

# JEANNE DEMESSIEUX

Karen E. Ford



Long before her untimely death at the age of 47 in 1968, Jeanne Demessieux had already become, in the words of her teacher Marcel Dupré, a virtuoso organist even more gifted and accomplished than himself. Critics rated her among the truly great artists of her day, and her reputation as a brilliant improviser was legendary. The first woman to play in both Westminster Abbey and Westminster Cathedral, her numerous concert tours in America and throughout Europe demonstrated impeccable standards of performance and technical excellence which drew rave reviews from audiences and critics alike. As a composer, Demessieux's contributions to the organ were no less significant, including eight major works for the instrument which reflected her remarkable flair for improvisation and often required a prodigious pedal technique unmatched in the entire organ repertoire. Today, more than 20 years after her death, Demessieux's contributions to organ literature have yet to be fully explored, although she was active at a time when few other French musicians (except Messiaen) were promoting the instrument. The study of her life and works serves

not only as an indispensable link in the history of 20th-century French organ music but also provides historically unique insights into the life and teaching of the master Dupré, whose pupil she was from 1936 to 1946.

The story of Jeanne's tragically short life differs little from that of any other budding artist in her early years. She was born on February 14, 1921, in Montpellier, in the south of France. Shortly after her birth, her sister Yolande, 14 years her senior, fell seriously ill and was unable to continue her studies. She thereafter became Jeanne's first teacher. Already something of an infant prodigy, Jeanne came to Paris with her parents in 1932 at the age of eleven and subsequently enrolled at the Conservatoire National de Musique, where she later won *premiers prix* in harmony, piano, fugue, and counterpoint. The following year, 1933, she became organist at Saint-Esprit, a position she was to hold for the next 29 years.

It was on October 8, 1936, at Meudon, that Jeanne's career saw a decisive turning point, when she was introduced to Marcel Dupré, a meeting arranged by the director of the con-

servatory at Montpellier. Jeanne later wrote in her diary, "This was an unforgettable meeting for me." In truth, the meeting with the great master of the organ proved to be a sort of reciprocal "thunderbolt" between teacher and pupil, leading to an exceptional and unique relationship rich with exchanges and discoveries for both. An established figure on the international organ scene by this time, Dupré must have immediately seen in the tiny slip of a girl the successor for which he had been looking, one capable of spreading the influence of the French organ school. Recognizing the multiplicity of her talents, he eagerly took the child as his prize disciple and over the next ten years trained her vigorously and rigorously, leaving no stone unturned in the development of her talent, later writing, "One cannot be a great artist without having (first) been the student of a great artist."

Under Dupré's strict and imposing (but fatherly) guidance, Jeanne commenced intense study in not only organ but also improvisation, harmony, composition, and orchestration. In addition, she studied Dupré's own writings from his years at Troyes, the copying, annotating, and correcting which followed were intended to stimulate further the young disciple's mind. Jeanne later compared this period of her life to living in a greenhouse but submitted herself quite willingly to the intense work which the master prescribed, and, by all accounts, maintained an exclusive and slavish admiration of Dupré.

While giving Jeanne private lessons, Dupré also had her participate in services at Saint-Sulpice, a post he had occupied since 1934. He actively supported her advancement in a field dominated almost exclusively by men, urging her appointment to the "temporary" post at the church, where she alternated with Jean-Jacques Grunenwald, himself a student of Dupré. Later, Dupré sought authorization from the Cardinal of Paris for Jeanne to become his replacement at the church, at one point remarking to a student of Widor, "She is the best, the men included." Although the request was eventually denied, Dupré remained steadfast in his support of Jeanne, and she continued to play at Saint-Sulpice for a number of years.

In January 1939, after having studied privately for three years with Dupré, Jeanne was admitted to the master's organ class at the conservatory and graduated in 1941 with the *premier prix d'orgue*, playing for a jury which included Gallon, Duruflé, Fleury, Marchal, Cellier, and Litaize. Yet this was only the beginning of a grand and glorious period for both master and pupil. Over the next five years, almost all the great works of organ literature were meticulously studied, memorized, and performed. Dupré tried to push the limits of Jeanne's virtuosity even more by writing for her works of enormous difficulty, furthering her acquisition of a near-impeccable and flawless technique. It now appears that the ten separate movements of his *Suite*, Op. 39, *Offrande à la Vierge*, Op. 40, and *Trois Esquisses*, Op. 41, originally formed part of a group of twelve studies that he began composing for Jeanne

in November 1941, when she was just 20 years old.

