

AGO WEBINARS ON ORGAN TEACHING SERIES - NOVEMBER 9, 2020

“IMPROVISATION AND THE MUSIC OF JEAN LANGLAIS”

by ANN LABOUNSKY, FAGO

This Jean Langlais Presentation is from the Duquesne University Chapel of the Holy Spirit, Pittsburgh, PA. It features the Dan Jaeckel Organ, as inspired by Charles Tournemire and was installed in 2015.

A. Biographical information on Jean Langlais

1. Blind at age of 3
2. Studied music at age 10 at the *Institut des jeunes aveugles* in Paris and was formed in Gregorian Chant at an earlier age in Brittany.
3. His first teacher was André Marchal from whom he learned the poetic aspect of playing.
4. Importance of repeated notes and legato playing from Marcel Dupré at Paris Conservatory.

B. Styles and techniques of Jean Langlais

1. Legato and Strictness, along with importance of thumb glissando
 - a. Example: “Méditation” from *Suite Médiéval*, we see Tournemire’s influence on Langlais to be very free and in the style of Franck

The image displays three systems of handwritten musical notation for an organ piece. The first system features a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature. It includes a melodic line with a 'G.' (Glissando) marking and a dynamic of 'mf'. The bass line has a 'R.' (Ritardando) marking and a dynamic of 'pp'. The second system continues the melodic and bass lines with various fingering numbers (1-5) and dynamic markings like 'pp'. The third system begins with a 'rall.' (rallentando) marking and a dynamic of 'mf'. It includes performance instructions: 'Poco più vivo', 'R. - Salicional', and '+ Bourdon 8, nazard et tierce'. The text '(ubi caritas)' is written below the staff. The system concludes with a 'p' (piano) dynamic marking.

b. Example: "Dialogue sur les Mixtures" from *Suite brève*. Notice Strictness and in a straight-forward manner.

Allegro $\text{♩} = 104$

GPR *stacc.*

Ped. GPR

stacc.

c. Example: "Acclamations" from *Suite Médiéval*. Notice strictness here:

tti

onds et Anches 32, 16, 8, 4

Solennel $\text{♩} = 54$

G.P.R. *fff*

Ped./G.P.R. *fff*

Christus — vin — cit

and also in "Fête," Op. 51.

Allegro $\text{♩} = 108$

GPR *fff* *staccato*

(Gt. Ch. Sw.)

MANUAL

PEDAL

Ped. GPR

2. Freer Style Pieces – Based on Gregorian chant, *Solesmes Method*. Count chant in divisions of 2s.

a. Example: “Méditation” with Ubi Caritas from *Suite Médiéval*, we see Tournemire’s influence on Langlais to be very free and in the style of Franck.

Poco più vivo
R. – Salicional
+ Bourdon 8, nazard et tierce

(4)
mf (ubi caritas)
p
- Bourdon 16

b. Example: “Te Deum,” Op. 173, notice two elements of freer Gregorian chant and strictness.

Maestoso $\text{♩} = 88$

ANUALE
EDALE
R. p
G.O. ff
13
Sra
R. p
13

3. Pieces Based on Folkloric Melodies

a. Example: “Adoration des bergers,” from La Nativité Op. 2, play straight forward, not in free style.



4. Original Themes – Many were based on people’s names by using the Code. The Code of musical pitches corresponds to letters of the alphabet. In his earlier years of composing, Langlais used the Braille notation alphabet for his Code. Starting in the 1960s, Langlais began to use the regular alphabet notation for his Code, as shown in the table below. As you see, the letters of the alphabet are read from the second column vertically. The letters read horizontally refer to the letters that apply to each pitch. Flats and sharps may be used except for the B-flat which has its own place. Langlais did not invent this table – he used it to a greater extent and to improvise on a person’s name. Other composers who used the code, were Bach, Duruflé, and Schumann.

<i>Musical Pitches</i>	<i>Corresponding Letter Names</i>			
A	a	i	q	y
B ♭	b	j	r	z
C	c	k	s	
D	d	l	t	
E	e	m	u	
F	f	n	v	
G	g	o	w	
B	h	p	x	

[An example using this table, where Langlais spells the name of his dog, Paf, can be found on the bottom of page 5.]

a. Example: "Pasticcio," from *Organ Book*, Op. 91.

