The Legend of Jeanne Demessieux: A Study

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The year 2008 marks the fortieth anniversary of the death of Jeanne Demessieux, and it may therefore be interesting to reflect on various aspects of her extraordinary career. Where did this legend begin and what has been her legacy? And what of the enigmatic lady herself—of whom so many have loved to talk, yet of whom so few have ever really known much. This article deliberately reflects more on the person and the artist than would a conventional academic study, and inevitably space here cannot discuss every angle of her career. A more purely biographical article appears by this writer in *Organists' Review*, November 2008.

Jeanne Demessieux died on November 11, 1968: born in Montpellier on February 13, 1921, she was only 47. One might even say that she "disappeared," for the dazzling star of this organist had already dimmed somewhat: once the talk of organists worldwide, a legend in her own younger years, the changes of musical fashions—as well as several unexpected twists of fate—had rendered her almost something of a bygone curiosity. This is reflected in the fact that some who were studying elsewhere in Paris during the '60s never even crossed the city to hear her play at the Madeleine.

At the time, the circumstances surrounding her passing were only discreetly alluded to and, as with so many musicians of exceptional achievement, much of what she had achieved was all too quickly forgotten, overlooked in favor of newer artists. A large crowd attended her Paris funeral in the Madeleine, and on that day even the organ—of which she had been *titulaire* since 1962, and that she so loved—mourned. Instead of flooding the church with music as it had so many times under her remarkable hands, it stood silently in respect of her passing, a vast black drape hanging from its gallery to the floor. Only some days before she died, she had told friends "I can hear the flutes of the Madeleine" as she lay convalescing in her bed after nearly two months in hospital. Little did she know she would never play the instrument again.

And how did this woman, once the "Queen of Organists," become almost overlooked in her later years, bypassed in favor of a younger generation? The spectacular successes and triumphs of her youth have been unparalleled by any other organist, yet the burning apogee of these years seemed almost to burn part of her out as the blaze faded, leaving her inwardly exhausted and bereft. An artist of the great virtuoso tradition, her style became less popular as the so-called Organ Reform movement continued to sweep through and gain ever-greater momentum like a rushing wind. And there was her health. Throughout her life, Jeanne Demessieux battled with serious health problems, undergoing numerous operations beginning in her early 20s. She fought cancer silently in an age when any public knowledge of such an illness was a social taboo that would leave the sufferer ostracized and an outcast.

Few ever got to see the woman behind the public persona; being both very reserved, but also having an uncommon force of character and purpose, she didn't let many people see the "person" behind, except the few she truly trusted. It must also be surmised that the famous "rupture" with Dupré probably seriously affected her faith, and it was a "scandal" she was aware would never leave her.

In many ways, so many elements of her life seemed always to have two such opposing poles: on one hand triumph and fame, on the other, obscurity; being "the chosen one" of her master Dupré, but then being bypassed and cast out; being very much a "grande dame" when at the organ or mixing professionally, yet being a woman of an (at times) uncomfortably reserved nature. The gentleness and sensitivity she showed those whom she trusted contrasted with her strong opinions and individuality. On one hand she was admired as a great artist—on the other she was viewed with suspicion because her brilliance was such that some simply couldn't see past that alone, and undoubtedly many seethed with jealousy. Even Demessieux herself was aware of the two poles in her personality—gentleness, sensitivity and creation contrasting with "violence" (although her exact word, it referred more to force and strength of character than any darker force). This duality in her nature reflected the two very different natures of her adored parents: her father—cultivated, artistic, sensitive and affectionate; her mother—highly strung, a forceful, driven nature disguised behind an emotive, gentle façade.

Jeanne Demessieux at Pleyel organ, Paris, 1946 (photo credit: Van Tuijl collection; courtesy Lynn Cavanagh)

By quite some years, she was the first woman to achieve international fame as a virtuoso organist, and her gender undoubtedly had a serious impact on her career. Not only was she entering what was at the time an almost exclusively male domain, it undoubtedly meant that she had, in fact, to be even better than her male colleagues to be accepted as their peer.

She had immense good fortune; she was taken under the wing of the great Dupré when she was still only fourteen. In her, he saw at last the messenger he had been looking for: someone of unlimited and precocious talent, the prophet who would bear the torch of the glorious French organ school forward from him, as he himself had done from his own master Widor. In addition to his other responsibilities and work, he devoted the next eleven years to her education, tirelessly and meticulously preparing her for the role he knew she could fulfill. Proclaiming her as his true successor, he elevated her prowess to such a level that she simply had no realistic competition; even before her famed 1946 debut, he proclaimed to Léonce de Saint-Martin: "You know that I do not say anything glibly, and I say Jeanne Demessieux is the greatest organist of all." He proclaimed that posterity would rank her alongside Clara Schumann.

