

## CHAPTER 8

### *American Tours in the Fifties*

Jean Langlais began receiving commissions from American publishers in the late 1940s (*Fête*, 1949, H. W. Gray). His first North American concert tour in 1952 had further strengthened his ties with America. From this time forward a certain divide began to appear in Jean Langlais' professional commitments. His Parisian career continued apace with his duties at Sainte-Clotilde, his recitals in France and elsewhere in Europe, his students at the National Institute for the Young Blind, and his French publishers, chiefly Herelle (later Philippo and, through acquisition, Combre) and Bornemann.

At the same time he drew steadily closer to North America, undertaking regular concert tours there and composing specifically for the American marketplace. Due to the slower nature of transatlantic communication before the Internet, there was a lack of awareness back home of the works he published abroad. *Fête*, for example, remains little known in France to this day, a fate shared by several other works from the 1950s and 1960s: *Organ Book*, *American Suite*, *Poem of Life*, *Poem of Peace*, *Poem of Happiness*, and *Three Voluntaries*.

Americans are an enthusiastic and decisive people. While his first tour was still underway, the Chicago publisher H.T. FitzSimons commissioned a collection of organ pieces. Jean Langlais began composing them in December 1952, taking as his point of departure themes from French folksong. As in the past (*Suite brève* and *Suite médiévale*, 1947, *Suite française*, 1948), he called his collections “Suites,” with a nod to America in the English title *Folkloric Suite*.

Aware that the five movements of the *Suite médiévale* had proven especially popular with American organists, Langlais adapted this model to the *Folkloric Suite*, scrupulously avoiding, however, any religious associations. He did not wish to offend the religious sensibilities of his new friends in predominantly Protestant North America.

As he would do so often in the future, he took as his point of departure an improvisation recorded for Radio Strasbourg many years before, in 1937, on a popular tune from eastern France, “Ils étaient trois petits enfants.” To this piece, entitled “Légende de Saint Nicolas (St. Nicholas Legend)” for the collection, he added four new ones, the first a fugue on the Easter

hymn “O filii,”<sup>1</sup> followed by “Cantique (Canticle),” a set of variations on the Breton folksong “Adoromp’holl.” At the beginning of the following “Canzona,” Langlais specified “this theme was originally a song dealing with the details of the Battle of Pavie was used by J. S. Bach in his chorale ‘Through Adam’s Fall.’”<sup>2</sup> A “Rhapsodie sur deux Noëls (Rhapsody on Two Christmas Songs)” closes the collection. This last work is dedicated to the great organist Catherine Crozier, whose talent and kindness Jean Langlais keenly appreciated.

These five pieces draw their unity not only from folksong themes but from the ease with which Langlais demonstrated the art of modal modulation. The established mode always remains intact in spite of rapid changes of key. Finally, to demonstrate that this new collection was truly destined for America, he indicated in the introduction: “The composer asks his interpreters to use his registrations unchanged insofar as possible.” By this he meant to discourage a practice that he fought against in all his masterclasses in the United States: the systematic alteration of the specific registrations indicated in his scores.

He went so far as to indicate, always in English, the keyboards desired (Swell, Great, Choir) and certain stops that he had discovered in America such as “Stopped Diapason,” “Orchestral Oboe,” and “English Horn.”

### **American concert tour 1954**

Following the success of his first American tour, Jean Langlais was immediately engaged for a second tour in February and March of 1954. Bernard La Berge, Langlais’ first agent, had passed away and was succeeded by Henry Colbert. The successor firm was known as Colbert-La Berge Concert Management. Lilian Murtagh stayed on as executive secretary for organ concerts.

The new agency devised an exceptionally busy tour for Langlais –26 recitals in 44 days – about one concert every two days between February 5 and March 30, 1954. Crisscrossing the vast North American continent from east to west and north to south, Langlais was accompanied by his wife Jeannette, as before. One can only imagine the difficulties they encountered, travelling immense distances by train for two months without really speaking English. The *Roanoke Messenger* commented maliciously:<sup>3</sup>

The French artist speaks English haltingly. His wife knows only one word: “Okay.”

Langlais recalled having brought along his Braille French-English dictionary, a considerable pile of paper that he consulted in his spare time when not using it as a pillow in hotels and on trains.

The stress of such travel never caused him to lose his sense of humor, however, as evinced in numerous press interviews. To Deborah B. Morrison of *The Baltimore Sun* he quipped:<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Dedicated to Claire Coci, a frequent advocate of his works in her recital programs.

<sup>2</sup> The English is his. “Canzona” enjoyed such success that it was published in an arrangement by Kenneth Dantchik for organ and brass quartet (FitzSimons, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> *Roanoke Messenger*, March 16, 1954.

<sup>4</sup> Deborah B. Morrison, *The Baltimore Sun*, March 20, 1954.



In Paris, he travels with Mrs. Langlais by car or subway and alone on foot. The trip from his home to Ste. Clotilde is a 25-minute walk. To his former church, he says, “it was a 45-minute walk when I was alone and 50 when I was with my wife.”

Remaining faithful to habits established during his first tour, Langlais devised three different concert programs for the 1954 tour. The first half of each program was devoted to the French organ school, both symphonic and modern. Franck, Saint-Saëns, Tournemire, Vierne, Dupré, Duruflé, Messiaen, Alain, and Litaize were well-represented. The second half consisted of a selection of his own works, both old and new, followed by a large-scale improvisation, usually a symphony on four themes provided by the public.

In his *Souvenirs* he recalled with scorn at least one set of themes submitted to him:

In Birmingham, Alabama, here were the themes proposed for each of movements of my improvised symphony:

Allegro: first theme of the Symphony in D minor of Franck  
Andante: the Pilgrims' Chorus from Wagner's *Tannhäuser*  
Scherzo: a Mozart piano concerto theme  
Final: Marguerite's theme from Gounod's *Faust*.

Certain commentators remarked upon the scarcity of early music in his programs, which was generally limited to J. S. Bach and C.P.E. Bach. Of his own works, here are the ones he chose for the 1954 tour:

Program 1: Postlude n°2, Cantique (*Folkloric Suite*), Antienne (*Hommage à Frescobaldi*), Fête.

Program 2: Acclamations (*Suite médiévale*), Communion (*Hommage à Frescobaldi*), Française (*Suite française*), *Incantation pour un Jour Saint*.

Program 3: Chant Héroïque (*Neuf Pièces*), Voix céleste (*Suite française*), Canzona (*Folkloric Suite*), Plainte (*Suite brève*) Epilogue for pedal solo (*Hommage à Frescobaldi*).

Jean Langlais wished to promote the diversity of his music by avoiding duplication in the tour programs. He was also careful to select works from earlier collections (*Neuf Pièces*, *Fête*, *Suite brève*, *Suite médiévale*, *Suite française*), placing them alongside more recent ones such as *Incantation pour un Jour Saint* (published as recently as 1954), *Four Postludes* (each dedicated to an American organist, Walter Blodgett, Hugh Giles, Charles D. Walker and Maurice J. Forshaw, respectively), *Hommage à Frescobaldi* or the very recent *Folkloric Suite* from which he selected the “Cantique” and “Canzona.”

Like many composers, Langlais preferred to be moving forward constantly rather than devoting time to works from the 1930s that were already well known in America, such as the *Poèmes évangéliques* or the *Trois Paraphrases grégoriennes*. “My best work,” he had a habit of saying, “is the one I just finished composing!”

In the course of this second tour the press took note of increasing interest on the part of the public, including organists and critics, in Jean Langlais' triple role as interpreter, composer, and improviser.

Here are some of the headlines he garnered:

**“Large audience hears blind French organist”**

*Delaware Gazette*, February 6, 1954

**“Langlais in fine organ concert”**

*Houston Post*, February 16, 1954

**“Pleasing organist draws full house”**

*The Nashville Tennessean*, March 12, 1954

**“Blind French composer amazes hearers with new “Symphony”**

*Roanoke Messenger*, March 16, 1954

**“His world of beauty and Braille”**

*The Sun*, Baltimore, March 22, 1954

**“Organist Jean Langlais plays at Symphony Hall”**

*The Christian Science Monitor*, March 29, 1954

**“Jean Langlais at Notre Dame: noted French organist plays own compositions”**

*The Montreal Star*, March 30, 1954

Let us examine more closely several excerpts from reviews that Jean Langlais’ management sent to him after his return to France:<sup>5</sup>

A large audience from Delaware and surrounding cities was attracted to Gray Chapel Friday evening for the Artists Series concert played by the eminent blind French organist, Jean Langlais. For this listener the latter portion of the program, comprising a varied selection of Mr. Langlais’ own compositions, was by far the meatiest and the most stimulating fare, as a whole, of the evening. The Langlais idiom is respectably contemporary, and at the same time accessible to ears accustomed to organ literature of the past. His music is possessed of a good deal of dissonance which produces no greatly startling effects because it is the logical outcome of compositional procedures. In closing, Mr Langlais improvised, with admirable skill, a “Symphony for Organ” on themes submitted from several members of the audience. His feat was so much appreciated and applauded that he played, as encores, two more of his own works. The first of these, an “Epilogue” from one of his Suites, was an amazing virtuoso piece for the pedals. The artist played it with dazzling effect.

Arriving in California on February 23, Langlais played five recitals in six days: Anaheim the 22<sup>nd</sup>, Los Angeles the 23<sup>rd</sup>, Redlands the 24<sup>th</sup>, Modesto the 26<sup>th</sup>, San Francisco the 28<sup>th</sup>; Clarence Mader wrote in *The Diapason*:<sup>6</sup>

Jean Langlais is no longer just a name to Southern California organists. By his recital at Occidental College, Feb. 23, the second in a series of three presented jointly by the Pasadena and Los Angeles Chapters in collaboration with Occidental College, he left his imprint as a composer-organist in a programme featuring his own works. Shelves in the local music stores were stripped of Langlais publications the day after his performance.

Under the title **“Pleasing organist draws full house”** the *Nashville Tennessean* wrote:<sup>7</sup>

A full house at an organ recital is by way of being news and that is what Jean Langlais, organist of Ste. Clotilde, Paris, had at Fisk University last night. Moreover, it was a

---

<sup>5</sup> Tilden Wells, *Delaware Gazette*, February 6, 1954.

