

Jeanne Demessieux:

Portrait of a star

D'Arcy Trinkwon

'In the world of the arts a fairy tale evokes either annoyance or delight. But one must believe it, when the unique and prodigious character happens to be a young lady, 25 years of age, who from the very first moment of her public appearance manifested herself as the irresistible absolute perfection.'

These words in *Le Figaro*, by the eminent critic, Bernard Gavoty, hailed the famous début of one of the organ's titans. Yet despite her legendary status, she remains the instrument's most enigmatic heroine. She was the first internationally famed female virtuoso, paving the way for all who followed her, yet her career did not end in the happiness a fairy-tale is supposed to. Her life ended far too early, the result of a battle she fought with cancer.

Throughout her career she was tainted by the scandal of her master, Dupré, turning violently against her. Initially he hailed her as 'the greatest organist of all time' and declared 'She will be – I'm sure of this – one of the greatest glories of France'. But just a few years later he severed all contact with her. Many belittle her achievements as being technical wizardry because her brilliance blinded them to anything else. However, political intrigue has sadly always been a powerful force in the organ world, and Jeanne Demessieux was another of its victims.

Her extraordinary technique is, of course, widely known. She could play virtually anything from the established organ repertoire without problem or any effort at a moment's notice – from

memory! Although appointed *Organiste-Titulaire* of one of Paris's most important churches, the Madeleine, in 1962, much of the city's organ world had long since closed its doors to her.

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after two months in hospital; she never heard them again, as just a few days later she passed away. A large crowd, including Dupré, attended her funeral, although the great organ stood in silent mourning, a vast black drape hung from gallery to floor.

Jeanne Demessieux died on 11 November 1968. A biography by Christiane Trieu-Colleney (now long out of print) was called *A Life of Struggles and of Glory* and that is exactly what it was. It began on 13 February 1921, in the *rue Henri-René*, a short walk behind the train station in Montpellier where her father, Étienne Demessieux, worked for the SNCF (*Société Nationale des Chemins de fer Français*). Hers was not a privileged background, but both parents loved concerts and music. Her doting father

was a gentle, happy man: he was a gifted amateur painter, played the bugle, and appreciated anything of aesthetic beauty. Madeleine Mézy, her mother, was from a local Camargue family: she was highly-strung and very emotive which was sometimes hidden by a tyrannical façade. These contrasting elements resulted in Jeanne's own complex nature: she was acutely sensitive, although this was often

hidden behind what some saw as an aloof exterior. Her sensitivity was reflected in her constant analysis of everything around her – something very apparent in her journals. An intensely private woman, few ever got to know her closely, and her writings tell us more than we would otherwise be able to know.

At the age of three, left without the option of a babysitter one evening when invited to a performance of

Gluck's *Orpheus and Eurydice*, Jeanne's parents took their small daughter with them. To everyone's amazement, she was engrossed from the first notes and later astonished them when, back home, she spontaneously, and perfectly, sang one of the arias she had heard that evening. Her sister, Yolande, was entrusted with her early musical education, and an unbreakable bond of the deepest love developed between the two sisters.

By the age of eleven Jeanne had won a *Premier Prix* at the Montpellier Conservatoire in both piano (where she was studying with Léonce Granier) and Solfège. Convinced of their daughter's exceptional talent, her parents moved to Paris in order for her to enter the Conservatoire.

Jeanne was determined to become

a concert pianist and composer. Despite being an awkwardly shy girl, her prodigious talent fascinated those to whom she was introduced, including Lazare Lévy who entrusted her to his assistant, Lélia Gousseau. The following October, Jeanne was admitted into the Conservatoire under the direction of Simon Riera with whom she frequently clashed, yet her studies and development continued to advance remarkably. For example, in one eight-day period she mastered two transcendental studies and Liszt's *Sixth Hungarian Rhapsody*, Beethoven's Op.106 sonata, Bach's *Chromatic Fantasia & Fugue*, and several Chopin *Études*!

