

# Jehan Alain—The American Festival Wichita State University

Thomas F. Froehlich



Charles Sundquist, Wim Viljoen, Thomas Froehlich, James Higdon, Robert Bates, Ronald Wyatt, James Frazier, Jesse Eschbach

The Rie Bloomfield Organ Series 2011–2012 presented *Jehan Alain, 1911–1940: The American Festival* at Wichita State University, September 28–30, 2011. The following is a personal reflection.

In January 2009, the church where I have been the organist for 34 years had a 20th birthday party for the organ in our chapel. It was built by Dan Jaeckel and inspired by the choir organs of Cavaillé-Coll, and we discovered quite accidentally that the stoplist is nearly identical to that of the choir organ at the Alain family church in St. Germain-en-Laye. That being the case, we decided to make the 20th-anniversary concert an “Alain Family Evening,” with music composed by, and in honor of, the Alain family. Organists participating were Lynne Davis, George Baker, Jesse Eschbach, and I, all former students of Marie-Claire Alain.

The next morning, basking in the afterglow of what had turned into a magical evening, Lynne Davis commented, “You know, 2011 is the centennial of Jehan Alain’s birth—somebody ought to do something.” I replied, “Why don’t you?” Instantly *Jehan Alain—The Amer-*

*ican Festival* was born. After an hour of brainstorming, the entire symposium was planned!

Flash forward to 2011, and the festival took place nearly exactly as we had envisioned. Our host was the Rie Bloomfield Organ Series in its 2011–2012 season on the campus of Wichita State University, home to a magnificent four-manual Marcussen organ. The room, Wiedemann Hall, around which the organ was built, was an inspiring venue for the concerts and recitals. Both were built exactly 25 years ago in 1986—another anniversary to celebrate. Across the street, the lectures and dialogue among festival participants took place in the Grace Memorial Chapel. The small room provided an intimate setting for these events without the need for any amplification.

### Wednesday, 28 September 2011

The first event of the celebration was the brilliant opening recital—and a festival highlight—on the 1986 Marcussen by **Lynne Davis**, Associate Professor of Organ at WSU, who holds the Ann & Dennis Ross Endowed Faculty of Distinction in Organ Chair. The substantial



Charles Sundquist, Thomas Froehlich, Wim Viljoen, James Higdon, Lynne Davis, Robert Bates, Aurélie Decourt, Ronald Wyatt, James Frazier, James David Christie, Jesse Eschbach



Lynne Davis and Aurélie Decourt



Aurélie Decourt, Lynne Davis, Norma Stevlingson, John Grew

## Scattered leaves ... from our Letter File

“I have played this 6-rank instrument every day for nearly two years. The Schoenstein accompanies the service extremely well, and, amazingly, we have not grown tired of its 6 ranks. It is capable of a build-up which is seamless and truly exciting. It performs a good percentage of the solo literature in a truly musical way. The individual stops are remarkably beautiful. Chief among these is the 8' Open Diapason. I cannot compliment you enough about this elegant stop. It fills the room with warm, vibrant, clear, singing tone. The Trumpet, too, is remarkable for its versatility. With the box open, it makes a regal and commanding solo; with the box shut, it gives the necessary Full Swell effect of repressed power.”

Preston L. Schultz  
St. Thomas' Episcopal Church  
Houston, Texas

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program, entitled “Jehan Alain and the Evolution of the French Tradition,” was physically and musically demanding, but one that Ms. Davis handled with great

ease. It opened with the *Vierne Toccata*, followed by Franck’s *Pastorale*. The first half ended with Jehan Alain’s *Trois Danses*. After intermission was the Alain



Women's ensemble, James David Christie at the console, John Paul Johnson



Aurélie Decourt



Jen Wieman, Becky Keraly, James David Christie

Alain for two pianos (followed by a performance of the original organ version). Organists for the concert were **Lynne Davis, James David Christie, Jesse Eschbach,** and **Thomas Froehlich.**

*Suite pour Orgue* and, in closing, the Dupré *Variations on a Noël.*

#### Thursday, 29 September 2011

Keynote speaker for the conference was **Aurélie Decourt**, niece of Jehan Alain and daughter of Marie-Claire Alain, and a noted musicologist in her own right. Her opening presentation, "Jehan Alain: Musician and Poet," part I, dealt with biographical details as well as personal reflections on the Alain family and of their home life in St. Germain-en-Laye. After a break, part two of her talk centered on Jehan Alain's multi-faceted personality and how this influenced his creative output in music, drawings, and writings.

