

Jeanne Demessieux (1921-1968)

"You have shown us this evening that we are in the present of a phenomenon equal to the youth of Bach and Mozart..." - Marcel Dupré

"In the world of the arts, a fairytale evokes either annoyance or delight. But one must believe it when the unique and prodigious character happens to be a young lady of 25 years of age, who from the very first moment of her public appearance manifested herself as the irresistible, absolute perfection." - Bernard Gavoty in *Le Figaro*

These were the words, dating from February 1946, in which Jeanne Demessieux was praised, just after her spectacular and strategically perfectly planned debut concerts in the Salle Pleyel in Paris, an event that shook the organ world and marking one of the great events when a legendary performer appears in public for the first time.

Youth and education

Jeanne Marie-Madeleine Demessieux was born at 13th of February 1921 in Montpellier, France, as the second daughter of modest, but musicloving parents. At the age of three it was already clear that she had a great musical gift: when the Demessieux family was invited to attend a performance of Gluck's *Orpheus ed Eurydice* and were unable to find a babysitter, they took their young daughter with them. Amazingly, she listened intensively to the whole performance and at home she spontaneously sang one of the aria's she just heard!



Young Jeanne at home, 1931

Her sister Yolande, 14 years her senior, took care of her first musical education. Jeanne joined the Montpellier Conservatoire very early and, 11 years old, she took the first prize for piano and solfège, performing Widor's *Piano Concerto*. The parents of Jeanne then realized that a provincial town was not able to give their daughter the ideal musical education, and they moved to Paris. Being faithful Catholics, they joined the congregation in the newly built church of Saint Esprit, and it didn't take long before Jeanne was asked to be the organist of this church. First she played on a harmonium, a year later, in 1934, the church installed a new 17-stop pipeorgan.

Some months after the Demessieux' arrival in Paris, Jeanne joined the Paris Conservatoire as a pianist. Already during her studies her exceptional gifts for both performing and composing impressed her teachers, a.o. Lazare-Levy (piano), Noel and Jean Gallon (theory), winning several first prizes with them: for harmony (1937), piano (1938), and fuge (1939). She worked

hard at the Conservatoire: once, in a period of 8 days she mastered two of Liszt's transcendental etudes and the *Sixth Hungarian Rhapsody*, as well as Beethoven *Sonate op. 106*, Bach's *Chromatic Fantasy and Fuge* and several Chopin Etudes! For her first prize in piano, she competed with no less than 55 others, playing brilliantly one of Liszt's Piano Concerto's.

After the installation of a pipe organ in the church of Saint Esprit, she needed an organ teacher, and a meeting with the famous Marcel Dupré, teaching organ at the Conservatory and organist of the St. Sulpice church, took place. Jeanne wrote in her diary on this date, the 8th of October 1936: "UNFORGETTABLE RENDEZ-VOUS". In the music hall of Dupré's private house in Meudon, which was equipped with the former Cavaillé-Coll organ of Alexandre Guilmant and an grand piano, Jeanne played Beethoven's *Sonate op. 106*, Liszt's *Vision* and *Feux Follets* and on the organ a Prelude and Fuge by Bach. Then Dupré gave her a theme to improvise. After this audition, Dupré said to her mother: "From now on, I am taking this child under my artistic wing" - words that not only indicate that Dupré realized that a talent of this stature could be his dream student, but also that she could fulfill a special role in realizing other goals and ideals, as we will see later. Dupré, took her in the organ class, although organ remained until 1938 only her second instrument. Next to this, she and her teachers held high hopes for her winning the first prize for composition. Although she attempted this several times, it never happened; was this because some members of Conservatoire jury were not in favor of female composers, or was it because she was associated with Marcel Dupré, then by many colleagues considered to be a hopeless conservative, still writing Preludes and Fuges? Whatever it may have caused, after the first great successes this was Demessieux's first setback.

Nevertheless, from the first meeting in 1936 both Jeanne Demessieux and Marcel Dupré found in each other a likeness of mind and many common interests. Dupré had stunned the world by learning by heart the complete works of Bach and all the other major organ works, a famous performer who had great successes with concert tours, spreading his fame as far as the United States and Australia; with his analytical mind, he developed his skills in improvisation in a systematical way, never heard before. As a composer he had won the prestigious Prix de Rome, and his organ pieces greatly enriched organ literature and pushed organ playing technique to the next level. This must have appealed to the young Jeanne with her prodigious memory, but most of all her eagerness to learn as much as possible and the will to work hard on new challenges. In 1941 she got the first prize for organ unanimously for a jury consisting of Gallon, Duruflé, Fleury, Marchal, Cellier and Litaize. She played, among other things, Liszt's *Ad nos ad salutarem undam*; it was her first attempt for the prize, only Messiaen before her actually succeeded in winning it the first time.



