

CHAPTER 7

A Sacred Triptych, First Recordings

Immediately upon his return to France, Jean Langlais participated, beginning on June 22, 1952, in the nation's solemn tribute to Louis Braille, as recounted in *Le Parisien Libéré*.¹

100 Years After His Death, Louis Braille, Conqueror of the Night, Is Laid To Rest in the Pantheon, Accompanied by Hundreds of the Blind²

Louis Braille, who invented the tactile alphabet for the blind that freed them from darkness, was laid to rest yesterday in the Pantheon, 100 years after his death. Considered a god among the blind, perhaps no man deserved the honor more. His invention returned to them a part of their lost light and brought them more fully into the world.

The body of Louis Braille was originally interred in the cemetery at Coupvray, his birthplace. Last Saturday his cremated remains were transferred to the Institution des Jeunes Aveugles. A solemn tribute took place in the amphitheater of the Sorbonne in the presence of Helen Keller, the blind, deaf, and mute American who succeeded, through a miracle of energy, to acquire language skills and regain contact with the world. Miss Keller received the cross of the Legion of Honor on this occasion, along with several others who have devoted their lives to the blind.³

Throughout the night from Saturday to Sunday the ashes of Louis Braille, attended by an honor guard bearing white canes, lay in state in the hall of the Institute for the Young Blind, transformed into a candlelit chapel for the occasion.

Yesterday morning, his coffin, draped in the tricolor, was hoisted into a hearse bound for the Pantheon. At the head of the procession were two carts laden with flowers and wreaths, followed by a hearse bearing the initials "L.B." and surrounded by a double cordon of armed soldiers.

Following the hearse were the descendants of Louis Braille, professors from the Institute and a crowd made up of the blind of all ages: men, women, and children, canes in hand or guided by others as church bells pealed.

Making its way along the Boulevard des Invalides and the Boulevard Saint-Michel, the procession reached the Pantheon, where it was welcomed by the President of the Republic Vincent Auriol and his entourage.

Braille's coffin was carried inside by six men and positioned on a catafalque in the nave. After a speech, President Auriol paused before the coffin before it was carried

¹ *Le Parisien libéré*, Paris, June 23, 1952.

² This Parisian monument, atop Mont Sainte-Geneviève near the Luxembourg Gardens, is the designated resting place for individuals of great importance in the history of France. To be interred there is to receive the ultimate homage of the nation.

³ Official announcement of June 20, 1952, by order of the Ministre de la Santé Publique, overseer of the National Institute for the Young Blind.

into the crypt... The greatest honor the nation can bestow was thus received by Louis Braille, who never sought such recognition.

Jean Langlais always recalled with great emotion his meeting with Helen Keller at the Institute for the Young Blind a few days later. The great lady asked him to play the *Toccatà in D minor* of Bach, a surprising request from a person without sight or hearing. Jean Langlais complied graciously. Afterwards, Helen Keller's communicated reaction was startling: "I received vibrations in my face." In the course of these ceremonies Jean Langlais was awarded the cross of the Legion of Honor, alongside Helen Keller and several others, in recognition of his devotion to his blind students.

Since the death of Albert Mahaut in 1943, Langlais had worked tirelessly for the professional placement of blind organists across France through the Association Valentin Haüy. He took this duty very seriously all his life, receiving numerous expressions of thanks in Braille, often from the most humble.⁴

A sacred triptych : Missa in simplicitate – Missa Salve Regina – La Passion

At the end of the 1940s, Jean Langlais embarked upon a compositional path dedicated to sacred vocal music: polyphonic in the case of the *Messe Solennelle*; more intimate with the *Trois Prières* for solo voice and organ dedicated to the soprano Marie-Louise Colozier.

Premiered at Saint-Clotilde by their dedicatee on August 16, 1949 during a rather fallow period in Parisian musical life, these short pieces (only two pages each) passed almost unnoticed despite favorable reviews.⁵ One must never underestimate these short, simple pages in Jean Langlais' output. The "Ave verum" in particular, the first of the *Trois Prières*, is a jewel that presages a masterpiece, the *Missa in simplicitate*.

. *Missa in simplicitate* (1952)

The summer vacation of 1952 afforded Jean Langlais the opportunity to compose this work for solo voice and organ. The composer recalls:⁶

One day in July, the rector of La Richardais, where I was spending my holiday, knowing we had invited Jeannine Collard⁷ of the Paris Opera to join us, came by to ask me to try to persuade her to sing at mass on Sunday. Because she had not brought any sacred music along she asked me to compose something. I made a Kyrie for her, to which she replied, "It's really not enough to sing just the Kyrie at mass!" "Alright, I'll make you an Agnus Dei so you can sing a Kyrie at the beginning and an Agnus Dei at the end."

In due course I composed an entire mass, even adding a Credo in passing. The idea for its long recitative came from the monologue of the Messenger in Act II of Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, which Jeannine Collard had sung magnificently shortly before.

⁴ Collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

⁵ Eric Sarnette, *Musique religieuse*, in *Musique et Radio*, Paris, November 1949.

⁶ Langlais, "Souvenirs".

⁷ Jeannine Collard (born 1923), mezzo-soprano of the Paris Opera, was one of the main interpreters of the vocal music of Jean Langlais beginning in the 1950s, remaining a close friend until his death in 1991.

One evening, before composing the Credo, I said to my old friend Father Vigour, “tonight I’m going to start and finish the Credo of my mass.”

I recall it was a magnificent night. Seated at my pedal piano, an open window brought in the fragrance of a yellow acacia. I was happy because I was writing exactly what I wanted to write. Once finished, I consulted my watch, thinking it must be at least midnight. In fact it was 4:30 in the morning, yet I scarcely realized it.

In such moments a man experiences the fullness of joy when he knows he has succeeded at something.

Instead of going to bed I took my cane and went out to sit on the banks of the Rance,⁸ where I had the immense pleasure of hearing the last songs of the nocturnal marine birds and the first songs of the birds that awaken with the dawn.

When I returned home around 6 a.m. my neighbor, a very characteristic Breton woman, said: “Well, my good man, you didn’t sleep at all last night!” “Did I bother you?” I asked. “Oh no, but I heard you working all the same. You can’t do that all the time, you’ll have a heart attack!”

I never regretted this long evening that continues to give interior light in my life.

In the preface of the work the composer specifies:

Written for solo voice and organ, the *Missa in simplicitate* aims to follow as closely as possible the Latin text, upon which it comments with deep humility, hence the title. The composer’s plan was to embody the most extreme simplicity, especially in the Credo, the centerpiece of the work which affirms the faith without which the Mass would have no reason for being. In the Agnus Dei the idea of the Kyrie returns to lend unity to the five moments, each of them based on a single theme.

This single theme is in fact a Braille transcription of the first name of its dedicatee, Jeannine Collard. Following the relationship between the letters of the Braille alphabet and musical pitches, one can deduce from “Jeannine” the following musical phrase: J(b) – E(d) – A (because it means a fingering in Braille, Langlais skips it, proceeding to the double N(c) to which he adds a sharp, followed by I(a), N(c#), and E(d). This produces b-d-c#-c#-a-c#-d, which one finds as an ostinato at the beginning and end of both the Kyrie and Agnus Dei. Langlais often employed this complicated system of letters and note names to construct melodies, retaining his artistic license as a composer to vary their duration and tessitura.

