

# André Isoir: An Eclectic French Organist

Carolyn Shuster Fournier

Vital music-making is the heartbeat that animates André Isoir. Honorary organist at the church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris, Chevalier of Arts and Letters and recipient of the National Order of Merit, André Isoir has received the highest distinctions as an international concert and recording artist, with a vast repertoire and more than sixty recordings to his name. An eminent professor, he has taught over 900 organists from all over the world. A Renaissance man, he is also a composer who has made many transcriptions. Fascinated by organ building, he has been a consultant for numerous organ restorations and has served as a corresponding member of both the French Historical Monuments Commission (1970–85) and the Commission of Unclassified Historical Monuments from (1980–84).

## Initial inspiration

André Isoir was born on July 20, 1935 in Saint-Dizier (in Haute-Marne, near Reims). He played the bugle in the city band. At age fourteen, his life was transformed when he heard J. S. Bach's *Prelude and Fugue in A Minor*, BWV 543, played on the organ in the chapel of his school. He immediately fell in love with this instrument. For the next two years, he studied on this organ with a Salesian priest and accompanied on the harmonium a church choir led by his father, an amateur musician. When Noëlie Pierront<sup>1</sup> came to Saint-Dizier with the Philippe Debat Vocal Ensemble<sup>2</sup> and performed a stunning rendition of Marcel Dupré's *Prelude and Fugue in G Minor*, Isoir had the opportunity of playing Bach's *Fugue in G Minor*, BWV 542, for her. Impressed by his immense talent, she encouraged him to come to Paris to study at the César Franck School.<sup>3</sup>

## Musical training

In 1952, André Isoir enrolled at the César Franck School, then located on the rue Vavin, near Notre-Dame-des-Champs, in the Montparnasse district. After studying piano with Germaine Mounier, he then studied with two of Louis Vierne's former students: Geneviève de La Salle and Édouard Souberbielle. First he entered de La Salle's organ class.<sup>4</sup> An excellent musician, she enabled him to acquire a firm technique and taught him to play with elegant phrasing, varied articulations, and refined registrations. She excelled in the art of registration so much so that Joseph Bonnet requested that she spend hours with him preparing for his concerts and recordings on the Gonzalez organ at Saint-Eustache. She gave her lessons on a Pleyel studio organ with electro-pneumatic action,<sup>5</sup> teaching the works of Bach, Alain, Duruflé, Franck, Messiaen, and Vierne, leaving aside those by Widor and Gigout. In February 1956, when Geneviève de La Salle left to teach at the Gregorian Institute in Lisbon, Isoir succeeded her as organist and choirmaster at Saint-Médard in Paris.<sup>6</sup>

To acquire a solid musical formation, Isoir studied Gregorian chant as well as improvisation and harmony with René Málherbe,<sup>7</sup> harmony with Yves Margat, counterpoint with Marcel Bitch, and continued piano with Germaine Mounier. This prepared him to enter Édouard Souberbielle's<sup>8</sup> organ class. This "true aristocrat of the organ" possessed a vast culture and an eminent spirituality that deeply influenced all of his students. He expanded each student's personal perceptions by making them feel uncomfortable with their own opinions. This enabled them to acquire an elegant style.

In Souberbielle's class, Isoir continued to play, notably, works by Bach and Franck, but more importantly, he began to play the early French composers. Influenced by his son Léon,<sup>9</sup> Édouard



Geneviève de La Salle and Édouard Souberbielle, with Michel Jollivet and Eugène Pelletier (in the center)

Souberbielle served as consultant for the construction of a Roethinger organ in the French classic style (curiously enough with electric action) at the Benedictine Abbey in Limon (in the southern part of the Île-de-France). Voiced by Robert Boisseau, this organ included a *Plein-jeu* as described by Dom Bédos. It thus served as an inspiration to future constructions in this style by Philippe Hartmann and Pierre Chéron. In addition, Souberbielle's refined and inspiring approach to improvisation, enrobed with Ravel-like harmonies, concentrated on the free treatment of a theme and, of course, the fugue.

In order to launch a career, it was necessary to obtain a First Prize in organ from the Paris Conservatory. While still enrolled at the César Franck School in September 1957, André Isoir entered Rolande Falcinelli's<sup>10</sup> organ class and Olivier Messiaen's analysis class at the Paris Conservatory, where his fellow students included Xavier Darasse and Yves Devernay. He remained there for three years, taking lessons on a "really horrible organ"<sup>11</sup> and received his Second Prize in organ on June 15, 1959. On June 22, 1960, he unanimously obtained, with the strong support of Maurice Duruflé, a First Prize in organ performance and improvisation. Fifteen days earlier, Isoir had received the ultimate degree that really mattered to him—the Superior Diploma in organ and improvisation at the César Franck School.

