

## Studied with... A pupil of...

Few - if any - teacher-pupil alliances in the history of the organ have been as famous as that of Marcel Dupré (1886-1971) and Jeanne Demessieux (1921-1968). He was one of the instruments titans, the doyen of his day: she, his pupil from the age of 13, was the remarkably gifted woman who almost eclipsed everyone else - including him. That this month, February 2021, marks the centenary of her birth on February 13, 1921, suggested a look (far too short due to space and time) at the particular, often sanctified, but occasionally difficult, even disruptive, relationship between teacher and pupil. The situation itself is an unparalleled and intimate one in the educational lives of most of us because it is an almost exclusively (at least in this country) one-to-one and personal confidences and trust are therefore part of the whole. The specifics of the Dupré-Demessieux history have been numerous explored elsewhere, so I thought a broader look more generally may prove stimulating.

How often do we read the endorsement on concert programmes 'X... studied with Y and Z'? At the start of a musician's career this trumpet-call can herald a style, or manner, of their playing to those as yet unfamiliar with them: "*I play like Y and Z: Hear me!*" If the result is good and well-received, that's fine - the alliance is a perfect match. But if not and things didn't go so well, it's *their* fault *not* mine the performer (read pupil) may say: "*So-and-so taught me to do it this way.*" Of course, it is so often - usually and quite correctly - a token of gratitude and esteem (idolatry even) from pupil to the teacher, or teachers, who has so inspired them for all they have learned and to who they have looked up. And many times - but not always - the teacher(s) concerned may have been generously helpful with endless professional advice, introductions and a watchful eye over their budding charge - and charge it ought to be because a teacher's responsibility should not stop with pointing out a wrong note; their role should be about empowerment, development, open not only the artistic mind but setting a strong moral compass. There is also a need for endless generosity of spirit from the teacher who must be aware at all times (and not fearful of the fact) that their pupil may, one day, rise to eclipse or at least equal them. Dupré was always aware of this in his teaching - and was confident enough in his own skin (as the French say) to rejoice in the fact; he strove so art might flourish more. Teaching is not a vainglorious act - it is a responsibility.

There comes a time, however, when one has to ask if any such claim - apart from an expected declaration of intent that a musician is in this or another musical camp - is even relevant? After all, with lessons taken years ago, is the teacher to be venerated (when it's all going splendidly) or blamed (at worst) for a performance that the current performer presents years later of music that perhaps neither discussed even in the halcyon days of study? And what about the evolution of each artist, change of opinion, realisation that their perhaps adored teacher may have given them only *one* idea of *thousands* in how to play this or that. The development of any artist is, and should be, in constant development; every single experience - cultural, intellectual, personal, and of life itself - colours the perceptions and sensitivities that inform what they in turn go on to produce - be it music, sculpture, painting, writing - as a person. One of the truly interesting things about musicians is that a sensitive and aware person can *hear*, in a clearly voyeuristic manner, what any musician knows and has experienced of Life in how they play. As Hindemith said "*Every composer and musician writes and makes music in the very likeness of himself.*" All practise and no play will

make Jack or Jill very dull players! How can we be the medium for music's joys and elations, disappointments and sadnesses, empathies and expressions, if we have no experiences to show us how this emotion feel?

Considering another angle, what about the teacher who imposes themselves on a pupil? It may be from their best-intentioned self-belief, but - at furthest extreme - it can amount to wilfully trying to dampen or control a pupil's own personality. Not all teachers can discuss (or argue), question (or answer), serve, cajole or lead; the same is true of pupils. Alas, there are certainly teachers who try - at all costs it sometimes seems - to mould a pupil into a mini-them, curtail a pupil's freedom of musical speech, because they believe theirs superior - or to simply 'pull-rank'. I have certainly seen the '*I am better than you*' syndrome in action - both as a pupil myself and by observation later. I retain a vividly-etched memory of a shameless egoist dealing with some outstanding participants in a masterclass at an international festival some years ago; that certainly wasn't good teaching and there was no generosity or kindness. Knowledge and experience of how not to do things can be as useful as knowing how to do them! By contrast I can remember my lessons - particularly with Odile Pierre - when I left wanting to go at once and practise until I couldn't sit at the organ any more, and then it was studying the scores (a vital, often overlooked process) 'at the table'. I read years ago one of the best definitions of a great teacher: 'A great teacher is someone who allows their pupil to believe that one day they too may be great'. Of course, the majority of teachers would do anything and everything to empower and support their pupils: this devotion is often a two-way exchange that lasts lifetimes.

