

CHAPTER 3

The End of the Thirties (1935–1939)

Jean Langlais in 1935, upon leaving the Conservatory

The period that had just come to a close was rich in professional successes for Jean Langlais: prizes in the organ class at the Conservatory and at the Amis de l'Orgue's performance and improvisation competition, appointment as a teacher at the Institute for the Young Blind, appointment to the organ position at the Saint-Pierre de Montrouge church, and Hérelle's publication of his first works. But the young composer had also seen darker moments: failure to get the first prize in the Conservatory's composition class, and twice in the Amis de l'Orgue's composition competition, and the sudden death of Paul Dukas.

Before moving ahead with this story, it would be useful to reflect for a moment on the Thirties, a glorious decade for the French School of the organ, which saw the rise and flourishing of a generation of great organists, improvisers, and composers. All these figures were born near the beginning of the 20th century (Duruflé, the oldest, was born in 1902; Alain and Grunenwald, the youngest, in 1911). All these artists had won first prizes in Marcel Dupré's organ class at the Conservatory, with the notable exception of Duruflé, who won it in Gigout's class. And all made a lasting mark on the history of organ music in the 20th century.

For them, having brilliantly finished their Conservatory studies, the Thirties represented the beginning of musical careers. In this, they were aided and propelled to the top by the very new young society, the "Amis de l'Orgue" and its young secretary, the musicologist Norbert Dufourcq (born in 1904).

And if one wants to make comparisons, it is surprising to note that, at the same time that these young people were publishing their first works, their elders—Vierne, Tournemire, Dupré—(all born in the 19th century) were composing some of their strongest works.

Here is a table of their works composed during the decade 1930-1939 (the listings of the young generation are in *italics*):

The End of the Thirties

1930	Vierne	6 ^{ème} Symphonie	Duruflé	<i>Prélude, adagio et choral varié sur le Veni Creator</i>
	Tournemire	L'Orgue Mystique (10 feasts)	Alain	<i>Postlude pour l'office des Complies - Lamento Ballade en mode phrygien</i>
			Litaize	<i>12 Pièces (vol. 1), 1930-1934</i>
1931	Tournemire	L'Orgue Mystique (16 feasts)		
	Dupré	7 Pièces; 79 Chorales Le Chemin de la Croix		
1932	Tournemire	L'Orgue Mystique (3 feasts) Sei Fioretti	Duruflé	<i>Suite (Prélude-Sicilienne-Toccata)</i>
	Ermend-Bonnal	Symphonie "Media Vita"	Langlais	<i>Poèmes évangéliques</i>
			Messiaen	<i>Apparition de l'église éternelle</i>
			Lesur	<i>La Vie intérieure</i>
			Alain	<i>2 Danses à Agni Yavishta Variations sur Lucis Creator Grave - Climat</i>
1933			Messiaen	<i>L'Ascension</i>
			Langlais	<i>Trois Paraphrases grégoriennes, 1933-1934 Vingt-Quatre Pièces pour harmonium ou orgue, 1933-1939</i>
			Lesur	<i>In Paradisum</i>
			Alain	<i>1ère Fantaisie</i>
1934	Vierne	Messe basse pour les défunts	Alain	<i>Le Jardin suspendu Suite - Intermezzo</i>
			Litaize	<i>12 Pièces (vol.2), 1934-1937</i>
1935	Tournemire	Sept Chorals-poèmes pour les 7 paroles du Christ Symphonie-choral	Fleury	<i>Prélude, andante et toccata</i>
	Dupré	3 Elévations	Messiaen	<i>La Nativité du Seigneur</i>
			Lesur	<i>Hymnes</i>
			Alain	<i>Prelude et Fugue</i>
1936	Tournemire	Symphonie sacrée	Fleury	<i>Vingt-Quatre Pièces pour harmonium ou orgue</i>
	Dupré	Angelus	Alain	<i>2^{ème} Fantaisie</i>
			Grunenwald	<i>Première Suite</i>
1937			Alain	<i>Litanies - Trois Danses Variations sur un thème de Clément Jannequin</i>
			Grunenwald	<i>Deuxième Suite</i>
1938	Tournemire	Suite Evocatrice	Poulenc	<i>Concerto pour Orgue, Cordes et Timbales</i>
	Dupré	3 Préludes et fugues, op. 36	Alain	<i>Aria</i>
1939			Messiaen	<i>Les Corps glorieux</i>

What an impressive list! Even skimming it one sees the best of what had developed in organ music in the Thirties and Jean Langlais is very much part of this list, with his two collections that were eliminated in the Amis de l'Orgue's competitions in 1932 and 1934.

After Paul Dukas's death in 1935, one of the busiest chapters in Langlais' life now begins, this time under the protective wing of his former teacher, Charles Tournemire.

Tournemire had been the successor to César Franck and Gabriel Pierné at the Sainte-Clotilde organ since 1898, and he had earned a reputation for being difficult. According to those who knew him, he could change in a flash from the calmest gentleness to vehement anger. Nevertheless, he knew how to show himself to be very affectionate for those whom he respected, and he soon had the occasion to prove the interest that he had in his young disciple in the best way possible: by asking him to be his substitute for services at Sainte-Clotilde.¹ The detailed instructions in a letter that Tournemire sent to Langlais are both amusing and informative:

Wednesday, June 19, 1935

My Dear Friend,

Thanks for your pneu.²

Thanks for June 30th. Mass at 8:40; if you want, mass at 11 without the "screamers" (the choir). At 4 pm, vespers and procession for the octave of Corpus Christi. Accompaniment for the Adoro te, the Credo by "Mister" Du Mont, and the Magnificat. At the Basilica it's a rule: the "screamers" always start everything. The gallery organ responds to everything. It's fun... and obligatory!!

I don't know which mass will be sung at 9. Since you have a memory like an elephant, you'll certainly know it.

Always leave the Amens to the "screamers." Make the psalm interludes short, and also the Magnificat verses. That's about it.

As for turning on the motor and the lights, you know my factory, and I am not worried. Don't forget to turn off the lights and motor, of course! There are two keys, the normal one and a security key (the door at the bottom of the stairs). I'll alert the sacristan, Mr. Jean. You should stop by at the sacristy at 8:45, and he'll give you the keys. You should return them to him after Vespers.

Many thanks for all of this.

Very affectionately yours,

Charles Tournemire³

But since Tournemire was a born worrier, he supplemented this letter with another, written a week later and full of a mass of precise details:

Paris, June 26, 1935

My Dear Friend,

For next Sunday, you should let all the « stuff » be given by the so-called choir. All you do is play in alternation. No preludes, neither at the Mass nor Vespers. During the procession last Sunday, this is what happened:

¹ His opinion of Langlais is recorded in his *Memoires*, in his comments about his "three of a kind" students: *Langlais*: distinguished composer; excellent organist; charming improviser (typewritten document in the collection of his niece, Odile Weber, published in 2014 on Internet by "Marie-Louise Langlais: *Eclats de Mémoires*, ml-langlais.com. 45 ("Un breelan d'élèves").

² Paris had an extensive pneumatic system for sending written messages quickly among neighborhood post offices, a sort of predecessor to email. It was in use from the mid-nineteenth century until 1984.

³ Collection Marie-Louise Langlais

Big organ prelude (after the sermon) until the clergy arrived at the level of the high altar; then motet. Then, a few measures, until the first altar; during the procession from the 1st to 2nd altar, the singing of the Credo and Du Mont (the Royal Mass) in alternatim. Then improvisation until the procession arrives at the altar. Lastly, wait for the end of the chants at the altar outside. And improvise at length until the beginning of the blessing. To end, postlude ad libitum.

But then, your instinct is your best guide.

Give my best to your wife.

Very cordially to you, and thank you again

Charles Tournemire⁴

In the area of composition, Jean Langlais was currently concentrating on the *Vingt-Quatre Pièces pour harmonium ou orgue*, playable on either instrument in all major and minor keys, which the publisher Hérelle had commissioned and which Paul Dukas had found an excellent idea from all standpoints, including financial. But here Jean Langlais didn't get exactly what he had hoped, and complained to Hérelle ten years later in strong language:

Paris, May 3, 1946

Dear Mr. Hérelle,

I don't think I've been very demanding with you for the last fifteen years. I also don't think I've caused you to lose money. I would like to call your attention to my pieces for harmonium or organ.

I worked on composing them for more than five years. They appeared in your series separately, then as a collection. At the time you sold each book for fifteen francs, and you paid me one franc per volume. I told you that this contract, which didn't allow my royalties to exceed 2.000 francs, was truly minimal given the effort and number of hours I put in on my *Vingt-Quatre Pièces*. You freely admitted it.