So how did this exceptional young musician, so obviously intent on a brilliant future as a concert pianist, turn to the organ? Quite by chance it appears. The Demessieux family was faithfully Catholic, and upon their arrival in Paris joined the church of Saint-Esprit. An unusual building, designed by the architect Paul Tournon, its lofty Byzantine interior was inspired by the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul and was just approaching completion. Aware of her talent, Jeanne was asked to be 'organist' in 1933 and as the organ had not yet been installed, she played the harmonium. The following year an instrument built by Louis Debierre to a specification of Albert Alain was delivered and it became necessary to find a suitable teacher for her. The only possible suggestion was Marcel Dupré, and at the intervention of the Director of the Montpellier Conservatoire (who still kept a watchful eye over Jeanne's musical path) an audition was arranged.

On 8 October 1936, Jeanne met Dupré at his home in Meudon and that morning was to change the course of her life: in her journal she wrote the words 'UNFORGETTABLE RENDEZ-VOUS'. She played first Beethoven's Op.106 sonata, followed by Liszt's *Vision* and *Feux-follets*. She then played a Bach fantasia on the organ after which Dupré gave her a theme upon which she was to improvise. At the end Dupré declared to Jeanne's mother 'As of now, I am taking this child under my artistic wing'.

At twenty Jeanne won *Premier Prix* in Dupré's class at the Conservatoire (up till then only Messiaen and she had

won *Premier Prix* at their first attempt), and, although such a prize usually heralded the end of a student's formal studies, Dupré had other plans. He had become aware of something remarkable: this young musician not only had exceptional talent, but she displayed an unequalled ability to learn, remember, and work. In her he recognised the 'prophet' he had long been searching for, the person to whom he could entrust the torch of the glorious tradition of the French symphonic organ – just as his own teacher, Widor, had to him. Dupré had never imagined finding his successor to be a woman. In fact in 1944, Dupré, suffering serious bronchitis, summoned Jeanne to make his testimonial presuming his days to be numbered. Among the things he told her he declared 'I wanted to tell you again that you are my successor. After me, I am passing you the flame. It so happens that you are a woman, not a man. But that is the way it is; the world will have to accept it'.

Following her award, Dupré proposed an unprecedented scheme to Jeanne's parents: he would train this young woman, who soaked up his wisdom and guidance like a sponge, privately for five years without charge. In return he asked for her assistance in editorial projects, particularly his editions of Bach and Handel, the latter being in effect her sole work, which would develop her further. Thus between 1941–46, Jeanne worked with Dupré in Meudon. The artistic bond between pupil and master was exceptional. Together they worked feverishly for hours, often several days every week, Jeanne meeting every single challenge proposed to her with ease. The Germans were occupying Paris, so liberty was seriously restricted, and Jeanne regularly walked more than six miles to and from central Paris to Dupré's villa in order to study and work. During these years she worked with such feverish dedication (sometimes 18 hours a day) that she later noted how the appalling horrors, privations and abominations of the occupation were, to some degree, less overpowering because of her concentration and joy in her study with Dupré.

Dupré was assisted in his career by

his wife, Jeanne Dupré: it was she who managed all matters of administration and together they turned their attention to Demessieux's début. Meticulous in everything he did, every strategic point was written and committed to a large file. Although it was agreed that Jeanne was not to give recitals during these years (all part of the plan), she would replace Dupré at Saint-Sulpice during his absences, thus her ever-growing brilliance could be heard and word would begin to spread. Jeanne also occasionally accompanied her master on concert tours, to try instruments, or simply to make contacts and be introduced to people. Finally, she began to give a series of 'test' recitals in Meudon for specifically invited guests of influence.

1946 was the year set for the début; not the customary single recital but a series of 'Six Historic Recitals', the name being chosen specifically for impact. The venue was crucial to the scheme; it had to have a console on view, giving the audience the opportunity to watch – just as they would expect with any other instrumental recital. Salle Pleyel, possibly the major Parisian concert hall at the time, was chosen. (Dupré's detractors accused him of serious intrigue here, claiming amongst other things that he managed to get the organ rebuilt just in time to fit in with his scheme.) On 2 February, an audience of 1,725, far more than customary even for a pianist's début, witnessed the first recital, but nothing (save anticipation and carefully structured public relations) had prepared the audience for the brilliance of the slight young woman dressed in a simple pale blue dress. The press wrote sizzling reviews that echoed the enthusiasm of all. Each recital was met with a similar frenzied enthusiasm and Jeanne was almost mobbed after each one by people clamouring for an autograph or a closer glimpse.