There are very few masses for solo voice and organ, the form having inspired composers to write polyphony since the 14th century. Jean Langlais here proposes a counterweight to this practice, in the spirit of its title “*in simplicitate*.”

The choice of mezzo-soprano Jeannine Collard of the Paris Opera as dedicatee explains the range of the solo part, which also may be sung by a baritone. To encourage the broadest possible exposure the composer does not specify voice type in the subtitle (“pour une voix”), contenting himself with “for solo voice or unison choir accompanied by organ or harmonium.” Performance by a unison choir presents certain issues, as the *Missa in simplicitate* was clearly conceived for an operatic voice with its expected stamina and a panoply of technical resources.

The score doesn’t offer much respite, omnipresent as the voice remains throughout five movements. There are practically no pauses, especially in the Gloria and the Credo.

⁸ The river Rance passes La Richardais on its way to the English Channel.



Jean Langlais and Jeannine Collard
Figure 37. (collection Marie-Louise Langlais)⁹

By introducing a powerful feminine operatic voice wasn't Jean Langlais going against the *Motu proprio*, which decried theatrical style as inappropriate for church music? Reading through and listening to the *Missa in simplicitate* quickly dispel such doubts. The composer, indeed, has succeeded in domesticating the theatrical style, elevating it for the sole benefit of a sacred Latin text, whose expressivity and fervor it underlines with an often overwhelming intensity.

The designation "*in simplicitate*" refers not only to the single voice that sings the ordinary of the mass, but also to the reserved style with which the text is treated, without ornamentation or vocalise aside from the Benedictus and the final "Hosanna." Beneath this apparent simplicity an orator's fire shines forth with evocative power, particularly in the Credo. This was the first time Langlais had composed a Credo, normally sung to Gregorian chant between the Gloria and the Sanctus. It was an experiment that proved to be a master stroke. Setting the entire text without repetition, he far surpasses the original epigrammatic plainsong, unfurling a free recitative that spans nearly the entire mezzo-soprano range, from middle C to soprano G-flat. The melody ascends powerfully at the key words "Deo vero" (mm. 13-14), "et resurrexit" (m. 31), and "cum gloria" (m. 37). It concludes in dazzling light with the five final measures "et vitam venturi saeculi. Amen." Note the gripping effect

⁹ Photograph taken July 28, 1964, upon the presentation of the Prix François Dhuine to Jean Langlais at Dol-de-Bretagne.

produced by the sudden eruption of the organ tutti in the last two measures, a perfect V-I cadence supporting the voice at full cry. Jeannine Collard said of this Credo:¹⁰

It was hearing me sing the “Song of the Messenger” from Monteverdi’s *Orfeo* that brought about the idea of a recitative. At the time, in 1952, no one performed this music except the great Nadia Boulanger, to my knowledge. Jean Langlais was completely taken with this work upon hearing it for the first time, adopting a similar style for his Credo, a long recitative that rises step-by-step through tonalities and crescendos toward a grand affirmation of faith. I recall him saying of its composition: “in such moments a man experiences the fullness of joy when he knows he has succeeded at something.”

After the inspired concentration of the Credo, the Sanctus begins in a contemplative mood, the voice gliding melismatically over an organ ostinato. Intensity returns gradually through “Pleni sunt caeli,” followed by a powerful “Hosanna” that precedes a gentle Benedictus couched on the Voix céleste. The final “Hosanna” unleashes a cascade of virtuoso vocalizations. The composer provides a simplified alternate version in anticipation of choral performance. If the Credo marks the dramatic summit of the *Missa in simplicitate*, the Agnus Dei concludes the mass as it began, in the quiet peace of the Kyrie composed for that Sunday morning at La Richardais. The voice fades away gradually, descending to low B for the final “pacem.” In a concise form, utilizing the simplest of harmonic means, Jean Langlais succeeds in evoking supplication in this compelling vision of humanity imploring a radiant deity.

The composer and musicologist Henry Barraud, longtime director of broadcasts for Radiodiffusion Française, sent Jean Langlais the following letter after hearing the mass on the radio:¹¹

Paris, December 19, 1956

Dear Sir,

As I was leaving home last night for one of those tedious evenings that come with the territory of my job I was stopped on my way to the door by something my children were listening to on the radio. From that moment I knew I had to stay and listen to all of your *Missa in simplicitate*.

I long ago gave up hope of experiencing such pure joy from contemporary music. It embodies a mysticism, a quality of thought and soul that moved me in the deepest part of my being. For once, I could listen to a modern work from beginning to end forgetting that I am a musician, but simply reminding myself that I am human.

I don’t know any better way of telling you how much this reveals of the man you are in addition to the composer I know. I won’t say that I congratulate you, as one does not congratulate someone for who he is, but I thank you.

Another letter came from a completely different source¹² :

Archiac, June 26, 1961

Dear Father,

Sunday, I was listening to the mass sung on the radio by the Jeunes Aveugles as I looked after our two young daughters. During the Credo I was preparing some green beans with our eldest, who is three years old. She was doing as one expects at that age, snapping the beans rather badly. I was especially taken by the melody in the Credo at the “Et incarnatus est,” which I found very beautiful. At that moment I noticed that my daughter had stopped working. She sat quietly with her hands folded, seemingly in

¹⁰ Conversation with Jeannine Collard, Paris, August 2008.

¹¹ Henry Barraud (1900-1997), composer and radio announcer. Letter Collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

¹² Letter signed by Gabriel Camus and addressed to Father Avril, director of Roman Catholic broadcasting at French Radio, sent to Jean Langlais on July 15, 1961. Collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

another world. My wife and I feel sure that the composer of this mass would be happy to hear this marvelous anecdote. There can be no doubt that it proves his music beautiful and sacred. Who will ever know to what extent a child's soul can be close to God?

We would ask you then to communicate this little story to the composer.

Truth comes from the mouths of children, resulting in a compliment devoid of all flattery. I wish for him that his faith will inspire him to write more sacred music and that his soul will be as enlightened by it as was our child's.

Given its first complete performance in Paris at the Church of the Dominicans on December 14, 1952 by Jeannine Collard and Jean Langlais, this *Missa in simplicitate*, product of an exceptional collaboration between creator and interpreter, marks one of the high points in the career of the composer. It is certainly one of his most personal and moving compositions. The following year, the firm Ducretet-Thomson recorded the work at the Basilica of Sainte-Clotilde with the same performers.¹³ It was the first LP recording of Langlais playing his own work, along with three works by Messiaen, *L'Apparition de l'église éternelle*, "Les Bergers" from *La Nativité du Seigneur*, and the rare original version of the motet *O sacrum convivium* for solo voice and organ. These are also noteworthy as the first LP recordings of Messiaen's music. The composer Jacques Chailley reviewed the recording with great enthusiasm.¹⁴

As for the *Missa in simplicitate* for solo voice and organ of Jean Langlais (Ducretet), I consider it a masterpiece. The interpretation of Jeannine Collard with the composer at the organ is of an incomparable purity and sensitivity. The Credo in particular, along the same lines as the *Prières* of [André] Caplet cannot be heard without emotion. This LP belongs in every collection.

Another positive review from J. Bouyer appeared in *L'Echo d'Alger* under the headline "Exceptional Recording":¹⁵

The *Missa in simplicitate* is sung by Jeannine Collard, whose supple voice outlines the harmonic contour of a melodic line that is simple, noble, and moving. The organ playing of Jean Langlais evokes profound sonorities that the recording captures brilliantly. His crescendos are strong but never exceed the technical possibilities of the recording. The entire mass is glorified by this simple but fervent music, a shattering prayer.

