

Théodore Dubois and César Franck at Sainte-Clotilde: A New Look at the Chronicle of the Years 1857–1863 through the Rediscovered Memoirs

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English translation by Carolyn Shuster Fournier

Much is known about the first musical activities at Sainte-Clotilde in the years 1863 to 1868 when César Franck, the organist of this church, worked together with the young Théodore Dubois, his choirmaster. Much less known is the reversal of these roles, which occurred precisely from 1857 to 1863 when César Franck was choirmaster and Théodore Dubois was the choir organist. Dubois' memoirs,¹ recently rediscovered at the Bibliothèque nationale de France and partially published in the complete edition of his organ works,² shed new light on many of the unclear details in the unfolding of what has been labeled as "the Sainte-Clotilde Tradition."

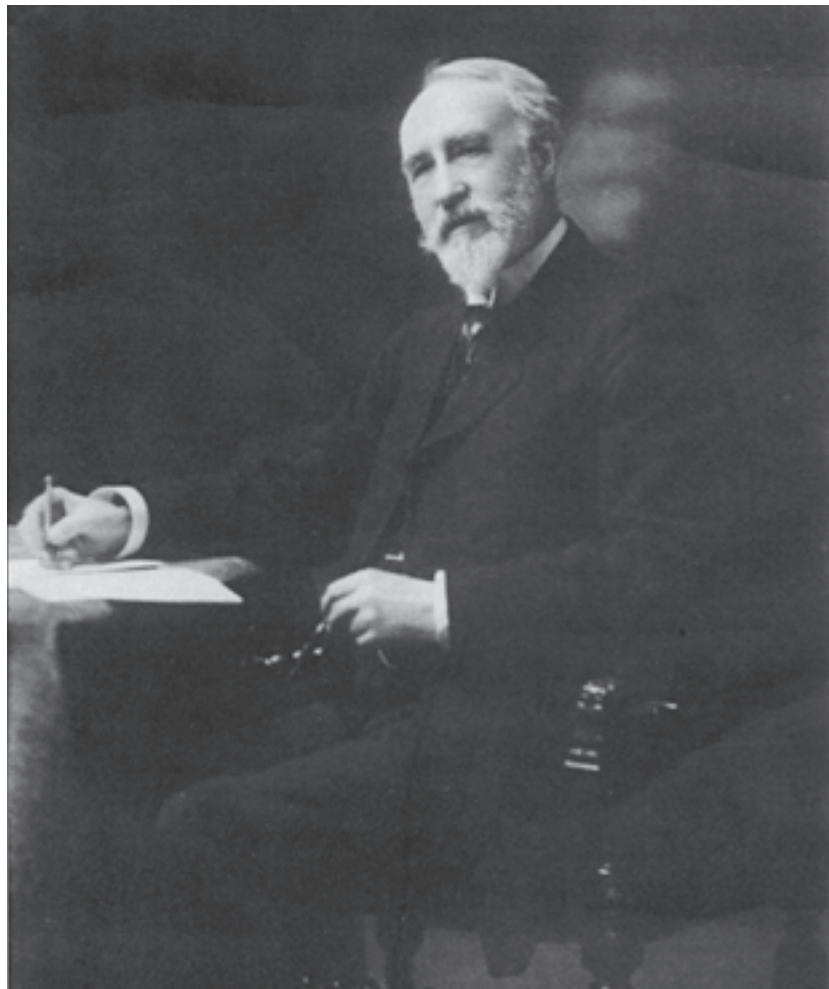
In 1857, at the time of the inauguration of this church, Théodore Dubois (1837–1924) was only twenty years old. The son of a modest basket maker in the Champagne region, Dubois was a third-year student at the Paris Conservatory, earning his living as a choir organist at the nearby Saint-Louis des Invalides Church. He recalls:

The Church of Sainte-Clotilde was to be consecrated and I learned that the newly appointed choirmaster César Franck (still unknown at that time) was looking for an organist accompanist. In spite of my shyness, I didn't hesitate and introduced myself to him without any recommendation. He immediately subjected me to a test in accompanying Gregorian chant, sight-reading and transposing. He finally engaged me on the spot for an annual salary of 1200 francs. With the incidental emoluments (700 or 800 francs) it was a fortune! Just imagine my joy at finally being delivered from all financial worries! [...] This was how I got to know C. Franck, who was always good and very kind to me, whose friend and admirer I became and remained up to his last hour.

