

CHAPTER 1

Childhood and Early Education (1907-1930)

Birth at La Fontenelle, February 15, 1907

In the year nineteen hundred and seven, the sixteenth of February at four o'clock in the afternoon, certified by Pierre Mazure, Mayor and Supervisor of the Civil Registry for the community of La Fontenelle, district of Antrain, Ille-et-Vilaine, Jean Langlais, stonemason, twenty-six years old, a resident of the village of La Fontenelle, appeared before us and presented a male child born yesterday, the fifteenth of February, at half past eleven o'clock in the evening to him, he attested, and to Flavie Canto, seamstress, twenty-four years old, his wife, living with him, and to said infant he attested to giving the first names of Jean, François, Hyacinthe.

These declarations and this presentation are witnessed by François Canto, cart-maker, twenty-eight years old, and by Arsène Gaignon, teacher, fifty years old, both residents of La Fontenelle. The father and the witnesses signed the present birth certificate with me after it had been read to them.

This is an excerpt of the official birth certificate of Jean-François-Hyacinthe Langlais, which unequivocally documents the date, time, and place of Jean Langlais' birth: February 15, 1907, 11:00 pm, at La Fontenelle, France. His parents were Jean Langlais, 26, stonemason; and Flavie Canto, 24, seamstress.

Where is La Fontenelle? It's a small village in the very northern part of the province of Brittany, just two miles from Normandy, and only about twelve from the famous Mont Saint-Michel. The name of Langlais' village, La Fontenelle, refers to a little fountain at the rear of the community called "Saint-Samson fountain" and which never ran dry; local lore had it that its waters were miraculous. And it's true that in this village—as elsewhere in Brittany—legends, beliefs, and superstitions mingled freely with Roman Catholic religion.

At the time of Jean Langlais' birth, La Fontenelle had the charm of a traditional little rural market town, with its somber granite houses and slate roofs. At the center of the village was the parish close, considered to be sacred by the villagers. This impressive grouping included the cemetery, the Calvary (an outside crucifix that was treated as a shrine), and the church, the entirety surrounded by a low stone wall. The whole center of the village is gone now, as

in most villages in Brittany, and the cemetery was moved outside the town later in the twentieth century—but this was the community that Jean Langlais knew as a child. The church with its Calvary is striking for its large size, the result of many eras of building from the twelfth to the nineteenth centuries:



Saint-Samson Church in La Fontenelle and its “Calvaire”
Figure 1. (photograph and collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

Family Life

The condition of the Langlais family when little Jean was born can be summarized in one word: poverty. Jean and Flavie Langlais, who were married in 1906, rented from their relatives a house abutting the cemetery at the back of the church. They shared this house with Flavie’s parents:



Birthplace of Jean Langlais in La Fontenelle
Figure 2. (photograph and collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

The Canto couple lived in the right-hand portion of the house, while Jean and Flavie made do with a single room that had a packed-earth floor (in the foreground of the photograph). The granite chimney served the kitchen, and their diet essentially consisted of bread soaked in vegetable soup. In the winter, chestnuts enriched the meager daily meals, and on feast-days some seafood, such as fresh sardines and shellfish from the nearby ocean, was added to this frugal everyday fare. There was, of course, no running water in the village, and Jean Langlais never forgot the weight of the buckets filled to the brim which he had to bring from the Saint-Samson fountain, 550 yards from the family home.

Four children were to be born in the home of Jean and Flavie Langlais: Jean, the eldest, in 1907; then the only daughter, Flavie, in 1915; and later Louis (1920) and Henri (1925). Almost twenty years separated the eldest from the youngest. Following tradition, the first son was named for his father and the first daughter for her mother.



Jean and Flavie Langlais, 1906

Figure 3. (collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

In his “Souvenirs,”¹ Jean Langlais painted a detailed picture the family:

I didn’t know my paternal grandparents well. My grandmother, Joséphine Lemarchand, was an admirable saintly woman. She had eight children, six girls and two boys, of whom my father was the elder. She died when I was very young, and unfortunately I have very few memories of her. On the other hand, I was present at the death of my paternal grandfather in 1910. Attending him were my mother and my Aunt Valentine, my father’s youngest sister, and I remember these two women perfectly, sitting next to the dying man who couldn’t die. Together the women fervently read the prayers for the dying out loud. I heard my grandfather’s last sigh, and then, as tradition dictates, they had me embrace him. I was only three years old and yet I remember it as if it were yesterday.

¹ Jean Langlais, “Souvenirs,” recorded on 60 minute audio cassettes in 1977, intended for his three grand-sons; these recollections, held by Marie-Louise Langlais, are a veritable goldmine of spontaneous information. They will be cited frequently as Langlais, “Souvenirs” as we recount the life of Jean Langlais.

On my maternal side, my grandmother lived to be very old (she died at 87). She was born on March 25th, a date that was very dear to her because it was the feast of the Annunciation. For her whole life, she went from one washtub to another. During the “War of ’14” she washed the soldiers’ clothes at the hospital near Antrain. And to do this, she was on her knees all day long, with nothing in her stomach except a thin soup gulped down before leaving home. She had terribly swollen hands, but she never complained.

My maternal grandfather was a stonemason, and he also worked for one farm or another. He left home at five in the morning with the clay pipe that he smoked from the time he got out of bed. Naturally, as a stonemason, he always worked outside. It also shouldn’t be surprising that people like him needed alcohol—coffee without alcohol was unthinkable! Thus, before starting his day at a farm, my grandfather drank down a cup of coffee generously laced with calvados, an extremely strong apple brandy. After that, he worked until nightfall. He and my grandmother had three girls, of whom my mother was the youngest.

There’s no doubt that my parents’ wisdom and teaching had a huge influence on my future. My mother was a woman of unimaginable courage. In 1915, during the First World War, while my father was at the front, she—like her parents—went to work on farms, repairing the farmers’ clothes; and for this she earned ten sous per day. At this time she had three people to care for in addition to herself: my father, to whom she sent packages, my young sister, and me, all with ten sous per day.

And that is why, when she returned home after working on the farms, she started another day’s work: sewing for her personal clientele. And there we shared wonderful times together, she and I. She used to buy the cheapest wood shavings from the clog-maker, and she lit the fire (which hardly warmed me, I must say); and as for me, I was in charge of maintaining the hearth and throwing in handfuls of shavings from time to time. During this time she sang songs, sewed, told me stories, and when we were put to bed she read me stories, which of course enchanted me. That is, she had unfailing devotion, not only to fill the material needs of her family, but also to think of my mental development; for to read me stories—often at midnight, when she was falling over from exhaustion and had to get up the next day at six—that was truly the stuff of heroism. This life could have killed a bull, but not a courageous woman!

Blindness



Jean Langlais at age two

Figure 4. (photograph A. Henry, Paris, collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

At Jean Langlais' birth, nothing suggested that he would soon become totally and incurably blind. However, from the age of six months the first symptoms of a terrible illness, congenital infantile glaucoma, appeared: the infant rubbed his red and crying eyes, turning his head away from the slightest light, to the point that his mother covered the windows with thick curtains. Soon the interior pressure in the eyes increased so much that it literally caused an explosion inside the eyes, in a surge of intense pain. Henceforth he could no longer distinguish what was around him, no longer even differentiating day from night. His parents tried, with little hope, to fight against this fateful event, going so far as to spend their meager means to consult an eye surgeon at the hospital in Rennes. An operation was attempted. It failed.

Since medicine seemed powerless, the mother turned towards God: on a beautiful day in 1909, carrying her two-year-old on her back, she undertook the trip to the little town near Pleine-Fougères on foot and with an empty stomach, as tradition dictated—that is, she walked fifteen miles a day for nine days in a row. The tomb of the beloved Father Bachelot was there. Popular faith had it that if one simply embraced his tombstone, one would heal. Little Jean repeated the gesture nine times, in vain. Many years later, when the composer, who was an ardent believer, would be asked why he never went to the Marian sanctuary at Lourdes, famous for its miraculous cures, he would reply:

If I had been sighted like everyone else, I would have inevitably followed my father as stonemason. One has to believe that the Virgin Mary had other plans for me, which included blindness. May her wishes be fulfilled.²

At La Fontenelle, Jean and Flavie Langlais had to accept the harsh reality of their little son's blindness, and they constantly faced the clumsy sympathy of their neighbors:

Today, they say that you should be careful about what you say in front of a child. But how many times did I hear someone say to my parents, right in front of me, "It would have been better if he had lost an arm or a leg rather than his vision." It pained me to hear such words throughout my childhood, and I developed an inferiority complex that I'm sure I'll retain until death.³

Usually the family of a blind child makes a choice between two strategies, both equally bad: overprotection, or the opposite (and happily rarer), rejection of the handicapped person. Jean Langlais' parents, however, were to adopt a third choice, dictated by their instincts and their intelligence: they made it their business to teach independence to this blind child who was to become a composer and an autonomous man for his whole life.

