Récital d’orgue de Jean Langlais (June 27).” *L'Information musicale* 124 (July 9, 1943). 389.

<sup>18</sup> Paris was occupied by Nazi forces from June 22, 1940 to August 25, 1944.

apartment.<sup>19</sup> The same cellar served as a bomb shelter for the whole building during the German and Allied air raids.

Rutabagas and Jerusalem artichokes rapidly replaced potatoes, and the shortages were so severe that sometimes, because of lack of provisions, the ration tickets couldn't even be used. Fortunately for the Langlais family, occasional packages from Brittany arrived to improve the ordinary situation, but this was completely insufficient and everyone competed in finding cunning ways to get food. Michel Villey, a friend, remembered:

Thus one day, Jean and I took off on a tandem bicycle looking for vegetables in suburban Paris. After a long ride, we came home exhausted but happy to proudly show off what we thought were cabbages, and with one look from our wives, who found it hilarious, we were told that it was lettuce.<sup>20</sup>

Another food story was retold by Janine, Jean Langlais' daughter:

I remember a certain rabbit that we had to throw out. God knows that no one wanted to throw out meat in those days! At the market, Mom had bought a (so-called) rabbit which she lovingly cooked. It smelled wonderful. But with the first mouthful it was obviously inedible, and we had to throw it out. I remember that Dad yelled at Mom, "So, did you take a good look at the head of the rabbit when you bought it?" "Of course, I assure you" she replied without much conviction.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, they later learned that the merchant who sold these rabbits at the market was arrested for having sold... cats. And, lacking warm clothing, Jean Langlais sometimes put newspaper in the lining of his clothes to protect himself from the cold.

In 1942, the musicologist Armand Machabey published a monograph that included a sensitive portrait of Jean Langlais.

From Francesco Landino to Cabezon and Vierne, illustrious predecessors paved the road that Langlais is following. This blind organist of Saint-Pierre de Montrouge, accepts a dark life not with simple courage, but with a sort of hopeful optimism, which is already justified by demonstrable results. It is because the interior life of a blind person has something of the unlimited and, I assume, inaccessible to the sighted; and when this blind man turns his attention to expressing himself in music, we cannot predict its boundaries, its depth, or its complexity...

Rich in the confidence of his elders and his colleagues, esteemed by critics not known for their leniency, Jean Langlais, who senses in himself a revival of a long Breton heritage, is gaining a reputation as a thoughtful and inventive musician with a solid technique, all animated by ideas that only he could conceive as he rises to the level of the great names that have preceded him in the austere destiny of a blind composer.<sup>22</sup>

The fact that Machabey reused this material in a 1949 volume in which he juxtaposed Langlais with the likes of Messiaen, Dutilleux, and Duruflé, is proof that at the end of the war Langlais was perceived to be a full member of the "Young French School."

---

<sup>19</sup> Langlais, "Souvenirs." The building did not have an elevator in this era; it was installed only toward the end of the 1960s, just after the composer bought the apartment in 1965.

<sup>20</sup> Recounted in an interview with the author.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with the author.

<sup>22</sup> Machabey, Armand. "Galerie de quelques musiciens parisiens: Jean Langlais." *L'Information musicale*: 77 (July 3, 1942). 1009.

Unfortunately, in this period, the time that he could devote to composition was greatly reduced by various duties: church services, private lessons, and above-all by his six hours of daily teaching of organ and theory at the National Institute for the Young Blind. One of his former blind students during the war, Lucienne Dannely, testifies to the care that Langlais brought to his teaching:

We worked according to Marcel Dupré's method, and he displayed great respect for the teaching of his former mentor at the Paris Conservatory. Jean Langlais explained our errors very clearly, and he could discern them perfectly by ear. He asked us questions about the form of the works we played, teaching us to understand the workmanship in certain pieces, telling us about the composers. He showed himself to be patient, assessing with certainty the potential of each one of us. For those of us who were far from conservatory level, he moderated his requirements, but each had to give his all. I never saw him ignore a relatively ungifted classmate, nor neglect him in favor of another who stood out.

Unlike the others, I particularly liked composition. One day when he had just finished improvising on a liturgical theme to teach us how to do it, I blurted out, "When one hears you, it seems so easy that one thinks he could do the same."

"But that's a real compliment that you're giving me! Go to the organ and improvise, too," he said to me. And when I had finished, he commented humorously, "You've made an improvisation for a sick room!"

He rarely had us play his works, because the slightest snag, the slightest wrong note wounded him as if by a thorn.