Shortly after the consecration of the Ste-Clotilde Church, since no organ had been built yet, I accompanied the singers on a good Mustel harmonium. [...] Through my daily contact with C. Franck, I grew to love and admire this great artist. I was lucky enough to witness him composing his Mass, his Motets, and the beautiful Offertories, and to be the first to accompany them, including top-level works—due to their sublimity and their personally colored expressive harmonies—such as *Dextera Domini* [1861], *Quae est ista* [1861] and the *Offertory for Lent*. What a contrast with the works usually heard then in most of the churches in Paris! This was the beginning of a reaction against banality and poor taste which, after so many years, had not completely disappeared from the repertoire found in the church choir schools!³

Religious music was in fact in a state of real decadence, sung with dramatic sentimentality; the tonal result was closer to that of salon romances [for house gatherings]. This was the bona fide beginning of the tradition that distinguished Sainte-Clotilde from other Parisian churches. Here, the music was made with serenity, power and lyricism. As there was no organ in the church, it was essentially vocal. The choir, directed by César Franck (1822–1890) and made up of three male voice parts (soprano, tenor and bass), sang with an orchestra or was simply sustained by a double bass and a Mustel harmonium played by Théodore Dubois. Dubois, who was fifteen years younger than his choirmaster, did not hide his admiration for him.

These memories are dear to me because they remind me that C. Franck was such a noble-minded artist. The affectionate kindness that he showed towards me and also the great impression that his works made upon me; they were written in a style so new for me. Nobody will be surprised to hear that the church members of Ste-Clotilde took a somewhat refractory view of their music director's compositions. They preferred the banalities of the current rep-



Théodore Dubois, ca. 1910 (Private Collection)

ertoire. Hasn't it always been like that and doesn't one see that time finally puts everything right in its place and that the name of C. Franck is met with universal admiration today!

The artist's outward appearance did not correspond to his talent, to his genius. Had his eyes not been lively, flashing and full of intelligence, one would more likely have taken him in a peaceful moment for a sort of upright provincial citizen. But as soon as he started talking, he changed: with the persuasive power of his words he focused his attention with brilliant observations on art and literature, becoming convincing, almost fascinating; one felt that one was in the presence of a powerful strong will! There are in fact few young artists who knew him that were not influenced to some degree by him.⁴

Very concerned about the splendor and the magnificence of the worship services, the abbot Pierre Ambroise Hamelin (1800–1883), priest at Sainte-Clotilde, only moderately appreciated his choirmaster's music. Nevertheless, Franck dedicated his motet *Dextera Domini*, Offertory for Easter Sunday, to him. Théodore Dubois describes in detail one of the dreadful confrontations between the two men. It was in 1861, the year of the composition of this motet, that Hamelin launched this quip to Franck in front of the choir members:

"Mr. Franck, you do not know your job!" Franck simply replied to this, but with a firm and convincing voice: "Father, I affirm to you that I know my job!" I believe that he did know it. But our good priest never suspected so. He loved blaring music; and still the blaring music, this was not at all Franck's cup of tea. We were all appalled at such an outburst. Franck alone remained impassive and with an angelic air he told us upon leaving: "He does not know; he cannot know!" Deep thought, simple, just, full of philosophy, of observation and of kindness!⁵

Until then, Franck only carried out his duties as choirmaster. Accumulating the multiple functions of this post hardly left him any free time:

With the agreement of C. Franck my choirmaster, I asked him if he would allow Mr. Bourjuge's nephew, one of my occasional students who knew what the job entailed, whom I had already shown what the post involved, to substitute for me during my absence. My request was accepted and I was thus assured to find my position upon returning. My mind was at ease and I was then able to look forward to the happiness that I anticipated for this trip and stay in Rome.⁷