At the César Franck School, Isoir met many of his future friends and colleagues: Denise and Michel Chapuis, Jeanne Joulain, Éliane Lejeune-Bonnier, Elisabeth and Joachim Havard de la Montagne, Simone and Jean-Albert Villard, Emmanuel de Villèle, Paule Piedelièvre, and others, as well as his future wife, Annie Kergomard, whom he married in 1961.<sup>12</sup> During his military service, from 1960 to 1962, he played brass instruments in a military band, along with Francis Chapelet, who became one of his closest friends.<sup>13</sup>

## Beginning a musical career: skills as an improviser and a composer

Following his studies, Isoir's international career was launched when he won various competitions: in Saint Albans (England), where he received the First



Rolande Falcinelli's organ class at the Paris Conservatory in 1960. From left to right: Francis Chapelet, André François, André Isoir, Yves Devernay, Jean Wallet, Marie-Thérèse Michaux (Besson), Xavier Darasse, Rolande Falcinelli, Christian Manen, James Caussade (seated), Pierre Jorre de Saint Jorre



André Isoir at the console of the Stoltz organ at Saint-Médard in Paris (1963)

Prize in 1965, and in Haarlem (Holland), where he won prizes for three consecutive years (1966–1967–1968). He also won the "Challenge Prize" and is the only Frenchman to have earned that distinction since the beginning of this competition in 1951. Isoir excelled in the ephemeral art of improvisation that enabled him to express his thoughts eloquently. For him, even a minimum amount of imagination, when it's coupled with an assimilation of various styles and a sufficient preparation of an abundance of fresh ideas, can enable one to improvise well. He was fascinated with presenting, in a short span of time, a coherent form with appropriate registrations that bring out the style of the proposed theme. His vital musical personality, ready to receive and develop unexpected ideas (it is not surprising that he is an avid fisherman!) has been fully revealed through his improvisations.

Animated by a love of accompanying the liturgy, André Isoir used his improvisation skills to prepare the parishioners to pray and become spiritually receptive. From 1956 to 1971, he served as organist and choir master at Saint-Médard in Paris.<sup>14</sup> He began his concert career by giving a recital in this church in October 1963, of classical works from the Flemish and German schools (Leonhard Kleber, Sweelinck, Wilhelm Karges, Scheidt, Lübeck, Pachelbel, Buxtehude and Bach). He played in such a manner that the romantic Stoltz instrument (1880) sounded like a German baroque organ!<sup>15</sup> Throughout his career, he constantly presented lesser-known works in his programs.

In 1970, he was named as one of the four organists at Saint-Séverin, along



André Isoir fishing in the Sorgue River near Saint-Rémy-de-Provence (1983)

with Michel Chapuis, Francis Chapelet, and Jacques Marichal, re-establishing the former Parisian tradition of having four organists. In 1963, Alfred Kern had successfully reconstructed the 1745 Claude Ferrand organ in a neo-classic aesthetic (under Michel Chapuis' guidance, with Philippe Hartmann redoing the action). Isoir has many fond memories of the pre-Vatican II repertoire that he accompanied there. While at Saint-Séverin, he composed a Ravel-like *Agnus Dei*, with the text in French. (See musical example.) In 1973, after having served as a consultant for the reconstruction of Haerpfers-Ermann's organ

**Musical example: André Isoir's Agnus Dei**

at Saint-Germain-des-Prés, he was appointed organist there, along with Odile Bayeux, following a long line of blind organists who had served there (notably Augustin Barié, André Marchal, and Antoine Reboulot).<sup>16</sup>

In February 1974, Les Amis de l'Orgue awarded him with a First Prize for his first organ composition, *Variations sur le Psaume 92* ["Variations on a Huguenot Psalm"]. James David Christie was in the audience for this occasion. When he told André that he really loved his piece more than any other and wanted to play it regardless if it won the prize or not, Isoir gave him his personal copy of the score on the spot! When the work was published by Forberg Verlag in Germany in 1979, Christie noticed that one variation had not been published:

When I asked André about this several years later, he told me in his very humble and self-effacing manner that he felt the piece was too long with seven variations and six were enough. The work is an absolute masterpiece and the audiences love it; I have played it in concert often since 1975. I tried to commission André in 1989 for another major organ work, but he refused. He said he found composition too stressful and preferred improvising and performing the repertoire of others. I have often lamented the fact he did not devote more time to adding great repertoire to the organ. I always felt his glorious, exciting improvisations would have been the seeds of many a great composition.<sup>17</sup>

André Isoir has made numerous transcriptions, many of which have been published by Delatour France.

**Interest in organ building and in early French music**

Fascinated with mechanics in his youth, Isoir has always loved to tinker with and repair broken clocks. In the early 1960s, at an antique dealer's near Saint-Séverin, he acquired an eighteenth-century barrel organ [a *serinette*] from Nancy, a cylindrical instrument that was used to teach domestic birds how to sing. He then constructed a copy of this instrument and installed ten pipes: C, D, E, F, G, A, B-flat, B-natural, C, and D. He reconstructed the cylinder with eight tunes, according to the indications specified by Engramelle, and incorporated an air by Couperin, *La petite chasse*. He has also built two regals and a virginal.