Cocooned in this privileged world of Dupré's home in Meudon, she was loved and nurtured by him and his family as their own. Yet only a year after her triumphant debut concerts, he abruptly severed all contact with her, cutting her off and out of his life without any explanation. Anyone wishing to understand the possible motives and reasons is strongly encouraged to refer to the excellent article by Lynn Cavanaugh, which offers the best considerations of this issue. [See "The Rise and Fall of a Famous Collaboration: Marcel Dupré and Jeanne Demessieux" by Lynn Cavanaugh, in THE DIAPASON, July 2005.] Although she was devastated and suffered enormously from this, some around her felt it was actually a good thing; they were all too aware that under the gently acquiescent girl was a woman who would be unable to live in another's shadow. Despite Dupré's unlimited generosity to her (he did, after all, do everything possible to plan her future triumph and success), they knew she could never be a puppet—however well-intentioned the master.

Again, the reader is refered to the above-mentioned article, which discusses with great clarity the unfortunate situation and "fall-out" of this "rupture." Undoubtedly, there were some who reveled in the scandal of the "fallen angel" and used the situation both for their own opportunity, and also as an advancement in the "turf war" that undoubtedly existed in the Parisian organ world. Despite the fame she enjoyed outside Paris (and to a lesser degree in France), she was certainly given the cold shoulder by a certain faction of its organists and concert promoters. As a result, even today many in France are surprised to know of the celebrity she had outside their country because of her having been largely ostracized from the French organ world. Her music remains largely unknown there.

The legend begins

Jeanne Demessieux made her debut in 1946 at age 25. Dupré himself had arranged a series of six recitals at the Salle Pleyel, Paris, in which he could launch the career of this, his most exceptional pupil. He planned every detail for their maximum impact, even calling them "Six Historic Recitals." Even the venue, the restoration of its organ, the setting of the stage were a specific part of their big scheme to launch her career. An audience of 1,725—considerably more than was customary for a debut recital (on any instrument) in Paris at the time—witnessed the level of accomplishment she displayed. It was a level that no other organist had before displayed, and the reaction of the audiences at these concerts was simply sensational. Her debut was compared to those of Horowitz, Menuhin, and Gieseking; Dupré himself said "You have shown us this evening that we are in the presence of a phenomenon equal to the youth of Bach or Mozart . . ." Of Paris's finest organists present—including Langlais, Litaize, Grünenwald and Falcinelli—Duruflé more humorously (but no less seriously) declared "Next to Jeanne Demessieux, the rest of us play the pedals like elephants!" The press gave free reign to the emotions felt by all, and noted that not even Liszt himself could have stunned them more—and the musical sensitivity she displayed was compared to that of Vierne. At the conclusions of these recitals she was often almost mobbed by the throngs who came to hear her as they clamored for autographs and a closer glimpse of her; their enthusiasm was like fire.

In short, these recitals were a triumph the like of which had never been seen before and has not since. They heralded what was to be an unparalleled few years.

Her career

That first evening (February 26, 1946), when that young woman walked out onto the stage at the Salle Pleyel, dressed simply and elegantly in a pale blue dress, had an impact on the organ world, and it was never the same again.

As a result of the word spreading—as well as due to the very careful particular public relations that the Duprés had planned—the young Jeanne quickly received a flood of invitations to give recitals throughout Europe. On many of these occasions she was the first woman ever to play in those cathedrals, churches and concert halls. Within a few years she had played in virtually every major European city, having given 200 recitals in only four years. As was the case with outstanding performers in an age before the numerous distractions of society today, her concerts usually attracted and drew capacity audiences—both fascinated by her as a woman, but also stunned by what they heard.

Jeanne Demessieux in Dublin, 1952 (photo credit: Van Tuijl collection; courtesy Lynn Cavanagh)

In the autumn of 1947 she gave a second, equally triumphant series of six recitals at the Salle Pleyel.