I also learned a lot from his theory classes: I still remember clearly the first one, where he "took apart" J.S. Bach's first Two-Part Invention. We also did reports on the works heard at the Concerts Colonne to which the school took us twice a month. In conclusion, I think that Jean Langlais prepared us for possible musical functions with great professional conscientiousness and competence.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to his official teaching at the Institute, Jean Langlais had numerous private students of all ages and backgrounds at home. Among these were the Baroness of Lassus, Blanche Trillat (whose uncle, Ennemond Trillat was the director of the Lyon Conservatory), Pierre Denis (his future assistant at the Sainte-Clotilde organ), the law professor Michel Villey, the organist Micheline Lagache (to be a first-prize winner in Marcel Dupré's class in 1946), and Claire Boussac (whose grandfather, the geologist Pierre Termier was a friend of the author Léon Bloy).

Ms. Boussac (Jean Langlais liked to remember her as "the only one of my students to whom I never had to say the same thing twice"<sup>24</sup>) found she still had a syllabus for a theory course that Jean Langlais taught to his private students in 1942. She recalls:

On those evenings, he analyzed the following works for us: a *ricercare* by Palestrina, a *tiento* by Cabanilles, various major Bach works (the *Prelude and Fugue in E-flat Major* and the *B-Minor*, the *Toccatas in F major and D minor*, and three *chorale-preludes: Babylone, De profundis, and Gloria*);<sup>25</sup> he also explained his motet "O Bone Jesu." Then, settling himself at the Kasriel pedal harmonium, he played the works just analyzed, even Bach's monumental *Passacaglia and Fugue in C Minor*.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Lucienne Dannely, October, 1993.

<sup>24</sup> Langlais, "Souvenirs."

<sup>25</sup> BWV 653, 686, 676.

<sup>26</sup> The present author's interview with Claire Boussac, November 1993.

As for concerts, there was greatly reduced activity, due to the war. Churches' lack of heat, supply difficulties of all kinds and rationing kept the public away from concerts in churches.

But in terms of composition, the war years would prove particularly fruitful for organ music. The publisher S. Bornemann, who was very involved in organ music, especially that of Marcel Dupré, commissioned a collection of organ pieces from Langlais in 1942. This set, composed in 1942 and 1943, will be titled *Neuf Pièces*.

These became a collection divided into three parts. The first brings together four "chants" (songs): "de peine" (of pain), "de joie" (of joy), "de paix" (of peace), and "héroïque" (heroic). They are free poems on themes reflecting the dedicatees of the pieces.

In the second part, for the first time in his career Langlais works on Lutheran chorales: "Dans une douce joie" (In dulce júbilo), "De profundis" (Aus tiefer Not), and "Mon âme cherche une fin paisible" (Herzlich tut mich verlangen nach einem sel'gen End, better known as the passion chorale, O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden). Finally in the third part he freely paraphrases Gregorian chants ("Prélude sur une antienne" and "Rhapsodie grégorienne," the latter using "Sacris solemnis," "Verbum supernum," and "Lauda Sion").

If the "Chant de peine," dedicated "to the memory of my dear teacher, Paul Dukas," gives an impression of intense sadness, with its long expressive phrases on the harmonic flute supported by series of dissonant chromatic chords, the "Chant de joie" is the opposite, celebrating in a toccata in which Langlais repeatedly makes reference to Tournemire, such as in the double trills in the inner parts on the manuals framing melodic lines in the *surmajure* scale on F (F major using a B-natural) typical of the Lydian mode.

Jean Langlais himself explains the genesis of his third "song":

My "Chant de paix" is dedicated to the grand-daughter of a great geologist, Pierre Termier. Her name was Claire Boussac and she was a such a peaceful soul, so uncomplaining, so calm in the face of life, that I wrote this piece for her.<sup>27</sup>

The piece is only 32 measures long, but these measures greatly contributed to the composer's fame, as they admirably reproduce a sense of poetry and internal life using the simplest means: a spacious melody, with a wide ambitus given to the four-foot flute in the Pedal, rises over long, sustained harmonies (largely inversions of seventh chords) in the Swell, in quadruple meter.

The following piece, "Chant héroïque," is also one of Langlais' better known works. Written "in memory of Jehan Alain, heroically fallen for France in defending Saumur, June 1940," it is a veritable cry of anger and sadness in the face of the tragic and unfair death of the young musician:

---

<sup>27</sup> Interview transcribed by François Carbou in the notes for his recording *Langlais joue Langlais aux grandes orgues de Sainte-Clotilde*. LP. Solstice, SOL1, 1976.

My “Chant héroïque” is dedicated to the memory of my very dear friend (whom I consider a genius) Jehan Alain. He visited me during his last leave, about a month before his death, and I said to him, “I don’t know, I’m not a soldier and I don’t know what’s going on, but this seems to me to be, above all, dangerous duty.”

And Jehan Alain replied with superb confidence, “You think so?! With the equipment that we have, we don’t risk anything!”