At the beginning, they held his hand so that he would not bump into the furniture, then little by little they let him explore his universe on his own; the child therefore established landmarks in the house, knowing where the table was compared to the armoire, to the bed. To be sure, he used his hands for this, but also his hearing, listening to where something he held in his hand fell, or locating a voice and moving towards it. Similarly, he differentiated

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

between the packed earth of the family room and the gravel of the road that passed his house. With the tip of his foot, he sought the border of the sidewalk, the corner of the wall, and—more and more—got bolder and acted as if he saw.

He later said:

I can say that my early years were happy. Instead of emphasizing my blindness, my mother treated me as if I were normal. Thus, when she had need of a roll of string, or of needles, she sent me to get them at the village store; I found out later that she followed me to be sure that I would find the door without incident, but she never told me. I wasn't afraid of anything: I rode a bicycle by myself, I climbed trees. I remember that I went all the way to the top of the tallest ones at full speed, much to everyone's dismay! Vertigo was unknown to me at the time. I think that I was considered a phenomenon in the countryside. I went alone to mass and to catechism class, alone to school as well. From the age of six I went to public school like my sighted friends. They were very kind to me, as well. Unfortunately, the teacher took little interest in my kind. Naturally, he knew nothing of writing in Braille, and I remember that he sat me at the back of the class. I could only understand history and oral mathematics. I was very strong in mental calculations, as well. When there was a reading, of course I listened, but I must admit that when I entered the National Institute for the Young Blind at the age of ten, I didn't know how to read or write.

My maternal grandmother, who was as illiterate as I, learned to read in 1914 in order to teach me my catechism. She was a marvelous woman, deeply religious, who told me fantastical stories from the popular tradition—but also the lives of the saints.

Another remarkable woman brightened my early childhood: my cousin Marie Langlais, with whom I spent my days while my mother worked at the farms. This cousin had received her primary school certificate, the only such female in the village, and I owe much happiness to her. She taught me so many things and loved me so without making a show of it; a May 10th, her birthday, never goes by without my thinking of her. The unfortunate woman died at the age of 29 from tuberculosis.

From the time I could go to school, I had lots of friends, and I think that in the realm of games, nothing distinguished me from them. I especially remember being very good at hoops! One of my favorite places at the time was... the cemetery, whose gate was only fifty feet from our house. I climbed to the top of the Calvary, and jumped with feet together from one tomb to another. It seemed natural to me, and in no way blasphemous. It should be said that our mother always taught us to be familiar with death and the dead.⁴

The reality in Brittany was that death was part of daily experience. Epidemics, wars, shipwrecks, and famines had taught the tough people to think of it constantly. But even if the idea of death was familiar to the people of Brittany, its physical image filled them with terror: it was Ankou, the skeleton with his scythe and disturbing cortege of apparitions, the announcements of imminent death seen in the unexpected omens of a crow or a particular pattern of smoke coming out of a chimney.

In La Fontenelle, the people were firm believers in the existence of Ankou and his apparitions, and during the long evenings they of course often recounted the sinister stories in front of the little blind boy who, truly shocked, remembered them forever. Nevertheless, he wasn't really afraid, because he knew that heaven was at the end of the road. His grandmother had told him so, and she had painted a marvelous picture of a paradise filled

⁴ Ibid.

with thick, soft carpets, compared to their miserable packed earth. The child protested, “But grandmother, the carpets must be worn out, with all the people who walk on them in Paradise!” The grandmother replied decisively, “Paradise’s carpets don’t wear out because the Good Lord doesn’t *want* them to.” Thus religion was powerful for the people of Brittany, so afflicted with hardships. The Langlais family were strong believers; they went to church faithfully, never missed the Stations of the Cross, processions, or the Marian devotions of the Month of May. On Sundays, everyone gathered for the high mass at ten o’clock. There one sang the masses by Henri Du Mont, but also French hymns, like the famous “Sainte Anne, O Bonne Mère,” with its eloquent text:

Sainte-Anne, ô bonne mère,
Toi que nous implorons,
Entends notre prière
Et bénis tes Bretons.

*Saint Anne, oh good mother
You whom we implore
Hear our prayer
And bless your Bretons*

Until they had made their first communion, the children were supposed to attend Vespers with the women. Almost all the men demurred, except for the truly devout. Obviously, no one worked on Sunday, and the rector formally forbade it. In this connection, we should note ecclesiastical terminology idiosyncratic to Brittany: the principal priest serving a parish was always called “rector” (*recteur*), which is to say the one who leads, while the vicar was called “curate” (*curé*), he who takes care of the parish.

In August of 1914, France declared war, and the father of the Langlais family, mobilized immediately, left for the front as a stretcher-bearer. In the first days of the war, word came of the death of uncle Louis, the brother of Jean senior, and many sons of La Fontenelle lost their lives in the carnage.

On May 20, 1915, Flavie Langlais gave birth to a daughter, Flavie, baptized two days later, following tradition. Time moved on, and we arrive at 1916. Little Jean is now nine, and a photograph from the time taken for the father, still in the nursing corps on the front lines, shows the child beside his mother and his little sister:



Jean Langlais, his mother and sister Flavie, 1916
Figure 5. (collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

The question of his future was becoming more and more insistent, but what could the mother do, barely able to feed her family with a husband at the front?

It was here that providence intervened in the form of a distant uncle, the commandant Jules Langlais. A singular figure, this officer began his military career as a simple soldier in Indochina, rose to the level of commandant by force of his courage, but ended his career as a captain, preferring to give up a stripe rather than obey the chain of command. Transferred to Paris, he acquired influential connections and soon took an interest in his young nephew, whose personality and vivacious spirit weren't lost on him. He advised his cousin Flavie to send little Jean to the best French school for the blind, the National Institute for the Young Blind in Paris (Institut National des Jeunes Aveugles de Paris).

The only problem, but a major one, was how could Flavie Langlais, with her meager income, pay the annual expenses of the school? Captain Langlais swept away this objection and arranged for a scholarship for his nephew. As for the 270 francs needed for ancillary expenses (sheets, towels, uniforms, shoes, and clothing), he paid them out of his own pocket. Jean Langlais thus returned to school, not in La Fontenelle but in Paris, in November of 1917, the date of the re-opening of the Institute. Closed to students during the first three years of the war, it had served as a military infirmary for the wounded.

At this moment when the young boy is entering a totally new phase of his life, a question that we have not yet addressed becomes obvious: what role had music played during his first years? The answer is: practically none. Except for the songs that his mother sang to him or that he heard at church, little Jean Langlais knew no music at all. He didn't know how to read music or play any instrument.

The only organ that he had ever heard, that of the church in Antrain (the main town in the district, a little over a mile from La Fontenelle) literally terrified him. In an instant, he thought that a storm, with its thunder and lightening, was pummeling his head. And this was only a modest rural organ. Certainly the dull harmonium at La Fontenelle, under the clumsy fingers of Father Jules, the local blacksmith who had been promoted to organist, wasn't what sowed the seeds of a musical vocation in the child. In starting down the path of the Institute for the Young Blind in Paris, ten-year-old Jean Langlais couldn't read or write and knew nothing about music, but he was endowed with a rock-solid faith and the kind of knowledge that was communicated orally by his loved ones.

Never will he forget the heritage of his birthplace.

L'Institut National des Jeunes Aveugles⁵ à Paris

Thursday, November 9, 1917. The young Jean Langlais, ten years old, walks through the gates, intimidated, into the courtyard of this venerable Institute located at 56 Boulevard des Invalides in Paris.

⁵ The National Institute for the Young Blind.



The National Institute for the Young Blind in Paris

Figure 6. (photograph and collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

It is worth recounting the history, sometimes difficult, of a modest school created as a charitable gesture that was transformed into one of the most important places in Paris for musical instruction. On the eve of the French Revolution, in 1784, Valentin Haüy founded the first school for blind children in Paris, l’Institution Royale des Jeunes Aveugles. During the Revolution, the Constitutional Assembly decided to keep it, giving it legal status as a national public establishment in 1791. Its location was moved to a place so unhealthy and dilapidated (the “Quinze-Vingts” hospital) that according to doctors at the time, “they’re dying there like flies.”⁶

It wasn’t until 1843 that the great poet Alfred de Lamartine, at the time a Deputy, outraged at the unsanitary places that he saw during a visit, made a vigorous public protest in the Chamber of Deputies. His action proved effective and a new building was constructed on the spacious site where it still stands today. It was high time, and as the director, Dufau, reported at the time,

Since moving to the Boulevard des Invalides, the number of student deaths was reduced by half.⁷

In the meantime, a huge event in 1825 had turned the world of the blind upside-down: the invention by Louis Braille, only 16 years old, of a system of notation with raised dots, allowing the blind, with their highly developed sense of touch, to read and write literature, mathematics, and music as fast as a sighted person. The introduction of this brilliant system was to give the teachers at the Institute the means for real instruction, and one of these teachers, Gabriel Gauthier, who was born blind in 1808 into a farming family, quickly

⁶ A communication from the Chambre des Députés as reported in *Le Moniteur*, 1 March 1832. 614.

