

A black and white photograph of Jean Langlais, an elderly man with white hair, wearing dark sunglasses and a dark tuxedo with a bow tie. He is seated at a large, multi-tiered console, likely a control panel for a recording studio or a large-scale electronic instrument. His right hand is resting on a keyboard, and his left hand is on a lower level of the console. The background features a wood-paneled wall with several framed portraits and a bookshelf containing various books and documents. The overall atmosphere is professional and focused.

*Marie-Louise Langlais*

**Jean**  
**LANGLAIS**  
*remembered*

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# Foreword

My first introduction to the music of Jean Langlais was in 1964 at the Cathedral of Saint Joseph the Workman in La Crosse, Wisconsin, an impressive new neo-Gothic building with eight seconds of reverberation. The cathedral was finished and consecrated in 1963.

I was 11 years old and a member of the newly formed Cathedral boy choir when we welcomed our bishop and an entourage of about 100 priests, Brother of Saint Pius X, Knights of Columbus, Knights and Ladies of the Holy Sepulchre and other dignitaries into the cathedral for a Pontifical mass with Langlais' *Sacerdos et Pontifex*, Op. 109, composed for unison choir, trumpets and organ. For the dedication of the cathedral, the bishop ordered four long heralding trumpets and these were used for the very long procession that lasted almost fifteen minutes – the work was sung through twice.

This imposing work had been composed in 1959 to honor the Archbishop of Omaha, the Most Reverend Gerald T. Bergan, and was premiered in Boys Town, Nebraska, in the archbishop's presence at the 1961 Boys Town Summer Liturgical Workshop. The influence of Langlais at the Boys Town workshops had a profound effect on Roman Catholic sacred music around the United States and his music became extremely popular. Langlais was also one of the most highly esteemed French concert organists. He was especially revered for his extraordinary improvisations.

The impressive organ part of *Sacerdos et Pontifex*, with its neo-medieval harmonies and modality, stirred my soul as a young child of 11 years old and it was from that moment I knew what my future would be.

Only one year later, I had the great fortune to begin my first serious organ studies with a master organist-teacher, Byron L. Blackmore, a former student of André Marchal and Arthur Poister who had just moved to La Crosse and became the first musician to ever be employed as a full-time church musician in the city. Prof. Blackmore was very devoted to the music of Langlais and performed his music regularly. Thanks to him, I was able to study more than 25 major works of Langlais and hear an amazing amount of Langlais' music in concert before I turned 18. In 1965, I was appointed one of the three organists at the La Crosse Cathedral by Msgr. Joseph Kunder. I regularly performed Langlais' music for the 6-10 weekly masses I was assigned.

To this day, I credit Jean Langlais with my decision to become an organist.

I never lost my love for his music and I have continued to faithfully perform, teach and promote it throughout my entire career. I had the great fortune to spend much time with Langlais in 1973-1974 when I was living in Paris and studying with his close friend, Marie-Claire Alain. I attended Sunday services at Sainte-Clotilde very often and took some private lessons at Langlais' home on the rue Duroc. Our friendship continued until his death.

*Foreword*

I am extremely grateful to Marie-Louise Langlais for all she has done during her entire career to keep her husband's name before the public.

Mme. Langlais' first book, *Ombre et Lumière*, is an extraordinary reference and a 'must have' for anyone who is serious about the composer's life and music. It is available only in French and it is a masterpiece.

Because of Langlais' great devotion and gratitude to his American public, Mme. Langlais decided to write a new book in English and make it available for free on the Internet to commemorate the 25th anniversary year of his death. This book was written over seven years and was a labor of love in honor of her late husband and their American public. I would like to express our gratitude to her for this extraordinary gift to us.

This foreword was written in Paris on the day Langlais' beloved daughter, Caroline Langlais-de Salins, gave birth to her son, Jean Langlais' grandson, Félix (February 8, 2016). We can imagine that Jean Langlais is smiling and looking down from heaven with pride and joy!

James David Christie



*For Margaux and Félix  
My beloved grandchildren*

# *Preface*

In the aftermath of the death of Jean Langlais on May 8, 1991, the French daily newspaper *Le Monde* published an obituary on May 15, 1991, stating conclusively, "...his organ pieces, skillfully composed, have overshadowed the rest of his production." This summary judgment spurred me to ask:

Would the writer reduce his entire *oeuvre* simply to his organ works?

Will Langlais leave a broader mark on 20<sup>th</sup> century music?

Was he an innovator or a follower?

This book was written to try to answer these questions.