While writing pedagogical studies himself, however, Dupré apparently felt that Jeanne was capable of writing a similar work going further than his own. In 1944, at Dupré's urgent request and with the publisher Bornemann backing the idea, Jeanne herself began writing organ studies, six of the most formidable and daunting pieces in the entire repertoire. As her work progressed, Dupré proudly exclaimed, "What is exciting is that we are working in parallel. I did my studies, and now you are doing yours . . . With your musicality, you will create music to bring people to their knees." Upon their completion, Jeanne dedicated the *Études* to Dupré, who in turn wrote a preface to the work and later honored her with their first performance in the United States.

In 1946, after a ten-year period of preparation, Dupré at last determined that Jeanne's formation as a "master in her own right" was assured, and her public debut was meticulously prepared. She was presented first at Meudon during a series of twelve private recitals, and finally in a series of six recitals at Salle Pleyel, from February 24 to June 3, 1946, followed by a second set of recitals in 1947. The very first recital, attended by, among others, Maurice Duruflé and the widow of Jehan Alain, produced a spectacular and spontaneous reaction from the public. Newspapers and magazines alike devoted entire columns to the debut, all the way from *Le Monde* in Paris to *The Herald Tribune* in New York. Bernard Gavoty, leading French critic, wrote in *Images Musicales*: "An organ wonder? No—stupendous, monumental . . . Liszt could not have caused any

more surprise by playing for the first time his *Études* . . . and no one but Dupré himself is capable of such marvels in improvisation. Demessieux should . . . be seated in the first rank of the artistic family . . . she follows." Hardly had the series at Pleyel ended when invitations began to arrive in abundance from France and abroad, and with them, an exhausting schedule of tours and concerts which would soon become a way of life.

For his part, Marcel Dupré could only have felt an enormous sense of pride and accomplishment in seeing his young disciple received by the public in such a stunning manner. "You are my successor, the only one to whom I give my secrets of technique," he would say to her, and in truth, Jeanne's triumph was a triumph for both pupil and master, the end of an incredibly hard ten years of work by both.

An extremely frank and vivid account of the relationship between master and pupil over the ten-year period may be found in a diary hastily scribbled by Jeanne at the time, offering unique insights into the day-to-day activities of both. Many glimpses are provided of "the very greatest organist who has ever lived" in his "workshop" (the organ hall at Meudon), in concerts, recording sessions at Salle Pleyel, and at such historic events as Saint-Sulpice for Widor's centenary in 1944; the diary is invaluable for the memories it provides of Dupré's activities during the war years, when he was at the absolute peak of his virtuosity and yet could not leave his country.

For the most part, however, the diary is devoted to the close, intense relationship between master and student. Dupré allowed Jeanne free use of his property while he was

away on frequent concert tours (and it was here, in fact, that some of her greatest organ compositions were created), publicized her works in the United States as a prelude to her own forthcoming appearances, and above all, claimed her as his prize disciple and eventual successor. Although his years at the conservatory had produced such students as Messiaen, Langlais, Crunewald, and Alain, Dupré clearly felt a bond with Jeanne unlike any of the others, and he spoke freely of her place in the long chain of tradition begun decades earlier. The following excerpts from Jeanne's diary are typical of the close, intense relationship which the two shared.

July 1941: "Dupré revealed to me the secret of his technique, which I am not permitted to translate . . . He summed up the curriculum of our tradition concerning the organ and named Lemmens, Guilmant, and Widor. Then he said to me, 'I am doing for you what Widor did for me.'"

September 1941: "Soon, when I have grown old, it is you who will be the interpreter of my works. You are the only one who has the technique to master them."

June 1942: "You have already begun the ascent which will enable you to surpass me . . . It is a pleasure to see one's self surpassed by those whom one loves."