⁷ Pierre-Armand Dufau. *Notice historique, statistique et descriptive sur l’Institution Nationale des Jeunes Aveugles de Paris*. Paris: Concierge de l’Institution, 1852. 28.

understood the professional importance of church music to the blind: a well taught blind person could make money by becoming a parish organist, a position where one could get, in addition to the fees for accompanying the religious services, money for giving private lessons in piano, organ, and other instruments.

Thus organ study came to be at the center of the education of the students, and under the direction of excellent teachers such as Gabriel Gauthier and Louis Lebel, this resulted in the blossoming of numerous artists, especially organists such as Adolphe Marty, Albert Mahaut, and Louis Vierne, future organist of Notre Dame in Paris.

In 1847, there were 30 blind organists in Paris and the other major cities in France, and some of them occupied prestigious Parisian organ lofts: Louis Braille at Saint-Vincent-de Paul and then at Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs, Charles Boissant at Les Invalides, Gabriel Moncouteau at Saint-Germain-des-Prés, and Gabriel Gauthier at Saint-Étienne-du-Mont.

In 1886, Adolphe Marty, César Franck's first blind student, won a memorable first prize in organ in Franck's class at the Paris Conservatory. The magazine *Le Valentin Haüy* devoted an article to this event:

A student from the National Institute for the Young Blind in Paris, Mr. Adolphe Marty, has just won the First Prize in organ at the Paris Conservatory in the class of Mr. César Franck. The jury, chaired by Mr. Ambroise Thomas⁸ and including some of the best organists in Paris, showed its satisfaction in awarding the first prize to the blind contestant, and his sighted fellow students, older than he, were ranked well after him. The program for the examination, very difficult, consisted of performing a large work, improvising a scholastic fugue (*fugue d'école*)⁹ and a piece in free form, as well as accompanying plainchant in four voices in florid counterpoint¹⁰.

In 1888, the first prize in organ was awarded for the first time to a woman, Joséphine Boulay; she was 19 and was blind. The next year, the other blind pupil Albert Mahaut won a first. We should also note César Franck's devotion to blind organists, as Mahaut emphasized in his reminiscences about his mentor:

Franck loved our school. He wrote one of his works for us and dedicated it to us; it was for choir, organ, and orchestra: *Psalm 150, "Louez le Dieu caché,"* which was performed at the school in a memorable concert on March 17, 1883 for the dedication of the new Cavallé-Coll organ (34 stops on three manuals). It was in our chapel that he himself conducted one of the very first performances of his *Mass in A*, which today is so famous. Our choirs outdid themselves in his presence and under his direction that was so magnetic. Already we owe the best of our aspirations to him.

And further on he continues:

He improved my counterpoint and fugue writing, and when he decided I was ready, in October of 1888, I joined his organ class at the Conservatory. An unforgettable year when three times a week I felt myself grow from contact with the master. He started his class at eight o'clock, usually arriving on foot, always punctual, even if he had stayed

⁸ The opera composer Ambroise Thomas (1811-1896) was then the Director of the Paris Conservatory.

⁹ A "fugue d'école" is a fugue written according to quite strict rules developed at the Paris Conservatory, beginning in the early nineteenth century. The classic text is: André Gédalge, *Traité de la fugue*. Paris: Enoch, 1901; English translation, Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1965.

¹⁰ *Le Valentin Haüy*, July 1886; this newspaper was named for the founder of what was to become the Institute for The Young Blind and was concerned primarily with issues relating to the blind.

up late the night before (and he always stayed up late), or if he had returned from a trip that very morning. How short his class seemed to us!... The master was amazingly good for all his students. He encouraged me, he loved to show me off, and when he was to have a notable visitor, he always contacted me: “Come tomorrow,” he would write, “and bring your tools.” That’s what he called the device for writing in Braille. I went, armed with my “tools”; he himself would dictate a plainchant which I accompanied in florid counterpoint. Deprived of my left hand, which was busy reading the Braille text, I substituted with a double-pedal part, and I got along fine with this test, playing the bass with the left foot, the tenor with the right foot, and the two upper parts with the right hand.¹¹

This excerpt helps us better understand the immense devotion that the blind organists always had for César Franck and his works.

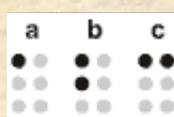
After Franck’s death in 1890, five blind organists received first prizes at the Paris Conservatory, between 1894 and 1915: Louis Vierne (1894), student of Widor; Augustin Barié (1906), student of Guilmant; Rémy Clavers (1912), André Marchal (1913), and Cécile Joseph (1915), all students of Gigout. What better proof could there be of the great value of the instruction at the National Institute for the Young Blind than all of these young people being crowned at the Conservatory?

Little Jean was a long way from all of this when he passed through the gates of the school, accompanied by his mother. He had a heavy heart at the thought of being separated from her and finding himself alone in the midst of strangers, boys from ten to twenty years old, partly or totally blind, in the closed world of the boarding school where blindness was the norm. Fortunately, his optimistic and vigorous spirit helped overcome this tribulation, and from the fourth day after his matriculation he found a life-long friend in the person of André Bourgoïn, as tall and robust as he was short and frail.

What exactly did they teach at the Institute in 1917? Actually, the curriculum was more or less the same as that established in 1784 by Valentin Haüy at the foundation of the school: professional, musical, and intellectual instruction.

Music was in first place, since besides obligatory piano, the pupils had to study a second instrument that allowed them to play in the orchestra. Every student in the music division began with three years of solfège, followed by three years of harmony and two of composition. Only after the first two cycles were completed could the student begin to study the organ. In addition, unless one had a special dispensation, everyone was required to learn a trade, having a choice among among recaning chairs, turning wood, or repairing and tuning pianos.

Obviously, at the center of learning was the study of the Braille alphabet, which is based on a grid of only six dots, variously disposed within a rectangle :



¹¹ Albert Mahaut. *L'Œuvre d'orgue de César Franck*. Paris: INJA, 1923. 16.

With arrangements of these six embossed dots, Braille created 63 different symbols to represent all the letters of the alphabet, not just simple letters, but accented vowels, diphthongs, punctuation, numbers, and mathematical symbols. And as an excellent musician, Braille did not neglect his own art, to which his system was perfectly adaptable, as Pierre Villey, the great and blind intellectual, explained:

The most invaluable of these uses of Braille is musical notation in raised dots. The system's sixty-three characters are sufficient for all the demands of musical notation, and today a piece of any sort of music can be transcribed without omitting the slightest symbol... At the least, "sight-reading" is possible for singing, for which the hands are otherwise unoccupied, and to a great extent also on the organ, where the left hand follows the music while the right hand plays it, assisted by the pedals. Further, since memorizing is the law of the blind, musical notation in raised dots gives the blind person at least the possibility of learning other than by ear, without outside help and especially if he is not blessed with an exceptional ear. This is what has allowed the blind the place in the musical world that they have already claimed for a long time.¹²

Villey also debunks received wisdom about the compensation of the senses:

People glibly think that the surviving senses of a blind person are more acute than those of the sighted. That's how one generally understands the compensation of the senses. Mssrs. Griesbach and Kunz have made some thousands of clinical observations on this subject.¹³ They concluded that:

- The ability to distinguish tactile differences is the same among the blind and the sighted; the difference in perception is more in favor of the sighted;
 - The blind smell less well on the tip of the index finger than the sighted (even though the index finger is the reading finger for the blind, therefore the one most used);
 - There is no difference between the blind and sighted, neither in terms of localizing sounds, nor the acuity of hearing (for sounds made at a distance).
- Thus it is firmly established that the senses of the blind are not superior in acuity to those of the sighted.

So let us reject once and for all this false notion that the blind have a "sixth sense," a sort of providential and mystical gift by which Nature (or God?) compensates the victims. On the contrary, let us admire their formidable strength of concentration and attention, as well as their ability to use their memory -- tactile, auditory, and intellectual. That's the key; just watch a blind person walk down the street alone: on the lookout, attentive, all senses in play to avoid obstacles.

At the National Institute for the Young Blind, there was always a schedule that was completely full and minutely regulated, from getting up to going to bed. Here is the schedule for an average day in 1917:¹⁴

5:30 am	Wake-up bell
5:30 to 6:10	Wash
6:10	Class in sacred history
7:10	Clean-up of the dormitory and making of beds
7:30	Breakfast in the refectory: soup and a 2 oz. round of bread

¹² Pierre Villey. *Le Monde des aveugles, essai de psychologie*. Paris: Corti, 1984. 38. (First published in 1914).

¹³ One can find the articles by Griesbach in Pflüger's Archiv, 74:577-638, 75:365-426, 523-573, under the title, "Vergleichende Untersuchungen über die Sinneschärfe Blinder und Sehender."

¹⁴ This list is based on the reminiscences of André Bourgoïn recorded on cassette by the author in 1982.