It is now 2016, and the choice to publish this work on the Internet rather than as a printed book, as tradition would dictate, was quickly made. This text, offered as open access, addresses the widest possible audience. The most influential language in the world today is English, so it seemed essential that it be published in this language. Conceived and written in French, my native language, it was translated by four American translators, Bruce Gustafson, Arthur Lawrence, Ross Wood and Shirley Parry, listed in the order of their involvement. Without them, nothing would have been possible.

And so that readers can fully benefit from this online version, 64 photographs, some in color, have been included in the text. Jean Langlais would certainly have embraced this contemporary medium of distribution...he, who loved to keep up with the times.

Born February 15, 1907, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jean Langlais died 25 years ago, May 8, 1991, at the age of 84. Together with him, their deaths just before or just after his, these last of the "sacred monsters" of French organ music of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were gone: Maurice Duruflé (1902-1986), Gaston Litaize (1909-1991), and Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992). One of their glorious brothers, Jehan Alain, born in 1911, had died much earlier, cut down by the war in 1940 at the age of 29. Duruflé, Langlais, Messiaen, Litaize and Alain were all Paris Conservatory prize winners and had in common some of the same prestigious teachers: Paul Dukas in composition (Duruflé, Messiaen, Langlais, Alain), Marcel Dupré in organ (Messiaen, Langlais, Litaize, Alain), and Tournemire in improvisation (Duruflé and Langlais).

Alone among this group, however, Jean Langlais has been very active--30 years, to be precise--in the United States. Between 1952 and 1981 he gave some 300 concerts and master classes there. From the end of World War II, his works were published by American publishers H. W. Gray, Belwin Mills, Elkan-Vogel, McLaughlin & Reilly, H.T. FitzSimons, Theodore Presser and Fred Bock. This book retraces his life in the United States in particular.

Unlike Jehan Alain, who died at age 29, before he could realize the full potential of his genius, Jean Langlais had ample time to express himself throughout his 62-year career, which lasted from 1929 to 1991. His more than 250 numbered works spanned all genres: music for

solo instruments (especially the organ, with more than 300 pieces), sacred choral music, chamber music, symphonic music, and melodies. What is striking at first glance, is the disparity between the heavy proportion of sacred music (organ, vocal music) and the smaller number of secular compositions (orchestra, chamber music, melodies). This imbalance was undoubtedly a consequence of the early success of his organ compositions ("The Nativity," the "Te Deum"), which quickly enclosed him in the circle of "organist-composers," just as his seniors, Charles-Marie Widor, Louis Vierne, Charles Tournemire and Marcel Dupré, had been. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, only the organists César Franck, Camille Saint-Saëns and Olivier Messiaen, whose universal genius no one questions, escaped this restrictive classification.

Jean Langlais' blindness also limited his creative freedom; he would have liked, he stated, to compose a ballet or music for a film, but no one sought him out for this, even though he had successfully illustrated many radio plays after the World War II. Slowly, imperceptibly, his musical universe was limited to the organ and the church. Was this painful for him? Yes, he said so many times, but this did not prevent him from admiring unreservedly and without jealousy the major works for large orchestra by his sighted colleagues Messiaen, Dutilleux or Jolivet.

Langlais' career falls into three periods. In the first, from the 1930s to the 1950s, his musical vocabulary is forged, with key elements being a mix of materials such as modality, free or Gregorian, tonality and chromaticism. The modal-chromatic idiom, with its tonal-chromatic variant, will thus be his signature during all the pre-war years; his "Te Deum" (1934) for organ remains the best example of this. The novelty of his message lies not so much in the language he used, which was traditional, as in his method of assembling and juxtaposing it, in the way that 20<sup>th</sup> century painters created collages. Joining together diverse and opposing elements of different historical origins--this is what he did that was revolutionary.

In the second, post-war period, he was seduced by a certain "neo-classicism." This is the period of his great "Suites" for organ: *Suite brève* (1947) and *Suite française* (1948). He even let himself be tempted by the "neo-medieval" pastiche in *Suite médiévale* (1947) and *Missa Salve Regina* (1954). His music met with immediate success everywhere.

He could have continued in that style that had done so well for him; however, in a third and final period extending from the early 1960s until his death in 1991, he preferred to explore different techniques of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as serialism (*Sonate en trio*, 1968), irregular rhythms (*Cinq Meditations sur l'Apocalypse*, 1974), semi-clusters, atonalism, or polytonality. This shift toward modernism will be definitive from *l'Essai* for organ (1961) on. And even if we notice, starting in the 70s, some flashbacks (*Offrande à Marie, Huit Chants de Bretagne* for organ), he is definitely getting "into" modernity, thus disorienting his traditional audience, who will judge this new language as too advanced, or, on the other hand, as not advanced enough, especially those who felt that after Messiaen's *Livre d'Orgue* (1951), one could no longer compromise with "neo-classicism" – something of which Langlais was regularly accused.