<sup>6</sup> Undated typed letter from Clarence Mader to Jean Langlais. Collection Marie-Louise Langlais. The review was apparently submitted but not published.

<sup>7</sup> Louis Nicholas, *Nashville Tennessean*, March 12, 1954.



warmly enthusiastic crowd. The general feeling seemed to be “This would be wonderful if a person with sight were doing it, but for a blind man – well, it is almost miraculous.” For myself, I may say that I enjoyed M. Langlais more than any other of the famous foreign organists I have heard at Fisk, and there were two principal reasons: he seemed not concerned with being a touring virtuoso and a celebrity, but with making music for which he had particular sympathy and affection; and he did not seem to chafe at the narrow limitations of the instrument on which he performed, but used its resources so skillfully that one was never reminded of its shortcomings.

This review highlights one of the most characteristic qualities of Jean Langlais’ playing: his excellence at registration. Even if the organ were limited in resources or unattractive, he was able to maximize its potential and cause the listener to overlook its faults. Even a downright abominable instrument, or one too small for recital work, found itself transformed into a credible concert organ under his fingers.

The final time he accomplished such a “miracle” was at the orgue de chœur at Ste. Clotilde on November 16, 1989, during an homage to Charles Tournemire organized by the Amis de l’Orgue on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his predecessor’s death. Weakened by his heart condition, Langlais did not feel able to climb the 72 steps to the grand orgue, going only as far as the lower gallery containing a small instrument by Convers reputed to be among the ugliest in Paris. There the intense poetry of his performance of Tournemire’s “Fioretta n° 2” (*Sei Fioretti*) and the “Communion” from n° 35 of *L’Orgue Mystique* left the audience incredulous, some believing that a special mechanism allowed the grand orgue to be played from the orgue de chœur.

As far back as 1951 the American press also noted Jean Langlais’ propensity for modern music, his desire to perform it, and to be a strong advocate for it. Langlais elaborated upon his views in the course of an interview before his recital at the cathedral in Cincinnati:<sup>8</sup>

According to Mr. Langlais, there are some critics today who believe that musical geniuses do not and cannot exist in this era, due to the influence of the modern. “This is not so,” the organist said, “the musicians of old had genius, but not all. There are many musicians living today who are as capable as those of another era, for merely bearing a modern title does not necessarily mean that the music is not good.” “Today’s critics,” the Frenchman asserted, “are too inclined to call a thing good just because it has aged over the years. Guillaume de Machaut and William Dufay of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries might be considered close contemporaries to our music today, for they had pure inspiration. Our so-called ‘modern music’ is also in the same category.”

One of the high points of the 1954 tour was his participation in Boston’s *Festival of Liturgical Music in Honor of the Marian Year*, sponsored by the American Guild of Organists under the auspices of Archbishop (later Cardinal) Richard Cushing and the Archdiocese of Boston.

In this concert, given on March 27, 1954 at Boston’s Symphony Hall,<sup>9</sup> the American premiere of Langlais’ *Messe Solennelle* took place. It was conducted by Theodore Marier, with the composer at the organ.

---

<sup>8</sup> Kathryn Murray, *The Messenger*, March 21, 1954.

<sup>9</sup> The same hall where Olivier Messiaen had attended the American premiere of his *Turangalila-Symphonie* on December 2, 1949.



**Theodore Marier conducting the American premiere of Langlais' *Messe Solennelle* at Boston Symphony Hall, March 27, 1954; the composer at the organ.**

Figure 41. (collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

In an article entitled *Mon second voyage aux Etats-Unis* published in the *Journal de Sainte-Clotilde*, an informal parish newsletter, Langlais described the evening:

In Boston, the archbishop, upon learning I was coming, rented Symphony Hall (the equivalent of our Palais de Chaillot) with its 2,400 seats for the personal musician of the diocese. My *Messe Solennelle*, dedicated to the curate of Sainte Clotilde, was performed by a chorus of 100 singers under the direction of Theodore Marier, while I was playing both the grand orgue and the orgue de chœur parts. Before I went onstage, a charming man smoking a cigarette in an elegant suit offered me words of encouragement and handed me a check.

“Who was that distinguished gentleman?” I asked.

“That was Archbishop Cushing,” I was told.

Another special memory from the 1954 tour occurred in Milwaukee:<sup>10</sup>

My most picturesque memory is perhaps the welcome we received in Milwaukee, in a convent of Franciscans. “We unfortunately cannot attend your recital,” a nun told me, “because we are giving a concert ourselves at the same time. We have an orchestra that rehearses one hour per day in which I play the timpani.” Sister Timpanist, oh, Saint Francis, did you see this coming?

A quick detour to Canada toward the end of the tour enjoyed strong public approval, as one finds in this review from Montreal:<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> From the same undated *Journal de Sainte-Clotilde*.

<sup>11</sup> Claude Gingras, *Montreal Gazette*, March 30, 1954.



The organ recital by Jean Langlais in Notre Dame Church was remarkable in several ways, but perhaps the most remarkable and encouraging feature was the size of the audience, which was unusually large for a local music function of this kind. In part it is due to the enthusiasm and organizing ability of the Canadian College of Organists, but it is also symptomatic of a renewed interest in the organ as a musical instrument in its own right rather than an inferior copy of the orchestra.

Eric McClean wrote of the recital in the same day's *Montreal Star*:

The occasion for such interest was a performance by Jean Langlais, who is regarded not only as one of the best organists France has produced in this generation, but also as one of the most important contributors to the instrument's repertoire today... After such an exhibition of fine playing it is hoped that no further opportunities will be lost in bringing Langlais to Montreal when next he tours this continent.

Jean Langlais and his wife did not keep a diary during the 1954 tour as they had in 1952, their tight schedule permitting scarcely any free time, but a few letters survive from Jeannette Langlais to her sister-in-law Flavie, Jean Langlais' young sister. Flavie lived in Antrain, a village close to La Fontenelle, where she was in charge of the public school. The Langlais family had entrusted their son Claude, barely ten years old, to her for the duration of the tour.

In a letter dated March 11,<sup>12</sup> Jeannette described their feelings upon encountering the California landscape for the first time, poetically evocative impressions that Jean Langlais would recall as he composed his « Californian Evocation » in the summer of 1959, the third movement of his *American Suite*.

California, where snow-covered peaks are visible from the hot climate of the plains, its exotic palms and so many trees unfamiliar to us, the eucalyptus groves, what character they all have! Further north, San Francisco seduced us, a city on a peninsula indolently offered to the Pacific where one senses a real joie de vivre. Its port assumes the character of so many others. Brittany? Marseille? Fishing boats and boats from the Far East – there is a Chinatown quarter – San Francisco is like a dizzying rollercoaster, as steep sometimes as Montmartre. A spacious, open city, vast, with splendid parks where squirrels will eat nuts out of one's hand. Everywhere beautiful, magnificent, noble trees and cool, shady valleys. We didn't see the giant sequoias but I saw several giant conifers, along with mimosa bushes and tree-like ferns. Roses, azaleas, and citrus trees announced the advanced stages of spring.

For his recital in New York at Central Presbyterian Church on March 22, a week before his return to Paris (he had four concerts remaining), Jean Langlais chose his program n°1: "Final" by Franck, "Communion" from *l'Office de la Pentecôte* by Tournemire, "Les Bergers" by Messiaen and "Litanies" by Alain, followed by his own works, *Postlude* n°2, "Cantique," (*Folkloric Suite*), "Antienne" from *Hommage à Frescobaldi*, *Fête*, and finally an improvisation on four themes submitted by Charles Dodsley Walker. This concert represented for Langlais the most challenging of the tour. It's amusing to read the unsigned review devoted to it in *The American Organist*:<sup>13</sup>

It was the first time respectable themes were handed a recitalist for public improvisation. It took 22 minutes and 50 seconds, ending with a fugue (on Mr. Walker's theme) and again it was the first time a recognizable fugue was used in public improvisation which should undoubtedly be attributed to Mr. Langlais' blindness which

<sup>12</sup> Collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

<sup>13</sup> *The American Organist*, vol. 36, n° 4 (April 1954).



enabled his great mind to stick strictly to its subject unannoyed by seeing a mass of keys and stopknobs in front of him. Colbert-La Berge Management has conferred a blessing on the profession – and industry – by bringing Jean Langlais to our land to stop the flood of American abuse of upperwork and mixtures.

A very strange conclusion, indeed, that to improvise a fugue well it is preferable to be blind!

When Jean Langlais boarded ship to return home on April 1, 1954, he carried with him a signed contract from Colbert-La Berge for a third North American tour planned for January to March 1956.

At this point in our narration let us turn to several informative and humorous recollections of Kathleen Thomerson,<sup>14</sup> a student and faithful friend of Jean Langlais:<sup>15</sup>

The Christmas of 1954 was an exciting time for me because I went to Paris to play an audition for Jean Langlais. At the time I studied with Flor Peeters at the Flemish Royal Conservatory in Antwerp, Belgium, and was deciding where to study next summer. Flor Peeters admired the works of Franck and Tournemire, and introduced me to the poetry in them. And I liked also the works of Jean Langlais that I have learned at the University of Texas. Flor Peeters suggested that I go to Paris to study with Langlais the next summer and arranged for my audition. I learned the *Suite médiévale* and went to Paris.

Being at the church where Franck had been the organist was thrilling, the sound of the organ was unlike any other I had played, and having Langlais the composer there beside me was a dream come true. I played several pieces for him. The hard part was the resistance of the keys when I played « Acclamations carolingiennes » (*Suite médiévale en forme de messe basse*) on full organ. Even through the Barker lever was employed when the keyboards were coupled, the Grand Orgue keys required all my strength to push down. By the final chord I was exhausted, but Langlais was pleased, and agreed to teach me privately beginning in June 1955. He also asked me to play « Acclamations » as the postlude after mass the following Sunday.

What a summer that was! I found affordable housing in the American House of the Cité Universitaire. If I remember correctly, there were only two dorms of the Cité that would accept women in the summer of 1955. My roommate was Tunisian. The American House had pianos for practice in the basement rooms. Next door, at the Canadian House, Kenneth Gilbert and Bernard Lagacé had rented a pedal harmonium and installed it in a practice room. I rented daily practice time from them, and the three of us kept that instrument busy! ... I decided to study only works of Franck, Tournemire, Langlais, and early French composers during this summer, and I worked ahead on them during the final five months I lived in Belgium.