This account contradicts Joël-Marie Fauquet's version, which states that

when Dubois left for the Villa Médici in 1861, Franck held concurrently the functions of organist and of choirmaster so that Dubois could resume his position upon returning.⁸

Moreover, from a practical point of view, concurrently carrying out both positions could hardly be imagined. Théodore Dubois then boarded at the Villa Médici while keeping his position as organist-accompanist. Very happy in Rome, he later described these two years of absence from Sainte-Clotilde as the most beautiful days of his life. However, in November 1863, upon returning from a tour in Italy, he was actually urged to decide on the spot to shorten his stay and return hastily to Paris in order to succeed Franck. Here is his account:

Shortly after returning to Rome I received news from Ste-Clotilde that made me happy and sad at the same time. I was told that they had finished constructing the 'Grand Orgue'⁹ and that César Franck wished to exchange his position as choirmaster for that of organist, that the priest had agreed to this, and that they would gladly offer me this position if I was prepared to return forthwith(!). The prospect of this situation, which would insure my livelihood—so difficult for so many musicians returning from Rome—made me happy of course, but at the same time the thought of having to leave the Villa Médici before the end of my two years greatly grieved me. After all, it was in November and I should normally have stayed until the end of December. My parents wanted me to have a secure position. After much hesitation and thoughtful consideration, I decided to apply for permission to leave Rome in November, and to forgo my travels to Germany, which I would have gladly carried out, but which—I don't know why—few of the scholarship students took at that time.¹⁰

After returning from Rome in November, 1863, the roles at the Sainte-Clotilde Church were reversed. With César Franck at the Grand Orgue tribune, Théodore Dubois immediately assumed his new job as choirmaster. His account is of utmost importance because it reveals precisely and without ambiguity that

Lessons for the choristers nearly every day, general rehearsals, services on Sundays and feast days, Thursday masses, Friday Benedictions of the Holy Sacrament, certain evening services, the Marian month, the octaves of certain feast days, weddings, funerals, the preparation and the choice of the programs, engaging additional artists if needed for a service; the choirmaster was responsible for calculating each person's salary at the end of each month; he supervised the music library and the performance repertory; he recruited children to sing after some voices had broken and other various circumstances.⁶

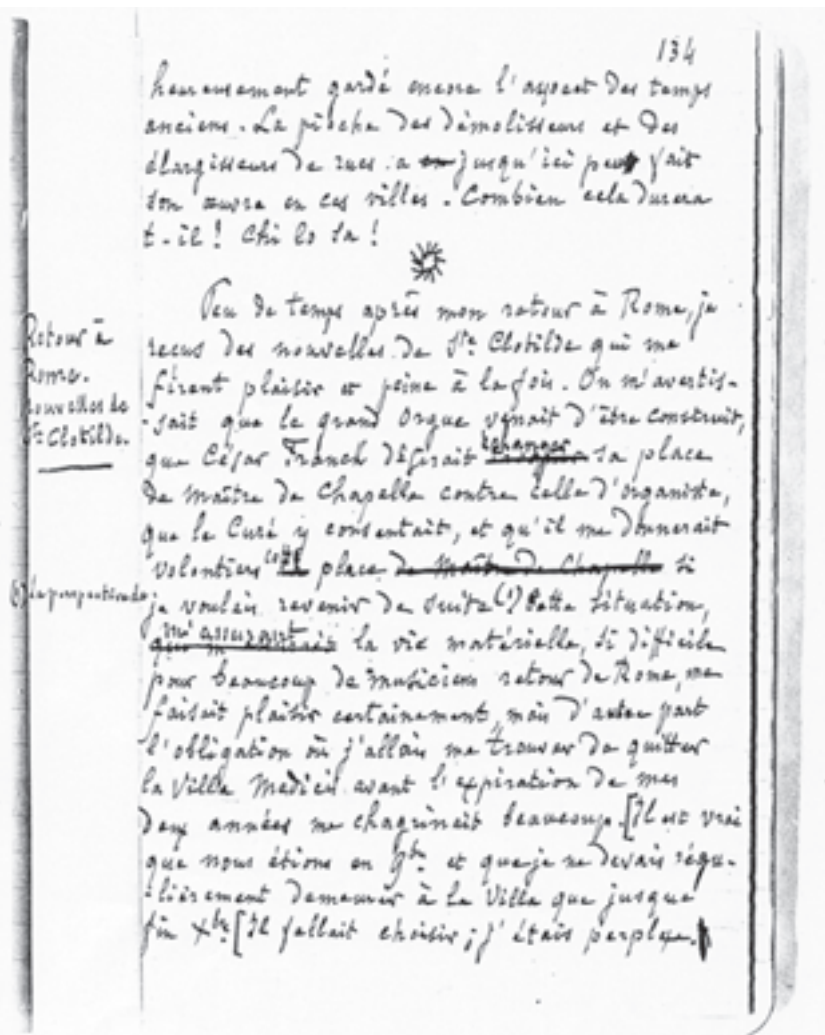
Also in 1861, Théodore Dubois won the Prix de Rome with his cantata *Atala*. He had to leave Paris on December 26, 1861, to travel and stay in Italy for two years, until the end of 1863. Concerned about resuming his accompanying post upon his return from Rome, he quickly went to see his priest in order to request his permission to find a substitute among one of his students during his absence.