Her London debut was on February 26, 1947 at Westminster Cathedral (where she would return many times). Attended by the whole of the Willis firm, Willis himself had to attend to a cipher immediately before the recital began! She made five visits between 1946 and 1948 alone, including a concerto at the Proms with Sir Malcolm Sargent, Jeanne loving the great Royal Albert Hall instrument. However, it is worth noting that the English critics were usually fairly hostile and, although not widely known, there was a definite intrigue involved here. In 1947 the London Organ Music Society, then headed by George Thalben-Ball, made a request that she present herself and undergo something of an audition for them; understandably insulted, she flatly refused such a ludicrous request—but they, with a pompous attitude, never got over the fact that she did. Equally—unlike the Americans—they seemed to have a serious issue with being so outshone (in so many ways) by a woman! At the time, English organ critics were usually organists from this Society, and the mean-spirited reviews they gave were in stark contrast to those given by the Americans whose generosity of spirit and enthusiasm knew no limits. During her years of training and preparation, Dupré had warned her she would undoubtedly encounter elements of jealousy. However, the audiences themselves and non-organist critics in the UK also shared this enthusiasm. Although not widely known, in 1953 Demessieux played, by invitation of the young Queen Elizabeth II herself, at her coronation in Westminster Abbey.

At the time of the Pleyel recitals, Dupré had been both planning and insistent that Jeanne must go and make her debut in America; he saw her potential as an artist to achieve considerable fame and success. She, however, flatly refused to agree to go there unless assured of the best possible terms and conditions; her strong-willed nature was beginning already to assert its independence. It has been written and suggested that Dupré was trying to manipulate her into something uncomfortable—to create a Hollywood-style glamor star—but surely he only saw the very real chances for her to

make a great life and in turn give herself the freedom such success would allow to devote herself to music. Dupré left for another of his own tours there the following year. Upon his return he never spoke to or had any dealings with her again.

Jeanne's first tour in North America did not, in fact, take place until 1953: but it was simply triumphant, the audiences and critics alike stunned by the experience. [See "The American Recital Tours of Jeanne Demessieux," by Laura Ellis, THE DIAPASON, October 1995.] Perhaps only Virgil Fox displayed a similar degree of virtuosity, although his style was, of course, far more flamboyant and his repertoire far more popular. She returned again in 1955 and 1958, and on each occasion packed audiences from coast to coast rewarded her with feverish ovations.

In the early days of her career, her virtually non-stop schedule of concerts included nearly every major city of Europe and North America—all the more remarkable since travel was in those days more reliant on slow trains and sea. Touring was not something she enjoyed, finding it exhausting and, at times, nothing but a punishment. She made only three tours of North America, apparently refusing any further invitations because of a wish to remain near her aging and ever more frail parents.

Unlike many were beginning to do, Jeanne refused to travel by plane unless absolutely necessary; as result of losing a great friend in a crash in her youth, Jeanne was terrified of flying. Undoubtedly, as the years progressed and younger organists were increasingly leaping on planes to play everywhere, this must have curtailed her activities and left her somewhat behind. Disliking traveling generally, unlike such as Dupré, she never ventured further afield to such places as Australia either.

The apogee of her career was undoubtedly during the late 1940s to the mid-1950s. Although she continued giving recitals widely after that, a new generation was emerging—figureheads of the so-called Organ Reform movement—whose fresh ideas and new approach to the organ were captivating followers, leaving the grander virtuosos of previous generations somewhat bypassed. But certainly no other organist—before or since—could ever claim such an auspicious beginning to a career as Jeanne Demessieux.

Repertoire

What did Jeanne Demessieux's repertoire include? As may be expected, her choice of music was very much based on the traditions of the French Romantic school; during her years with Dupré she studied most of Bach's works (including all the great preludes, toccatas, fantasias, fugues, sonatas, *Orgelbüchlein*), as well as many of the works that were the cornerstone of Dupré's own repertoire—including the great works of Liszt, Franck, Mendelssohn. She also studied numerous works of Dupré himself—both sets of preludes and fugues, both symphonies, *Évocation, Le Chemin de la Croix*, the *Variations, Suite Bretonne* and *Sept Pièces*—all of which she performed in Meudon before 1946. And there was the "riddle" of the *Etudes* he wrote for her, the transcendental sketches he later regrouped. (It may be pertinent to remark that this was not done, as has been incorrectly noted by some, after the "rupture" between them: it was openly discussed between them prior to her Salle Pleyel debut.)

Jeanne's concert programs are fascinating to study. However—as with all performers who play from memory—the inevitable restrictions of memorized concert repertoire meant there were, as a result, numerous repetitions of the same works. This aside, all her programs show a decided concern for a variety and balance of periods, texture, styles and emotional impact. Despite a certain classical austerity and obvious concern for music of serious quality, purity and refinement—much in the way a concert pianist of the same era would have chosen that instrument's classics—there was also very much a regard for aural and structural color.