Then there is the '*When you are a pupil of mine you do not listen to anyone else!*' syndrome. Happily, this seems mostly to have died a death - as have many of those who insisted on this depressingly limiting attitude. The belief that one musician only has the right view or the God-given authority to be correct is bewildering: politically this would be dictatorship! But artistically it is ridiculous; there are hundreds of ways to do this or that, and one's opinions may change (from experience, renewed consideration, experiment) as quickly as the tides. Taken to obviously ridiculous extremes, the rigid belief that a pupil should be metaphorically expected to stick their head in the swell shutters and shout "*OK! Now!*" (BANG! as the teacher slams them shut) if your teacher said you should is pointless. I sadly and clearly remember the *froideur* directed at me (a thing which never really thawed) and withdrawal of support from one of my early-years' idols and mentors when I wanted to go elsewhere and see what others had to say; I'd grown aware that there are innumerable different approaches and wanted to see over the fence and consider new ones. That's how things should be. But it didn't mean I didn't value or appreciate their wisdom.

Sometimes, thankfully less frequently, there are instances of teachers being the catalyst against which a pupil really develops because the teacher's (sometimes inadvertent, sometimes determined) intransigent attempts at control cause a gifted pupil to square up to them and rail against restrictions. Whilst initially difficult, even unpleasant or depressing, this can be very highly for a strong-minded, or strong-willed, individual because they are forced to go and seek answers elsewhere. Through adversity it can, ultimately, be very empowering.

The Dupré-Demessieux alliance was a special, remarkable thing, and it was exceptionally fruitful. Dupré had taught virtually all the outstanding aspiring organists in France of a generation because, as a result of the education system there, they had to go to his class at the Paris Conservatoire and study to win the *Premier Prix* (the kind of equivalent to a degree-cum-performer's diploma, done separately in each difference

instrument and discipline when the student attained the required standard in each) in order to qualify as outstanding.

Before Demessieux came his way, Dupré's pupils had included Alain, Duruflé, Grünenwald, Langlais, Litaize, and Messiaen – the crème of French talent. That she joined that list was entirely accidental: having recently moved to Paris to study principally piano and composition, her newly-found parish church needed someone to play for the masses. As she had already several *premier prix* (including piano) to her credit from the conservatoire in her native Montpellier, the parish asked her to play for their masses. Trying to find her a teacher of suitable stature that could teach her the organ, only Dupré, the doyen of French organists, was considered good enough.

After Demessieux would follow Rolande Falcinelli, Marie-Claire Alain, Marie-Madeleine Chevalier (later to marry Duruflé), Pierre Cochereau, Michel Chapuis, and lastly, before he became the Conservatoire's Director, my own teachers Jean Guillou and Odile Pierre. These names are, of course, only short roll-call of those who became internationally famous in their own right: he trained many other outstanding musicians who chose to spend their lives in cathedrals, churches, or teaching in the regional conservatoires.

In Demessieux, Dupré believed he had found the successor he had looked for so long in whom he could entrust the future of the French organ tradition that had been passed to him by his own teachers Widor and Guilmant.

But things went wrong for Demessieux remarkably quickly: the sad and awful falling-out that in would in just a few years ruin the mutual devotion in Dupré-Demessieux alliance changed everything. The dreams and plans he had discussed (and promised her) - that she would in time succeed him as organist of Saint-Sulpice, inherit his class at the Conservatoire, and perhaps even become the organist of Notre-Dame itself – crumbled to nothing in an instant as he turned against her. Some may have meddled because of their jealousy of his favouritism and seen an opportunity for trouble-making and other reasons have been picked over for years. Whatever the cause, it shows how the once favoured of a teacher can become the least favoured just as quickly. The saying 'it takes years to build a relationship and seconds to ruin it' comes to mind.

All of the above 'greats' are now gone, the youngest of which (my teacher Odile Pierre) died last year at the age of 88 – and it can be said with embarrassment to any, that many of them really didn't get on easily with Dupré's teaching or even musical ideas. Whilst his genius or expertise were not in question, some found his approach inflexible, this and allowing them no room to manoeuvre their own ideas... *until* they left his class. Musical ideas do, of course, evolve with new generations seeing things differently.