Francis Prod'homme, the organizer of concerts at Notre-Dame in Pontorson, near Mont Saint-Michel, has related an example of André Isoir's generosity.<sup>18</sup> During one evening meal, Isoir observed that Francis's clock was not well-regulated and that it needed to be "tuned." As on numerous other occasions, Isoir proclaimed "I will take care of that for you." In several minutes, and with a delightful child-like smile that lit up André's face, the clock was once again happily chiming in universal harmony.

Isoir's close friend, the organ builder Jean-Georges Koenig,<sup>19</sup> taught him how to construct wooden pipes. His friend, Father Michel Chausson (a priest who built organ pipes) taught him how to construct metal pipes. In addition, in 1965, Isoir constructed his first regal with Jean-François Clément and worked with Gérard Fonvielle, who built him a harpsichord. Isoir is not in favor of building exact copies of instruments; he prefers to play mechanical-action instruments that enable the performer to bring out the vocal polyphonic lines and to play a large part of the repertoire. His repair kit has accompanied him on his various concert tours, and he has admitted that on many occasions that he has spent more time repairing and tuning the various organs than rehearsing on them!

The composer Alain Louvier attests to André Isoir's capacities as a "solitary navigator" ["navigateur solitaire"]:

André Isoir could have constructed a hydraulic organ, an aeolian, solar or geothermal . . . and could have taken it on a non-stop trip around the world on a trimaran sailing raft . . . he knew how to do everything, to repair anything. One would have thought that he was born in an organ case! A true genius in making repairs, with practically nothing he could fix a tremolo, a reed pipe, even its mechanism.

I imagine him—as an organist in the Iron Age—busy cutting down trees, carving wood, casting tin, hammering it, and, finally, creating his own organ, the fruit of his ear and his unbounded imagination.<sup>20</sup>

Isoir's innate inventive spirit in improvisation and organ building led to his fascination with the interpretive possibilities of "recreating" early French organ works. Right from the start, Isoir realized that the organs he had played in the 1950s and 1960s in Paris, most of them in the neo-classical style, were not suitable for early French repertoire. This had not stopped interpreters such as Abel Decaux, Joseph Bonnet, and André Marchal from playing this repertoire. With restorations of magnificent organs like Jean-Esprit Isnard's 1772 basilica organ in Saint-Maximin-en-Provence (restored by Pierre Chéron in 1954) and François-Henri Clicquot's 1790 organ at Saint-Pierre Cathedral in Poitiers (restored by Robert and Jean-Loup Boisseau in 1971–1972), organists began to discover the splendid sound of these organs as well as a lively, variable wind and a suspended mechanical action, which allowed one to vary the attack.

Obtaining a varied, responsive action is extremely important to André Isoir. The French classical organ, with its sensitive action and lively wind, needs only a minimum amount of material to offer a maximum sound effect. For example, in Poitiers, with a wind pressure of 110 mm., four or five stops suffice to fill the cathedral. Following Alfred Kern's reconstruction of the Saint-Séverin organ in 1968, René Delosmes, Pierre Hard-



André Isoir repairing his eighteenth-century barrel organ (1980)

ouin, Jean Fellot, Alain Lequeux, Michel Chapuis, Francis Chapelet, and André Isoir, presided over by Jean Fonteneau, united to protect early French historic organs: they founded the French Association for the Preservation of Early Organs (A.F.S.O.A.—*Association française pour le sauvetage de l'orgue ancien*).<sup>21</sup>

By consulting early sources, Isoir discovered that the early French repertoire can be moving and expressive. Once he had studied the various treatises and documents, notably with the musicologist Jean Saint-Arroman, he realized on the one hand that the knowledge of these texts did not suffice to bring this music to life; on the other hand, he was also aware that spontaneity and freshness never come by chance. To attain the elegance, distinction and well-proportioned expressions that are so characteristic of French art, one must study the various imperative rules and then put them aside, along with any automatic mechanical responses. Instead, one must use one's intuition to find a harmonious balance, continually determined by good taste, the ultimate guide. As with wine tasting, it is so much more important to "taste" its fragrance than to recite texts about it. Isoir was especially guided by the writings of Eugène Borrel, who wrote that eighteenth-century art was "elegant, distinguished, warm without excessiveness."<sup>22</sup> Simplicity is a sign of real intelligence. Isoir particularly loves

playing early French music because it gives the interpreter a great deal of freedom in bringing this music to life.

**Organ professor**

For André Isoir, teaching is a sacred mission, enabling one to give priceless treasures to others, helping them to feel completely at ease while playing. He taught organ and harmony at the Angers Conservatory (1966–79);<sup>23</sup> at the conservatoires in Versailles and Orsay (1974–83);<sup>24</sup> and from 1982 to 1996 at the Boulogne-Billancourt Conservatory as well as at various summer academies: Lagny (1982, 1985, 1986), Meaux (1983), Mitry-Mory (1984), Luxembourg (1989) and Nemours (1993). Among his 900 students are Jörg Abbing, Michel Bouvard, Jean Boyer, Monika Dabrowska-Beuzelin, Frédéric Denis, Frédéric Desenclos, François Espinasse, Pierre Farago, Yves Fossaert, Dominique Fournier, Jean-Louis Gil, Juliette Grellety-Bosviel, Emmanuelle Haïm, Makiko Hayashima, Léonid Karev, Joachim Kunze, Sven-Ingvart Mikkelsen, George Ritchie, Henri de Rohan, Pascale Rouet, Christophe Simon, Liuwe Tamminga, Timothy Tikker, Jean-Michel Verneiges, Francis Vidil and Haru Yamagami, to name but a few. Convinced that knowledge about organ building is indispensable to improving one's interpretation, notably in the art of registration and touch, he also taught his students the rudiments of organ con-

struction and maintenance. According to organist and composer Pierre Farago, his successor as organ professor at the Boulogne-Billancourt Conservatory,