Now you make me a lifetime offer of two francs per volume, but you sell the volumes for 40 francs each. That's four [actually five] percent for me. Don't you think my dear Mr. Hérelle, that in all good conscience it would be more equitable if I took a little more of the income from my works? You could counter that all I had to do was protect myself when you made the first contract. I respond by noting that I never argued with you, you have to agree with that. But given the initial surprise at the success of my modest creations, and facing (like everyone else) a difficult life, I present the problem in good faith; you'll find a solution that accords with your means and your sense of fairness. It's obvious that permanently fixing the royalty at two francs per volume, aside from being disgraceful, is apt to become negligible if, as is very likely, a new devaluation arrives. In this case, you have to admit that it would not have been worth to have worked so hard for virtually nothing.

I leave my thoughts in all good faith for your consideration, and I shall be happy to know your decisions as soon as possible. I'm sorry that this message is so long, and I'm also sorry to have discussed such an inartistic topic, but I hope to have been both precise and understanding of your interests.

With all my very best wishes, dear Mister Hérelle,

Very sincerely yours,

Jean Langlais⁵

This long plea underscores the work that was necessary to produce the *Vingt-Quatre Pièces*, whose success with the public seems to have astonished the young composer! Jean Langlais ran the risk of a certain dullness in these pieces when he chose not to avail himself

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

of the organ's richly sonorous palette of the organ, and especially its pedals; but if he felt this, he never let it show, to such an extent does an intensely fresh inspiration reign in these two books of a dozen pieces each. In spite of their modest size and despite the fact that they were conceived for harmonium, an instrument of limited possibilities,⁶ these pages occupy a special place in the works of Jean Langlais; they are a veritable laboratory for ideas where he tried out all sorts of forms and styles.

Putting aside the grand Gregorian paraphrase, the composer displays a diversity of traditional musical structures, such as the prelude ("Prélude modal," "Prélude"), the fugue ("Fugue," "Fuguettes"), the ricercar ("Ricercare"), the toccata ("Toccatas"), variations on a theme ("Choral," "Noël avec variations"), the fantasy ("Fantaisie," "Fantaisie sur un thème norvégien"), the art song ("Prière," "Prière pour les morts"), the chorale ("Choral orné"), the Gregorian paraphrase ("Paraphrase sur le Salve Regina," "Homo quidam"), and forms borrowed from the sonata or symphony ("Arabesque," "Scherzetto," "Allegro," "Impromptu").

Once he chose the form, usually a classic one, the composer—though supposedly exploring the twelve major and minor tonalities—always actually takes a modal path. One has only to compare the key signatures with the music itself in, for example, the "Noël avec variations" (n° 6), in dorian mode, not D minor; or the "Choral" (n° 7), with its two flats in the signature, even though it is supposed to be in E-flat major; or the "Fantaisie" (n° 21) with no key signature but coming where the key should be B-flat major.

This apparent modality displays various characteristics, however, depending on whether the theme is Gregorian, folkloric, or free.

In effect, what Langlais seems to be exploring is multiplying the number of surprising effects and the unexpected juxtapositions: bathing in modality, he introduces the most tormented chromaticism; using particularly aggressive dissonances, it's better for the resolution to a triad, or more often an open sonority. "Hommage" (n° 2) summarizes these oppositions with its brief contrasting episodes.

In addition to the forms, the melodies, the modes, and the juxtapositions, Jean Langlais seems to have sometimes worked out some of the 24 pieces according to their dedicatee. Such is the case in "Hommage à Landino" (n° 12) constructed entirely with the harmonies typical of this fourteenth-century blind Italian composer (open fifths, parallel fourths, obvious modality). The same could be said for "Point d'orgue" (n° 23), dedicated to Erik Satie, with its long and virtuosic bass solo based on two descending fourths (B–F#–C#).

Some movements seem, in effect, to be small-scale models for forms that Langlais was to develop and expand in the coming decades. That is the case of the "Fantaisie" (n° 21), which adopts a cross section, alternating brilliant toccata fragments with slow meditation on a cornet solo, a cousin of Messiaen's "Le Verbe" in *La Nativité du Seigneur*, in which premiere Langlais would participate at La Trinité on February 27, 1936.

The musicologist Armand Machabey wasn't wrong when he wrote:

⁶ It should not be forgotten that Jean Langlais was something of a specialist in the harmonium, from the time that he did his harmony exercises for Albert Mahaut on the harmonium at the Institute for the Young Blind beginning in 1920.

It would be absurd to disparage large-scale works; but thirty substantial measures can create a more singular atmosphere than a symphony: that compressed miracle happens in the work of Mr. Langlais, and I'm thinking of the *Vingt-Quatre Pièces* for organ, every one of which reveals the author's doctrines at the same time as it reveals the particularities of his creativity. Among these, modality, which surreptitiously engages the listener, is the extension of the Gregorian discipline from Solesmes, to which the composer has long been indebted.⁷

The conception and execution of the *Vingt-Quatre Pièces* took more than five years, from 1934 to 1939, but that didn't prevent the composer from writing other works, unrelated to the organ and religious music in general: thus, after his wife read him *Noces*, a collection by the avant-garde poet Pierre-Jean Jouve,⁸ Langlais was enthusiastic about it and confided in Paul Dukas (this was the year before he died) his wish to set some of these texts. Dukas, at first reticent and thrown off balance, hesitated, but upon reflection gave his unequivocal approval, even saying, "How I wish I were the author of these texts!"

After securing the poet's permission to set his texts, Jean Langlais went right to work, and in a single rush produced six songs for soprano and piano, comprising the collection *Humilis*, dedicated to the memory of Paul Dukas.

The composer faithfully maintained the restrained atmosphere of the poems, as in the second song, "Je t'aime," where the accompaniment is reduced to monophonic melody, which was certainly not the style of the day! Pierre-Jean Jouve later made a comment that absolutely delighted Jean Langlais: "It's Gregorian chant in two parts." In the Thirties, Jouve was little known, but Langlais did not care. Fascinated by the force of the free verse, as well as the recurring theme of blindness (poems 1, 2, 4, and 6), the composer applied himself to translate its concision, tragedy, and hermeticism by having a piano style that was very austere, often in one or two voices, three at the most (n° 1, 2, 5) or mingling fleeting modality, tonality, and chromaticism.

The work received its premiere on January 12, 1936 at the Société Nationale, performed by soprano Suzanne Marchal (André Marchal's wife) and Jean Langlais at the piano.⁹ The audience demanded an encore of the cycle and the next day Messiaen sent his congratulations with this note:

Paris, 13 January 1936

Dear Friend,

Once again, "bravo" for your songs (*Humilis*). It's very beautiful. The 2nd and 3rd especially. My wife is very enthusiastic.

I embrace you

Messiaen

After these intimate songs, the young man felt the need to change his musical focus completely, and Father Capelle, curate of the Escalquens parish (South West of France, near Toulouse), where he spent his summer vacation in 1935 with his wife's family, gave him the

⁷ "Galerie de quelques jeunes musiciens parisiens (1): M. Langlais," *L'Information musicale* 77 (3 July 1942): 1009.

Armand Machabey (1886–1966) was a student of Vincent d'Indy and a specialist in the music of Guillaume de Machaut.

⁸ Pierre-Jean Jouve (1887–1976) was a prolific French poet, writer and critic.

⁹ The cycle remains unpublished, like most of Langlais's secular songs. Manuscript in the collection of Marie-Louise Langlais; reproduced by Richard Powell in 2014, pdf available for free on Jean Langlais website.

occasion to do so. This priest, who was very much loved and respected by his parishioners (he stayed in the same post for 54 years), requested that Jean Langlais compose a mass for his choir. He had a number of stipulations: first, the work should be short, because he had to celebrate Mass on Sunday mornings at three different villages whose names are typical of the area: Belberaud, Pompertuzat, and Escalquens; Father Capelle was, therefore, always in a hurry. Secondly, the mass should be for equal voices and easy, the amateur choir of the parish being composed exclusively of men of modest musical abilities. None could read music. And finally, the composer had to settle for the harmonium for the accompaniment, since the Escalquens church lacked an organ.



Church bell tower of Escalquens

Figure 21. (photograph and collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

Langlais was so fond of this area and its inhabitants that he gracefully acceded to these conditions and, in a few days during that summer, wrote an untitled mass, later called *Messe d'Escalquens* for publication, a score of just ten pages, with a duration of approximately eight minutes, and written for two equal voices and harmonium.

The composer himself taught it to the choir, teaching each of the elements of the Latin Mass traditionally sung by the choir (Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus, Benedictus, Agnus Dei) note-by-note. Except for the Sanctus, where the theme is given by the bells of the church (the four notes D-C-A-F#), he did not use any plainsong.