In St. Sulpice, 1946

An ideal collaboration

However, it was 1941, and Dupré, realizing that her talent was worthy to go much further than the closed borders of wartime, made an agreement with the Demessieux family: he offered to give her private lessons for free, as long as the borders were closed, to perfect her technique, and to work on every aspect of her development as the ideal preparation for a great career....

We can ask the question if the excitement Dupré undoubtedly felt over such a once-in-a-lifetime talent and the concern he had about her person the only reasons were for this generous agreement? For the answer of this question, we should be aware that Dupré's position as organist and composer and his ideas about the future of the organ were suffering under certain new developments in the French organ scene. It is important in the story about Demessieux to understand a little of this background. Norbert Dufourq, a musicologist, together with his close friend André Marchal (who was organist of the St. Eustache church, Paris), was initiating in the 1930's the so-called "Organ Reform"- movement. This movement revived and revalued the interest in historical organs from the baroque era and propagated in new organs the combination of baroque, romantic and modern elements, calling this the *style néoclassique*. They associated themselves with the organbuilder Victor Gonzalez, who, in their eyes, could realize this ideals. Gonzalez rebuilt in 1939 the famous Cavaillé-Coll-organ from the Palais du Trocadéro, a true masterpiece for which Franck and Widor were inspired to write famous works (Franck's *Trois Pieces* and Widor's *5th* and *6th Symphonies*). Nothing of this splendour is found in Gonzalez disrespectful rebuilding, unwilling to understand the importance and quality of this organ. Before 1939, this organ had been one of Dupré's favourites too: he even raised funds for restauration of this instrument in 1926, and played on it the complete Bachworks as well as many premieres of his own works. Dupré furthermore found it very important that in a concert hall a good organ was placed, taking an integral part in the musical life, not restricted to the religious surroundings. In his concert tours he had encountered the modern technologies of Setzer and combination systems, and according to him the tonal qualities of the Cavaillé-Coll organ (maybe enlarged with extra stops as he did with his own organ in Meudon) combined with modern technologies could make the ideal organ of the future: as a full-worthy concert instrument, with as much public attention and highly trained virtuoso performers as other instruments like the piano or the violin. The Organ Reform movement however was interested in different repertoire, such as old music, searching for more differentiated articulation than Dupré's legato school. They gathered a lot of (international) attention with their then fresh ideas. This rivalry must have worried Dupré, who wanted to carry on the tradition he got from Widor. However, the Gonzalez rebuild of the Trocadero-organ must in Dupré's uncompromising mind have turned Marchal and Dufourq from mere rivals into sworn enemies: after the inauguration of this unfortunate rebuild in the Palais du Chaillot, played by Dupré himself, Marchal was appointed its titulaire...

The years of the occupation of Paris by the Germans, Demessieux studied with Dupré all the aspects of organplaying, improvisation, composition and organbuilding. He wrote, to challenge her technique, the Suite op. 39, Offrande à la Vierge op. 40 and the Trois Esquisses op. 41; in 1944, Demessieux herself wrote her Six Etudes, still being one of the benchmarks in absolute virtuosity. Jeanne accompanied Dupré to concerts he gave, with testing new instruments, helping preparing new editions and replacing him at services in St. Sulpice. Next to this, she gave private recitals, mostly in his house in Meudon. In her diary, she writes about the intense relation and about Dupré's intentions with her:

"July 1941; 'Dupré revealed to me the secret of his technique, which I am not permitted to translate... He summed up the curriculum of our tradition concerning the organ and named Lemmens, Guilmant and Widor. Then he said to me: 'I am doing for you what Widor did for me.'

September 1941: 'Soon when I have grown old, it is you who will be the interpreter of my works. You are the only one who has the technique to master them.'

June 1942: 'You have already begun the ascent which will enable you to surpass me... it is a pleasure to see one's self surpassed by those who one loves.'

January 1944: "I tell you again that you are my successor. After me, I pass the torch to you."

August 1944, Dupré told to the organist of Notre Dame, Leonce de St. Martin: 'You know that I never say anything lightly... Jeanne Demessieux is the greatest organist of all the generations.'

We learn from her diary that Jeanne greatly enjoyed these years, taking information as a sponge, eager to learn and in complete trust of the superiority of Dupré's mastership.