Shortly thereafter, also in 1953, Jean Langlais made another LP recording premiere with the same firm, featuring works by César Franck: the "Grande pièce symphonique," the "Prière," and the "Final,"¹⁶ reflecting his profound attachment to a composer he would love and serve all his life. On two later occasions, in 1964 for the Gregorian Institute of America and in 1975 for the Arion label, he would record the complete *Douze Pièces* of his distant predecessor, the first organist of Sainte-Clotilde. For the moment, in 1953, he was content to record three works that were the least known and least played of all of Franck's output for organ at the time. The critical reception was enthusiastic:¹⁷

The "Grande pièce symphonique" recorded complete in France at long last, is the second of the *Six Pièces* of 1860-1862. Franck was 40 years old. His mature genius

¹³ Ducretet-Thomson 270C003 (10") recorded August 25-26, 1953, released in 1954.

¹⁴ Jacques Chailley (1910-1999), *La Musique religieuse*, in *Almanach des disques*, 1954. 96.

¹⁵ J. Bouyer, *Disques d'exception*, in *L'Echo d'Alger*, March 16, 1955.

¹⁶ César Franck, *Prière, Final, et Grande Pièce Symphonique*, Jean Langlais at the organ of the Basilica Sainte-Clotilde, 33 rpm, 12 in, LAG-1017, Ducretet-Thomson, 1953.

¹⁷ C.R., *Chronique des nouveaux disques – César Franck: Grande Pièce Symphonique op. 17*, in *Disques* n° 58, 1953.

speaks authoritatively, particularly in this piece ... Ducretet offers us an admirable disk. Jean Langlais is one of the most important of our present-day organists. Having embarked on such a recording project of Franck, one hopes that he will continue ... It is superb, demonstrating an incomparable sense of style and feeling combined with brilliance of execution. The recording quality is sumptuous, faithful, and very clear, possessing an acoustic perspective of uncommon beauty.

Nor can the same critic conceal his enthusiasm for the two works on side two. Concerning the “Prière”:

The interpretation of Jean Langlais merits the same high praise as the music itself: intelligence, musicality, sensitivity. The recording is equally sensational, and it seems to be a world premiere recording of this work.

And, on the subject of the “Final”:

It’s a showy piece, extroverted in the style of a postlude at mass, which has the advantage of showing off the brilliant and robust technique of Jean Langlais as well as the beauty of the recording. This is the first time it has been recorded in France, concluding a disk that we recommend to all lovers of organ music with the greatest insistence. Taken as a whole it forms one of the most successful recordings of its type.

More than one critic expressed hope for a complete recording of the organ works of Franck from Jean Langlais, a project he would undertake 11 years later.¹⁸ A photo taken at this time shows Jean Langlais at the organ of Sainte-Clotilde, concentrating intensely :



Jean Langlais at the console of Sainte-Clotilde, 1953

Figure 38. (collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

At the outset of 1954, on the eve of his second concert tour of the United States, Jean Langlais already had a considerable number of important compositions to his credit, among them several of his best such as the large suites for organ and the *Missa in simplicitate*.

¹⁸ Jean Préteselle, in *Résistance de l'Ouest*, July 9, 1953; Raymond Lyon and Pierre Guitton, in *Paris Comoedia*, July 9, 1953.

At 46 years of age, having also made two important premiere recordings, he seemed at the height of his powers. Nevertheless, the work that followed was undoubtedly the one that secured his fame: the *Missa Salve Regina*.

. *Missa Salve Regina* (1954)

On April 1, 1954, Jean Langlais boarded ship to return to France, having played 27 recitals on his second tour in North America. Tucked in his pocket was a signed contract for his third American tour, planned for January through March of 1956. In the meantime, a major event would mark his compositional career, the *Missa Salve Regina*, whose creation he chronicled in his *Souvenirs*:¹⁹

One day at the beginning of November 1954 the director of religious broadcasting at Télévision Française, Father David Julien,²⁰ came to see me with the following request: “The Christmas Eve Midnight Mass will be televised live from Notre-Dame and rebroadcast in eight European countries. For this occasion we’d like to have a mass for choir and organ that involves the congregation. Could you write it for us?”

“Certainly not,” I replied. “And why not?” “Because I don’t see how one can get a congregation to sing without any rehearsal beforehand.” “But surely it can be done by writing something very simple.” “Then do it yourself, I just don’t feel able to do it.” In this manner I declined energetically.

Toward mid-November he returned so insistent that I finally said, “OK, I’m going to look for a way to do it, and if I find one I’ll write your mass.”

Given the vast size of the cathedral, Father Julien wanted a work that used both the orgue de chœur and the grand orgue, along with brass, choir, and congregation. Since Notre-Dame is dedicated to the Virgin Mary, it occurred to me to draw upon the Gregorian chants devoted to her as a unifying element. I paused over the great antiphon in the first mode, the *Salve Regina*, for which I’ve always had a special predilection. I had to find a simple melodic passage, the verses “O Clemens, O Pia” seemed particularly appropriate.

I set to work right away. Within four days the Kyrie, which seemed to me the most difficult to write because of the few words it contains, was finished. Everything was completed within thirteen days. Father Julien was right despite my initial reluctance. If the modal color of Gregorian chant formed the basis for my work, another strong influence was the School of Notre-Dame, particularly the style of Perotin le Grand. Guillaume Dufay and Guillaume de Machaut, for whom I’ve always professed the greatest admiration, were also invaluable guides. My goal was not to create a pastiche of these masters. On the contrary, through means not available to these venerable composers I sought to recreate the medieval atmosphere their work embodies.

Myself, I prefer the penetrating poetry of the music of the Middle Ages to the prodigious accomplishment of the musicians of the Renaissance. Chords without a third and the use of whole notes were indispensable to the medieval atmosphere I was looking for. The work employs two choirs: a polyphonic choir for three men’s voices that can be doubled by three women’s or children’s voices, and a unison choir intended to be sung by a congregation of men, women, and children. There are no soloists. The first choir part, aside from being more difficult to perform, has an entirely different character from the second, which can be learned simply by listening to it and committing it to memory. No known mass seems to have been written in this fashion,

¹⁹ Langlais, “Souvenirs”.

²⁰ Father David Julien (1914-2013) originated religious radio broadcasting in France and was active in promoting sacred music in the vernacular after Vatican II.

allowing the faithful to participate in a polyphonic work. I must say the idea was suggested to me. I was not its originator, but I put it into practice. The congregational part employs only two fragments of the plainsong antiphon, allowing any group to learn it quite quickly. All modulations are carefully announced in instrumental parts that don't present any serious performance difficulties.

Two organs are used. The grand orgue adds a decorative element, generally in full ensembles with an occasional solo stop, such as the Cornet in the Benedictus. The orgue de chœur plays the role of accompanist, supporting both the polyphonic and congregational parts. Eight instrumental parts complement the two organs: two trumpets and two trombones the grand orgue; one trumpet and three trombones the orgue de chœur. These instruments are almost never used alone but serve to augment the vocal effects. The four instruments associated with the orgue de chœur facilitate the congregational singing by announcing their entrances, then doubling their part.