However, this was only the start of Dupré's real plan. He began to solicit performance opportunities abroad as the borders were again open (dates being meticulously planned for this eventuality). One of the first was arranged for 26 February 1947, Demessieux's London début at Westminster Cathedral. (NB:



Jeanne Demessieux at the console of La Madeleine in 1967

readers will note an inconsistency here with Felix Aprahamian's biographical notes which incorrectly note her London début as a recital for the Organ Music Society on 13 March of that year). Soon invitations poured in... everyone wanted to hear this phenomenon.

Dupré now planned to launch Jeanne in America; he knew she had all the qualities (not just the musical ones) that could make her a big star. However, this idea did not appeal to Jeanne and she flatly refused even to entertain it. This was the first time she had disagreed with Dupré on any matter: a silent seed of dissension was sown.

Jeanne saw Dupré off for his tour of America. However, after his return he never spoke to her again, brutally severing all contact with her. Often referred to in France as '*La Rupture*', it was a huge scandal, the exact reasons not being known. Of course, there have been

many who wished to unearth salacious coffee-shop gossip, but the exact reason was never even known by Jeanne herself. She made numerous approaches to Dupré for an explanation; each met with a cold, concrete silence. Once her sister, more argumentative by nature, confronted Dupré in the Conservatoire; he merely pushed her aside and walked on. Although Jeanne never discussed the matter, she was devastated and once said had it not been for her family she would never have survived this period. However, there were those around her who actually felt it was for the good – she was developing into a strong person in her own right, and she was unlikely to be able to remain in anyone's shadow for long. In the years that followed her individuality and independence became acute; as did the fact that she found it very hard ever to trust people again. Still, Jeanne never lost her admiration and respect for

Dupré's artistic greatness: she never spoke a word against him. In fact in 1950, she contributed an article *The Art of Marcel Dupré* to *Revue Études* in which she espoused his remarkable genius. As all parties are long since gone, evidence can be discussed more easily, and to gain a better understanding of the whole issue, read Lynn Cavanagh's excellent articles (see below); they contain (and reveal) many fascinating insights.

The fact remains that rivalry between Parisian organists was fierce. There were two definite sides on the (battle) field; Dupré (representing the lineage of Widor and Guilmant, and of the virtuoso school) versus André Marchal, determined to establish more Baroque ideals. 'Dupré and Marchal are enemies to the death' said Bernard Gavoty. Demessieux was quite probably seen as a pawn to be used in the battle and so the Parisian organ world turned against her. There were even tales citing rivalry between Jeanne and another Dupré pupil, Rolande Falcinelli, whom he now appeared to favour. Such claims are entirely fictitious. Both women were good and respectful friends and had different motivation and character. Jeanne Demessieux had 'star-quality' and thirsted for performance, whilst Rolande Falcinelli was interested in academia and was less extrovert in temperament.

Outside France, Demessieux enjoyed a celebrity few have ever matched, yet she remained absolutely dedicated to her art. When she eventually visited the USA (1953, 1955 & 1958) she generated unequalled enthusiasm from the majority, and jealousy from others envious of her success. However, she loathed the non-stop travelling and touring schedules and refused further invitations to perform there expressing concern at leaving her aging parents.

In England she enjoyed popularity in many spheres, giving numerous recitals in all the most important venues. She was even invited by the Queen to play the organ at her Coronation, playing solos as the dignitaries took their seats before the ceremony. Although the public's enthusiasm was great, a faction of British organists was challenged, if not irritated, by her brilliance. Dismissive in their reviews, they never got over their

fury at her flat refusal of their request that she 'audition' for them in 1947. The English reviews were thus the least generous internationally. The all-too-few recordings she made (many now reissued on CD by Festivo) attest to her exceptional artistry and expressive musicianship, far from that of an empty technician and speed-merchant.

Over the years Jeanne performed over 600 recitals throughout Europe and North America yet she still maintained her teaching schedule. At the start of her career she taught 25 hours a week in Paris and in 1950 she was appointed Professor of Organ at the Conservatoire in Nancy; in 1952, she was appointed to the same post in the Royal Conservatoire of Liège. However, she never became a 'fashionable' teacher; being a key representative of the French virtuoso school, she was largely out of favour.