*"All my life and with all my heart I have loved teaching"* - Dupré once said; he went further that he *"just followed the path which had been opened... These two great masters brought me up, formed me, as if I were their own child"*. (Referring to Guilmant and Widor). He also often repeated his belief that to become a great artist, one had to have studied with one. His standards and demands were fearfully high – but, with this expectation being his required level, he elevated all those he wished to see attain their absolute potential. I am reminded of something that his own teacher, Widor, said to his own pupils at the Conservatoire when he took over the class from the recently deceased (and much loved) Franck in which

he explained his much higher demands of them - *"everything I ask of you, arduous as you may find it, is uniquely for your future good"*.

Dupré's creed for teaching – and indeed to playing – was, despite his magnificent talent and brilliance, determined. He did not allow personal expression in class believing, like Widor, in the classical manner that great art spoke for itself without the need for emotional input from the 'presenter'. (Now, there opens a huge debate!) However, there was another in Paris at the time, André Marchal (1894-1980), whose approach to playing was very different - poetic, expressive and free. His approach was one of fun (meaning pleasure, not anything superficial: the words can be easily, even wilfully, misunderstood) and expressed a love for the music rather than just a reverential awe that must not be questioned. Many – like Langlais, Litaize, and Marie-Claire Alain – were powerfully drawn by the pull of this charming bon-viveur Marchal who made music dance and live. And he encouraged them to do the same when they played.

Despite her absolute gratitude, which remained even after he turned on her, the fascinating thing is that Demessieux did not - at least after the very earliest recordings - sound anything like Dupré, despite a similarity of manner. Even though she was always hailed as his musical disciple, her playing tells a very different story. Listen to her early Franck recordings (London and Geneva), Dupré's influence maybe clear. But then listen to her sublime readings some 20 years later (the famous recordings made at the Madeleine) and hear interpretations and expression that has nothing to do with Dupré's' approach. Here another question opens as we approach the two divergent schools of Franck performance. Dupré's was acquired through study with Guilment who had worked in detail, as only Guilment did, with Franck on every matter in the pieces. Opposing this is the more widely favoured ideas from the d'Indy-Tournemire-Marchal-Langlais line. This discussion is at least one lecture in its own right. Demessieux's style was entirely her own, but obviously deeply touched by both.

There can be no question that Dupré's teachings were to the benefit of those he taught. He gave them each a remarkable virtuoso technique and framework from which to work and then develop from: as it is said 'without discipline there is no freedom' as freedom without discipline turns becomes abandon, even chaos at worst, which is not the same thing at all. I am reminded of the story a friend told me when studying with Langlais, who, despite disliking much of Dupré's teaching and ideas, was remarkably strict with his own pupils. One day she dared question him and he answered in the very matter-of-fact and direct way he was known for: *'If they come to me, they want to know my ways of doing it. If they are musicians, they will then leave my class and go out and play the music informed by the musical tradition I uphold, but free to do things their way.'* He drew breath before hastily adding - *'And if they aren't musicians and can't do that, my way is better than theirs!'*

All of us are the sum of our experience, our learning (which ought never to end or reach anything approaching a conclusion – or we are finished as artists) and practise (as in being out there, doing it) of our craft. Whatever we learn along the road – this including both the things we assimilate with open arms, the things we are taught, or the things obstruction force us to go round to find better answers that satisfies our need – makes us the musicians we are.

So, it may be nice to read 'X... Studied with Y and Z' – but is it really of much relevance a few years after we've gone down our own path and left their studio? Personally, I think it'd be interesting if all biographies were removed from programmes altogether: then what the musician does would have to be judged by that

alone, the audience would have to listen (not just hear) to X or Y with their ears. But, of course many are rightly proud of their achievements, grateful for the support, help and example given them, and such biographical notes are an expected thing and broadcast of activities.

But, back to the remarkable Jeanne Demessieux. Decca will release an 8-CD box of all her recordings (plus a BBC broadcast) in March to celebrate her centenary. I was delighted to be asked to contribute an essay (which ran to over 8000 words) about her for the set. She was an exceptional artist, a name and stature of which few will ever approach.

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