The *Missa Salve Regina* differs significantly from its medieval models. In the men's choir, polyphony prevails over monody. The two choirs are in constant opposition, joining forces only for the "Amen" of the Gloria and the "Hosanna in excelsis" of the Sanctus. The organ and brass parts contribute to the rich counterpoint of the whole in a manner recalling the sonorities of the Venetian School, particularly the *Symphoniae sacrae* of Gabrieli conceived for the two choir lofts in the Basilica of San Marco. The instrumental harmonies are often altered chromatically. Modulations to nearby keys are the norm throughout. These anachronisms blend quite easily into the medieval texture of the mass because both the choral and instrumental parts move predominantly in fourths, fifths, and octaves.

There remained the actual performance of the mass with the cameras of Eurovision rolling. Jean Langlais knew that miscalculation was not possible under the circumstances. Would a crowd estimated at nine thousand be capable of singing their part with only one short rehearsal beforehand? The results exceeded all expectations.

He recalled:²¹

By 11 pm on December 24 there were no vacant seats left in the cathedral. Father Julien arrived to explain what was going to take place, and concise copies of the congregational part were distributed. The rehearsal began. From the very first minutes I was amazed. Just before midnight success seemed assured. At precisely midnight the mass began, and I could scarcely believe my ears! Our enthusiasm and our faith helped us tremendously. What I wouldn't hesitate to describe as a miracle unfolded with a perfection and a simplicity beyond words. Of the 9,000 people present it was estimated at least 3,000 took part in the premiere of this *Missa Salve Regina*. Since that occasion I have not made any changes to the work.

Live television broadcasts were still quite uncommon at the time. Across eight countries Eurovision viewers simultaneously witnessed 500 seminarians in white robes processing into the packed cathedral, an immense white wave accompanied by the music of Jean Langlais.

The enormous success of the *Missa Salve Regina* inspired André Charlin,²² recording engineer of the new French recording company Erato, founded in 1953, to record it right away with the same performing forces: the Schola of the Pères du Saint-Esprit du Grand Scholasticat de Chevilly under the direction of Father Lucien Deiss, Jean Langlais at the grand orgue, Jean Dattas at the orgue de chœur, the eight brass players and congregation

²¹ Langlais, "Souvenirs."

²² André Charlin (1903-1983) was one of the first French recording engineers to specialize in stereophonic sound.

under the direction of Father Julien. The recording took place at Notre-Dame on the unusually cold night of February 18, 1955. A member of the congregation recalled:²³

Discophiles who listen to the *Missa Salve Regina* of Jean Langlais will never know the ordeal the four hundred singers had to endure that Friday evening at Notre-Dame in order to record it for posterity. I can say with a bit of pride, as after a memorable battle, "I was there."

I came to understand on that occasion the double purpose of discreetly stomping the feet while performing: to keep time (a little) and to keep the legs warm (a lot). To say that it was merely cold is to miss the point. The vast stone vaulting launched a deep-freeze operation against us all, meeting little resistance as no serious measures against it had been foreseen and taken.

Around twenty minutes to midnight, between the Kyrie and Gloria and interruptions from the cathedral's clock, thermos bottles begin to appear surreptitiously, alongside sugar cubes and mint Schnapps.

May I betray a confidence? There were even certain cowardly defections among our ranks. After 11 pm, from the Sanctus to the Agnus Dei, our numbers shrank from four hundred to three hundred. Thanks to the skill of the recording engineer no one will ever be the wiser.

A challenging evening, but what a result! Even before the recording appeared the press took notice.²⁴

An extraordinary recording is due out in about a month from Erato, the *Missa Salve Regina* of Jean Langlais. Having heard an advance copy I can only share the enthusiasm of its creators. Beyond the spectacular aspects of the recording, made at Notre-Dame with more than 600 singers, two organs, and a luxurious complement of brass, the LP will have important symbolic value: a modern composer, heir to all the musical developments of succeeding centuries, returns to the Middle Ages, successfully reviving the spirit of his distant predecessors.

The enormous masses of sound the composer deploys follow a very simple plan, yet their effect, recorded exactly as one would wish, leaves the listener stunned by their power and beauty.

The bare, ascetic musical architecture Jean Langlais has chosen only increases its effectiveness. Let us hope the disk appears as soon as possible.

At Jean Langlais' request the LP record united the *Missa Salve Regina* on side 1 with Guillaume Dufay's *Missa sine nomine* on side 2, in a desire to demonstrate stylistic continuity across the ages at Notre-Dame, a fact that René Dumesnil, music critic of *Le Monde*, remarked upon.²⁵

Four centuries separate Dufay and the present-day organist of Sainte-Clotilde, yet an identical spirit inspires them and a shared popular inspiration informs their music.

Jean Langlais has evoked the poetic freshness of the Middle Ages so successfully that one could imagine him a colleague of Machaut and Dufay, if not Pérotin and Léonin, even though he was born in 1907 and studied with Marcel Dupré and Paul Dukas. His Mass possesses a singular beauty and is magnificently French; it is, in short, a masterpiece.

Elsewhere in the press the recording's reception was also unanimously positive:²⁶

²³ Gilbert Allan, *Confidences d'un choriste de la Missa Salve Regina*, in *Le Figaro*, February 21, 1955.

²⁴ A. R., *Une Messe de Jean Langlais*, in *Réforme*, April 9, 1955.

²⁵ René Dumesnil, *Missa Salva Regina de Jean Langlais*, in *Les Disques*, *Le Monde*, August 7, 1955.

²⁶ R. L., *Disques*, in *Guide du concert*, April 29, 1955.

Here is a recording of the Midnight Mass of 1954. José Bruyr reviewed the original live television broadcast.²⁷

On this disk one encounters afresh the thunderous grandeur of the brass and the shared emotion of the congregation, an enormous crowd come not only to attend mass but to participate in the *Missa Salve Regina*.

Its musical style harmonizes perfectly with the architectural style of the cathedral; a musical monument has been erected inside one made of stone. In writing his Mass, Jean Langlais has not simply added to the repertory of contemporary sacred music; he has given the Treasury of the Cathedral of Paris one of its richest ornaments.

The recording, made during the course of a re-enactment on February 18, 1955, is absolutely sensational, the more so for having been made in the immense nave of Notre-Dame rather than in a recording studio.

The Académie du Disque Français, presided over by Arthur Honegger,²⁸ awarded 34 prizes on November 26, 1955. The *Missa Salve Regina* figured among them, receiving the additional distinction of the “Grand Prix Madame René Coty,” established to honor the memory of the wife of the President of the French Republic, who had passed away on November 12.

The impact of the recording, combined with the circumstances of the televised broadcast of its premiere, served to enlarge substantially the national and international audience for Jean Langlais. Conceived to increase the participation of the faithful in the sung portions of the Mass, following the Pope’s wishes, it surpassed even the hopes and expectations of the composer. The success of his formula – choir, congregation, brass, and two organs – became something of a straitjacket, in fact. He experienced some difficulty escaping from it in the commissions that followed.

The first of these was *Lauda Jerusalem Dominum* (1955) for four mixed voices, unison choir, and organ, in which the antiphon chanted in unison by the congregation alternates with nine versets of the psalm given to the mixed choir doubled by organ. It ends with a Gloria that unites choir and congregation in the final measure.

