

CHAPTER 5

Professional Recognition (1945-1951)

“Organiste Titulaire” at Sainte-Clotilde

Once the intense joy at the coming of peace to Europe on May 8, 1945 had abated and once his appointment as *organiste titulaire*¹ at Sainte-Clotilde was officially announced, Jean Langlais had to adapt to his new parish,² so different from the ones he had known previously. Notre-Dame-de-la-Croix de Ménilmontant and Saint-Pierre-de-Montrouge, big parishes with 84,000 and 64,000 parishioners respectively, had many paid extra services, weddings, and funerals. There was nothing comparable at Sainte-Clotilde, which had at most 10,500 parishioners in 1945.

Although the smallest parish in Paris, it was, however, prestigious because of its location. The neighborhood included the National Assembly, embassies, and most of the governmental ministries; its boundaries, within the 7th arrondissement, virtually coincided with the administrative center of France. All these public buildings meant that there were that many fewer apartment buildings. Sainte-Clotilde, unlike Ménilmontant and Montrouge which were largely working class neighborhoods, was the fiefdom of the French aristocracy which since the eighteenth century had chosen to live in the beautiful private mansions of the nearby Saint-Germain neighborhood. Clearly, Jean Langlais was not an aristocrat. He used to tell the following anecdote:

After having played at Sainte Clotilde for the marriage of a descendant of the Rohan-Chabot family, owners of the Bonnefontaine château,³ I was invited to the post-wedding reception; it was probably the only time, by the way, that I received such an invitation from a Sainte-Clotilde parishioner.

The groom, the Count of Rohan-Chabot, thanked me in a very friendly fashion, and I said said to him : “I know your family well because it happens that my grandmother was one of the servants to your family and washed your laundry at the château.”⁴

¹ “Titulaire” does not have a direct equivalent in Anglo church systems. Being appointed *organiste titulaire* is akin to being tenured in an academic position, in which the appointment is assumed to be lifetime unless the organist chooses to leave or some other major upheaval occurs.

² It should be understood that “parish” here refers to the total population within the boundaries declared by the church and state, not the number of people attending services on a regular basis.

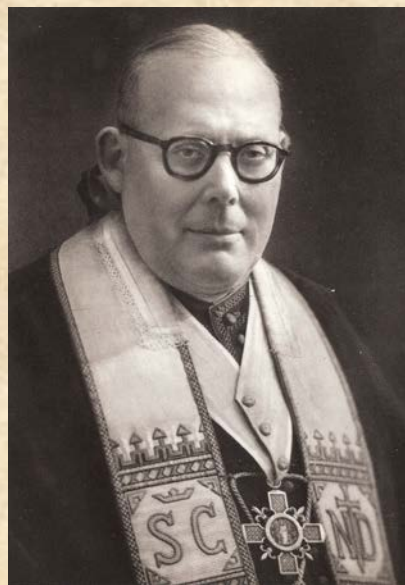
³ Located next to La Fontenelle, Jean Langlais’ birthplace.

⁴ The present author accompanied Jean Langlais at this reception.

I often played for the weddings or funerals of famous people, like the Murat princesses, for example, and the ceremonies were always interminable, sometimes lasting more than two hours. In a more intimate setting, in March of 1956 in the Sainte-Clotilde chapel, I played for the wedding of Jacques Chirac, future president of the French Republic, to Bernadette Chodron de Courcel, whose father, an affluent Sainte-Clotilde parishioner, wrote a superb book on the basilica, to which he added a handwritten inscription to me.⁵

In 1946, Canon Verdrie, who had kept Jean Langlais waiting so long to be named to Sainte-Clotilde, died. His successor, Canon Henry Hubert, was installed with great pomp on October 5, 1946 by Cardinal Suhard, who stressed the importance of the parish in his homily:

We know that this beautiful basilica extends its influence well beyond the limits of the parish which includes two train stations,⁶ nine ministries, and numerous large administrative offices.



Canon Henry Hubert⁷, curé of Sainte-Clotilde (1946-1968)

Figure 27. (Photograph in Robert de Courcel. *La Basilique de Sainte-Clotilde* : Paris, Lescuyer, 1957. 129)

Canon Hubert was a simple man, but throughout his long tenure at Sainte-Clotilde (1946–1968) he had to carry the fatal flow (in the eyes of some snobbish parishioners) of having spent 30 years at the working-class parish of Notre-Dame-de-la-Croix de Ménilmontant, whereas Canon Verdrie had only known Saint-Louis-d’Antin and Sainte-Clotilde, both of them chic and posh.⁸ In any case, the new priest-in-charge decided that he needed a professional choirmaster capable of handling important marriages and funerals. He therefore brought with him François Tricot, who had fulfilled these functions at his previous parish.

⁵ Robert Chodron de Courcel. *La Basilique de Sainte-Clotilde*. Lyon: Lescuyer, 1957. On the front page of Jean Langlais’ personal copy, is the following handwritten dedication: “A Monsieur Jean Langlais, organiste du Grand Orgue de la Basilique Sainte-Clotilde et compositeur éminent, bien cordialement, Robert de Courcel, 10 novembre 1957” (collection Marie-Louise Langlais). The printed dedication is, “À Monsieur le Chanoine Henry Hubert, curé de la Basilique Sainte-Clotilde, Hommage très respectueux.”

⁶ Gare des Invalides and Gare d’Orsay, the second later becoming the Musée d’Orsay.

⁷ Jean Langlais dedicated his *Messe Solennelle* to him in 1949.

⁸ Jean Tranchant. *Petite Histoire de la Paroisse Sainte-Clotilde (1935–1965)*. Paris: Sainte-Clotilde, 1996. 75.

Tricot stayed in the new position for 42 years, from 1946 to 1992, just like Jean Langlais, with whom he always got along perfectly well.

The Basilica of Sainte-Clotilde

To understand the architectural peculiarities of Sainte-Clotilde which directly influenced the construction of the organ that was built and dedicated there in 1859, it is important to understand the history of the church's construction. It was the Municipal Council of Paris, not the archbishop of Paris, who decided to build a large new church in the Saint-Germain neighborhood in 1827; we can reasonably assume that it was essentially a political decision, given the location. It was built primarily to fill a void: although the neighborhood was one of the most religious in the capital and had a whole constellation of chapels, monasteries and convents, it had few large parish churches aside from Saint-Sulpice. Therefore a new religious edifice of grand proportions was deemed essential.

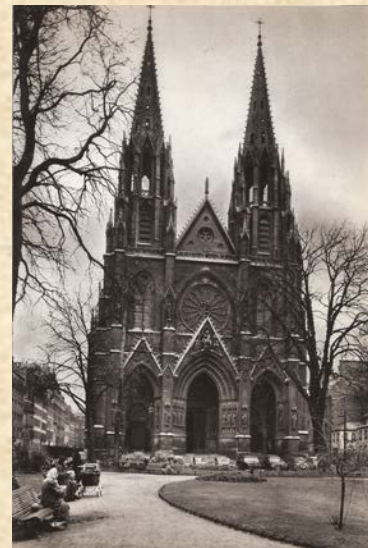
Architectural taste at the time still tended toward monumental buildings inspired by Greek art, such as the nearby Panthéon and Church of the Madeleine. But as ideas evolved, little by little the taste for medieval architecture, especially gothic, grew, and thus the first neo-gothic church in Paris was erected: Sainte-Clotilde.



Church of La Madeleine in the Fifties

Figure 28. (photograph by Lottman)

Greek style



Basilica of Sainte-Clotilde in the Fifties

Figure 29. (in Robert de Courcel. *La Basilique Sainte-Clotilde*)

Neo-Gothic style

Sainte-Clotilde was dedicated in 1857, 30 years after the decision to build it was made by the Municipal Council. Two architects were responsible: François-Chrétien Gau,⁹ whose fame came principally from his expertise in uncovering the Pompeii ruins;¹⁰ and after his death, his assistant Théodore Ballu, later celebrated for the rebuilding of the Hôtel-de-Ville in Paris. From the beginning, the new building was the butt of very strong aesthetic criticism,

⁹ Franz-Christian Gau (1790–1853) was born in Köln, Germany.

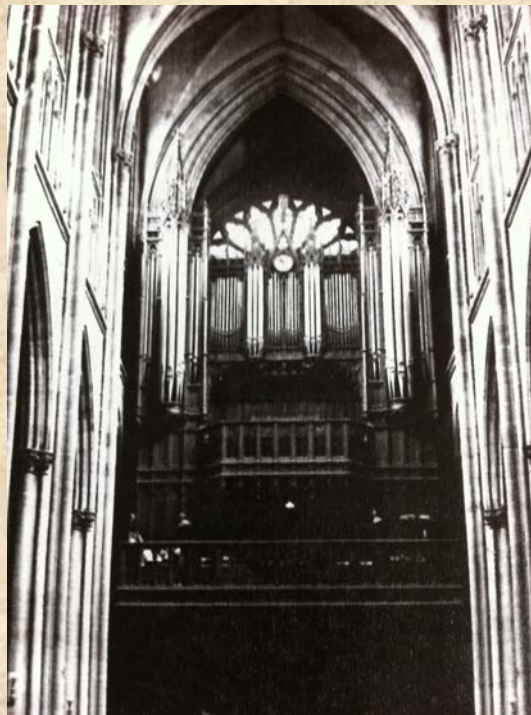
¹⁰ It was said that prefect Rambuteau, charged by the City of Paris with choosing the architect, selected François Gau, explaining that “Gothic architecture having its origins with the Goths, François Gau’s name alone is a sufficient guarantee of his fitness.” Quoted in Augustin-Joseph du Pays. “La nouvelle église Sainte-Clotilde.” *L’Illustration* 771 (5 December 1857). 371.

objecting to its “neo-gothic” qualities as well as the lack of proportion and the severity of its lines: a narrow church, topped by two rather graceless towers, a very high portal and a central rose window placed very low in the façade. Everything invited criticism and no one held back, starting with the organ builder chosen by the City of Paris, Aristide Cavallé-Coll.

Cavallé-Coll was already famous for his instruments at the Basilica of Saint-Denis (1841) and the Church of the Madeleine (1846). The Préfet de la Seine awarded him the contract for Sainte-Clotilde on 22 June 1854, when the church was far from finished.

The Sainte-Clotilde organ built by Aristide Cavallé-Coll

Cavallé-Coll had to overcome the serious problems connected with the construction of the church itself: the building’s narrowness (the nave is 314 feet long, but only about 30 feet wide and 90 feet high), the excessive height of the stone loft intended for the organ, and a relatively low rose window which had to be left visible.¹¹ All these factors were obstacles to a harmonious design for the instrument.



The Sainte-Clotilde organ case
Figure 30. (collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

Cavallé-Coll couldn’t cure the problems, but invented very bold solutions. Ignoring the stone gallery intended by the architect to be the organ loft (it was much too small), he substituted—with considerable technical prowess—an immense two-story wooden structure. The first story, situated above the main entrance door, had to support the great organ case’s main façade (the second story of the structure), the organ itself being attached to the church’s

¹¹ This photograph (collection Marie-Louise Langlais), taken before Jean Langlais’ modification of the organ in 1963, shows the height of the rose window, partially visible above the organ. By adding an acoustic panel, Langlais would completely close off the window from view from inside the Basilica.

wall with a system of metal pillars. This part of the case and the wooden flooring under the console are thus completely suspended.¹²

The work was declared finished with a “final statement of work on the organ” that the builder presented to the architect Ballu on 29 August 1859.¹³ Thus it took Aristide Cavallé-Coll five years to complete his work. His particular and very original solutions to the architectural problems would lead the first official organist, César Franck, appointed in 1859, to develop a unique style of registration, the specifics of which can be only be understood in this context.

If the organ case has a resolutely Gothic appearance with its big side-towers crowned by two finely chiselled openwork steeples reminiscent of the church’s towers, the instrument conceived by Cavallé-Coll has nothing to do with things medieval, quite the opposite. It is a wonderful example of French symphonic organ building, with its 46 stops on three 54-note manuals (C–f’’) and 27-note pedalboard (C–d’), its large proportion of 8-foot foundations (11 of the 46 stops) and reeds (14 of 46).

Certain stops of great finesse (Oboe 8’ and Voix Humaine 8’ in the Swell) lend a touch of delicacy to the organ’s broad and brilliant sounds. The distinguished voicing, entrusted to Gabriel Reinburg, is well served by the nave’s exceptionally clear acoustic.