I was determined to make the most of my limited time in Paris, and took two lessons a week. Langlais agreed to my specialized course of study, but said he would prefer that I study the early French composers with Gaston Litaize, who was excellent for these works. He wrote me a note of introduction which I took to Mr. Litaize, and it was arranged that I would go once a week to take a lesson at the organ at his apartment. That was also wonderful. I was fascinated by Litaize's instructions in musical ornaments.

---

<sup>14</sup> Kathleen Thomerson taught organ at Southern Illinois University, then at St. Louis Conservatory of Music. She is the author of the first book in English on Jean Langlais, *Jean Langlais, a Bio-Bibliography* (New York, Greenwood Press, 1988).

<sup>15</sup> Kathleen Thomerson, *Tribute to Jean Langlais*, 8 typed pages sent to the author on February 16, 2001, collection Marie-Louise Langlais.



At that time Langlais did not have an organ in his apartment, so I went to the Basilique Sainte-Clotilde for my lessons. They started at 9 in the evening, when the church was closed, and continued as long as I had literature to play. I remember being amazed at the cohesiveness of the organ sound, the beautiful blend of the stops. Afterwards, we would often have a cup of tea at a café, and then walk off in different directions, he to walk home, and I to take the metro back to the Cité. The month of August he went to vacation at his home in La Richardais, Brittany, but since I did not want to stop my study, he asked me to come there to take my final lesson on the Franck Chorales. He said there was a beautiful Cavaillé-Coll organ in the nearby town of Saint-Servan where I could play for him. So, he went off to La Richardais, and I was to follow in two weeks.

I was ready for some sight-seeing after all the concentrated practice, so when two American girls who were there for a summer French language course talked about driving down in their rented car to see the châteaux de la Loire, I joined them. After a week, I was dropped at a railway station to take the train for Brittany. The only trouble was, the address and directions for contacting Langlais turned out to be back in Paris! I had written the instructions on whatever composition I was playing at the time we walked, but had brought different scores with me.

I often wrote on my music, especially French phrases I heard that I didn't know and wanted to be able to say. Bernard Lagacé was scandalized at this sacrilege, and had told me that it was no way to treat my music. I paid no attention (and now, 46 years later, enjoy playing from my old scores with their interesting notations), but now that habit presented quite an obstacle. I didn't remember the name of the village where I was to go, nor the address. I could remember that the nearest rail station was Dinard, so that's where I bought a one-way ticket. Once there, I went to the post office to call the Langlais, and was astounded to find that they didn't have a telephone! They didn't know what day I would arrive, and I could see that contacting them was not as easy as I thought it would be.

I was 21 years old, alone, and afoot in Brittany. So I went back out in the street, looked for the tallest church steeple that I could see, and set out. Surely, I thought, the organist or priest there will know the famous Jean Langlais.

I arrived at the rectory at lunchtime, and the housekeeper let me wait at the parlour. When the pastor came in, I tried to explain in French that I was to take a lesson with Mr. Langlais, and didn't know where he lived. It sounded a little strange, I admit. After some time in conversation, the good father decided to believe my story. He told me the name of the village, said it was in walking distance, and directed me to the right road out of town. It was more like a footpath most of the way, as I recall. My big suitcase had gone back to Paris with the girls' car, so I was mainly carrying my music, organ shoes, and a few clothes.

Once I got to La Richardais, I started asking at various cottages for the Langlais home. No one had heard of them. Obviously I was on the wrong side of town! Finally I found someone who knew and found their small home. No one was there, but I could see neighbors in the next yard. Off I went again. I had gotten somewhat more fluent in the often-repeated request by this time. Still, everyone seemed to think it was unusual. However, this couple said that they had just seen the Langlais drive off to the seaside for his daily walk. They let me wait in their lawnchair. I was almost as exhausted as when I played the organ Tutti. An hour later, a car drove up, and Mme. Langlais was quite surprised to see me next door. Le Maître thought it was amusing, particularly as I exclaimed: "Mr. Langlais, you are better known in America than here!"

Langlais was inspiring as a teacher. In later years I sometimes heard him scold students, but he was always kind to me. For one thing, he knew I was practicing and working hard. For another, I wrote down what he said and tried to do it. I remember one time at the organ when I stood up on the pedals, making a great racket, to reach my



pencil. He said, “WHAT are you doing ?” I explained, and he commented, “You are writing down what I say. The others don’t remember.”

When I left, he gave me a Braille alphabet, a stylus and slate, and asked me to write him in Braille. This was not because he didn’t want anyone else to read my letters, but was another example of how he wanted to be as independent as possible. If he had my letter in Braille, he could find it and read it for himself, without having to wait for someone else to tell him what it said. I regret that I usually only wrote about twice a year. Since I wrote in English, without using abbreviations, every word was spelled out, and it seemed to take forever. If I made a mistake in punching the stiff paper, I took it out of the slate, turned it over, and pushed the dot identification back level with the surface of the paper. Langlais said that my letters were clear, and he had no problem reading them.

After I returned to Austin and my senior year at the University of Texas, I was able to study with Langlais once every two years when he would make a concert tour in America. I drove to the closest city each time, bringing his compositions that I had learned in the interval. I remember taking lessons in Baton Rouge, Wichita Falls, New Orleans, Oklahoma City, Austin, Fort Worth, Denver, New York City, and Boys Town, Nebraska. Organ registration at these unfamiliar organs was more of a problem for me than for him. While I would be looking for a certain stop, his hand would go out and pull it on. Because he could not look for the stopknobs, he developed an amazing and efficient memory for their placement.

Langlais’ kindness, and interest in my work as an organist, was shown in several ways. He often encouraged me, and wanted to hear about the organs and programs I played. He took time in his busy recital tours to give me a lesson, and refused to accept any money for this.

## **American Concert Tour 1956**

For his next concert tour Jean Langlais was accompanied not by his wife, as in 1952 and 1954, but by a relative, Monique Legendre. Jeannette Langlais explained the reasons for the change in a letter to Lilian Murtagh:<sup>16</sup>

December 1, 1955

Dear Miss Murtagh,

It’s been a long time since I’ve had the pleasure of writing you.

I do so today with some sad news. Due to the fragile state of health of our son, who at 12 years of age is growing up too fast, I will not be able to accompany my husband in America this time. Our child has needed close supervision for some time now, and I would not be comfortable so far away from him. Fortunately, one of our close relatives will serve as a guide for my husband. She speaks English very well.

From this point on the guides for Langlais’ tours would all be relatives, friends, or students having a good command of English or even American students: Monique Legendre (1956), Christiane Chivot (1959), Marie Villey (1962), Ann Labounsky (1964), Susan Ferré (1967), Colette Lequien (beginning of the 1969 tour) then Marie-Louise Jaquet (1969, 1972, 1975), David Lloyd (1976), Kirsten Kolling (1978) and Marie-Louise Jaquet-Langlais (1981).

---

<sup>16</sup> From the correspondence of Lilian Murtagh bequeathed to the Organ Library of the Boston Chapter, American Guild of Organists, Boston University, copy in the collection of Marie-Louise Langlais.



In the course of the 1956 tour Jean Langlais dictated to Monique Legendre a group of letters to his wife, who later copied them into a manuscript journal entitled “*Troisième tournée aux U.S.A 1956.*”<sup>17</sup>

From it we are able to follow step-by-step the progress of this tour, always by train or automobile (as explained earlier, the tragic airplane accident off the Azores on October 28, 1949 that claimed the lives of the great French violinist Ginette Neveu and the world champion boxer Marcel Cerdan had made such a powerful impression throughout France that Jean Langlais refused energetically to travel by air).



**Departure for the United States, 1956 concert tour**

Figure 42. (collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

The result was an especially tiring itinerary that began in Boston and ended in Jamestown, New York, by way of several Midwestern states, Texas, New Mexico, California, Colorado, Utah, Chicago, Washington, D.C., North Carolina and Georgia.

All told there were 28 concerts and four masterclasses between January 7 and March 6, 1956. Especially significant was the fact that Langlais had been invited to play by the most well-known American organists: Robert Baker (New York City), Alexander McCurdy

---

<sup>17</sup> 93 manuscript pages transcribed by Jeannette Langlais from the letters Jean Langlais sent her while on tour (collection Marie-Louise Langlais). Certain excerpts from this sort of logbook were published 40 years afterwards on the occasion of the centennial of the composer’s birth, translated by Kathleen Thomerson for *The American Organist: Jean Langlais, “My Organ tour of the United States 1956,” The American Organist* (February 2007). 60-65. Ten years before, they already appeared in *Hommage à Langlais*, a 143-page booklet published by Marilyn Mason and the University of Michigan School of Music, Ann Arbor, 1996, in a translation by William R. Steinhoff (*Jean Langlais and the United States; a love story*. 11-16).

(Philadelphia), Marilyn Mason and Robert Noehren (Ann Arbor), Robert Rayfield (Chicago), Alexander Schreiner (Salt Lake City), and William Teague (Shreveport).

Let us examine several characteristic passages, often humorous, from Langlais' letters to his wife during this tour:

**Wednesday, January 11, 1956, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**

At 9:30 am I become acquainted with the most complicated organ that I have ever seen: 100 stops, two instruments in one console, separated by a large distance. Seven Swell boxes of which two are crescendo pedals, divisional combinations for each of the organs, general combinations for the organs separately and together.

At the intermission, Mc Curdy mentions that he is astonished I can handle the organ alone, given only a few hours to familiarize myself with it. I share his opinion. But what fear this morning when he explained the puzzle to me! The console rises by elevator at the beginning of the concert: when the organist takes his place on the bench, it rises and does not come down until one wants it to. For me, it was awful; and it took me at least fifteen concerts before getting rid of that feeling of vertigo.