In the same vein and always on commission, Jean Langlais wrote *Dieu, nous avons vu ta gloire* (1956) for four mixed voices, unison choir, and organ, to a text by Didier Rimaud, translated into English fifteen years later as *Lord, your Glory in Christ we have seen*.²⁹ Sung in the cathedral of Strasbourg by the 3,000 attendees of the Centre de Pastorale Liturgique convention on July 28, 1957, it was recorded in both 33 rpm and 45 rpm.³⁰

On March 1, 1955, the composer participated in a recording project at the churches of Saint-Clotilde and Saint-Merry. Entitled *Oeuvres Modernes pour l’Orgue*, it brought together music of Jehan Alain and Jean Langlais, the former interpreted by Marie-Claire Alain, younger sister of Jehan Alain.

Marie-Claire Alain, then 29 years old, had already begun a brilliant recording career with Erato. On this occasion Jean Langlais played his “Te Deum” and the “Canzona” from his

²⁷ José Bruyr, *Messe de Minuit télévisée à Notre-Dame de Paris*, in *Guide du concert*, January 7, 1955.

²⁸ This was the last public appearance of Arthur Honegger (1892-1955), who died the day after the ceremony.

²⁹ Translation by Anthony Petti, in *New Catholic Hymnal*, London, Farber, 1971, followed by Brian Wren, in *More Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, New York, Walton, 1972.

³⁰ Vigil for the seventh Sunday after Pentecost, *Dieu nous avons vu ta gloire*, Studio SM, Paris, 1957.

Folkloric Suite. Marie-Claire Alain performed the complete *Suite médiévale* of Langlais³¹ along with *Litanies*, *Postlude pour l'office des complies*, and the *Suite* of her brother. Olivier Alain, elder brother of Jehan and Marie-Claire, wrote the liner notes:³²

It is remarkable to note certain parallel tendencies at the heart of a school of young French organists that began to manifest itself brilliantly around 1937. Olivier Messiaen, Jehan Alain, Jean Langlais, Daniel-Lesur, Jean-Jacques Grunewald, Gaston Litaize – a constellation of obvious talent: composers, interpreters, and improvisers whose shared esthetic evolved on the eve of World War II.

The principal themes of their orientation would appear to be the following: a renewed emphasis on the use of modes (old, exotic, or invented), an extremely refined harmonic language (whether complex or simple), a suppleness of rhythm recalling free scansion of plainchant, a certain taste for the archaic (born of a fear of decadence, a desire to revive tradition, and a need to distinguish themselves from frequent orgies of new-fangled rhythms and harmonies), and finally, intentions that are very often deliberately poetic and evocative, only signifying and suggesting.

The overall impression that comes a bit hesitantly from this sunbeam of personalities is that of a true “School of Colorists.”

A photograph from the era shows the Langlais family (Jeannette, Jean, Claude, and Janine) gathered outside Sainte-Clotilde after Claude’s solemn Communion in 1955.



Jeannette, Jean, Claude and Janine Langlais at Claude’s solemn Communion

Figure 39 (collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

. *La Passion* (1957)

In 1957 Jean Langlais realized the dream of every composer of Western sacred music since the Middle Ages: he wrote a *Passion* for chorus and orchestra (brass, woodwinds, strings, and

³¹ This recording of the *Suite médiévale* has been re-issued as volume 18 of the collection « Marie-Claire Alain: l’orgue français » (22 CDs, Erato/Warner Classic, 2014)

³² Olivier Alain, liner notes for *Oeuvres modernes pour Orgue, Jehan Alain – Jean Langlais*, Jean Langlais and Marie-Claire Alain at the organs of Sainte-Clotilde and Saint-Merry, Erato, 33 rpm, LDE 302, 1955.

percussion) to which he added eight soloists and a narrator. Certain composers in the history of music, certainly not the least important ones, have preferred to compose Requiems instead. Most were Roman Catholic, like Verdi, Fauré, and Duruflé, taking their inspiration from the Catholic Office for the Dead. Others, chiefly Lutherans, drew their inspiration from the “Passion” of Jesus Christ, the most obvious example being Johann Sebastian Bach. Jean Langlais, though Roman Catholic, preferred a Passion to a Requiem for reasons he outlined in the *Guide du concert*.³³

The composer called upon the poet Loys Masson,³⁴ who augmented the traditional account of the Passion with a text rich in mysticism. A narrator intervenes several times during the course of the work to deliver passages drawn directly from the Gospels. There are eight roles: Judas, Peter, Pontius Pilate, Jesus, and Mary. Three bear no proper name (First Woman, Second Woman, A Man) but are of great importance. Provided with a text of such high quality, the task of the musician becomes simple: he must follow the sacred drama down to the last detail. Choruses, sung or frequently spoken, are invaluable for augmenting the pathos of the drama. The orchestra, by turns transparent and violent, accents and underscores the various emotional states of the drama without overwhelming it. The final part of the work could be called “Hymne à la Croix,” as it is based on a single verset, “O Crux Ave” of the Gregorian hymn “Vexilla Regis.” The theme of the Gregorian “Ave Maria” also serves to introduce certain interventions on the part of the Virgin Mary. The entire composition is freely written, the composer deliberately wishing to avoid any definite form.

The musical form of the Passion was one of the earliest to evolve in European Christianity, as we know from the numerous early documents that have come down to us. The practice of singing and dramatizing the Passion of Christ was codified across the centuries and brought to a summit by Johann Sebastian Bach in his stupendous Passions.

More than two centuries later Jean Langlais took up the form again, but with several modifications. Most notably the role of the Evangelist, usually assigned to a tenor, is given to a narrator, following the example of Arthur Honegger’s *King David*. In the same fashion certain choruses are spoken rather than sung.

If most other Passions make the most of the Gospel’s dramatic action by alternating recitatives, arias, and choruses, Jean Langlais, following the spirit of Loys Masson’s poem, emphasizes commentary rather than action, especially in the long and sorrowful meditation at the foot of the cross. Distancing himself voluntarily from the Lutheran model founded upon the Protestant chorale, he erects instead a Catholic monument that draws its inspiration from Gregorian chant.

According to the conventions of the 18th century, the classic structure of a Passion comprises a recitative, *secco* or accompanied, that serves to evoke the narrative of the Passion as found in the Gospels. Various ariosos, arias, choruses, and chorales are interspersed by way of commentary as the drama unfolds.

As a point of reference, the *Saint Matthew Passion* of Bach contains no fewer than 78 sections. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the majority of older Passions (Vittoria and

³³ *La Passion, Jean Langlais, 1ère audition*, in *Guide du concert*, March 21, 1958.

³⁴ Loys Masson (1915-1969), French poet born in Mauritius, active participant in the French Resistance, editor-in-chief of *Lettres Françaises* after the war, devout Christian.

Byrd) adopt a more sober form, favoring recitation of the text or psalmody over vocal or instrumental commentary. It is this earlier conception, more static and austere, that Jean Langlais evokes in *La Passion*. It contains neither arias nor large orchestral or vocal movements with the brief exception of the final “O Crux Ave,” a mere 45 measures concluding an hour of music. Unlike Bach, Jean Langlais deliberately disassociates himself from the Protestant tradition by avoiding the introduction of chorales.