But one has to take into account the smallness of the Swell, and César Franck understood this well: only ten stops, four of them reeds. Because of their unusual placement, at the very back of the instrument, they sound very distant. But because of a very sensitive expression pedal, the organist can make very subtle nuances with this division, which Franck didn’t ignore. One just has to listen to the sound of the organ under Charles Tournemire’s fingers to realize all the dynamic possibilities that exist between pianissimo and forte.¹⁴

The other unusual element of the disposition of the organ’s divisions is the placement of the Positif. Situated in the front-middle of the case, it is as loud as the Great to which it, in fact, acts as a complement, each having 14 stops.

As Robert Martin writes:

Being forced to fit the two bellows for the Great into the side towers, Cavallé-Coll *ipso facto* favored the Positif, placed ideally in the front-center of the case, thus very present, creating an entirely new effect as the Positif was as loud as the Great.¹⁵

Similarly, the reeds (16’, 8’, 4’ on the Great, and 8’, 4’ on the Positif) had the same power if not the same colors, which meant that Franck, in the Andante of his “Grande Pièce Symphonique” could have the swell foundations and reeds accompany a solo on the Positif Cromorne, Bourdon and Flûte 8’, unthinkable on most instruments from this era. Relatively small, with its 46 stops, the instrument sounded magnificent, amplified by the

¹² Robert Martin. *Les Grandes Orgues de la Basilique Sainte-Clotilde, essai historique et technique*. Unpublished typescript, 1993. 125 (collection Marie-Louise Langlais).

¹³ Fenner Douglass, *Cavallé-Coll and the Musicians*, Volume 1, Sunbury Press: Raleigh, 1980. 134.

¹⁴ Recordings made by Polydor in 1930, re-issued on CDs as volume one of *Orgues et Organistes Français du XXe siècle*, 5 volumes. (EMI Classics, 2002).

¹⁵ Martin, op. cit. 31.

nave's dimensions: height, narrowness, and length. It is certain that Franck composed at least eight of his "Douze Pièces pour grand orgue" with the Sainte-Clotilde organ in mind.¹⁶

The most beautiful rendering of the Sainte-Clotilde organ's console, unquestionably, is in a famous painting by Jeanne Rongier,¹⁷ showing the perfect harmony between César Franck and his instrument.



Cesar Franck at the console of Sainte-Clotilde, 1888

Figure 31. (painting by Jeanne Rongier. Photograph in collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

The organ remained virtually unchanged for 74 years, but in 1933 Charles Tournemire declared that the organ demanded constant care. A "pious" refurbishment was decided upon "because of the poor condition of the whole instrument".

Even though he greatly admired the organ, he wanted to correct certain defects, above all the ranges of the keyboards (54 notes) and the pedalboard (27 notes), which he found much too narrow for a demanding twentieth-century composer such as himself.

On the other hand, he deplored the gaping hole in the stoplist, that of mutations, especially the cornets needed for old music, which he admired; and he found the Swell poor without mutations and mixtures.

He took advantage of the deterioration of the instrument, with insufficient wind, to make major changes, adding ten stops, six of them in the Positif, thus getting close to an organ that was clearer, more complete than in the past, the ideals extolled by people like André Marchal and the Amis de l'Orgue.

¹⁶ We exclude the "Final" from the *Six Pièces*, obviously composed for a much larger organ than Sainte-Clotilde's, and the *Trois Pièces* written specifically for the inauguration of the Trocadéro organ in 1878.

¹⁷ Jeanne Rongier (1852–1934), French painter close to the Barbizon school.

This is how he explained himself at the re-dedication of the organ:

The addition of ten new stops and the extension of the keyboards (from 54 to 61 notes) and pedal (from 27 to 32) demanded the greatest circumspection... This enrichment is justified by my concern with fully serving, in all good conscience, the art of the organ from the thirteenth century to our time. Further, I didn't stop myself from dreaming of future possibilities.¹⁸

To be historically faithful, he chose the Cavallé-Coll firm to carry out the work, directed by the very young Joseph Beuchet, assisted by Michel Mertz as voicer.

The Sainte-Clotilde organ was surely the first Cavallé-Coll in the history of the twentieth-century French organ to have taken the “neo-classic” route, in Tournemire's sense of the word, lightening it without eliminating Cavallé-Coll's rich sonorous fabric.

Jean Langlais and the Sainte-Clotilde organ in 1945

This, then, was the organ that Jean Langlais inherited in 1945: a Cavallé-Coll, still with mechanical action, but “classicalized,” and its original balance modified by the addition of 10 stops and with the enlargement of the swell-box, which had become too small for the 16 stops that had replaced Cavallé-Coll's 10.

Basically, the new stops were a Cornet on the Great; a Piccolo and Tierce on the Positif; a Bombarde 16' and both mutations and mixtures in the Swell. Another balance change: the Positif's assertive Cromhorne was moved to the Swell, where, in coming under expression, it took the name Clarinette. This is not to mention the modified pressures, the added top notes to the manuals and pedal (including some new super octaves in the pedal), and of course, a new console to take all these additions into account.¹⁹

We are led to wonder if Tournemire, pulled in opposite directions by his devotion to Cavallé-Coll and Franck and by the wish to leave his personal modern composer's mark, had doubts about irreversibly denaturing the balance Cavallé-Coll wanted by his enlargement of Sainte-Clotilde's organ. Surely not, since in his eyes the only thing that mattered was the higher ideal: to serve Art.

Still, after the inauguration of the organ in 1933, the critics—muted before—multiplied. It was left to his successor, Jean Langlais, to face the consequences after he assumed the position in 1945. Jean Langlais was not bothered by these aesthetic concerns about organ building. What mattered above all to him, as it had to his predecessors César Franck and Charles Tournemire, was the inspiration that the prestigious instrument gave him to continue his organ work. And from the outset, with *Fête* (Celebration), the first organ piece composed after the war, in 1946, Jean Langlais expresses an enormous joy, joy to be past the horrendous wartime, and joy finally to be at Sainte-Clotilde. Deeply admiring of the art of his predecessors, he was determined to continue on their path.

¹⁸ Charles Tournemire, *Inauguration du grand orgue de la basilique Sainte-Clotilde de Paris* (dedication program, June 30, 1933, collection Marie-Louise Langlais). The 1859 and 1933 specifications are listed in this program.

¹⁹ Tournemire gave the original César Franck's old console (whether or not he had the right to do so) to his friend, the Belgian organist and composer Flor Peeters. Since 1991, it is the property of the musical instrument museum (Vleeshuis) in Antwerp, Belgium, inventory no. AV 991.05.



First photograph of Jean Langlais at the console of Sainte-Clotilde, 1945

Figure 32. (Collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

Ouest-France, one of the most important French dailies, greeted his appointment with the headline, “**After Franck, Pierné, Tournemire, a Breton: Jean Langlais is organist at the Sainte-Clotilde Basilica.**” The reporter introduced the new official organist in this way:

The little door, hidden on the left of Sainte-Clotilde basilica’s neo-gothic peristyle, opens to a narrow spiral staircase. I climbed the seventy stone steps, and there I was in the loft of the celebrated organ, celebrated for its musical qualities but above-all because it was played for more than thirty years by César Franck, then by Gabriel Pierné, and finally until 1939 by Charles Tournemire. A little forty year old²⁰ man sat where Franck composed and registered so many masterpieces. He wore dark glasses, but these glasses didn’t change the expressivity of his face. He is a Breton.

How could it be that the little boy from La Fontenelle near Antrain, from a modest family, becoming completely blind at the age of three, is official organist in this loft which enjoys immense prestige in the world?²¹

Then follows an interview with the new organist that traces his musical development; his studies with Marchal, Dupré, Dukas and Tournemire, his previous positions in Ménilmontant and Montrouge, and his appointment at Sainte-Clotilde. And the reporter concludes:

And now, to make me appreciate the infinite variety of this organ, the most beautiful in the world for Tournemire, Jean Langlais improvises on a popular Breton noel for me. The instrument’s fullness was moving and gave me shivers. Langlais’ playing is by turns mysterious, scintillating, and sumptuously forceful. This master who does honor to Brittany, also honors Franck and Tournemire, whose photos, the only decoration in this loft, animate the somber woodwork. Jean Langlais leaves me. Alone in Paris with his

²⁰ Actually, he was 38 years old at this time.

²¹ Valmarin, *Ouest-France*. December 23, 1945 (collection Marie-Louise Langlais).

white cane, for he has an independent spirit above all; he is going home to his wife and two little children.

Visitors came up to the loft in numbers, to hear the new organist and congratulate him. For example, this is what Maurice Duruflé wrote in the guest book kept on the organ's console:

To my dear friend Jean Langlais, with hearty congratulations on becoming the official organist of this magnificent instrument, and all my joy that he is a worthy successor to César Franck and Charles Tournemire.²²

But in addition to Sainte-Clotilde, what exactly were Jean Langlais' musical concerns in the post-war period? We find some examples in this letter to Melchior and Christiane de Lisle, his friends then living in Cameroon and to whom he gives news of the musical world:

Paris, January 7, 1946

Dear Friends,

Still no organ appointment at St-François-Xavier.²³

I think you have all the organ news, except of my *Première Symphonie* (Hérelle) written after my first failure at Ste-Clotilde.

As for chamber music, the other day I heard Webern, a student of Schoenberg, recently assassinated by a Nazi,²⁴ who seemed to me a great talent. Unfortunately Stravinsky's wartime productions seem to me uninteresting, as are those of Darius Milhaud. On the other hand, I recommend the strong personalities of Tibor Harsanyi and Martinu. We were rewarded with a good number of Soviet works, including Shostakovich's renowned "*Stalingrad*" *Symphony*; I don't remember much of note in all that, and to my knowledge the greatest glory of the Soviets is the major talent Prokofiev, who has been living in Paris for a long time. Keep in mind the "*Moscow*" *Symphony* by Tournemire, which has some surprising moments; but especially as a "great event," let us remember well the *Visions de l'Amen* by Messiaen, large pieces for two pianos, a work of genius in my opinion. Also keep in mind this great fellow's *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* [Quartet for the End of Time] for clarinet, violin, viola, cello,²⁵ written while in captivity,²⁶ *Trois Petites liturgies* for orchestra and women's voices, and *Vingt Regards sur l'enfant Jésus* for piano (lasting two hours and forty minutes). We congratulate you on the enlargement of your family; ours now also has a new member in the person of a young Claude, two years old. Everything you tell us about your life is very interesting; ours is unremarkable. We spent the whole war in Paris, including the most moving moment, which was the arrival of the Allies. On the whole, events were fairly positive for us. Come home as soon as possible and stay for as long as possible; with our faithful remembrance.

Jean Langlais

26 rue Duroc VIIe

PS: Dupré has three new pieces dedicated to the Virgin being published (Bornemann), and I just wrote a new piece for Gray in New York (started the 4th, it will be finished the 8th).²⁷

²² November 7, 1949 (collection Marie-Louise Langlais).

²³ It would go to Gaston Litaize in May of the same year, as offered by Msgr Chevrot, the priest-in-charge. Litaize kept this position for 44 years, until his death in August 1991, three months after Langlais.

²⁴ Actually, Webern was wrongly shot by an American soldier while smoking a cigar outside his home during the Allied occupation of Austria four months after the end of the war. It was decades later that the seemingly true story emerged.

²⁵ The instrumentation is actually piano, violin, clarinet, and cello: what was available to him while a prisoner.

²⁶ Messiaen was captured at Verdun in 1940 and was imprisoned in Stalag VIII-A in Görlitz, an actual boarder between Germany and Poland.

²⁷ The collection of letters from Jean Langlais to Melchior and Christiane de Lisle were returned to Marie-Louise Langlais after the death of Mrs. de Lisle (1913-2009). She was, among other things, assistant to Olivier Messiaen at La Trinité from 1951 to 1961. The composition mentioned in the post scriptum was *Fête*, and the comment makes it clear how rapidly it had been composed.

Radio Music

Upon the Liberation, French radio broadcast was fundamentally changed at the Libération and the musical direction was entrusted to composer and musicologist Henry Barraud. An enthusiastic and indefatigable man, he divided his new domain into a multitude of areas; among these were religious music (Sunday services and organ recitals) under the direction of Gaston Litaize, and incidental music headed by the composer Henri Dutilleux, whose duties included commissioning original music for radio broadcast.

