

Jehan Alain: His Life and Works

Aurélie Decourt

Saint-Germain-en-Laye, 3 février 1911—Saumur, 20 juin 1940

On February 3, 2011, Jehan would have been 100 years old. But he met his death at the beginning of the Second World War, leaving a wife, three little children, and a great musical heritage. Last year, in many places in France, but also in Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, and of course in the U.S.A., his memory was celebrated and numerous commemorations took place, one of the most important in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, his birthplace, with great musicians coming from all over the world, among them such famous Americans as Lynne Davis, James David Christie, and Norma Stellingson, among others. The Alain centennial in Wichita last September was a very important opportunity because it took place in the U.S.A., where there are many fans of Jehan Alain's music. I also gave two lectures at Oberlin College in October. The man, himself, gathers ever more fans.

I will try to present Jehan Alain's rich personality and his original works in two articles: the present one will deal with his biography and personality; the second will describe the sources of his musical inspiration, focusing on orientalism, and will analyze his creative process.

In fact, Jehan Alain's personality is extremely rich. In addition to his musical gifts, he also knew how to draw, and he wrote letters full of poetry, tenderness, and humor. These qualities make him an attractive man. Thanks to accounts of his family, his friends, and various musicians, but also through his own reflections on religion, love, and life in general, we can better understand his human and exceptional artistic qualities.

A prolific and original musician:

Albert Alain, organist, composer, and organbuilder (1880–1971)

Albert Alain's influence on his son Jehan was essential. He gave him an appreciation and love of music, that is to say serious music, well constructed and well performed. Albert was a prolific composer, with 469 opus numbers, primarily short religious vocal works. Thus, church music held a fundamental place in Jehan's training; he retained an appreciation of Gregorian chant and its modes. Ever since he was old enough to turn the pages of a score, his father brought him along to church services; little Jehan thus learned at a young age the order of the liturgy.

His father acquainted Jehan with well-written music. Albert Alain excelled in harmony (obtaining the First Prize in harmony at the Paris Conservatory in 1904). He also gave Jehan the opportunity to discover sixteenth- and seventeenth-century music. Finally, he directly conveyed to him his personal passion for music. In one of his letters, Jehan wrote, "Half of my head always thinks about music."

Albert Alain was a remarkable teacher. He gave lessons to his four children—Jehan, Marie-Odile, Olivier, and Marie-Claire—who all became professional musicians; two of them were exceptional artists. His children are extremely indebted to him for his strong impact on their musical education.

The organ

Albert Alain was a very original man. He developed such a passion for the organ that he undertook what seemed to be a crazy project: to build a home organ by himself. This home organ would keep him busy for his entire lifetime (1880–1971). Planned initially in 1910 for 19 stops, the organ amounted, in 1950, to 42 stops.

One could say that this organ was Albert Alain's fifth child. It influenced the musical life of the 20th century. As a



Jehan Alain's "official" portrait



The four children



Young Jehan Alain (4 years old)



Albert Alain's organ with Albert Alain standing, 1950

matter of fact, Albert Alain was connected with all the famous organists of the 1920s and 1930s, from Marcel Dupré to André Marchal, and also Joseph Bonnet and Alexandre Cellier.

This organ is very interesting for several reasons. It shows the technical prowess of a single man, who built everything in it (except metal pipes). The aesthetics of the specification show great originality, especially in the beginning, 1910—Albert Alain conceived a neo-classic organ, revealing himself as a precursor. What is more, the organ inspired many registrations in Jehan Alain's works; it fostered Marie-Claire Alain's vocation. It gave a testimony, at a time when electric action came into fashion, to mechanical action.

Albert Alain carefully studied many instruments in the Parisian area, as well as an organbuilding method, entitled *Roret et Guédon*, a sort of abstract of Dom Bedos' work, *L'art du facteur d'orgues*. Finally, he talked with his teacher at the Paris Conservatory, Alexandre Guilmant, who knew much about organbuilding and advised him to return to the typical stops of the 17th and 18th centuries.