If *La Passion* does not draw upon the Gospels, it does adhere closely to Masson’s poem, which comments only upon certain key phrases from Saint Matthew’s chapters 26:47-75 and 27:1-50. Loys Masson’s decision to write such a text seemed completely logical in 1957. Langlais had collaborated with him shortly before on his *Cantate de Noël* radio broadcast. By following the choices the poet made for *La Passion*, Langlais deliberately deprived himself of an essential springboard for the drama related in the Gospels: the action, to which Masson makes only brief reference from a distance. Instead, he prefers to interject poetic commentary of occasionally cumbersome lyricism; for example, the exhaustive repetition of “Je suis la Mère,” or the obsession with blood and the crucifixion that compromise the story rather than magnify its drama and power. “Blood” is a recurrent theme upon which the poet insists heavily, dragging the musician along in his wake through a score of some 169 manuscript pages.³⁵

Other obsessive themes developed at length by poet and composer include Judas (and by extension betrayal, expressed in the phrase, “forgive us, Lord, for Judas is in each of us and we know not what we do”), the Cross and its symbolism, and finally the Mother of Christ (“I am the Mother, I have bled so much I have the eyes of the dead”).

Throughout *La Passion* one cannot ignore the primary role assigned to the Virgin Mary, normally a secondary figure in the Gospels’ account. This recalibration of relative importance can only have pleased Jean Langlais, whose Marian devotion was well-known.

Here is the vocal distribution of parts established by the composer: Mary (contralto), Pontius Pilate (tenor), Jesus (baritone), Judas (bass), and two women and one man without proper names.

An important place is reserved for the chorus, who take on the double role of “turba” (an unruly crowd prone to brief and dramatic interruptions more frequently spoken than sung) and Christian commentator, as in the Passions of Bach.

The work unfolds in uninterrupted fashion, without set pieces or strong structural delineation. The excerpts from Saint Matthew assigned to the narrator are either spoken alone or with accompaniment from the darker colors of the orchestra: bassoon, cello, and double bass or clarinet, bass clarinet, and bassoon.

Masson’s poem is set to music either as expansive recitative (vocal soloist accompanied by strings and woodwinds while flutes trace arabesques in counterpoint with the melody) or sung and spoken choruses.

Whenever the dramatic action intervenes briefly, usually unornamented, the poetic commentary that follows is lengthy, diminishing the action with a certain complacency blended with the symbols of blood, treason, the Virgin Mother, and the Cross.

³⁵ Jean Langlais, *La Passion*. 169 manuscript pages, unpublished. CD recording of the premiere made by Radiodiffusion Française, March 27, 1958, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris, duration: 67 minutes. Collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

Because the *La Passion* unfolds without pause, lacking clear distinction between recitative, narration, and choruses, there is an undeniable sensation of monotony. The music tends toward abstract reflection rather than commentary upon the action.

From a harmonic point of view Jean Langlais juxtaposes free modality and chromaticism in a musical language quite typical of the composer. The transparency of the orchestration and the prevalence of recitative recall Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, one of Langlais' favorite scores.

In the final analysis the unusual emphasis on certain characters and symbols disoriented the public and the critics, who were expecting a more active work based on the models of the past.

The premiere took place on March 27, 1958 (Maundy Thursday) at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées with Jeannine Collard (Virgin Mary), Claudine Verneuil (First Woman), Flore Wendt (Second Woman), Bernard Demigny (Jesus), Joseph Peyron (Pontius Pilate), Jean-Jacques Rondeleux (Peter), Xavier Depraz (Judas), Jean Giraudeau (A Man), Alain Cuny (Narrator), and the Chœurs de la Radio with the Orchestre National under the direction of Manuel Rosenthal. It was a prestigious cast, not only for the singers but also the narrator. Alain Cuny was a famous actor previously chosen by Paul Claudel in 1944 for his *L'Annonce faite à Marie* and by Curzio Malaparte for the principal role in *Le Christ interdit*.

The event was highly anticipated, the critics curious to see if the composer could repeat the triumph of his *Missa Salve Regina* in a different vein.

All the major Parisian papers were represented: Clarendon (*Le Figaro*), Claude Rostand and René Dumesnil (*Le Monde*), Jean Hamon (*Combat*), Eric Sarnette (*Musique et Radio*), Jacques Vasa (*La Nation française*), and Jean Quéval (*Mercure de France*). Even the American composer Edmund J. Pendleton was present to review the work for the *New York Herald*.³⁶

The public's reception at the premiere was plainly enthusiastic, according to Jacques Lamy:³⁷

As far as I was concerned, and the audience shared my feeling, it was magical. Everyone was impressed by the rightness of expression, the close marriage of words and music, the dramatic brilliance of the choirs and orchestra, the tranquil melodic and harmonic sense.

The critics were more divided. If some praised "a solid work, well thought-out and obviously sincere"³⁸ others found it:

An oratorio rather old-fashioned in concept, in which voluntary limits on size make for extraordinary strength of evocative power, expressive in the fusion of diverse elements in its sonic architecture.³⁹

Others expressed serious reservations, beginning with the text:

I confess I do not share the composer's enthusiasm for this poem, the best passages of which are borrowed from the Gospels, recast in neo-medieval garb. For my part, I find

³⁶ Edmund J. Pendleton, *Music and Musicians, Twentieth-Century French*, in *New York Herald*, April 4, 1958.

³⁷ Jacques Lamy, *Un musicien aveugle à l'honneur*, in *La Canne blanche*, March-May 1959.

³⁸ René Dumesnil, *Création d'une "Passion" de Jean Langlais*, in *Le Monde*, April 2, 1958.

³⁹ Eric Sarnette, *Musique et Radio*, November 1958.

the style of “all ye who pass by here, see if there is any sorrow like unto my sorrow” quite artificial and worn-out. It’s fake poetry.⁴⁰

Even more severe:

The text of the Gospels is sufficiently descriptive without the addition of commentary in the high moral tone of the Saint-Sulpicians. This is a mistake on the part of Loys Masson, and he drags the composer along with him.⁴¹

In addition to these critiques of the text there was the music itself:

Far from composing a spectacular Passion, Jean Langlais has delivered a long meditation at the foot of the Cross. Was he correct to forgo all variety? Was this a requirement dictated by the Holy Spirit? I’m not sure, as I’m still trying to figure out what he was up to inasmuch as the text by Loys Masson incited him to a certain monotony.⁴²

“Monotony” was a word that also flowed from the pen of other critics, notably Jean Hamon:

There are so many repetitions in this work, such as the crescendos in the choirs, that ultimately become boring.⁴³

Or Claude Rostand :

The only serious criticism it seems possible to bring to this score concerns its weak dynamic on the one hand, and on the other a rhythmic invention without much relief, all of which risks a certain impression of monotony and lengthiness.⁴⁴

The commentary and conclusions drawn by Jacques Vasa were more damning:⁴⁵

The work is curiously constructed. The action and the text are stripped of all music, through a modesty that is perhaps a renunciation. Such texts clearly take pride of place in the listener’s mind, the music falling into commentary or paraphrase in its wake. Once the power of suggestion that comes from the words escapes, the music searches in vain to retrieve it. Becoming too human, it cannot avoid cliché and repetition. For better or worse, I don’t think in its present form the *Passion* of Jean Langlais adds any laurels to his already vast fame. One expects, especially after this, something better from him.

Was Jean Langlais bothered by the poem, even paralyzed by the mythic scale of the work he was attempting? Whatever the case, he reacted by making deep cuts in the score immediately after the premiere, eliminating measures here and there to reduce its duration from 67 to 53 minutes, proof that he gave some credence to the reviews. In a letter to Theodore Marier he confirmed:⁴⁶

As you will see, I have made numerous cuts, the work seeming too long to me. The text has been translated into English by Emita Brady. This young woman worked hard on this long translation⁴⁷.