In 1946, Dutilleux asked Jean Langlais to set to music a “Mystère” by the poet Jean Cayrol, entitled *Le Diable qui n'est à personne* (The Devil Who Belongs to Nobody). In his introduction to the broadcast Étienne Lalou emphasized the importance of this work:

Today, the characters of the medieval mystery with their truculence and naïveté seem to us to be simultaneously colorful and as out of date as *Images d'Épinal*,²⁸ with their truculence and naïveté; nevertheless, to the eyes and ears of people at the time they evoked a profound reality that formed the substance of their life. In trying to touch our very different profound reality, we who are still shaken after a horrifying ordeal, Jean Cayrol revived the same spirit as the Mystery of the Middle Ages.

French Radio is proud to create a work of this importance. It is proud that a musician like Jean Langlais, actors like Berthe Bovy, Pierre Renoir, Jean Vilar, and so many others have assisted in erecting this monument.²⁹

In reading the score—the music was approximately half the total length of the work—it is easy to imagine the thankless labor of the composer, confined by a strait-jacket of discontinuous but strictly timed sections (sometimes extremely brief, five seconds for example), even though he had a large orchestra at his disposition, with strings, woodwinds, brass, percussion, choir, harp and ondes Martenot. This production obviously pleased the authorities at the Radio, since a short time later, the office of Musical Illustrations again asked Jean Langlais to collaborate on *La Légende de Saint Julien l'Hospitalier* after Flaubert.

Once again, the composer found himself required to write disconnected musical passages (17 in all), separated by spoken text. This piece, in which the music only lasted about ten minutes, was broadcast on March 8, 1948. For his third such collaboration, Jean Langlais launched into a much more ambitious undertaking than the previous ones: 45 minutes of music for a text by Albert Vidalie about Saint Francis of Assisi, *Le Soleil se lève sur Assise* (The Sun Rises on Assisi).

This time, each musical section has a title and form that are so autonomous than one could imagine the music standing on its own, without the text. Actually, in subsequent rebroadcasts, the play was presented without music, and one time even with music by a different composer! The titles of the scenes are as follows:

1. The Sorrows of the War
2. Choirs of the Angels and Countryside of Assisi

²⁸ “Épinal prints” were 19th century images that were a commonplace in France and later fostered a term for simplistic depictions.

²⁹ Étienne Lalou. “La Création du *Diable qui n'est à personne*.” *Radio 46* (Lyon), February 7, 1947. A recording of this modern Mystery is preserved at the Phonothèque de l'Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA) in Paris.

3. Song of the Soldier and Military Rhythm
4. The Beautiful Dream-Arms
5. Rustic Dance
6. The Blood of War
7. The Sun of Love
8. The Prayer of Francis
9. Interlude and March
10. Francis's Grand Prayer
11. Sister Tourterelle and the Apparition of the Leper
12. The Kiss to the Leper
13. Hymn to Creatures
14. Saint Francis March
15. Simple and Pure Love

The 109-page manuscript, some of whose pages have less than 17 staves, constantly contrasts two groups: full orchestra, with woodwinds, six-part brass, strings, percussion, and three ondes Martenot; and "small" orchestra with just strings and woodwinds, while the male chorus only joins the full orchestra for the overture and final. This concluding section is spectacular, mixing the Maundy Thursday Gregorian melody, "Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est" sung fortissimo by the male chorus, with the orchestra.

Le Soleil se lève sur Assise was broadcast for the first time on Saturday, December 30, 1950, and received a number of reviews in the press, such as this one:

Here is one of the summits of the art of the microphone, both artistically perfect and moving on the human level. The perfect production by Jean-Jacques Vierre, the beautiful music by Jean Langlais, and the performance, dominated by Serge Reggiani's Francis, come together to enhance the beauty and the grandeur of an exceptional work.³⁰

30 years later, Olivier Messiaen, starting with the same figure of Saint Francis of Assisi, created his only opera, *Saint-François d'Assise*, which premiered on November 28, 1983 at the Paris Opera, and to which he invited Jean Langlais. Langlais' version was certainly more modest, from the perspective of 50 years later, but the choice of subject shows a similar approach by these two composers who were so devoted to faith.³¹

In 1951, those in charge of religious programming at the Radio had the idea for Christmas to have *Le Mystère de Noël* (The Mystery of Christmas), a poetic text by Loys Masson, set to music by five composers: Claude Arrieu, Elsa Barraine, Daniel-Lesur, Raymond Gallois-Montbrun, and Jean Langlais. Each of these artists was to illustrate a different episode from the Gospel: the annunciation, going to Bethlehem, the nativity, the adoration, the flight into Egypt, the massacre of the innocents.

The last two parts were assigned to Jean Langlais. Unlike Langlais' previous three radio contributions, the music in *Le Mystère de Noël* largely overrides spoken text. The solo singers and female choir sing and speak, according to the plot, following and commenting on the action, on the model made famous by Arthur Honegger in his 1921 oratorio *King David*. The

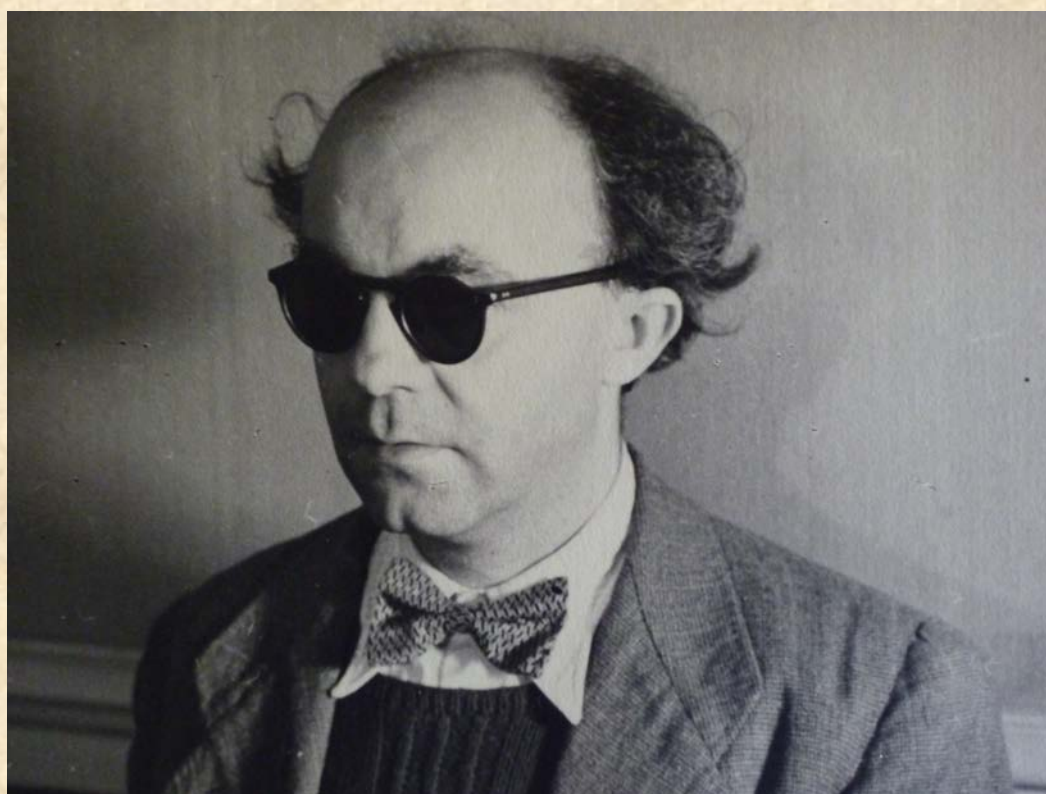
³⁰ Roger Richard. "Le Soleil se lève sur Assise." *Radio-Cinéma-Télévision: hebdomadaire catholique des auditeurs et des spectateurs*, November 18, 1951 (collection Marie-Louise Langlais).

³¹ Let us not forget *Il Poverello di Assisi*, five lyric pieces in seven scenes, the last major work composed by Charles Tournemire in 1937-1939, just before his death.

Gregorian hymn “*Maria mater gratiae*,” in honor of the Virgin Mary, serves as a Leitmotiv for the 76 pages of the manuscript of *La Fuite en Egypte* (The Flight Into Egypt) and *Le Massacre des Innocents* (The Massacre of the Innocents). Thus Mary, represented by her hymn, figures as the main character in these episodes of the Nativity story. We will find exactly the same idea a few years later, in Jean Langlais’ 1958 *La Passion*, where contrary to tradition, he gives the primary vocal part to Mary rather than to Christ. This Marian vision of Christ’s Passion, completely original, corresponds well with the composer’s deep beliefs: in his personal faith, Mary was the central figure.

In just five years, between 1946 and 1951, Langlais was asked four times by French Broadcasting to write the music for radio plays on religious subjects. Clearly he was perceived at the time as a specialist in sacred music.

The Grand Suites for organ



Jean Langlais, 1947

Figure 33. (photograph in the collection of Marie-Louise Langlais)

At the same time, Jean Langlais was impatient to create large frescos for organ, and his new organ at Sainte-Clotilde was to supply many occasions. But what was the state of the organ world in the post-World War II era? Langlais wrote a long article in May of 1947 giving a detailed and optimistic picture of the organ at the period, but he also warns against certain tendencies that seemed to him to be dangerous and against which he battled all his life:

Some Reflections on the Modern Organ

To witness the increasingly important role that the organ plays in the French musical literature of our time is great consolation. For 40 years the number of artists who dedicate their lives to the study of this great instrument has continually grown, and the era in which only two or three organists surpassed all the others is over.

In France there is a veritable host of eminent virtuosos which never stops asserting itself and increasing; their dominant characteristics are precision in execution, great care with timbre, and in all areas, soberness. We should also be mindful of the comforting homage often paid to the modern French school from abroad. It should be emphasized that this school counts among its members an overwhelming majority of composers, and because of their talents, in our opinion, it is no longer possible to divide musical production into two distinct parts, the music of composers and the music of organists. In fact, in addition to their organ works, the majority of them have had brilliant success in a variety of musical activity. On the other hand, I note that some of the great non-organist masters of our time have been drawn by the numerous resources of the pipe organ and have made contributions to enrich its literature.

An informed and larger public eagerly attends organ concerts and reads whatever is written about the instrument. French radio has considerably enlarged the number of organ broadcasts, and its efforts to improve them continues unflaggingly.

It is only our great orchestral conductors who still seem to be poorly informed of the immense possibilities right at their doorstep; but they do have the excuse that their concert halls don't have the equivalent of the grand instruments that are the pride of our churches and of French organ building.

Under pressure from a very small number, albeit genuine, friends of the organ, a new orientation to organ building is trying to assert itself. Its essential characteristics are to minimize the foundation stops and maximize the mixtures, both to an extreme;³² the justification for these two tendencies, according their propagators, is to return to the concepts of the old masters. It is not possible, in a simple article, to develop all the necessary arguments for a real rebuttal about such an aesthetic matter that has potential consequences for the performance of Romantic, Modern, and future works.

In my opinion, and in that of the large majority of my colleagues, it is extremist to consider mixtures as a goal in and of themselves. Their scintillating effect is as precious as it is necessary, but their ill-considered profusion in an organ stoplist seems to me as regrettable as their extreme rarity would be.

Similarly, it seems to me that to play complicated polyphony on a registration in which the fundamental is insufficient (an eight-foot bourdon, for example) is regrettable and ends up disappearing under the avalanche of mixtures.

Is the argument that a *plein-jeu*, a composed mixture, is a clarifying element, is that argument irrefutable?

One doesn't have to be particularly well versed in organ matters to know that what's called a "*plein-jeu*" comprises the fifth, the fundamental, and a doubling of the fundamental. There could be several fifths and several octaves according to the composition of the registration. Let's take the chord of C-E-G. The C produces the fifth G, E the fifth B, and G the fifth D. If, then, a registration includes several *pleins-jeux*, the sound of the foreign pitches is more and more perceptible, and in my opinion, the polyphony loses its precision. We must also highlight the confusion caused by repeating composed mixtures, especially when it comes to the cymbale; these repetitions create overlaps, crossings, sonorities which make a low voice sound with higher pitches than the upper part, etc.³³

³² This is the opening salvo of a lifetime war that Langlais waged against what he would later call *le baroqueisme*.

³³ Published in *Musique et radio* 38: 432 (May, 1947). 133–135.

Armed with these certainties, he went ahead to put his convictions into practice and in a remarkably short period of time composed his best known suites.

• *Suite brève* (1947)

Langlais started writing for the organ in 1947 with a *Suite brève*, the first of his first large “Suites” for organ, published by Bornemann, who had already brought out his *Neuf Pièces*.