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Théodore Dubois: *Souvenirs de ma vie*, p. 124: Bibliothèque nationale de France, BNF Rés. Vmc. Ms. 3

the Sainte-Clotilde Grand Orgue was not completely finished before the fall of 1863 and that Franck was not named titular organist until after the completion of the work.¹¹ It also clearly reveals the unexpected urgency of the missive from Sainte-Clotilde. Why did Franck so suddenly make up his mind to change roles and become organist? This crucial moment of the completion of the organ was thus revealed to be the real turning point in his musical career. Until that time, he had not yet composed any important organ pieces. But suddenly in September and October of 1863, he began composing with great intensity, which until now seemed to be surprisingly unexplained.

Théodore Dubois' account thus allows us to place in its true context the genesis of Franck's *Six Organ Pieces*, his first symphonic works, composed in 1863/1864 and edited in 1868. It establishes a link between the Sainte-Clotilde organ on the one hand, and his nomination to the organist position on the other hand. The *Six Pieces*, as the composer presented them at their first performance at Sainte-Clotilde in November 1864, are thus indebted to the finished state of the Cavaillé-Coll organ in the fall of 1863. Two of the *Six Pieces*, the *Grand Pièce symphonique* and the *Pastorale* (dedicated to Cavaillé-Coll), are dated precisely on September 16 and 29. The other ones—such as the *Fantaisie*, one of whose versions is dated October 1863, or the *Final*—were revised. It is incontestably the new aesthetic of the Sainte-Clotilde organ, one of Cavaillé-Coll's most beautiful instruments, which is at the origin of Franck's new genius

and which transformed and directed his creative thoughts towards new horizons.

Théodore Dubois' memoirs attest that the "completed" Sainte-Clotilde organ does not date from 1859 but from 1863. In his memoirs (cited above), the composer specifically uses the same phrase "the Grand Orgue was just constructed." A second witness concerning the work carried out between 1860 and 1863 was Charles-Marie Widor. He reports that one of the first to try out the instrument "which had just been finished" in the Sainte-Clotilde Church was the "old Hesse," on June 30, 1862.¹²

However, since the archives are missing, the rereading of the chronicle of these years shows uncertainties concerning the different revisions of the organ. Actually, the known documents concerning the construction of this organ suddenly end on December 2, 1859, namely three days before the originally determined date for the inauguration. Following some uncareful work carried out by the workers of the architect Théodore Ballu (1817–1885) during the installation of the top of the organ case, Cavaillé-Coll declared that

the instrument has become unplayable. Sawdust, wood shavings and even heavy objects had fallen into the organ, had stifled the sound of the pipes and altered their sonority so much that it was then impossible to repair the organ for the inauguration, announced for the fifth of this month.¹³

The date of the inauguration was then moved to December 19, the time allowed to "repair, clean and tune all the damaged material." To accomplish this,