Here is the specification of the first organ in 1914, with the Cornet décomposé on the Positif. Later, in the 1920s, the organ would have three manuals, with a Récit (Solo).

Grand orgue

- 16' Bourdon
- 8' Montre
- 8' Flûte harm.
- 4' Prestant

Positif

- 8' Cor de nuit
- 4' Flûte douce
- 2½' Nazard
- 2' Doublette
- 1½' Tierce
- 8' Basson-hautbois

Pédale

- 16' Soubasse
- 8' Basse
- 4' Flûte

Albert and Jehan Alain were most influenced by the organ of the abbey of Valloires, built in 1845, but with several ancient stops. The sonorities of this instrument, very original for the time, enchanted Jehan and Albert. Here is an extract of a letter Jehan wrote to his friend Denise Billard in 1930:

There is a three-manual organ here which is splendid, and (which is) located in the most "acoustigenic" place I have ever met. It contains some old pipes two or three hundred years old that are "fully-flavored". Unfortunately, it has a huge defect: it is not tuned according to our pitch. In order to play from memory, you have to think one measure ahead of time to transpose by ear. Finger memory is the only true memory. . . . But this instrument is marvelous to play around eleven at night, when silence is perfect in the countryside and you play pianissimo the low notes of the pedal which make the atmosphere quiver. It's really moving.

Albert Alain wanted for his organ new sonorities and new registrations in order to play Couperin, Daquin, Clérambault, and above all J. S. Bach, Buxtehude, and Pachelbel. So the specification of his organ mixed together the post-romantic influence with a return to the 17th- and 18th-century French tradition.

In the 1930s, Albert Alain planned a fourth manual, Récit-Bombarde, including a Plein-jeu and the typical *batterie d'anches*: Bombarde 16', Trompette 8', Clairon 4'. But Jehan Alain never saw this fourth manual completed. On the contrary, the organ was in perpetual transformation in the 1930s, with certain



Jehan at his father's organ

stops remaining mute. This is the reason for several registrations on Jehan Alain's works. Albert Alain completed the fourth manual and the organ in 1950.

Grand orgue

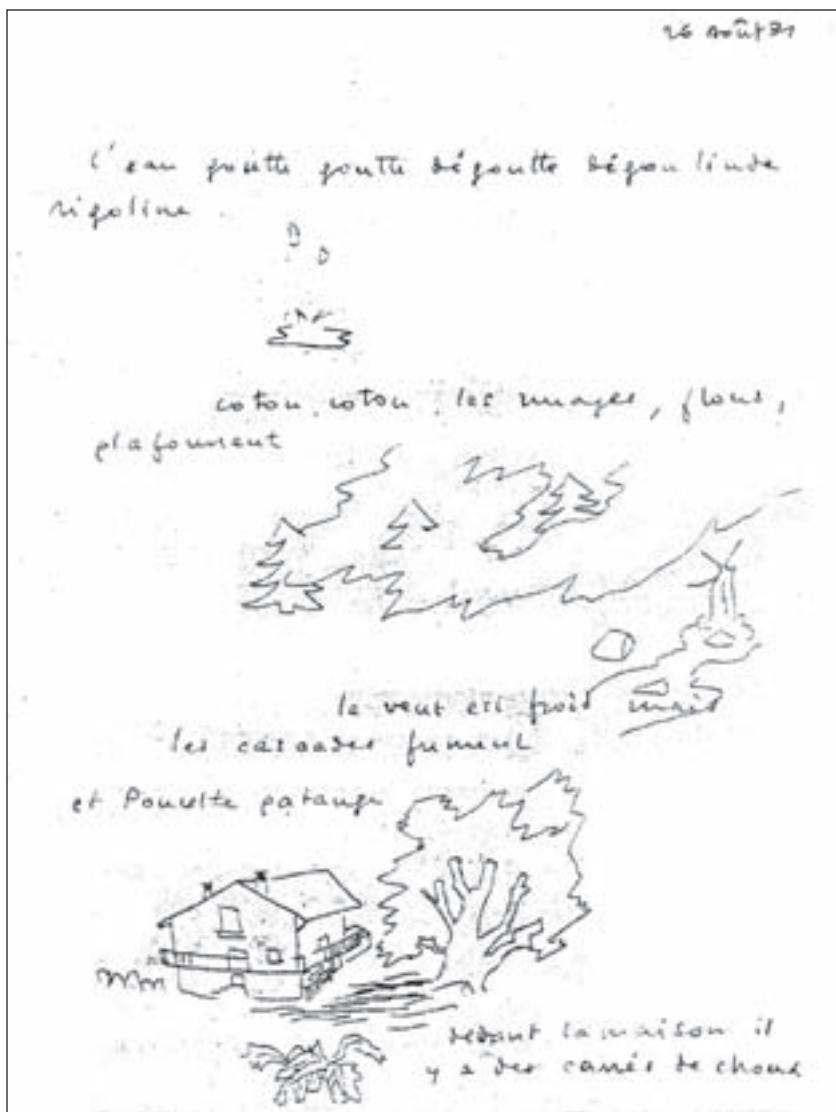
- 16' Bourdon
- 8' Montre
- 8' Flûte harm.
- 8' Bourdon°
- 4' Prestant
- Plein-jeu III°