His model for a traditional suite was a succession of at least four contrasting movements (slow-fast-slow-fast). The *Suite brève* conforms more or less to this scheme, since the majestic “Grands jeux” at the beginning is followed by a “Cantilène” theme and variations, then a melancholy “Plainte,” gives way to an impetuous rondo entitled “Dialogue sur les mixtures.”

But if his titles refer to the classic French organ style, he only rarely pays attention to historical meanings, which were not normally considered important at that time: his “Grands jeux” mixes foundations, reeds, and mixtures (an incongruous combination in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), while his “Dialogue sur les mixtures” should be a dialogue literally on the mixtures, not with the reeds that the Langlais score stipulates. Couperin and his contemporaries used the term “dialogue” for flutes or reeds, not mixtures.

Langlais made his thoughts clear about “old music,” typical of the organists at that time, when he wrote:

Corrette, in his 1703 edition, suggests playing a fugue with the following registration: “Manual 1: bourdon, prestant, trumpet; Manual 2: bourdon, prestant or montre and cromorne.”

And to top it off, he asks for the manuals to be coupled. Can anyone reasonably imagine such a disparate combination? It is easily tempting and easy to show that the historic registrations sound bad, and that such precedents are not always to be followed.³⁴

So, in 1947 Jean Langlais knew historic registrations, but couldn’t think of them as “reasonable.” Caring so little about historic accuracy in terms of registration, he also had no intention of making a harmonic pastiche of the classics, which is evident in the four movements, each of which speaks a different musical language.

Firstly, the “Grands jeux,” inspired by excerpt 11 in *Le Diable qui n’est à personne*, composed for the Radio not long before, has a penchant for a major triad in root position and the use of C major on full organ, illustrating Henry Barraud’s comment :

Although we are today, after four centuries, a little jaded about the plenitude of C major, if not tired of it, it still has a certain power of fascination.

Witness moments in the music of the musician who can be considered the first assassin of the tonal system, Richard Wagner, who in the prelude to *Das Rheingold* doesn’t hesitate to submerge us for 46 measures in the three notes of a major triad.

These three sounds. Nothing more, nothing less. It’s true that it is the beginning of the tetralogy [the *Ring des Nibelungen*]. He had plenty of time ahead of him!³⁵

³⁴ Ibid. 135.

³⁵ Henry Barraud. *Pour comprendre les musiques d’aujourd’hui*. Paris: Seuil, 1968. 22–23.

In the second movement of the *Suite brève*, “Cantilène,” also an organ version of a section of *Le Diable qui n’est à personne* (section 15), modality dominates, derived from the old Breton song that serves as the theme, which Langlais harmonizes according to his mode (Dorian transposed to F-sharp minor).

Although this movement is totally a slave to the melody, the composer plays all sorts of contrapuntal games and enjoys constantly modulating, without ever changing the original modal scale, a technique that he was to use throughout his life; the registration gives the theme to the pedals using the octave coupler to the Swell’s Oboe 8’, a registration that could seem odd but is explained by the fact that at the time four-foot pedal reeds in France were usually powerful clarions, not soft stops.

The third section of the *Suite brève*, “Plainte,” plays the role of a slow movement, immediately announcing itself with a pronounced Franckian chromaticism. For the third time, Langlais uses a theme previously found in the first Dance (*Trois Danses* for Orchestra, 1944) and in the twentieth section of *Le Diable qui n’est à personne* (1946). The registration, the Great’s soft foundations 8’ and 16’ with the Swell’s Voix Humaine and tremolo coupled, accentuates expressiveness, especially at Sainte-Clotilde where this combination has a profundity and mystery without equal. Tournemire used this color frequently in his published music and improvisations.

With the fourth movement of the collection, “Dialogue sur les mixtures,” the composer recaptures the verve and energy of *Fête*, with a rondo in which the C-major refrain alternates with three couplets (in G major, G minor, and E major). As in *Fête*, Langlais places a short meditative passage with solo cornet in the middle of the movement, before returning to the dynamic, fast refrain. The echo effects in this pirouette finale are a reference to classic dialogues.

• *Suite médiévale* (1947)

With the previous work barely finished, the composer added a second “suite” for organ, this time entirely liturgical, as the subtitle specifies: *Suite médiévale* “en forme de messe basse.” Dedicated to his first organ teacher, André Marchal, it is divided into five movements with the following double titles:

- Prélude (Entrée)
- Tiento (Offertoire)
- Improvisation (Elévation)
- Méditation (Communion)
- Acclamations (sur le texte des Acclamations Carolingiennes)

Gaston Litaize explained the two categories of Sunday Masses at the beginning of the 1950s in France :

- During this era, the organist at the main organ normally played two Sunday Masses:
- 1) The “Grand Messe,” which involved a processional, an offertory, often an elevation, a communion, and a postlude; in addition he alternated with the choir for verses of plainchant for the Ordinary (Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus, Agnus Dei); they sang a verse and the organ commented on it, changing registrations for each verset.
 - 2) The “Messe Basse,” where the organist could virtually play a recital. With everything spoken in a low voice [“à voix basse,” hence “Messe basse”], this is what happened: the priest left the sacristy; the organist played a procession, which lasted until the Gospel

reading, then came the sermon. The organ then resumed and didn't stop until there was no one left in the church. So one could easily play a complete *Choral* by Franck.³⁶

The sub-title of the *Suite médiévale* ("in the form of a low Mass") and the shortness of each of its movements allowed it to be used both for a low and high Mass, and nothing prevents us from even imagining it as concert music.

Clearly, in this "Suite," Langlais followed the formula devised by Charles Tournemire in his 51 Offices in *L'Orgue Mystique*, which takes the Gregorian themes appropriate for each service as a point of departure, creating a suite of five pieces, always in this order:

Prelude to the introit
Offertory
Elevation
Communion
Closing piece

This is exactly the organization of Langlais' *Suite médiévale*, except that unlike Tournemire he didn't try to create a service with the themes appropriate to the feast-day (Easter, Epiphany, Assumption, etc.).

On the contrary, Langlais chose plainchant melodies from various liturgical services. We have suggested, with regard to the *Suite brève*, that its diverse elements came to the fore, mixing neo-classicism, chromaticism, modality, and tonality.

With the *Suite médiévale*, it is more appropriate to speak of a « neo-medieval » aesthetic, made explicit in the title as well as in the first measures of the Prelude where successions of parallel fourths and fifths for a long time inevitably evoke the Notre-Dame School. Rhythmically, Langlais worked out multiple changes of meter, alternating 2/4 with 7/8, 3/8, and 9/8; but realizing the cumbersomeness of that system, for the "Tiento," the second piece, he used 0 as the time signature, explaining in a note, "The sign 0 means that the length of measures is variable, but the relative values of the notes are literal." He used this system in movements 2, 3, and 4 of this Suite and in a number of later works.

The "Tiento" is sub-titled "Offertoire" to make clear its placement in the service. Here Langlais honors the Spanish masters of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, using a genre with similarities to the Italian *ricercar*. A four-voiced fugato (SATB) with successive expositions, more and more closely spaced, is punctuated by three insertions of the Kyrie "fons bonitas" in the Pedal on a soft 8' reed or flute 8', 4' to make it clear.

The third movement of the *Suite médiévale*, the calm and meditative "Improvisation-Élévation," briefly introduces the intonation "Adoro Te," one of the best known and most frequently sung melodies in the Gregorian repertory. In so isolating a short Gregorian fragment, Langlais gave it an unexpected magnitude, which Father Giraud perceived when he wrote, "To the extent that a Gregorian citation loses importance in length, it gains interest by being merely a small gem in its frame."

The fourth piece, "Méditation," along with the final "Acclamations," is one of the most fully developed pieces in the collection, in length as well as complexity, intended for Communion. Jean Langlais symbolizes this

³⁶ Conversation with the author.

singularly important liturgical moment with two appropriate plainchants, treated separately and then together, following a technique derived from César Franck. Thus we hear “Ubi caritas” and then “Jesu dulcis memoria,” both presented in a unique color: Bourdon, Nasard, and Tierce for the first, and Bourdons 16’, 8’, and 4’ for the second.

The “Acclamations (on the words of the Carolingian Acclamations),” the last movement of the *Suite médiévale*, is a perfect example of what Langlais could create for a grandiose and majestic postlude at Mass. The composer takes the “Laudes Regiae” (the Carolingian Acclamations) as a base, repeating constantly the melody for the words “Christus vincit, Christus regnat, Christus imperat” (Christ has overcome, Christ reigns, Christ commands) in a powerful litany alternating with “exaudi Christi,” a fragment from the same chant. Once he has established the characteristic Gregorian cell (“Christus vincit”), Langlais animates the whole piece in an almost obsessive fashion, using an ascending harmonic progression that he favored when he wanted to create tension. Thus we find “Christus vincit” successively in F, G, A, to which “Christus imperat” responds in the pedal in F, F-sharp, and then G. Towards the end of the piece, when everything seems to have been said, Langlais introduces a pedal carillon in long notes (C-F-G-D) which is superimposed on the “Christus vincit” litany and whose peal, in counterpoint with the chant, closes the piece with blazing full organ. In writing this ringing of the bells, Langlais was thinking of the bells of the Reims Cathedral, where French kings were crowned in the Medieval period, as he explained to the present author.

Father Patrick Giraud summarized the liturgical aspects of the *Suite médiévale* as follows:

As Jean Langlais well knows, the role of the organist during a service is to help the faithful in their prayers, not to distract them, to improvise on the choir’s singing to give the “musical climate” or to prolong a meditative chant, such as at the Offertory.

And when it isn’t a question of either a prelude or a postlude [to a sung chant], as in a *messe basse*, he chooses appropriate themes, simple and familiar, very evocative because of the associated words; and he doesn’t impose them on the faithful in learned forms in which the musical interest is dominant, but rather in supple paraphrases, often delicate improvisations during which, as if by chance, he inserts the selected text.

In the sumptuous Prélude of the *Suite médiévale*, he discretely announces the Asperges which will soon be sung; at the Elevation, he stimulates the faithful’s adoration in delicately suggesting the words of the “Adoro te” to them, and his preaching is as good as a young priest’s vigorous admonition!

At the Communion, he meditates on an antiphon from the Holy Thursday service, “Ubi caritas,” which he joins with the “Jesu dulcis memoria.” And he sends the faithful off with a big joyful litany on “Christus vincit, Christus regnat, Christus imperat,” which he offers them for their day.³⁷

• *Suite française* (1948)

How can we not think that Langlais’ appointment to Sainte-Clotilde was a powerful catalyst for creating organ music, when we see that barely had he finished the *Suite médiévale* in 1947 than he set to work on the *Suite française*, completed in January of 1948.

³⁷ Father Patrick Giraud. *Le Thème grégorien dans les œuvres pour orgue de Jean Langlais*. Thesis, Institut Grégorien de Paris, July 1, 1964.

Dedicated “to my friend and student, Pierre Denis,”³⁸ the *Suite française* is the opposite of the *Suite médiévale* in the sense that it has no preoccupation with liturgy and shows the composer’s willingness always to take the opposite stance from his preceding works, following the principle dictated by Paul Dukas in the composition class at the Conservatory: “A composer should always give the lie to his reputation.”³⁹ This Suite is divided into 10 movements:

1. Prélude sur les grands jeux
2. Nazard
3. Contrepoint sur les jeux d’anche
4. Française
5. Choral sur la voix humaine
6. Arabesque sur les flûtes
7. Méditation sur les jeux de fonds
8. Trio
9. Voix céleste
10. Final rhapsodique

Conceived in the same spirit as the classic French organ suite, this new collection attempts to breathe new life into the genre that was so popular in the early eighteenth century with composers such as Clérambault, Dumage, and Guilain.

But if the *Suite française* conforms to the old organ model in the sense of being a collection of brief pieces that explore a variety of tone colors (« Voix céleste », « Nazard »), the title of the last piece, “Final rhapsodique,” brings us clearly into the symphonic and post-symphonic world.

The “Prélude sur les grands jeux” immediately announces its color, registered by Langlais with a combination of foundations, mixtures, and reeds, as he had done the year before in the “Grands jeux” from the *Suite brève*, even though the classic grand jeu uses reeds and cornets.

It must be said that at the time only a few initiates, led by Jean Fellot and Edouard Souberbielle (the teacher of Michel Chapuis and André Isoir at the École César Franck) were concerned with historic registrations whose rugged sounds shocked most organists in that era, including Jean Langlais. Moreover, there is another departure: in French Baroque practice, the “Prélude” would be played majestically on a *plein jeu* (foundations and mixtures) and not as a brilliant toccata on full organ. These differences let us know immediately that the *Suite française* transcends its model.