Nearly every program included at least one major work of Bach, often supplemented by an intimate and expressive chorale prelude or two. Although she played all six of Bach's trio sonatas in a recital at Dupré's home on March 19, 1942, only very occasionally did she perform one of these in her subsequent programs. By contrast, some of Handel's concertos (I, II and X) featured regularly in her programs, complete with spectacular cadenzas of her own—and it may be worth noting here that Dupré's edition of these was, in reality, almost entirely her work, done during her years of study with him. A variety of other Baroque composers featured occasionally in her concerts—some of these obviously being taken from Dupré's series *Anthologie des Maïtres Classiques*. She seemed to like opening recitals with Purcell's *Trumpet Tune*, something she first played as an encore in one of her Salle Pleyel programs, when she noted how it "refreshed the audience." From the Hamburg recording we can today hear on CD, she opted for a bright, sparkling approach to this music, this quite in contrast to the heavy, ponderous and pompous style often given to the same work by many English and American players of her time. Mozart's *Fantasia in F minor*, K. 608 was obviously another favorite work of hers, and she performed it frequently. Generally, however, she only included the odd Baroque piece as a bit of "fluff" in her early years; in the '60s she did, however, include more works—such as Buxtehude, sometimes a suite of Clérambault—although she obviously felt her attentions better directed (and requested) towards more specifically "concert" music. Of particular note (for it being unusual) was her including a fugue of Gibbons in a recital at Westminster Abbey on May 3, 1956—also because it appears that was her only performance of anything English. She did not appear to play any American works.

Jeanne Demessieux publicity photo
(photo courtesy Emmet Smith and Lew Williams)

Despite performing all the Mendelssohn sonatas and preludes and fugues in her youth, these were only rarely included subsequently, whereas the three great works of Liszt featured throughout her whole career and were of obvious great importance to her. Occasionally she chose one or two lighter works of Schumann (a fugue, perhaps a canon) or, less often, maybe a Brahms prelude, usually placed as a moment of contrast after or before a big piece. An unusual work in her repertoire (from the '50s onwards) was her own transcription of Liszt's *Funérailles*—one of the first times being at Westminster Abbey on May 3, 1956, and subsequently she played it quite often. She never wrote it out, instead playing her transcription from memory of the piano score. Similarly, many of her actual compositions were never written out until they were exactly as she wanted them in her head.

The music of César Franck was of particular importance to her, and after Bach it appeared more regularly than anything else. It is interesting to note that on the organ in her apartment, an instrument bought on the success of her American concerts, she hung the famous print of César Franck serenely playing the organ of Sainte-Clothilde.

Other than Franck, the only French Romantic composer she performed with any regularity was Widor, the Allegro from the *Sixth Symphony* being presented often. Only rarely did she perform a complete symphony—occasionally maybe the *Gothique*—but the variations of both this and the Fifth appeared often, the latter regularly in her later programs. Interestingly, Vierne (whose music would have suited her so well) only occasionally appeared: for example, sometimes the Scherzo of *Symphony No. 2* appeared, much in the role of a refresher between bigger works.

Of the twentieth century, only three names ever appeared with regularity: Messiaen, Berveiller and Demessieux herself. Other than her early years—during which they appeared only occasionally—she hardly ever performed any works of her other contemporaries.

She frequently performed one or two of her own pieces. Apart from her very early concerts, she did not play the *Six Etudes* as a complete set, later often taking just one or two (*Tierces, Notes Repetées, Accordes Alternatés* and *Octaves* being those she chose most often). She did sometimes include one of her choral preludes (*Rorate Caeli*—her own favorite of the set—and *Attende Domine* appearing most often), and the austere and granite-like *Dogme* from the *Sept Méditations* seems a work she had particular affection for, it appearing many times; occasionally she played one or two other movements from this same set. The *Triptyque* (with its mysterious and poignant Adagio written just a day or so after the "rupture" with Dupré) appeared on programs throughout her career. In the 1960s, the then recently written *Prélude et Fugue* and the *Répons pour le temps de Pâques* quite often featured, as had her *Te Deum* in the years following its own composition.

Jeanne's association with Jean Berveiller was of significance. Both apparently loved jazz and particularly Duke Ellington—and the influence of this "lighter" music is reflected in Berveiller's colorful style. His music suited Jeanne's obvious wish to bring freshness to her programs, and she played many of his works—*Epitaphe*, the *Suite*, his transcription of Franck's *Redemption*, and *Cadence*, written for her 1953 U.S. debut (although one wonders why she didn't include any of her own *Etudes* there, for they are far more spectacular). And, of course, there was that famous *Mouvement*—organists sought to unearth the score for so many years. However, not all these works were, as has been variously claimed, dedicated to her.