January 1944: "I tell you again that you are my successor. After me, I pass the torch to you."

In August 1944, while rehearsing at Notre-Dame, Dupré remarked to another organist in Jeanne's presence, "You know that I never say anything lightly . . . Jeanne Demessieux is the greatest organist of all the generations."

Given the evidence of all of the above, it

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CONCERT ARIA, H.W. Gray / C.P.P. *Belwin GSTC 01061*

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seems strange indeed that such an intense and exceptional relationship could turn from triumph to tragedy. Yet the departure of Dupré to the United States in 1946 for his ninth American tour seems to mark the sad end of the unique collaboration, retraced faithfully by Jeanne's numerous written accounts. The outward causes seem to stem from differences of opinion regarding the organization of Jeanne's concerts and upcoming tours in North America, where she refused, in spite of Dupré's insistence, to venture alone without having prior assurance of specified conditions.

In truth, the exact causes of the rupture remain shrouded in mystery. Perhaps Jeanne ultimately possessed too strong a personality to continue to trace her career in the shadow of a master, as great as Dupré was. Perhaps she suffered from the "secrecy" which surrounded her delayed debut, as well as the corresponding lack of public recognition. Still others talk of a close and endearing relationship between master and pupil which ultimately threatened to disrupt Dupré's family life, suggesting that the rupture was more the result of insistence on the part of Mme Dupré. All that can be stated conclusively is that the break seems to have been initiated by Dupré and was both definite and irreparable.

Whatever the cause, it seems clear that Jeanne never knew the real reason for Dupré's change of attitude and suffered terribly in the aftermath. The break shook her already fragile health, and she later wrote that "I would not have survived (this period) without my family." She had not only lost her best friend but an entire world, although her admiration for Dupré as musician remained unshakable. The rupture was made even more painful, however, by the refusal of Dupré to sponsor her at the time of her entrance to the Société des Auteurs, Compositeurs et Éditeurs de Musique. She later wrote to Dupré in a letter, "It will always be very painful to me to think that, after having affirmed that nothing or no one would separate the master from the pupil, you could have seized an occasion to break a bond which for me was sacred, without explaining to me the reasons. Nothing would be able to make me lose the respect of a doctrine to which I have devoted such a strong faith."

Although wounded inwardly, outwardly the years with Dupré had indeed accomplished their purpose, for by now Jeanne was fully a master in her own right, ready to scale the heights of musical glory. Following her second set of debut recitals at the Salle Pleyel in 1947, she began extensive travel as a virtuoso recitalist, crisscrossing France, playing in all the major churches of Western Europe, and receiving universal acclaim as a phenomenon. She was widely regarded as one of the most brilliant improvisers on the organ, and her recitals almost always included an improvisation on submitted themes. Technically impeccable, one critic wrote of her playing: "Her virtuosity strikes the imagination even more when one realizes that she plays with Louis XV (i.e., high) heels, these famous silver shoes from which she is never separated and which will become legendary."

A frequent and popular visitor to England, Jeanne gave her first London recital for the Organ Music Society in 1947, when she ended her program by improvising a four-movement symphony on themes composed for the occasion by four London critics. On February 27 of the same year, she played at Westminster Abbey in the presence of Henry Willis, the famed British organbuilder, whom she noted was present with all of his company. At the age of 26, she was the first woman to be invited to play at Westminster Cathedral, and her many subsequent appearances in England included one of the recitals given at Westminster Abbey in connection with its 900th anniversary, as well as the inaugural ceremony at the Metropolitan Cathedral in Liverpool. Following her triumphs in England, Jeanne continued to tour Europe, where she consistently packed houses and drew rave reviews. In August 1949, she departed for Vienna and Salzburg, followed by tours of Austria, Bavaria, Portugal, Scotland, Ireland, and Scandinavia. At one point, she gave more than 200 recitals in a four-year period.

In 1953, Jeanne toured North America for the first time, again drawing critical acclaim for her electrifying performances. The following review of a recital on her third American tour in March 1958, at Central Presbyterian Church in New York City, is typical of the adulation with which she was greeted:

The young, brilliant French artist... gave a performance in New York which held to the incredible standards of technical excellence which she sets for herself in both playing and composing. In all departments of recital giving, Mlle Demessieux is impeccable... There are few, if any, who can match this charming young girl in sheer virtuosity.