Demessieux in 1947

The début

Dupré, in his meticulous manner, prepared Jeanne Demessieux' debut into the smallest detail. All the organ repertoire was studied: for example at a private concert in 1942 she played all Bach's Triosonatas, later in Rouen Dupré's newly composed Evocation. Everything performed without scores! It is interesting to realize, that during the wartime there was no lack of organconcerts; members of the jury who heard Jeanne Demessieux play for her first prize in 1941 invited her repeatedly with tempting offers, and Dupré himself played recitals in Paris often, unable to go on tours. Dupré forbided Jeanne to accept concertoffers, and as becomes clear her diaryentries from these years, became more and more aware of the hostility of Dupré in the direction of the Dufourq/Marchal circle, and the rivalry between these two camps. She remained however faithful to Dupré and was convinced of the rightness of Dupré's ideas and principles. The Organ Reform movement tried to gain influence, but was confronted with the unyielding Dupré, holding the influential posts at St. Sulpice and the professorship at the Conservatoire, and enjoying popularity as virtuoso. It might be possible that the Organ Reform movement tried to interest Demessieux for their ideas, seeing in her a possible flamboyant prophet, capable of attracting large audiences with her virtuosity and musicality.

Together with his wife, Dupré now tried everything to make Demessieux' debut into a definitive display of the superiority of his ideas and the securing of his tradition. This he tried with attracting a large public. Rather than planning recitals for example at St. Sulpice, where the organist would be seated invisibly upstairs in the organ loft, he found in the then popular concert hall Salle Pleyel the ideal venue. He convinced the associates of this concerthall to restore the Cavaillé-Coll organ according to his instructions, with a console onstage, situated in a way that the audience could see her playing and admire her prodigious pedaltechnique. The restauration

was ready exactly in time (so arranged by Dupré) for her debut recitals, planned from February until June 1946. Also a plan of Dupré's marketing technique was the 'unofficial' public appearances of Jeanne at services in St. Sulpice where she replaced him during his absence: her abilities were in in this situations not coming out into full extent, but gained among listeners enough fame to make them very curious to hear a full recital.



At the organ of Salle Pleyel

This was the setting for the most spectacular debut concerts in organ history! In 6 recitals Jeanne played all the important and virtuoso works of Bach, Mendelssohn, Liszt, the French Baroque, and of course modern works of Dupré himself (Esquisses) en her own Études. In an elegant pale blue dress and in silver shoes with high heels, from the first moment when this slender girl of 25 years old stepped onto the stage to the last she stunned the audience with performances that were perfect, technically dazzling, but also full of spirit, testifying of a deep understanding and a passionate and poetic nature; everything performed without scores. To an audience of 1.725 (much larger than any debutconcert, including other instruments), among who a lot of invited organists and concertagents from abroad, she immediately set her reputation as one of the greatest virtuoso's of the century. Langlais, Litaize, Messiaen and Duruflé, all present, were baffled, the latter declaring: "Next to Jeanne Demessieux, the rest of us play the pedals like elephants!" The press was equally triumphant, and the concert- and recording invitations followed immediately.



In this way, Dupré proved and secured four things:

1. That his teaching methods had the best results and that the main French organtradition was held up through his art;
2. That he is passing on the tradition as Conservatory professor and organist of St. Sulpice to Jeanne Demessieux;
3. That an organ suited for different styles was an evolution of a Cavallé-Coll style instrument, rather than a return to older building principles;

4. That the organ was capable of gaining a place as a full worthy concert instrument in the concert hall, able to draw large audiences like violin- or pianovirtuoso's.

Was Dupré only concerned about Jeanne herself when he offered her free lessons for five years? For sure, there was a strong personal bond between Dupré and Jeanne, and maybe this love was for Dupré not the same as for Demessieux... but Dupré was looking much further, and tried to do everything in his power to secure his accomplishments; he was not a foolish romantic. Can we blame Dupré for his intentions? As we can see now, Dupré proved to be right about the unsuccessful rebuilds of many Cavaille-Coll organs, and for many years to come he proved to be a professor who delivered organists of world class, and a composer of important organworks.

For Demessieux, Dupré had even greater plans, and immediately after this recitals he left for a tour to America, preparing the audiences there for an ever greater virtuoso than himself... He and Mme Dupré prepared invitations for her and issued her compositions in America, again to create great expectations. It is however at this point that history takes a mysterious turn. After their returning to France in December 1946, the Dupré's cut all contact with Jeanne Demessieux, leaving her in a state of confusion and disbelief... What could be the cause of such a sudden break, in France referred to as 'La Rupture' (the Rupture).