Positif

- 8' Salicional
- 8' Cor de nuit
- 5½' Gros nazard
- 4' Flûte
- 2½' Nasard
- 2' Doublette
- 1½' Tierce
- 1½' Larigot

Récit-Bombarde

- 8' Principal (diapason)
- 8' Flûte trav.
- 4' Prestant
- 2½' Quinte
- 2' Doublette
- Plein-jeu III
- 16' Bombarde
- 8' Trompette
- 4' Clairon



Letter to Denise Billard, 1931

- Récit-Solo**
- 16' Quintaton (sans 1^e octave)
 - 8' Gambe
 - 8' Voix céleste
 - 8' Flûte conique
 - 4' Flûte octav.
 - 4' Salicet
 - 2 3/4' Quinte
 - Cymbale II
 - 8' Cromorne
 - 8' Hautbois
- Pédale**
- 16' Soubasse
 - 8' Basse
 - 4' Flûte
 - 4' Bourdon
 - Mixture II
 - 3/4' Tierce

* stops not yet connected

The four children—Jehan, Marie-Odile, Olivier, and Marie-Claire—were deeply affected by their father's organ. How could they be offered a more beautiful toy? Since their early childhood, they had been nursed by the sounds of the instrument and their little fingers discovered the sense of touch, thanks to its accurate mechanical action.

A precocious musician

Jehan put his hands on a keyboard as soon as he was able to stand up; his musical talents were evident at a very early age. He worked with his father, then with other professors. Finally, at the age of eighteen, in 1929, he entered the Paris Conservatory of Music, where he remained for ten years.

He studied harmony with André Bloch, fugue with Georges Caussade (who had taught his father), and composition with Paul Dukas. Jehan really appreciated Dukas but only studied with him for one year because Dukas died in 1935. Roger-Ducasse succeeded Dukas.

In 1936, Jehan entered the organ class of Marcel Dupré, one of his father's old friends. In memory of their friendship, Dupré was very affectionate to Jehan. He appreciated Jehan's gift for improvisation. According to a fellow student, one day Jehan was improvising during the class. He had not concluded according to the strict established rules. When he realized it, he cried out, "Ah! I am mistaken!" and Marcel Dupré respond-

ed with a smile: "Don't hesitate to make such mistakes often!"

Jehan amused himself by decorating his harmonic exercises with hearts pierced by an arrow. During the 1933 exam, this resulted in his receiving a simple promotion instead of a first prize!