After lunch, **Lynne Davis** gave a presentation on the Alain family's organ, now housed in Romainmôtier, Switzerland. She started by showing the DVD on the organ produced by Guy Bovet and the Alain Association, and then opened the floor to a general discussion, questions and answers, and general comments.

The next event was a musical one, the first of two recitals featuring the complete works of Jehan Alain, played by former students of Marie-Claire Alain on the Marcussen organ. Organists participating were **James Frazier, Jesse Eschbach, Ronald Wyatt,** and **Thomas Froehlich.** Following the recital was a gala cocktail reception at the WSU "Ulrich Museum," which houses the famous mural by Joan Miró. The campus of WSU is home to one of the most important outdoor sculpture collections in the world.

The gala recital that evening, "Autour de Jehan Alain," featured students and faculty from the WSU School of Music, and included vocal, choral, and instrumental music of Jehan Alain. Of greatest interest to the organists were the original version of the *Intermezzo* for two pianos and bassoon (followed by Jehan Alain's own arrangement for organ) and an arrangement of *Litanies* by Olivier

#### Friday, 30 September 2011

The morning began with another lecture by **Aurélie Decourt**, "Jehan Alain: His Creative Musical Inspiration," which expanded on the two presentations made the previous day. Time was spent discussing sources, looking at manuscripts, etc. This led beautifully into a spirited dialogue between **Norma Stevlingson** and **Jesse Eschbach** entitled "New Editions, Critical Notes, and Anecdotes," and also opened up the floor to seminar participants.

After lunch was another former-student recital, this time featuring **James Higdon, Robert Bates, Wim Viljoen,** and **Charles Sundquist.** The afternoon ended with a panel discussion centered on understanding Jehan Alain through the teaching of Marie-Claire Alain. Panel members were several of her close friends and former students. **Lynne Davis** was the moderator for the panel, which included **Thomas Froehlich, James Higdon, Norma Stevlingson, John Grew,** and **James David Christie.** **Aurélie Decourt** also participated.

The evening concert took place at Century II, the Wichita convention center, which houses the famous Wurlitzer organ built for the Paramount Theatre in New York. Resident organist **James Riggs** presented a program of music celebrating the 100th anniversary of the birth of Tin Pan Alley and the Big Band Era.

Sincere thanks go to James David Christie for his invaluable help and insight in organizing the Thursday night concert as well as to Rodney Miller, Dean of the College of Fine Arts at WSU, for his invaluable support. Hearty congratulations and thanks are due to Lynne Davis, who had both the vision and stamina to organize a symposium that was incredible in every detail. The lectures were both fascinating and informative, and the music was memorable, inspirational, and at times even spiritual. Not only were we nourished musically, but there was also



Patrick Harms, Sylvia Coats, Scott Oakes



String ensemble, Thomas Froehlich at the console, Mark Laycock

plenty of good food and time for socializing! Certainly all who were present left having had an intimate encounter with Jehan Alain, with his music, and with the legacy of the entire Alain family. ■

*Thomas F. Froehlich graduated cum laude with a Bachelor of Music degree from Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin, where he was a student of Miriam Clapp Dun-*

*can. He earned a master's degree from Northwestern University, studying with Wolfgang Rübsam. Other teachers have included Anton Heiller and Jean Langlais (improvisation). During his second tenure in Paris he served as organist/choirmaster at St. Michael's Anglican Church, where he oversaw the installation of their Kern organ and subsequently administered a recital series. He has served as organist at the First Presbyterian Church of Dallas since 1977.*

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