

Paris dans l'entre-deux-guerres

Paris in the Interwar Years

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“An artist has no home in Europe except in Paris” ~ Friedrich Nietzsche

After a tumultuous recovery from the “war to end all wars,” Paris flourished as one of Europe’s thriving artistic capitals. The city was a meeting ground for the world’s eminent painters, composers, and writers—Pablo Picasso, Igor Stravinsky, and Ernest Hemingway all left their mark on Parisian culture. As host of the 1924 Olympics and 1931 Colonial Exposition, Paris asserted itself as a player on the world stage, and new music was just one indication. “Exotic” sounds captivated the budding composers of this generation: American jazz, ancient Greek rhythms, Oriental melodies, and Hindu modes were topics of study and sources of inspiration. Even organ music, long associated with Western Christian traditions and conservative styles, breaks new boundaries. This is in large part due to the Paris Conservatory, whose faculty inspired a revolutionary generation of performers and composers. Professors such as Maurice Emmanuel (history), Paul Dukas (composition), and Marcel Dupré (organ) exposed their students to neglected repertoires of the past while forging a new path for French music.

Written in Paris between 1926 and 1939, tonight’s program is the fruit of these pursuits. We will hear the composers engage in dialogues prevalent at the time—music of the ancients and moderns, familiar and foreign, and sacred and secular. As a result, each piece responds uniquely to its social, religious, and political environment. The composers, although seated far away in an organ loft, were well aware of their country’s triumphs and fears—they witnessed the devastation of the first World War, prospered during the “Crazy Years” (*Années folles*), and by the end of the ‘30s, sensed the threat of yet another war. It is within this context that the following pieces were conceived.

Deuxième Fresque Symphonique Sacrée, op. 76 (1939)—Charles Tournemire

We begin with the final work of Charles Tournemire, the master organist-composer of the Basilica of St. Clotilde. As its title suggests, Tournemire creates a sonic fresco for the listener. Splashes of harmonic colours paint a world where medieval modality blends with modern dissonances. The composer’s use of open fourth- and fifth-sonorities reflects his interest in plainchant, although he also employs thick chords and chromaticism to vary the musical texture. Woven throughout the piece are familiar

chants from the feast of Pentecost, “Veni sancte spiritus” and “Veni creator spiritus,” melodies that Tournemire treats in diverse harmonizations. We also hear Tournemire’s indebtedness to the French improvisation tradition; musical ideas seem to come and go on a whim, and tempi fluctuate between just a few measures.

This piece is dedicated to the Cathedral of St. Peter in Beauvais, whose impressive Gothic architecture surely inspired his conception. In fact, Tournemire’s kaleidoscopic use of the organ resonates with visual art found in this church—constant registration changes bring to mind light bouncing continuously off of stained-glass windows, while its structural complexity and rich harmonic palette mirror the ornate architecture around you.

Scherzo, op. 2 (1926)—Maurice Duruflé

A highly gifted student of the Paris Conservatory, Maurice Duruflé dedicated his very first organ work to his teacher Tournemire. The budding composer spent many hours in the loft of St. Clotilde as an assistant before claiming the post of titular organist at St. Etienne-du-Mont. Duruflé was an extremely self-critical composer, and he published only a handful of organ works; today, however, they are regarded as some of the most treasured pieces in the repertoire. The scherzo genre is a particular hallmark of the French organ school, showcasing the player’s virtuosity as well as the organ’s variety of sounds. Cast in a rondo form, we hear two themes throughout: a bouncing flute melody swirling around the keyboard followed by a tranquil second theme. As in his other pieces, Duruflé’s lush harmonic language calls to mind the “Impressionist” style of Debussy and Ravel. After a climactic buildup and reprise of the lively first theme, the Scherzo unwinds in tender repose.

“Combat de la Mort et de la Vie” from *Les Corps Glorieux* (1939)—Olivier Messiaen

Regarded as one of the most influential composers of the 20th century, Olivier Messiaen imbued his strong Catholic faith into nearly every piece he composed. His monumental organ cycle, *Les Corps Glorieux* (“The Glorified Bodies”), is no exception. As meditations on the afterlife, each of the seven movements reflects on a certain aspect of resurrection. The subtitle of the central movement, “Combat between Life and Death,” comes from the Mass for Easter Day:

Death and life fought a strange struggle. Though dead, the prince of life is victorious and reigns. He saith, My father, I am risen, and I am with thee.

Messiaen finished the cycle on August 25, 1939, just days before the German invasion of Poland. One cannot help but consider these theological professions, namely Christ’s sacrificial death and resurrection, in the face of another fatal war. This drama plays out in two contrasting sections: a gruesome battle with Death followed by the bliss of Eternity. Death announces itself in low growls interspersed with tumultuous toccata sections. The dizzying figurations and irregular rhythm of the hands suggest Jesus’s stumbling on His way to Calvary. After several dialogues between Death and Christ, we

hear and feel His final moments: the organ's violent cacophony brings to mind the blow of hammers, the nails that pierced His hands and feet, and finally, His last breath on the Cross. Amid the roar of full organ, He cries out: "It is finished."