The Code is used to spell Jacqueline's (Marchal) name in Braille notation. [*The Braille notation used in "Pasticcio," is further explained in the 'Dear Uncle Max' article (from The American Organist Magazine, September 2001) presented on pages 8 and 9.*]

b. Example: "Larmes," from *Progression*, Op. 200. The Code is used to spell *Paf, the name of Langlais's dog who died.

*Paf: "p" = B, "a" = A, "f" = F

5. Some pieces express great feelings of loss.

a. “Chant de peine,” from *Neuf Pièces*. It was composed during World War II and laments the death of Langlais’s composition teacher, Paul Dukas. Play it with freedom and feel the emotion.



b. In contrast, “Chant de joie,” from *Neuf Pièces* is filled with joy.

c. “Chant héroïque,” from *Neuf Pièces* is dedicated to Jehan Alain who was killed in war. Play *con fuoco*.

C. Improvisation – Langlais was a marvelous improviser. With improvisation, do not think of what went wrong. Hear a style and use it, practice motifs often, explore to find out what you like, and do not be afraid to improvise. Your best teacher can be a recording of what you improvised.

1. Taught based on chant (Kyrie Orbis Factor)

XI. IN DOMINICIS INFRA ANNUM
(Orbis factor) (X) XIV-XVI. s.

1.

a. ABA Form using one phrase

1. Introduction
2. Cantus Firmus (CF) in Soprano
3. Interlude modulating away from main key and returning to main key
4. CF repeated, but slightly changed
5. B Section - short development with a motif, fragment of theme
6. Recapitulation with CF in Pedal at 4'

b. Toccata Form – find a figure that will drive it. Try using fingers 2 and 4 in both hands and keep repeating the figure. Put theme in soprano or in pedal. Langlais sometimes used big chords. Ending with an open fifth is appropriate.

1. Same ABA form
2. Development uses several key centers
3. Recapitulation

D. Questions and Answers

E. Resources

Labounsky, Ann, *Jean Langlais; The Man and His Music*, Portland, Oregon, Amadeus Press, 2000.

Selected Service Organ Music by Jean Langlais with Levels of Difficulty: <https://www.agohq.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/langlais.doc20with20annotations.doc>

Labounsky, Ann, *The Complete Organ Works of Jean Langlais*, Voix du Vent Recordings, LLC, 2011.

THE COMPLETE ORGAN WORKS OF
Jean Langlais
ANN LABOUNSKY, ORGAN

"I have just learned that the recordings of my organ music will happen. This is the greatest joy of my life and it is to you, dear Ann that I owe this."
— JEAN LANGLAIS
OCTOBER, 1978

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Labounsky, Ann, Video of Jean Langlais, *Life and Music of Jean Langlais*, A Production of Los Angeles Chapter of American Guild of Organists, 2006.

F. Other references: Article: "Dear Uncle Max"

[The Braille notation used in "Pasticcio," is further explained in the 'Dear Uncle Max' article (from The American Organist Magazine, September 2001) presented below.]

DEAR UNCLE MAX

I have long enjoyed playing Jean Langlais's "Pasticcio" from his Organ Book. It suddenly occurred to me that the general dictionary meaning of "Pasticcio" does not seem to fit this piece. What is the significance of the title of this charming piece?

J.D., Mass.

First, we will deal with the dictionary definition to see what correspondence there is between it and the composition, then we'll look at this specific piece to see if we can determine in what sense Langlais applies the term.

Grove's Dictionary says the word is Italian for "mess" or "hotchpotch," then goes on to say it is a dramatic work or sacred vocal work whose parts have been borrowed, new texts may have been written, or works by various composers combined. Around the beginning of the 18th century, when independent opera impresarios came on the scene, one way to ensure success was to include arias already well known and loved. Opera composers also had a habit of borrowing their own tunes for their own pasticcios. All interesting, but not to our point.

When asked by Karen Hastings Flegel, who was studying the "Pasticcio" with Langlais, what he meant by the title, he remarked, "A pasticcio is a composition derived from other works." We recognize, at the opening at least, its nod to historic beginnings for canzonas, as Ann Labounsky observes; a specific model may have been in mind, but that seems doubtful. Yet Langlais's use of the term is still a bit more mysterious and comes from a love of encoding names in his musical themes.