The “Nazard” is much closer to the spirit of Couperin or Clérambault, a successful translation of a color (solo Bourdon 8’ and 2 2/3’) of Baroque “récit de nazard.”

The “Contrepoint sur des jeux d’anche,” on the other hand, doesn’t have any particular precedent in classic French organ literature. To begin with, the reeds here (bassoon, oboe, and clarinette) were unknown to the old masters.

³⁸ Pierre Denis was Langlais’ student, friend and biographer, and from 1945 the primary substitute at the Sainte-Clotilde organ. Notably, he wrote a long chronicle of Jean Langlais’ life in the series “Les Organistes français d’aujourd’hui” in *L’Orgue* 52 (July-September, 1949), 66–73.

³⁹ A principle repeated to the present author more than once.

The title of the fourth piece in the collection, “Française,” is a little witticism because “it has the form of...an allemande [“German” in French],” as the composer liked to say, and is a reference to J. S. Bach’s French Suites, introducing a German element to “Française.”

The “Choral sur la voix humaine” also evokes a German model, even though the theme is not religious, unlike a German chorale-prelude with an ornamented solo cantus firmus. Langlais, in any case, delivers deliciously subtle counterpoint.

The fluidity and technical difficulty of the “Arabesque sur les flûtes,” a spinning song on an eight-foot flute, is reminiscent of the “Fileuse” in Dupré’s *Suite bretonne* or Vierne’s “Naïades” from the *Pièces de fantaisie*. The velocity and constant modality of this piece prevent any comparison to the classic French “flûtes” movements, which are always slow. In any case, it was one of Jean Langlais’ favorite pieces, which he played more than once as an encore to his recitals.

The “Méditation sur les jeux de fonds,” the seventh piece, is of majestic harmonies, always supported by the pedals in octaves with foundations 16’ and 8’, a sonority and technique inconceivable on a classic French organ with its eight-foot pedal. If there is one piece in this collection that has virtually nothing to do with classic spirit, it is the “Trio” (n° 8) where atonality reigns from the very first measures. It was, Jean Langlais said, Messiaen’s favorite piece in the collection.

To treat the « Voix céleste », as the ninth piece is titled, as a solo voice, was an original and even audacious idea, as most organists think of this stop, vulgarized in the nineteenth century, as accompaniment. In using it as a solo with quick monodic arabesques, Langlais was playing against type, and in the process ennobled this stop.

The closing movement, the “Final rhapsodique” combines the themes of the “Prélude sur les grands jeux,” “Choral sur la voix humaine,” “Arabesque sur les flûtes,” and the “Voix céleste,” not to mention a few fragments from the “Nazard.” We have already seen this “rhapsodic need” in Langlais, which recalls one after another the various motives heard separately earlier, following the exalted model of Franck’s “Grande Pièce Symphonique.” Here, that cyclic tendency again contradicts the conception of the classic French Suite, whose rules Langlais was trying to renew.

But in using a sometimes biting harmonic language, he opened himself to criticism. As proof, we offer an example from London’s highly respected *Musical Times*:

In his *Suite française*, the composer shows some relenting from the acerbities—mental even more than tonal—of his recent work... Some of the ten movements are quite hideous, and often oddly miserable. Surely the *voix céleste* has never before been made to sound so dyspeptic as in the movement so named, nor the *nazard* so much like a wet Sunday in Wales.

In all this there is nevertheless an interesting technique. Mr. Langlais writes each movement as if he were trying to score for some particular organ tone; he seems to listen for the reeds, the foundation stops, the mutations to suggest to him what he has to say. He has a fondness for the major seventh, one of the most impersonal and ugly of intervals, which is heard continually in both melody and harmony. It is a pity he takes his pleasure so sadly.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Archibald Farmer. “New Music.” *The Musical Times* 1282. 90. (December 1949). 447.

Here then we find Langlais vigorously taken to task by the English press, for the first time in his career, although at the same moment a French critic wrote about this same work:

This month we find in the Bornemann catalogue the *Suite française* by Jean Langlais, a collection of ten pieces which one must recommend to all who wish to have a precise understanding of what modern organ literature is, a literature, one should remember, that has provoked so much controversy.

It would be pretentious to try to say in mere words all that these admirable pages contain. We simply note that in general every thematic element, within a plan showing extraordinary musical enlightenment, presents itself with a sovereign clarity that only great creators know how to execute.

To the continual originality of everything written by this pen is joined an absolutely personal manner—and this is indisputable—of taking a motive consisting of a few notes, a motive that in other hands would mean little, and making it take on a meaning that is also moving.⁴¹

As the saying goes, “There’s no accounting for taste”!

Premier Concerto for organ and orchestra (1948-1949)

Incantation pour un Jour Saint (1949)

Hommage à Frescobaldi (1947-1951)

This period of intense creative activity just after the war was brutally interrupted by a chance accident: Jean Langlais was taking a walk along the water at La Richardais,⁴² holding the hand of his four-year-old son, Claude, when he fell off a low wall and fractured his right ankle. Poorly treated at the Dinard hospital, this fracture limited his mobility for eight months and seemed to permanently compromise his career as an organist.

Moved by this state of affairs, Professor de Sèze,⁴³ an old friend, entrusted him to the care of the surgeon Merle d’Aubigné,⁴⁴ who decided on a second operation on the ankle and rebuilt it fragment by fragment. But he warned Jean Langlais that he would probably never play the organ again, a proposition that the composer couldn’t accept. To completely re-educate the stiff joint, Langlais decided to write a piece « for pedal solo » that greatly increased the technical difficulties, with four-note chords in long notes and a three-voiced fugue on a theme by Frescobaldi.

This formidable piece would later be included as the “Épilogue sur un thème de Frescobaldi pour pédale solo” in the *Hommage à Frescobaldi* (1951).

However, Langlais did not receive this review at the time; the article didn’t come to his attention until 40 years later, in 1987.

⁴¹ Eric Sarnette. “*Suite française* de Jean Langlais.” *Musique et Radio* (October, 1949): 131

⁴² After the war, Jean Langlais had acquired a small vacation home at La Richardais, a Breton village between Dinard and Saint-Malo; he used it until 1983. Having purchased a pedal piano, he wrote a large part of his works there.

⁴³ Stanislas de Sèze (1903–2000), French professor of medicine, father of French rheumatology, and a friend of both André Marchal and Jean Langlais.

⁴⁴ Robert Merle d’Aubigné (1900–1989), famous French orthopedic surgeon.

• *Premier Concerto for organ and orchestra*

The composer took advantage of his forced inactivity in 1948 to compose, after the *Suite française*, a first Concerto, a major undertaking that occupied him from October 1948 through July 1949. It was commissioned by the Swiss conductor Walter Kăgi, who wanted to invite him to be the soloist on August 14, 1951, playing Handel's G-minor Concerto (op. 4, n^o 1, HWV 289) and a work composed specifically for this concert, to be given by the Bern Stadtorchester at the cathedral there. It would be more correct to speak of the new work as a concerto for organ **or** harpsichord, which is the title in the manuscript.

The pedal part of its three movements (Allegro, Andante, Final) is *ad libitum* (optional) and thus the choice of either instrument is possible. It seems that Langlais was inspired for this extremely neoclassic work by Handel's manualiter organ concertos. The orchestra is also classic, with strings doubled by woodwinds in pairs (flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons).⁴⁵

• *Incantation pour un Jour Saint*

While writing the Concerto, Jean Langlais composed one of his strongest works, the *Incantation pour un Jour Saint* (Invocation for a Holy Day, 1949), written for the first issue of a new series called *Orgue et Liturgie* and edited by Nobert Dufourcq and Félix Raugel. It was dedicated to Rolande Falcinelli, who had just played the complete organ works of Marcel Dupré in four concerts at the Salle Pleyel.⁴⁶ Since the title of this first issue of *Orgue et Liturgie* was "Easter," the works in it were all supposed to be inspired by that holiday. Thus, there were new works by three French composers (Henriette Roget, André Fleury, and Jean Langlais) as well as historic works by Pachelbel, Scheidt, Fischer, Dandrieu, and Albrechtsberger.

Langlais chose to illustrate the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday, a transitional day between Good Friday and Easter, as stipulated in the Roman Missal:

At the Office

The Priest, surrounded by the Clergy and acolytes, with the cross, Holy Water, and Incense, repairs to the porch of the Church, and there blesses the new fire... He then blesses the five grains of incense, which, in the form of a Cross, will later on be placed in the Paschal Candle... The procession moves towards the High-altar... As the procession moves up the Church, one of the three candles on the rod is lighted... a second is lighted... and a third... As each candle is lighted, the Deacon kneels, and sings, raising his voice higher each time, Lumen Christi (The light of Christ), Deo gratias (Thanks be to God).

That is exactly the musical plan that Jean Langlais was to adopt for this work, but in addition to this triple invocation (fortissimo in D, D-sharp, and E with closing cadences on open fifths) Langlais chose a different Gregorian fragment, the Litanies of the Saints,

⁴⁵ It was published posthumously in 2004 by Dr. J. Butz Musikverlag (Germany), edited by Otto Depenheuer.

⁴⁶ Rolande Falcinelli (1920–2006), composer, organist, and disciple of Marcel Dupré, whom she succeeded as organ teacher at the Paris Conservatory from 1955 to 1986.

traditionally sung at the Kyrie in this service, in which he underlined the offbeats in the melody by accompanying them with hollow chords, largely open fourths and fifths.

Invocations and litanies, these are the two elements that alternate for the whole first part of the work. To respect the liturgical rubric, Langlais adopts an ascending harmonic scheme, stretching to a presentation of the obsessive motives of the litanies in C, D-flat, E, F-sharp, B-flat, F, A-flat, B-flat, D-flat, and D. The second section of the piece, *vivo con fuoco*, uses a new melody taken from the Litany of the Saints, the fragment “Peccatores te rogamus audi nos” calling for the risen Christ to liberate humankind from evil. Here the style breaks completely from what preceded, using brilliant toccata style in the manuals while the pedal incessantly repeats the new chant fragment. To close, Langlais brings back the “Lumen Christi” of the beginning, concluding *tutta forza* with a majestic “Deo Gratias” which triumphs in the pedal with a D-major chord, unexpected after so many pages in minor. But in retrospect, there is nothing more normal than this triumphant major. Isn’t it logical for a musical conclusion celebrating the God’s mercy to humans, despite their sins, in the light of Christ?

One can see that for Jean Langlais, music was not just an expression of his artistic soul; it is also, in as clear a manner as it was for his predecessor Charles Tournemire, a profound expression of his Christian soul. That is undoubtedly one of the factors that make this organ work—written very quickly between February 14 and 20, 1949—one of the composer’s key works, and this is with the perspective of more than 60 years after its appearance in 1954.

In this same period, Olivier Messiaen, who had put aside organ composition after *Les Corps glorieux* (1939), was preparing once again to revolutionize the organ world, as he had already done in 1936 with *La Nativité du Seigneur*. This time it was with two new scores, the *Messe de la Pentecôte* (1950–1951) and above all, the *Livre d’orgue* (1951–1952), both of which overtly use serial language. Jean Langlais admired the construction, but remained impervious to “avant-garde” techniques, which to him raised too many mathematical speculations.

For his part, as he wrote *Hommage à Frescobaldi*, Langlais followed, without deviating, the line that he had drawn in *Suite brève*, *Suite médiévale*, *Suite française* and *Incantation pour un Jour Saint*.

• *Hommage à Frescobaldi*

As we have previously seen, Jean Langlais effectively started this new organ Suite when, in August 1947, as physical therapy for his broken ankle, he composed a piece for pedal solo, with a central three-voiced fugue based on a theme from Frescobaldi’s “Canzon dopo l’Epistola,” from the “Messa della Madonna”, part of the *Fiori musicali* of 1635. Langlais particularly liked this collection and frequently played the elevation toccatas from it at Sunday Mass at Sainte-Clotilde, just as his mentor Charles Tournemire had done in his time.

The “Épilogue sur un thème de Frescobaldi” for solo pedal takes the form of a Buxtehude “prelude and fugue,” juxtaposing four continuous and contrasting sections (prelude, recitative, fugue, toccata) which explore all the possibilities of the pedalboard: rapidity and chords requiring the use of the heel and toe of both feet. The piece is striking in the extreme classicism of its

harmonic language, and it quickly became famous among organists the world over for its demanding virtuosity. In placing it as the closing movement of his new suite in 1951, Langlais clearly indicated the general sense of this new eight-movement organ suite, composed “in the spirit of Frescobaldi.”