In addition to composing, Jeanne took her role as a church organist very seriously, playing at Saint-Esprit for 29 years, until she went to the Madeleine. She felt strongly that the role of a liturgical organist was different to that of a concert performer, and she became an active member of the union to protect church musicians and the art they aimed to uphold. Even today, there are some in the parish of Saint-Esprit who remember the charm and humility with which she served, and how she often accompanied choir rehearsals with goodwill – merely to encourage the church's singers.

Jeanne was also passionately interested in organ building, admiring many diverse styles. She loved the great Baroque instruments, and had a particular affection for the famous Weingarten instrument. In England she greatly enjoyed the instruments in the Royal Albert Hall and Westminster Cathedral. Some years before her death, she was commissioned to undertake a major government project classifying organs throughout France. Her papers include a considerable dossier on numerous instruments throughout the country.

Despite her fame elsewhere, for many years she felt somewhat disowned by her own country, so winning a *Grand Prix du Disque* in 1960 for her now famous Franck recordings was of particular

significance to her. In 1962 she was made a Chevalier of the Order of the Crown of Belgium. It was also in this year that her adored father died.

Poulenc and Messiaen were among the distinguished musicians who were fervent admirers of her work, both as a virtuoso musician and as a composer. Messiaen spoke of the '*parfum unique*' of her works, and he often invited her to be on the jury for the exams in his analysis class at the Conservatoire, such was his respect for her as a musician. Messiaen considered her performances of his works to be outstanding, and for years she was one of his most brilliant champions. In the early 1960s he agreed that she should record his (then) complete works; unfortunately the project was never begun owing to contractual issues.

The question must be asked what would have happened had the rift between Dupré and Demessieux never arisen? We will never know; however it is certain that the organ world would have been very different. Demessieux's life followed its path, but she never got over the trauma of Dupré turning against her. Romantically, her hopes of marriage to Jean Berveiller crumbled when he opted for someone else – another devastation. Her constant battle with frail health and cancer was another burden – she underwent many energy-sapping operations and it is remarkable to think she was often up and touring only days after some of these. On one occasion she required an operation on her throat during one of her USA visits, but carried on playing! By the time she recorded some works for the Ryemuse LP celebrating the then new organ in Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral, she was seriously ill, ravaged by cancer.

The sadness of spirit so apparent to those who knew and met her in her last

years was undoubtedly the result of these numerous events. Jeanne had even begun to resent the demands that music had made on her life – the lack of a fun-filled childhood haunted her, the solitary hours demanded by her career (and its preparation) began to cloud her smiles.

Jeanne was survived by her mother and sister, and by Dupré. Both Montpellier and Aigues-Mortes have honoured her in recent years, both towns now having an 'Avenue Jeanne Demessieux'. Pierre Labric, one of her pupils and most loyal friends, has beautifully said of her 'in her most glorious triumphs Jeanne Demessieux never departed from her natural simplicity which gave her so much charm. The glory gave her an aura without ever affecting her. The international press, much more than in France, admired her without any reserve and discovered in her an exceptional person, who was already a legend in her own lifetime'.

Further reading

The Legend of Jeanne Demessieux D'Arcy Trinkwon: an article discussing in details aspects of her career, personality and life. *The Diapason* (USA), November 2008

Lynn Cavanagh *The Rise and Fall of a Famous Collaboration: Marcel Dupré and Jeanne Demessieux*, *The Diapason* (USA), July 2005

Many of her recordings have been reissued on CD on Festivo: www.festivo.nl. A recording of Demessieux's complete works is being released this month by Aeolus, performed by Stephen Tharp: www.aeolus-music.com

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One of the distinguished concert organists of his generation, D'Arcy is Vice-President of *Les Amis de Jeanne Demessieux*. He has made a particular study of her life and works, and given numerous performances worldwide. Renowned for his mastery of an almost unlimited repertoire, he performs worldwide in international festivals and concert series and his reputation has been built almost exclusively on live performances (for further information see www.darcytrinkwon.com). On Monday 17 November, D'Arcy performs a concert *Homage to Jeanne Demessieux* at All Souls, Langham Place, London W1.