

JEANNE DEMESSIEUX (1921-1968)

A centenary tribute

Susan Landale



Jeanne Demessieux at the organ of the McEwan Hall in 1954

It is not easy to give true and realistic picture of a person one has never met, even if the person was a genius, surpassing her contemporaries on every level and acclaimed worldwide. Jeanne Demessieux was all of this, and her simplicity, her sincerity and her sweet nature could only enhance her extraordinary gifts and bring her to the heart of those who knew her. Having missed the one opportunity I had of meeting her, after a recital in the McEwan Hall in 1954, I have had to rely on the testimonies of friends and contemporaries, hoping my readers will forgive me for quoting certain of these at length.

A review which Bernard Gavoty, under the name of Clarendon, wrote in the columns of *Le*

Figaro, of Jeanne Demessieux's recital on the grand organ of the Salle Pleyel on 25th February 1946, gives us a picture of the brilliant young organist:

"In the world of art, a fairytale is either exasperating or delicious. One cannot but accept this when the unique and prodigious person is a young lady aged just 24, who in her first public appearance, imposed an irresistible radiance of absolute perfection".¹ The life of Jeanne Demessieux was, in fact, hardly a fairytale!

Rather, indeed, a life of work, combat, triumph, and what her biographer, Dominique Tréfouel² described as “a frightening solitude”

Born in Montpellier on 14th February 1921, Jeanne grew up in a musical climate: her parents, inveterate concert-goers, sacrificed everything to her education, moving to Paris, as soon as the resources of their southern province became exhausted, to satisfy the development of the extraordinary gifts which they discerned in their daughter.

From the age of three, Jeanne showed a fondness for the violin, learning the rudiments until her sister, 13 years older and herself an excellent pianist, tore her away from the realms of Paganini and forced her to study a polyphonic instrument. From then on her instruction at the Conservatoire of her home town continued; she won a first prize in theory and ear-training then, aged eleven, a first prize in piano, after which she performed, in public and with orchestra, the work composed for the competition: Widor's ‘Concerto’ for piano and orchestra.

In Paris, aged 12, she was appointed organist of the church of the Holy Spirit, a post which she held faithfully until 1962, when she succeeded Edouard Mignan at the *grand orgue* of the church of La Madeleine.

The doors of the Paris Conservatoire opened to welcome the young virtuoso; from 1937-41 she obtained a first prizes in harmony, piano, counterpoint and fugue, a certificate of merit in composition and finally, a first prize in organ.

Her professors all held her in constant affection; other distinguished personalities in the world of music, and eminent composers - Poulenc as well as Messiaen - all testified their fervent admiration.

The day after her first prize in organ, crown of her imposing prize list, she left the Conservatoire, and her professor, Marcel Dupré, took her in hand for five years at his residence in Meudon, where she became part of the family circle, practising and having lessons of the organ that had been that of Alexandre Guilmant. Here Dupré kept her in the shadows, and she developed an unprecedented technique, explored the principal forms of improvisation; without forgetting to compare the diverse aesthetics of organ building, both French and foreign. During the dark

years of the German Occupation she worked incessantly - sometimes up to 18 hours a day! - striving to perfect a subtle virtuosity to the service of her brilliant intelligence, which was later to reveal her art to the musical world in the sensational recital in the Salle Pleyel, on 25th February 1946. Here the first audition of her *Six Etudes* (Studies), immediately imposed an aspect of her genius upon the audience.¹ After the recital, Maurice Duruflé, captivated by her pedal technique, said “compared to Jeanne Demessieux, we are like elephants on the pedalboard!”

² She was to give a series of six recitals (on Mondays) in the Pleyel concert hall.

This was the starting point of more than 700 worldwide concerts; after dazzling Paris, France and Great Britain, she performed successively in Spain, Portugal, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Denmark and the Scandinavian countries. In 1953 she embarked for North America, where she made a complete tour of the United States including the Pacific coast; a tour that was followed by two more, in 1955 and 1958. Echoes of the

praise following her triumphant transatlantic recitals did reach France, but with infinite discretion. Rare, in fact, were those who could have read the brilliant testimony of admiration after her recital in New York cathedral: “Jeanne Demessieux is without doubt a highlight of the glorious French organ tradition. Having heard most of the great organists of our time, from Widor, Joseph Bonnet and Louis Vierne to Dupré, I could only think of these masters as emulators of this extraordinary virtuoso musician”.²

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She had indeed, the wonderful gift of transfiguring everything she played; under her fingers, the most varied works touched on the sublime. Who else will ever express the emotional splendour of her admirable interpretation of the ‘grand romantics’; animated with a passionate vital spark, in which transcendent power and caressing delicacy combined in a perfect balance and scrupulous respect of the text.¹