And a month later he was no longer of this world... It was an enormous loss for music, and I wrote a protest song in his memory. I put into it... as a sort of poetic feeling of his own music. I didn’t want to make a pastiche of it, of course, but I wanted to immerse myself once again in his modal thought.

However, I cut that short by emphasizing certain passages of “La Marseillaise” (“aux armes, citoyens!”), but in minor and with harrowing harmonies, since I must say that the death of Jehan Alain truly broke my heart, my spirit; and further, it put an end to our friendship, which had been grand.<sup>28</sup>

Jean Langlais composed this tumultuous and heartbreaking musical farewell in a single night on his modest pedal harmonium. The piece pays homage to his friend by using a melodic line and the second mode characteristic of Alain’s *Litanies*, with frequent rhythmic pauses and the unexpected insertion of the phrase “Aux armes citoyens” from the French national anthem, “La Marseillaise”, in minor (B minor and then C minor) on full organ, a sort of tragic sublimation of patriotic protest.

After these four “songs,” so very personal, the composer turns for the first time to the Lutheran chorale. Until then, the word “choral” seems to have only meant to him an abstract style (see, for example, the “choral” in the *Vingt-Quatre Pièces pour harmonium ou orgue* or in the *Première Symphonie*), stripped of any religious context. But in *Neuf Pièces*, in contrast, he chose chorale melodies that are particularly well known to Lutherans and set them in his own manner, without worrying about their original versions because he was content to take the versions that J.S. Bach used. So, without realizing it, by taking Bach as his model, Langlais modified the Reformation originals. But didn’t he do more or less the same thing rhythmically with plainchant in his early works?

The composer seems to hesitate about the language for the titles of his chorals. Consciously ignoring the German (the war undoubtedly played a role in his choice; he loathed using the occupiers’ language), he used French (“Dans une douce joie,” “Mon âme cherche une fin paisible”) and Latin (“De profundis”).

But no matter; Jean Langlais perfectly grasped the meaning of the messages conveyed by the chosen texts, and while distancing himself from any reference supporting Bach, he inserts into his own pieces, although with a different vocabulary, the same pulsations of joy, sorrow, or peace that his illustrious predecessor used.

For the chorale “De profundis” (n°6 in *Neuf Pièces*), he breaks away from the normal rigidity of the Lutheran melody and renews the commentary on it, as he himself explained:

For a theme, I took the same text that Bach used in his six-voiced chorale-prelude, in German “Aus tiefer Not” [BWV 686]. But I didn’t look at it only through the contrapuntal lens: I was just as concerned with the literary text. It is a sort of lament. I remember a commentator who wrote, concerning this subject, “At the end, we have the

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

striking impression of a tomb that is closing.” I had never thought of the image, but I find it very apt.<sup>29</sup>

He similarly transforms a harmonized chorale (n°7) into an extraordinarily expressive page just by appoggiaturas, ritards, and tritone progressions which create a translation of the tormented soul in search of heavenly peace.

In the chorale “Mon âme cherche une fin paisible” (piece n°7), the repeated use of appoggiaturas gave birth, rather obviously, to the idea of the intended indecision to symbolize what the soul is seeking. It would be appropriate to see a few measures of this piece in the appoggiatura section of a harmony book to show music students how effective the appoggiatura can be when well understood and used well technically.<sup>30</sup>

For Jean Langlais:

Another chorale that Bach set marvelously; as a result, I was careful not to approach it in the same manner, as that would have been certain failure!

On the other hand, I was very drawn to it: my soul longs for a peaceful end, so it doesn't have it now. Thus a chromatic system that describes the present state of the Christian soul, which seeks peace but does not have it.<sup>31</sup>

The last two of the collection draw upon Gregorian chant, and oddly they are the least convincing works in the *Neuf Pièces*, even in the opinion of the composer himself. That is certainly true of the “Prélude sur une antienne,” which is nothing more than a simple vacation exercise that Marcel Dupré assigned his organ students in 1929; the lack of maturity is obvious. On the other hand, it is perhaps over-ambition that makes the “Rhapsodie Grégorienne” miss the mark. Jean Langlais himself said that several times. 15 pages long, and filled with plainchant, this final piece in the collection is intended as an homage to Charles Tournemire, to whom it is dedicated. In it Langlais presents and then combines three of the best known Gregorian melodies: “Sacris solemniis”, “Verbum supernum” and “Lauda Sion”, in other words, two hymns and a sequence for the Feast of the Blessed Sacrament.