**Sunday, January 15, Youngstown, Ohio**

Arrival in Youngstown at 6:40 am. Cold and foggy. No one at the train station. We go to the hotel, then to the church. We try to enter, at 7 am unsuccessfully. Return to the hotel to phone the concierge of the church. Return to the church, still unsuccessful. It was not the right church! We enter the right one at 7:50 am. The organbuilder is there. The instrument is in bad working condition. The setter for the manual combinations brings on the pedal stops. I fix without pedal stops. Then it suppresses all the pedal stops that were there before. I practice one hour and come back at noon: the organist cancelled all my combination pistons.

At four o'clock, the concert; all goes well. Very nice atmosphere.

**Monday, January 16, Akron, Ohio**

Arrival in Akron at 10:30 am. The organ has 118 stops, of which a large number are unusable strings. The crescendo pedal contains only strings. Certain reeds are also unusable. The organ works badly. Concert without trouble with good themes for improvisation. Good audience, nice environment.

**Tuesday, January 17, Ann Arbor, Michigan**

Very nice dinner in a private residence with eight students, Marilyn Mason and her husband. Marilyn Mason reminds me that I promised her a musical work. "I shall give you a commission," she says... That's the way it's done here. Of course, I refuse.

**Wednesday, January 18, Ann Arbor**

I confess that I feared this concert; I have had one of the worst cases of stage fright in my life. In the "Pièce héroïque" I really wondered if I could keep going.

We left under an avalanche of snow.

**Saturday, January 21, Kansas City, Missouri**

After a 16-hour trip, we arrived in Kansas City to cold and snow.

Horrible organ, no mixture on the Great, an unusable one in the Swell, no 4 foot in the Pedal, two general combinations that don't capture the couplers, dead notes everywhere, stops that come on when you don't want them, abominable sounding, out-of-tune instrument.

I fume openly and assert that one does not invite somebody to play such an organ.

All the same, I shall play the best I can, but without joy, and without stage fright either.



**Sunday, January 22, Kansas City**

Very bad sleepless night. Cold and still snow. Concert with stage fright (!). They placed 56 candles around me while I played ; the only thing missing was a coffin.

Cipher in one of the reed stops during the improvisation... Very long day.

We left at 9 pm to arrive tomorrow at midday in Shreveport. This snow and bad weather prevent me from taking walks, which depresses me immensely. I feel that the life of a concert artist is not for me<sup>18</sup> and I miss France and the ones I left there.

**Monday, January 23, Shreveport, Louisiana**

Fifteen-hour trip in the Pullman car of the train, where there is nothing hot to drink. Arrival at noon. Here it's better, there's no snow.

The organ is wonderful. No mechanical trouble.

I practice for two-and-a-half hours only. During the concert, I invert Dupré and Ross.

Everything goes well, yet I have continuous stage fright, despite an audience who applauds in this church. I play my "Te Deum" as an encore. The first theme given to me for improvisation is so complicated that it must have cost its composer a lot of work. The second is a folk-song... 17 days working: 10 recitals. Finally, one can go for a walk; how liberating!

**Tuesday January 24, Fort Worth, Texas**

Endless trip from Shreveport to Fort Worth. Arrival on a beautiful evening.

We stay on the university campus: 2 rooms, 4 beds, 2 bathrooms, and, above all, the countryside. I feel close to the earth in this ground-floor room facing a wide-open Texas, almost warm, and calm. So far from the artificial comfort to which I feel less and less suited! I compose until 1 am in this nice peacefulness. My *Prélude* for solo voice is begun and far along.

**Wednesday, January 25, Denton, Texas**

In Denton, Miss Helen Hewitt asked me to hear her organ students. Among other things, I listen to the chorale "In Thee is Gladness." "We tried the chimes in the Pedal, but I don't believe that we were right," Miss Hewitt said to me. "I do not believe it either, dear Miss Hewitt, nor were you right to put the tremolo in the "Prélude, fugue et variation" or the Oboe and the Voix céleste for the solo in the Choral n°1 of Franck. But you are so charming, looking for your car, which you didn't bring, and relating your cats' thoughts under various circumstances."

Return to Fort Worth; it's a nice evening. I finish my small *Prélude* for voices begun yesterday. Buxtehude gives me an idea. I am going to add a chaconne to this small piece: *Prélude, Fugue et Chaconne*.<sup>19</sup>

**Thursday, January 26, Denton**

Three pupils ask me to listen to them. The first plays the sixth Sonata of Mendelssohn with the Unda Maris and Flute 4' for the solo of the first variation. The second plays the theme of the Passacaglia with Foundations 16', 8', 4' and Voix céleste. When the third announced that he would play the "Dorian," I immediately recommended the sounds to be used.

**Friday, January 27, Denton**

The weather reminds one of the beautiful days in the South of France. Bye bye, the coat. I worked late on campus and from my open window I could hear the various horns of the trains that cross the city (E-A# or E-G-C or F#-A-C). To combat insomnia I made myself stay up past midnight.

<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, between 1952 and 1981 Jean Langlais would give some 300 recitals in America.

<sup>19</sup> This *Prelude, fugue et Chaconne* for voices was apparently never completed. No trace of it has ever been found in the papers of the composer.

I replaced my sleeping pills with the composing of *Prélude, Fugue et Chaconne* for wordless voices. This medicine surpasses the others, and I also have the impression that my little piece written entirely without instruments is not half-bad. I would add that walks outdoors are also as effective as the previously mentioned medicine.

At noon, the organists invited me to Western Hill, an excellent restaurant. It was Friday, the day for fish, but I was surprised that my neighbor ate meat. No matter, I wrapped myself in the flag of a French Roman Catholic organist and ordered halibut, which could have been anything between salmon and pike.

At 3 pm I practice, I sleep at 5 pm and Kathleen (Thomerson) arrives at 6 pm.

At 8:15 pm I start the concert. First class stage fright, both in the “Récit de Cromorne” of Couperin and in the Final of Vierne’s *Sixième Symphonie*. I don’t understand why. The Dean informs me that the audience is one of the largest seen here for several years. If, as Saint Augustine said, « humility is the truth, » I would say that I played well. 200th anniversary of the birth of Mozart, to the day. I improvise on the theme of the fugue of the *Fantaisie and Fugue* of said Mozart, in C major.

Two encores and they suggest to me one concert here per year, there being three in their series. They speak to me of my precision, of my light registration. This is definitely what I sought to show the Americans.

Everywhere I tell them bad things about their Solo (4th) manuals, showing them that I never use it except for perhaps a few notes on an English Horn.

I occupy a lower berth in the train. I fight courageously to undress in a horizontal position, to put my things away in this small space. What complicates everything is when you have a keyboard under your pillow.<sup>20</sup> And then, the prospect of reversing the process the next morning. Let’s hope that the night gives me strength for the new battle!



**Jean Langlais with his portable keyboard, 1956**

Figure 43. (collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

### **Saturday, January 28**

6 am. Second battle in the lower berth, crowned by a considerable victory: pulling my pants on without putting my feet on the ground, due in large part to the thickness of my pillow as augmented by my portable keyboard.

---

<sup>20</sup> Indeed, during the 1956 tour Jean Langlais carried with him a mute folding keyboard, as shown in a photo from January 1956. Let us recall that for his first tour in 1952 he took along a bulky French-English Braille dictionary. Feeling more certain of his English this time, he preferred to bring along a keyboard upon which he could practice during the interminable train rides.



Got cleaned up in the men's room, surrounded by business men, presumably, who all spoke loudly and used electric razors. Alone in a corner with my \$1 mechanical razor, ought I to confess that I did not feel inferior to my neighbors in spite of my humble condition? Change of trains in Amarillo, very Mexican in character, treeless, quiet, with children hawking newspapers in voices already typically Spanish in tone.

Arrival in Albuquerque at about 7 pm after having crossed the arid desert regions, then the Rocky Mountains which circle the city from where I write.<sup>21</sup>

### **Sunday, January 29, Albuquerque, New Mexico**

For the second time since I started this tour, I can attend Mass. It feels good to go to church this morning in the sunny and cool mountains, 2.000 meters above sea level.

I played a concert at 4 pm without problems, on an interesting organ, which, however, contains on the Choir a Cornet made with Dulcianas!... Delightful reception, after the recital, where I had the pleasure of speaking French with four priests, among whom were three Fathers of the Holy Sacrament. With the Mass and the sparrows, one felt at home.

### **Tuesday, January 31, Albuquerque**

Between 10 am and noon, I settled myself in peaceful solitude in the church where I played on Sunday. There I wrote the beginning of a suite for organ that I want to construct modally. However the starting mode chosen for each piece will be transposed over the course of the piece, but never modified in its modal scale.<sup>22</sup>

Departure for California.

### **Wednesday, February 1, Fresno, California**

We left Albuquerque yesterday night one and a half hours late, arriving in Fresno with a five-hour delay. Endless trip with three hours on a bus in between two trains. A short visit to the charming town of Bakersfield.

### **Thursday, February 2, Fresno**

The organ for the concert is tiny, two keyboards, four general pistons, four divisional pistons, none in the Pedal. Ugly sonorities. While I'm practicing the priest comes to see me, a charming and courteous man. He doesn't speak French but knows France, specifically the cathedral at Poitiers and its old organ... This morning, at the church, I finished my first "Pièce Modale."

### **Friday, February 3, Fresno**

Glorious weather... Concert at 8.30 ; I play program Number 3 on this terribly ugly organ without Pedal pistons, then, no stage fright.

### **Saturday, February 4, San Francisco, California**

Up at 5:30 am. We left by car at 7:15 to arrive at 10:45 (180 miles) in San Francisco. In Mrs. Larkey's large car, we listened to the *Symphony Eroica* toward the end of the trip. This beautiful music in this beautiful country has a considerable effect on me!

### **Sunday, February 5, San Francisco**

Magnificent weather. Forshaw,<sup>23</sup> Nin,<sup>24</sup> Ann Larkey<sup>25</sup> and I go to church, where I am to rehearse at noon, after having lunch at John Forshaw's.

---

<sup>21</sup> Albuquerque is actually surrounded by the Sandia Mountains.

<sup>22</sup> These are the *Huit Pièces modales* composed between January 31 and March 12, 1956 in Albuquerque, Fresno, and aboard the *Maasdam* on the return voyage. They were completed for publication by Filippo in 1957.

<sup>23</sup> John Forshaw, friend and student of Jean Langlais who invited him to play in California in 1956.