In the second half, Messiaen reveals the ultimate outcome of the Passion narrative: Jesus leaves the tomb and walks among His disciples. The believers' reward of Eternal Life results in some of Messiaen's most sublime music. He evokes the timelessness of the afterlife with an extremely slow tempo, undulating strings, and subtle harmonic changes. Christ's words of reassurance, "I am with thee," can be heard in the caressing dialogues between the organ's Flûte harmonique's. Although the piece feels like it may never end, it eventually settles in the warm glow of F-sharp major—Messiaen's key of love.

Deuxième Prélude et Fugue (1929)—Elsa Barraine

Elsa Barraine studied at the Paris Conservatory alongside famed colleagues such as Messiaen and Duruflé, although her gender and political leanings probably stunted her works' popularity at the time. She wrote her second Prelude and Fugue for organ at the age of 19, the same year that she won the Prix de Rome (Barraine was the fourth woman to receive this prestigious award). In 1941, she co-founded the Front National des Musiciens, an organization in Nazi-occupied France that, among other activities, supported Jewish musicians in hiding and organized demonstrations. Her involvement in the French Resistance is even more remarkable considering her part-Jewish lineage.

Like Messiaen, Barraine was inspired by Biblical passages and the Far East, although her organ music speaks with youthful originality. The prelude quotes Psalm 116, a text central to several Jewish holidays: "I love the Lord because He has heard my voice and my supplications." The movement is built on a hypnotic swirl of running eighth-notes that grows in intensity. Seductive flute melodies reminiscent of Eastern music are woven throughout, and they eventually return for a peaceful conclusion. The fugue quotes the Jewish chant "Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu" ("Blessed are you, O Lord our God") and demonstrates the young composer's mastery of contrapuntal techniques. As in the prelude, one can hear the influence of her composition teacher, Paul Dukas, through her colourful harmonies and skillful use of motives. The fugue suddenly dissolves into a charming dance for flutes; this passage's inscription cites another verse of Psalm 116: "I will pay my vows unto the Lord now in the presence of all His people, O Jerusalem."

Trois Danses (1937, arr. for organ 1939)—Jehan Alain

Jehan Alain had one of the most unique musical voices of his generation, and he composed an impressive output between the age of 18 and his untimely death ten years later. Serving as a dispatch rider for the French army, he encountered a group of German soldiers in Saumur; alone with the enemy, he fired despite being outnumbered. Alain was posthumously awarded the Croix de Guerre for his bravery.

A free-spirited composer, Alain imbued his vibrant personality into every piece. Many of his manuscripts, in fact, are decorated with vivid (and often humorous)

drawings—everything from landscape sketches to elves playing the organ! Nevertheless, Alain’s spiritual connection with the other composers from this program is undeniable: the “mystical” style of Tournemire and Duruflé, as well as Barraine and Messiaen’s “exotic” inspirations, caught the attention of the young composer. Tonight’s final work, *Trois Danses*, represents the height of his compositional genius—at least what ultimately had to be the height.

Originally written in 1937 for piano, Alain arranged orchestral and solo organ versions of this piece while away at war. The composer reveals a wide variety of human emotion as suggested in the movements’ titles: Joys, Mourning, and Struggles. Brass fanfares open the first movement, imposing statements that become leitmotifs throughout the entire work. Most of *Joies* centers around an insistent dance. Offbeat rhythms and lack of tonal cohesion contribute to a jazzy, yet nervous energy that eventually spins out of control. After this climax, a plaintive oboe melody bridges this dance with the tragic central movement. The feet introduce a foreboding ostinato, and Alain slowly layers more voices and strange timbres to create a mantra-like effect. Halfway through the movement, a faster, more insistent *danse macabre* grows into a cataclysmic fortissimo. This dance ends with a mournful recitative, hushed and almost timeless. *Deuils* was initially conceived as a standalone movement, and its original title reflects the composer’s own mourning. Alain’s sister Odile died in a mountain-climbing accident, resulting in this *Danse funèbre pour honorer une mémoire héroïque*. In the brief *Lutttes*, we hear fragments from earlier movements: the apocalyptic fanfares, plaintive melodies, and frenzied dance all return with a bit of nostalgia and disarray. The last page, marked “brutalement,” announces this story’s tragic outcome in militaristic rhythms, jagged lines, and an abrupt final chord.

As in the other works from tonight’s program, one cannot help but hear this piece as a reflection of the troubling times. The Interwar period, despite significant artistic achievements, was marked by uncertainty and political unrest across Europe. Although he could not have foreseen his own demise, Alain clearly knew, like his colleagues, that world peace was unattainable at the end of this decade. In fact, the war was far from over.