Was he subjected to a mock trial? Almost all 20<sup>th</sup> century musicians, Stravinsky being at the top of the list, suffered such setbacks at one time or another. A musical revolutionary is often the one who draws from other sources, like Messiaen, who was fascinated by the rhythms and percussion of the Far East. Neo-classicism is certainly questionable when it is slavish imitation. But was that the issue for Langlais? Perhaps it was rather that his attraction to the past echoed Arthur Honegger's assertion: "To advance the art, one must be firmly attached to the past, like the branches of a tree. A branch cut from the trunk quickly dies."

By changing his style, Jean Langlais condemned himself to creating malcontents of every stripe. He, whose "modernism" seemed acceptable when the works of Messiaen shocked people in the 1930s and 1940s, suddenly seemed outdated at the beginning of the 1950s, when music drew its inspiration from serial concepts and experimental music.

But indifferent to these shifts in opinion, Langlais followed his path without letting himself be influenced. Gradually, leaving behind orchestral and secular instrumental music, he increasingly concentrated his energy on the organ, at the moment when the "baroquists" triggered a kind of devastating cyclone which limited organ music of the time to that of J. S. Bach. I experienced those years, the 1960s and 1970s, during which César Franck inspired only amused contempt and during which the organs that Aristide Cavaillé-Coll built seemed doomed to the artistic trash heap. Undaunted, Langlais played and taught Franck, Tournemire and Vierne when some of his colleagues did not go beyond Buxtehude, Couperin or Grigny.

And when, in the 1980s, the 19<sup>th</sup> century becomes fashionable again, Langlais was roundly rebuked for electrifying the Cavaillé-Coll of Sainte-Clotilde, an unforgivable crime for those who saw this organ solely as César Franck's instrument and who refused to admit it was also Tournemire's and Langlais'. In short, Jean Langlais, who had up until then enjoyed in France very broad approval, found himself the object of all kinds of opposition starting in the 1960s. However, he still felt free and found a rigidly applied system foreign to him. One day in 1975, reading a letter that Olivier Messiaen had just sent him after receiving the score for *Cinq Méditations sur l'Apocalypse*, Langlais remarked: "Messiaen has discovered a lot of things (especially Hindu rhythms) that I have found by accident."

This book does not analyze all the works of Jean Langlais, for there is not enough time and space. I have selected the pieces that I consider essential; they will be presented with some technical analyses, press reviews and letters from colleagues.

Three different font styles are used in this book. Text in the largest font presents the biography of Jean Langlais. Reviews, commentary and correspondence appear in a slightly smaller font. Finally, in a different and still smaller typeface is detailed musical analysis of individual works. If this latter is deemed too abstract or complicated reading, the reader should feel free to skip these passages. This eleven-chapter book concludes with the funeral oration delivered by Msgr. Jehan Revert during the funeral Mass for Jean Langlais at Sainte-Clotilde on May 30, 1991. Of very high quality, it is both moving and rich in symbolism. Finally, a chronological catalog of works by Langlais from 1929 to 1990 can be found in a postscript.

Jean Langlais was born poor in Brittany, which in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was the most impoverished of French provinces. Blind from the age of 2, he lived through two world wars, almost dying in 1917 during the first war when he caught the Spanish flu. In Paris he suffered through the second war, with its privations and cruelty. But thanks to his gifts, to his tenacity and his optimism, and sustained by an unshakable faith, he knew success in his lifetime. The triumph of his *Missa Salve Regina* in 1954 was one of his proudest moments, justifying his profession of faith: "My best music is that which I have written to the Holy Virgin." Considered by critics as an "accessible" modern, he was revered. In the following decades, America took over, and Langlais was then acclaimed from coast to coast, attracting both audiences and students eager to receive his message and ready to follow him to France. In the last years of his life, however, he had the impression of being neglected in his own country.

## Preface

Staying true to harmonic and melodic music, deviating from the Catholic Church's new directive concerning religious music while opposing in the strongest terms the triumph of the baroque, he had much to lose. People wanted to oppose him to Messiaen, Duruflé and Alain. But to no avail. These musicians complement each other more than they contrast, and the sum of their talents represents a richness beyond compare in France in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Impervious to all exoticism, Langlais summed himself up: "I am a Catholic Breton." This statement expresses everything, from his provincial origins to his religious beliefs. The art of Jean Langlais is an art of synthesis which, combining languages and aesthetics from different eras and backgrounds, succeeded in giving new life to timeworn material. This "naïf from the Middle Ages," with a character as rough as his music, was perfectly able to exercise the most exquisite refinement, as his harmonies testify. He lived his life with passion and enthusiasm, and his music is in his unique image, full of sound and fury, but also overflowing with poetry and subtlety. Donning a thousand faces, it spans the 20<sup>th</sup> century without deviating from its authenticity.