<sup>24</sup> Joaquin Nin, brother of the famous writer Anaïs Nin, composer and student with Jean Langlais in the class of Paul Dukas at the Conservatoire de Paris in 1934-1935.

<sup>25</sup> Ann Larkey, dedicatee of the *Huit Pièces modales*.

I practice a short half-hour, then we go for a walk in San Francisco... Concert with a minimum of stage fright. The organ bench, short and narrow, rocks back and forth!

#### **Thursday, February 9**

Up at 6:10 am. 7 to 8: A walk among the streams, birds and trees is enchanting : marvellous Californian morning's poetry. Unknown birdsongs... I love this country, though it is so far from mine. I intend to set down my memories in an orchestral work.<sup>26</sup> I began my third "Pièce Modale" yesterday. Alas, I'll only have time to work on it again on the ship going home.

#### **Saturday, February 11, Denver, Colorado**

At 9 am, I familiarize myself with the organ on which I will play this evening.

Incredible Pedal: three 16' stops, one huge 8', no 4'.

No mixture, for reeds: just an Oboe. Great: no mixture, an unusable Trumpet as the only reed, the only 2' in the organ is on the Choir. No general pistons. The first things the crescendo brings on are the 16'...

At 5 pm, reception at the consulate, which brought out 40 or 50 people. At the end, a guest, saying goodbye, wanted to show me that she had on an orchid.

1. she put my finger on her lighted cigarette
2. on her chest
3. on the orchid
4. of all that, I think that I preferred the cigarette...though lit. She offered to have me smell the orchid, but I quickly retreated !

#### **Tuesday, February 14, Salt Lake City, Utah**

Mr. Schreiner shows me the organ<sup>27</sup> : 188 stops, five manuals, 196 pistons, 20 general pistons, 8 for each manual, 5 expressive boxes and so on. This organ is marvelous, the most beautiful I have ever seen. A new thing for me: a 32' Mixture in the Pedal with a 7th; a 32' reed stop on the Swell. Nine-rank Cornet on the Positif, including the 7th and the major Tierce.<sup>28</sup>

The preparation of this recital fills me with enthusiasm. I exhaust myself without realizing it. 8.15 pm, concert. Two encores... This huge temple holds about 8,000 persons seated and the acoustic there is very special.

#### **Thursday, February 16, Omaha, Nebraska**

4:40 am: Arrival in Omaha; frozen, icy cold.

A staff member from Boys Town, an orphanage with 900 children, is at the train station with his car.... The ambience here is very nice, lunch with Msgr. Wegner and Father Schmitt, who conducted my *Messe Solennelle* and my *Missa in simplicitate*.

Yesterday, it was my birthday and I received greetings from Miss Hewitt and her pupils in Denton. Her cat, Quintadena, was born on February 14, so she had an important reference point from which to remember *my* birthday.

At the concert, optional for the boys, 300 out of 900 attended.

I improvised on "Puer natus est" which was intoned by the boys.

#### **Friday, February 17, Minneapolis, Minnesota**

Departure Boys Town: 8 am, it is very cold.

Arrival Minneapolis: 7 pm. It is even colder (-15° F)...

---

<sup>26</sup> In fact, Jean Langlais wrote 3 years later, in 1959, an *American Suite* for organ in eight movements published by H. W. Gray. The title of each movement evokes a part of this American land that he loved so much: "Big Texas", "New-York on a Sunday morning", "Californian evocation", "Scherzo cats", "At Buffalo Bill's grave", "Boystown, place of peace" and "Storm in Florida".

<sup>27</sup> Alexander Schreiner (1901-1987), organist at the Mormon Tabernacle and its 1948 Aeolian-Skinner organ.

<sup>28</sup> After discovering this organ Jean Langlais decided to add a Clairon 2' to the Sainte-Clotilde Récit, to complete the battery of reeds to 16-8-4-2; it was added in 1963 during restoration and electrification.



**Sunday, February 19, Chicago, Illinois**

Departure for Chicago at 7:30 pm; arrival at 4 pm.

Rayfield is at the train station and takes us to his home, an hour by car.

It is freezing, there is some snow, but compared to the weather in Minneapolis, it seems warm.

**Wednesday, February 22, Decatur, Illinois**

At the concert, I hardly have stage fright.

During my “Arabesque sur les flûtes” there’s a sonority that I didn’t want. I searched everywhere for what was making it. Only at the end of the piece I discovered that the crescendo pedal was slightly open. No one noticed...

12:15 pm: Mass during which I play. They told me that I could practice from 1 to 2:30 pm. Asked to make a recording. I makes some trials with the microphone until 1:30.

But then I learn that there’s a silent retreat at 1:45 pm. Therefore, I cannot practice for the concert scheduled for 3 pm. So it is with Catholic churches!

2:45 pm: the organbuilder arrives, all smiles, 15 minutes before the concert. I show him what is not working. He offers to intervene but I respond, “Please, do not touch the organ, there is enough wrong with it already!” and I do not hear from him anymore.

Concert at 3 pm with a full church and people standing. Everything went as well as possible. The gods were present. It is terribly hot. I play without a jacket and it seems that I am photographed non-stop. “When one has a necktie, one is dressed,” the Cistercian priest told me.

**Monday, February 27, Washington, D.C.**

19 hours of travel. Joyful arrival in Washington without cold or snow. How good it is! Nobody at the train station. A taxi drives us to Saint Matthew’s Cathedral where I am to play. The organist says he is astonished at my English, remembering my difficulties four years ago. Finally an organ that works. I register my entire program in two and half hours. Dinner and a walk in this city that I like so much.

**Wednesday, February 29, Washington**

Happy funeral for the end of this month. My joy is hidden because I do not feel capable to express it with a bottle of Coca-Cola.

**Monday, March 5, New York, NY, Central Presbyterian Church**

The hardest day of my tour and I play this evening in New York.

Only two more days, but I feel that I have really reached my limit. Very low morale.

I practice with very little joy, though the organ is poetic...

8:30 pm: concert. The church is packed. There are many New York organists, many French people as well. The programme has no improvisation. However Hugh Giles has Bingham themes and gives me one. I felt the audience with me from start to finish.

The daughter of Paul Dukas was there, Virgil Fox also. I recalled with emotion César Franck’s organ bench.

I had stage fright. I was really on edge this afternoon. Then, something came over me, and my spirit lifted. I played with more joy than I would have thought.

I lost my beret this morning and one of my two handkerchiefs. It’s time to go home. Murtagh gently sounded me out about a new tour in two years. Nothing doing.

**Tuesday, March 6, Jamestown, NY**

Jamestown. Small city of 43,000 habitants, having 43 churches!...

Concert: after my first piece, the audience expresses itself by wildly shaking the programs. What a curious effect, the sound of the paper; it will be like that all during the concert.<sup>29</sup> It reminded me a little bit of a student assembly.

---

<sup>29</sup> Certain American churches of the time forbade applause at any time.

During the “Pièce héroïque” of Franck, a bat kept flying back and forth quite near me; then it was chased and caught.

They asked for a Lutheran chorale as an improvisation theme, in C major. I thus finished my series of twenty-eight recitals on a magnificent “C” chord whose clarity was not exactly in harmony with my extreme fatigue.

10 pm, train for New York. The tour is practically finished. I find it hard to realize.

**Wednesday, March 7, New York, NY**

Meeting with Gray concerning my quintet for string quartet and organ that he will publish this summer.<sup>30</sup>

It is quite easy for me to sum up: I cannot play anymore.

In the 65 days I have been in the U.S.A, I have had three full days of rest, two in California, one in Washington.

Once again, Providence has done things well in helping me hold on until the job was done. I am thankful, but I am so tired that even my great enthusiasm at returning to France and everything I left behind there doesn't show.

May the eight quiet days of the crossing allow me to recover my equilibrium.

These are the most important excerpts from Jean Langlais' letters to his wife during the 1956 tour. One can scarcely imagine the immense fatigue he must have felt during the constant train travel, the frequently cold and snowy weather, the crowded schedule of concerts and masterclasses on occasionally inadequate organs, and the insomnia of which he rarely spoke but which left him exhausted each morning. Even so, his fundamentally optimistic disposition and fighting spirit allowed him to transcend exhaustion. There were moments of sunshine in the landscape of California, as well as in certain cities, New York, Washington, and San Francisco among them. Above all there was the pervasive feeling of friendship and admiration that he felt all around him.

Arriving in New York in January 1956, Jean Langlais was only a blind organist appreciated by connoisseurs. By the time of his departure in March, he had become one of the most sought-after concert artists, composers, and teachers from across the Atlantic. The definitive establishment of this new reputation would open a bright future for him. At the same time, he found in America a new world that would greatly stimulate his imagination, as his future compositions would demonstrate.

One recalls his first American commissions: *Fête* (Gray, 1949), *Four Postludes* (McLaughlin & Reilly, 1951), *Mass in ancient style* (McLaughlin & Reilly, 1952), and *Folkloric Suite* (Fitzsimons, 1954). Upon his return from the 1956 tour Jean Langlais began receiving further commissions from American publishers, beginning with *Organ Book* (Elkan-Vogel, 1957), a collection of ten easy pieces composed between March 27 and August 7, 1956. He dedicated it to Jacqueline Marchal, the only daughter of his first teacher, André Marchal, on the occasion of her marriage to the Swiss avant-garde composer Giuseppe Englert. “Pasticcio,” the final piece in the collection, celebrates the newlyweds with a delightful pastiche of early dance music. This collection, while originally a wedding gift, offered American organists an unpretentious selection of easy, short pieces, most without pedal, for use in a variety of church and concert situations. They are excellent teaching pieces, even for

---

<sup>30</sup> This is the *Pièce en forme libre* composed in 1936 and dedicated to his wife Jeannette, one of his best works, according to the composer. It would be published by Gray, not in 1956 as planned but in 1960 under the title *Piece in free form*. Later, after its copyright was returned to Jean Langlais, it was reprinted by Combret in 1984 under its original French title.



beginners. Registration indications are provided in English alone. Their immediate success surprised both the composer and the publisher. The composer Seth Bingham noted:<sup>31</sup>

These pieces are surprisingly easy, yet richly varied in mood and treatment. They have originality, distinction and expressive power – qualities utterly lacking in hundreds of worthless attempts by “short and easy” writers.