The dimensions of the work are indeed small: Kyrie, 21 measures; Gloria, the longest movement, 68; Sanctus/Benedictus, 39, and Agnus Dei, 26. Obviously Jean Langlais considered this to be a minor work, because as soon as he had written it and taught it to the choir, he forgot about it; it would be completely lost today if his faithful disciple, Pierre Denis—charmed by the naivety of the work—hadn't insist on copying the whole by hand and keeping the manuscript. Not realizing that it was in his own library, he found it again after Jean Langlais' death in 1991.

The work's apparent simplicity, with its harmonic language reminiscent of Fauré, doesn't hide a very structural thinking. An example is the Sanctus, built on a four-note ostinato that is drawn from the Escalquens church's bells—which the composer would re-use repeatedly much later in the 1980s *Offrande à une âme* for organ, in memory of his first wife, and in *Vitrail* for clarinet and piano.

This, then, is the first vocal mass (1935) by Jean Langlais, a prelude for the later *Messe Solennelle* (1949), as complex as the *Messe d'Escalquens* is simple, but it is well worth attentive listening.

The young composer had little time to waste because his colleague and friend, the organist Noëlie Pierront, looking for new pieces, commissioned him to write a quintet for strings and organ for her opening recital of the 1936 Amis de l'Orgue series. Remembering that before he was an organist he held a bow, Jean Langlais took to heart the challenge of marrying instruments so diametrically opposite as organ and strings—and Poulenc's *Concerto pour orgue, cordes et timbales* not yet been written.¹⁰

Thus the *Pièce en forme libre*, dedicated to Langlais' wife Jeannette, was born. It wasn't published until 1960 (25 years after its composition) by Gray of New-York as *Piece in Free Form*, and once that edition was out of print, it appeared in France in 1984, published by Combre under its original French title, *Pièce en forme libre*.

Approximately 13 minutes, this work, which Jean Langlais always affirmed was « one of my best », seamlessly connects the five parts: Adagio–Maestoso energico–Allegro molto–Più lento–Adagio, in which the central allegro is the powerful pinnacle of a pyramid and is flanked by two majestic and two slow symmetrical movements. At first, the organ is very discrete, leaving it to the strings to enunciate the chromatic theme. Little by little the quartet's fugal entries, tighter and tighter, from bottom to top, culminate in the middle of the work, the strings in high tessitura and the organ at fortissimo and with a rhythmically powerful sequence alternating between strings and organ. The work ends with a marvelously poetic adagio in which, the opposite of the introduction, the strings have extremely drawn-out held notes while the organ has modal arabesques on an eight-foot flute accompanied by the gamba and céleste.

The first performance was on Tuesday, January 28, 1936, at Saint-Pierre-du-Gros-Caillou, with Noëlie Pierront at the organ. Jean Langlais remembers:

What's important for a composer is to know what he wants to do before beginning. Well, there's one work that I wrote exactly as I wished, and that's my *Pièce en forme*

¹⁰ Poulenc finished his *Concerto* at the end of July 1938, and the premiere took place on July 21, 1939 in the Gaveau Hall.

libre. At the close of the premiere at Saint-Pierre-du-Gros-Cailou Messiaen was the last to remain with me and said to me verbatim, “The ghost of Dukas visited you. I won’t tell you that the piece is very good, as that would be too stupid!” I always took this remark as a great compliment.

Reciprocally, ten years later, after the premiere of his *Vingt Regards sur l’enfant Jésus* for piano, I was the last to congratulate him, and I told him, “No one since Liszt has written piano music as new as you have, and in sum no one in a long time has written music of any sort that is so new.” And Messiaen responded, “You know, there must have been three or four hundred people who came by to shake my hand, but no one said that. And it’s what I hoped someone would say.”¹¹

There was a “second premiere” of the *Pièce en forme libre*, this time in a version for string quartet and piano, in the very official musical evening of new music at the Société Nationale de Musique on February 6, 1937. The critic Claude Altomont was highly laudatory about Jean Langlais. Note his emphasis on evoking the author’s blindness :

Many premieres, but which were the ones that, instead of giving this word simply a conventional and abstract feeling, in contrast gave it its fullest meaning? ...Happily, there was ... the *Fantaisie* for string quartet and piano by Mr. Jean Langlais;¹² and ... “premiere” found again its true significance... How to translate the emotion that came over us without indiscreetly indulging in overly real sorrow? Further—in the face of these accents that from the beginning convey the most profound and poignant resignation—how not to say that perhaps there never has been such a decisively heroic musical translation of the struggle of a soul—and its appeasement—before enlightenment refused? This discovering and creating, beyond any lament, another enlightenment. And arriving, through sound, at the creation of a *new reality* which, while visually impossible, surpasses in *visionary* surrealism. The author and with him the performers of these pages, Mme Primans-Bach, Mlle Monique Jeanne, Mmes Combrisson and Yvonne Thibout, performed these pages with a powerful sobriety.¹³

Two days later, on February 8, 1937, Jean Langlais took part in the Lyon premiere of his two pieces for full orchestra and organ, written in 1934 in the Conservatory composition class under the direction of Paul Dukas. *Le Nouvelliste de Lyon* described it:

Mssrs Langlais and Darius Milhaud brought the temperate weather of our France to the Grands-Concerts. Of Mr. Jean Langlais’ two pieces for organ and orchestra, the *Essai sur l’Évangile de Noël* instantly captivated me with its poetic sentiment. It’s a discretely colored country nocturne; the organ, notably its reeds, naïvely dialogues with the orchestra’s woodwinds, and this brief piece concludes giving the impression of exquisite serenity.

With its simple means, but free of clichés, the *Hymne d’action de grâces* maintains its noble organization. Ardent melodic phrases and majestic harmonies respond to fragments of the “Te Deum” and “Vexilla regis.” The luminosity, the truly distinctive construction, and the musical substance explain the sympathetic, even warm reception that Mr. Jean Langlais received.¹⁴

¹¹ Langlais, “Souvenirs.”

¹² Curiously, Jean Langlais had changed the piece’s title from *Pièce en forme libre* to *Fantaisie*, even though the scores are exactly the same, aside from the transcription of the organ part for piano (manuscript in the collection of Marie-Louise Langlais). The composer, undoubtedly wanting to present his work in a context larger than that of the church, decided to offer it to the prestigious concerts of the Société Nationale de Musique, and made the transcription of the organ part. Unfortunately, there was no follow-up to this initiative, and the *Pièce en forme libre* will certainly remain for strings and organ.

¹³ “Société Nationale de Musique (6 février),” *Le Ménestrel*, February 12, 1937. 59.

¹⁴ “La Vie musicale” (unsigned). *Le Nouvelliste de Lyon*, February 11, 1936. 2.

In this concert, Jean Langlais fortuitously found himself next to the era's famous French cellist, Maurice Maréchal, since both artists were playing in the program. Impressed with the young composer and the audience's warm reception of his music, Maréchal immediately commissioned him to write a work for cello and orchestra; he appeared delighted when he received Langlais' acceptance:

Paris, August 7, 1936

Dear Mr. Langlais,

I am delighted by the good news you sent me, because I am convinced that you are incapable of writing anything uninteresting!

Therefore, I am anxious and very curious to see your new work for cello and would be very happy to receive the photoengraving that you suggested.

Needless to say, I would be very happy and flattered to accept the dedication of your pieces, and I hope to take them on the road with me as much as possible.

Very sincerely yours,
Maurice Maréchal¹⁵

It was an arduous task, but Jean Langlais, spurred on by the idea that his work would enter the repertory of his illustrious commissioner, wrote a *Symphonie concertante* for cello and orchestra, about 25 minutes long, fairly quickly; it was dedicated, of course, to Maurice Maréchal.

In this work in four movements,¹⁶ we note that in the third movement the composer re-used the poetic final Adagio of his *Pièce en forme libre* for quartet and organ, here orchestrated for woodwinds, strings, and organ. Unfortunately, after Langlais had waited several months for a response to having sent the manuscript, the cellist announced that he couldn't play the score because, he said, "The audience would see me, but not hear me" (in other words, "the orchestra is too loud and would cover me").¹⁷ Furious and disappointed, the composer recounts the rest of the story:

So I went to Florent Schmitt's to show him my score and ask his advice. "At this spot," he told me, « make the strings pizzicatti, which would be better; but don't change the rest of it: it's fine ».

And then, by the merest chance, Maréchal arrived at Schmitt's at just that moment. With his habitual caustic tone, and in front of me, Schmitt said, "Tell me, Maréchal, it seems that you don't want to play Langlais' piece? Stick to playing cello and don't get mixed up in criticism of orchestral scores. It's none of your business!"

Shortly after, to have peace of mind, I went to the great cellist Pierre Fournier to ask what he thought of the cello part. Much to my surprise, he asked me, "Can you play a reduction of the orchestral parts on the piano?" "I think so," I answered, surprised.

"Fine. There's the piano, we'll play the work together."