7:45	Break
8:00	Class (practice in Braille and verb conjugations)
9:55	Break
10:05	Class (reading)
12:00 pm	Lunch in the refectory, with another 2 oz. round of bread
12:30	Recess in the courtyard
1:30	Class (music)
3:30	Break and snack of another round of bread (with nothing else)
4:00	Class or study
7:00	Dinner in the refectory (with a fourth 2 oz. round of bread)
7:30	Break
8:00	Lights out

This routine applied to every day of the week except Thursday and Sunday, because on those days there were, in addition, Mass at 8:30 and Vespers on Sunday afternoon. Today, we fret about the intensity of school life imposed on young people, but what would people say about ten hours of class daily and 5:30 a.m. rising, inflicted on children ten years old?

The school year of 1917–1918 was, however, almost completely lost because of the enormous disruptions of the war. “Big Bertha” fired ceaselessly on Paris.¹⁵ A shell even landed in the Saint-François-Xavier Place, 200 meters from the school. Often the alarms went off two or three times during the night, and the barely-dressed children had to take cover in the cellars of the Institute. The school year of 1918 was shortened by a month because of the bombardments. To make matter worse, during these last months of the war little Jean Langlais was attacked by a potentially lethal disease, Spanish influenza, from which he miraculously recovered.¹⁶

But to return to musical studies at the Institute. All the students were required to study solfège, piano, and an orchestral instrument chosen according to their physical aptitude. Thus André Bourgoïn was assigned the oboe, Jean Langlais the violin. For piano and the assigned instrument (organ came later in the pedagogical plan), the pupils were grouped into seven divisions, going from the beginning level and moving up through seven years of study, but numbered in ascending order (division seven was the first year of study, etc.).

If no division was repeated, one arrived in the eighth year at the “supplemental” division, and then at the “division of honor.” After that one was “outside the divisions,” which is to say outside the juried system. Theoretically, students were admitted at the age of ten and remained at the Institute until twenty. The exams were at the end of each trimester: in January, before Easter, and in July, this last being the annual end-of-year competition. Starting with the fourth division, every student had to play in the orchestra, which gave four concerts a year, not counting those given for special occasions.

The building was divided into two sections, one for boys, one for girls, rigorously separated according to the rules in force in education in general; the girls only joined the boys for religious services and choral rehearsals or concerts. For orchestral rehearsals and concerts the girls and boys sat on opposite sides of the chapel (now Salle André Marchal). All of the teachers in all disciplines were blind, unlike the members of the administration.

¹⁵ “Big Bertha” was the nickname for the huge German howitzers that bombarded Paris during World War I, said to be named for Bertha Krupp, elder daughter of and heiress to the German weapons manufacturer Friedrich Krupp.

¹⁶ About 165,000 died from this pandemic in France, the most lethal in the XXth century.

The students, who wore uniforms, had little leisure time; during the years 1917 and 1918, authorized excursions were limited to once a month and only on a Sunday afternoon. Nevertheless, Langlais had fond memories of the educational enterprise in these quasi-military conditions:

This school was admirably run. They gave us our schedule hour by hour, and all we had to do was follow it...

At the beginning of school in 1918 we were in the joy of the armistice, and that gave us wings, but my first good memories were my Sunday outings: I went to visit my uncle, commandant Jules Langlais, who lived in the rue de la Glacière. He came to get me at the school and brought me to lunch at his place.

I had oysters there, something that had never happened to me in Brittany, because that was much too expensive.¹⁷

Starting with his first year at the Institute, Jean Langlais followed a daily regimen of two-and-a-half hours of music per day with one hour of solfège, quarter-hour lessons in piano and violin, and an hour-long private harmony lesson at one of the two small practice organs at the Institute.

He always realized how much he owed to his piano teacher, Maurice Blazy, a friend of Louis Vierne, a fine musician, and a cultivated man, who later could connect him with first-rate outside people, such as the pianist Lazare Lévy.¹⁸

His instrumental teacher, Rémy Clavers, was in charge of violin instruction. He had received a first prize in Gigout's organ class at the Conservatory, was equally comfortable playing piano, organ, and violin, in harmony with the Institute's goal of not creating specialists, but rather, fully formed musicians ready to be disseminated throughout France.

André Bourgoïn remembers:

In the second year we knew how to read and write in Braille, and we were moved up to the teachers of "intellectual" content: French, mathematics, history, and geography. We had a big anthology of literature, and we read, in short excerpts, the prose writers and the great classics. We did a summary each trimester, and a dictation every month, with spelling less than stellar! We read very few books. In any case, we were very mixed in terms of age, because 15-year old boys — that is to say, much older than we were— began school at the same time that we did.¹⁹

But the teacher whom Jean Langlais remembered as the most influential on him, was unquestionably Albert Mahaut, who had won a first prize in César Franck's Conservatory class.

I've always retained unbounded admiration for Albert Mahaut. Just think about the fact that he played Franck's complete organ works at the Trocadéro in 1896 in a single concert, more than two and a half hours of music, and Mahaut was blind! He was the first to accomplish this feat, and I doubt that many organists have done the same thing since!

I'll never forget the harmonic language taught by Monsieur Mahaut (and that's what I've always called him). It was something transcendent: everything was explained

¹⁷ Langlais, "Souvenirs."

¹⁸ Also known as Lazare-Lévy (1882-1964), influential French pianist, organist, composer and pedagogue.

¹⁹ Bourgoïn tapes, 1982.

orally, without reference to a textbook. We had to do one exercise per day and play it by heart on the harmonium.

Monsieur Mahaut had his own style of teaching: he explained something once, then he asked if anyone failed to understand. If that was the case, he explained it again. Then he never mentioned the issue again. Thus, you had to follow his explanations very carefully. Obviously, with this kind of regimen, we had a lot of technique, somewhat akin to the pianists who play scales every day.

At the end of the first three years, when we previously had an hour to do our harmony exercises, we were given no more than ten minutes for them. I remember that my friends and I finished so fast that we used the remaining time to sight-read at the harmonium, each one with a hand on the 63 pieces from Franck's *L'Organiste*. Obviously, not everyone could maintain such a workload. Thus it was that we were 34 in the first year of solfège, and at the end of the harmony classes we were... three, which is to say that 31 pupils were left along the way, repeating classes (perhaps more than once), or dropping out altogether.²⁰



**Albert Mahaut playing the Cavallé-Coll organ
at the National Institute for the Young Blind in Paris**

Figure 7. (Valentin Hatty's Association Museum in Paris)

Once one began harmony class (at the age of 13 or 14), the schedule of music classes was more demanding, increasing to two hours each day of lessons and practice on each instrument, plus an hour at the harmonium to do harmony homework, not to mention learning liturgy through the obligatory participation in the choir directed by Adolphe Marty, three times a week between 5:00 and 6:00 in the afternoon. As he grew older, Langlais sang soprano, then tenor, then first bass!

I always worked with a genuine passion. My mother kept all my report cards from every trimester during my thirteen years of boarding school; the summary at the end of all of these documents was always the same: "A student who fully satisfies all of his teachers." I remember that in 1926, when I was really worn out, I only got second

²⁰ Langlais, "Souvenirs".

prizes in more or less everything. A second prize was not a bad thing, but because I had had so many firsts, my parents concluded that I had completely thrown the year away.²¹

Fortunately, there were vacations at La Fontenelle. There he rejoined his family and his familiar environment.



Jean Langlais at age 12, in the Institute's uniform, with his sister Flavie

Figure 8. (collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

To make up for the lack of a piano at home, his father bought a violin in 1923, for which he paid 12 francs.²² “More expensive than a cow,” his mother observed! And so the child played, dazzling those around him with his facility.

He even entered a competition: in a community not far from La Fontenelle, for a civic festival, an assistant to the mayor and member of the festival committee, thinking himself to be the only person in the area who could wield a bow, decided to organize a violin competition with a 25-franc prize, which he assumed he'd pocket. But Jean Langlais, on vacation, got wind of the event and showed up. Climbing up onto the stage, he pointedly removed a string from his instrument and on the remaining three played *La Berceuse de Jocelyn*, a favorite in the countryside. Of course he won first prize, but nevertheless had to share the 25 francs with the municipal organizer.²³

In 1923, Langlais was 16, and the first part of his education was finished: He had completed his three years of harmony with Albert Mahaut, simultaneously with the so-called “intellectual” courses, and could therefore dedicate himself completely to music, at a rate of

²¹ Ibid.

²² about \$12 today.

²³ This anecdote was related 15 years later by Pierre Cressar in *Ouest-Éclair*, May 15, 1941.

eleven hours a day! Judged to be exceptionally gifted, he was excused from learning a manual trade because his teachers had ambitions for him. Rémy Clavers especially saw him as a professional violinist. But the boy had other ideas and preferred to begin organ and composition studies with a barely 29 year-old teacher at the school, André Marchal, a match that would prove crucial to the rest of his life. Marchal, although a novice teacher, was already crowned with laurels: first prize in organ in Gigout's Conservatory class in 1913; he succeeded Augustin Barié (blind organist and composer who died at 31) as the chair of organ, improvisation, and composition at the Institute. He was then just 25.

