

Jeanne Demessieux (1921-1968): 100 on the 13th!

"She will be – I'm sure of this – one of the greatest glories of France." Marcel Dupré

By and large the sale of commercial recordings is a flat market these days – and this isn't relevant to, or the result of, Brexit or the epidemic of the past year which has seen the cultural world decimated: theatres, concert halls, cathedrals and churches forced to shut their doors to those who thirst for live arts and performance events. Whilst the advent of such media platforms as YouTube and Spotify, the market for CDs has been in serious decline for some years; whilst the giants (such as EMI, Sony, Decca etc.) still endeavour thrive (albeit some significantly chasing financial return rather than outstanding talent which motivated them before), but many smaller companies fare significantly less well in a market flooded with reissues of luminaries of yesterday, numerous versions of the same repertoire, and the added influx of new artists ever hopeful of getting fair and due notice.

The reissue of long-deleted recordings (inevitably fewer in number than would be typical of 'greats' today) of towering musicians of real historic importance is, however, always going to draw significant interest, and February 12 sees the launch of an 8-CD box set celebrating the life an extraordinary artist who, even in her own lifetime, achieved true legendary status that far exceeded organ circles and only a few women achieved among masters of any instruments. Jeanne Demessieux was born 100 years ago on February 13 and to mark this Decca is issuing the complete recordings she made for them together alongside two further recordings – one from Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral and one of a BBC broadcast.

At the height of her remarkable fame – which exploded, quite literally in PR terms, after her Paris début in 1946, and was at its height during the '50s (though perhaps trailed off in the '60s) - Demessieux was one of the most famous classical musicians alive. Her extraordinary *'Six Historic Recitals'* at the Salle Pleyel, the series meticulously planned and choreographed by her *maître* (that uneasily translated French epithet and token of esteem encompassing idol, mentor, teacher, and even quasi-parental guide) generated never-before-seen frenzied receptions at each recital: even the *cognoscenti* of Paris audiences, themselves quite blasé in their familiarity with an indulgent and constant diet of great musical talents performing for them, went wild. Throngs of people clamoured to get a closer look, or maybe even touch, the beautiful and diminutive young woman of 25 who was, in the words of *Le Figaro*, "*from the very first moment of her public appearance manifested herself as the irresistible, absolute embodiment of perfection*". One can only imagine what it must have been like to witness.

Not only through his role as the doyen of French organists at the time, but also as a result of his teaching at the Conservatoire (the famous class through which all of France's outstanding organist *had* to pass, and in which the hoops and hurdles to be jumped excluded all but the outstanding), not to mention his compositions, the great Dupré had already elevated the standard of organ playing to a level unequalled anywhere else in the world. Even his remarkable line of students to that date (everyone from Messiaen, Langlais, Alain, Duruflé, Fleury, Grünwald, Litaize, to mention just a few) were stunned by what they heard at the Salle Pleyel as Demessieux's demonstration of that 'perfection' must have made them pale in their own mirrors; Duruflé's famous exclamation *'next to Jeanne Demessieux we all play the pedals like elephants'* spoke collectively of what they all knew. In no time, the mysterious girl who, after winning a raft of *Premier Prix* (organ, piano, harmony, fugue) at the Conservatoire, had 'disappeared' to study in veiled privacy with Dupré during the intervening five years, was inundated with invitations to perform in the major, and numerous smaller, cities and towns across Europe and Scandinavia; the restrictions of the war were gone, travel was again possible.

The following year, the London arm of Decca invited her to make her first recordings with them. The initial few were made at St Mark's, North Audley Street in London's Mayfair (when the church closed some years later that organ was rehoused – and remains - in the Holy Trinity, Brompton); subsequent ones were made in Geneva's Victoria Hall, and more – including her famous, and (in my opinion) unsurpassed versions of the great works of Franck – in the Madeleine in Paris, where, in 1962, she was to be appointed Organiste-titulaire. Even today original copies of these old records are regularly to be found in charity shops, on Ebay or other second-hand record sales places, these probably treasured items in the collections of those passed who may quite possibly have had the pleasure and experience of hearing her in a concert. She performed throughout the British Isles: a pal of mine (then 9, who had been taken to Demessieux's concert in St James' church by her father) even remembers meeting her standing (alone, always alone) on the platform at Tunbridge Wells waiting for the train to ferry her back to London and further...