La Rupture

In Lynn Cavanaugh's article "The Rise and Fall of a famous collaboration", several possible causes are dismissed, such as feelings of jealousy of Dupré, because she was more talented than him, or the idea that Dupré was hopelessly in love and that Mme Dupré insisted on breaking off the relation. On the contrary, Dupré even enjoyed to be surpassed, as he repeatedly said to others and Demessieux herself. As to personal feelings of both Dupré and Demessieux, we will never know everything. We know however that Mme Dupré warmly treated Jeanne as her daughter, always at Dupré's side supporting his ideas and goals and sharing the happiness they felt in Jeanne's accomplishments. These things are very clear from correspondences between all of them and from Jeanne's diaries. Dupré never had contact with Demessieux after 1946, only leaving many decades later a note that the correspondence of him about Jeanne Demessieux should be suppressed: "...Although during the years after her prize, I worked with her for free, she was unworthy of me and Mme Dupré."



Marseille, 1948

So what has happened? Although we will never now exactly, there are several facts known. During the Dupré's absence after her debutrecitals, Jeanne accepted for the first time an invitation to attend a soirée of the 'Organ Reform'- circle. She reported in her diary of this evening as an 'unpleasant time'; could it be that this circle tried to talk her into something she didnt want; or to invite her for a concert without Dupré's knowing; or did they tell her things she didn't know about Dupré; or did they warn her about his too suffocating influence when she would remain 'under his wings'? We don't know... What is however clear, is that Jeanne Demessieux before her début always refused invitations from this circle, and that Dupré repeatedly asked her to be faithful to him and his art. From several dialogues between her and Dupré, written down in her diary, this is very clear. But maybe Dupré's ideas about 'being faithful' was very different from what a young girl with not so much experiences in personal relations thought it was. And Jeanne, possessing a strong character herself who found out that the organworld is (literally) at her feet... It is possible, that in some way Dupré heard that Demessieux attended this soirée, and nota bene *during his absence!* This alone (but maybe Dupré was told more, true or untrue...) he already will have interpreted as treachery; it meant that she was not anymore in his power... After everything he had done for her, for free!

Another fact is, is that Jeanne never accepted to go on the American tour as Dupré was planning for her. She refused to go there, not knowing the details of the circumstances. She didn't like travelling, and in 1947 she accepted to play a second series of concerts in the Salle Pleyel, this time without the Dupré's interference. These concerts were an equally great succes as the concerts in the previous year. Did Demessieux want this break with Dupré? This certainly not: she sent him several letters, asking for an explanation why he cut the contact. She was confused and in disbelief about the whole matter. Dupré never answered her. In fact, for Dupré the whole Demessieux - affair was so delicate that neither in his biography nor in his memoirs, nor in the information that the Association des Amis de Marcel Dupré gives about him, there is one word about Demessieux to be found... For Demessieux it was very painful, and she later declared that without the support of her family she would have not survived this difficult time.



London, 1947

The virtuoso years

After her spectacular debut, Demessieux however toured extensively, everywhere leaving audiences in awe of her abilities and musicianship. In 1947, she played for the Organ Convention in London, improvising a 4-movement symphony on themes given by 4 London music critics. The audience was enthusiastic, but the famous organist George Thalben-Ball suspected that this improvisation was 'tricked': "Nobody can think that fast!" - which was a compliment after all, as well as an indication of the level of improvisation English organists were used to.



Dublin, 1951

Everywhere she played she got raving reviews and packed halls and churches. She was the first woman to play a recital both in Westminster Cathedral and Westminster Abbey, thus pioneering for future generations of female organists. In 1953 she played by invitation of Queen Elisabeth II herself at her coronation in the Westminster Abbey. During these years she toured in Europe, mostly in Austria, Germany, the UK, Holland and Scandinavia. Mostly she concluded her programs with an improvisation on a given theme.



Jeanne Demessieux in America

In 1953, 1955 and 1958 she toured after all in the United States, enjoying great successes, but not enjoying all the other obligations she had to fulfill apart from playing. Smiling during receptions she found more fatiguing than playing Etudes... All these tours, she always travelled without scores!



Repertoire, concert programmes and recordings

Although her concert programmes show many repetitions of the same pieces, they testify of Demessieux' preference for the masterpieces of the organ literature of all era's, contrasted with shorter pieces of a lighter or more intimate character. Her programs mostly included a great Prelude and Fuge by Bach or an organconcerto by Handel, followed by an expressive choralprelude (like *Liebster Jesu wir sind hier*, or *Erbarm' dich mein'*). In the romantic repertoire she followed the same procedure, a piece like Liszt's *Fantasy and fuge on B.A.C.H.* or *Ad nos ad salutarem undam* followed by a Schumann Canon or a Brahms choralprelude. Next to Liszt, she played some pieces by Widor (*Allegro vivace* and *Toccata* from 5th Symphony, *Allegro* from 6th), but mainly Franck was one of her favourite composers. In 1959 she recorded his complete works on the Cavaillé-Coll organ of La Madeleine in Paris. The organ was then not in an ideal state, and not yet equipped with Setzer. She played most of the pieces as one take, although she had often to start a piece again when the organ didn't work properly or when sounds from outside were too disturbing; recording Choral nr 3 for example, she only played one take for the microphones!