His humor, his pleasure at telling jokes and making people laugh, led him to write letters to several young women who became his favorite correspondents: Denise Billard, a pianist, with whom he discussed his pianistic technique, Aline Pelliott, and Lola Bluhm. He described his impressions, his feelings, his dreams, and all of a sudden, in the middle of a letter, he began to draw. You can see the first illustrated example in this letter addressed to his friend Denise Billard with a drawing, dated August 26, 1931 (see illustration above).

Jehan immensely benefited from his ten years of study at the conservatory. While still retaining his originality, he started writing in a more sophisticated and rigorous way and further developed his musical ideas. Far from being held back in his inspiration by the rules, he was, from then on, able to transcend them in composing a new and very personal music.

Various influences

Early music was an important source of inspiration; in his father's vast library, Jehan discovered works by early French, Italian, and German masters. This inspired him to compose his *Variations on a Theme by Clement Jannequin*. He dedicated this piece to his friend Pierre Segond, saying:

It ought to be possible for a musician of the twentieth century to retain the soul of this early music. The language does not matter, only the spirit speaks.

Jehan discovered François Campion's lute tablatures, which he transcribed into modern keyboard notation. He said that he preferred the simplicity of this music to the complexity of works from the end of the nineteenth century, such as those by Vincent d'Indy, for example. Jehan said in a letter to Denise Billard, at the end of 1934: "Pure and simple music is often more beautiful than delirious richly dense music."



Manuscript of the First Fantasy

Another source of inspiration, Gregorian chant, was of paramount importance. From his earliest childhood on, he was used to accompanying and paraphrasing it. He incorporated it into certain works such as the *Postlude for the Office of Compline*. It was composed in Valloires, inspired by the mystical atmosphere of the chapel at nightfall.

In the same spirit, monody was very precious to him and he composed several monodic pieces such as his *Suite for piano*, 1935.

The musicians he most frequently mentioned were J. S. Bach, César Franck, and Frédéric Chopin. Concerning Franck, he said that he was "extra terrestrial," but for him Bach was the "greatest of all."

Chopin was his favorite as a pianist. Jehan very often played his music. One anecdote: oftentimes his friend Aline Pelliott knew that Jehan had arrived at the conservatory because she heard somebody playing Chopin's *First Ballade*—Jehan Alain, of course!

Exotic music was in fashion at the time, but it was hybrid, a very confusing type

of exoticism: Asian or Arabian, with combined sources. Jehan visited the 1931 Colonial Exhibition in Paris and the music that he heard there inspired him, but he transformed it, retaining only its spirit.

Oriental influence is very important, especially in the two fantasies for organ. I will write about the *Second Fantasy* at length in my next article; it is essential in Jehan Alain's creation paths. (See illustration above: the manuscript of the *First Fantasy*.)

Jehan was not a theorist, contrary to Olivier Messiaen. He was interested in the impact of these sonorities upon his own sensitivity. In any case, he wrote several works under this rather oriental influence: *Togo* and *Tarass Boulba*, both for piano.

A committed man and a poet: His friendships and his correspondence

Friendship was of utmost importance to him. His letters and his writings prove that he was faithful to his friends: "Affection is a totally inexhaustible rich type of poverty. I do give to you and, above all, I do not want any gratification."

Scattered leaves ... from our Scrapbook

From a review of *Spirited Sounds in a Small Sacred Space* (AndrewJPeters.com)

Andrew Peters, pastoral musician at the Second Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, MO., ably demonstrates this fine, versatile little Schoenstein at Historic Franklin Presbyterian Church in a multifaceted program. Schoenstein's unique design and tonal philosophies apply equally to small instruments such

as this and to larger organs such as one in nearby Nashville's new Schermerhorn Symphony Center. Schoenstein's instruments are notable for their flexibility, depth of expression, smoothness, clarity and coherence of tone, richness of color, and judicious allocation of voices for maximum usefulness. Andrew Peters's program includes music from four centuries and four countries.

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Jehan and his daughter Lise

His friends' opinions were very significant to him, as is shown by this anecdote he shared with Aline Pelliott concerning his piece *Le Jardin suspendu*, which he also called a *chaconne*:

The *chaconne* which I played for you yesterday, do you really like it? Are you sure? Would you prefer a G-sharp? If it pleases you, I will use a G-natural.