Messiaen was of particular significance to Jeanne; he greatly admired her, and she was one of his first and most powerful advocates. She regularly performed his pieces in recitals. Movements of both *L'Ascension* and *La Nativité* appeared frequently, as did the whole suites occasionally. For example, she gave the first complete performance of the former at London's Royal Festival Hall on May 15, 1957, and she played the complete *La Nativité* at the English Bach Festival on July 1, 1964 in Christ Church, Oxford. She also played *Le Banquet Céleste, Apparition de l'Eglise Eternelle,* and *Combat de la Mort et de la Vie* regularly. It is also interesting to note that many players of younger generations who later became associated with this music first heard it in performances (either broadcast or live) by Jeanne Demessieux. It is also a measure of the respect Messiaen held for her that he frequently invited her to be an examiner for his analysis class at the Conservatoire.

And Dupré? She performed so much of his music during her years of study, and some pieces also featured in her earliest public recitals outside France. She performed the *Prelude and Fugue in B* as part of London debut, and the *Symphonie-Passion* for a recital there on March 13, 1947 for the Organ Music Society. (This recital has often, erroneously due to Felix Aprahamian, been cited as her London debut.) She also performed the *Suite* in London.

But did she ever perform Dupré after the "rupture"? Very seldom and from the rarity with which she did, one may believe it was only when specifically asked. She never played any in America, but it is poignant to note that she included the *Symphonie-Passion* in what was to be one of her final recitals—one in Chester Cathedral, as part of the Chester Festival in July 1967.

Whatever her feelings of betrayal and disappointment, her respect for Dupré as an artist, as much as for the values he upheld and represented, never diminished; neither was she ever known to make any remark against him. A testament to this was the article she contributed to *Études* (Paris, April 1950) entitled "L'art de Marcel Dupré."

Improvisation

Improvisation featured in all of her recitals, and her extraordinary skill in all forms of this art was widely known. Dupré once claimed that he could train any technically competent organist to improvise a five-part fugue within six months; so, given the extraordinary gifts of this pupil, it is not surprising that he trained her in this skill to be as brilliant (more, some said) as he was himself. At her first Salle Pleyel recital, she improvised a four-movement symphony. She also did the same in her March 1947 London recital, whose brilliance prompted George Thalben-Ball to say—with a reserve of generosity typical of the British organists—that it was "trick" improvisation because "no one can think that fast"! The French prowess at improvising specific and disciplined musical structures was a world apart from the meandering service-style improvisation of the English, and, again, one notes the distinctive "green eye" looking at her.

Of particular note was a recital she gave at the Conservatoire in Liège on March 1, 1957, the entire program of which was improvised! During it she improvised in numerous forms and structures—from choral variations, a trio sonata, prelude and fugue, paraphrase, and various treatments of chorale (polyphonic, contrapuntal, canon, fugue, ornamented).

Concertos

Quite unusually for an organist of her times, Jeanne was invited to perform concertos fairly often. There were the Proms, the performances with orchestras in France, Belgium and elsewhere—although never, surprisingly, America. She wrote her own "concerto," *Poème,* in the very early '50s, giving its premiere in 1952, as well as that of Langlais' *Concerto*. In December 1964 she gave the Belgian premiere of Poulenc's, also performing Jongen's *Symphonie Concertante* with the Orchestre de Liège. Less successful was her recording of two of Handel's concertos with the Suisse Romande orchestra; she found working with its conductor, the aged Ernest Ansermet, very difficult and was infuriated by his despotic wish to control the proceedings—including her playing, and even trying to suppress her cadenzas. Again, her strong will and individuality were far too strong to be so treated by a despotic conductor.

Recordings

Nearly all the recordings Jeanne made were for Decca, in those days probably the most significant recording company. Her first were several 78s, featuring works by Bach, Widor, Franck, Mendelssohn, and Purcell's *Trumpet Tune*.

Then she made numerous LPs—several were made at Victoria Hall in Geneva in the early 1950s; in addition to the Handel concertos mentioned above, these included works of Bach, Liszt, Widor and Franck. A recital of Bach and Franck on the organ of St. Mark's, North Audley Street (an instrument later removed to Holy Trinity, Brompton, where it remains) was also issued. A project a few years later for her to record a series in Notre-Dame (Paris) was never realized, much to her great regret. She did, however, record several mixed selections at the Madeleine a few years before her famous recording of Franck made there, for which she won the Grand Prix du Disque in 1960. Two years later she was appointed *Organiste-titulaire* of this great church and its organ, an honor she considered so special she admitted she "cried with joy." She had served prior to this appointment as organist in the church of Saint-Esprit during her teenage years.

In the early 1960s, Messiaen agreed she should record his (then) complete works. Although greatly passionate about this project, her refusal to sign the contract easily and continued questioning and bargaining of its terms meant that by the time of her unexpected death, the actual contract remained still unsigned. On the strength of her extant recordings, one can only imagine how we have missed out from these never being recorded. Her last recording was made at Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral as part of the celebrations of the then new cathedral and its organ.