Unfortunately, the harm was done and the work was never performed again, not even in the United States where it was planned that Theodore Marier would conduct it. The recording

⁴⁰ Clarendon (Bernard Gavoty), *La “Passion” de Jean Langlais*, in *Le Figaro*, March 29, 1958.

⁴¹ Renée Vollier, *La Tribune de Genève*, n° 95, March 1958.

⁴² Clarendon, see footnote 349.

⁴³ Jean Hamon, “*La Passion*” de Jean Langlais, in *Combat*, March 29, 1958.

⁴⁴ Claude Rostand, “*La Passion*” de Jean Langlais et Loys Masson, in *Le Monde*, April 3, 1958.

⁴⁵ Jacques Vasa, “*La Passion*” de Jean Langlais, in *La Nation française*, April 9, 1958.

⁴⁶ Jean Langlais, letter to Theodore Marier, December 3, 1959, copy in collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

⁴⁷ Unpublished English translation, collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

planned by Erato was simply cancelled. Jean Langlais was all the more affected by the reception the work received in the press because he felt the performance at the premiere had been splendid.

But I console myself, he confessed later, in remembering the words of Paul Dukas:
“In life one is often reproached for having accomplished what one set out to accomplish.”⁴⁸

Never again would he undertake a work of such vast proportions. He turned the page on this aspect of his composing career, leaving behind its failure and never venturing into this domain again. Asked toward the end of his life why he had never written a Requiem or a Magnificat, he replied:⁴⁹

A Magnificat after Bach? A Requiem after Fauré and Duruflé? Impossible! I have opted for discretion, and thus my *Offrande à une âme* for organ, written in 1979 in memory of my first wife, is my way of dedicating a Requiem to her, one drawn upon the Gregorian themes from the Roman Catholic rite for the dead.

In any case, he scarcely had time to reflect upon the failure of his *Passion*, having accepted a commission from Radiodiffusion Française in 1957 for a shorter religious fresco, *Le Mystère du Christ*, for narrator, soloists, chorus and orchestra, a sort of mirror image of *La Passion* in which the Virgin Mary, surrounded by a halo of happiness, implores her newborn son whom she knows to be the Savior. The first part of this oratorio, entitled “Suite des Mages,” opens with an oboe solo on the complete melody of the “Pastoral Song,” the second piece in the *Organ Book* of 1956. The theme of another old French Noël already employed by Marcel Dupré with notable success in his *Variations sur un Noël* for organ, op. 20 runs throughout large portions of the work, evoking the birth of Christ. This *Mystère du Christ*, op. 100 (duration: 21 minutes) would be the last important work commissioned by Radiodiffusion Française.

One must believe that Jean Langlais made his greatest impression upon musicians as a composer of large vocal ensembles, specifically the combination of large unison choir and mixed choir in four parts made famous by his *Missa Salve Regina*. For this reason he received a somewhat unusual commission at the beginning of 1958, from César Geoffroy, founder of the movement “A Coeur Joie,” for a cantata in French to be sung at the third Choralies de Vaison-la-Romaine⁵⁰.

This would be the choral cantata *En ovale comme un jet d'eau* for large choir (women and men) and four mixed voices on a text by his friend Edmond Lequien, written from March through June 1958.

César Geoffroy specified the requirements imposed upon the composer:

The problem posed to the musician was to write a piece for 1,500 singers (perhaps 2,000) of very different backgrounds and levels of musical accomplishment. They

⁴⁸ Langlais, “Souvenirs”.

⁴⁹ Conversation with Jean Langlais, October 1979.

⁵⁰ Les Choralies de Vaison-la-Romaine is an international choral festival that takes place every three years over nine days in a medieval village in the south of France famous for its Roman ruins. The 21st festival took place in August 2013, with 4,000 participants.

would rehearse two hours a day for a week before performing on the eighth day before 6,000 listeners.

The weakest among them would not know how to read music. Fortunately there would also be a core group of strong singers whom one could call upon for soloists. To succeed, the composer had to accept the rules of the game, depriving himself of competition from an orchestra. Not every composer agreed to do so. Few truly succeeded, because one must live in a choral environment all year long, as some of us do, to truly understand that the voice is not a clarinet or a bassoon. The least melodic or harmonic awkwardness applies the brakes and spoils the enthusiasm. Jean Langlais accepted this challenge right away when we proposed it. Here is his score. The single opportunity I had to read through the freshly hatched manuscript with him filled me with a musical interest that we shall all discover as we rehearse and perform it.⁵¹

This impressive event would unfold at Vaison-la-Romaine at the beginning of August 1959, uniting more than 2,000 young singers of different nationalities. The first hearing (and to this day one of the only public performances, the score being out-of-print) took place during the grand final evening, August 11, 1959, before an audience of 9,000. The press gave the following review:⁵²

César Geoffroy, founder and director of the Choralies, ascended the podium to conduct the cantata *En ovale comme un jet d'eau*, composed for the festival that year. The text by Edmon Lequien, generally abstract in style, nevertheless contains certain passages of startling realism, for example, “SOS, firemen!” It evokes the grand cycle of the universe, of civilizations that kill their sorcerers’ apprentices, launching a call to hope and love above the chaos, tokens of rebirth in a world of tenderness and brotherhood.

On these themes Jean Langlais has composed dense and lively music, avoiding both a dreary, facile style and an unnecessarily bold one. An almost Gregorian monody alternates in striking contrast with outbursts of shouted rhythms. The final chorus, whose harmonies bear the mark of a master, is of an incontestable beauty. Under the direction of César Geoffroy, Caillat, Corneloup, Pernoud, and Martorel, the choirs gave a more than honorable performance of a difficult score.

New Organ Works composed for England

We have spoken at length about the large-scale vocal works of Jean Langlais and his first recordings, but during this period (1952-1958) he never ceased composing for the organ. In late 1956, on commission from Novello for its new *International Series of Contemporary Organ Music*, he wrote a *Triptyque* (Melody-Trio-Final) dedicated “To my friend Maurice Duruflé.” The journal *Music for Organ* reviewed it:⁵³

This opus is in three movements entitled Melody, Trio, and Final.

The first movement, “Melody,” is off-and-on a trio in itself, since the uppermost voice is doubled in the pedals, while the inner voice supplies a second motive. The piece is fairly representative of the facile technique of Langlais and leaves much to be desired in real music composition.

The “Trio” is awkward keyboard music which sometime appears as a two-part composition. It sounds clever but again this is not always the requirement for music. The “Final” would appear in print to be a scherzo by Vierne. The work is a disappointment to those who have encountered exciting rhythms in other works by this

⁵¹ Jean Langlais, *Cantate chorale “En ovale, comme un jet d'eau”*, preface by César Geoffroy to the score published in the series *A Coeur joie*, Paris: Presse de la Cité, 1959.

⁵² Henri Dumoulin, *Les Choralies de Vaison-la-Romane*, in *Le Monde*, August 1959.

⁵³ Harry W. Gay, *Novello & Co: Jean Langlais, Triptyque*, in *Music for Organ*, October 1958, vol. 41, n° 10.

composer, for it falls into the utterly predictable and sometimes stagnantly impressive. The difficulty does not quite become the value of the music, but for those avid fans of this usually dependable composer, here is a set of three.