Not content with a career in performing alone, however, Jeanne soon sought recognition in other fields. In 1950, she was appointed professor of organ at Nancy and in 1952 was appointed to a similar position in Liège, Belgium, the birthplace of César Franck. Among her pupils were Louis Thiry, later to record the complete works of Messiaen, and Pierre Labric, himself a noted teacher and performer today.

In 1955, Jeanne received appointment to the Academy of Haarlem in Holland and shortly thereafter was named director of the jury for the International Organ Competition in Improvisation. She frequently served as a member of the jury for organ competitions at the Paris Conservatory and also adjudicated competitions in the analysis classes of Messiaen. In 1962, after serving almost 30 years at Saint-Esprit, she was appointed to the Madeleine, where Saint-Saëns and Fauré were among her predecessors, a position she retained until her death. In addition, she made 16 records, winning her first distinction at the age of 29 by receiving the *Grand Prix* of the Charles-Cros Academy. Four years later, her recordings of the complete works of Franck at the Madeleine, brought the *National Grand Prix* for the year 1960-61.

If her activities seemed centered on tours, teaching, and recording, Demessieux left an equally important legacy of compositions. Her published works include eight major pieces for organ, *Poème* for organ and orchestra, *La Chanson de Roland* for mezzo-soprano, choir, and orchestra, *Ballade* for horn and piano, and numerous unpublished works, most dating from her years as a student. It is clear, however, that her work had the admiration of numerous composers, among them Poulenc, Duruflé, and Messiaen. After publication of the *Six Études* in 1946, the latter wrote: "The *Six Études* are in their genre, a masterpiece... Demessieux demands from the feet what Chopin de-

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mands from the hands . . . Every good organist should know them and practice them. However, very few will be able to play them with the astonishing virtuosity of their composer."

By 1961, Jeanne spoke of the saturation which frequently plagued her. Always in frail health, the strain brought about by years of teaching, performing, and recording, plus the constant burden of isolation which she carried, had begun to take their toll. Yet in 1964, she was named Knight of the Order of the Crown of Belgium, and her recitals continued to reveal even greater involvement with the music she played, suggesting that she had not yet reached the zenith of her powers as a performer. She slowed the pace of her activity but in 1967 again departed for England to prepare a new recording and signed another contract to record the complete works of Messiaen. By the end of the year she admitted to exhaustion and seemed to have an impending sense of her own mortality. "For me," she wrote, "the preparation of an international career, followed by 20 years of solitary traveling, has left the bitter memory of a youth without games, without outings, or without friends my own age because of the precociousness of my studies, where others were eight or ten years older than I."

The year 1968 brought frequent visits to doctors and clinics for treatment of mysterious maladies, but as late as one month before her death, Jeanne wrote to her sister, "Reassure yourself, after all sorts of tests, that there is not even a shadow of a microbe, no fever." On November 3, she again wrote, "I am going home now after nearly two months in a clinic on the outskirts of Paris. I am no longer suffering. This is a state of nervous saturation which will pass." Eight days later, on November 11, 1968, she died in Paris. Her funeral at the Madeleine was attended by a large crowd; the great organ remained silent and was draped in an immense black crepe which fell to the floor. Today Jeanne rests in the cemetery of Aigues-Mortes in southern France, not far from an avenue which bears her name. Before the public for only 22 years, her untimely death cost the world of organ music a player, teacher, and composer whose time had hardly come, an irreparable loss made even more tragic by the fact that her great teacher and friend Marcel Dupré actually outlived the young girl he once proudly proclaimed as his only true successor.

#### Demessieux's Organ Works

As a composer, Demessieux inherited the French neo-Romantic style of earlier French composers such as Alain, Langlais, Tournemire, and Vierne, and thus did not come under the spirit of her contemporary, Messiaen, whose works she nonetheless admired. In particular, her work frequently resembles that of Alain, who also wrote programmatic music of great suggestive and imaginative power. At least three different styles can be identified in her compositions: literature based on Gregorian melodies, programmatic music (both religious and secular), and colorist or Impressionistic works.