César Franck: a "symphonic" page taken from the *Final*, Op. 21 (1864): Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. 22410

the organ builder not only required this delay, but also requested a compensation of more than 500 francs from the architect. Since the new date was set fifteen days later, what was he able to do in such little time? Was the organ entirely repaired? The reference found in the newspaper articles is evasive and puzzling. Adrien de la Fage announced that he would speak about "the organ in another article or that certain questions, rather serious, would eventually be dealt with."¹⁴ *La France musicale* praised Ballu's marvelous case and reported that

this instrument ought to have been as complete as possible, in keeping with the proportions of the church, that is, to possess 46 stops on three keyboards and a pedalboard, 14 combination pedals and 1796 pipes. This is, in fact, the Sainte-Clotilde organ.¹⁵

Why then was new work carried out on an organ supposedly "complete," finished and inaugurated? Moreover, the caliber and the undetermined length of the work threatened to put the organ "out of service" for many long months, restricting the parish to remain without a titular. Théodore Dubois' memoirs lead us to believe that this work continued until the fall of 1863. After studying the various archives (estimations, letters) published in Fenner Douglass's book, quoted above, only one explanation emerges. To render our hypothesis more pleasant and more familiar we imagine it under Théodore Dubois' pen, who, of course, in his memoirs does not say one word about these events.

The year 1859 marks a date in my career: I finally obtained my First Prize in organ and in November *La Maîtrise* published my first organ piece, an *Offertory* that I composed with the inspiration of the Sainte-Clotilde organ. The construction of this large three-manual instrument was finished at the end of August, the great Lefébure-Wély who had been chosen to inaugu-

rate it had come to play it in September in the presence of the Duchess d'Albe as well as at the ceremony of the large wedding celebrated by the Bishop of Carcassonne. The previously announced inauguration, which was to have been brilliant, had been set for December 5 and it had become urgent to install the top of the imposing organ case. Pressed for time, the architect's workers allowed some debris and even some heavy objects to fall into the organ. One of these "shells" had violently crashed into a special device for the wind chests of the Grand Orgue placed at the base of the great case towers. Regardless of the pneumatic levers, Cavaillé-Coll had to construct this new mechanism that required this special very expensive device (3,000 francs) in order to overcome the difficulties that had been raised. Alas, all attempts to tune the Grand Orgue were useless and the inauguration took place using only the rest of the undamaged stops.

It was then necessary to dismantle, verify, repair or reconstruct the damaged mechanism—or to change it. This took time and new funding. Wouldn't it just be easier to inverse the keyboards? Our hypothesis is then that Cavaillé-Coll would have inverted, between 1860 and 1862, the order of the Positif and the Grand-Orgue keyboards to simplify the mechanism of the note transmission to the pipe valves of the Grand Orgue. More appropriate to the quite special location of this tribune, the new layout thus presented the Grand-Orgue on the first keyboard and the Positif on the second one.¹⁶

The first public performance of all of the *Six Pieces* was given by Franck himself in the Sainte-Clotilde Church on November 17, 1864: this represented, in a way, a second but genuine inauguration of the completed organ. The columnist S. Dufour from the *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris* underlines the immense influence that the organ's construction had on these compositions. Here is his report published in the 47th number of this periodical, on November 20, 1864:

Last Thursday at Sainte-Clotilde the elder M. César Franck gave a recital on the Cavaillé-Coll Grand Orgue which was attended by a great number of artists and amateurs. M. Franck performed the pieces he had composed, written by a master, and one remarked in the first a choir on the Voix Humaines which was most effective; and in the *Grande Pièce symphonique* a most distinguished melody was played initially on

the Clarinet and then repeated on the Voix Célestes stops. This recital, in which M. Franck was revealed as much as a learned composer as a skillful instrumentalist, will have proved once again that the artistic level of the organist is rising from day to day in France, and that the accomplished proficiency in modern building, far from harming the musical composition, gives it, on the contrary, a precious and powerful means of expression. The beautiful organ at Sainte-Clotilde was not less brilliant in this recital by this learned organist.¹⁷