"It so happens that you are a woman, not of a man. But that is the way it is; the world will have to accept it." This remark, made by Dupré when he realised he had at last found the person in whom he could safely entrust the future of the French organ school that his own teachers Widor and Guilmant had entrusted him, may seem openly sexist. In reality, however, it must be remembered that the bias was not certainly Dupré's: he was comfortably aware that talent was not given to one gender or another but to an individual, and, in any case, France was familiar with outstanding woman organists – among them Renée Nizan, Marthe Bracquemond, Noëllie Pierront, and Jeanne Marguillard had achieved significance on the concert scene before Demessieux. Dupré made his remark, surely with an air of despondency, because he was aware of the prejudice that would be directed at her as she pursued and achieved the aims and purposes he and she had spent years polishing - because she was a woman. And it was...

Women, it should be remembered, had been historically excluded, even banned, from playing the organ in churches (let alone at mass!) in, among other places, England. Whilst there may have been exceptions, it was a 'ruling' strongly upheld; unquestioned until now, it was considered inappropriate in the exclusively-patriarchal religious systems here. In order for Demessieux to give her first London recital – at Westminster Cathedral (this frequently and incorrectly cited as 'Abbey' in many articles) on February 26, 1947 - special permission had to be granted for her, a woman, to play the cathedral's organ! In the ensuing years, numerous similar situations elsewhere arose when and where she was invited to play...

Today, in a world in which we are thankfully very familiar with women playing the organ like gods, such restrictions may indeed seem remarkable.*

In this way, Demessieux – whose celebrity and fame at the organ has only ever been matched by a handful of men or women – was the real trail-blazer. However, this was done for entirely artistic reasons as her mastery and talent elevated her to a level only inhabited by even a handful of men; in her heyday, she was the only woman who would be presented in recital line-ups with the great names such as Thalben-Ball, Germani, Peeters, and Fox. (Sadly, after *'La Rupture'* - the famed bitter 'rupture' in which Dupré severed all contact and association with his now renowned protégée - it has been cited that he himself would refuse to play in any series in which she was invited.)

Today, 75 years later, we know well, and rejoice in the fact, that many of the world's greatest organists have been women – perhaps none more so than our own doyenne, the very great Dame Gillian (whose 80th birthday in January Decca also marked with the release of a 20-CD collection of her recordings). Such extraordinary artistry speaks for itself now – but Demessieux frequently had to assert herself in order to do her work because of, and despite, her gender. On the other hand it has been another 'issue' that others have used to try and clear their path with by using gender as a bargaining or marketing tool - or by educational gatherings that exclude one or other gender. I myself had a heated exchange with one whose summer school only excluded one gender from learning. There can be no justification in such exclusions: knowledge, practise (and thus experience), encouragement and learning should be open to all – regardless of background, gender, race, creed, hair-colour, passions, shoe-size or anything else.

The trail Demessieux blazed - and path she opened to other women to follow her (and the truly outstanding of them were in years past always been spoken of as 'a new Demessieux' at some point of their ascent) didn't last for her: having suffered weak health (perhaps as a result of privations of her early years during the War) throughout her life, she lost her battle at the age of 47 when cancer (which she had fought secretly for some years) swept her off. Equally, the changes of musical taste – specifically the emergence of the neo-classical style so at odds with, and in defiance of, the Romantic virtuoso Demessieux herself was the embodiment of – made her style fade from fashion in that ever-turning flow of what is-and-is-not musically favoured at the time.

But the flow has changed again: after the severity of that uprising (at its height in the '60s and '70s), tastes are different again. The Decca Demessieux is a testimony of one of the most outstanding and glittering (those famous high-heeled silver shoes her feet dazzled audiences in...) virtuosos the organ has ever had: let us hope many of those who haven't had the chance to explore the legacy of her recordings will take great delight in hearing them now.

**France had, and was always, different: women had played the organ in churches for years, although they were accorded no real profile for doing so. However, only a year after Demessieux's debut, her only real rival, the remarkable Rolande Falcinelli (1920-1906 - whose centenary was thus last year), who was also one of Dupré's favourites and who would, in fact, within a few years replace Demessieux completely in his favour, became the first woman appointed organist to a major Paris church with her appointment to the Sacré-Cœur.*

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