“Worked out too fast, in a single evening,” he used to say; this vast rhapsody never pleased its author, who never stopped reworking it, something very rare with him. It wasn't until 37 years later (!), in 1980, that he brought it to a conclusion, cutting 42 of the 185 opening measures and completely rewriting the end. Bornemann published the new version as the 19th printing of the collection. Was Jean Langlais completely satisfied with the changes? It's doubtful, in view of the fact that six years later, in 1986, he composed *In Memoriam*, a vast fresco for organ based on several Gregorian themes, and once again dedicated to Charles Tournemire. To be sure, the themes that he chose were different from those in the “Rhapsodie Grégorienne,” but it is unusual to see an artist work—with a 40-year interval—on two similar large-scale works dedicated to the same person. In his 1986 recorded recollections, the composer asserted, “Each time, I was agonized by the idea of not reaching the level of this master who was so enamored of perfection.” Perhaps that is the best explanation.

In any case, from their first appearance, *Neuf Pièces* had an undisputed success. More than 20,000 copies were sold between 1945 and 2014 (according to the statement of royalties sent

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Jean Langlais, “Orgue.” *Musique et orgue* (February, 1946). Collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

<sup>31</sup> Carbou, op cit, footnote 188. 100

by the Bornemann editor), led by the “Chant de paix” and “Chant héroïque,” if one believes the evidence of concert programs both in France and abroad.

During this wartime period, Langlais learned about the deaths, both on March 19, 1943, of two musicians who were dear to him: Albert Mahaut, his harmony teacher at the Institute for the Young Blind, and Abel Decaux, former organ teacher at the Schola Cantorum. In honor of their memory, Langlais composed *Deux Offertoires pour tous les temps* for organ, which the Durand company immediately agreed to publish.

The first, sub-titled “Paraphrase de la messe ‘Stelliferi conditor orbis’” (Mass 13) is dedicated to Decaux, while the second, “Paraphrase de la messe ‘Magnae Deus potentiae’” (Mass 5) is for Mahaut. Both use the complete melodies of three of the Ordinary texts, the Kyrie, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei, and for the first time in his composing career Langlais replicates the traditional rhythmic interpretation of the chants, presenting them in even quarter notes, with longer notes only where the modern rules of plainchant require them.

Here in these new pieces, he takes a decisive step forward, retaining the unmetrical rhythm of plainchant as he had heard it his whole life, a new approach for him that he would make a rule in the years to come.

He was careful to specify, at the top of his first Offertory, “in the rhythm of Gregorian chant,” a notation that appears here for the first time in his organ works.

After these many pages for organ, our composer agreed to the request of one of the priests at Saint-Pierre de Montrouge, Father Pouplain, to work on a project for “the liturgical mystery of Good Friday.” He was given a detailed synopsis that specified exactly where music should intervene in the spoken texts (Overture, Miserere, Psalm verses, and the final hymn, “Pange lingua”).

Father Pouplain described a vibrant pageant that he hoped to create:

Men, all veiled in black, process and prostrate themselves before the tomb that is placed in the middle of the stage, topped by an empty cross. They murmur the Miserere, in French so that the congregation can understand it, with voices in the background who sing in Latin.<sup>32</sup>

Jean Langlais began this *Mystère du Vendredi Saint*<sup>33</sup> with a short “Prelude” in Latin for four mixed voices, strings, and organ on the text, “O crux ave.” This is followed by a “Miserere mei” that remains one of Langlais’ most deeply moving pieces. The whole work, premiered at Saint Pierre de Montrouge on Good Friday 1943, with Antoine Reboulot at the organ, was published only in part (just the “Miserere Mei” section) under the title *Déploration*.<sup>34</sup> It took the many celebrations of Jean Langlais’ 80th birthday to bring this gripping work out of the shadows. Various audiences were struck by its intense beauty; the American organist Kenneth Landis, director of the Arch Street Church Choir in Philadelphia, wrote after such a concert honoring Langlais’ birthday:

---

<sup>32</sup> Manuscript in the collection of Marie-Louise Langlais.

<sup>33</sup> Unpublished manuscript. Collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

<sup>34</sup> It was first published separately by Costallat in 1956, then after Langlais’ death republished by Combre in a score titled *Déploration*, together with “Libera me Domine” for three voices and organ, composed in 1948. The pair of works was given the title *Deux Déplorations*.

The concert went well; even though most of the audience and singers were not familiar with this music, they became Langlais' "fans." Many people told me how moved they were by "Déploration"; several singers were in tears at the end of the piece! And most of them (the choir has about fifty singers) are professionals coming from the "Philadelphia Singers." Their sound was exceptional.<sup>35</sup>

As in the chorale-prelude "De Profundis" in *Neuf Pièces* for organ, composed at about the same time, in the *Déploration*'s 47 measures, Langlais intensifies the dramatic force of Psalm 50<sup>36</sup> (from which he borrowed the Latin text "Misere mei") with very effective use of silences, to give the impression of "a tomb that is closing."