When André Isoir taught and played, the instrument was transformed under his fingers, and relinquishing its mechanical aspects, became purely organic—if I dare say—like a living being gifted with flowing expressiveness. His teaching is subtle and complex, insisting on utmost rigor, with utmost patience, without ever expressing it in the form of a dogmatic principle. The scores we studied were never cenotaphs, empty monuments or museum graphics, but rather sleeping beauties which ought to be brought back to life.<sup>25</sup>

In the early 1980s, the composer Alain Louvier, Director of the Conservatory in Boulogne-Billancourt, met André Isoir during the construction of the Koenig organ in the concert hall there. In spite of the fact that the city did not really want to invest in what the “very cultivated and refined” mayor Georges Gorse referred to as an “accordion for the wealthy,” Louvier appreciated Isoir’s “sense of humor, in addition to his wide-ranging competence, which both worked wonders.” Louvier had included stops in this organ with the seventh and eleventh harmonics that produced quarter tones. He was astonished by Isoir’s use of these stops:

By combining these experimental stops with the voix humaine, he was able to produce a sort of strange Bombarde 16 on the pedal that the city could not afford... thanks to his extraordinary acoustical intuition, one could play a Bach chorale with quarter tones, that were not noticed as such.<sup>26</sup>

In his teaching, André Isoir constantly emphasized the importance of acquiring a more fluid technique, of becoming sufficiently inventive in bringing music to life. At my first lesson at the Boulogne-Billancourt Conservatory in 1983,<sup>27</sup> we spent two hours looking at possible interpretations of the first movement (a *Plein-Jeu*) of Jean-Adam Guilain’s *First Suite*. I felt as if André were an optician who kept inserting different lenses to ask me if I could read the letters. It was necessary to understand the structure and the vital expression of this work from the inside out, to let the notes speak naturally. A deep harmonic and melodic analysis of each work, coupled with a fantastic imagination, enables one to perform this music spontaneously.

In the eyes and ears of a great artist, no detail is too small to be taken into consideration. An authentic artist with a vital personality abandons all preconceived static conceptions with prefabricated formulas and continually externalizes his capacity to listen to his playing, thus enabling him to understand more fully and to communicate an inner musical message. Each artist is a medium who communicates the deep spiritual message of the music. When I wrote to Frank Taylor in 1983, to share my experiences with him, he replied:

I’m happy you are studying with André—I think he’s perhaps the greatest eclectic (all round good) organist in the world. And I would rather hear him play anything, than anyone else I can think of. Give him my very most affectionate best wishes when next you see him.<sup>28</sup>

Recognized as an excellent teacher, in 1991 André Isoir co-authored, with

Dominique Ferran and François-Henri Houbart, a practical catalog of the organ repertoire, in order of difficulty for the first ten years of organ lessons. It presents exercises and methods, early music until the seventeenth century, separate chapters on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the traditional notation and new notation in the twentieth century, concertos and unclassifiable pieces.<sup>29</sup>

#### International concert and recording artist with an eclectic repertoire

André Isoir first gave concerts in North America in the 1960s, thanks to his friend Jean Fonteneau, an assistant organist at Saint-Séverin. In 1971, Isoir performed in Oberlin (Ohio), Quebec, Montreal, at Harvard University, and in New York. At that time, Fisk was building his famous organ for the Old West Church in Boston. Isoir provided him with numerous details concerning the construction of the French-style reed stops incorporated into this instrument, thus contributing to the movement in favor of restoring instruments to play early French music in the United States. In 1974, he performed in Toronto and in Buffalo, where he met with the early French music specialist David Fuller. In 1975, he played concerts in Toronto and Montreal. In 1976, he returned to Harvard and gave recitals in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

In November 1989, James David Christie invited André Isoir to come to the United States for a mini-tour in Boston. He testifies to Isoir’s memorable performances in Wellesley and Worcester:

He played a fantastic concert at Wellesley College on the meantone Fisk organ, complete with short octave, sub-semitones, a three-octave keyboard range, etc. He ended his program with a super-charged, exciting performance of his transcription of Bela Bartók’s *Roumanian Folk Dances* (originally for piano solo).

He played at Holy Cross, Worcester, and ended the program with an incredible improvisation on “B-A-C-H.” I think there is an archival recording of the Holy Cross concert; it was just stunning and André was in his usual top form, having the time of his life.<sup>30</sup>

During this last tour to the United States, Isoir also gave masterclasses on the Charles Fisk organ at the Old West Church for the AGO national convention. On this occasion, Isoir has quite fond memories of the moments he spent with Frank Taylor, Barbara Owen, and Charles Fisk.