In the same way, he wrote in the Preface of his piano works:

Here is a series of impressions. Don't try to find there a lesson or an argument; just consider them as a passing vision . . . My goal would be achieved and I would experience great joy if each reader would suddenly find himself within one of these lines. Deeply moved, he might stop momentarily before continuing, touched by a bit of the pleasure one feels upon receiving a friendly glance.

The correspondence is essential in order to understand his development, his artistic state of mind and his sensitivity. In a letter to Denise Billard, dated August 15–20, 1933, Jehan wrote:

Downstairs, in the living room, an excellent violoncellist is playing with Papa. But his playing makes me nervous. Oh, it's frightening what a string can render. This man expresses that which one should never express . . . this type of latent pain which each person carries deeply inside himself, which moans even in the midst of the greatest joys. . . . Now I would like to hear a diabolic music; something like jazz which contains only trumpets . . . something which flaps like a strong wind. I cannot stand music which sounds like drizzling rain that drizzles on for entire days, without respite. . . .

No news from my friends . . . what have they been up to? Is it my fault? It's true that people who pretend to know how to live are strong. I believe I will never know that. I feel like writing a letter to Destiny in order to receive some information. . . . Should we take our suitcases for the long trip? When I die, will someone remember me? Will I have known how to do some good around me? . . . It is beneficial to imagine eternal mercy!

His family and his Christian faith

In 1935, at the age of 24, Jehan decided to marry a childhood friend named Madeleine. Their marriage was very happy and very shortly afterwards they had three children: first Lise, followed by Agnès and Denis. (See illustration: Jehan and his daughter Lise.)

Jehan adored little children. He was very sensitive to the childhood world. He drew many designs for them, of fairy tales and animals. He said: "Musician's ears which have not heard the laughter of a child have only heard the sound of scrap iron."

Jehan had a very solid Christian faith. During his service in the army, he tried to convert his fellow soldiers; otherwise,



Jehan and his brother Olivier on the motorcycle



Drawing by Jehan: playing saxophone

he spoke to them about Christian morals. In 1938, he wrote in his diary: "There are only two possible ways to live: either as a priest or an apostle, or, on the other hand, to have small children, to live as an artist and to have a firm religious faith."

On the level of personal commitment, his Christian faith partially explains his ultimate gesture of sacrifice: he gave his life for his family, for his country. This can only be understood in the context of the Catholic faith in the 1930s. This was the way that he was brought up. These were his family values. His last words were: "May Providence especially protect small children in France!"

A poet: his passion, his humor and his dreams

Jehan had a wide-range personality, which varied from the deepest melancholy to a bursting joyfulness. His music expresses his inner anguish.

Jehan was an eminently changeable person, capable of being deliriously happy one minute and equally sad the following minute. Completely free from convention, he mocked routines, made fun of the "bourgeois," being at the same time a good father to his family and a conscientious church organist. All who knew him remember the incomparable humor of his jokes, bordering on the ridiculous, whereas the dominant thought coming from his music is that of a profound sadness.

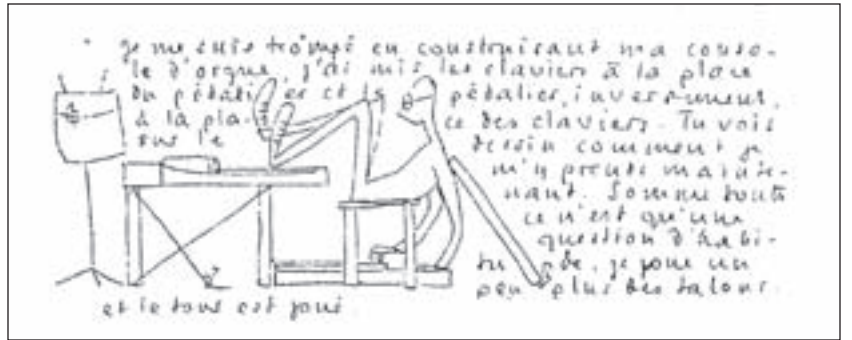
He wrote: "The world creaks painfully like a giant windmill which indifferently crushes all good and bad acts, all the desires, all the passions, all the faults . . ."