At the end of 1943, French Radio commissioned Jean Langlais to write *Trois Motets* for one voice, orchestra, and bells. The titles of these unpublished motets are "O Salutaris," "Salve Regina," and "Oremus pro pontifice";<sup>37</sup> they were conceived for concert performance, not for the church. All Gregorian references seem to have been excluded: the words are faithful to the Latin texts, but the melodies are radically different from the plainchants. The celebrated soprano Irène Joachim sang the longest of the three, "Salve Regina," on March 30, 1945, accompanied by the Colonne orchestra.

The end of 1943 also brought great extra-musical joy to the composer and his wife with the birth of a son, named Claude in memory of Claude Debussy, on December 16.<sup>38</sup>

In 1944, a single major work was added to the Langlais catalogue, one not at all related to the organ: *Trois Danses* for winds, percussion, and piano. There are some orchestrational innovations here, as Langlais used only the low woodwinds (English horn, two bass clarinets, and two bassoons) along with the brass in threes. The percussion (snare drum, cymbals, gong, and bass drum) has a modest role, whereas the piano is ever-present and constantly changing its role, sometimes soloist, sometimes accompanist. Modality reigns supreme in each of the *Trois Danses*:

Mode two in the first, whole-tone scale for the second, and a freely chromatic mode in the third. Rhythmically, they are straightforward and fairly rudimentary, even with balanced phrases in 3/4 and 2/4, and are a bit disappointing in this middle of the twentieth century which is so teeming and exuberant. Jean Langlais said several times later that he regretted that, because of his blindness, he had not been able to learn in detail the percussion instruments, which would have allowed him more fantasy and rhythmic liberty in orchestration.

These new pieces were not performed publicly until 1949, five years after their composition, and here is what a critic said of them:

In this good old hall at the Conservatory, which hardly attracts anyone other than the Society of Wind Instruments, directed by Fernand Oubradous, we were first offered the *Trois Danses* by Jean Langlais. Here is an original work, remarkably written for some winds that play with finesse together with a sober but clever piano. A somewhat oriental

---

<sup>35</sup> Letter sent to the present author by Kenneth Landis on February 28, 1987 (collection Marie-Louise Langlais).

<sup>36</sup> Psalm 51 in Protestant numbering

<sup>37</sup> Unpublished manuscripts. Collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

<sup>38</sup> Beethoven's birthday, as Jean Langlais enjoyed pointing out.

harshness suits the nostalgic languor or the rhythmic bursts that follow with a rare skill in this triptych for which one can foresee a enduring success.<sup>39</sup>

Alas, reality gave the lie to this assertion, and this work for which Gérard Michel predicted a brilliant future was not published until fifty years later, in 1999 (eight years after Jean Langlais's death), by the German publisher Carus. It no doubt had the misfortune of being too distant from the rest of Jean Langlais's repertory.

## The liberation of Paris: August 25, 1944

In a letter sent on September 20, 1944, to his relatives in La Fontenelle, Jean Langlais describes in detail the greatly desired liberation of Paris.

His almost cinematic "reporting" is striking, coming from a blind man:

Dear Family,

I tried to get a note to you via the Red Cross, but here is more complete information about us.

The months of July and August were terrible here. Food supplies were completely insufficient. And so we have lost a lot of weight, especially Janine and me. As for Claude, he never has enough milk.

Here are some details about the events:

During the week leading up to August 15 we clearly heard all over Paris intense bombardments that first got closer and then seemed more distant. We have since learned that it was the encircling of the capital. We should mention that the Parisians appeared overjoyed to hear these formidable sounds of war.

At the same time an enormous movement of German vehicles of all sorts occurred.

We had no idea if they were going to Normandy or East. What we did know was that lots of buildings were being emptied of their German occupiers.

On August 15th, a huge event: we learned of a general strike by the police.

An enormous resistance was getting ready. Until the 19th, there was no evident change. We all expected the arrival of the allies on Friday evening the 19th. In its place there was a general uprising. The FFI<sup>40</sup> seized the police headquarters, the Paris City Hall, and other official buildings. From that moment, the Germans were no longer the masters of the capital. In the following days you could see the streets filled with trucks loaded with Germans armed to the teeth, crossing other trucks full of FFI, also armed, but with much less powerful weapons, seeming to ignore each other. On the evening of the 23rd, enormous agitation: we went through the houses collecting everything we could, and in the blink of an eye strong barricades were erected, practically encircling the German army within the capital. All sorts of things were put into these barricades: sacks of sand, old stoves, old metal bed frames, wooden gates, public benches, quickly cut trees, old baby carriages, and even newspaper kiosks. We never understood how the construction could happen so quickly. It was these barricades that most aroused the Germans' fury.

The FFI, with insignificant arms, managed to capture tanks, some Tiger tanks.<sup>41</sup> On the evening of the 24th, Paris was transformed. We were told of the imminent arrival of 30,000 men from Leclerc's army and an unknown number of Americans. About eight o'clock in the evening, one of our neighbors across the street yelled from the window that some French troops were crossing the Austerlitz bridge. Opening my window and

---

<sup>39</sup> Gérard Michel. "Musique: enfin, de vraies premières auditions." *Paroles françaises* (March 18, 1949). 5.