And never having seen a single note of this score, he played it from beginning to end, linking the four movements without pause except for an enormous cadenza for solo cello in the final allegro: "I'll finger it for you," he said, "because at first glance one wants to escape!" In any case, he played the whole piece as if he had known it for 20 years! I then thought of rewriting the work for piano and orchestra, which I did, but only regarding the first two movements (Adagio sostenuto and Introduction et vivace).

The orchestra is exactly the same in the two versions, only with a completely changed

¹⁵ Collection Marie-Louise Langlais

¹⁶ Adagio sostenuto, Introduction et vivace, Adagio, Allegro appassionato. The work was first published posthumously in 1999 by Carus, in Germany.

¹⁷ Jean Langlais, "Souvenirs."

part for the piano soloist. I titled the piece *Symphonie concertante* pour piano et orchestre or *Suite* pour piano et orchestre.

This score, like its predecessor for cello, stayed in my boxes, and I never had the joy of hearing it with orchestra. It's a shame, because I think it's good music. In any case, Pierre Fournier was enthusiastic. This made me cautious afterwards, and I realized how difficult it is to get played by an orchestra.¹⁸

February 27, 1936 : Premiere of Messiaen's *La Nativité du Seigneur* at La Trinité Church in Paris

Among Jean Langlais' projects, an exhilarating task appeared on the horizon: his participation in the premiere of Messiaen's brand new work, titled *La Nativité du Seigneur*, a set of nine meditations for organ that was to revolutionize the organ's language. The concert, which can truly be called "historic," took place on the organ of La Trinité church on 27 February 1936 at 8:45 pm, under the auspices of the Amis de l'Orgue; it was presented as a "special additional concert."



Program from the premiere of Messiaen's *La Nativité du Seigneur*

Figure 22. (collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

Because of the work's length and complexity, Messiaen divided it among three of his organist friends: Daniel-Lesur (n° 1–3), Jean Langlais (4–6), and Jean-Jacques Grunenwald (7–9). He finished the concert himself, playing his *Banquet céleste*. "Le Verbe" (The Word) "Les Enfants de Dieu" (The Children of God), and "Les Anges" (The Angels) were, then, for Langlais, and he long remembered the problems he had in memorizing the second part of "Le Verbe," a long, meandering cornet solo, changing constantly. What a sighted person could easily read became a test loaded with pitfalls for a blind man.

As Messiaen wrote in his program notes:

¹⁸ Ibid.

Second part of “Le Verbe”: the divine Speech stretches forth, the Word speaks. It is a long solo on the cornet whose form is related to Hindu ragas, to plainchant sequences and graduals, and to J.S. Bach’s ornamented chorale-preludes.

Such diverse influences!

The composer had said to his friends that his pieces were not “so difficult,” and tried to reassure Langlais about “Les Anges”: “You’ll see that there isn’t even a pedal part.”¹⁹

Yes, but the hands! Messiaen gave the following written instructions to Jean Langlais regarding the interpretation of this piece:

For the beginning there should be almost no 8-foot stops.

Here’s the opening registration at La Trinité:

Récit: Octavin 2, Cymbale III

Positif: Principal 8, Prestant 4, Doublette 2

Grand Orgue: Prestant 4

Play on the Grand Orgue with everything coupled.

Page 3, second system, second measure: the last C in the left hand is obviously natural.

The final trill is for alternating hands, right hand on D-G, left hand on C-F.

At the end of the trill, slow the repercussions, stopping on a staccato D-G, a comma and a period, and a dry C-F.²⁰

In his program notes for “Les Anges,” Messiaen wrote:

A sort of heavenly dance. An exultation of bodiless spirits. The piece is based on rhythms that are immediately preceded by or followed by their augmented values and additions of short values.

It seems that the composer was happy with his interpreter’s playing, as the next day he wrote to Langlais:

Paris, February 29, 1936

Thank you for your great friendship and your marvelous performance of *La Nativité*.

“Les Anges” were astounding. You are a terrific guy.

I embrace you

Messiaen

And Messiaen inscribed the following dedication on the flyleaf of the third fascicle of his *Nativité*, which opens with “Les Anges”:

To my dear colleague and friend, Jean Langlais, who knows how to ring the bells so well, to flap the butterfly wings, to ethereally celebrate the “angels” who open this fascicle.

With great affection,

Olivier Messiaen²¹

Messiaen, extremely fussy about every detail in his works, demanded that performers observe absolutely everything in his texts, an annoying characteristic when one knows the liberties that Messiaen himself took with his own works, but also when he played those by others, as Langlais enjoyed recalling in this charming anecdote:

As I composed my *Poèmes évangéliques* in 1932, I had wanted to paint a rather realistic picture in the third piece, “Les Rameaux” (The Palms), the one day in Christ’s

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Copy in the collection of Marie-Louise Langlais

²¹ Collection Marie-Louise Langlais

life in which crowds received him enthusiastically. To do this, I indicated “tutti” in my score, with fast perpetual motion in the hands that accompanied a majestic presentation in the pedals of the Gregorian theme, “Hosanna filio David.”

I encountered Messiaen a few days before Palm Sunday in 1935.

He said, “Guess what, next Sunday at La Trinité I’m going to play your “Rameaux,” but don’t come.”

Naturally, I went; and this is what I heard: My piece is marked as allegro, legato, with full organ, and a big bass. But Messiaen played very slowly, with the manual parts entirely staccato; further, he used only a few pedal stops, so one practically didn’t hear the Gregorian theme. When I got home, I wrote to him:

My Dear Olivier,
I’m just back from La Trinité. I heard my “Rameaux.”
If you still have any friendly feelings at all towards me, I beg you to prove it and never again play a note of my music.

Three days later, receiving no response, I call Messiaen and say:

“Did you get my letter?”

“Yes.”

“What did you think about it?”

“Well, I thought it was very funny,” but he added maliciously, “Come to La Trinité next year on the same date.”

And the next year, on Palm Sunday, I did just that. Messiaen played my piece dazzlingly as a postlude to the Mass, as no one has ever played it since! That’s so Messiaen...²²

The premiere of *La Nativité du Seigneur* was like a clap of thunder in the organ world. Never had anyone written music that was so new in all aspects, its modality, its rhythms, its form, and its registrations. Messiaen’s later writings, reported by musicologist Brigitte Massin, clarify the role he thought *La Nativité* played in the new organ music:

Especially with the intrusion of Hindu rhythms in *La Nativité*, I proved—or at least I think so—that one could write organ music that was something other than post-Franckian.²³

Emotions were comparable to the newness of the score. Although there wasn’t a real scandal (like the one ten years later touched off by the premiere of Messiaen’s *Trois Petites Liturgies de la présence divine*), the backlash was sufficient that the publisher Gilbert Alphonse-Leduc vehemently responded to the critic and organist Bernard Gavoty ten years after the work’s premiere:

You say that Jehan Alain’s faith is luminous, Duruflé’s sensitivity is harmonious, and Langlais’ approach is clear. This recognizes some excellent remedies for our great weariness, which Messiaen also realizes, but in his case he adopts a mystical literature. You seem to consider Messiaen to be isolated and lost in this half of the twentieth century, and consequently you find him an unexpected one-party dictatorship, and certainly unbearable; for my part, I cannot think of him as isolated, and I think he is like a new link in a great mystical chain. He is searching for a new language. Like Tournemire, like all the innovators, Messiaen can’t avoid this necessity. In so doing, he wants to escape from the stable, which all the school leaders created; he leaves the hay behind and seeks green fields.²⁴

²² Langlais, “Souvenirs.”

²³ Brigitte Massin, *Olivier Messiaen: une poésie du merveilleux* (Aix-en-Provence: Alinea, 1989). 172.

²⁴ The original article by Bernard Gavoty appeared as “Musique et mystique: le ‘cas’ Messiaen” in *Les Études* (1945): 21–37. Leduc’s “Réponse à M. Bernard Gavoty,” 4 printed, n.d., is in the collection of Marie-Louise Langlais.

In any case, one of the glories of Langlais' long career as a recitalist was participating in this memorable evening. As a footnote to this event, we have an excerpt from a letter that Messiaen sent to Marcel Dupré shortly before the recital, which also indirectly documents a latent conflict between Dupré and the Amis de l'Orgue in the Thirties:

The concert on February 27 (8:45 pm) is devoted entirely to the premiere of one of my works (the fruit of many years of reflection); you know, dear Master, that it would be an immense joy to have your presence, as well as that of Mrs. Dupré. The work is very heartfelt, the registration very carefully worked out, and the three performers play like lovers. But this is under the patronage of the Amis de l'Orgue, and since I don't know what your attitude is towards them currently, I send my invitation, leaving you free to use it or not. I write this with much affection, as you know, my dear Master, and you know equally that for me there is only one organist in the world, I'd even say only one friend (since Dukas's death)! After that, I have nothing to add. Be assured again of my profound admiration and please accept my affection and respect

Olivier Messiaen²⁵

Naturally, Messiaen had his detractors, and surprisingly among them was Charles Tournemire at a certain point of his life. In his *Mémoires*, he comments on the "young generation" and on Messiaen in particular²⁶ :

From the end of September to October 10, 1936

What do we see today?