But he soon corrected: "And yet what a fire, what a thirst for living eats me up! I long to live an ardent life with all its suffering and irrepressible joy."

Jehan never surrendered to melancholy. He wrote: "Everywhere the comic is mixed with drama. When we have suffered a great deal, we need to laugh a great deal."

Physically very agile, he loved working with engines and acquired a motorcycle in 1932. (See illustration with motorcycle, above.)

He played saxophone when he was a soldier in 1933–34 (obligatory military service). At that time, on March 2, 1934,



Drawing to his sister Marie-Claire: pedalboard and console



Jehan and Marie-Claire, 1933

he confessed to his mother: "I am neither a pianist nor an organist, but a semi-acrobat, a sort of sincere charlatan."

He had a highly developed sense of humor, sometimes a bit too easy-going. He loved associating words with strange or harmonious sonorities:

A cataract-like cascade: *une cascade cataractique*

Flowing funny trickling water: *l'eau dégouline rigoline dégouline*

Jehan has drawn lots of fantastic cows. He saw these cows when he was in the family house in the Alps, near Chamonix. Every summer, the entire Alain family spent their holidays there. They were hiking in the mountains and, one day, they had to take refuge in a hut because of a violent storm. They sang by memory lots of things, and then Jehan wrote on a wrapping paper a short song, amidst thunder and lightning. He wrote letters to his little sister that were bristling with designs and humor, for example this one (see illustration above: a design of the console pedalboard):

I was mistaken, I put the console in place of the pedalboard and the pedalboard in place of the keyboard. You can see on the drawing how I manage to play now. In the end, it's only a matter of habit: all I have to do is to play with my heels a little more, and there you go. The only disadvantage is that I'm always pulling Pedal couplers instead of manual couplers, but within a fortnight, everything will be all right.

Of course, little Marie-Claire was able to understand this. She already knew everything about the organ.

Dreams and poetry

Many a dream can be found in his writings, tales, stories and imagination (see illustration: the Dwarf).

The later works: griefs and struggles The masterpieces

The *Suite for Organ*, composed as early as 1934–35, was awarded a prize in 1936 by Les Amis de l'Orgue. This was a satisfaction for Jehan, who had not obtained a prize in composition at the Paris Conservatory. His *Second Fantasy* for



The Dwarf

organ also dates back to 1936. In August 1937, Jehan simultaneously finished *Litanies* and the second of his *Three Dances*.

There is a lot to say about *Litanies*, his most well-known piece. *Litanies* is a cry of anguish and distress. After the ethereal dream of *Le Jardin suspendu* and the classicism developed in the *Variations*, Jehan Alain confides in us his tortured soul, without mask and reserve. Doubtless, it is this absolute sincerity, this direct character that makes the work a success for all audiences, even on the first hearing. As Gavoty reports, Jehan added,

This prayer is not a lament, but an irresistible storm which overthrows everything in its way. It is also an obsession: it must fill the ears of men and of the good Lord! If, in the end, you do not feel exhausted, it's because you will neither have understood nor played as I wish.

Three weeks after the completion of *Litanies*, Jehan and Marie-Claire Alain's sister, Marie-Odile, died in an accident in the mountains. Jehan wrote the dedication that appears in the 1939 edition:

When the Christian soul no longer finds new words in its distress to implore God's mercy, it ceaselessly repeats the same invocation with a vehement faith. Reason has reached its limit. Faith alone pursues its ascension.

In the same way, he added the subtitle to his *Second Dance*: "Funeral Dance to Honor a Heroic Memory." And he wrote about this piece: "There is no contradiction between dance and distress. Dance, like music, expresses itself without a concept and it can translate in such a sublime manner that which words cannot say without brutality."