At one time or another, we are all attracted to something of the sort. With great fortitude, as a young boy in the fourth grade, I consumed two boxes of Wheaties (which I hated), earned a quarter, and sent away for a Dick Tracy Golden Code Badge, waiting impatiently for the two months delivery time to go by. When it arrived, it consisted of a circle with the alphabet and an inner circle that could be spun, rotating numbers. Every new position meant one more code using numbers for letters. My best friend (who did like Wheaties) also had a Dick Tracy Golden Code Badge. He and I were able to pass notes in class with such highly secret information as, "Recess! The Elm tree!" without much fear of teacher intervention—or for that matter, even interest! The fifth grade included the study of Egypt and off we went into the study of hieroglyphics. My friend did not share my enthusiasm. I got so I could painfully draw the alphabet, but by now all I retain is that my initials, M M, are represented by two inscrutable owls staring out passionlessly at the world as they have for the last few thousand years. A monument to those with names including M.

It is wonderful to have Ann Labounsky's *Jean Langlais: The Man and His Music* (Amadeus Press, Portland, Oreg., 2000) available (see review in TAO, Feb. 2001, p. 75). Certainly, to me at least, it was something of a revelation to learn how frequently Langlais encoded names of those to whom he dedicated works, or was otherwise close to—Ann, Susan Ferré, Marie, Marie-Louise, Olivier Messiaen, Pascale, Collette Alain, Paf (a dog), Jeannette, Karen Hastings, and so forth. "He . . . sought to reveal, in his music, his innermost desires and thoughts as well as the names of persons. . . . By using pitches to correspond to letters of the alphabet, he was able to write names and even complete sentences, in the form of a musical theme" (p. 190). The sentence, "I love you, Ann," is included in the fourth movement of the *Homage to Rameau*. Dr. Labounsky was not only Langlais's choice to write his biography, but also to record his complete organ works—a daunting task to be concluded in a few more years.

To get a quick sense of how the coding was done, see the table below; note that the capital letters correspond to musical pitches.

A	a	i	q	y
B	b	j	r	z
C	c	k	s	
D	d	l	t	
E	e	m	u	
F	f	n	v	
G	g	o	w	
H	h	p	x	

The following example from the "Voluntary Saints-Marie-Madeleine" includes "je t'aime" in the right hand—B, E, D, A, A, E, E, though it does seem it should begin with a B♭, and where is the second E for the M in aime? Composers ought to be able to use things freely—we will see this again.



This sort of jump-start in the search for thematic material is hardly new—it's all a part of how-to-get-going. In a discussion on the art of invention in Mauritius Vogt's *Conclave Thesauri Magnae Artis Musicae* of 1719, he suggests, for the embellishment of a simple progression, that one take four horseshoe nails, bend them into different shapes, ascribe embellishments to each, such as *trita*, *gropo*, *circulus*, and *messaza*, throw them on the ground, and embellish in the order in which they fall. Elsewhere he admits, "And so that I may be even better prepared to invent and compose . . . I will not spurn a hearty flask of wine."

Mr. Bach himself liked these *Lusus Ingenii*, intellectual games, and indulged in the common practice of substituting numbers for letters. Here is a chart in common use in his day:

A	1	K	10
B	2	L	11
C	3	M	12
D	4	N	13
E	5	O	14
F	6	P	15
G	7	Q	16
H	8	R	17
I, J	9	S	18

Of particular interest to him were the possibilities for incorporating his own name. BACH = 2 + 1 + 3 + 8 for a total of 14.

J.S. BACH = 9 + 18 + 2 + 1 + 3 + 8 for a 41 total; 14 and 41 are reversible! Nice! In Bach's final composition, which he dictated just before his death, the chorale prelude, *Vor deinen Thron tret' ich*, also for the text, "Wenn wir in höchsten Nöten sein," he uses exactly, with the ornamentation counted, 14 notes in the first line of the chorale and a total of 41 notes in the melody of the whole composition: signed Bach, and to be very sure, J.S. Bach. (See Karl Geiringer's lecture at the Library of Congress, May 1955, "Symbolism in the Music of Bach.")

