



Jean Langlais - The Man and His Music (Hardcover)

Ann Labounsky

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Jean Langlais (1907–1991) was one of the glories of twentieth-century French music, uniting two great traditions. As organist of the church of Sainte-Clotilde in Paris for more than forty years, he maintained the deeply spiritual musical legacy established there by César Franck and continued by Charles Tournemire; as a blind man, he was his generation's foremost successor to the great blind virtuosos Louis Vierne and André Marchal.

Born in great poverty in rural Brittany, he came to Paris and studied first at the National Institute for the Blind and then at the Paris Conservatory, where he took a first prize in Marcel Dupré's organ class. From his very first published works, Langlais became known as an important composer particularly for organ: he may be considered the culmination of the French post-Romantic school of Widor, Vierne, and Dupré, to which he brought the same love of Gregorian chant and modal harmony as did his mentor Tournemire.

Finally attaining his dream of becoming organist of Sainte-Clotilde in 1945, he had a long career as organist, teacher, composer, and traveling virtuoso. Despite his blindness he was among the most active touring performers of his time, his legendary recitals always concluding with an improvisation on a submitted theme.

This biography by a scholar-organist examines both his life and his music. Although he denied it, he was an exceedingly complex and sometimes contradictory personality. He was both intensely religious and sensual, selfish yet humble, a loyal friend with a marked competitive streak. His music evolved throughout his life, including late experimentation with serial techniques and encoded messages. He wrote much music for the church and took part in the controversies surrounding the liturgical reforms of Vatican II.

All these aspects of his life and art, including the rigorous training and arduous practice that transformed a blind peasant boy into a superb musician, his lifelong friendship with Olivier Messiaen, his sometimes turbulent family life, and the body of works he left — only J. S. Bach wrote more compositions for the organ — are narrated and analyzed by Ann Labounsky, who is uniquely qualified to write this definitive biography. A favorite Langlais pupil, she was asked by Langlais himself to write it and had his full cooperation for numerous long interviews over many years.

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