An analysis shows that the work divides into two parts: the first five movements comprising movements for a service, in the manner of the *Suite médiévale*, and the last three freely complete the service:

1. Prélude au Kyrie
2. Offertoire
3. Élévation
4. Communion
5. Fantaisie
-
6. Antienne
7. Thème et variations
8. Épilogue sur un thème de Frescobaldi pour pédale solo

Unlike the *Suite médiévale*, whose medieval splendor unfolds with brilliance in its “Prelude” and concluding “Acclamations carolingiennes,” the “service part” of the *Hommage à Frescobaldi* (excepting the concluding “Fantaisie”) seeks above all poetry and meditation (for example, the “Prélude au Kyrie” where the Gregorian melody blossoms peacefully on a pedal four-foot flute, accompanied in the manuals by a soft gamba).

Jean Langlais admired Frescobaldi’s modernity and pays homage to him in using polytonality in the imitative counterpoint of the “Homo quidam” in the Elevation.

Throughout this mass, he uses various Gregorian motives: “Lucis creator” (Offertory), “Homo quidam” (Elevation), and “Sacris solemnibus” (Communion), but always in the sweet and mysterious atmosphere that he so appreciated in the *Fiori musicali*. In the “Fantaisie” that closes the “mass,” Langlais employs a procedure that he would always willingly use, the transformation of a short motive—here the first four notes of the “Ite missa est” of the “Cunctipotens genitor Deus” Mass (A-A-G-A)—into an animating cell for the work (one hears it no fewer than twenty-four times) before presenting it in full on the pedal reeds 8’ and 4’, accompanied by open fourths and fifths more evocative of Machaut than Frescobaldi!

Hommage à Frescobaldi could well have ended with this brilliant “Fantaisie,” but the composer added three supplementary and completely independent pieces. None of them brings in a plainchant motive, not even the “Antienne” (n° 6) where the modal and personal theme serves as a point of departure for the contrapuntal games that evoke Frescobaldi but also Marcel Dupré, the dedicatee of the volume, recalling the scheme he gave to his improvisation students at the Conservatory. In the “Thème and Variations” Langlais displays his contrapuntal skills in the first two variations, two-voiced then four-voiced, and his sense of humor in the Lisztian third variation. The final pirouette, humorously, is reminiscent of the picturesque conclusion of Louis Vierne’s “Impromptu.”

Upon its publication, the *Hommage à Frescobaldi* quickly proved to be one of Jean Langlais’ leading collections, along with the *Neuf Pièces*, and the *Suite brève*, *Suite médiévale* and *Suite française*. In just a few years, from 1942 to 1951, the composer thus

established himself as one of the masters of organ music in his time. But the organist made himself equally known as one of the recitalists who was well-known to the public.

At the end of the 1940s in the aftermath of World War II, organ recitals were fairly rare in Paris. And when the young American organist Charles Dodsley Walker⁴⁷ arrived in Paris from New York in the summer of 1948, having just been named Cathedral Organist and Musical Director at the American Cathedral, he was delighted to hear his first Parisian concert, the 18th concert in the series “Musical Season for Summer.” Held on Saturday, August 14, 1948, at Sainte-Clotilde, it featured the titular organist, Jean Langlais, in a program titled “Festival Bach–Franck.” Walker recalls the era:

For me today, it’s striking and joyous to think about those days in Paris. I remember that it was my first adventure when I arrived: I went to Ste-Clotilde to attend a recital that was played magnificently by Jean, whom I hadn’t yet met.⁴⁸

Walker continues his Paris memories in a published interview and remembers his special ties with organists from this era in connection with his position at the American Cathedral:

Neal Campbell: Tell me about the organ series you organized at the American Cathedral.

Charles Dodsley Walker: We did a concert with the *Palestina Missa Brevis* and the *Bach Magnificat* with the Paris Chamber Orchestra directed by Pierre Duvauchelle ... I must have met Langlais by then, because I remember that he came to that concert and complimented me on the Palestrina... When I got there I found out what a wonderful organ it was. It had been a big three manual Cavaillé-Coll. In 1930 it was enlarged and a fourth manual added. It was one of the very few organs in France at that time with capture combination action...

Anyway, I saw this organ and thought “wouldn’t it be nice to have a recital series.” The way it worked was this: I said to the dean “I’d like to invite a bunch of famous French organists to play on this organ” and he said “Fine, go ahead.” I wish I could remember the fee we paid them, but it was ridiculously small. I think it was 10,000 F which was about \$30. So, I picked up the phone—believe it or not—and called Marcel Dupré, who I had met through Clarence Watters in this country. He was the only one I knew, and I didn’t call him Marcel, either!

It was “Maitre, would you be willing to play in a series on this organ? I want to help raise the reputation of the American Cathedral as an artistic center in Paris.” He agreed and I thanked him, and put the phone down.

Then I called André Marchal, and repeated my story, saying that Dupré had agreed to play, and would you do it, and he said yes. Of course if Dupré hadn’t agreed to do it, it might have been a different story. I didn’t know Marchal from a hole in the ground! So, the same with Langlais, Messiaen, and Duruflé. These names were legendary, even back then... The recitals were a week apart in Lent, and there were big crowds, and wide newspaper coverage.⁴⁹

NC: How did the organ in the American Cathedral really stack up in comparison with the famous Paris organs?

CDW: Well, for one thing, it was in better tune than any of the others, and that was

⁴⁷ Charles Dodsley Walker (1920-2015), founder and conductor of Canterbury Choral Society. He earned a Master of Arts at Harvard before moving to Paris. Returning from Europe in January 1951, he became then organist/choirmaster of the Church of the Heavenly Rest in New York for 38 years. He was President of the American Guild of Organists (1971–1975).

⁴⁸ Comment made to the author in New York City, July 2007.

⁴⁹ The series of six Friday evening organ recitals (“Lenten Concerts”) began March 4, 1949, with a program by Charles Dodsley Walker, then continued with André Marchal, Jean Langlais, Marcel Dupré, Olivier Messiaen, and Maurice Duruflé, every Friday until April 8, 1949. One of the reviews about this series, “Recitals by Noted Men at the American Cathedral in Paris,” appeared in *The Diapason* 40:5 April 1, 1949. 21.

because of the Germans. They had taken over the cathedral and used it as their army church. Say what you will about their politics, but by golly if they were going to have a *Wehrmachtskirche*, it was going to have an organ that was in tune. So the organ was in great shape when I got there. It was amazing.

NC: Did you have an opportunity to hear any of these organists in their own churches?

CDW: Very little... I did go to Ste.-Clotilde from time to time, because I was very close to Langlais.⁵⁰

For his recital on March 18, 1949 at the American Cathedral, Langlais played (as he would often do in the future) music by his predecessors at Sainte-Clotilde, César Franck and Charles Tournemire, but also Louis Vierne and the “young” composer of the era, his friend Gaston Litaize. Then he chose excerpts of his own works, from *Neuf Pièces* and the recent *Suite brève* and the *Suite française*. He ended, as always, with an improvisation, on a theme given by Nadia Boulanger.

This concert marked the beginning of the friendship between Charles Dodsley Walker and Jean Langlais.

In the next season’s “Lenten Concerts,” Jean Langlais was again invited, this time with the addition of Walker’s young wife, the soprano Janet Hayes, to perform his *Trois Prières* (1949). During this concert on March 5, 1950, he played the premiere of his just completed *Incantation pour un Jour Saint*, which would later become famous, as well as excerpts from his *Suite médiévale* and his *Suite française*, and ended with the “Final” from his *Première Symphonie* (1942).

The bonds of friendship forged at this time with Charles Dodsley Walker and his wife Janet proved to be unailing, lasting until the death of the composer in 1991.

The Secular and Sacred Songs

Jean Langlais didn’t want to appear to be only an organ composer,⁵¹ which is why after the war he had invested himself in other parts of the musical world, especially song. When his wife, passionate about modern poetry, read to him from the first published collection of Jacques Prévert’s *Paroles*, he was immediately beguiled and decided to set seven texts to music, favoring alternately emotion and derision:⁵²

Déjeuner du matin (Brunch)
Pour toi, mon amour (For You, My Love)
Le Jardin (The Garden)
Paris at Night
Quartier libre (Free Time)
Conversation
Les belles familles (The Beautiful Families)

⁵⁰ Neal Campbell. “Conversations with Charles Dodsley Walker.” Part II. *The Diapason* 101:6 (June, 2010). 24.

⁵¹ The category of organist-composer was said to make the composers captives in a sort of musical ghetto from which few had any chance of escaping; this was especially true for Charles Tournemire.

⁵² Jacques Prévert (1900–1977), surrealist poet and screenwriter, was adept in casual French with a caustic humor, and a virtuoso of the absurd. The 1946 collection, *Paroles* (Words), made him instantly famous, and several later editions appeared of the poems, many of which had been published individually in the 1930s. Jean Langlais set nine poems, two of which having unfortunately been lost: n° 5, “Sables mouvants” (Quicksand), and n° 10, “La Batteuse” (Thresher).

Langlais premiered these *Paroles* on May 10, 1946; he himself was at the piano accompanying soprano Anne-Marie de Barbentane. Bernard Gavoty wrote the following review:

At the Société Nationale de Musique, it was an organist who appeared, this time separating himself from the lot: Jean Langlais.

Putting aside for a moment the serious concerns of his fine profession, he had fun illustrating nine miniatures by Jacques Prévert, familiar, tender, or amusing. He did it with restraint, charming relevance and moderation, and above all, even with malicious texts, his music has the great merit of remaining vocal: it never descends into sarcasm or overdone caricature, heavy doses of which are completely insufferable.

Miss Barbentane was exquisite with them, vocally and physically.⁵³

And for Pierre Denis:

The Société Nationale gave a premiere of a new suite of songs, *Paroles*, on texts by Jacques Prévert; the musician delightfully translated the short poems where the banality of daily life and a certain legendary fairyland join together, astounding everyone who thought that the only things an organist is capable of writing are *Tantum ergo* and *Ave Marias*.⁵⁴

Convinced of the quality of this cycle, whose duration is less than 13 minutes, the composer decided to look for a publisher. To that end, he requested permission from Jacques Prévert... who categorically refused it. It is true that the poet already had his appointed musician in the person of Joseph Kosma. Thus this collection remains unpublished even today.⁵⁵

Some isolated vocal pieces from 1946 to 1948 saw the light of day, one of which, an old Breton song, *La Ville d'Ys*, exists as a song with piano accompaniment as well as in an a capella version.

In 1948, overwhelmed by Jean Cayrol's reading of the enigmatic *Passe-temps de l'homme et des oiseaux* (Pastime of Man and Birds), a poetic and transcendent account of the daily horror that the poet experienced in the Mauthausen concentration camp, Langlais resolved to set four of the poems to music:⁵⁶

J'ai chanté (I sang)
À bas la feuille (Down with the leaf)
Oiseaux fatigués de m'entendre (Birds tired of hearing me)
Il y a des hommes (There are men)

Here is the superb and tragic text of the first of these:

J'ai chanté pour la mort
Pour les hommes nus en tas
Qui brûlaient dépareillés.
J'ai chanté pour une femme

⁵³ Clarendon [pseudonym for Bernard Gavoty.] "Les Concerts." *Le Figaro*, June 5, 1946. 2.

⁵⁴ Pierre Denis. "Les Organistes français d'aujourd'hui: Jean Langlais." *L'Orgue* 52 (July–September, 1949). 72.

⁵⁵ Fortunately, there is a beautiful recording with virtually all the songs by Jean Langlais, almost all which are unpublished. It was made under the supervision of Canadian organist and producer Jacques Boucher. These *Paroles* were remarkably well served by soprano Louise Marcotte and pianist Brigitte Poulin, using the manuscripts from the collection of Marie-Louise Langlais. VOX 7841-2. 1998.

⁵⁶ Jean Cayrol (1911–2005) was a poet, novelist, and essayist; he was a member of the Resistance in the Second World War and was deported to Mauthausen. He was the screenwriter for *Nuit et brouillard* (Night and Fog), which made a great impression on generations of audiences. The manuscript texts for these songs are in the collection of Marie-Louise Langlais.

Ouverte comme une ciguë
Les seins bleus
Elle était vêtue par habitude.
J'ai chanté pour un enfant tout froid
Avec son pain à la main
Il recommençait à rire
Et personne ne veut plus
M'entendre

(I sang for death | For the nude men in a heap | Who burned separately. | I sang for a woman | Open like a hemlock | Her blue breasts | She was dressed as usual. | I sang for a totally cold child | With his bread in his hand | He started to laugh again | And no one still wants | To hear me).