<sup>40</sup> FFI: Forces Française de l'Intérieur (French Domestic Forces), composed of all the groups in the French Résistance, about 400,000 people.

<sup>41</sup> A particularly heavy tank developed by the Germans and used in the war from 1942 to 1945.

my big piano, I played, practically breaking my wrists, a formidable “Marseillaise,” which was applauded in the street below.

The next day, about 9 am, the Leclerc troops entered a delirious Paris.

In nothing flat the people tore down the barricades in order to let the army pass. At about 10 am the Leclerc army came through the Boulevard des Invalides.

I stayed at home to babysit Claude; Jeanette and Janine rushed out to watch the march. They had barely reached the Invalides boulevard when the FFI suddenly sent everyone home, announcing that our troops were going to attack the École Militaire and the Invalides, which are a little over 400 yards from our apartment. The first shells fell immediately. The noise was enormous, but short-lived. Then something unspeakable happened: men and women appeared on the roofs or at their windows shooting at the soldiers and the crowd. This roof-top gunfire continued day and night; for two days we couldn't put a foot outside, as it would evoke rage. The FFI responded with gunfire under our windows. We had to pay close attention not to be anywhere near the windows, as bullets whistled and ricocheted everywhere.

On Saturday the 26th, de Gaulle was supposed to go to Notre-Dame to hear the Te Deum. The square was filled with people. With one of my colleagues, I managed to get into the cathedral. As de Gaulle was at the entrance to Notre-Dame, gunfire came from the towers, and even from the galleries within the cathedral more gunfire came, and it didn't stop until the General left, twenty minutes later.

Most of this time we were mostly flat on the floor. It was real work to get home, all the roofs being full of snipers. The saddest is that many of them were French.

There's much more to tell, but we will talk about it in person.

I embrace you all.

Jean.<sup>42</sup>

The war lasted five years, five years of a life of privations, fear, and anger. When it began in 1939, Jean Langlais was 32, the age of all hopes, the age of a successful career unfolding. Six years later, at 37, his career as concert artist had stagnated, necessarily, because of the war, except for the two concerts he gave at the Chaillot Palace on June 15, 1941 and June 27, 1943. Still organist at Saint-Pierre de Montrouge, he had seen his hopes to succeed Tournemire at Sainte-Clotilde evaporate, and his new compositions, aside from the *Première Symphonie* and the *Neuf Pièces* for organ, were fewer and fewer during the war. But he never stopped writing for orchestra, as the *Trois Motets* for voice and orchestra, commissioned by the Radio, testify.

### **Ermend-Bonnal death - The Sainte Clotilde appointment**

And then, eleven days before the liberation of Paris, on August 14, 1944, Joseph Ermend-Bonnal died at the age of 64. Once again, the organ loft at Sainte-Clotilde was vacant, but this time it was a matter of succeeding Ermend-Bonnal rather than Tournemire. On the other hand, the archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Emmanuel Suhard, had issued a new ordinance, instituted in April 1943, more than a year before Bonnal's death: there was to be no appointment to a major Parisian organ, like Sainte-Clotilde, without having a juried competition. Jean Langlais, who had never abandoned the hope of becoming the organist at Sainte-Clotilde, immediately decided to renew his candidacy with father Verdrie, the priest-in-charge of the basilica. He got the following reply:

---

<sup>42</sup> Copy of the letter; collection of Marie-Louise Langlais.

Paris, October 24, 1944

Dear Sir,

I have received your letter informing me that you are still a candidate for the succession of Mssrs. Tournemire and Bonnal. I only learned of the latter's death a few days ago.<sup>43</sup>

I remain very favorably disposed towards your candidacy, which is perfectly legitimate. Officially there must be a competition if other candidates make themselves known within a few days.

As you know, Madame Tournemire has always maintained that her husband wanted you as his successor, but via a competition.<sup>44</sup> But if there is no other serious candidate, obviously, there is no need for a competition, and in this case you would become our organist. I think you have already realized that from a financial standpoint, the situation would undoubtedly be less advantageous than what you have, because here the extra fees are not significant.

Very sincerely yours,  
P. Verdrie<sup>45</sup>

Four days later, he sent Jean Langlais the letter that he had received from Father Lesourd, private secretary to Cardinal Suhard:

His eminence's personal wish is clear. The reply that I am to give you frankly is that there must be a competition, and in any case an appointment must not be made without a jury having been convened (as per the ordinance published in April 1943), even in the case in which the choice is a candidate with unquestionable credentials.