Certain newspapers and more or less distinguished amateurs scream genius at the renewal of organ music by the "under thirty" crowd, who inundate the market place of human thought with their absurd and ugly hair-braided ideas; they're children!!

Here's one example among many of the melodic poverty that characterizes an organ music that they speak of as some sort of revelation:

(Extremely slow and solemn) *What follows, in Tournemire's hand, is his pronouncement on one staff of the 25 first measures of the complete theme of the "Prière du Christ montant vers son Père" (Prayer of Christ Ascending to His Father), the last piece of Messiaen's Ascension, and Tournemire's assessment:*

The conclusion is even uglier. The harmonies are implausible. It's a sauce in which pepper and all sorts of ingredients are all mixed up together.

No comment!

Jean Langlais and the Amis de l'Orgue in 1936

From the first organ performance/improvisation and composition competitions sponsored by the Amis de l'Orgue (1929 and 1930), and both won by Maurice Duruflé, Jean Langlais had hoped to participate in the following ones.

Although he won the performance/improvisation competition in 1931, he lost twice in composition (in 1932 and 1934). It should be said that the Amis de l'Orgue, conceived and created by Bérenger de Miramon Fitz-James and Norbert Dufourcq in 1926, worked tirelessly to promote the organ through concerts, conferences, and competitions.

²⁵ Quoted by François Sabatier in "Olivier Messiaen: Documents des archives des Amis de l'Orgue," *L'Orgue* 295–296 (2011). 117.

²⁶ Marie-Louise Langlais: *Charles Tournemire, Eclats de Mémoires*, ml-langlais.com website. 126-127.

Very quickly this group, with André Marchal at its center, oriented itself towards the neo-classic, both in terms of organ building and of repertory. After joining this movement for a brief time, Marcel Dupré became a bitter adversary of its stances that were so far removed from his own creed, the symphonic organ and its repertory as inherited from his predecessors at the Paris Conservatory, especially Widor. Since Jean Langlais was taught by both Marchal and Dupré, which path was he to follow? In 1936, Béranger de Miramon sent a questionnaire to 11 young French organists;²⁷ in it he asked them to express their opinions and choices, which Jean Langlais did:

Paris, April 21, 1936

Dear Mr. Miramon,

I am extremely honored to receive your questionnaire, to which I shall respond honestly.

What role do you think the organ played in your musical education?

Because of its enormous literature, especially with the masterpieces that this literature includes, the organ was a powerful source of instruction for me. Further, the many improvisation exercises that are part of any complete organ study were infinitely profitable from all points of view.

What artistic benefits have you reaped?

Important artistic benefits: purity of style and aesthetic that comes only from pure music.

What instrumental interest do you acknowledge in it?

Although I think the comparison of this instrument with the orchestra is completely erroneous, the two do share an infinite variety and richness of colors, much more complete than any other instrument.

What are the current trends for the organ in terms of performance, improvisation, and composition?

It seems to me that organ performance has acquired an accuracy that never existed before this era, to the extent that precise rules can be used for all situations. The fact that improvisation currently features a true and clean technique marks an important development in organistic style. The pursuit of detail—which, however, should never obscure the lines of the totality—seems to me a very modern orientation that can serve as a base for an organ composer, who isn't worthy of this title if he isn't a real organist. The current French school seems to me to be the weightiest influence on organistic brilliance.

Do you think that the return to building organs oriented towards old polyphony, without completely renouncing nineteenth-century developments, could foster the creation of a new style and new repertory?

Personally, and while admiring old instruments as in a museum, I don't think that their resurrection could foster the birth of a new style. The consonant harmonies (mostly) of the old composers could tolerate few fundamentals and many harmonics, while current harmonies, with their aggregations, require rigorous exactness [of pitch], an exactness that wouldn't be consistent with the overuse of mixtures from the past. It seems to me that current registrational practice is based on the natural value of colors.

What is an organist's standing in the musical world? From an artistic standpoint, is he understood and valued?

²⁷ Jehan Alain, Daniel-Lesur, Maurice Duruflé, André Fleury, Jean-Jacques Grunenwald, Jean Langlais, Gaston Litaize, Olivier Messiaen, Noëlie Pierront, Henriette Roget, and Edouard Souberbielle.

Musicians generally think that there are two kinds of music: music and organists' music. That speaks for itself. For 20 years, it seems to me, the organist has gained a status with an independent audience, which wasn't typical before. It is because of this regrettable situation that in big symphonic concerts he doesn't have a place equivalent to a violinist or a virtuosic pianist.

Very Sincerely Yours,
J. Langlais²⁸

Most of the Langlais' answers seem fairly conventional except for the one about the aesthetics of old instruments: Jean Langlais never recanted his opinion that a return to old instruments could never foster the creation of a new style.

On this issue he was at odds with his friend Messiaen, who responded to the same question as follows:

The re-emergence of building organs in the old polyphonic style is greatly to be praised because it gives us "mixtures," that is colors that are the most original, the most vivid, the most characteristic of the instrument. But to have this one should not renounce the wonderful additions to the organ from the nineteenth century, the roundness of the flutes, the breathtaking power of the reeds.²⁹

Regarding the organist's standing in the musical world, Daniel-Lesur's answer was much bolder than Jean Langlais':

Alas, you know as well as I that organists are the pariahs of music, and most often, because of their laziness they deserve to be considered as such. The rest of the musical world shamefully ignores them; fine, but what do they, the organists, know about the rest of music? Except, of course, for the ten or fifteen musicians whom we know as the elite class. How many [organists] have you encountered at orchestral concerts?³⁰

In short, in the middle of the Thirties, the Parisian world as represented by the Amis de l'Orgue seems to have considered Jean Langlais as a full member of the young guard of organ. He, like his colleagues, fully endorsed the Amis de l'Orgue because he knew that the Society encouraged and assisted young organists and composers, and that this patronage would be very useful for all, at the time and in the future.

In 1937, on the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Amis de l'Orgue, when they undertook an assessment of their activities and asked for the opinions of organists. Jean Langlais answered:

I am extremely happy to give my very best wishes—for a long life, a steady evolution, and artistic activities—to our Society on the occasion of its tenth anniversary. There is no doubt that after encouraging beginnings and practical activities, our phalanx will convert the indifferent who surround us (alas, all too numerous) to the cause of the organ and its music. Our dear founding president certainly has a right to the thanks of

²⁸ A photocopy of his hand-written letter was returned to Jean Langlais on May 6, 1987; it was to be reread and approved on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary issue of *L'Orgue*, titled *Soixante années au service de l'orgue, 1927–1987* (special issue, 201–204, 1987), "Jeunes organistes français en 1936". 20–53. Some of the 1936 responses were modified by their authors. Jean Langlais didn't change a comma, not because he hadn't changed his opinions, but because in 1987, after a stroke in 1984, he was stricken with aphasia and could only express himself with great difficulty. The original responses were not published individually, but were summarized in 1936, by Béranger de Miramon Fitz-James in "Notre jeune école d'orgue," *Bulletin trimestriel des Amis de l'Orgue* 27 (September, 1936). 19–21, and (December, 1936). 8–10.

²⁹ *L'Orgue: Soixante années au service de l'orgue 1927-1987*. 28-29.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 23.

the persuaded, whose cause he has served with so much dedication and comprehension.³¹

In the same publication, Bernard Gavoty presents a very nuanced portrait of Jean Langlais:

Right with his first works, Jean Langlais has shown a concern for refined writing and balanced forms. Perhaps he owes these qualities to his teacher Paul Dukas; he would certainly be the last to deny his influence on the development of his talent.

In spite of his name,³² he writes music that is as French as could be: delicacy and clarity dominate, but make a good mix with an assertive personality.

He has a sense of structure—not in the sense of stylish—but successful, satisfying as much for the spirit as for feelings.

The pieces that comprise his *Poèmes évangéliques* and his *Trois Paraphrases grégoriennes* are all extremely welcome: the fact that they are played by everyone everywhere (recently America welcomed them) obviates further discussion here. It's not that it is "easy" music, quite the opposite, but it is music where charm dominates.

Blessed man, blessed music!³³

Jean Langlais was indeed a particularly blessed man, this time in his personal life, with the arrival of his first child, an adopted little girl named Janine. Tournemire sent the obligatory congratulations in a letter very much in his own style:

Paris, March 28, 1936

My Dear Friend,

Bravo!

This is worth more than two symphonies, even for organ!!