Isoir has inaugurated at least eighty organs. I was privileged to attend the memorable inauguration of the Gonzalez organ at Meaux Cathedral on June 8, 1982. That year, he also inaugurated the Grenzing organ at Saint-Cyprien (in the Périgord, where he also served as a consultant) and the Marc Garnier organ at the church in Esquelbecq. On November 3, 1990, he was especially pleased to inaugurate the restored Aristide Cavaillé-Coll organ in Saint-Dizier, his hometown. In addition, he often plays with other musicians. In 1973, he toured with Georges Brassens in Paris and the Île-de-France, playing twenty-one concerts on a positive organ built by Jean-Loup Boisseau.

Isoir has given numerous concerts outside of France, performing in Freiberg on September 18, 1983. In 1988, he was absolutely delighted to perform for



André Isoir at the console of the organ in Katowice in Poland (1987)

the first time on the magnificent organ in Weingarten, in Sion in 1989, in Lübeck and Hamburg in 1990. He has also performed on numerous occasions in Japan: in 1978, 1987, 1990 and 1993. In 2006, he toured Russia, performing in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

In addition, he performs regularly on the four-stop, one-manual organ that the builder Philippe Vialle built for him. Isoir had added a tremolo and a “cymbale” made up of fifteen pipes that he “invented,” only to discover since then that it is present in several diverse and unknown pieces. He rarely ever plays the same piece on the same organ.

The variety of styles in his eclectic repertoire is revealed by the pieces that four composers have dedicated to him. In June 1973, Jean Langlais acknowledges his “classical side,” appropriately dedicated to him his *Plein-Jeu*, the first movement of his *Suite baroque*, op. 176.<sup>31</sup> In 1983, Alain Louvier’s *Etudes for Aggressors, Book Six for Organ (Etudes pour Agresseurs, livre 6 pour orgue)*, published by Alphonse Leduc in 1987, were written for the mechanical-action three-manual Koenig organ in the concert hall at the Boulogne-Billancourt Conservatory. He dedicated these pieces to Isoir, who premiered them.<sup>32</sup> They use the same techniques as in his previous five books for piano and harpsichord (ten fingers, two palms, two forearms, without fists), but with the addition of two feet! The two last pieces are appropriate tributes to André Isoir, who also plays the trombone and the French horn: Lionel Rogg’s *Finale* (written in the spring of 1994) was inspired by the sumptuous sonorities of the American big band;<sup>33</sup> Pierre Vidal’s piece, entitled *Cromorne*, was written in 1996.<sup>36</sup>

In 1971, Jacques Le Calvé, the director of Calliope, was so impressed by Isoir’s performance of this repertoire that he asked him to make his first record at the Church of Saint-Jacques in Compiègne (*L’Orgue français au Grand Siècle*, works by André Raison, Jacques Boyvin and Guillaume-Gabriel Nivers).

Among his favorite historic French organs, Isoir has recorded numerous times on the J. Boizard (1714) historic organ of the Abbey of Saint-Michel-Thiérache: in 1987, *The Couperin Dynasty*, François “the Great,” Armand-Louis, Gervais-François Couperin (ADDA 581063); in 1993, Nicolas de Grigny, *Complete Organ Works* (Erato S.A./Radio France, MUSIFRANCE 4509-91722-2); and in 1997, Jean-Adam Guilain, *Four Suites for the Magnificat* (1706) with the Demoiselles of Saint-Cyr, directed by Emmanuel Mandrin (France Musique, Temporements, TEM 316012, Distribution Harmonia Mundi).

André Isoir has always felt comfortable playing a vast repertoire (although never ever Reger!). Among his recordings of romantic works, two were made on the Cavaillé-Coll organ at Luçon Cathedral: César Franck’s *Complete Organ Works* (Calliope, CAL 9920/1, 1987, recorded in 1975) and *The Romantic Organ*, works by Boëly, Lefébure-Wély, Guilmant, Pierné, Widor, and Ropartz on the Cavaillé-Coll in Luçon and on the Isnard/Cavaillé-Coll/Boisseau organ in Pithiviers (Calliope, CAL 5922). In 1996, he recorded *The Organ in Compiègne during the Second Empire* on the Carlier/Plet organ at Saint-Antoine in Compiègne (Calliope, CAL 9934).

Isoir loves performing on successful neo-classical organs, such as the Pas-



André Isoir at the console of the organ at Saint-Jacques in Compiègne (1971)

cal Quoirin in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence and the Haerpfer-Ermann at Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris. Among the recordings that bear witness to this, he recorded François Couperin’s *Messe des Paroisses* and French Noël’s on the Saint-Séverin organ (Calliope, *Le Livre d’Or de l’Orgue français*).