When the French musicologist Lila Maurice-Amour dedicated a radio broadcast titled *Les poètes et leurs musiciens* (The Poets and Their Musicians) to Jean Cayrol on October 4, 1951, she made the following observations about Jean Langlais' music :

Simple music, but rich in consequence, intentionally pared down, but not naked; music in which the melody lets the text speak, and brings the background landscape to the surface without ever replacing it.

The process of composition brings together two linear melodies: the song and its accompaniment. If it weren't nonsense, one could say that this resembles "two-voiced Gregorian chant," to borrow Pierre-Jean Jouve's phrase regarding his own poems, also set to music by Jean Langlais. In effect, the melodic text remains completely outside, to retain all of its integrity, and the piano intervenes only to underline the aridness of the scene.

This is the poetry of waiting, of a world on the look-out, like on Holy Saturday when the sepulchre is empty: one doesn't yet know if there will be a resurrection, but something has to happen.

In this waiting, Jean Cayrol writes poems, for which Jean Langlais composes the music... It will be good when the people of the church sing them, these simple and strong words, these words of certitude.⁵⁷

During this period Jean Langlais also wrote *Trois Prières* for solo voice or unison choir with organ. Two of them, "Ave verum" and "Ave maris stella" use French translations of the Latin texts, while the third, "Tantum ergo" can be sung in either Latin or French. Similarly, the composer easily supported religious song in the vernacular, prefiguring the recommendations of Vatican II in the 1960s.

Of the 65 songs written during the composer's long career, 25 come from this short post-war period, where he seems to have had an active interest in the genre, going from the cheeky humor of Prévert to the tragic intonations of Jean Cayrol.

But afterwards he showed a increasing disaffection for the art song, so prized in France at the beginning of the twentieth century and then abandoned in the aftermath of World War II.

⁵⁷ The typed text of this broadcast was sent to Jean Langlais by Lila Maurice Amour (collection Marie-Louise Langlais).

Sacred polyphony: Cantatas, Messe Solennelle

. *Cantatas*

Of the *Cantate à Saint-Vincent* for mixed voices and string orchestra or organ, which Jean Langlais wrote in 1946, there remains no trace; the composer destroyed the manuscript. It was an “occasional piece” commissioned by the Saint-Vincent school in Rennes for the inauguration of its chapel organ. The composer judged it too long, and completely rewrote it in 1953 in an abridged version entitled *Caritas Christi*.

Another vocal piece, in simple style, *Cantate en l'honneur de Saint-Louis-Marie de Montfort* (1947), wasn't published until 2007 on the occasion of the composer's centenary. This work, for three-part female choir, solo soprano, organ, and three *ad libitum* trumpets, was written at the request of the school for blind girls in Larnay.⁵⁸

In 1948, Jean Langlais wrote a motet in Louis Braille's memory, *Libera me Domine* in Latin for soprano, tenor, bass, and organ, for which he borrowed the whole text of the Gregorian response sung at the dismissal of the Requiem Mass. But even if the Latin words are those of the service, Jean Langlais uses a completely personal music, as had Gabriel Fauré and Maurice Duruflé in their Requiems. This *Libera me*, with its poignant simplicity, was performed at the Madeleine in Paris for the funeral of the organist Jeanne Demessieux in 1968. Knowing she was dying, she had specifically requested that this work be sung at her funeral.

• *Messe Solennelle*

For more than 15 years, Langlais had had an ambitious and difficult project in mind, writing a solemn mass in Latin for four-voices mixed chorus and two organs, on the model of Louis Vierne's *Messe Solennelle*. The provision for a choir and two organs (“grand orgue” in the rear gallery and “orgue de chœur” at the other end of the church) is reasonable in France because most large churches have both; an old tradition assumed that the organist of the “grand orgue” never accompanied the choir, but dialogued with it (playing in alternation with sung verses). Although conceiving this solemn mass was long and difficult, the actual writing of it was rapid: according to the markings in the braille score,⁵⁹ the composer began with the Gloria (November 9-12, 1949), then added the Kyrie (November 14-15), Sanctus and Benedictus (18-19), and ended with the Agnus Dei (20-22), that is, eleven days to compose a work that he had thought about for more than 15 years!

When he began notating this mass, he was absolutely scrupulous in following the liturgical requirements of the time, particularly Pope Pius X's *Motu proprio* on sacred music from November 22, 1903, which was considered the final word on Catholic music until the Second Vatican Council. Jean Langlais knew it in French translation and with commentary by

⁵⁸ This Cantata was printed by Combre in 2008 and recorded for the first time on a CD in October of 2007, on the occasion of the Jean Langlais centenary by the Maîtrise des Bouches-du-Rhône under the direction of Samuel Coquard, with organist Marie-Louise Langlais (Soltice SOCD 241 CYD 75).

⁵⁹ Collection Marie-Louise Langlais

Amédée Gastoué as published by Schola Cantorum, 2nd edition (Paris, 1910). The key recommendations were as follows:

1. Sacred music, an integral part of the solemn liturgy, shares in the overall purpose of the liturgy: the glory of God and the sanctification, the edification of the faithful. Sacred music contributes to the beauty and the splendor of the ceremonies of the Church...

2. Sacred music should consequently possess, in the highest degree, the qualities proper to the liturgy, in particular, *sanctity* and *goodness of form*, which will spontaneously produce the final quality of *universality*.

It must be *holy*. Sacred music must, therefore, exclude all that is profane, not only in itself, but also in the manner in which it is presented by those who execute it.

It must be true art... but it must above all *universal*...

3... These qualities are found in the highest degree in Gregorian Chant.

Consequently, this is the song that is proper to the Roman Church, the only song she has inherited from the ancient Fathers, the only song she has jealously guarded for centuries in her liturgical manuscripts, the only song she directly proposes to the faithful as her own, the only song she prescribes exclusively for some parts of the liturgy, and the only song which recent research has so happily restored to its integrity and purity...

4. The above-mentioned qualities are also possessed in an excellent degree by classic polyphony, especially of the Roman School, which reached its greatest perfection in the sixteenth century, owing to the works of Pierluigi da Palestrina... Classic polyphony is an admirable match for Gregorian Chant, the supreme model of all sacred music...

5. The Church has consistently favored the progress of the fine arts, admitting to the worship service everything good and beautiful that human talent has produced, down through the ages, although always with due regard to the liturgical laws. Consequently, modern music is also allowed in the Church when its compositions have a kindness, sobriety and gravity that do not render it unworthy of its liturgical functions.

6. Among the different kinds of modern music, that which appears less suitable for accompanying the liturgy is the theatrical style, which was exceptionally popular during the [nineteenth] century, especially in Italy...

Langlais took the following points to heart:

7. The language proper to the Roman church is Latin. Hence it is forbidden to sing anything in the vernacular in solemn liturgical functions, let alone to sing in the vernacular the variable or common parts of the Mass and Office.

9. The liturgical text must be sung as it is in the books, without alteration or inversion of the words, without undue repetition, without separating syllables.

15. Although the music proper to the Church is purely vocal music, music with organ accompaniment is also permitted. In some special cases, within due limits and with required appropriateness, other instruments may be allowed, but never without the special permission.

16. As the singing should always have the principal place, the organ or other instruments should merely sustain and never overwhelm it.

17. It is not permitted to have the singing preceded by long preludes or to interrupt it with intermezzo pieces.

Langlais followed these papal injunctions to the letter, especially Paragraph 9 about modifying the liturgical text. This paragraph is reacting to vocal works—more numerous than might be imagined—where the breaking up of texts is virtually heretical, as for example in a “Kyrie eleison” in which the choir sings “ele,” and then after a long rest or a chord from the organ, finally adds “ison”!

Complying with the *Motu proprio*, Jean Langlais uses syllabic repetition in just two situations: first, where a word or phrase has exceptional importance (e.g., doubling “Jesus Christe” and “Amen” in the Gloria, the “Hosanna in excelsis” of the Sanctus, or the “Dona nobis pacem” at the end of the Agnus Dei); and second, when it is a matter of imitative polyphony, such as a four-voiced point of imitation (the entrances of “Et in terra pax bonae voluntatis” in the Gloria, or the fugal exposition of the first Agnus Dei).

Pius X authorized organ accompaniment to the extent that it didn’t dominate or interrupt the text (paragraphs 15, 16, and 17). Langlais clearly observes this in the *Messe Solennelle*, in which the organ serves two functions: the “orgue de chœur” accompanying the voices, merely doubling them at each entrance to provide stability and security; or the “grand orgue” as soloist, providing preludes, interludes, or postludes, always brief (ten measures for the Kyrie and Sanctus preludes, four or five measures for the interludes, and one to three for the postludes). This stereophonic distribution (the “orgue de chœur” accompanying the choir, while the “grand orgue” enters solo) will prove extraordinarily effective.

Olivier Messiaen analyzed the work in an undated manuscript which Langlais carefully preserved in his archives:⁶⁰

Jean Langlais : Messe Solennelle, analysis by Olivier Messiaen.

The Kyrie is excellent with its austere form. Its primary harmonic progression is reminiscent of a cadence by Guillaume de Machaut. The second part (the expressive part) of its theme is inspired by the plainchant Kyrie XIII (stelliferi conditor orbis). It borrows a litany form with rhythmic changes (think of Gregorian neumes); but since it is almost always in even quarter notes, this is easy to accomplish (as long as one conducts in quarter notes when the changes should happen).

The Gloria is a fugue. Its subject, in the mode on D, takes the first notes of the plainchant Gloria XIII as a point of departure. The episodes, on various fragments of the subject, separate the subject entries in distant tonalities. Stretto, and conclusion in the major.

In the Sanctus, free use of major and minor consonant chords, creating chromatic modes. Once again we find Machaut’s cadence.

The Benedictus will captivate all true musicians. The chromatic two-voiced arabesques on the eight-foot bourdon, over the voix céleste’s modal background, provide much poetry in supporting the singing of the women alone in octaves.

The Agnus is simultaneously tormented and meditative. The call for peace has tragic

⁶⁰ Collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

intensity which is especially topical.⁶¹

This work doesn't pose any great performance difficulties, all the vocal passages that are a little tricky are always doubled by the organ, and the choral entrances always carefully prepared. The two organs never play at the same time: a single organ could easily suffice if the work were performed in a church that only had one. In sum, a beautiful work, severe, serious, truly liturgical, easily prepared, to be recommended to all choir directors.

Olivier Messiaen

Messiaen said it all, except for Jean Langlais' achievement of a perfect stereophonic effect if two organs are used, opposing the small choir organ for accompanying and the great solo organ, in the best of circumstances in a large church, more than 300 feet apart.

In his choice of texts, Langlais maintained the classic Ordinary (Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus with Benedictus, and Agnus Dei), intentionally omitting the Credo, which in France was normally sung in plainsong *alternatim* by the choir and congregation.

Here is how the composer successfully reconciled Pius X's wishes regarding Gregorian chant, "Palestrinian" polyphony, and modern music:

a) Gregorian Chant:

Strictly speaking, there is no plainchant in the *Messe Solennelle*, but many of its melodic lines were inspired by it, especially in the first two movements, where the contours of motives in Mass XIII are suggested and stylized, before Langlais frees his imagination to create a personal melodic line.

b) Polyphony:

Paragraph 4 of the *Motu proprio* praises both Gregorian chant and Palestrina-like polyphony. For Langlais, polyphony is not necessarily synonymous with Palestrina, and he used imitative techniques without feeling bound to any one style. Thus he drew from various eras, alternating as he wished Medieval practices (the Kyrie and Agnus Dei) with fugal passages (especially in the Gloria, where one finds a virtually classic four-voiced fugue with entrances from bottom to top, and episodes using fragments of the subject). And although the *Messe Solennelle* is clearly a polyphonic Mass, it has a long homophonic passage in its Benedictus for the words "Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini," in which the sopranos and altos sing in long-note octaves, an oasis of peace in the midst of complex polyphony. In terms of the vocal tessituras, the composer is traditional, writing in middle registers and carefully preparing, using step-wise motion, extreme notes, highlighting the voices without demanding needless prowess.

c) Modern Music:

The fifth paragraph of the *Motu proprio* recognized the validity of modern music in church as long as it bowed to the requirements of liturgical laws. Jean Langlais fully complied, but how was he to work within such tight constraints without preventing the blossoming of his language? A study of his first organ works, especially the *Vingt-Quatre Pièces pour harmonium ou orgue* already displayed his taste for musical collage, juxtaposing musical

⁶¹ Messiaen is undoubtedly referring to Korea and the Cold War that so troubled the times.

fragments derived from totally diverse techniques or eras. Further, the composer seemed to have a distinct penchant for the musical atmosphere of the Middle Ages (*Suite médiévale*) revisited in the light of distinctly twentieth-century harmonies. The *Messe Solennelle* confirms these tendencies: next to affirmations of Gregorian modality (Hypodorian in the Kyrie and Sanctus, Dorian in the Gloria, Hypolydian in the Sanctus) is polyphony inspired by the Middle Ages and Renaissance; and it adopts also tonality and chromaticism developed in much later periods. In that way, Jean Langlais moves easily from a medieval Kyrie with open fourths and fifths and Machaut-like cadences to fortissimo Sanctus that opposes tormented chromaticism and triumphant tonality on the word “Sanctus,” sung on a completely consonant C-major chord with a spectacular high C for the sopranos.⁶² And to complete this balancing of diverse techniques from different eras, he closes the Agnus Dei in an absolutely modern atmosphere, using a whole-tone scale, melodic tritones, and melodic added-value notes.