A child is the most beautiful "symphony" that one could give to the world. I imagine that the family celebration must have been truly merry, especially having a godfather of the caliber of Litaize.

Madame Tournemire and I send you and Madame Langlais our very best wishes.

Charles Tournemire³⁴

The deaths of Charles-Marie Widor and Louis Vierne in 1937

Charles-Marie Widor, born in 1844 and the doyen of practicing French organists, passed away in Paris on March 12, 1937, at the age of 93. Organist at Saint-Sulpice, a post from which he retired on December 31, 1933, at the age of 89, a world-renowned virtuoso and composer, professor of organ and composition at the Paris Conservatory, and permanent Secretary of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, Widor died at an advanced age, having had a truly full career and leaving behind a complete body of work.

Louis Vierne's case was quite different, dying less than three months after Widor, at just 67, and in a dramatic way that left everyone shaken, especially Jean Langlais. Bérenger de Miramon Fitz-James gives the details of this tragic passing:

³¹ "Ce que les grands maîtres compositeurs et organistes français pensent de notre croisade," in "Dix Années au service de l'orgue français (1927–1937)," *Bulletin trimestriel des Amis de l'Orgue* 30/31 (special issue, June–Sept. 1937). 27.

³² "Langlais" can be understood as "l'anglais," "the Englishman."

³³ Bernard Gavoty. "La jeune école d'orgue française," in "Dix Années au service de l'orgue français (1927–1937)." *Bulletin trimestriel des Amis de l'Orgue* 30/31 (June–Sept 1937). 119.

³⁴ Collection Marie-Louise Langlais

The death of Louis Vierne

On Wednesday evening, June 2nd at nightfall, we saw him at the foot of [Notre-Dame's] north tower, accompanied by his doctor and a few students and friends ready to help him climb the long spiral staircase that led to the organ. For almost two years, illness had often prevented him from getting to his loft.

Nevertheless, he had resumed playing in the spring.

That evening his face, paler than usual, seemed to us to be puffed with confident energy and cheerfulness. He told us how pleased he was about this intimate concert that had been organized in his honor by the Amis de l'Orgue to celebrate the society's tenth anniversary. Perhaps a little bitterness showed through in the tenseness of his determined features.

He knew, in fact, that in the future the Chapter of Notre-Dame would no longer permit the organ to be heard outside religious services. For him and the thousand « Friends of the Organ », colleagues, students, and admirers who had gathered in the in the darkness of this basilica where he had exercised his talent for 37 years, this evening was to mark the end of his career as a virtuoso.

He had just played his last published work (*Tryptique*: Matines, Communion, Stèle pour un enfant défunt) with meditative emotion that struck those who knew him well.

He was about to improvise a paraphrase on "Alma redemptoris Mater," when a long pedal note reverberated like a harrowing cry.³⁵ Losing control of his movements, Vierne had just fainted, felled by an embolism.

Doctor Mallet, with the help of Madame Mallet-Richepin, Maurice Duruflé, and Monsieur and Madame Jean Felot tried everything to revive him.

A teacher in Notre-Dame's choir-school came up to the loft and gave him general absolution. A little later we learned that they had moved him to the Hôtel-Dieu.³⁶

In the absence of any member of the Notre-Dame clergy we thought it best to explain the painful situation to the audience, invite them to pray privately to commend His servant's soul to God, and then to withdraw.

The worried crowd who gathered at the doors of the Hôtel-Dieu soon learned that all hope of returning the dear Master to life had been abandoned. . . .

The next day it was decided, with the agreement of the administrative Canon, that the body would be moved Friday evening, June 4th, to Notre-Dame.

The wake in the mortuary chapel, for which a number of organists and friends volunteered,³⁷ continued until the funeral which took place on Saturday the 5th, with a ceremony reserved for members of the Chapter.

The Gregorian service was sung by the choir; the main organ, draped in black, remained mute. The attendees were numerous, and gathered sadly. The absolution was given by Monseigneur Beaussart, assistant to the Cardinal of Paris.

The Master was buried in the family tomb in the Montparnasse cemetery.³⁸

This dramatic event was engraved on the collective memory of organists of the era, and was a shock for Jean Langlais, who loved him as a father, even though he had not been his student. Ironically, he had a meeting scheduled with Vierne for June 4th (two days later), since the Master very much wanted to meet his little daughter, Janine.³⁹

³⁵ Jean Langlais, who was present along with his colleagues at Notre-Dame, remembered years later that it was a second-octave E on foundations 16 and 8. He was there too, when, just before climbing to the organ, Louis Vierne turned to Madeleine Mallet-Richepin and spoke this strange premonition: "I leave my work to you, Madeleine, because this night I shall die." (Langlais, "Souvenirs").

³⁶ The Hôtel-Dieu is a hospital bordering Notre-Dame Square.

³⁷ Including Jean Langlais, who stood watch over the departed for a portion of the night (Langlais, "Souvenirs").

³⁸ *Bulletin trimestriel des Amis de l'Orgue*, 32 (Déc. 1937). 1-2.

³⁹ Langlais, "Souvenirs."

After the funeral, Count Miramon, president of the Amis de l'Orgue, opened a letter that Vierne considered to be his artistic will, which he had addressed to Cardinal Verdier, Archbishop of Paris:

Your Eminence,
Official organist at Notre-Dame for thirty-five years, I am hostage to illness and do not know if the attack that I recently suffered will recur; given the state of my heart, I have little hope of winning.
I cannot help being worried about who will succeed me at the Notre-Dame organ, an instrument with world-wide prestige. With only the goal of seeing the post awarded to an artist worthy of the primary basilica of France, and inclined to maintain the grand tradition which I served, I submit to your great benevolence the wish that my successor be subject to the test of a competition, as I was, and recommended to the ecclesiastical authorities by an eminent jury.
I am retaining sealed copies of this letter for the archpriest of Notre-Dame and for the president of the Amis de l'Orgue, asking them not to open them until after my death.
With great respect, your humble and devoted servant.⁴⁰

Vierne's worries about his successor were understandable because for the preceding five years, he had been stripped of the right to choose his official substitute; and it was public knowledge that the Notre-Dame Chapter had fixed its choice on an amateur organist, Count Léonce de Saint-Martin, against Vierne's advice.

The organ world mobilized immediately, and created a candidate list of four organists to elicit support for a competition: Maurice Duruflé, Jean Langlais, Gaston Litaize, and Jehan Alain. Litaize makes a point that is essential to understanding Jean Langlais' candidacy:

On the advice of Béranger de Miramon, Jean and I sent our candidacies to the archpriest in order to justify the competition, reserving the right to withdraw at the last minute in order to leave the field to Maurice Duruflé. We knew Vierne's secret wish to see this great artist succeed him.⁴¹

It turned out to be a waste of time, for the very next day Jean Langlais received the following response from the administrative Canon at Notre-Dame:

Paris, June 8, 1937
Dear Sir,
Allow me to say, on behalf of the Chapter, how much we appreciate your offer and to thank you for offering the Cathedral your talent, which certainly the curate of Saint-Pierre de Montrouge appreciates. However, I should tell you that the Chapter does not foresee a competition for Notre-Dame's organ, since it appreciates the work of Mr. Vierne's substitute, and want to continue to enjoy it.
That is what motivated the unanimous decision to name Mr. de Saint-Martin organist of Notre-Dame.
Very sincerely yours,
L. Favier, Administrative Canon at Notre-Dame⁴²

The affair was over, and the turbulent story of Vierne's succession remains a particularly painful and inglorious episode in the annals of the often stormy relations between clergy and organists.

⁴⁰ *Bulletin trimestriel des Amis de l'Orgue* 32 (Déc.1937). 4.

⁴¹ Litaize tapes, 1983.

⁴² Collection Marie-Louise Langlais

Jean Langlais, a very active thirty-year-old

In 1937, Jean Langlais celebrates his 30 years and is fully part of what is now called the "Young French School of the Organ."

He proves it by participating, on January 28, 1937, in a collective concert in the organ hall of the Schola Cantorum in Paris, which also included Jehan Alain, André Fleury, Daniel-Lesur and Olivier Messiaen.

Several premieres were presented that night, notably by Jehan Alain, who played for the first time in public his *Suite* for organ, which won the award at the Amis de l'Orgue competition in 1936; by Daniel-Lesur, *Cinq Hymnes*; by André Fleury, *Deux mouvements*; and by Jean Langlais "Hommage à Francesco Landino" (*Vingt-Quatre Pièces pour harmonium ou orgue*).