One fact has reinforced the Cardinal's wish: two other major organ lofts are vacant at the moment: Saint-François-Xavier, and for the last several weeks, Saint-Eustache. The appointment of an organist with neither competition nor jury at Sainte-Clotilde, whose organ is one of the most prestigious in Paris, would be a regrettable violation of the rules promulgated last year. It would make it difficult for the priests at Saint-François-Xavier and Saint-Eustache to hold to the decision they have made: to be contented with an interim organist until the end of the war, when there would be a competition.<sup>46</sup>

Would you not, Father, want to adopt the same solution: keep Mr. Bonnal's replacement<sup>47</sup> for the moment and reserve the appointment of a permanent organist until the end of the hostilities, which, one hopes, will not be more than several months away.

Respectfully yours,  
H. Le Sourd, private secretary<sup>48</sup>

For Jean Langlais, as tenacious as any Breton, it was out of the question to shirk the obligatory competition. But things dragged on for almost a year, and four months after the end of the war, on September 12, 1945, Le Sourd suggested that Langlais offer his candidacy yet again to Vicar General Labourt, secretary of the Commission on Sacred Art and Liturgy:

---

<sup>43</sup> Bonnal died on August 14, 1944, more than two months before this letter, and the Sainte-Clotilde priest-in-charge was not informed?

<sup>44</sup> This contradicts her letter to Langlais cited at the beginning of this chapter.

<sup>45</sup> Collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

<sup>46</sup> In point of fact, André Marchal would be appointed the permanent organist at Saint-Eustache without a competition, by a simple letter of candidacy in July 1945, succeeding Joseph Bonnet who died on August 2, 1944 at St. Luce-sur-Mer in Québec.

<sup>47</sup> It was Bernard Schulé (1909–1996), a Swiss organist and composer. He was the last replacement for Charles Tournemire in 1938–1939, then substitute for Ermend-Bonnal from 1942 to 1944, and then interim organist from August 1944 to November 1945.

<sup>48</sup> Collection Marie-Louise Langlais. At the liberation of Paris, Cardinal Suhard (1874–1947) was accused of collaborating with Marshal Pétain's government and of being weak facing the Germans; he was refused entrance into the Cathedral of Notre-Dame for the famous *Te Deum* celebrated in de Gaulle's presence the day after the Liberation.

Paris, September 12, 1945

Dear Sir,

I did receive your letter and my delay in responding was to gather information. I did so yesterday with Vicar General Labourt, the general secretary of the Commission on Sacred Art for the diocese.

Canon Verdrie has not told the General Vicar of his intentions, but nothing suggests that he might want to evade the rules laid down by the Cardinal: competitions and, in exceptional cases, appointment on the basis of credentials.

This second path was followed recently for the appointment of Mr. Marchal at Saint-Eustache, but after deliberation of the archbishop's council.

It seems to me that the best thing is for you to present your candidacy to the priest-in-charge at Sainte-Clotilde.

I very much hope that your candidacy will be successful by means of the test of a competition, which seems to me to be in the best interests of both the artists and the church. ...

Devotedly yours,

H. Le Sourd<sup>49</sup>

At the beginning of October 1945, the weekly *La Semaine Religieuse* announced the vacancy of the position of organist of the main organ at Sainte-Clotilde and invited candidates to make themselves known as soon as possible, conforming to the ordinance by his Eminence dated March 12, 1943. Thus, six years after Tournemire's death, they were back where they started.

But Providence intervened: Father Marc Lallier, a personal friend of Jean Langlais's who knew of the young composer's repeated setbacks at Sainte-Clotilde, brought Cardinal Suhard and Jean Langlais together for a cordial lunch at the Petit Séminaire, where he was the superior. At the end of the meal, the archbishop of Paris had these words for the young organist: "We understand your problems and we'll reflect on them," which in ecclesiastical language, Father Lallier said to Jean Langlais, means: "it's a done deal!"<sup>50</sup> The very next day, the priest-in-charge at Sainte-Clotilde sent the following message to Langlais:

Paris, October 28, 1945

Dear Sir,

The waiting period for applications from potential candidates is over. No one came forward. Therefore I consider you the permanent organist in the Sainte-Clotilde loft, starting now.

I am writing, however, to Mr. Labourt. I believe that he has come to an agreement with you that Mr. Schulé will play the organ on All Saints Day.

On Sunday the 4<sup>th</sup>, at the 11 o'clock Mass, we want to honor the memory of Mr. Tournemire (it's the anniversary of his death).

Mr. Schulé, who has been asked to play some pieces by this master, will defer to you if you decide to play the organ yourself.

Let us know, and especially Mrs. Tournemire.