Church of La Madeleine and its organ by Aristide Cavaillé-Coll (1846)

Of contemporary composers, the 'toccata'-pieces by Messiaen were on her programs quite often, like the *Transports de joie* from *l'Ascension*, *Dieu Parmi nous* from *La Nativité* and *Combat de la Vie et de la Mort* from *Le Corps Glorieux*; many organists who later specialized in Messiaen's music heard his music for the first time by Jeanne Demessieux. Messiaen himself was among her greatest admirers, and said about her own organworks: they have a special perfume and all good organists should practice her *Six Études*, although not many will be able to play it like she did. In the late 50's he wanted her to record his (then) complete organworks, but because of disagreements about the conditions, Demessieux never signed the contract with the recording company.

Of her own pieces, she often played one or two of her *Six Etudes* and sometimes a choralprelude. Being of a more lighter character, the music of Jean Berveiller, an acquaintance of the Demessieux family, was among her favourites, like his *Mouvement* and *Cadence*. Jeanne and Berveiller were good friends (it is even said that she was hoping to marry him, but he chose someone else) and they shared a liking for jazz music, and he dedicated several pieces to Jeanne. Fascinating to see, is that the works of Dupré very rarely occur on her programmes. She studied all of his pieces before *The Rupture*, but only in her first recitals outside France she regularly performed Dupré's works - in 1947 in London the *Symphonie-Passion* and the *Suite*. After this,

very seldom and maybe only when she was specifically asked. Two programmes from her American tours illustrate her programming and repertoire:

February, 2, 1953, Central Presbyterian Church, New York:

Trumpet Tune, H. Purcell
Prelude and Fuge in A minor, J.S. Bach
"The Old year has oassed away", Bach
Fugue in G (gigue), Bach
Pastorale, Franck
Variations from Symphonie Gothique, Widor
Banquet Celeste, Messiaen
Fifth Study, repeated notes, Demessieux
Dogme, Demessieux
Cadence, Berveiller
Improvisation on given themes

March 21st, 1958, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Buffalo:

Fantasy and Fuge in G minor, J.S. Bach
Chorale: "Blessed Jesus, we are here", Bach
Fuge in C, Buxtehude
Tenth Concerto in D minor, Handel
Canon in B minor, Schumann
Redemption (Interlude Symphonique), Franck
Scherzo (2nd Symphony), Vierne
Dogme and Paix, Demessieux
Dieu parmi Nous, Messiaen
Improvisation on given themes



America, 1958

Apart from the Franck recording, she recorded LP's for Decca, featuring works of Purcell, Bach, Bach/Vivaldi, Liszt, Berveiller and Messiaen (from Victoria Hall Genève) and a recording for the inauguration of the Metropolitan's Cathedral in Liverpool in 1967. Many of these recordings, including the complete Franck, have been re-issued as CD's by the Dutch label Festivo. Among this also liverecordings of concerts from Haarlem, Amsterdam and Hamburg. In his recording of Demessieux' complete organworks, the American organist Stephen Tharp included a live performance from 1952 where Jeanne Demessieux plays her own Poème for Organ and Orchestra, recorded in the Salle Pleyel. At YouTube, her performance of Bach's *Fantasy and Fuge in g minor* can be heard.

Style and appreciation

How can her style be described? A comparison with Dupré is tempting, but from the few recordings of Dupré's playing, we can only say that Demessieux' style differs from his in many ways. Dupré's style is imposing, authoritative, with a granite tempostability, with registrations emphasizing the more heavy sounds of the organ. Demessieux shows a more spontaneous approach, with very free but natural rubato, combined with a very energetic rythmical drive. In registrations she had a preference for the clarity and brilliance of high mixtures. Although in articulation clearly a pupil of the French (legato) school, she developed a very characteristic staccato playing, bringing out spectacularly effective accents, as can be heard in the recording of for example Widor's *Toccata* and Purcell's *Trumpet Tune*. From every recording we have now, the clarity of the playing is striking. Her tremendous virtuosity combined with the grip on the overall structure of the piece, and her poetic and strong character makes her performances unique and a 'must-hear' for all organmusic lovers!

Other features of her playing are told to us by who saw her playing: her behaviour at the console. From her American tours, there are some reviews of her concerts, pointing a finger to many things that are still true in our own time:

"...One thing always annoys me, and a lot of other organists too, is a players making a silly show of himself or herself when playing *ffff* organ, trying to make the audience think its harder to play *ffff* than *pp*. Observe this young lady and you'll be delighted with her honesty. Only once or twice she flung a hand off the keyboard at the release of a *ffff* chord, and then it was only the left hand, never the right."