Langlais also played "Mors et resurrectio" (*Trois Paraphrases grégoriennes*), and Messiaen interpreted three excerpts from his *Nativité du Seigneur*. Alain, Messiaen, Langlais, Fleury and Lesur playing in the same concert, this is a prestigious bill! The critic present at this event revealed some very definite opinions that do not lack zest:

Jehan Alain comes first: he has dynamism, talent, elegance. Rich in tone, mobile and contrasting, his *Suite* exaggerates a bit the dissonance which, among others, serves as an idea and does not lose strength; in the "Choral" it's a game of scabrous turns modulating abruptly and building... Jean Langlais triumphs. The audience unanimously celebrated him for his "Hommage à Francesco Landino" and especially "Mors et resurrectio" based on the gradual "Requiem"... Messiaen compounds the mannerisms of all that is hermetic about his language and comical about his quaintness. Might he have a taste for farce and jokes? This could be spiritual, not in the religious sense. Twirls of the flute ("Les Bergers") give way (in "Les Anges") to the amiable plop-plop of frogs jumping into the pond! A supplement to the *Carnaval des animaux*.⁴³

However, in 1937 more than ever, Jean Langlais was interested in diversifying his compositional activities. Still primarily interested in the organ, he dedicated a charming "Légende de Saint-Nicolas"⁴⁴ to his daughter Janine. It was inspired by an old popular song from eastern France, "Il était trois petits enfants" (There Were Three Little Children), whose theme had been given him for an improvisation during a concert recorded by Radio-Strasbourg.

Tournemire congratulated him as follows:

Paris, February 20, 1938

My Dear Friend,

I received your new organ work. The end is suave, very religious. It's real organ music. In spirit it's a return to the healthy traditions of the past, of Buxtehude and Bach. You understood that we have to break away from yesterday's misguided ways from which we still suffer!!

Best,

Charles Tournemire⁴⁵

⁴³A. Trotrot-Dériot. *La Petite Maîtrise* 287 (April 1937): 20.

⁴⁴ Later inserted into the *Folkloric Suite* in 1954 as the second of the five pieces published by FitzSimons of Chicago.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Without explaining just what he meant by “yesterday’s misguided ways,” Tournemire, by invoking Buxtehude and Bach, is truly complimenting his young disciple, who was at the time in the midst of composing Two Psalms for choir and organ or piano, in French (*Psalm 123*, “Cantique des montées” and *Psalm 58* “Contre les juges iniques”). The two texts are wildly contrasting, going from extreme peacefulness (*Psalm 123*) to the most savage violence (*Psalm 58*). Both works received an enthusiastic reception at their premiere on March 19, 1938 at the Société Nationale de Musique:

... I heard the concert on the 19th at the Société Nationale. In a perhaps arbitrary order of merit, I would unhesitatingly put in the top category Jean Langlais’ admirable *Psalm 123*—“Je lève les yeux vers toi” [To Thee I Lift up My Eyes] suavely sung by Joseph Noyon’s Campanile, with a sweetness, a marvelous serenity appropriate to these quasi-celestial pages.

Florent Schmitt⁴⁶

And:

Two *Psalms* by Mr. Jean Langlais, for mixed chorus, 123 and 58; and now it’s matter of immediate certainty. Sensitivity and grandeur are present; and deep intuition of the voices within the hall and outside its walls: there where the crypts or the vaults become, suddenly, simulacra that the music will have seemed to destroy. For the fullness—or perhaps for the inexorable solitude—of outrage or of praise.

The Bible suddenly opened wide.

And, knowing how to make us hear it, the composer at the piano and the “La Campanile” chorus, directed by Mr. Joseph Noyon.

Claude Altomont⁴⁷

These two works were never published during Jean Langlais’ lifetime, and there was never a second performance. But the composer didn’t forget about them, as he transcribed the first one (*Psalm 123*) for solo organ as “Celui qui a des oreilles, qu’il écoute” (He Who Has Ears to Hear, Let Him Hear, Matthew 11:15) at the beginning of the *Cinq Méditations sur l’Apocalypse*, published by Bornemann in 1974—36 years after the original version for choir and piano.

Jean Langlais abstained from the Amis de l’Orgue 1936 composition competition, which was won by Jehan Alain with his *Suite* for organ. But the announcement of the 1938 competition declared an entirely new conception:

In order to encourage enriching the concert repertory for organ, and in view of the restoration of the organ in the Salle Pleyel as well as the rebuilding of the one at the Trocadéro, we have decided that it was the right moment to invite French composers who have never published works for organ and orchestra (as of May, 1938) to send us for this time period a work for *String orchestra, with the optional addition of trumpets, trombones, and percussion*. The award of 6.000 francs will be split among a prize and two mentions (3,000, 2,000, and 1,000 francs). The rules can be requested from our General Secretary.⁴⁸

Langlais didn’t want to submit any more pieces for organ solo—too many bad memories of his defeats in 1932 and 1934—but he was enthused by the prospect of organ, strings, brass,

⁴⁶ *Le Temps*, April 2, 1938. 3.

⁴⁷ *Le Ménestrel*, March 25, 1938. 82-83.

⁴⁸ “Notre Concours de composition de 1938.” *Bulletin Trimestriel des Amis de l’Orgue*, 9: 32 (December, 1937). 14.

and percussion. He completed a *Thème, variations et final* in two months, using organ strings, trumpets, and trombones, with a duration of approximately eleven minutes. For the competition this triptych was performed at the home of the count of Miramon by André Fleury at the organ, a reduction of the orchestral part being played by Maurice Béché and Jean Langlais, piano four-hands.

This review appeared the next month:

Our composition competition for organ and orchestra was judged on Sunday, May 15th. The jury for this test consisted of Mssrs. Maurice Emmanuel, Gustave Samazeuilh, Louis Aubert, Achille Philip, Alexandre Cellier, and André Marchal.

The single work that was entered (*Thème, variations et final* for organ and orchestra consisting of strings, trumpets, and trombones) was unanimously awarded a First Mention (2,000 fr.).

It was authored by Mr. Jean Langlais, teacher at the National Institute for the Young Blind, organist at Saint-Pierre de Montrouge, and former student of the late Paul Dukas.⁴⁹

Partial success, partial failure, depending on how you look at it; certainly a First Mention was not the same as a First Prize for Jean Langlais. He remembered exactly what criticisms he received:

In the finale, the three trombones attack the theme, which is transposed and therefore demands a low C. The trombone can't play that note, but it was also played in the pedal part of the organ, the cellos, and the double basses, and I didn't want to disrupt the line for the trombones by putting a rest there. During the deliberation, I heard my compatriot Louis Aubert say, "He doesn't know how to orchestrate, he wrote a C for the trombones that is unplayable." Before announcing the judgment, I was brought before the jury and Aubert made his criticism.

My reply was, "In Wagner's 'Magic Fire Music' the theme is C-sharp-B-G-F-E, though the flute doesn't have the C-sharp. And that was written by Wagner."

Maurice Emmanuel then said to me gently, "I was a close friend of Dukas, and I should take his place for you. If I see someone who is about to get too close to a gas burner, I should stop him." "Fine," I said, "but where is the gas burner?" "Chromaticism," he replied. And the affair was over. I later changed the piece, deleting the brass parts and adding an andante for solo organ and a finale for strings and organ. This became my *Deuxième Concerto* for organ and string orchestra, premiered in 1963 in the United States.⁵⁰

This criticism of Langlais' use of chromaticism, already made in the second half of the Thirties, was to dog him through the Seventies, as a major fault in the work of someone so adept with modality. It is true that the strong influence of the Second Viennese School and atonality, relegated chromaticism to the world of the old-fashioned, out of the question for a composer worthy of the name to use. Jean Langlais was to suffer for a long time with this label. He briefly considered including this work in a vast *Pièce symphonique* for strings, brass, and organ, with a total duration of approximately 27 minutes,⁵¹ re-using music written earlier in the following design:

⁴⁹ Béranger de Miramon Fitz-James. "L'Activité des Amis de l'Orgue." *Bulletin trimestriel des Amis de l'Orgue* 10: 34 (June, 1938). 20.

⁵⁰ Langlais, "Souvenirs."

⁵¹ Ibid.

Part 1: *Pièce en forme libre* for strings and organ (complete score from 1935)

Part 2: Piece for brass and organ derived from the Toccata from the *Vingt-Quatre Pièces pour harmonium ou orgue*, titled *Choral Médiéval* and structured as follows:

Brass and organ are first contrasted with the full force of the respective voices, then uniting to proclaim the Easter sequence after having given, in the style of a chorale, the most moving Gregorian Kyrie that the Middle Ages ever produced, the Kyrie “Deus sempiternus,” used in the Toccata of my *Vingt-Quatre Pièces pour harmonium ou orgue*.

Part 3: *Thème, variations et final* for strings, brass, and organ (complete score from 1938).

But in the end he regretfully abandoned this ambitious project⁵². It does show his definite inclination to reuse his own works with different orchestrations, a habit that would prove to be consistent during the rest of his career.

