

# Jehan Alain masterclass by Helga Schauerte for Duquesne University

Stephanie Sloan and Rebecca Marie Yoder



Helga Schauerte shows Duquesne students Chaz Bowers and Rebecca Yoder one of her manuscripts of Jehan Alain's organ works

On October 8, 2011, the organ and sacred music performance students at Duquesne University, who study under the direction of Dr. Ann Labounsky, participated in a special masterclass given by Helga Elisabeth Schauerte-Maubouet on the organ works of Jehan Alain. A masterclass of this sort was the first in the United States that she conducted along with her newest publication, a three-volume Bärenreiter Urtext edition of Jehan Alain's music. These volumes are the first German publication of Alain's music and were studied extensively over the course of this 8-hour masterclass at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Pittsburgh. During the masterclass, the Duquesne University organ students gained much valuable insight into the works of Jehan Alain through the research of Schauerte, organist of the German Lutheran Church in Paris.

Schauerte's interest in the art of organ playing began when she was young, for at 13 years of age she became the chief organist at a local church in Lennestadt, Germany. The story behind her inspiration to study Alain's music began with *Litanies*. The first time she heard this piece was during a performance by her brother in Frankfurt, during which she assisted him with page turns and registration changes. She was struck by the expressive tonality of the piece and desired to know more about it and its composer. Consequently, she began studying at the Conservatory of Rueil-Malmaison with Marie-Claire Alain in 1983, after finishing her degree at the University of Cologne. As she advanced in her studies, Schauerte noticed technical and numerical discrepancies in the available editions of Alain's compositions.

Thereafter, she decided to perform her own investigations in search of an authentic interpretation of Alain's works. Her Bärenreiter edition is the result of over a decade of intensive research. It critically compares the earliest versions of Alain's music preserved in his family archives and scores from the French National Library with all other known manuscripts. As recently as 1975, additional autographs were discovered in the Alain family archives and in 1987 in his friends' collections.<sup>1</sup> Schauerte made a careful effort to ascertain not only an authentic interpretation of Alain's pieces, but also the correct chronological order of his works. Within this chronology, Schauerte disregards transcriptions and unfinished works. The great significance of this new edition is that it, for the first time, merges Alain's full organ works with details of the discrepancies between the different manuscripts. The performer can see the reasoning behind the changes made to Alain's

original documents, and also make his own judgments of what Alain originally intended. In addition, these volumes of the complete works of Alain publish the composer's biography and his commentaries on many of the pieces. There are also thoughtful enhancements for each piece, with a catalogue of all sources consulted. The edition brings Alain's total compositional effort to 120 titles.

The music of Jehan Alain is important for an organist to study in such detail because of the unique modernist voice Alain brought to 20th-century French organ music. Jehan Alain—a musician, artist, and poet—was born on February 3, 1911, the eldest of four musical children. From his humble beginnings, taking lessons from his father on their homemade house organ, Alain went on to study at the National Conservatory in Paris under André Bloch, Georges Caussade, Paul Dukas, Jean Roger-Ducasse, and Marcel Dupré. When Alain was drafted for the Second World War in 1939, he was just blossoming into creative maturity. Even while performing his duties, he continued to write compositions for organ, piano, orchestra, and voice.<sup>2</sup> He drew inspiration from nature, imitating its purity and freshness, and was also influenced by Eastern music. Alain often composed polytonal music, seeking "new colorings created by unusual blends of registers. He experimented with soloistically employed mutation stops" and composed with unique timbres that require complicated registration changes.<sup>3</sup> Seventy years after his tragic demise, Alain's pieces are a staple in nearly every organist's repertoire, including works such as *Litanies*, *Le Jardin Suspendu*, and *Choral Dorien*.

*Litanies* was written in August of 1937 under the initial title "Supplication." On the original manuscript, Alain depicted a grotesque nightmare: a man pushing a three-wheeled cart, behind whom are twenty policemen pelting him with bricks. The students were fascinated by the fact that Alain, in the original manuscript, dictated that he wished the performer to double in octaves the pedal line in measures fifty-two to fifty-eight. This is so that the theme in the pedal will be more prominent than the accompaniment in the manuals. *Litanies'* uneven theme, evocative of a tortured soul intoning a desperate prayer, is repeated unceasingly at a frantic pace while transitioning through several modifications that reach the point of breathlessness.<sup>4</sup> Alain himself was enduring great hardships at this point in his life. While Alain was writing this piece, his wife and he suffered through a miscarriage. The piece's creation may also have been preemptive: two weeks later, his sister Marie-Odile



Helga Schauerte working at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church with Stephanie Sloan at the organ

died in an Alpine climbing accident trying to protect their brother Olivier from a fatal fall. Both these events gave Alain and his wife personal cause to constantly lift their prayers to God.