".... At a time when American women organists were wearing floor length concert dresses and harem pants underneath, Mlle. Demessieux was gowned in the height of Parisian chic... The New Look was still new then!"

"It was an excellently fine recital. There was a brilliant display of her pedal technique, especially in her own pieces and her improvisation. I sat behind her in the chancel, the only one there who could see her feet and was amazed at the speed of the pedal passages. She wore VERY high heels and seemed to move her legs very little. Her ankles did the work and appeared to place her high heels where she wanted them with with unfailing accuracy and incredible speed. Hers was a very efficient and, by American standard, an unusually personal pedal technique. It was quite a show!"

"A word should be said about what might be called Mlle. Demessieux' console presence. Rarely, if ever, does one involve a European artist indulging in the ridiculous console gyrations so dear to the hearts of certain American recitalists bent on attracting a rock-and-roll set, yet in my corner of the balcony I could see a number of people sitting on the edge of their seats, and even standing, just to watch an organist who could tear flawlessly through the most difficult manual and pedal passages almost literally without batting an eyelash, and wearing high-heeled shoes at that (only other female organists will understand the import of this!). The sight of an organist sitting upright in the midst of a tumult of sound is to me more awe-inspiring than having to speculate on wether he or she is suffering from St. Vitus dance or an epileptic seizure."



Paris, 1950's

Teacher and later developments

Jeanne Demessieux was appointed professor for organ, first in Nancy (1950) later in Liege (1952), the birthplace of César Franck in Belgium. She never moved out of Paris however, travelling by train from Paris to Liege to stay there for several days a week. Among her pupils were Louis Thiry, who later recorded Messiaen's complete organworks and Pierre Labric, who recorded for the first time Demessieux' complete organworks, and Charles de Wolff, a renowned Dutch organist and conductor. Her pupils unanimously praise her exact, but warm and encouraging way of teaching. Before these appointments, she taught from an early age both organ and piano at her apartments in Paris. Of course, before the Rupture, Dupré intended her to succeed him as professor at the Paris Conservatory... In 1955, Dupré's pupil Rolande Falcinelli was put forward and succeeded Dupré. Falcinelli, an accomplished virtuoso, improviser and composer herself, always maintained a good relation with Demessieux, inviting her regularly as a member of the jury for exams; as did Messiaen for his analysis classes.



Titulaire at La Madeleine

To Demessieux's happier moments of the 60's belong the winning of the Grand Prix du Disque for the years 1960 and 1961 for her Franck-recording, and the appointment in 1962 as titulaire of La Madeleine in Paris: she wrote that she 'cried with joy' when she heard the news of her appointment. Several days before she died in 1968, she said in the hospital after an operation that she could hear the flutes of the Madeleine organ.... However, in reality she would never hear them again.



In Haarlem, St. Bavo church

Her untimely death at age 47 is, like the exact causes of *The Rupture*, somewhat surrounded by mysteries. Not many know however that she suffered from cancer from her 20's, undergoing many operations. A frail health and a serious disease were in this era somewhat of a taboo to share in public, and only her intimate circle knew about it. Next to this, in the 60's her popularity and fame seemed to suffer; not because the level of her playing was getting lower, but because other performers (not in the least other pupils of Marcel Dupré: Pierre Cochereau, Rolande Falcinelli, Marie-Claire Alain, Jean Guillou...) and also other ways of playing gained popularity of the international organworld. A lot of her popularity in the 40's and 50's was maybe also based on the fact that for the first time in history a female organist was able to reach an unmatched level. About developments in organbuilding, Demessieux remarked that she was very disappointed with the neobaroque organtype, expecting the modern organ to be an intelligent synthesis of the good elements of previous organtypes. Very different from Marie-Claire Alain who was interested in a different way of approaching old music by studying sources, authentic performance practice and choosing style-suited organs, Demessieux remained in her way faithful to the Dupré-school. This may have caused that many visitors of Paris who wanted to encounter the newest developments in the organworld, simply overlooked Demessieux, not even taking the effort of listening her playing services at La Madeleine. Demessieux herself admitted that after 20 years of touring and intensive practicing, she felt that she was musically saturated, looking back on a youth without games, occupied by practicing... Next to this, in the sixties her beloved father died, her hopes for marrying were vanishing, and visits to clinics and hospitals became more frequent. In her youth a shy girl, later regarded by some who met her as a somewhat aloof and distant woman, the happiness of Jeanne must have suffered severely; from pictures of the last years we see, understandably, that her facial expression was not so unclouded as it was during earlier years. People who were close to her however always spoke of her positive attitude and her bright and warm personality.