In 1923, the year that Langlais joined his class, Marchal was very much in the public eye because of four organ concerts in the Berlioz auditorium at the Conservatory, dedicated to classic, romantic, modern repertory, concluding with the *Prelude and Fugue in B Major* by Marcel Dupré, published barely a year earlier. A rounded musician, interested in all eras and open to all styles, André Marchal gave the impression of being a sensitive performer, refined, the possessor of magical technique, a top-notch improviser, and notable for his keen sense of poetry and orchestral colors.

When Jean Langlais began learning organ with him, Marchal had at his disposal, for his teaching, the Institute's Cavaillé-Coll organ, a three-manual instrument built by Aristide Cavaillé-Coll in 1883–1884, and dedicated by César Franck in 1884.

With his new ideas about repertory and colors of the organ, André Marchal was one of the creators of a new aesthetic for the instrument, insisting on “neo-classicizing” the Institute's Cavaillé-Coll in 1926, a task entrusted to Auguste Convers, the new director of Charles Mutin's firm, which was the successor to the Cavaillé-Coll company.

In so doing, Marchal found himself in direct opposition to Marcel Dupré, who was firmly attached to Cavaillé-Coll and was the uncompromizing guardian of this aesthetic for his organ at Saint-Sulpice, which he obstinately refused to modify in any way during his tenure there. The two schools opposed each other, and Jean Langlais, still a beginning organist, very shortly found himself at the center of this aesthetic quarrel.

Much later, after Marchal's death in 1980, Jean Langlais paid homage to his first teacher:

His biggest artistic step was probably the tremendous assault that he launched against what one then called “The Tradition.” In 1922, at the age of 28, he presented a recital on the Paris Conservatory organ on which he played the Triptych in C by Johann Sebastian Bach in a uniquely personal way that, in spite of the delicacy of the registrations, created a big stir. This magisterial audacity was just at its beginnings. It continued with total independence throughout a long and beautiful career of one who was called “the blind man with the fingers of light...”²⁴

Returning to 1923: from his very first lessons with Marchal a special understanding was established between the young teacher and the adolescent. Right away, Marchal assigned pieces thought to be difficult, such as the “Dorian” Toccata by Bach.

²⁴ “Jean Langlais, organiste de Sainte-Clotilde de Paris,” *L'Orgue*, special issue: *Hommage à André Marchal*, ed. Norbert Dufourcq (1981): 57–58.

For pedal study, he used the work of his blind colleague, Adolphe Marty, *L'Art de la pédale*, while for keyboard technique he recommended the method of the Belgian organist, Jacques Lemmens, based on a rigorously legato touch.²⁵ Simultaneously with technique and repertory, Marchal taught his students improvisation. André Bourgoïn, 62 years later, still remembered the extraordinary progress that Langlais made from one lesson to the next, to such an extent that, beginning in 1925, Marchal would ask Langlais to substitute for him at Saint-Germain-des-Prés.



André Marchal at the Saint-Germain-des-Prés organ

Figure 9. (collection Jacqueline Englert-Marchal)

In addition to organ and improvisation, Langlais studied counterpoint and fugue with Marchal, and from 1923 regularly brought to his mentor his own compositions: little piano preludes or accompanied songs.

At the same time, he became part of the orchestra directed by Adolphe Marty, who made him first chair of the second violins. In this orchestra of blind players conducted by a blind leader (what a performance!), the young violinist gradually learned the repertoire. One day, since all the other second violinists were sick, he even had to carry his part alone in the andante and scherzo of the *Symphony in D Minor* by César Franck, one of Marty's favorite works.

Thus, patiently and methodically, at the price of intense work, Jean Langlais forged a rock-solid command of musical technique. His reputation within the Institute grew, and both teachers and students recognized in him a future professional, undoubtedly a future master.

²⁵ Adolphe Marty, *L'Art de la pédale du grand orgue, ouvrage contenant des gammes majeures, mineures, des exercices pour les octaves et l'indépendance des deux pieds*. Paris: Macker et Noël, 1891. Jacques-Nicolas Lemmens, *École d'orgue basée sur le plain chant romain*. Mainz: Schott, 1862.



Jean Langlais at age 18 (passport photograph)

Figure 10. (collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

But one day in February of 1926, an unexpected competitor from Nancy arrived at the Institute, the young Gaston Litaize, 17 years old, who remembers with an astounding wealth of detail his first encounter with Langlais, two years his elder:

I entered the Institution February 4, 1926, and after the traditional medical exams, I found myself at lunch in the dining hall. There were three tables: at one of them were 12 students who were distinguished from the group of the others by one or more stripes on their sleeves, a sign that they were inscribed on the Tablet of Honor. There were four or five "regents" with two stripes and a "dean" who had three. It was a kind of super Award of Excellence of the School. But when I entered the dining hall that day, the "dean" was none other than Jean Langlais.

Because I entered in the middle of the year, I had been put by the Administration in classes where there was space available. That's why I was not with Jean either for piano (I was in Bourdeau's studio and he was in Blazy's) or organ (I was with Marty, while Jean was with Marchal).

I have a very precise recollection of our first end-of-year competitions, which took place that year on July 5 and 6, 1926. That was the period when Jean, who was exhausted, for the first time in his career as a student received only second prizes—except for the violin for which he won the prize in a remarkable way with an impeccable performance of the First Sonata for solo violin, in G minor, by Bach. In piano, he competed with the Caprice in B-flat Minor by Mendelssohn. For the organ competition, there were four of us, two of Marchal's students, of whom Jean was one, and two of Marty's, of whom I was one. Marcel Dupré was the head of the jury that year, and I got the first prize, Jean the second. In composition he was to present a quartet (introduction and allegro). I remember that he had written a big canon in A for his introduction. I thought it was very good, but for some inexplicable reason it didn't win the prize.²⁶

Shortly before these final exams the first article about our young musician appeared in the press. Here it is in its entirety:

²⁶ A reminiscence recorded by the author in Paris on cassette in 1983 (cited henceforth as Litaize tapes 1983). The quartet movements are no longer extant.

A very young artist, Mr. Jean Langlais, gave his first recital on the organ the other night, at the Valentin Haüy Association.²⁷ Very few are those virtuosos who dedicate themselves to this instrument; thus we should especially thank him because while he is very gifted on the piano and violin, and he has somewhat neglected them to cultivate his talents as an organist. He seemed to me to possess all the resources of his art. In a well- designed program, bringing together Bach, Palestrina, Schumann, Dupré, and Vierne, he demonstrated his absolutely solid technique as well as a very expressive and agile touch, especially in the Toccata by Gigout. He is a student of Mr. Marchal, who—recognizing excellent abilities in him—sometimes entrusts the organ at Saint-Germain-des-Prés to him. The parishioners at Saint-Étienne-du-Mont also have the pleasure of hearing him because he substitutes for Mr. Singery from time to time. Next October, Jean Langlais plans to join the organ class at the Conservatory. This was certainly a debut of interest and full of promise for a career that is just beginning.²⁸

Gaston Litaize recounts:

During 1926, Marchal told Jean that he was thinking of sending him to the Conservatory. He asked Dupré to come and listen to his young student at his home at 22 rue Duroc, close to the Institute, which Dupré did. Jean improvised on a free theme and a fugue which he himself judged to be bad. Nevertheless, Dupré accepted him as an auditor of the class, but only for the following year. Marcel Dupré, at barely 40 years old, had just taken over from Eugène Gigout at the Conservatory; Gigout had died at 81 on December 9, 1925. And so it is likely that Dupré preferred to hone his teaching with just the last Gigout students before taking new students in the class.



Marcel Dupré at his Meudon house organ

Figure 11. (Association des Amis de l'Art de Marcel Dupré collection, Paris)

In December of 1925, six students were in the Dupré's organ class: André Fleury, in his fifth year; Maurice Béché, in his fourth; René Malherbe, in his third; Noëlie Pierront, abbé Delestre, and Joseph Gilles, in their second.

²⁷ The Valentin Haüy Association was founded in 1889. It was named for the founder of what became the Institute for The Young Blind and is located not far from it in Paris's 7th *arrondissement*.

²⁸ J.B.Le Conte, "Jean Langlais", *Artistes d'aujourd'hui*, Paris, May 1, 1926.

In June 1926, Fleury and Béch  won the first prize; so the only ones staying in Dupr 's class were Ren  Malherbe, No lie Pierront, Father Delestre and Joseph Gilles. Thus it was to be another year before new students were admitted; as it turned out they were: Olivier Messiaen, Jean Langlais, Henri Cabi , and me.²⁹

Before starting in at the Conservatory, Langlais was committed to erasing his “bad” results from the Institute in 1926; and from this standpoint his awards in July of 1927 were dazzling, dominated by a first prize with congratulations from the violin jury in front of a distinguished jury headed by Paul Oberdoerffer, solo violinist from the Opera Orchestra, who predicted for him a brilliant career as a solo violinist; Jean Langlais didn't care about this at all, to the great disappointment of his teacher, R my Clavers. In what one could see as a premonition, he won this award with an extremely remarkable performance of the Violin *Sonata* by C sar Franck.