Concerning Franck as an improviser, Maurice Emmanuel (1862–1938), who met him for the first time in June 1881, reports that his sonorous creations

were always colored with very rich registrations. He even was able, through ingenious devices, to multiply the resources that the master builder had put at his disposal. It is thus that he gladly improvised on the Positif coupled to the Récit, in order to profit from the Positif 16' stops and to surround them momentarily on the voices of the Récit in a more vast choir; this realization thus anticipated the great Récit with 16' stops, which Cavallé-Coll later endowed in the Saint-Sulpice organ.¹⁸

In his memoirs, Théodore Dubois boasts about having seen the birth of Franck's *Six Pieces*, for which he helped the composer by pulling stops when Franck practiced on the Grand Orgue. In 1866, he also witnessed firsthand the famous meeting between César Franck and Franz Liszt who "religiously listened to these beautiful pieces which appeared to produce a great impression on him."¹⁹ The happy collaboration between Franck and Dubois at Sainte-Clotilde continued until 1868, the year when Dubois was named choirmaster at the Madeleine. The relationship between the two musicians, founded on mutual esteem, always remained very fraternal. Théodore Dubois dedicated to Franck the first piece of his *Twelve Pieces* for the organ (Leduc, 1886), whereas Franck indicated that one of his *Three Chorals* would be dedicated to Dubois.²⁰ Shortly after the success of his oratorio *The Last Seven Words of Christ*, when Théodore Dubois changed his post at Sainte-Clotilde with that at the Madeleine and became professor at the Paris Conservatory, he did everything he could to renew his collaboration with César Franck by pleading favorably for his nomination to the post of organ professor in 1872.

The discovery of Théodore Dubois' memoirs permits us to maintain that the Sainte-Clotilde organ, whose completion in 1863 no longer corresponded to the initial 1853 project, is later than that of Saint-Sulpice (1862). Closely related to the emergence of his symphonic works, the "Sainte-Clotilde Tradition" was established beginning with Franck's *Six Pieces*, which he composed or finalized at the time when he took possession of the completed organ. If the young Dubois' testimony irrevocably clarifies the mystery that hung over the genesis of these works, it engenders on its own another mystery widely accepted by all the biographies, organ monographs, dictionaries and encyclopedias: that of Franck's false nomination as titular organist at Sainte-Clotilde in 1859. ■

Notes

1. Théodore Dubois, *Souvenirs de ma vie* [*Memories of My Life*], autograph, BNF Rés. Vmc. Ms. 3. Signed and dated in August, 1912, this autobiography, written in Rosnay between 1909 and 1912, consists of seven books that are continuously numbered. Given to the Bibliothèque nationale by his son Charles Dubois (1877–1965), these books, which were lost for a longtime in the archives of the Music Department, were refound in 1997 after an investigation by Christine Collette Kléo.

2. Théodore Dubois: *The Organ Works*, edited by Helga Schauerte-Maubouet, published by Bärenreiter, Kassel. The urtext edition has been in progress since 2005. Three of the six volumes are actually available: Volume I (BA 8468): the early works and organ pieces with minimal pedal or optional pedal; Volume II (BA 8469): *The Twelve Pieces* from 1886; Volume IV (BA 8471): *The Twelve Pieces* from 1893, *Ascendit Deus*. All the volumes are provided with explanatory texts in three languages and numerous illustrations.