1968

Nevertheless, her flair and accomplishments as performer still appealed to many and during her last years she gave recitals all over Europe. In 1961, she was made Chevalier in the Order of the Crown by the Belgian government. By the French government, she was asked to write an inventory about important organs in France, a task that she started in her characteristic detailed and conscientious manner.

The last years she visited a lot of hospitals and clinics. Even in the end of 1968, she was however hopeful to recover, and wrote to her sister Yolande from the hospital at the 3rd of November: "I am going home now after two months in a clinic in the outskirts of Paris. I am no longer suffering. This is a state of nervous saturation that will pass." Several days later, at 11th of November 1968 she passed away in Paris. Her funeral service in La Madeleine at the 14th of November was attended by a large crowd, including... Marcel Dupré. The organ remained during this service silent and was draped in an immense black crepe, that reached the floor.



Jeanne Demessieux' legacy

Apart from her legendary recordings, her legacy mainly lives in the few organworks she left. These works strongly root in the French tradition of Vierne, Dupré Langlais and Alain. Her harmonic language was however not so advanced as Messiaen's, and the long melodic lines resemble a more romantic style. Her Six Etudes are an excellent study in pedal precision and the agility of the ankles, each of them exploring different techniques to master: Pointes, Tierces, Notes repetees... The choral preludes and the *Méditations sur le Saint Esprit* are of a more poetic nature. For a long time her works didn't enjoy a widespread interest, but the younger generations of organists seem to change that. Her Te Deum is undoubtedly her most performed work, and young virtuoso's challenge their technique by practicing Dupré's Esquisses (in a way Demessieux has to be thanked for them) and the Six Etudes. Several recordings of her organworks (most notably the complete ones of Maxime Patel on DVD and Stephen Tharp on 3 CD's) have appeared in the last years.

As a performer, it is a fact that she is regarded by many great organists of the present time as one of the peaks of the French organ tradition, and among the greatest organists of all time. In France, there is an association Les Amis de Jeanne Demessieux, whose goal it is to stimulate the interest in her legacy. In the region of the Camargues, an avenue was named after her.

Bert den Hertog, written for the Russian organ magazine The Organ in Januari 2014

<http://www.organjournal.com/english.htm>

Recordings by Jeanne Demessieux:

- **César Franck: The complete works for organ.**
 - Jeanne Demessieux, Organ. Recorded in July 1959 at the Cavaillé-Coll-Orgel of La Madeleine in Paris, France. Amersfoort, Netherlands: Festivo, n. d. FECD 155/156. 2 CD's.

- **Jeanne Demessieux aux grandes orgues de l'Eglise de la Madeleine à Paris, Vol. I.**
 - J. S. Bach: Sinfonia from Cantata No. 29, Erbarm dich mein, o Herre Gott BWV 721, O Mensch, bewein dein Sünde groß BWV 622, Christ unser Herr zum Jordan kam BWV 684; W. A. Mozart: Fantasia in F minor K. 608; F. Liszt: Prelude and Fugue on the name BACH; Ch. M. Widor: Allegro from Symphony No. 6 in G minor.
 - Jeanne Demessieux, Organ. Recorded in July 1958 at the Cavaillé-Coll-Orgel of La Madeleine in Paris, France. Amersfoort, Netherlands: Festivo, n. d. FECD 131. 1 CD.

- **Jeanne Demessieux aux grandes orgues de l'Eglise de la Madeleine à Paris, Vol. II.**
 - J. S. Bach: Toccata and Fugue in F Major BWV 540, Fantasia in G major BWV 572; W. A. Mozart: Adagio and Fugue in C minor K. 546/426; E. Mignan: Toccata Médiévale; J. Berveiller: Mouvement; J. Demessieux: Te Deum op. 11.
 - Jeanne Demessieux, Organ. Recorded in July 1958 at the Cavaillé-Coll-Orgel of La Madeleine in Paris, France. Amersfoort, Netherlands: Festivo, n. d. FECD 132. 1 CD.

- **The Legendary Jeanne Demessieux, Vol. III.**
 - O. Messiaen: Transports de joie (L'Ascension); J. S. Bach: Liebster Jesu, wir sind hier BWV 731; J. Berveiller: Mouvement; Ch. M. Widor: Toccata from Symphony No. 5 in F minor; W. A. Mozart: Fantasia in F minor K. 608; J. S. Bach: Toccata, Adagio and Fugue in C major BWV 564; F. Liszt: Ad nos, ad salutarem undam.
 - Jeanne Demessieux, Organ. Recorded on July 6, 1961 at the Müller-Orgel of St. Bavo, Haarlem (Mozart), on July 23, 1963 at the organ of the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam (Bach: BWV 564), at Victoria Hall in Geneva (1963; Liszt: Ad nos), and the Metropolitan Cathedral in Liverpool (1967; Messiaen; Bach: BWV 731; Berveiller and Widor). Amersfoort, Netherlands: Festivo, n. d. FECD 141. 1 CD.