The success did nothing: Langlais abandoned with no regrets his stringed instrument, in his view too dependent on an accompanist, to turn towards the piano, the organ, and composition, where he felt he could better express his personality. Another big success: first prize in piano accompanied by a scholarship of 500 francs, awarded for his performance of the Sarabande from *Pour le piano* by Debussy and the Overture from *Cantata 29* by Bach, transcribed by Saint-Sa ns. Then in organ, he took the prize in the first division, with congratulations of the jury, for playing the Fantasy and Fugue in G Minor by Bach and improvising on a single line of a plain chant and a free theme based on a subject by Louis Vierne. In composition, finally, the first prize honored his *Scherzo in C sharp minor* for string quartet, a score that is now lost.

After these brilliant examination results, Jean Langlais had only one goal that was urgent: to enter the Paris Conservatory, the “holy of holies” of a musical career in France.

The Organ Class at the Paris Conservatory

When Marcel Dupr  was named professor of organ the Paris Conservatory in 1926, he was considered the last link in the French School of organ, already celebrated internationally. Below are the names and the dates when they taught the organ class at the Paris Conservatory:

Fran�ois Benoit	1819-1872
C�sar Franck	1872-1890
Charles-Marie Widor	1890-1896
Alexandre Guilmant	1896-1911
Eug�ne Gigout	1911-1925
Marcel Dupr�	1926-1954

In the early nineteenth century, the first professor to be named to the newly established organ class at the Paris Conservatory was the pianist, organist and composer Fran ois Benoit (1794-1878), holder of a Grand Prix de Rome, who kept the position for 53 years, evoking

²⁹ Litaize tapes, 1983.

this mocking comment from Jules Massenet: "During his tenure, M. Benoist killed three kings, an emperor and two republics!"

César Franck succeeded Benoist in 1872. Born in Liège, at that time part of the Low Countries (becoming part of Belgium in 1830), Franck was trained at the Liège Conservatory before continuing his studies in Paris at the age of 13. He joined Benoist's organ class at the age of 18 in 1840, and a few months later won a second prize in organ. Shortly after, surprisingly, he quit the class; he then left the Conservatory completely in order to concentrate on composition and his career as a piano virtuoso. Because of his brief sojourn as Benoist's organ student, Franck always had the reputation of being a Belgian pianist and composer without much organ background, something that was still said when he was named professor of organ at the Paris Conservatory in 1872.

His successor was Charles-Marie Widor (born in 1844), who—in order to avoid the Benoist class—went to Brussels for his composition and organ studies at the Royal Conservatory, with the Belgian teachers François-Joseph Fétiis and Jacques-Nicolas Lemmens. Franck's successor, Alexandre Guilmant, did the same, so that one could say that what we call the highly esteemed French School of organ was actually a Belgian School of organ, which is not the smallest of paradoxes. Also, when Marcel Dupré, born in 1886, first prize in organ in the class of Alexandre Guilmant, was named professor of organ at the Conservatory, he can be seen as a product of this Belgian organ school. This was the opposite of his predecessor, Eugène Gigout, exact contemporary of Widor and successor to Guilmant at the Conservatory from 1911-1925, who was a pure product of the Niedermeyer School in Paris, founded in 1853 with the goal of restoring sacred music in the face of the secular Conservatory.

Since then, one can distinguish two opposing organ worlds in Paris: that of Dupré, direct successor of the Franco-Belgian school; and Marchal, Gigout's disciple. In joining Dupré's class after having been a student of Marchal, Jean Langlais inherited these two parallel and competing traditions, something that will not be without consequence for his future.

Louis Vierne described the revolution imposed by Widor in 1890 when he took over the organ class at the Conservatory after Franck's death:

Widor's big reform in organ teaching had, above all, to do with technique. We were obliged to redo all manual exercises using the Lemmens method; it was necessary, and it wasn't fun... Absolute legato in all parts, precise articulation of repeated notes, tying when parts cross, planned nuances... all this was rewarded with a marvelous clarity.³⁰

The basis of the Lemmens method was legato; in codifying and expanding the rules in various treatises and prefaces, Dupré elevated them to the level of unquestioned dogma that he imposed on all his students from the moment they started at the Conservatory in 1926.³¹

³⁰ *In memoriam Louis Vierne (1870–1937)*. Paris: de Brouwer, 1939; reprinted in *L'Orgue*, special number 134 bis, 1970, 1: 29, 33–34.

³¹ The following rules are based on the recollections of Rachel Brunswig, Langlais' fellow student in the Dupré class in 1927–1928 (conversation recorded by the author in 1986; henceforth cited as "Brunswig tapes, 1986").

- It is impossible to play the organ well if one hasn't first acquired real piano technique.
- Durations should be rigorously observed, and the connection of notes produced with neither gaps nor overlaps, to make an absolute legato.
- The length of time between two detached or repeated notes should be just as precisely measured as a printed rest. These notes are shortened, depending on the situation, by a half, a third, or a fourth of the written value.
- The common notes between two chords in different voices should be tied.
- One must slow up at cadences that are truly important, and slightly delay chords that are the dynamic high point of a phrase. Nevertheless, to abuse these retards is to be unfaithful to the work that one is playing.

Dupré thought that once these rules (“purely common sense,” he said) were applied, the performance of any piece in the repertory would become, *ipso facto*, perfect. One day when a woman from an audience waxed ecstatic about his technique, he said to her, “Really, madam, it’s very simple: one just plays the right note at the right time, having pulled the right stops.”

Performance was, however, only one aspect of organ instruction at the Paris Conservatory. Following an old French tradition, organists especially cultivated the art of improvisation, and since the nineteenth century this discipline was divided clearly into three strictly defined genres: the scholastic fugue (*fugue d’école*), the free theme, and plainchant. Although Franck, Widor, Guilmant, and Gigout introduced a few adjustments, the basic principles were never questioned, and Marcel Dupré inherited a mission to teach them to his students.

When classes resumed after Easter holidays in 1927, Jean Langlais was admitted as an auditor in Dupré’s class, at the same time as a timid, sweet young man, aged eighteen, already crowned with laurels in various disciplines: Olivier Messiaen. That very day an unflinching friendship between the two musicians was born, a friendship that continued undiminished until their deaths. A few months later, in the fall of 1927, new auditors joined the Dupré class: Gaston Litaize, Henri Cabié, Yvonne Desportes, Rachel Brunswig, and Monique Debroise; but at the examinations on December 17, 1927, only four of these auditors were named official students: Messiaen, Langlais, Litaize and Cabié. They joined those already officially part of the studio, Noëlie Pierront, Joseph Gilles, and René Malherbe, making a total of seven organ students for the 1927–1928 school year.

Jean Langlais recalls this class as follows:

At that time, group classes took place three times a week from 1:30 to 3:30 in the afternoon, with the following schedule:

- Monday: improvised fugue
- Wednesday: improvisation on a free theme
- Friday: performance of pieces from the repertory

Dupré didn’t put up with lack of discipline or inaccuracy. Thus, his classes began precisely at 1:30; those who arrived at 1:31 would find the door closed and could consider themselves expelled from the class, he told newcomers by way of an introduction.³²

This was unnecessary advice for Litaize and Langlais, who were used to a quasi-military discipline at the Institute for the Young Blind. Further, because they were thought of as prestigious alumni they still had the support of the Institute for lodging, board, and practice

³² Langlais, “Souvenirs.”

instruments, which allowed them to be financially independent and devote all of their time to their studies.

Dupré was a demanding teacher. He told them, “At your age, I worked twelve hours a day. You would be smart to do the same!”³³ The students had to bring a new piece every week to the performance class, learned perfectly by memory. To Langlais, who played Bach’s Fugue in B Minor (BWV 544) for him two weeks in a row, Dupré said coldly, “If you want to stick with the same piece for the whole year, I don’t think it will get you far.” The shamefaced adolescent never again played the same piece more than once. Later, Langlais paid homage to this demanding teacher:

He was a marvelous mentor and a charming man. We were very intimidated by this Master who had made a world tour, receiving acclamations everywhere. On his first American tour, he played 102 concerts in 99 days, a feat no one has duplicated. He held first prizes in piano with Louis Diemer, in organ with Guilmant, and in fugue in Widor’s class; and he won the Grand Prix de Rome in composition in 1914, also in Widor’s class. We were all in awe of his prestige. I am still influenced by his sense of order, precision, clarity, and his enthusiasm for beauty, which were infused in me, much like the love of work and its regimen.

He recalls the ambiance of the class:

We students got along together perfectly. After Dupré’s class, we made a habit of going out together to a café called “Les Capitales.” We had a hot-chocolate or a coffee with cream, and ate croissants—especially Litaize and I, who were so poorly fed at the Institute for The Young Blind: how many times had my meal there consisted of dipping my bread in reddened water, which is to say 90% water and 10% wine of poor quality—and the rest of the food that we were given was inedible!³⁴

Gaston Litaize also talks about this era, in his case about Dupré’s repertory classes:

He was a conformist in the sense that he never stopped us except for technical problems (lack of attention to release of notes, bad hand position, excessive body motion). I especially remember that he made Jean repeat, for he had staccato technique in which he shook his hands. Sometimes he gave a fingering, but he rarely played himself. When he did take over the console it was dazzling, and we were really awed by him. But he didn’t say much to us about style, editions, or musicology. It should be remembered that at this time we were barely at the beginning of the rediscovery of Bach’s organ works, and most organists had a very limited repertory.