It was rumored that during the '50s she recorded the *Six Etudes* for Decca, although this may have been just a legend. Certainly this writer has failed to unearth any concrete facts about these.

Many of Demessieux's recordings have now been reissued by Festivo and are available on CD. They testify to an artist of exceptional gifts and clearly disprove the claim of those who tried to brand (even dismiss) her merely as an empty virtuoso.

Performance style

Jeanne Demessieux was a spectacular and transcendental virtuoso. Although the influence and tradition handed down to her by Dupré is apparent, her playing obviously had a personality decidedly her own, one markedly different from his; despite certain similar elements, there are few other similarities. From recordings we can hear her remarkable strength of authority, characterized by the same rigorous heroism and rhythmic power that Dupré demonstrated—but her playing demonstrated very little of Dupré's rigidity, instead displaying a far more emotional expressive range, even at times being remarkably sensual.

In recitals, critics repeatedly spoke of her commanding mastery, taste, responsibility and respect for the composers and works she played (with the exceptions of those less generous mentioned earlier). Again, from her recordings, it is also very clear that she listened intensely to her own playing and to the inner workings of what she played. She was also very aware of and sensitive to acoustics, which she employed in a very personal way.

Demessieux once remarked "a performer has her rights," implying that a performer must create an interpretation. Unlike many of the "organ reform" brigade, she, like Dupré and other virtuosos, did not attach great importance to slavishly following the score indications and registrations (as some have insisted we all should) in either her own or others' music without question or a certain (tasteful) liberty. From her journals we can note frequent questioning of things such as metronome markings and performance indications. Her ambition was clearly to make music "live," free from rigidity and the dogmatic approach certain other performers favored.

Another point is worth mentioning with regards to certain British and American reviews in which it was claimed she was simply a dazzling virtuoso and nothing more. For one, they missed that her playing—decidedly French—was strikingly different from the often overtly sentimental styles of performance common in both countries at the time. Few players had the exceptional sensitivity and subtlety she was capable of in her Bach chorales, her Franck. Maybe her excessive brilliance actually irritated some who were made all the more aware of their own limitations.

One thing is certain: no one, especially not Demessieux herself, would claim any were "definitive"—for such a claim would only reveal more arrogance and ego than true artistry. But these recordings are a wonderful testament to a great artist; we younger generations have truly missed out, not being able to hear her live.

Jeanne Demessieux, Marseille, 1948
(Archives of the Association "Les Amis de Jeanne Demessieux," Versailles)

The performer

The commanding presence of Jeanne Demessieux was widely remarked upon, and she was known for an aristocratic "hauteur" combined with a feminine, graceful demeanor. As with Dupré (and most of his pupils), once seated at the organ she was virtually motionless. Sitting bolt upright with regal carriage, she played with remarkable physical dignity and relaxation, and had no interest in the kind of performing histrionics and display that were customary in America—something often remarked upon by the press. This seemed to cause an even greater impact on the audiences, because the authority and strength of her performances belied her small and fragile physique. Dupré himself had repeatedly spoken of her power and strength as a player, even using the terms "masculine" and "virile."

In the early days of her career, applause in churches was not customary and recitals were quite a sober affair; she presented herself accordingly in reserved, but elegant, attire. However, in concert halls or more relaxed venues Jeanne brought a sense of occasion and glamor not previously known in recitals and not adopted as the norm for many years afterwards. She was known for beautiful, stylish long evening gowns, often including a train that she would drape gracefully over the back of the organ bench. Perversely, this often obscured the pedals and her legendary pedal prowess from the view of the audience! The silver shoes—with their high Louis XV heels—in which she always played have become part of her legend. However, it would be quite wrong to believe there was anything remotely exhibitionist or "flashy" about her presentation—this was quite contrary to her reserved nature; it was for her just presentation and style.

Other than occasionally during church services, she never used music and played everything entirely by memory, never traveling with any scores. According to Marie-Madeleine Duruflé-Chevalier, who was a loyal and trusted friend, she had little (if any) difficulty in recalling any of the great works of the repertoire from memory.

Teacher

In her years of study, Dupré had repeatedly spoken of his wish that she would succeed him as Professor of Organ at the Paris Conservatoire, also expressing his wish that she succeed him as Organiste-titulaire at Saint-Sulpice ("only Jeanne Demessieux can occupy the organ loft of the great Widor" he declared). Indeed, on a few occasions about the time of her first Salle Pleyel recitals, she took his class while he was absent giving concerts. However, after the "rupture" these were just shattered dreams. The conservatoire post was in the end filled by another Dupré disciple, Rolande Falcinelli.