Rodin’s most penetrating thoughts concerning French taste that have been perpetuated from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century sum up André Isoir’s approach to an eclectic repertoire:

The additions of previous centuries in our cathedrals, in different styles—chapels, stained-glass windows, decoration—do not destroy the harmony of them, because throughout the various periods these embellishments have been determined by the same French taste.<sup>35</sup>

In the same spirit, it is not surprising that in November 2000, Isoir recorded repertoire from the fourteenth century to the end of the nineteenth in celebration of the 500th anniversary, in 2001, of the Renaissance organ in Lorris, one of the oldest organs in Europe.<sup>36</sup> This is in spite of the fact that this organ only has a 48-note keyboard with a 14-note coupled pedalboard and is tuned at A=405/408! Father Michel Chausson, who initiated the restoration of this historic instrument, admires André Isoir: he is among “all those who have provided great poetical inspiration to twentieth century organ interpretation.”<sup>37</sup> Our world needs such a spirit more than ever.

From 1976 to 1993, Isoir crowned his career with an ultimate homage to his great teacher Édouard Souberbielle, by recording J. S. Bach’s complete organ works on six different organs by German builders (fifteen CDs produced by Calliope, 9703-17). His greatest joy was recording Bach’s *Passacaglia and Fugue* on Josef Gabler’s monumental stunning organ (1737–1750) at Weingarten Abbey, a legendary instrument conceived around the number 6: the number of the beast of the Apocalypse, six windows, six tonal plans, 6,666 pipes.

Grenzing’s Saint-Cyprien organ is among Isoir’s favorites, where he rerecorded, in 1993, Bach’s four *Toccatas and Fugues* along with the *Fantasy and Fugue in G Minor*. In 1988 and 1989, André Isoir played in European television broadcasts, notably on the France 3 channel, in programs written and hosted by Gilles Cantagrel and in Alain Duault’s “Musicales.”

In all his interpretations, Isoir’s deeply human approach gives a spiritual dimension to his artistic offerings. His interpretations are well conceived and prepared, yet spontaneous. His wife Annie observed that it was very rare to hear him play a piece in its entirety during his practice sessions. He usually works fragment by fragment, even measure by measure. More than searching for perfection, he aims at playing as naturally as possible. His eyes, ears and mind are constantly receptive to discovering new elements of a musical score. Adapting to each particular circumstance, his elegant playing moves his audiences. As Yves Saint-Laurent said, “without elegance that comes from the heart, there is no elegance.”

Thank you, André, for sharing your immense joy in making beautiful music and for so generously enlightening your audiences and students throughout the world. ■

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**André Isoir at the console of the Cavaillé-Coll organ at Luçon Cathedral (1975)**

Dr. Carolyn Shuster Fournier thanks Father Michel Chausson, James David Christie, Jean-Louis Coignet, Pierre Farago, Jean Fonteneau, Yves Fossaert, André Isoir, Alain Louvier, Yvonne Mills, Francis Prod'homme, and Pascale Rouet for their assistance in preparing this article. Author of numerous articles for THE DIAPASON, she is a French-American organist, musicologist, international concert organist and titular of the Aristide Cavaillé-Coll choir organ at La Trinité in Paris, France. She has premiered numerous contemporary works, collaborating with composers such as Jacques Castède, Jacques Chailley, Jacques Charpentier and Daniel Pinkham. In April 2009, she recorded a CD in homage to Nadia Boulanger at La Madeleine in Paris. She is Chevalier in the Order of Arts and Letters.

#### Notes

1. Noëlie Pierront (Paris, September 23, 1899–Paris, September 25, 1988) took organ lessons with Eugène Sergent, Abel Decaux, Louis Vierne, and Vincent d'Indy at the Schola Cantorum, and with Eugène Gigout and Marcel Dupré at the Paris Conservatory, where she also studied music history. She received a First Prize in Organ there in 1928. Organist at Saint-Germain-des-Prés from 1926 to 1928, she directed several choirs and taught *solfège* at the Schola Cantorum from 1925 to 1931. Titular organist at Saint-Pierre-du-Gros-Caillo from 1929–1970, she edited numerous collections of early music for the Schola Cantorum Editions and collaborated with Jean Bonfils to write an organ method. She was an international concert organist; Jehan Alain dedicated his final work, *Aria*, to her. Cf. Raphaël Tambyeff, "Noëlie Pierront (1899–1988)" and Pierre Denis, "Les Organistes français d'aujourd'hui : Noëlie Pierront," *L'Orgue*, n° 223, 1993, January–March, pp. 9–16.

2. At that time Philippe Debat was the founder (and director) of "Les Petits Chanteurs de la Sainte-Croix" (from the Sainte-Croix School in Neuilly, near Paris).

3. The César Franck School (École César Franck) was founded in January 1935 by Louis de Serres, Marcel Labey, Pierre de Bréville, and Guy de Lioncourt, following a split with the Schola Cantorum. In 1941, it was located at 3 Jules-Chaplain Street in the sixth arrondissement of Paris, near Notre-Dame-des-Champs; in 1968, it was moved to 8, rue Git-le-Coeur until it closed at the end of the 1980s.