Demessieux's writing for organ is most often characterized by long, legato phrases of a fluid, flowing nature. This concept of the organ, shared by most French composers, varies sharply from that of contemporary German composers, who usually view the



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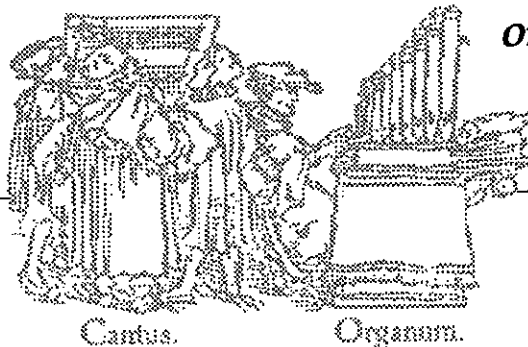
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instrument as better suited to the shorter phrase units and rhythmic impulses of lively contrapuntal textures. Although the latter are considerably more idiomatic for the organ as a general principle, one must observe Demessieux's ability to write well for the instrument within a framework that is more harmonic than contrapuntal, and usually more orchestral than organistic. The rhythmic texture is often the diametrical opposite of Baroque idioms, since the music tends to exhibit long, flowing phrase units, simpler rhythmic patterns in most cases, a sense of

legato lyricism, and a pianistic quality typical of French composers of organ literature.

Harmonically, Demessieux's writing reveals a rather conservative and non-daring approach, obviously the work of one who has a thorough command of traditional harmony and counterpoint, perfected by considerable experience in improvisation. The harmony is mostly vertical and tertian in concept, with many traditional elements of intervallic resolution, chord progression, and rather conventional cadences. On the other hand, some contemporary devices to

be found include free chordal spelling, greater use of nonharmonic tones, nonfunctional chord progressions, and added tones within tertian chordal structures.

Melodically, flat seventh tones and flat second and fifth degrees are common, showing an influence of Ravel, Debussy, and jazz elements. Angularity in large leaps and jumps and athletic skips are also frequent. These are especially noticeable in the pedal parts, where they give a sensation of bouncy, jumping undulations.

One further influence on Demessieux's writing may be observed in the numerous Impressionistic qualities present (use of parallelism, seventh and ninth chords, and the ethereal, subtle atmosphere often created). Of further significance is the fact that the use of modality enjoyed a renaissance during the Impressionistic period and may be frequently seen in the composer's organ works. Conversely, the influence of medieval music may be seen in both the use of the cantus firmus style and the frequent employment of consecutive perfect fourths and fifths, traits which Demessieux shares with most other French organists of the period.

Overall, Demessieux's writing is conservative but colorful, characterized by distinct but not extreme harmonic and melodic idioms. Technically demanding but always well-wrought musically, her work deserves greater recognition for the quality, rather than quantity, it represents. If she had not had an untimely and premature death, today she would surely be accorded a place of universal honor among the giants of her field.

Karrin E. Ford, AAGO, is assistant professor of organ and music theory at Belmont College, Nashville, Tenn. Her article is based on a lecture delivered at the 31st annual meeting of the College Music Society, Santa Fe, N.Mex., in October 1988.

**JEANNE DEMESSIEUX  
LIST OF COMPOSITIONS**

**Chamber Music**

- Sonata for Piano and Violin (1939)
- Quatuor à Cordes
- Ballade for Horn and Piano, Op. 10 (1958)

**Piano (unpublished)**

- Préludes
- Étude
- Ballade
- Suite

**Organ**

- Six Études (1946)
- Meditations on The Holy Spirit (1947)
- Triptyque, Op. 7 (1948)
- Twelve Chorale Preludes on Gregorian Themes, Op. 8 (1950)
- Poem for Organ and Orchestra, Op. 9 (1952)
- Response for Time of Peace (1968)
- Te Deum, Op. 11 (1959)
- Prelude and Fugue in Lydian Mode (1962)

**Symphonic Music (unpublished)**

- Oratorio for chorus and orchestra
- La Chanson de Roland for mezzo-soprano, choir, and orchestra

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