Langlais's "Pasticcio" is the last composition in his *Organ Book* of 1956, which was written as a wedding gift for Andre Marchal's daughter, Jacqueline Marchal. What makes the piece earn its title is the fact that the composition has its own idea, straightforward, until bar 54, the change of key, when two new but similar themes are introduced. They are derived

from Jacqueline's name and that of her husband-to-be, the composer Giuseppe Englert. All three themes then are operative, a little of this, a little of that. Ann Labounsky has written in a letter that "Langlais told me how proud he was that he was able to place the two themes exactly together to represent the union of the newly married couple and that this aspect was the governing principle in his working out of the two themes in Braille."

To follow the process as closely as we can (and at that there is some conjecture), I am going to use the working out done by Karen Hastings Flegel, another Langlais student, who has done considerable work with music in Braille.

First the alphabet in Braille as used in literature:

Pitches										
alphabetical	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
letters:	⠠	⠡	⠢	⠣	⠤	⠥	⠦	⠧	⠨	⠩

Braille uses the symbols below for musical pitches, one letter to the right—that is, D to J from the above list for C to B—this is so that the solfège syllable *Do* will be under D and equal C in a Fixed-*Do* system. Rhythm and octave registers are unimportant here.

⠠	⠡	⠢	⠣	⠤	⠥	⠦	⠧	⠨	⠩
C	D	E	F	G	A	B			

Langlais simply omitted Braille letters without corresponding Braille pitches as if Jeannette is spelled Jannette (see Labounsky, p. 71). This is paramount for understanding Jacqueline (see below):

J	A	C	Q	U	E	L	I	N	E	M	A	R	C	H	A	L
⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠
B	F	D	A	C	D	G	G									

By dropping the Marchal (two Gs), we get the following six-note theme (rhythm supplied by the composer), which is transposed here and there. This is used six times; its primary form is the following, found in bars 66–67, 68–69, and 85–86. N.B. I have for the purposes of comparison transposed them all to a starting note on F. Apparently, accidentals are unimportant as long as the pitch name remains the same. The theme below at the right is with the accidentals as they appear in bars 54–55.

Primary form	Primary form with accidentals

Two altered versions appear, bars 58–59, with the upward leap of a fifth reduced to a third, and bars 56–57, with rather more changes, including direction:

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The Giuseppe Englert theme is highly problematic. By using the first six letters of Giuseppe, one gets FAADEE instead of

either of the two forms used—FAEACD or FAEABD. Karen has experimented with a more French spelling for Giuseppe—using Giëseppe results in a closer match:

G	I	U	S	E	P	P	E	G	I	Ë	S	E	P	P	E	
⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠	⠠
F	A	A	D	E	E	D	F	A	E	A	D	E	E	D		

The three forms for the Giuseppe theme are found, first in bars 62–63, and without accidentals in bars 68–69.

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The third form, with the interval of a third moved, is in bars 81–82.

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It is possible that:

1. Langlais liked the theme derived from Giëseppe better, or liked it better, derived or not.
2. he trimmed the theme to fit with the Jacqueline theme.
3. he trimmed the theme to get six notes on general principles.
4. Giuseppe had a nickname we don't know.

The two themes are only used overlapping once, in bars 68–69:

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This overlap certainly could have been exploited more fully; however, it is worth noting another type of overlap: both themes have the same second bar. Is it here that the couple is joined symbolically from a duality to a unity? It's a nice thought. Usually we work from the question to an answer; in this case, we know the question and the answer but not the argumentation. This may be as close as we can get to the intermediate steps.

How much does all this add to what we know about the music? Well, something—the more we can know about anything the better. Does it actually change the way we might perform the composition? I'm a skeptic; its interest lies in another direction. Good stuff for program notes and a good get-started point for the composer, but the listener will probably just hear it as a good piece.

If you find a better solution, let me know. Since I have confessed my cryptographic skills have atrophied since the fifth grade, let me once again express my thanks to Ann Labounsky and Karen Hastings Flegel for their gracious, insightful, and necessary help.

MAX B. MILLER, FAGO