Langlais didn’t forget about the piano in his concern for diversification. In 1936 he had written a *Mouvement perpétuel* for the marvelous French pianist Ida Périn, who always supported his music; three years later it would be at the center of a lively argument with a critic for the newspaper *Le Ménestrel*, “M.H.” (Michel-Léon Hirsch), whose review prompted a reply from Jean Langlais:

Paris, June 10, 1939

To the Director:

I find the following sentence by Mr. H. in the *Ménestrel* from May 12th, about my *Mouvement perpétuel* that was performed in the concert at the Société Nationale on May 3rd: “The *Mouvement perpétuel* by Mr. Langlais, which has three godfathers, Liszt, Chopin, and Debussy (its Toccata, in particular is literally stolen), isn’t worth much.” Exercising my right to reply, I ask you to print the following in the next issue of your newspaper: Having been charged with stealing, I am taken as having committed an artistic theft, the most immoral of all thefts. I don’t accept this sentence, at least until my good critic feels up to proving what he says with specific and concrete allegations. The “thief” will be generous in giving the precise layout of the work that he created with the help of his looting: this *Mouvement perpétuel* is written in a free mode (A, B-flat, C, D-sharp, E, F, G, G-sharp) of eight notes.

It is based on two themes, in ternary form: exposition of the first theme (first section), exposition of the second theme (second section), and combination of the two themes (third section). From one end to the other, this piece has uninterrupted sixteenth-note motion, hence the title *Mouvement perpétuel*. All harmonic ideas were intentionally eschewed, and only counterpoint serves for development. I would like to tell Mr. H. that he will search in vain for the slightest echo of the sumptuous harmony that pervades Debussy’s Toccata. As for the rhythm, it is essentially free and fluctuating, as one encounters 3/4, 5/8, 9/8, etc. The work begins and ends in half-light. Obviously, like Debussy’s Toccata, this modest *Mouvement perpétuel* is written “pour le piano” [the title of Debussy’s triptych].

It is perhaps to this curious similarity that one should look for the cause of Mr. H’s error.⁵³

⁵² The three movements of this imagined work were in fact published separately, at different times, and by three different publishers: the *Pièce en forme libre* by Gray in the United States, 1964, then by Combre in 1984; the *Choral médiéval* by Carus in Germany, in 2004; and the *Thème, variations et final* by Doblinger in Austria, in 2016. A scattering of the movements that hardly encouraged performance of the work the composer first envisioned. It was tried, none-the-less, in a world premiere at the First Methodist Church in Duluth, Minn. with string and brass from the Basilica of St. Mary (Minneapolis), Marie-Louise Langlais (organ), and Teri Larson (conductor), on October 26, 2003.

⁵³ Collection Marie-Louise Langlais. An abbreviated version of this letter was published in *Le Ménestrel* of July 14, 1939.196, with an editorial comment: “Our correspondent, to whom we sent these lines, told us that he has nothing to add to his review.”

In this same concert, Ida Périn played the premiere of the *Suite Armoricaïne* that Jean Langlais had composed during the summer of 1938. This Suite, titled *Suite Celtique* in another manuscript, is in five movements with titles that evoke the sea and Brittany:

- I. Épitaphe pour les marins qui n'ont pas eu de tombe (Epitaph for the Sailors Who Had No Grave)
- II. Le vieux pêcheur au large (The Old Fisherman Offshore)
- III. Danse bretonne (Breton Dance)
- IV. Coquillage solitaire (Solitary Shellfish)
- V. Conciliabule chez les mouettes (Seagulls' Chatter)

The press gave it a favorable review:

In closing, Jean Langlais' very noble and very moving *Suite Armoricaïne* for piano, a suite of eloquent internal visions, discreet, completely colored by the interior, and which at the same time are brilliant piano pieces. Miss Ida Périn was a wonder, with sensitive, dazzling, and luminous playing. A beautiful piece!⁵⁴

But to illustrate how the musical press can be completely divided, here are some lines written about these two piano pieces by Jean Langlais, still referring to the concert on May 3, 1939 at the Société Nationale:

The *Suite* by Mr. Jean Langlais is dedicated to the Armorique with the piano as spokesperson. It unfolds picturesque impressions to which I greatly prefer the same composer's brilliant *Mouvement perpétuel*, played by Miss Ida Périn with a virtuosity beyond all praise. A great success.⁵⁵

However, after this, Langlais would not compose a single additional note for piano other than the short easy pieces, *Histoire vraie pour une Môn* (A True Story for a Môn, 1942)⁵⁶ and a *Petite Suite* (1985) dedicated to both his grandson Camille and his second daughter Caroline. Was he burned by the poor review of his *Mouvement perpétuel*? Possibly, but that's very unfortunate.

In any case, was it perhaps a reflection of the depressing ambiance of the "Phoney War,"⁵⁷ there is not a single trace of a musical score by Jean Langlais in 1939.

Admittedly, during this year the composer had to pass a test, including writing a long pedagogical treatise, to gain tenure at the National Institute for the Young Blind. He therefore wrote *The Organ, Improvisation, and Musical Composition Taught to Blind Students by a Blind Teacher*, in which he gives the broad strokes of the pedagogical philosophy that guided him throughout his long career, for the blind as well as the sighted.⁵⁸ He succeeded in the examination and was tenured as the organ instructor of the girls, the class for boys having been assigned to André Marchal.

Langlais, who had begun his teaching career with boys, was hardly happy with the change:⁵⁹

⁵⁴ P. de St. dans *Les Concerts*, May 5, 1939, collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

⁵⁵ *L'Art musical* 4 :123 (May 12, 1939). 912.

⁵⁶ "Môn" was an affectionate nickname that Langlais gave to his goddaughter, Ariane Litaize, daughter of Gaston Litaize. It was an expression used in Lorraine, Litaize's home province.

⁵⁷ In French, « la drôle de guerre ».

⁵⁸ *L'Orgue, l'improvisation et la composition musicale enseignés à des élèves aveugles par un professeur aveugle*, typescript, 54 pages (collection Marie-Louise Langlais).

⁵⁹ Langlais, "Souvenirs."

I really loved my class of boys; my students were always my friends, and our mutual understanding was complete in all senses.

But one day the Director, Mr. Gayet, called me to my office and abruptly told me, with no explanation, "Starting tomorrow, you will no longer teach the boys, but rather the girls." I found the atmosphere very different than with the boys, less cordial, less direct, and it took me at least fifteen years to get used to it!

On an even more important topic, he continues his recollections from 1939:

On June 14, 1939, I got a telephone call from Tournemire, asking me to come over that very night. "It would be difficult," I replied, "as our little Janine is only three, and we don't have a baby sitter." "I want to see you this evening," he said.

You didn't argue with Tournemire, and I made arrangements for Janine to be cared for. I went there shaking like a leaf, thinking to myself, "I must have said something about his music that was misreported to him and displeased him, and now I'll get one of his tongue-lashings!" I was scared stiff.

We arrive at his doorstep, my wife and I. He was charming. We're seated, and he offers us tea. His wife was there. All of a sudden he says, "All right, you know that I had an operation recently. I looked death in the face and I realized that the one thing that really matters to me is my successor at Sainte-Clotilde. I offer it to you."

I was totally stunned and I said what I thought, "But you can't think, dear Master, that I am worthy to succeed Charles Tournemire!"

Since he was very touchy, he flew into a rage and said, "So, I don't know anything about it!" I capitulated.

He added, "I want a successor who is a Christian musician. I want you, and if you accept I'll put a sentence in my will."

I accepted. Afterwards, he invited us to spend a few days vacationing with him at his house on Ouessant Island where he spent all his summers.

Unfortunately, war had just been declared, and on 4 November 1939, he was found drowned in Arcachon's pool.

After Widor and Vierne, another grand Master of the French School of organ was gone. And this was the Master who had taught Jean Langlais so much, during the same period as Paul Dukas. With these two, Langlais lost his mentors, his friends.

What is striking in the pre-war period is the great variety of Langlais' works that were written after 1935, whether chamber music, vocal music, secular and sacred, symphonic music, not to mention organ music. It is clear that, aware of the narrow limits of the organ world, Jean Langlais tried to escape them, following Dukas's advice.

With an enormous effort, he thus was able to impose on the public and the critics, who seemed very sympathetic, the image of a multi-faceted musician, with an elegant and distinguished style, who was not just an organist. Without being in the avant-garde, like Messiaen, he represented the proven and recognized value of the "Young French Organ School." Rather than appearing revolutionary, he instinctively preferred to express himself musically with sincerity (a touchstone for him), the fruit of a diverse mosaic of influences: Breton folklore, plainchant, Medieval and Renaissance polyphony, Franckian chromaticism, Debussy-like impressionism, and the rhythms and colors of the twentieth century.

He now had to go through the very hard times of World War II.