Dupré, in 1920, himself had given a series of ten recitals at the Conservatory, in the course of which he played the complete works of Bach by memory, a monumental event. But of course he completely neglected the pre-Bach repertory. At this time, in 1927, only Marchal was known to have made stylistic distinctions. So Dupré was completely of his time.

Litaize then goes into detail about the improvisation class:

As for the improvised fugue, in Gigout’s time students could retain or drop the counter-subject, but Dupré was much stricter: he required that the counter-subject be retained with every restatement of the subject—which was not easy! As a corollary, he wanted us to introduce the subject in the middle voices. He never let us do a bass fugue, which would have been much easier, saying “The bass fugue would be nice, but I’m not sure one is allowed to do it.”

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

He never wanted to make such a pedagogical change without having consulted the director, who at that time was Henri Rabaud.

We improvised a fugue in the same style as written fugue, with a couple of liberties that are idiomatic on the organ, such as making the second episode in three voices without pedal. Dupré invoked the example of Bach in this case.

The plainchant study happened once per week, at the end of one of the three weekly classes, as long as there was some time left over. Dupré liked to say, as a wisecrack, “Plainchant is something you can learn in forty minutes!”

In fact, he wanted us—following the Conservatory traditions put in place by his predecessors—to harmonize Gregorian chants in four voices, on the model of the Bach chorales: polyphonic, ornamented, contrapuntal, canonic.

Today, homogenizing German chorales and plainchant seems totally illogical, but at the time it wasn’t jarring. The rhythms of Classic French music were treated with the same casualness as the modality of Gregorian chant. The chosen text would be relatively short, in order to allow us to make the contrapuntal chorale, so Dupré generally chose a tune, always in seventh or eighth mode (in G), and one didn’t depart from this formula.³⁵

But the crown jewel of improvisation, which allowed the student to shine as an artistic personality, was the free theme, and Dupré had the privilege of guiding a whole generation of prestigious organists, from Messiaen to Alain, with the likes of Langlais and Litaize along the way. Rachel Brunswig, an auditor in Dupré’s 1928 class, provides precious testimony about the musical personalities of her fellow students, and the way that Dupré fostered each:

Dupré was very sensitive to the personality of each of his students, seeking to push them along their own routes. Nothing escaped his attention.

Messiaen was already greatly interested in modes (he kept little numbered scraps of paper in his pocket on which he wrote harmonic formulas, modal characteristics, and progressions some of which he collected from the works of Debussy), and Dupré had him improvise on Greek rhythms.

Characteristic of Langlais was distinctiveness in the free theme, with a little bit of humor. His music had a lot of counterpoint, and a little archaism mixed with modernism, just the opposite, for example, of Henri Cabié’s seventh, ninth, eleventh, and thirteenth chords.³⁶

To enter the end-of-year competition in June of 1928, the students had to pass a qualifying examination. Langlais failed. As for Litaize, he made it through, but got no prize in the competition, which was awarded that year to Noëlie Pierront; Joseph Gilles and René Malherbe shared second prize, and Messiaen shared in the honors, receiving an honorable mention (*premier accessit*).

And so our two friends from the Institute for the Young Blind were crestfallen at the end of their first year at the Conservatory. They got a little balm from the examinations at the Institute where they were both in the supplemental division (which is to say their last year); Langlais was awarded a first prize in composition for his *Prelude and fugue* in A-flat Major for organ, the first opus to be completed by this 20 year-old composer still steeped in academicism. There was nothing revolutionary in these pages, which didn’t prevent the president of the jury, Henri Dallier, organist at the Madeleine, from commenting to his table-

³⁵ Litaize tapes, 1983.

³⁶ Brunswig tapes, 1986.

mate, Marcel Dupré, “You know, Marcel, I think we’ve been encouraging anarchy!”³⁷ This evaluation is perplexing, since the work merely juxtaposes various musical techniques that were very well-known at the time. In this first piece, Langlais proved that he already excelled in a sense of architecture. Harmonically, the young composer tried a variety of techniques without really showing a preference for one over another. The Prelude is resolutely modal, exploiting the whole-tone scale so dear to Debussy. The tonal fugue is the opposite, making ample use of chromaticism, signs of kaleidoscopic musical language that favored juxtaposing various systems—modal, tonal, chromatic—without giving dominance to one or another. But if he had set out on new paths in 1927, it was still cautiously, and this duality in him—respect for tradition and a certain nonconformity—co-existed throughout his compositional career. Langlais didn’t attach much importance to this *Prelude and fugue*, and it remained unpublished for more than 50 years; its eventual publication in 1982 was at the insistence of one of his students, the young Austrian organist-composer Thomas-Daniel Schlee, who arranged to have it brought out by Universal Edition in Vienna. Thus one had to wait 55 years to see the publication of the first work by Jean Langlais!

After this punishing first year in Dupré’s class, Langlais needed some rest at La Fontenelle. There he cut his teeth as a church organist, as he wittily recounted much later:

Thanks to a change of rector at La Fontenelle, I finally had the pleasure of becoming the substitute for the blacksmith, my old friend Jules, the official player of my childhood church’s harmonium. My access to this most hallowed of all instruments had always been impossible, my father having been a socialist municipal councilman and the rector a royalist (a chouan, as they said in the countryside), which is to say a devoted Catholic. The worthy Jules obviously didn’t know how to read music. In this era, one sang two of the masses by Du Mont, those in the sixth and second tones.³⁸ (For her whole life, my grandmother thought that these “du Mont” masses were from Mont Saint-Michel!) The first mass is in F major. I amused myself by accompanying it in F-sharp. Jules was both delighted and surprised: delighted because I used the black notes, and surprised because he couldn’t do it. “However,” he asserted, “I’m not a bone-head.” Indeed, my dear Jules! You habitually played the Mass in the Second Tone in E minor, and harmonized (if one can call it that) the final cadences with D-A-D-F / C-G-C-E. I tried everything to keep you from playing those parallel fifths and octaves, but in vain. In heaven, your true homeland, the angels have initiated you into the secrets of the G clef. I think it would have taken the intervention of the archangels to inculcate in you the F clef. From up-above, rest assured of my lasting friendship. You were modest. One can’t say that about all organists. And you also shod the horses so well!³⁹

His failure with Dupré having pointed up his weakness in improvised fugue, Jean Langlais decided to take Noël Gallon’s fugue class at the Conservatory, on the advice of Marchal and Dupré.

Yes, but a serious obstacle presented itself: where would the money come from to pay for a copyist needed to transcribe my homework from Braille into regular notation? My friend René Malherbe resolved the problem. He already had five children, and would have five more later. One day, he asked me gruffly:

“Well, are you still interested in fugue?”

³⁷ Langlais, “Souvenirs.”

³⁸ These were two of the five monophonic settings of the Ordinary published by Henry Du Mont in 1669. In a sort of modernized plainchant style, they remained staples in French churches until well into the XXth century.

³⁹ Jean Langlais. “Quelques Souvenirs d’un organiste d’église.” *L’Orgue* 137 (1971). 4-6.

“Yes of course, but you know perfectly well that I can’t take the class because I don’t have the money to pay a copyist.”

“All right, I’ll copy your fugues.”

And he did it, consistently. Thanks to his generosity, I could take the class like the sighted students. I was grateful to him for it my whole life.⁴⁰

At the resumption of school in October of 1928, Langlais presented himself to Noël-Gallon and was admitted to his fugue class at the same time as the brothers Henri and René Challan, future pillars of theory pedagogy at the Paris Conservatory. This period also marks Langlais’ real debut as a church organist, which he recounted 43 years later:

From being harmonium substitute at La Fontenelle, I became official organist at Épinay-sur-Orge, in the suburbs of Paris. High Mass was at 10:00 am, and my train arrived at the station at 10:00. The unflappable parish priest said, “No problem: a boy from the choir will wait for you on the platform, and as for us, we’ll wait for you in the church.” Everything went perfectly except for one little thing: I earned 100 francs per month, but my travel cost 110. Alas, my means didn’t allow for being a benefactor; I lasted just one month.