The timid organist who nibbles warily at new music but darts away at the slightest hint of difficulty will be emboldened to gulp the tempting Langlais bait. (...)

As for the witty “Pasticcio,” it risks being played by everybody!

“Pasticcio” remained so popular that 25 years later, in 1982, Jean Langlais arranged it for two trumpets and organ as *Pastorale et rondo* (Elkan-Vogel, 1983). He also authorized the American composer Sue Mitchell Wallace to adapt it for handbells (3 octaves, 35-38 bells) and organ under the title *Paeon of Joy* (Elkan-Vogel, 1987).

Langlais’ next American commission, *Miniature*, appeared in H. W. Gray’s “Marilyn Mason Organ Series” in 1959 and was dedicated to her.

## **American Concert Tour 1959**

Jean Langlais’ exhaustion was such at the end of the 1956 tour that he confided to his journal on March 8: “At noon we leave America. God knows when I’ll return.”

The answer would come fewer than three years later, when New Year’s Day 1959 would find Jean Langlais aboard the *Queen Mary* bound for New York. This fourth concert tour would also be documented in a journal<sup>32</sup> taken down by his new guide, Christiane Chivaux.

Once again the schedule devised by his agent Colbert would have given any recitalist pause: 41 concerts in the space of 71 days, with the usual travel by train and automobile across enormous distances. Langlais’ itinerary would take him across New Jersey, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Missouri, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Colorado, Washington, California, Arizona, Oklahoma, Texas, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Kentucky, New York, and New Hampshire.

As Langlais noted with pride in his journal entry for January 4:

In the course of conversation, Colbert, who met our ship but somehow missed us, confessed that I was his artist with the most engagements in the most prestigious locales. Simply reading the ten pages of my schedule typed out by Lilian Murtagh required courage.

There was another side to this notoriety, however, as Langlais expressed in an interview in the *St. Louis Globe Democrat*:<sup>33</sup>

On his own ground, he can forget his handicap but when he travels he must take with him a companion. Probably for this reason, tours aren’t much fun for him. “I don’t like them too much but I’m obliged to make them,” he said. “This work is hard, 38 recitals in 10 weeks.<sup>34</sup> At the beginning of this tour I had seven recitals in 10 days. It is exhausting, because I must practice too. The organ is always difficult on tour because

<sup>31</sup> Seth Bingham, *The Diapason*, November 1957.

<sup>32</sup> Jean Langlais, *Relation de voyage, Etats-Unis, tournée 1959*. Typescript, 59 pages, collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

<sup>33</sup> *Blind organist is one of world’s best*, *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, January 22, 1959.

<sup>34</sup> In fact, three additional recitals would be added during the tour, bringing the total to 41.

they are all different in each place: some big, some small, some in good order, some bad. So you must see what you have before the recital. Four hours of practicing is usually enough.”

How does he manage the pace? “By sleeping as much as possible,” he said with a shy smile. “Whenever there is nothing else to be done, I sleep.”

Langlais’ reception in the press was consistently favorable, where he garnered such headlines as:

“**700 here cheer blind organist**” (Frank Mulheron, *Bridgeport Post*, January 13, 1959)

“**Blind organist is one of world’s best**” (*St. Louis Globe Democrat*, January 22, 1959)

“**Langlais attracts 1400 to recital, 91 to master class**” (Nancy Ragsdale, *The Diapason*, April 1, 1959, regarding his appearances in Des Moines, Iowa)

In its January 1959 issue, just as Langlais’ tour was about to begin, *The Diapason* published a long article by Robert Sutherland Lord that included a complete list of Langlais’ published organ works from the *Poèmes évangéliques* of 1932 through *l’Office pour la Sainte Famille* of 1957, with detailed analyses. It also included several typical anecdotes:<sup>35</sup>

Another work with American associations, although it was published in France, is his *Huit Pièces modales*. This collection was begun during his last concert tour of the United States in 1956. According to the composer, the first piece was completed in Fresno, Cal., and the second in Albuquerque, N.M.

The collection is dedicated to one of Langlais’ American friends, Anne Larkey. Their chance meeting took place in Paris near Ste. Clotilde. Although Langlais is very familiar with the rather long walk from the church to his home, he became confused one late afternoon by the movement of the traffic -- not a difficult thing to have happen on Paris streets. Anne Larkey happened to be at the same corner and noted the confusion of the blind man. She went over to him and asked if she might be of assistance. From this first meeting has grown a long friendship.

Such visitors are familiar with the small leather-bound guest book which he keeps. The names of many American musicians are recorded in it – Seth Bingham, the late Richard Ross, Catharine Crozier, Harold Gleason, David Craighead, Virgil Fox and Walter Holtkamp.

As had become his custom, Jean Langlais prepared three different programs for his 1959 tour, each concluding with a large-scale improvisation. The formula included a dose of early music (Couperin, Calvière, the Bach Ste. Anne fugue, BWV 552 and *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*, BWV 645), some symphonic school excerpts (“Final” from the *Première Symphonie* by Vierne, the “Final” by Franck and “Communion” from *l’Office de la nativité de la Sainte-Vierge* of Tournemire) and contemporary music (Messiaen, Bingham).

The last invariably included a selection of his own works with emphasis on the most recent (“Rhapsody on 2 Noëls” (*Folkloric Suite*), *Triptyque*, “Pièce modale” n°1 (*Huit Pièces modales*), “Scherzando,” “Pasticcio” from the *Organ Book* alongside a few earlier ones : “Prélude au Kyrie” (*Hommage à Frescobaldi*) and “Final” (*Première Symphonie*).

---

<sup>35</sup> Robert S. Lord, *Sources of past serve Langlais in organ works*, *The Diapason*, January 1959. 24-25.

Lord, who studied with Langlais in Paris in 1958 on a Reynolds fellowship from Dartmouth College, was a doctoral candidate at Yale University at the time of the article’s publication. He became one of Langlais’ closest American friends and was the first American musicologist to research the organ music of Charles Tournemire.



Langlais' journal from the 1959 tour is rich in anecdotes and descriptions, but let us examine more closely the summary Jean Langlais published afterwards in the magazine *Musique et Liturgie*. In it he compared the situations of church organs in France and America:<sup>36</sup>

The organ in Long Beach, California, upon which I played<sup>37</sup> cost \$100,000, or around 100 million francs. Beneath the church in which this magnificent instrument resides there is an active oil field, which makes it easier to understand the aforementioned extravagant sum. The church has subsided four feet as a result of the oil exploration, but it possesses one of the most beautiful instruments in the country. One would be grateful for a few oil wells under our churches in France.

Still, it is to be feared that the role of the organ as it evolves today may no longer be what it once was. In spite of its intrinsic beauty and that of its repertory it must increasingly yield to religious songs in our services whose merit is highly debatable.

On the other hand, consider the following: in Boston, for the second time, His Eminence Cardinal Cushing invited me to play at Symphony Hall. Speaking before the recital to an audience of 2,000 he began, "what would you like me to sing?" Responding to the audience's amusement he continued, "what would you think of a little benediction?" which he proceeded to give: "Sit nomen Domini benedictum," to which he responded "Ex hoc nunc et usque in saeculum." His Eminence then explained that we were about to hear the premiere of my *Psaume 150* performed by a choir of 80 men. Then this prince of the Church, whose unpretentiousness was legendary, came and brought me onstage. Having presented me to the audience, he led me to the organ bench, saying aloud, "Here is your throne, Monsignore." I received a friendly tap on the head, heard him say "good luck!" under his breath and thus began the concert in a truly unusual way.

In Lansing, Michigan, I was informed that the Catholic bishop wished to meet me. What an interesting conversation we had. I related to my distinguished visitor how often I was surprised to hear bad music poorly performed in American Catholic churches. I asked him why Protestant churches held religious services that differed so markedly from the prevailing atmosphere in Catholic churches. One had to recognize, alas, that good Catholic organists and choirs are very rare, and that the majority of organ virtuosi are Protestant.

How many times have I heard Presbyterians or Episcopalians boast of the beauty of a particular Catholic church while simultaneously bemoaning the poverty of its musical resources? My friendly bishop was extremely embarrassed by my question, to which he gave no precise answer. The obvious reason for this state of affairs seems clear: some Protestant organists are paid four or five hundred dollars a month. Catholic organists are frequently dedicated volunteers. The organist who wishes to make a living from his profession has to dedicate himself fully to it, while the pastor who offers a living wage to a musician expects a commensurate level of talent from him.

How I wish this respectful observation would come to the attention of certain French clergy. If I personally heard some masses in America that were scandalous from a musical point of view, I also had the opportunity to observe, at Cambridge,<sup>38</sup> the style and perfection of a boy choir singing Gregorian chant.

Once again, I took away from America so many touching and pleasant memories.

My meeting with Darius Milhaud is far from the least of these recollections. The frenetic pace of Parisian life prevented us from meeting there last year. We promised

---

<sup>36</sup> Jean Langlais, *Mon quatrième voyage aux Etats-Unis, Musique et Liturgie*, July-September 1959. 15-17.

<sup>37</sup> At First Congregational Church, Möller's opus 8800 of 1956.

<sup>38</sup> At St. Paul's Choir School, Cambridge, MA, under the direction of Theodore Marier.



one another to remedy that. Thus it was that I spent several precious hours with him near San Francisco, this great master who has mastered the art of remaining simple.

As for the organs I had to play, they were like the trains: I experienced the best and the worst. However, nowhere in America was I inconvenienced by organ pipes filled with droppings and parasites. Fortunately their poison has not spread across the Atlantic. No American organist told me that one can play the third Choral of Franck perfectly well without a Swell box, devoid of all dynamic expression. What would one think of a violinist who, inspired by such an allegation, played the *Sonata* of Franck with a similar misunderstanding of the nuances specified by the composer himself? No, gentlemen, the organ of Buxtehude will not suffice. Our contemporary music requires finesse, a thousand subtleties, and thus Swell boxes.

American organ builders understand this and have reason to believe in the future while respecting the past. There is no reason for the organ to be the only musical instrument exempt from perfection. Grigny was a great musician. Messiaen is another. By virtue of what principle should we have the possibility of playing Grigny but not Messiaen? In spite of everything, artistic reason will prevail.