- **The Legendary Jeanne Demessieux: The Hamburg Organs.**
 - St. Sophienkirche: H. Purcell: Trumpet Tune; J. S. Bach: Praeludium and Fugue in A minor BWV 543, Liebster Jesu, wir sind hier BWV 731. St. Michaelis: C. Franck: Prélude, Fugue et Variation op. 18, Cantabile (Trios Pièces). Christianskirche: J. Berveiller: Mouvement; J. Demessieux: Te Deum op. 11, Consolateur (Sept Méditation sur le Saint Esprit op. 6), Tierces (Six Études op. 5); O. Messiaen: Dieu parmi nous (La Nativité du Seigneur); J. Demessieux: Improvisation on the Choral "O großer Gott der Treu" from Cantata No. 46 of J. S. Bach.
 - Jeanne Demessieux, Organ. Recorded in May 1959 (St. Sophienkirche), in November 1962 (St. Michaelis), and June 1958 (Christianskirche). Amersfoort, Netherlands: Festivo, n. d. FECD 6961/862. 1 CD.

Jeanne Demessieux list of organcompositions:

Organ Solo

- **Nativité**, op. 4 (composed 1943/44. Sampzon: Delatour France, 2005)
- **Six études**, op. 5 (composed 1944. Paris: Bornemann/Leduc, 1946)
 - *Pointes*
 - *Tierces*
 - *Sixtes*
 - *Accords alternés*
 - *Notes répétées*
 - *Octaves*
- **Sept méditations sur le Saint-Esprit**, op. 6 (composed 1945–47. Paris: Durand, 1947)
 - *Veni Sancte Spiritus*
 - *Les eaux*
 - *Pentecôte*
 - *Dogme*
 - *Consolateur*
 - *Paix*
 - *Lumière*
- **Triptyque**, op. 7 (composed 1947. Paris: Durand, 1949)
 - *Prélude*
 - *Adagio*
 - *Fugue*
- **Twelve Choral-Preludes on Gregorian Chant Themes**, op. 8 (composed 1947. Boston, MA: McLaughlin & Reilly, 1950)
 - [*Rorate Caeli*](#) (aka. [*Rorate Coeli*](#))
 - [*Adeste fideles*](#)
 - *Attende Domine*
 - [*Stabat Mater*](#)
 - [*Vexilla Regis*](#)
 - *Hosanna filio David*
 - *O Filii*
 - *Veni Creator Spiritus*
 - *Ubi caritas*
 - *In manus tuas*
 - *Tu es petrus*
 - *Domine Jesu*
- **Andante (Chant donné)** (composed 1953. In: *64 Leçons d'Harmonie, offertes en hommage à Jean Gallon*, edited by Claude Delvincourt. Paris: Durand, 1953)
- **[Te Deum](#)**, op. 11 (composed 1957/58. Paris: Durand, 1959)
- **Répons pour le temps de pâques: Victimae paschali laudes** (composed 1962/63. Paris: Durand, 1970)
- **Répons pour les temps liturgiques** (composed 1962–66. Sampzon: Delatour France, 2006)
 - *Répons pour le temps du Très-Saint-Rosaire: Ave Maria*
 - *Répons pour le temps d'Advent: Consolamini*
 - *Répons pour le temps du Saint-Sacrement: Lauda Sion* (first version, composed 1963)

- *Répons pour le temps du Saint-Sacrement: Lauda Sion* (second version, composed 1966)
- **Prélude et fugue en ut**, op. 13 (composed 1964. Paris: Durand, 1965)

Organ and Orchestra

- **Poème**, op. 9 (composed 1949. Paris: Durand, 1952)

Sources:

- website of Les Amis de Jeanne Demessieux: <http://scratchpost.uregina.ca/demessieux/>
- website: www.musimem.com/demessieux.htm
- Jeanne Demessieux, Karen E. Ford, *The American Organist* 26,4, April 1992
- The American recital tours of Jeanne Demessieux, Laura Ellis, *The Diapason*, October 1995
- The Rise and Fall of a famous collaboration: Marcel Dupré and Jeanne Demessieux, Lynn Cavanaugh, *The Diapason*, July 2005
- The Legend of Jeanne Demessieux: a study, d'Arcy Trinkwon, *The Diapason*, October 2008
- Jeanne Demessieux: Portrait of a star, d'Arcy Trinkwon, *Organists' Review*, November 2008
- Marcel Dupré, *The work of a masterorganist*, Michael Murray, Boston 1985