Jeanne Demessieux at Texas Christian University, 1955 (photo courtesy Emmet Smith and Lew Williams)

In addition to her concerts, Jeanne did, however, teach both organ and piano throughout her career. In the early days, she was teaching some 25 hours each week, on top of which were 14–15 hours for Saint-Esprit. After all this came the most important call on her time—her own practice; she often worked eight hours a day at the organ, as well as composing. And in addition to all these demands, was the greatest of all—her hectic concert schedule!

In Paris she taught privately in her apartment, also doing some teaching in Nancy. She was appointed professor of organ at the Royal Conservatoire in Liège in 1952, a role she took with great responsibility, traveling every week on the train from Paris for two or three days. She was as exacting with her pupils as she was with herself. However, she managed this imperceptibly, and their testimonies speak always of her kindness, warmth and encouragement as a teacher—and her unlimited generosity in encouraging them to achieve their maximum. She was also enthusiastic, encouraging and aware that a pupil may wish and need to explore other styles and traditions of performance than her own—illustrated by her recommending one student to go to study with Anton Heiller, who was then setting Europe alight with his brilliant interpretations, in a style very different from her own. Among her outstanding pupils were noted virtuosos Pierre Labric and Louis Thiry.

She was also invited to give various masterclasses and interpretation courses—among them Dublin in 1954 and Haarlem in 1955 and 1956, where she also become chair of the jury for the competitions. Following Dupré's retirement, she was several times invited to be on the jury for the organ class at the Paris Conservatoire.

Organ building

What is less known is that Jeanne Demessieux had a passionate interest in organ building: she was fascinated by traditions and future ideas for organ building. Again, it was Dupré who had awoken this, and again—as with everything she did—she cultivated her own views and knowledge. She admired many diverse types of instrument—the great Cavaillé-Colls of course (particularly those in Rouen, Saint-Sulpice, the Madeleine and Notre-Dame), but also many older instruments, such as those in Weingarten and various great Dutch instruments.

In the 1960s, she began a major project for the French government to undertake a classification and study of the great instruments throughout France. Her private papers include a large file of her notes written in longhand analyzing many aspects of each of the numerous instruments considered in detail.

Perhaps least favorite for her were some of the large, heavy and ponderous American instruments. One note in her diary remarked a certain instrument was flat, dull and heavy in sound—"unfortunately, just what Dupré would love!"

The person

Jeanne was a person of complex personality—although not in the "temperamental" way. She could have great charm, yet be very aloof and display noted reserve with people. While not displaying any offensive ego or arrogance, she was well aware of her capabilities and stature: how could she not have been?

Her "duality" has been touched on earlier. A woman of highly intellectual capacity, with a remarkable ability to learn and retain, she was not interested in the superficial—thus she found many of the inevitable post-concert receptions (these being especially part of the American scene in the days she played there) quite dreadful; she loathed them, and even felt she'd earned her money just by enduring "ordeals," as she called them! She seemed to have confused many—some saw her as very shy, others as reserved, some as charming, some as distant and impersonal. Yet under these various exteriors was a woman who was perhaps exactly all of these things by turn. She was also an observer of others—she noted in her diary how, on one of the boat trips going to play in America, she asked to dine alone at her own table—so that she could watch all the other passengers from a distance, but not have to mix with them or exchange superficial conversation. She also remarked elsewhere that she did not like the "snobbism" of certain artistic and cultural circles, some of whom were there merely because it was "the thing to do."

Few—realistically only a mere handful—ever knew the real person behind the woman. Of those who did, all have spoken without limit of generosity of her kindness, gentleness, distinction, warmth and charm; to these people she was never affected by her celebrity, but remained a person of modesty and humility. She retained a sincere loyalty and friendship with those she trusted. Possibly the "rupture" with Dupré scarred her here too, for she never allowed many to ever become close to her again.

When relaxed, she had a sparkling and engaging personality, and to some she was a breath of fresh air from the usual, more drab male colleagues whom promoters had to entertain. Her correspondence to friends reflects a charming and effusive spirit; the radiant and effusive tone here was of great warmth, energy and spirit.

What was not publicly known in her life was that she suffered precarious health throughout much of her life, battling cancer in particular. It must be remembered that, until only recent generations, the discussion of illness—particularly serious illness—was an absolute social taboo; knowledge of any serious illness could often leave a person socially outcast, even professionally ruined. In addition to cancer, she had repeated bouts of "nervous exhaustion"—undoubtedly exacerbated by constantly fighting cancer plus her own fragility in order to continue working. Her drive, however, is reflected in that on several occasions she was up and traveling merely days after one of the many operations she underwent.