4. Geneviève de La Salle (1905–1995) studied with Louis Vierne, Eugène Sargent, and Joseph Bonnet at the Schola Cantorum from 1920–1930 and served as organist at Saint-Médard from the early 1930s to 1954, at Saint-Charles-de-Monceau from 1954 to 1955, then at Saint-Louis in Fontainebleau from 1956 to 1974. She later directed the organ class at the Gregorian Institute in Lisbon.

5. Jean-Louis Coignet, "Letter to Carolyn Shuster Fournier," December 20, 2006. The other three organ professors at this school were Édouard Souberbielle, Jean Felot, and Brémont d'Ars. Among the other organ students was the niece of the professor Brémont d'Ars, Marthe Brasseur (the daughter of a sculptor, member of the Institut), who studied, beginning in 1957, with Marcel Dupré.

6. James Caussade replaced her as organist at Saint-Charles-de-Monceau.

7. René Malherbe (1989–1969) studied at the Schola Cantorum, then with Eugène Gigout and Marcel Dupré at the Paris Conservatory. He served as organist at Notre-Dame-de-la-Croix and as choirmaster at Saint-Pierre-du-Gros-Caillo.

8. Édouard Souberbielle (1899–1989) studied organ with Abel Decaux, Eugène Sergent, and Louis Vierne at the Schola Cantorum and then for one year at the Paris Conservatory where he received two First Prizes in 1925:



**André Isoir at the console of the Gabler organ at Weingarten Abbey (1988)**

in harmony (in the class of J. Mouquet) and in organ (in the class of Eugène Gigout). A brilliant virtuoso and an excellent choirmaster (at Saint-Ambroise from 1929–1943, then at Saint-Pierre-de-Chaillo), he served as organist at Notre-Dame-de-la-Croix and Saint-Joseph-des-Carnes. Appointed organ professor at the Schola Cantorum in 1926, he also taught improvisation and accompanying there, as well as the advanced organ courses at the École César Franck and the Institut Grégorien. Cf. Pierre Denis, "Les Organistes français d'aujourd'hui, VI. Édouard Souberbielle," *L'Orgue*, n° 54, January–March 1950, pp. 13–15.

9. Léon Souberbielle (Paris, October 31, 1920–Montoire, November 3, 1991) was known for his remarkable book, *Le Plein-Jeu de l'Orgue français à l'époque classique (1660–1740)*, printed by the author at Montoire-sur-Loir in 1977. After serving as organist at Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois (1954–1974), he became choir organist at Notre-Dame and at La Trinité.

10. Rolande Falcinelli (Paris, February 18, 1920–Pau, June 11, 2006) taught organ and improvisation at the Paris Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique from 1954 to 1986. One of the leading exponents of the modern French school of organists-improvisers-composers, her pupils are among the greatest French virtuosos and improvisers of our time.

11. André Isoir thus described the Jacquot-Lavergne organ, designed by Marcel Dupré, built around 1950 for the Salle Berlioz (which later was named the Salle Marcel Dupré), at the Paris Conservatory, 14, rue de Madrid.

12. His wife Annie became organist at the Reformed Church in Auteuil, Paris (53, rue Erlanger, in the 16th arrondissement), where Jean-Georges Koenig installed a two-manual, fifteen-stop organ in 1971; it was inaugurated by both of them. They have three children: Hélène (1962), an amateur cellist; Daniel (1963), a professional pianist; and Laurent (1966), an amateur violinist; and three grandchildren (Arthur, Colin and Myrtille).

13. Isoir's interest in brass instruments remained with him: in 1986 he studied trombone, and in 1987 French horn at the Boulogne Conservatory.

14. In 1971, André Isoir was succeeded by Jean-Louis Gil. The present organist, Jean Galard, substituted there in 1972, and was named titular in 1973.

15. *L'Orgue*, n° 112, 1963, p. 107.

16. The present co-titulars, Jean-Paul Serra and Anne-Marie Blondel, both studied with André Isoir.

17. James David Christie, e-mail to Carolyn Shuster Fournier, January 17, 2009.

18. Cf. <www.musiquesapontorson.com> and <francisprod'homme@orange.fr>.

19. In 1975, his son, Yves Koenig, installed a nine-stop organ in André Isoir's home in Palaiseau, a southern suburb of Paris. Until then, he had practiced on a one-stop Schwenkedel organ. In 1971, Jean-Georges Koenig constructed a two-manual mechanical-action organ for his wife's church in Auteuil, and in 1982, the organ for the concert hall at the Boulogne-Billancourt Conservatory where he taught.

20. Alain Louvier, e-mail to Carolyn Shuster Fournier, January 14, 2009. Alain Louvier was born in 1945. After brilliant studies at the Paris Conservatory, he was awarded Premier Grand Prix de Rome in 1968. In 1972, he was named Director of the Boulogne-Billancourt Conservatory and in 1986, he became Director of the Paris Conservatoire national supérieur de musique de Paris.

21. Their periodical *Renaissance de l'Orgue* was published by Bärenreiter; it appeared until 1970 and was followed by *Connaissance [sic] de l'orgue* in 1971. Among the organs they discussed were those at Saint-Gervais in Paris, the Chapel of Fontainebleau Château, and Notre-Dame in Rozay-en-Brie.