3. Théodore Dubois: *The Organ Works*, edited by Helga Schauerte-Maubouet, Vol. I, Kassel, 2005, p. XIII.

4. Ibid.
5. Dubois, *Souvenirs de ma vie*, pp. 138–139.
6. Cf. note 3, p. XIV.
7. Ibid.
8. Joël-Marie Fauquet: *César Franck*, Paris, 1999, p. 313.
9. Should one read "grand orgue de tribune" ["Grand Orgue in a gallery"] or "Grand-Orgue" in relation to the Positif and the Récit keyboards?
10. Dubois, *Souvenirs de ma vie*, p. 134; cf. illustration. On page 137 Dubois marks the exact date of his return to Paris: "November, 1863."
11. According to the past organ literature, the construction of the Grand Orgue at Sainte-Clotilde lasted from 1853 to 1859. As to Franck's nomination to the organist position, it is usually presumed to coincide with the organ inauguration, in December 1859.
12. "Cavallé-Coll recalled, with the same astonishment, the slow tempo of the Fugue in D Major under the fingers of the old Hesse on the organ that had just been completed in the Ste-Clotilde Church in Paris." Charles-Marie Widor in his Preface (Venice, October 20, 1904) to Albert Schweitzer: *J. S. Bach*, Edition Maurice and Pierre Foetisch, Lausanne [1905], 6th printing, page IX. Hesse came to Paris twice: in 1844 and in June 1862.
13. Cited in Fenner Douglass: *Cavallé-Coll and the Musicians*, Raleigh, 1980, p. 1501.
14. *Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris* 27, no. 1, 1er janvier, 1860, pp. 4–5.
15. *La France musicale* 23, no. 52, December 25, 1859, p. 506.
16. The established order of an organ with three keyboards was the Positif (1st keyboard), the Grand-Orgue (2nd keyboard), and

the Récit (3rd keyboard). Until then, Cavallé-Coll disapproved of the idea of changing this accepted order (cf. Douglass, op. cit., p. 1440). All of the estimates of the Sainte-Clotilde organ mention the keyboards in the generally adopted order. This said, the little applied notation of certain estimates (cf. for example Douglass, p. 1391) can lead to a misunderstanding: one may read "2nd [Article] [-] Positif Keyboard" and not "2nd Positif Keyboard" (cf. the writing, more explicit, in other estimations, for example, in that of the Invalides Church communicated in Douglass, p. 1315).

17. The indication of the cited stops is in accordance with that of the Durand 1880 Edition (Maeyens-Couvreur, 1868). The Sainte-Clotilde organ then included an Unda Maris on the Positif and a Voix Céleste on the Récit. Cf. my article on the organ music in France in *Handbuch Orgelmusik*, Kassel, 2002, p. 376.

18. Maurice Emmanuel, *César Franck*, Paris, 1930, p. 108.

19. Cf. note 3, p. XIV.

20. According to Théodore Dubois (*Souvenirs*, page 223), César Franck, in 1890, had named him as a dedicatee of one of his *Three Chorals*. The posthumous publication (Durand, 1892) changed the names of the dedicatees.

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Through her concert tours, radio recordings and CDs (the complete organ works of Jehan Alain and Dietrich Buxtehude, portraits of Buttstett, Reger, Boëllmann, Dubois and Langlais, comprising some twenty recordings), as well as her musicological re-

search, Helga Schauerte-Maubouet has become one of the outstanding musicians of her generation. Organist of the German Lutheran Church in Paris, teacher at the Paris Conservatoire Nadia et Lili Boulanger, lecturer and jury member for international organ competitions, she maintains a brilliant career as a performing artist in Europe and the USA. Author of the first book in the German language on Alain's music, she has discovered and acquired some 40 of Alain's musical autographs. She has been engaged by Bärenreiter to contribute to the new edition of MGG, to write on French organ music subjects in the *Handbuch Orgelmusik*, and to publish scholarly-critical editions of the complete organ works of Léon Boëllmann, Théodore Dubois and Louis Vierne as well as of vocal music of Marc-Antoine Charpentier. She has also composed French Noël and German carol settings for other instruments and organ published by Merseburger-Verlag. In 1987 she received the cultural prize of Olpe, Germany. Since 1990 her biography has been included in the International Who's Who in Music, and she has been included in 2000 Outstanding Musicians of the 20th Century.

A French-American organist and musicologist, Carolyn Shuster Fournier is an international concert artist and titular of the Aristide Cavallé-Coll choir organ at La Trinité Church in Paris, France (cf. www.shusterfournier.com). Her latest CD, "An American in Paris" (Ligia Digital, distribution Harmonia Mundi), recorded at La Madeleine Church, is dedicated to French and American music. Chevalier in the Order of Arts and Letters, Dr. Shuster Fournier has written several articles for THE DIAPASON.

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