It was typical of her reserve that she lived in only modest accommodation—her apartment being only two rooms in a suburb of Paris. Yet she died owning multiple properties.

The last years

The auspicious successes and good fortune of her youth did not follow her through to middle age. Although the center of everyone's attention in her youth, this changed. Despite the unswerving loyalty and love of her family, Dupré—the man she loved as her mentor and second "father"—turned against her (as did many in the wake of this), and the wider organ world began to look at new and emerging younger artists, rather overlooking her in the process. Understandably, for someone as sensitive as she undoubtedly was, this must have been immensely difficult to endure.

In the mid 1960s, she began to look back on her life and reflect, sometimes quite plaintively, and began to speak to those she trusted of her exhaustion and serious inner fatigue. Some who met her in these years spoke of her displaying quite visible inward sadness, despite the smiling and charming exterior. In addition to the enormous drain her illness must have had on her, her soul seems to have become disillusioned not with music itself, but with it as a profession and with all it had demanded of her. Despite her luck, she felt trying to establish her career had been a constant battle, many having viewed her either with suspicion or envy (often both). The dreams of her youth were shattered and soured, the sadness of her broken alliance with Dupré had distressed her immeasurably. Instead of looking back on a happy childhood, she began to look back with resentment on a childhood of solitary study, on a life of great personal disappointment, of disillusioned sadness at betrayed trusts. As a performer, the outstanding fame of her youth had waned.

One wonders how Dupré must have felt when she died, something he is never known to have divulged. Once as dear to him as his if she was his own daughter, to whom he had promised so much (and against whom he had turned against violently), she died—as did his own daughter, Marguerite—from cancer far too young. One wonders what he felt, and notes how pointless all those wasted years of non-communication surely were.

The legacy

The legend of Jeanne Demessieux has been of far greater importance than many have considered, or been willing to admit. Maybe some even felt such discussion would have distracted from their own achievements? To many, the star of this brilliant artist has always been something quite untouchable, and many organists (this writer among them) have practiced themselves into a frenzy in the hope of attaining just a little of her level of brilliance. Many openly freely admit how much they have been inspired by her image, and nearly every outstanding female organist since has, inevitably, at some stage been compared to her. Some people were, of course, less generous (as is their right) or simply didn't appreciate her style, and undoubtedly there were also those who may even have been well served by the waning of her star and her passing because it gave them more space to grow. Yet she still remains one of the most talked of organists of all, a name virtually every organist knows.

Today there is renewed interest in her both as performer and composer and younger generations are discovering a legend anew. Her music is being discovered and performed more than ever before. Her influence is a great deal more than just the eternal talk of "the silver shoes." ■

In all his studies, D'Arcy Trinkwon has been fascinated by the person behind the musician. An early interest in the Dupré tradition inevitably led to Jeanne Demessieux, and his particular interest in her began when he first heard her recordings in the early 1980s. Over the years he has explored, researched and studied in depth all he could of her, fascinated and inspired by her legend. Inspired by her Salle Pleyel programs, in 1994 he presented eight concerts in as many weeks: "The King of Instruments" was a celebration of the great masterpieces and culminated in a complete performance of her famous Six Etudes*—then the first organist to do so in recent time. He has since become particularly associated with them and her other works as a result of his numerous performances of them. He is vice-president of Les Amis de Jeanne Demessieux.*

D'Arcy welcomes any correspondance on the subject of Jeanne Demessieux and, time permitting, hopes to write a serious and comprehensive biography of her.
<www.darcytrinkwon.com>

Further reading

Jeanne Demessieux, "Un Vie de Luttes et de Gloire" by Christiane Trieu-Colleney, Les Presses Universelles 1977

Jeanne Demessieux: Témoignages de ses Elèves et Amis, published by Les Amis de Jeanne Demessieux, 1901

"Six Etudes, Op. 5, of Jeanne Demessieux," by Marjorie Ness, THE DIAPASON, August 1987, pp. 9–11.

"The American Recital Tours of Jeanne Demessieux," by Laura Ellis, THE DIAPASON, October 1995, pp. 14–18.

"The Rise and Fall of a Famous Collaboration: Marcel Dupré and Jeanne Demessieux" by Lynn Cavanagh, THE DIAPASON, July 2005, pp. 18–21.

The recordings of Jeanne Demessieux now reissued by Festivo contain excellent writing by one of her devoted friends, Pierre Labric.

Websites:
Les Amis de Jeanne Demessieux: http://cat.uregina.ca/demessieux/