Carry on then, Aeolian-Skinner and the other American organ builders. You are the ones to see this clearly.

What would Jean Langlais say today, in 2016, regarding the numerous new organs constructed in the United States, Europe, and Asia according to purely historical Germanic and French techniques? He would be extremely disappointed, but as the saying goes, “the wheel turns.”

Langlais’ diary from the 1959 American tour is more extensive than the earlier ones from 1952, 1954, and 1956. It is intended more for his family. By this time Langlais was familiar with America. He had travelled the length and breadth of it and was no longer an isolated occasional visitor. Well-known, admired everywhere, he returned frequently now to places he already knew. His thoughts turned to his relatives back home, to whom he took pleasure in recounting the details of his extremely busy schedule.<sup>39</sup>

He took special pleasure in seeing old friends again during his travels. Writing less about his concerts and the new organs encountered, he preferred to relate with no small amount of pride the reactions his appearances produced:

After my class Melvin West<sup>40</sup> said to me, “Nobody had any questions for you because they were fascinated.” (Springfield, Massachusetts, January 6)

Yesterday evening, in Des Moines, I was told that my concert drew about three times as many listeners as other recitals, with people coming from as far away as California and the Dakotas.

Everywhere I go I am the beneficiary of a favorable partiality, both beforehand and afterwards. Technically speaking, I have never felt more in possession of my powers.

On the social side, I am enjoying much more satisfaction now than on previous tours.

My compositions and a weak knowledge of the language have helped me on this point.

(Des Moines, Iowa, January 24)

In Seattle as well the organizers told me they had never seen so many people at an organ recital. (Seattle, Washington, February 2)

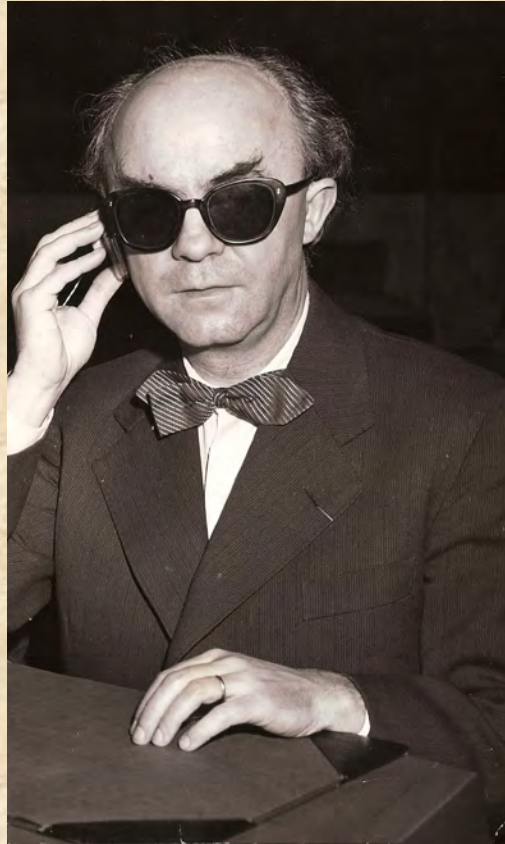
---

<sup>39</sup> In Jacksonville, Illinois, he wrote on January 20, 1959: “Yesterday I telephoned Colbert. In the course of our conversation he asked me, ‘Where are you?’ and I could only reply, ‘I no longer know.’”

<sup>40</sup> Melvin West (born 1930), Adventist organist and Chair of the music department at Walla Walla College from 1959 to 1977.



I gave a Bach concert recorded for radio that would not have made Claude, my son, blush upon hearing it.<sup>41</sup> I was hidden at the organ, and told there would be no applause in this chapel of 500 seats. Nonetheless when I appeared with Catherine Crozier there was a long standing ovation. (Winter Park, Florida, February 26)



**Jean Langlais at the end of his 1959 American tour<sup>42</sup>**  
Figure 44. (collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

The 1959 tour marked an important moment for Jean Langlais from a compositional point of view, for during his transatlantic crossing home on March 19 he began to translate his “American impressions” into music in the form of a long suite (nearly 45 minutes) entitled simply *American Suite*.

He had conceived the idea for it during his 1956 tour, originally thinking it would be for orchestra. Composed in eight movements with English titles, this new suite, published in the United States by H.W. Gray in 1961, received a lukewarm reception, particularly among French organists put off by its anecdotal nature. They were especially shocked by “Storm in Florida,” whose realism they judged vulgar. These were the same organists who, unable to appreciate a modern storm scene, were the first to revive the taste for the storm pieces of Lefébure-Wely and other 19<sup>th</sup>-century composers. A French paradox!

*American Suite* marked the beginning, perhaps without full awareness on Langlais’ part, of his disengagement from the French-speaking organ world. The purists found this collection of picture postcards trivial, too far-removed from the world of sacred organ music.

---

<sup>41</sup>Langlais’ 16 years old son Claude was an excellent musician in his own right, whose opinion mattered enormously to his father.

<sup>42</sup> Photograph published in *Le Télégramme de Brest* (April 29, 1959) to illustrate an article titled: “Jean Langlais, organist-composer, tells us about his triumphant tour of the United States.”

A review from Langlais's recital on April 5, 1962 in Montréal, Canada is indicative:<sup>43</sup>

The two excerpts from the *American Suite*, particularly this indescribable "Storm in Florida" (sic!) are in dubious taste and seem to me unworthy of so great a thinker.

Nevertheless the suite had its admirers, even in France:<sup>44</sup>

One is surprised at the evocative visual power of these eight pieces written by a blind musician, who takes us across the New World from the shores of the Atlantic to the Pacific. Here, first of all, is a majestic interpretation of Texas, followed by a surprising depiction of "New York on a Sunday morning" complete with pigeons cooing and church bells tolling softly in a silence the music renders tangible. After a luminous tableau of the California coast, we enter a church in Chicago to attend a confirmation. Two melodies stand in opposition before being superimposed skillfully through a modal alteration.

"At Buffalo Bill's grave" (theme and variation) transports us to the icy landscape of the Rocky Mountains, before we're invited to another church service, Roman Catholic this time, at "Boys Town, place of peace." A children's choir intones "O Salutaris hostia" and "Ave Maris stella."

The collection concludes with a realistic evocation of a "Storm in Florida," terrifying both in its effect and in the demands it makes upon the performer. A work for virtuosos and the concert hall, certainly, but also a symphonic poem in eight parts, similar in certain respects to the *Pièces de Fantaisie* of Vierne, aligning itself with a descriptive vein that runs through French organ music from the "Cloches" of Lebègue through the "Carillons" of Louis Couperin right up to Dupré's *Suite bretonne*.

The inspiration for the controversial "Storm in Florida" was recounted by the composer himself in his tour journal. Arriving at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, on February 26, 1959 to participate in the all-Bach concert with Catharine Crozier, Langlais found himself in the midst of a tropical thunderstorm :

For the first time in my life thunder actually frightened me. I attempted to portray by atypical means the unleashing of meteorological forces that began as menacing and intensified to cataclysmic. I suggested a sky in fury musically, following the precepts of Louis Vierne when he said, "he who reproduces the sound of the sea for himself is a simpleton; he who creates the atmosphere of the sea to serve as a framework for his dream is an artist."

In spite of this storm piece in the manner of Lefébure-Wély, the attentive reader will discover in *American Suite* several new developments in Langlais' musical language. By simplifying his style, a process already begun in *Organ Book*, Langlais gives free rein to verve, lyricism, and exuberance accompanied by notable rhythmic advances. These are most evident in "New York on a Sunday morning," where he incorporates polyrhythms in the form of "rhythmic personalities" that are introduced separately and then combined in subtle counterpoint. One also finds in several places, most notably in "Californian evocation," the introduction of birdsong, not in the scientific manner of Messiaen, but freely, with a voluble sense of poetry.

Jean Langlais also sprinkles these pieces with quotations that allow him to perfect his descriptions of certain places. In "Boys Town, place of peace" he incorporates two plainsong themes, "O salutaris" and "Ave

<sup>43</sup> Claude Gingras, *Jean Langlais, organiste et compositeur*, La Presse, Montréal, April 6, 1962.

<sup>44</sup> Pierre Denis, *L'Orgue*, n°100 (October–December 1961). 190-191.



Maris stella,” and the litany “pray for us” that were frequently sung in the chapel there. To this he adds the well-known Westminster carillon theme because, as the composer explained, “the grandfather clock near the room in the presbytery where I stayed at Boys Town intoned this theme day and night, which certainly did not help my natural tendency toward insomnia.”<sup>45</sup>

The descriptive character of this collection relies upon unusual sonorities as well. Flute 4' and Tierce 1 3/5' evoke church bells in “New York on a Sunday morning.” Other unusual combinations include Bourdon 16' and Voix humaine 8' with Tremolo (“Confirmation in Chicago”) and Hautbois 8', Bourdon 8', Nazard 2 2/3', and Piccolo 2' (“At Buffalo Bill's grave”).

From a harmonic point of view, *American Suite* offers a balanced synthesis of various elements deployed according to the nature of the melodic material at hand. If it is modal, the accompaniment will be also, as in the “Western” style Dorian mode transposed and harmonized with characteristic color “At Buffalo Bill's grave.” On the other hand, if the theme is chromatic (“Storm in Florida”) its harmonization will abandon all modal and tonal footing in order to devote itself entirely to chromaticism.

In conclusion, *American Suite* is one of Langlais' largest descriptive frescoes, introducing certain promising innovations (rhythmic structures, birdsong, unusual registrations) without breaking with the past. It presages his development over the coming decade. It also contained much to displease French organists of the time, who were increasingly turning their attention back to the French Classic organ and its composers: Couperin, Grigny, Clérambault, Marchand, and others.