Then everything suddenly changed: Count Christian de Bertier proposed that I substitute for him at the main organ at Saint-Antoine-des-Quinze-Vingts in Paris. That was the jackpot. After a month of substituting, the organist asked me how much he owed me. “About 500 francs,” I replied. And this wonderful man, a distinguished and excellent musician, issued a pronouncement that still rings in my ears: “Young man, in life one has to be more precise in accounts; I owe you 625 francs.”⁴¹

Still worried about augmenting his paltry finances, Langlais, along with Gaston Litaize, launched an unexpected career at the beginning of 1929: as music-hall musicians. The two friends accepted an offer from the owner of a brasserie near the Saint-Cloud bridge, to play there every Sunday for a modest fee. Litaize recounts the episode:

We would arrive at 4 pm and were supposed to play until midnight. Until six o’clock there weren’t many people, and we’d refine our program. Then, little by little, the customers arrived to eat oysters. The big rush was around nine o’clock and people listened to us as background music. We played light music (mostly transcriptions made by the violinist Fritz Kreisler), but also classical music, such as Mozart sonatas or even the first two movements of Franck’s Sonata, Jean playing violin, I piano. We made about 300 francs per evening, which was fine with us. But the customers came to eat, not to listen to us; at the end of a month, the owner realized that we were drawing in hardly anyone and that the trial run wasn’t convincing. And so that’s how we became brasserie musicians for a month.⁴²

Gaston Litaize, who loved jokes, had a charming anecdote about Messiaen, his fellow student in Dupré’s class, as retold by his son, Alain Litaize:

One day Messiaen arrived a little late for class. He never did that, so it was very surprising. He sat down next to Gaston Litaize and put a package at his feet. As always, he turned towards the central aisle, closed his eyes, and with his chin in the palms of his hands, concentrated on listening to the classmate who was at the console.

“What’s in your package?” Litaize asked. “Don’t touch it, watch out: it pinches; it’s a lobster!” The warning seemed implausible. Curious as a cat, Gaston cautiously felt the

⁴⁰ Langlais, “Souvenirs.” These unpublished fugues remain in the private collection of the author.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Litaize tapes, 1983.

package, and quickly recognized the object. Without making any noise at all, he unwrapped it, picked it up, put it at Messiaen's feet and set it in motion.

Marcel Lanquetuit, who was substituting for Dupré that day, turned around, furious at Messiaen, and shouted, "Come on, Messiaen, now you need a metronome to follow your classmates? Stop it right now!" Shamefaced, Messiaen complied, grumbling "You think it's fun to make me look like a dimwit?" "You shouldn't have lied to me, taking me for an imbecile," Gaston replied.⁴³

But the school boys were also hard workers and extremely talented. Jean Bouvard found some letters sent to his parents in which he talks about Langlais in Dupré's organ class:

Courbevoie, March 19, 1929

Because of a friend of mine in Paul Dukas' class, Olivier Messiaen, I attended several organ classes at the Conservatory. What a great class! The improvisations! I was really stunned in listening to a young blind man improvise, Jean Langlais.⁴⁴

And from another letter:

Courbevoie, April 26, 1929

Wednesday afternoon I went to the organ class at the Conservatory. Marcel Dupré had written a lovely theme. I was filled with wonder to hear each of the students, one after the other. No one imitated the previous one. I particularly remembered the harmony and development in the last two measures improvised by the youngest in the class, the blind Jean Langlais.⁴⁵

A photograph shows Marcel Dupré and his students in the 1928-29 class at the Conservatory:



Dupré's 1928–1929 organ class

First row: Joseph Gilles, Gaston Litaize, Olivier Messiaen, and MARCEL DUPRE at the far right;
Second row: *Léon Levif, Tommy Desserre, Jean Langlais, Henri Cabié, Rachel Brunswig, Henriette Roget at the console (Italics indicate auditors).*

Figure 12. (collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

⁴³ Alain Litaize. *Fantaisie et fugue sur le nom de Gaston Litaize* (Sampzon: Delatour France, 2012). 36–37.

⁴⁴ Photocopies of these letters sent to the author (henceforth cited as "Bouvard letters"). Jean Bouvard was the grandfather of Michel Bouvard, currently the teacher of the organ class at the Paris Conservatory, along with Olivier Latry, since 20 years.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* Bouvard was wrong as Messiaen was one year younger than Langlais.

The number of prize-winners in the 1929 competition is a good indication of the high quality of Dupré's class:⁴⁶

First Prizes: Olivier Messiaen, by unanimous vote
Joseph Gilles
Second Prizes: Jean Langlais
Henriette Roget
Honorable Mention1: Gaston Litaize
Honorable Mention2: Henri Cabié.

And in a letter, Jean Bouvard noted:

I was with Charles Tournemire at the organ competition on May 31, 1929, and he said to me as we were leaving the Conservatory, "Langlais deserved a first prize, as well."⁴⁷

A month later, Langlais finished the 1928–1929 school year in the very best way, in getting the Institute for the Young Blind's highest honor, the first prize in composition for his *Six Preludes* for organ, dedicated to one of his fellow students in Dupré's organ class. Langlais told this story about the work:

One day just after I had written my *Six Preludes*, Vierne (for whom I had great admiration) came to hear them at the Institute for a whole afternoon. The group of pieces only lasted twenty minutes, but Vierne prolonged the session with much advice. He told me in particular before leaving me, "My Darling (he always called us that), you'll see that in life, everything can leave you: health, happiness, money; but believe me, there's one thing that will never abandon you, and that's music." And he was right. I think that the most joyous times that I have had in my life were in writing music, alone at home, in spite of all the pain that it sometimes gave me!⁴⁸

At the same time, Langlais learned that Adolphe Marty, the organ teacher at the Institute for the Young Blind, had announced his plan to retire. A competition was organized immediately to select his successor. Langlais turned out to be the only person to enter this competition because the requirements were so daunting that the other potential candidates withdrew. Candidates were judged on the following:

- Performance of a major organ work from the standard repertory (Langlais chose J.S. Bach's F Major *Tocatta*, BWV 540).
- Harmonization and improvisation based on a plainchant.
- Improvisation on a free theme.
- The writing of a scholastic fugue (*fugue d'école*)
- Piano examination.
- Violin examination.
- Demonstration lesson in improvisation to a blind student.

It has to be said that Adolphe Marty was himself a one-man orchestra, teacher of organ and improvisation, choral and orchestral conductor, and accompanist for the Institute's liturgies.

⁴⁶ "Orgue et Improvisation," in *Conservatoire National de Musique et de Danse: Palmarès, 1928–1929*. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1929. 48–49.

⁴⁷ Bouvard letters, 1929.

⁴⁸ Langlais, "Souvenirs."

Aware that he was being presented with a unique opportunity to have long-term financial security, Langlais put all of his energy into preparing for the competition. Not wanting to spread himself too thin, he asked for and received a year's leave of absence from the fugue class at the Conservatory and set to work.

In order to be more competitive in the organ competition at the Conservatory in 1930, Langlais—always intent on moving ahead and hoping to improve his piano technique—used his connection with his old teacher Maurice Blazy, to ask for piano lessons with the great pianist Lazare Lévy.

And when the time came to present himself at the competition, on March 30, 1930, he was completely ready to face the difficulties of this formidable examination. Triumphant over all the hazards, he was named “aspirant-teacher in training” (*aspirant-professeur stagiaire*) in an official report on April 3, 1930.

He now had peace of mind in preparing for the organ competition at the Conservatory ; when the academic year began in October of 1929, Dupré had three new students in the organ class (Odette Vauthier, Denys Joly and Léon LeVif), making a total of seven students.

The photo of Dupré's 1929–1930 class shows the students and auditors side-by-side, surrounding their teacher :



Dupré's 1929–1930 organ class

First row: Léon LeVif, Jean Langlais, Henriette Roget, Odette Vauthier, Gaston Litaize, *Tommy Desserre*;

Second row: Henri Cabié, *Théodore Besset*, MARCEL DUPRE, Denis Joly, *Jean Bouvard*

(Italics indicate auditors)

Figure 13. (photograph by Louis Roosen. Conservatoire national de musique. Paris. Collection Marie-Louise Langlais)

The final exam took place on June 6th. He had some very stressful moments that day, as he confides in his « Souvenirs.»

Paul Faucher's fugue theme didn't pose any major problems, but in the improvisation on a free theme in A minor, submitted by Alexandre Cellier, instead of making the usual modulation to the relative key—C major in this case—I decided to modulate to E minor, which seemed to me a better musical choice.

But this wasn't at all how we normally proceeded in the class.

At the end of the examination, Dupré sought me out and said, "My poor little one, you've made me sick! What were you thinking in the free theme improvisation? I looked at the jury at that moment thinking that you were a goner. But those men didn't raise an eyebrow. Fortunately you saw it through well, or otherwise your chances of winning a first prize would have been over. I think that they're going to give it to you anyway."

Dupré had read the jury correctly; they awarded a first prize to the young candidate who hadn't hesitated to put music before theory. The group of awards was brilliant that year, as one can see:⁴⁹

First Prizes:	Jean Langlais Henriette Roget
Second Prize:	Gaston Litaize, by unanimous vote
Honorable Mention 1:	Henri Cabié
Honorable Mention 2:	Denis Joly.

In addition, Langlais received the "Alexandre Guilmant Prize" of 500 francs for the winner of a first prize in organ. Holder of a first prize from the Paris Conservatory and aspirant-teacher at the National Institute for The Blind, Jean Langlais could certainly think that, at age 23, his education was complete.

But he had other ambitions, and above all, he knew that he still had much to learn.



⁴⁹ "Orgue et Improvisation," in *Conservatoire National de Musique et de Danse: Palmarès, 1929–1930* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1936). 46