22. Eugène Borrel, *L'Interprétation de la musique française (de Lully à la Révolution)*,

Paris, Librairie Félix Alcan, 1934, p. 150. Eugène Borrel (1876–1962), a French violinist and musicologist, had studied the violin with Jules Garcin, de Rémy, and Paul Viardot at the Paris Conservatory, and with Gustave Lefèvre at the École Niedermeyer in Paris. He taught violin at the Schola Cantorum. Strongly interested in eighteenth-century French classical music, he performed this music often and founded, in 1908 with Félix Raugel, the Société Haendel.

23. André Isoir served as a consultant for the construction of Jean-Georges Koenig's 15-stop, two-manual organ at the Bon Pasteur Convent in Angers.

24. The Conservatoire de la Vallée de Chevreuse in Orsay (located in the 91st département) was then known as the École Nationale de Musique de la Vallée de Chevreuse.

25. Pierre Farago's entire text will appear in a book of interviews by Pascale Rouet, which will be published by Delatour France.

26. Alain Louvier (see note 20).

27. I was fortunate to study with André Isoir at the Boulogne-Billancourt Conservatory from 1983 to 1985.

28. Frank Taylor, letter to Carolyn Shuster, non-dated [1983]. A disciple of Melville Smith, he was teaching then at the New England Conservatory in Boston.

29. Dominique Ferran, François-Henri Houbart, André Isoir, *10 ans avec l'orgue*,

Paris, la Villette, Institut de pédagogie musicale et chorégraphique, 1991.

30. James David Christie, e-mail to Carolyn Shuster Fournier, February 26, 2009.

31. Jean Langlais premiered his *Suite baroque* at the Saint-Jean Temple in Mulhouse on December 2, 1973. It was published in Paris by Combre in 1973. Cf. Marie-Louise Jaquet-Langlais, *Ombre et Lumière, Jean Langlais 1907–1991* (Paris, Combre, 1995), p. 355.

32. This piece was played by André Isoir on the Pascal Quoirin Grand Orgue at the 1983 International Composition Competition in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence; for this same occasion, Alain Louvier played his *Quatre Alleluias* on the Gregorian Alleluia from the Easter Mass on Pascal Quoirin's choir organ with a divided keyboard. (These *Alleluias* were published by Alphonse Leduc and recorded by Jean-Pierre Baston on the Claude Berger organ at the Temple Church in Vigan, available at <www.particule.com>.) Both of Alain Louvier's organ works were awarded the Saint-Rémy-de-Provence Composition Prize.

33. This piece is the final movement of three pieces entitled *Arcature*, composed for the 1993 Van de Heuvel organ in the Victoria Hall in Geneva. They were published in Paris by Lemoine Editions in 1995.

34. This piece was published as the third and final movement of Pierre Vidal's *Second Suite [Deuxième Suite]*, published in Paris by Leduc in 1996. Pierre Vidal recorded his entire works. These six CDs, published in 2006 by the Association of the International Music Festival in Wissembourg, are available for €40 at <www.pierre-vidal.com>.

35. Eugène Borrel, op. cit., pp. VI–VII.

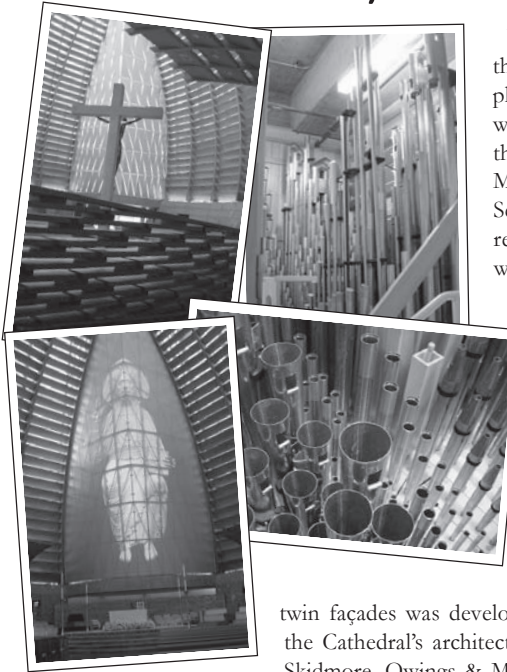
36. "Musiques européennes," Disques Triton, 2008. The organ case, its gallery, and 200 pipes remain from the Italian-style organ built in 1501. In the seventeenth century, it was reconstructed in the French style. Thanks to Father Michel Chausson, this organ was classified as a historical monument in 1971. J. G. Koenig from Sarre-Union restored it in 1974. In 2001, Michel Chausson and Yves Koenig wrote a book, *Lorris en Gatinais, un orgue, cinq siècles d'histoire, 1501–2001*, published by the Organ Association in Lorris (cf. <http://www.loiret.com/lorris.orgue>).

37. Alain Louvier (see note 20).

All of the citations in French were translated by the author.

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## The Cathedral of Christ the Light OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA



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