*American Suite* was eventually abandoned by H.W. Gray, who returned the copyright to the composer in 1976. Jean Langlais then had the idea to revise seven of its eight pieces,<sup>46</sup> dividing them into two groups and consigning them to different publishers. Combre took “At Buffalo Bill's grave” and “Boys Town, place of peace,” which became parts of *Mosaïque*, volume I. The five remaining pieces became the *Troisième Symphonie* published by Universal. “Storm in Florida” was decommissioned, transformed into “Orage” and stripped of more than 50 measures, one-fifth of its original length. “Californian evocation” was also cut extensively, taking on the neutral title “Cantabile.” “Scherzo-Cats” became “Intermezzo.” Only “New York on a Sunday morning” kept its original title, although translated into French as “Un dimanche matin à New-York.”

Did these transformations engender a fundamental change in public opinion?

An examination of publishers' sales figures gives an answer:<sup>47</sup> H.W. Gray sold 703 copies of *American Suite* between 1959 and 1976, while Universal moved 1021 copies of the recycled *Troisième Symphonie* from 1981 to 2014. Proportionally the quantities are about the same, but the music itself did not disappear. One can still find “Scherzo-Cats” on recital programs

---

<sup>45</sup> Related to the author on November 4, 1969.

<sup>46</sup> He did not wish to republish “Confirmation in Chicago,” a piece he considered unsuccessful.

<sup>47</sup> Collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

today, the use of its original title rather than “Intermezzo” suggesting that some organists did not forget the “Cats”...

## **Boys Town Summer Liturgical Workshops – Missa Misericordiae Domini**

Jean Langlais made an acquaintance during the 1956 tour that proved to be a lasting influence on his future compositions. On February 16 he met Monsignor Wegner,<sup>48</sup> successor to Father Flanagan, the founder of Boys Town.<sup>49</sup>

Commensurate with his vision that all children could prosper if given love, shelter, education, and a trade, Father Flanagan had founded a choir at Boys Town in the 1930s. In 1941 he appointed Father Francis Schmitt<sup>50</sup> as choirmaster with the stipulation that he build “the finest boys’ choir in the country.” Father Schmitt developed an extensive musical program that led to recordings, television appearances, and concerts around the world. He was also editor of *Caecilia*, a sacred music journal for Roman Catholic musicians, in which Seth Bingham published a long and important review of the choral masses of Jean Langlais.<sup>51</sup>

In addition, from 1952 to 1969 Father Schmitt organized and directed the Summer Liturgical Music Workshops at Boys Town. They were a center of musical excellence for church music of their time, uniting some 150 musicians of all faiths. Father Schmitt led sessions on vocal technique, using his boy choir for demonstrations. The noted choral conductor Roger Wagner<sup>52</sup> prepared the participants for a large-scale choral work (for example, the Duruflé *Requiem*) to be presented in concert at the end of each two-week session. European organists were regularly invited to teach and play during the summer workshops, among them Flor Peeters, Michael Schneider, Anton Heiller, and Jean Langlais.

As he wrote in his *Relation de voyage aux Etats-Unis, tournée 1959*, it was at the conclusion of a recital in Des Moines on January 23, 1959 that Langlais met Father Schmitt, who invited him to teach at Boys Town during the last two weeks of August 1959.

I accepted, but for 1960. Naturally, Claude will be my traveling companion if it comes about. I want to introduce him to America.

Jean Langlais preferred 1960 because he judged his son Claude, 16 years of age in 1959, to be too young at the time. He encountered considerable pressure from Father Schmitt, however, and finally accepted for 1959. Claude did accompany him on that occasion, and again in 1961 and 1963. Shortly after their arrival in New York the two “tourists” boarded a train headed for California. Claude wrote to his mother:<sup>53</sup>

It’s a very comfortable train, but the trip is so long: fifty hours without stopping for air!  
Past Denver the train moved so slowly that we thought it was going to stop (and there

<sup>48</sup> Nicholas Wegner (1898-1976), executive director of Boys Town from 1948 to 1973.

<sup>49</sup> Edward J. Flanagan (1886-1948), an Irish priest who emigrated to America in 1904, founded his orphanage for delinquent boys aged 10 to 16 in Omaha in 1917, relocating it ten miles west to the present site of Boys Town in 1921. The eponymous 1938 film starring Spencer Tracy and Mickey Rooney won an Academy Award and spread the fame of his work.

<sup>50</sup> Francis P. “Frank” Schmitt (1916-1994).

<sup>51</sup> Seth Bingham, *The choral masses of Jean Langlais*, *Caecilia*, vol. 86, no. 2, (summer 1959). 73-82.

<sup>52</sup> Roger Wagner (1914-1992) emigrated from his native France to California at an early age, returning to study with Marcel Dupré in the 1930s. Returning to Los Angeles, he founded the Roger Wagner Chorale and later the Los Angeles Master Chorale, both widely known through concerts and recordings.

<sup>53</sup> Handwritten letter dated August 12, 1959, collection Marie-Louise Langlais.



were three locomotives!). We crossed the mountains of Colorado and some very impressive canyons before coming to the desert. It took us more than 17 hours to cross it, even at 90 to 100 kilometers per hour. It's frightening! No trees, no signs of life, just a few dried-out bushes.

Arriving on time in Oakland, the train stopped in the middle of the street. As we got off I remembered I had forgotten my camera and rushed back onboard. When I got off again the train jerked suddenly and startled me.

How tiring it is, these long days passing through different time zones.

After several magnificent days in California, the two travelers made their way to Boys Town, where the weather was unbearably hot.

Jean Langlais had a compelling reason for arriving there in 1959 rather than 1960: the premiere of his *Missa Misericordiae Domini* that Father Schmitt had commissioned to close the Boys Town Liturgical Workshop of 1959. In a letter to his wife Langlais recounts his activities in detail:<sup>54</sup>

Life is very agreeable here, even if there is a bit too much work, never less than five hours per day and sometimes more. Private lessons from 9 am to noon or 12:30, plus a class in the evening from 6:30 to 7:30... Sunday I'm going to hear my *Missa Misericordiae Domini* for the first time, but during the day it's always terribly hot, at least 104 degrees<sup>55</sup> in the shade.

Further on he adds:

They have commissioned me for a *Sacerdos et Pontifex* for the jubilee of the archbishop of Omaha. I think I'll have about two hours at the most to compose it.<sup>56</sup>

In spite of the workload and the heat, Jean Langlais was very content at Boys Town. To the French journalist who interviewed him as he disembarked from the Queen Mary he said:<sup>57</sup>

Boys Town in the United States is a foundation created twenty years ago by an Irish priest, Father Flanagan, to serve disadvantaged, displaced, and mistreated children. There are about 1,000 youth from all parts of America, from California to Boston. I've had the opportunity to introduce singing and other music to these young people aged 15 to 18. The archbishop in charge, Monsignor Wegner, is very inclusive. There is a Protestant chaplain and a Jewish piano teacher and everyone cooperates freely in a spirit of mutual understanding at Boys Town.

The Boys Town Boys Choir under the direction of Alexander Peloquin gave the premiere of the *Missa Misericordiae Domini* on Sunday, August 30, 1959. It's an unusual work in that, according to the terms of the commission, it was destined for a choir of three voices (STB) and organ. Langlais explained in the preface to the 1989 Carus Verlag reprint:

For the summer sacred music workshop at Boys Town I composed my *Missa Misericordiae Domini* between September 15 and 18, 1958, on commission from Father Schmitt, to whom the work is dedicated. The work is written for three voices (soprano, tenor, and bass) at the request of Father Schmitt, as there were no altos in the boys choir at the time... Conceived for an ensemble of one hundred boys, this mass can just as easily be performed by a mixed choir of modest proportions. Registrations and

---

<sup>54</sup> Handwritten letter dated August 20, 1959, collection Marie-Louise Langlais.

<sup>55</sup> 40 degrees Celsius.

<sup>56</sup> The result was the *Sacerdos et Pontifex (Tu es Petrus)* for unison choir, two trumpets and organ premiered at the ninth church music workshop at Boys Town in August 1961, during a pontifical mass in the presence of Monsignor Gerald Bergan (1892-1972), archbishop of Omaha.

<sup>57</sup> M. Miquelot, *Presse de la Manche*, September 1959.

expressive nuances at the organ should take into account the size and volume of the choir.

Coming after his varied and successful works *Messe Solennelle* (1949), *Mass in ancient style* (1952), *Missa in simplicitate* (1952) and *Missa Salve Regina* (1954), this new mass could have been a repeat or a pastiche.

Instead, it's an extraordinary testament to the adaptability of the composer, who succeeds in borrowing some of the best elements of each while uniting them in a new context. From *Messe Solennelle* it retains the co-existence of different languages (modal-tonal-chromatic) and the dialogue between different layers of sound. From *Missa in simplicitate* comes the recitative style of the Credo alongside the simplicity of its harmonic progressions. Finally, from the *Missa Salve Regina* there is the idea of a polyphonic choir engaged in dialogue with a unison congregational part, adapted to three voices treated successively as soloists or sections.

The way Langlais balances and distributes the three voices is a remarkable performance. One quite forgets the lack of alto voices. This is quite perceptible in the Kyrie when each of the voices in turn stresses "Kyrie eleison" in a stereophonic litany.

As in the *Missa in simplicitate*, the dramatic climax of the work occurs at its geographic center, the Credo. Unlike its predecessor, however, the *Missa Misericordiae Domini* abruptly interrupts the flow of the Credo twice as soprano and tenor soloists comment upon "Et incarnatus est" and "Qui cum Patre et Filio" in music of an entirely different esthetic. The polyphonic choir returns forcefully at "Crucifixus" and "Et unam, sanctam, catholicam." These sudden interruptions impart an extreme tension to the entire movement. As the composer noted, "the Credo inspires the faith without which the Mass has no reason to exist."

The *Missa Misericordiae Domini* in 1959 brought to a close the cycle of Latin masses composed by Jean Langlais over the span of a decade. The directives of the Second Vatican Council would soon throw the process of composing sacred vocal music into upheaval. In the meantime, Langlais' five Latin masses, each with its own personality and scale, form a body of work unique in the history of European sacred music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The 1950s ended triumphantly for Jean Langlais. His four successful tours of America comprised 121 recitals and masterclasses in steady crescendo: 22 in 1952, 26 in 1954, 32 in 1956, and 41 in 1959. His public had grown significantly as well, including an increasing number of students who crossed the Atlantic to study with him. From this time forward his stature as a master of the organ was affirmed.

He had found in the United States an adopted country whose affection and admiration he would never forget.