René Dumesnil,³ who went to listen to her one Sunday at the Church of the Holy Spirit, was amazed by her talent of improvisation: “I had brought her”, he said, “a fugue subject: the opening bars of the final chorus of Claude Delvincourt’s *Lucifer*. The resulting experience was unforgettable: for quarter of an hour a complete symphony in three movements, crowned by a prestigious fugue was improvised in front of me. And this miracle – for what other word can be used for this extraordinary gift developed through study – was accomplished with such ease and simplicity that I thought I was dreaming! But no, Jeanne Demessieux completely ignored the short phrase I had brought; the series of 12 notes was enough to plan and construct a whole work. I had often been present at sessions of organ playing and heard many organists improvise, but there was something here I had never felt before, a freshness, a sort of masterly ingenuity, an art so pure, so natural, so sincere and profound that I was bowled over”.¹

For the 50 years of the great Cavaillé-Coll organ in the Abbey Church of Saint-Ouen in Rouen and the inauguration of the restoration work on 26th October 1941, Dupré composed a piece entitled *Evocation*, in which he aimed to evoke, in music, the three characteristics of his anxious, tender and proud father, Albert Dupré. While writing the piece, Dupré told Jeanne that she should play it, and gave her the manuscript. A first reading sufficed for her to understand the technical difficulties, a second to penetrate the spirit of the work, and the third to perform it from memory; such were her incredible abilities! A few weeks later, at the beginning of 1942, she gave a private recital in Saint-Ouen for some ten privileged guests, playing the *Evocation* with flame, brio and an incomparable ease. While the distant echoes were still vibrating under the centennial vaults of the vast nave, Dupré, beside her, was moved to tears and said “my little Jeanne, I didn’t recognise my piece!”¹

In the midst of her most brilliant triumphs, whether at the Wanamaker Auditorium, in New York Cathedral, the Albert Hall London, at St Sulpice under the ecstatic eyes of Dupré, at Edinburgh Cathedral [we do not know which one this refers to -Ed.], or the Victoria Hall in Geneva, Jeanne never abandoned that natural simplicity which radiated so much charm when meeting her. The international press, much more so than in France, published its unreserved admiration, esteeming her to be already a legend.¹

As a composer, she left a considerable catalogue; as well as chamber music, vocal pieces and symphonic works, she wrote for organ: *Six Etudes*, (published in 1946), *Seven Méditations on the Holy Spirit* (1947), *Triptyque* (1948), *Twelve Choral-Preludes* (1950), *Poème* for organ and orchestra (1952), *Te Deum* (1959), *Prelude & Fugue* (1965), and *Responses* for the liturgical calendar. There is also a *Song of Roland* (1951), for which she wrote both the music and the words. Her works for organ brought new means of expression to the instrument's literature, expanding its technical possibilities to convey the aesthetical richness of her inspiration.¹

Through her masterly teaching, she revealed across the world the prestige and brilliance of our organ tradition: her students at the Liège Conservatoire became, in their turn, professors at the University of Texas, in Austin USA, the Santiago Conservatoire in Chile, the Luxemburg Conservatoire, the Verviers Conservatoire in Belgium and the Maastricht Conservatoire in the Netherlands.²

In June 1947 Dupré undertook a tour in the United States. Jeanne went to the station where the train left for Le Havre, to wish him “Bon voyage”. He said to Jeanne “I am no longer your Maître...I am your – one time – friend and I will remain so”. The train departed and, Jeanne said, “Dupré has left my life”. On his return, Dupré refused to speak to her, to answer her letters or telephone calls. When he spoke of his pupils he ignored her and the five years at Meudon are absent from his ‘Memoirs’.

The reasons for this rupture are known today, and are hardly to the honour of Dupré, but no explanation was ever given to Jeanne. It was an immense bafflement and a desperately cruel disillusionment. But Jeanne rearmed her courage, and without ever pronouncing a word against Dupré, continued her magnificent and triumphant career.

Today, on the centenary of her birth, her art is emerging from decades of semi-oblivion and we can hear her recording of the *Douze Pièces* of César Franck (Grand Prix du Disque in 1960), as well as Bach, Handel, Liszt, Widor and Messiaen. More recently, a complete recording of her organ works by Pierre Labric (Disques Solstice: 1971-1974) is a magnificent testimony of her art.

To us all, she remains an example: may her courage and understanding, her temperament, technique, simplicity and sincerity never be forgotten, nor her place as one of the greatest organists of the 20th century.

1. Pierre Labric: *Hommage à Jeanne Demessieux* (1969)
2. Dominique Tréfouel: *Jeanne Demessieux* ISBN 2-906196-14-2
3. René Dumesnil (1879-1967): physician, musical and literary critic, distinguished author of works on music.

An eight CD boxed set of many of her recordings: 'Jeanne Demessieux, the Decca recordings' (though also including some unpublished BBC broadcasts) has just been released. Most of these are also available on Spotify as is Pierre Labric's recording of Demessieux's complete organ works; (see following page-Ed.).



Pierre Labric and Jeanne Demessieux (front row, second and third from left). Date and location unknown.