

Organs in Corsica and Southern France

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Helen VanAbbema Rodgers



Group at Monticellu organ (photo credit: Don Auberger)



Marie-Louise Langlais at St. Maximin (photo credit: Don Auberger)

From treacherous hairpin turns finally reaching a remote Corsican village to play a tiny historic Italian treasure to the magnificent new Monaco Cathedral organ, our unique and carefully planned organ trip built a steady crescendo unlike any I have ever experienced.

Most of us were veterans of previous organ trips (British and French Organ Music Seminars—BFOMS) arranged by **Christina Harmon**, Dallas organist and composer. The trip organizer was **Marie-Louise Langlais**, with whom Harmon has a longstanding working friendship. Assisted by Parisian organist **Sylvie Mallet**, Dr. Langlais was with us every step of the way.

Our Corsican expert was **Jean-Louis Loriaut**, who for three days fascinated us with tales of local politics, history, and religion. Since 2000, the Parisian-born organbuilder, married to Corsican organist **Viviane Loriaut**, has been restoring and preserving these largely untouched instruments, an organ heritage consisting of 102 pipe organs on this island.

A small group allowed for ample playing time. On the small organs in villages of La Porta, Pedicroce, Aregno, and Monticellu, we offered Frescobaldi, Zipoli, and Marcello. Pedicroce, meaning foot of the cross, had the oldest organ, dating from 1617. The Aregno organ had 19th-century percussion added to the Ripieno, so this organist played Balbastre "Ou s'ont les gais Bergers?" with amusing effects. More amusing was the large herd of running sheep skirting our bus, carefully managed by an overworked dog as we left the village!

In the large port city of Bastia we visited the largest church, St. Jean Baptiste, and the beautiful Chapelle St. Croix. During our last dinner in Corsica we were spellbound by an *a cappella* men's quartet, one of several



Monaco Cathedral (photo credit: Don Auberger)

on the island that keep the traditional indigenous chant style of singing alive and well. This chant, which began in the 16th century, is filled with improvisatory passages and enchanting melismas, along with unique timbres and meters, making it much different from typical chant. It was impossible not to feel both the profound spirituality and the earthy humanity of this music.

After an early morning flight to the mainland, we played the organ in the Cathedral of Aix-en-Provence. Then came the highlight, the large 1772 Isnard at St. Marie Madeleine in Saint-Maximin. We knew something was about to happen as Dr. Langlais' excitement grew (this is her favorite organ outside of Paris), and as we approached this organ



Nice Cathedral at night (photo credit: Don Auberger)

and were met by the venerable organist at St-Maximin, **Pierre Bardon**. Luxurious playing time here!

The next morning we visited the active parish of St. Vincent de Paul in Marseille, a façade that bears a strong resemblance to Ste. Clotilde in Paris. This five-manual organ is the combination of three previous organs housed in the church for an impressive musical effect. Marseille organist **Robert Martin** led us to a fine café for lunch, and at this point I will say the trip excelled in gourmet delight led by our local experts.

In Roquevaire, deep in the heart of Provence and only thirty miles from Marseille, Dr. Langlais gave a stimulating masterclass on Vierne and Langlais. Organists played Pierre Cochereau's keyboards on this refurbished organ at L'Eglise St. Vincent. The organ of over 100 ranks began as a memorial project to the late great Notre Dame organist and *improvisateur* Pierre Cochereau (1924–1984). In the summer of 1997, the FOMS group visited Roquevaire while this organ was lying in thousands of pieces on the floor, awaiting assembly. Since that time, this church in Roquevaire has become home to a very active organ concert series.



The blue lights of the Monaco Cathedral organ (photo credit: Don Auberger)

After the days on buses, the walking organ tour in lovely Nice to play at Notre Dame Cathedral and Eglise St. Pierre d'Arène was most welcome. Local organist **Stephane Eliot** impressed us with his lunch order of steak tartare as well as his playing of the Jongen *Toccata*. Later that evening the trip reached its apex at the Cathedral of St. Nicholas in Monaco with our esteemed host **Olivier Vernet**. Vernet dazzled us with a beautiful improvisation, imbued with many jazz elements, while the organ reacted by changing colors. Each of us was then able to play the dazzling (and with changing colors that Messiaen would have loved!) new organ built by Belgian organbuilder Dominique Thomas on into the night, with Grace Kelly at rest in the apse.

More friends (from France, Singapore, and U.S.) made for the musical journey of a lifetime, and much-needed inspiration to learn more organ repertoire was gained by all. Thank you, Christina Harmon and Marie-Louise Langlais, who make the impossible dream of playing these instruments come true. ■

Helen VanAbbema Rodgers has been director of music at St. James Episcopal Church in Fairhope, Alabama, for 20 years, where she directs three choirs, plays a Schlicker organ and a 14-rank 1896 Hook and Hastings organ, and administers the St. James Concert Series. Her organ and choral repertoire has been greatly inspired by organ-playing trips to England, France, Germany, and Spain.

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