This period of mourning made Jehan gloomier. His music also conveyed the tense pessimistic atmosphere in Europe at the end of the 1930s, as threats of war became ever clearer. He then wrote these premonitory words: "Always kiss your wife and your little daughter, as if it were the last time you would see them."

In 1938, Jehan composed in just a few days the *Modal Mass*, then the *Aria* for organ. He completed the *Three Dances*, but the score for orchestra was lost with him in 1940, when he was in the process of completing it. Fortunately for us, not having had the time to copy it all, he decided to make a transcription for the concert organ and sent it by mail to Noëlie Pierront, only nine days before the German attack. And the mail miraculously arrived: this is the only remaining autograph version of this masterpiece.



8th armored cavalry



Jehan in the dunes in Dunkirk

The War

September 1, 1939–June 22, 1940

On the first of September, the German army invaded Poland; France and Great Britain, according to their commitments, declared war on Germany. But it was called “the phony war” because during nine months, there was no attack from neither French nor British armies against Germany. (See illustration: design of the 8th armored cavalry.)

One of the first to be mobilized, Jehan left as early as the first of September 1939 for northern France. A simple soldier, Jehan found himself in the middle of the men of his troop. Their equipment was very poor: the men slept on straw until December and did not have enough covers. The hygiene was deplorable and Jehan suffered from remaining wet for endless hours, with the cold weather that numbed his hands, and filth everywhere.

The “phony war” lasted for ages: France, although officially at war with Germany since September 3, 1939, did not launch any attack. On the contrary, the French troops stationed behind the Maginot line adopted a defensive strategy.

In these conditions, Jehan’s superiors appreciated his talents: in fact, he immediately proposed to animate recreation periods, religious services, and evening activities. He even founded a choir known as the “Small Singers with Loud Voices,” teaching them how to sing, making arrangements for them, and copying scores. He held several rehearsals and the Christmas Mass was a huge success. Meanwhile, he played the piano in the evenings for the officers.

He wrote to his wife every other day. He assured her of his love, spoke about his suffering from their separation, and made drawings for the children. His third child, Denis, was born on November 3, 1939; Jehan obtained three days of leave to come and see him.

The German troops began their offensive on the Western front on May 10, 1940, by invading Holland, Belgium, and Luxembourg. The Blitzkrieg strategy was successful: in the north, the French and the English were trapped, surrounded by the German army. Under dreadful bombing, 350,000 French and English soldiers were evacuated through Dunkirk (from May 29 to June 4).