It is lyricism that unites all these heterogeneous techniques, a lyricism that comes from his concept of the sacred, lyricism that never oversteps the bounds of Pius X’s call for religious decorum.

The private premiere of the *Messe Solennelle* took place on October 15, 1950 at Sainte-Clotilde, with the choir from the National Institute for the Young Blind directed by Jean-Gabriel Gaussens; at the great organ was Pierre Denis, and at the choir organ was Sainte-Clotilde’s choirmaster, François Tricot⁶³.

Three years later, the public premiere took place in the Besançon festival, and Clarendon wrote in *Le Figaro*:

Babylonian success for Jean Langlais, whose *Messe Solennelle* received its premiere at the Saint-Ferjeux Basilica with the fine participation of the Marcel Couraud vocal ensemble. In basing his polyphony on Gregorian melodies or simple modal tunes, the author uses a very old formula of which the old masters have left us many examples. That was precisely the danger, to fall into a pastiche and make faux-Lassus or imitation Palestrina. Langlais knew how to remain traditional while protecting his personality. I particularly admired his Gloria, whose structure is magisterial. Jean Langlais, my colleague, have you finally found the recipe for religious music, the church composer’s philosopher’s stone? In that case, the crown of the blessed awaits you.⁶⁴

After its publication in 1950, the *Messe Solennelle*, dedicated to Sainte-Clotilde Canon, Henry Hubert, found immediate success, particularly in English-speaking countries, Germany, and Northern Europe. 65 years later, there are many who consider it a classic in 20th century religious music, alongside Duruflé’s *Requiem*. The two works, in fact, are often paired in choral concerts. Before signing a contract on February 15, 1951 to publish this work

⁶² Jean Langlais wanted this high C, but he wasn’t certain that choral sopranos could sing it easily, so he compromised on a G. While concertizing in the USA, he explained this to Karel Paukert, organist and choirmaster at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, who was to conduct the *Messe Solennelle* on September 27, 1981. Paukert invited Langlais to the performance, and the composer for the first time heard the high C.

Enthused, he immediately had the publisher correct the score.

⁶³ The stereophonic arrangement desired by the composer was unfortunately impossible at Sainte-Clotilde, since there, “orgue de chœur” and “grand orgue” are placed one below the other, in two superimposed galleries.

⁶⁴ Clarendon [Bernard Gavoty]. “Au Festival de Besançon.” *Le Figaro*, October 1953 (clipping in the collection of Marie-Louise Langlais).

with Éditions de la Schola Cantorum et Procure Générale de Musique (a French publisher specializing in religious music), Jean Langlais received this letter from the head of the firm:

Paris, January 9, 1951

Dear Sir,

We willingly give you permission to orchestrate your *Messe Solennelle*, published by our house, and to have it performed in this version.

It goes without saying that you will submit this orchestration to us with the intent of our acquiring it.

Please accept my best wishes,

Abbé Bardy⁶⁵

Langlais did in fact make a version for large orchestra (strings, woodwinds, brass), but it remained in manuscript in the composer's personal papers, thus completely unknown until 2015, when the Éditions de la Schola Cantorum (purchased in 1983 by the Swiss conglomerate of Charles Huguenin, Cantate Domino, and Triton) decided to publish it at the initiative of the new dynamic young director, Sébastien Frochoux.⁶⁶ Thus, this work for chorus and orchestra without organ,⁶⁷ which Langlais never heard, appeared 65 years after its composition.

But the original version gained rapid success and critical acclaim:

Jean Langlais has an uncommon writing technique, but for him technique becomes power and beauty, since genius reigns in this music. It is very difficult, almost indelicate, to express that which can be born under the power of religious sentiment, but for us the *Messe Solennelle* by Jean Langlais isn't a tired act of kneeling, an overly contemplative acceptance; it is an anguished and fervent cry of a man of the twentieth century, one of those men who still believe in sincerity, one of those who know how to approach God without embellishment, without hypocrisy, without fear and even without pride, simply burdened with the weight of their doubt, of their hope, of their unquenched generosity, of their love. If our enthusiasm has gotten the better of us, we ask Jean Langlais to forgive an exaltation whose only defense is in the admiration that we have for his music.⁶⁸

Jean Langlais thus acquired a veritable notoriety in the world of sacred music at the very moment, when, having just turned forty, he was in full possession of his musical skills. A long interview with Pierre Denis only four years after he assumed his post at Sainte-Clotilde, paints an enthusiastic portrait. Here are a few excerpts, starting with the introduction:⁶⁹

At Sainte-Clotilde, the service is soon to end. The joint shadows of Franck and Tournemire seem, with their silent presence, to challenge the musician who is trying to measure up to them on the instrument that was recently the witness to and translator of their inner thoughts, in a competition both perilous and hopeless. A young artist at the keyboards improvises on the hymn or the introit, calm and lucid, he elaborates a vast rhapsody, always coherent and which blooms in our attentive and overjoyed ears. The creator of the *Béatitudes* couldn't disavow these broad variations or these canons wisely worked out; and the ardent author of *L'Orgue Mystique* would have quickly recognized these plainchant-like arabesques as his own, with imponderable rhythms,

⁶⁵ Letter in the collection of Marie-Louise Langlais.

⁶⁶ Son of Jean-Charles Frochoux, who purchased the French Editions in 1983.

⁶⁷ There is also an optional version for choirs, orchestra and organ, edited by Marie-Louise Langlais in 2015, available through the same publisher.

⁶⁸ Henri Dufresse. "Messe de Jean Langlais." *Images musicales* 127 (February 23, 1951). 5.

⁶⁹ Pierre Denis, "Les Organistes Français d'aujourd'hui." *L'Orgue* 52 (July-September 1949). 68,72.

heightened with precious harmonic treasures. And yet, Jean Langlais, the official organist of the Basilica, only imitates himself, in these too-fleeting compositions in which one glimpses a soul imbued with a very sharp sensibility and a deep inner life that early blindness has long withdrawn into itself.

Then, asked about his preferences in organ building, Jean Langlais firmly gives his credo:

“Since I particularly like the richness of foundation stops in a well designed organ, I don’t join the movement that would suppress them in favor of mixtures. This concept is undoubtedly fine for old music, but can’t be suitable for the majority of contemporary works. The mixtures bring a superimposition of dissonances to chords, a multiplicity of the pleins-jeux renders polyphony more complex instead of clarifying it, giving it just an extra color and a more brilliant timbre. I am especially the enemy of high, frequently breaking mixtures (cymbales) which muddle the musical discourse, overlapping the alto with the tenor. That said, I praise those who make tasteful mutations. I am in favor, in a large instrument, of having plain jeux voiced differently, some for the foundations, others for the reeds.”

On the role of the organist in contemporary Catholic liturgy, Jean Langlais reveals his ideals as a believer:⁷⁰

“The organist who is concerned with his role in services has a huge task in the religious domain. He must always maintain a close cohesion among the organ pieces that he has meticulously selected in advance of the day’s liturgy.

This choice, relatively easy for certain feasts (Pentecost, Assumption, Christmas), can be tricky when it comes to simple Sundays lacking very specific religious significance. One should be inspired by the readings from the Gospel or the Epistle, or the Introit, for example. Charles Tournemire understood this so perfectly, and that’s what Olivier Messiaen does every Sunday at La Trinité. ...

From Solesmes I gathered the great research into melodic purity, and plainchant has always made a big impression on me, principally in metric regularity. I am always surprised that Beethoven, for example, wrote so many masterpieces without freeing himself of the rhythmic strictures of his time. There are better things to do, it seems, than to think just in two or in three. As for Lutheran music, one can safely interchange certain chorale-preludes intended for a specific feast, but their character doesn’t always work very well with the corresponding Roman Catholic feast; certain Advent chorale-preludes can easily be played outside that season, certain austere Easter chorale-preludes, like “Christ lag in Todesbanden” are appropriate in Lent.

However, I mercilessly denounce playing certain organ masterpieces which, with rare exceptions (Christmas), should not find a place in church: some of the Bach trio sonatas (an exception for the slow movements), most of Liszt’s works. ...

The service that I think is the most essential and the most interesting for an organist is Vespers, which I am truly passionate about. Of course, it is habitually the most ignored of all of them. The organist should take to heart the truth that his interlude is a commentary on the antiphon and that it should reflect the text that it is replacing. The same is true for hymns. The organist thus truly incorporates himself into the service; from this comes the necessity that he blindly submit to the needs of the service and, especially, to stop himself at the slightest ringing of a bell, no matter what it costs him. Note that here at Sainte-Clotilde, the organist has the benefit of considerable deference because of the celebrity of his predecessors.

⁷⁰ Jean Langlais would nevertheless sometimes be in conflict with certain priests in the parish, especially the one who in effect put a traffic light on the organ in the 1960s to make the organist respond instantly to the celebrants’ wishes. The present author saw this personally, and one can imagine Jean Langlais’ fury when he discovered this new device, which we described to him. He went down to the sacristy immediately and said to the priest involved, “What a brilliant idea for a blind man!” The lights were quickly removed, to the general hilarity of the numerous listeners who were in the loft that day.

I am free to play anything I want, and to improvise as long as I please in my interludes. The artistic life of the loft is continuing perfectly, thanks to the careful attention of the priest in charge.”

When Pierre Denis asked him about his repertory, Langlais answered:

“I greatly admire the old French masters in their short pieces. But they quickly run out of steam in the big compositions and spend too long in a single tonality. As for their successors in the nineteenth century, Widor, Gigout, Guilmant, etc., their works betray an aesthetic in which pathos is king, it seems to me. Who can be surprised that their contemporaries like Debussy, a wonderful orchestrator, could ignore the organ! These organists used registrations that simply offered sonic mush to the ears from which pure timbres seem deliberately excluded; and it is a harmful tendency to think of the organ only as divisions, and not details.”

The author of the interview then summarizes Jean Langlais’ musical tastes:

Although the composer of the *Poèmes Évangéliques* refers to Cabezon or Landino, he is naturally more closely attached to the French masters of organum, to Léonin, Pérotin, and Machaut, of whom he seems a misplaced disciple in our century. Listen to his *Hommage à Landino*, his motet “O Bone Jesu,” and see how he easily recreates Medieval polyphony. Among later classic masters, Jean Langlais claims Frescobaldi, whose *Fiori musicali* he strongly praises.

But our composer is also a musician of today who, after hearing the messages of Fauré and Ravel, turns an attentive ear to the great contemporary symphonists: Roussel, Hindemith, Stravinsky, and Bartok. He doesn’t forget his debt to Erik Satie, to whom he dedicated an “Hommage.” He thinks highly of the young school in our country, currently with illustrious members, with Olivier Messiaen at the top of the list.

“I am eclectic in my taste,” says Langlais, “and I shake off all partisanship in judging the music by others. I force myself never to judge by preconceptions, and my own sensibility comes into play when it has to do with aesthetics.”

And after detailing the catalogue of his subject’s works, Pierre Denis concludes as he began, giving a picture of Jean Langlais at his organ at Sainte-Clotilde:

The faithful leave the Basilica which is slowly enveloped in darkness. A few listeners remain to hear the last notes of the organ, whose velvet sounds fade in mysterious pianissimos. The Sainte-Clotilde nave, for a moment transfigured by the magic sonorities by Cavaillé-Coll’s masterpiece, has taken on the appearance of a splendid Gothic vessel, somber in its gloomy grayness once the final chord is reached.