Jean Langlais definitely did not enjoy good luck with the severe British critics (as a case in point, see the comments on his *Suite française* in *The Musical Times* of December 1949). However, when he performed his own music the reviews were more nuanced, if not enthusiastic. That was the case when he premiered his *Triptyque* at the Parish Church of Leeds on February 11, 1958.⁵⁴

Mr. Langlais reserved for Leeds the premiere of his *Triptyque*.

This, as its title implies, is in three movements, the first a serious but approachable essay in modal counterpoint (often a central tune with wide-spaced octave accompaniments and at least one glorious moment of canon), the second, an engaging movement for flutes, reminiscent of his “Arabesque sur les flûtes” he played previously in the programme but without that work’s chromatic runs, the third, a vigorous spiky toccata clearly meant as a tribute to us since it is based on the Westminster chimes.

The three movements in fact make a happy summary of M. Langlais’ style, which advances no extreme ideas but is freely diatonic and contemporary and ever inventive.

The *Triptyque* collection is in fact the result of a misunderstanding: Novello wanted three easy organ pieces but neglected to mention this detail to Jean Langlais. As a result, the second movement of the *Triptyque* is a trio very close in spirit to Johann Sebastian Bach’s trio sonatas, of exceptional difficulty. Jean Langlais considered it one of his finest works and played it in concert throughout his life. However, the publisher clung to his original idea of a collection of easy pieces. The composer complied gracefully with three new pieces, “Pastoral-prelude,” “Interlude,” and “Bells.” These were united in a collection entitled *Three Characteristic Pieces* published in 1957 as number 10 in the series *Novello’s Organ Music Club*. The *Triptyque* was not published until one year later so that the public would have the easy pieces before the difficult ones. Jean Langlais wrote the following preface for this new collection:

COMPOSER’S NOTE

I pay homage to John Stanley with these pieces, and the subject material of *Bells* is directly inspired by his music. Any of the pieces can be used as voluntaries or they may be played together as a suite for recitals. The music does not demand elaborate color and the suggested schemes of registration may be modified to suit the smallest organ. Paris, May 1957.

The dedication “Homage to John Stanley” requires a bit of explanation: John Stanley (1712-1786), the blind English composer and friend of Handel, was one of the musicians Jean Langlais admired the most. He especially appreciated his *Voluntaries* for their classicism and elegance, often playing op. 5, n° 8 in D minor in concert from the mid-1960s on. For Jean Langlais, John Stanley, a blind musician who could not read music, was an exemplary artist whose music it was Langlais’ duty to perform. On February 19, 1958, he performed the work again during a memorable recital at Royal Festival Hall in London. At this occasion, Basil

⁵⁴ Ernest Bradbury, *Blind Organist at Leeds Recital, M. Jean Langlais of Sainte-Clotilde*, in *The Yorkshire Press*, February 12, 1958.

Ramsey wrote in *The Musical Times*:⁵⁵

The cream of French organ recitalists are musicians of extraordinary ability, equipped with spine-tingling technique, highly-developed powers of improvisation, and the coolest of console manners. We are fortunate in having regular visits from them.

Jean Langlais appeared on 19 February in a programme that ranged from Buxtehude to the present day. Mr. Langlais brings tremendous rhythmic vitality to all that he plays; its effect on the Bach first *Trio Sonata* was quite electrifying...

The remainder of the programme was devoted to the recitalist's own works.

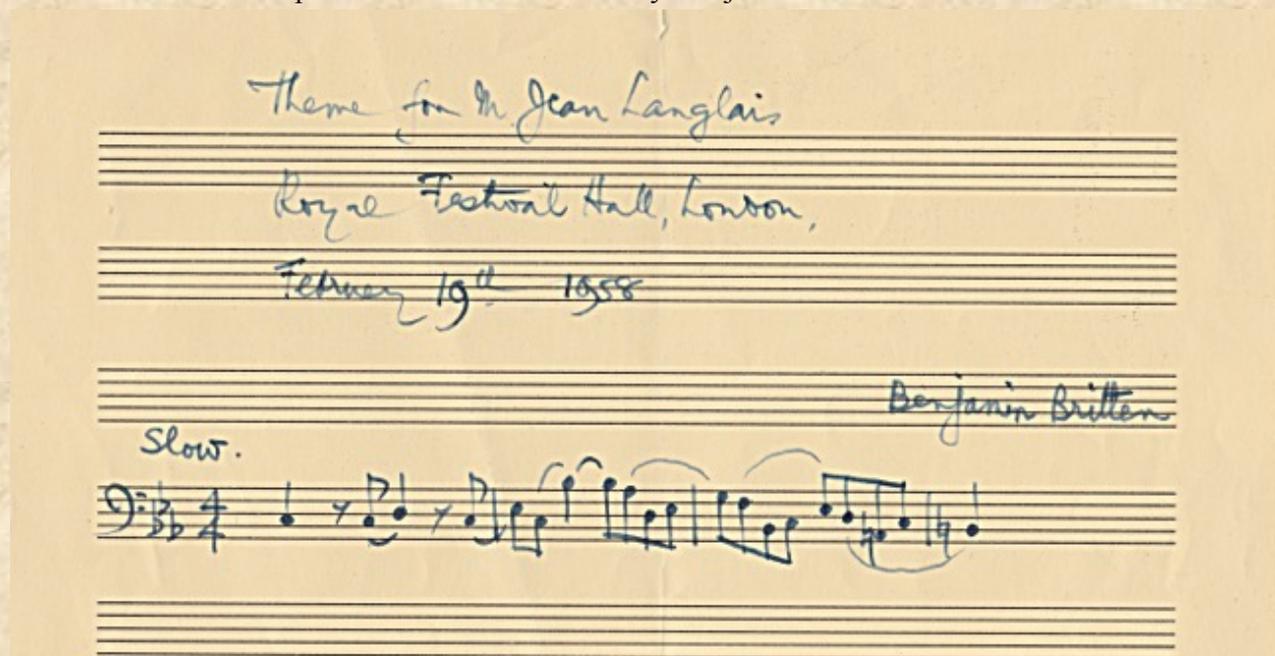
Jean Langlais writes with an uncanny knowledge of the organ's ability, a flair for unusual textures, and with a strong sense of rhythmic and harmonic colour.

His recent *Triptyque* proved a delightful exploration of three distinct moods, from the quiet contemplation of "Melody" and the incessant nervous ripple of "Trio" (with its attractive pedal tune), to the swagger and flourish of "Final."

After a short "Arabesque sur les flûtes," Mr. Langlais concluded this group with the last of *Trois Paraphrases Grégoriennes*, written in 1933-34. This stirring piece is based on the plainchant "Te Deum."

What Benjamin Britten had in mind when he wrote his theme for Jean Langlais' improvisation is a little difficult to ascertain. What is quite certain is that it became the subject of a whirlwind display that picked haphazardly at almost every contrapuntal device known to man, a *tour de force* that showed the amazing vitality of the modern French School.

Let's look to this improvisation theme written by Benjamin Britten:



Improvisation theme given by Benjamin Britten to Jean Langlais at the Royal Festival Hall, London, February 19, 1958 Figure 40. (collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

We now follow the steps of Jean Langlais's career on another continent, North America, with his new concert tours in 1954, 1956 et 1959.



⁵⁵ Basil Ramsey, *Royal Festival Hall Recitals*, in *The Musical Times*, April 1958, vol. 99. 218.