It was under these conditions that Je-

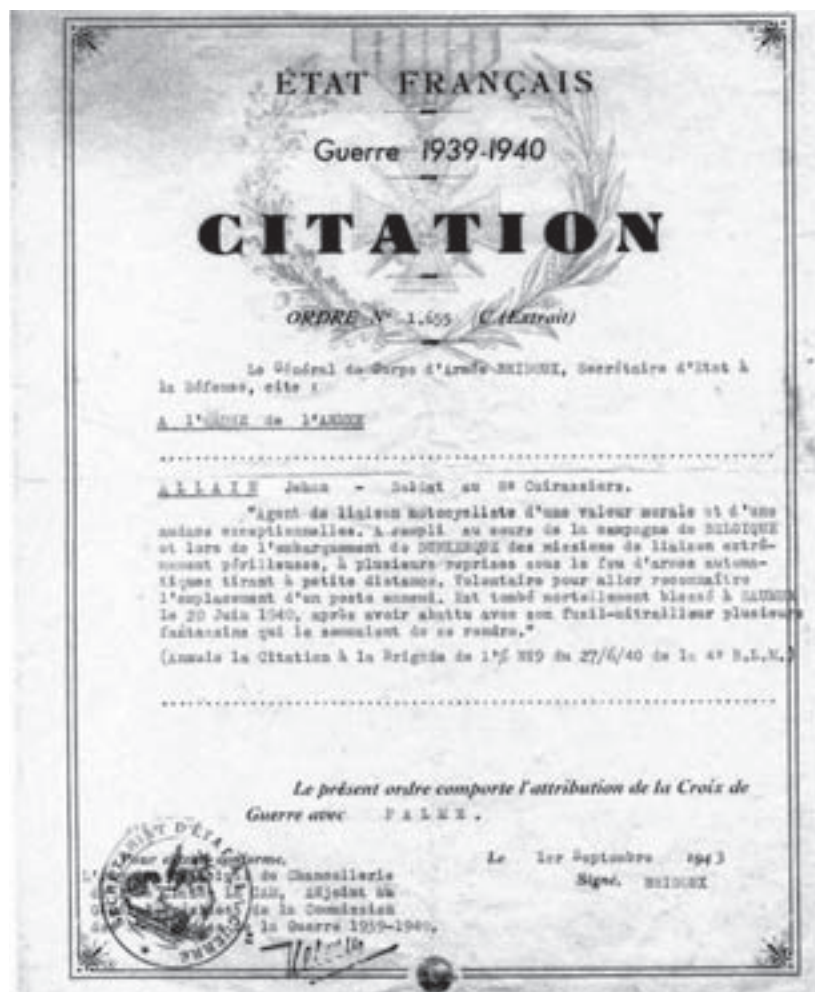
han won his military medal: in May 1940, during the Dunkirk battle, he carried out (this is the text of the quotation) “a very perilous contact mission, completely defying the danger involved” and collapsed asleep upon returning. We have a photograph of this (see illustrations: a photo of the dunes, and a citation).

Defy all danger: this was the predominant driving force that fully appealed to Jehan Alain in the spring of 1940, following months of boredom. His physical agility, his skillful driving of the motorcycle, and his absolute courage compelled him to attempt anything. This context is essential to understand his final gesture: upon returning from England, he voluntarily enrolled in an irregular force, to continue fighting. The group advanced towards the Loire River, a major obstacle in the German progression towards the south. Jehan Alain, who had left on a reconnaissance mission, was confronted by an enemy troop. Trapped in a garden, alone, he made his decision: instead of fleeing, an unthinkable choice, or surrendering, Jehan emptied all of his cartridges, jammed his gun and encountered the Germans who shot him down. The German officer rendered him homage for his bravery. According to the inhabitants, for several days, sheets of music scores, which had slipped out of his sidecar, were carried away by the wind and found in the countryside.

Jehan’s gesture was a part of his entire life and can be better understood if one knows his personality and his social background. Today, mentalities have changed and the idea of sacrificing one’s own life for the sake of honor might seem unrealistic and unreasonable. But, beyond these opinion differences, Jehan’s death unquestionably remains a symbol of courage and total commitment.

Conclusion

A short yet full life: Jehan Alain died at the age of 29, but he has left us with an immense legacy. In my book, I have tried to give a faithful account, essentially including Jehan’s own works: his selected letters, his drawings, adding a biography and some critical notes. I hope that this book expresses Jehan Alain’s following sentiment: “If you love my music, if it speaks to you, that you think likewise, then my dream is fulfilled.” In the same way, I would like



The citation

to say: “If you love Jehan Alain, if he speaks to you, that you think likewise, then my dream is fulfilled.” ■

Auréli Decourt, Jehan Alain’s niece and biographer, studied history and art history and holds a Ph.D. in musicology at the University of Paris-Sorbonne. She has published articles in journals such as L’Orgue, La Tribune de l’Orgue, Diapason, and in the New

Grove Dictionary, a book on Albert Alain in 2001, and in 2005, Jehan Alain, Biographie, Correspondance, Dessins. In March 2011, she organized the French centennial of Jehan Alain’s birthday in Saint-Germain-en-Laye and published a book on the Alain family (Une famille de musiciens au XXe siècle, Paris, Hermann, 2011), including a new chapter on Marie-Claire Alain’s life. First translation of this article by Carolyn Shuster-Fournier; new English translation by Laetitia Decourt.

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