Respectfully yours,

Father Verdrie, priest-in-charge at Sainte-Clotilde<sup>51</sup>

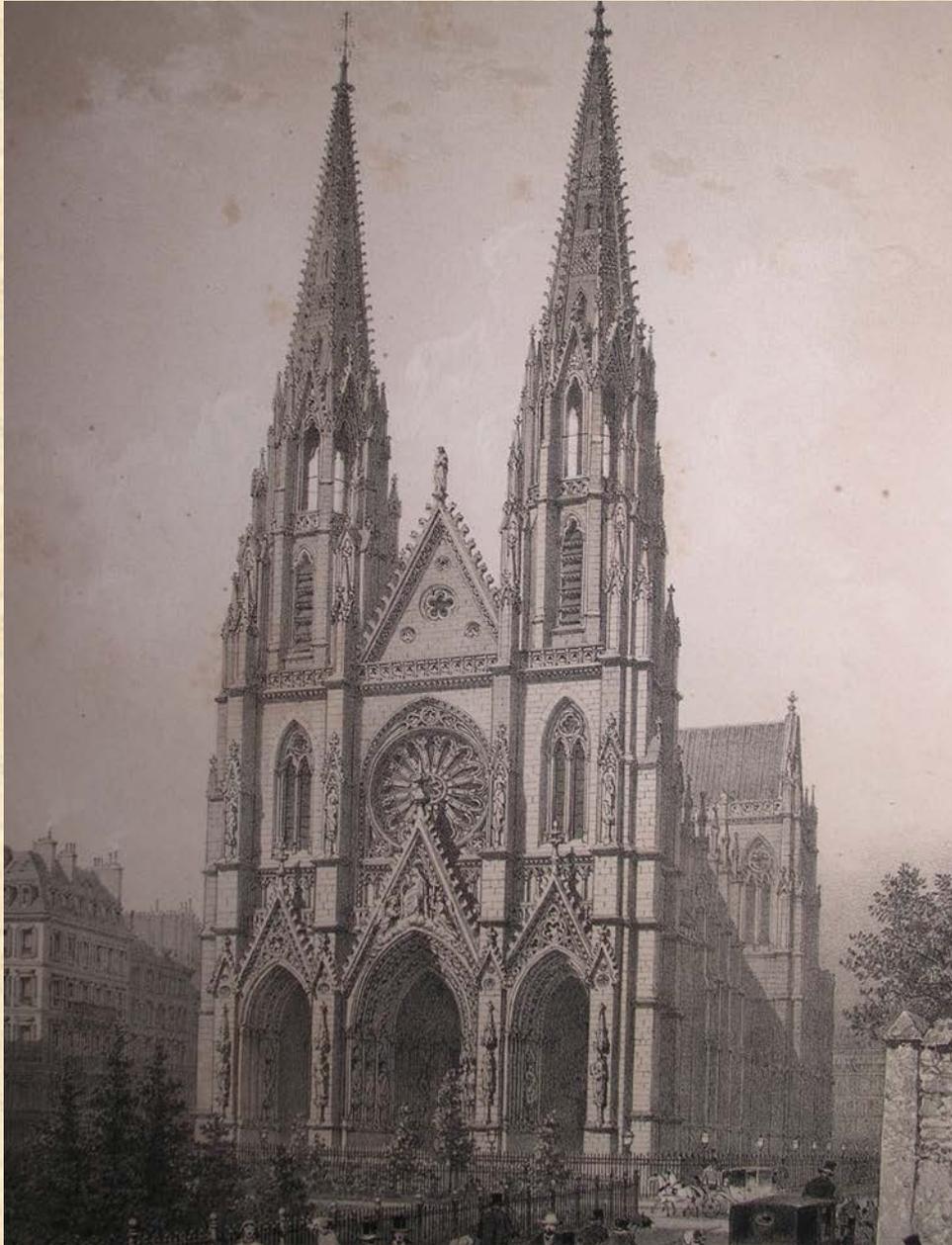
Thus Jean Langlais assumed the organist duties on November 4, 1945. It had taken him six years to get the post that he wouldn't leave until 42 years later, in 1987, at the age of 80. And during all those years as *titulaire*, he never stopped playing, teaching, and recording the

<sup>49</sup> Collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

<sup>50</sup> Private conversation with the author.

<sup>51</sup> Collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

music of his glorious predecessors, César Franck and Charles Tournemire, marking the line of descent from these composers that he would always assert. Thus, he himself will become the third link in what the American musicologist Robert Sutherland Lord would later call “The Sainte-Clotilde Tradition.”<sup>52</sup>



**The Basilica of Sainte-Clotilde, 1857**

Figure 26. (lithography by Philippe Benoist, collection Marie-Louise Langlais)



<sup>52</sup> Robert Sutherland Lord, *The Sainte-Clotilde Tradition, Toward a Definition*, taped essay sent to Jean Langlais, November 4, 1981. 7. Collection Marie-Louise Langlais.