Alain dedicated the exquisite *Le Jardin Suspendu* (1934) to his close friend Marguerite Evain. This was one of his favorite pieces, which describes a "land of cheerfulness and peace."<sup>5</sup> Schauerte told the students in the masterclass to observe that the piece has three distinct sections and to be aware of the variations of the theme throughout the piece. In regard to balancing the registration for the middle section of *Le Jardin Suspendu*, she mentioned that the triplets should not be so loud that the listener cannot easily discern the primary theme in the chords.

Alain generated the title of *Choral Dorien* (1938) from the Greek mode, "which refers to today's Dorian as Phrygian and vice versa."<sup>6</sup> Performers of this piece and other Alain works often misinterpret his tempi indications. Alain did not like the constraints of bar lines and rarely denoted a particular, strict tempo. Instead, he was concerned primarily with the "living pulse of his musical thought" and wrote down the durations of his pieces to determine their relative tempi. Schauerte remarked that the tempo of *Choral Dorien* should not be too lethargic. She suggested that the performer sing the theme in order to correctly pace the tempo. These indications for *Litanies*, *Le Jardin Suspendu*, and *Choral Dorien* are critical to the correct interpretation of Alain's pieces and, if applied, form important habits for the pupils of Jehan Alain's works.

The organ students at Duquesne University thoroughly enjoyed this intensive study of Jehan Alain's music with Helga Schauerte as well as her recital the previous evening at St. Paul's Cathedral. Many were impressed with the excellence of Schauerte's research and were glad for her attention to detail and informed advice on each piece. Others were amused with Alain's artwork and were interested to learn more about his life. The masterclass provided a fresh musicological insight into the works and life of an inspiring modern composer whose creative life was tragically cut short during his military service in World War II.

The experience of a masterclass on the works of Jehan Alain with Helga Schauerte made a lasting impression upon those who participated. Alain's life and music are inspirations that echo in the works of Jean Langlais and Maurice Duruflé, as well as in numerous organ-

ists' repertoire. Whether through a masterclass, a celebratory dinner with friends of Jehan Alain meeting each other for the first time, or the National French Centenary Celebration of the Birth of Jehan Alain, musicians across the globe delight in studying and internalizing the musical expressions of this inspirational man and will do so for decades to come.<sup>7</sup> ■

## Notes

1. Helga Schauerte-Maubouet, preface to *J. Alain: Complete Organ Works*, by Jehan Alain, ed. Helga Schauerte-Maubouet, trans. Howard Weiner (Germany: Bärenreiter, 2011), 1: XII.
2. *Ibid.*, 2: XII.
3. *Ibid.*, 1: XVIII.
4. *Ibid.*, 1: XVIII.
5. *Ibid.*, 1: XVII.
6. Marie-Claire Alain, *Critical Notes on the Organ Works of Jehan Alain*, trans. Dr. Norma Stevlingson (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 2003), 11.
7. James David Christie, "National French Centenary Celebration of the Birth of Jehan Alain (1911–1940)," *THE DIAPASON* 102, no. 11, November 2011: 21.

## Bibliography

- Alain, Marie-Claire. *Critical Notes on the Organ Works of Jehan Alain*. Translated by Dr. Norma Stevlingson. Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 2003.
- Christie, James David. "National French Centenary Celebration of the Birth of Jehan Alain (1911–1940)." *THE DIAPASON* 102, no. 11 (November 2011): 21.
- Schauerte-Maubouet, Helga. Preface to *J. Alain: Complete Organ Works*, Vol. 1, by Jehan Alain. Edited by Helga Schauerte-Maubouet. Translated by Howard Weiner. Germany: Bärenreiter, 2011.
- . Preface to *J. Alain: Complete Organ Works*, Vol. 2, by Jehan Alain. Edited by Helga Schauerte-Maubouet. Translated by Howard Weiner. Germany: Bärenreiter, 2011.

Stephanie Sloan and Rebecca Marie Yoder are undergraduate students in the sacred music degree program at Duquesne University.

## THE WANAMAKER ORGAN

Listen to it worldwide over the Internet!

Hourlong streamcasts are featured at 5pm ET the first Sunday of each month at [wrti.org](http://wrti.org)