Will he remain known solely as a composer of sacred music? Perhaps not, as evidenced by the almost simultaneous recent publication, for the first time, of some of his manuscripts in diverse genres. These range from melodies (see the Jean Langlais website), to large pieces with orchestra like his *Messe Solennelle* (the 1949 version for choir and orchestra, with or without organ, published by Schola Cantorum (Switzerland) in 2015), to *Essai sur l'Évangile de Noël* and the *Te Deum* of 1934, published under the generic title *Diptyque symphonique sacré* by Bonnorgue editions (Germany, 2016), to his 1937 *Thème, variations et Final* for organ, orchestra and brass, published by Doblinger (Austria, 2016). All these pieces from the 1930s are being reborn today, nearly 75 years after their composition. Could this be a sign that sacred music may not be the single category under which Jean Langlais will be referenced?

...We dare to think so...

Marie-Louise Langlais  
Paris, February 8, 2016



# *Acknowledgments*

I especially want to thank my translators whose help has been indispensable.

First of all Bruce Gustafson, Charles A. Dana Professor of Music Emeritus at Franklin and Marshall College, author of over two hundred articles in scholarly journals and encyclopedias, publications which have been very well reviewed; and Arthur Lawrence, former organ faculty member at the Manhattan School of Music, editor of several organ magazines, and author of articles, reviews, and CD booklets. Both accepted without hesitation the heavy challenge of translating Chapters 1- 6 from French into English. In addition, they carefully researched all the sources which were not available in France. Their very musicological approach has been indispensable in shaping the section on the first period of Jean Langlais' life. They also met the challenge of translating several poetic, sometimes obscure, and always complex passages by Olivier Messiaen into readable English.

Chapters 7 - 9 were translated by Ross Wood, an expert in sacred music as well as in organ repertoire, including the music of Langlais. He has served as associate organist and choirmaster at Boston's Church of the Advent from 2001 to 2016. I especially appreciate his ability to bring to life the direct and unsophisticated personality of Jean Langlais.

Shirley C. Parry, Ph.D., Professor of English Emerita at Anne Arundel Community College in Maryland, and a lover of both organ music and French, translated chapters 10 and 11. An experienced editor, she had the responsibility of harmonizing the translations of all the chapters while maintaining the different "esprits" of the various translators. This was difficult and delicate work for which I am very grateful.

My very good friend James David Christie, Chair and Professor of organ at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, international recitalist all over the world, gave me unceasing support from the beginning, and with his help, this translation received support from the Boston chapter of the American Guild of Organist's Special Projects Fund. My thanks to him and to the Fund's coordinator Martin Steinmetz.

John Walker, president of the AGO, has been a close friend since the 1970s. He has always been present and has been invaluable in arranging contacts with the AGO for this project. I am delighted that, with his help, the AGO will be able to offer this book for free to all AGO members.

And, for their tributes, always given without any restrictions, I wish to thank George C. Baker, Marjorie Bruce, Lynne Davis Firmin-Didot, Douglas Himes, Thomas F. Kelly, Jan Overduin, Emmet Smith, Kathleen Thomerson, Bishop Pierre W. Whalon, and French film director Coline Serreau.

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Sylvie Mallet brought great patience to the task of transferring and organizing the 63 photographs contained in this book. Richard Powell has been invaluable in transcribing several of Langlais' unpublished songs and these editions now figure in the Langlais' website. Alice Benevise-Germain and Matthieu Germain used their computer expertise to transform this book unto a pdf document available to everybody.

I am grateful for all the many letters, documents, stories, given by close friends of Jean Langlais, all dead now, including some of his prestigious teachers. Let me cite many names particularly dear to Jean Langlais's heart: Paul Dukas, Olivier Messiaen, Charles Tournemire, Gaston Litaize, André Bourgoin, Rachel Brunswig, Pierre Denis, Pierre Lucet, Msgr. Jehan Revert, and, from the United States, Seth Bingham, Catharine Crozier, Charles Dodsley Walker, John Forshaw, Theodore Marier, Robert Sutherland Lord, Lilian Murtagh, Father Francis P. Schmitt.

Of course I will not forget the members of Langlais' family whose help was essential to his life: his first wife, Jeannette, who copied all his music, his son Claude and daughter Janine, and, at the end of his life, his second daughter Caroline. Her father died when she was only ten, but I can testify that she has been the light of his painful last years.

Marie-Louise Langlais

