

Tuesday 5 April: Talk on Jehan Alain by Stephen Farr

When Stephen Farr played Jehan Alain's 'Litanies' in a concert in Montreal, a critic there wrote that the music had been played too fast. It had whizzed by, blurring details as it went. In his fascinating lecture on Alain at St. Mary Magdalene's Church, Enfield, on 5 April, Stephen Farr recalled this critical review, but pointed out that Alain's own instructions were that the piece should be played as fast as possible. Even if some individual notes were obscured this music should be coruscating. It was not to sound like 'a jolly French toccata', but to reflect Jehan's grief at the death of his sister Odile in a tragic mountain accident in the early 1930s.

This account was one of many insights in Stephen's highly informative talk. We learned that Jehan had come from a highly musical family: his father had been *titulaire* at St.Germain-en-Laye, and Jehan himself had studied with Dupré at the Paris Conservatoire. His sister's death had contributed to the haunting, enigmatic quality of 'Les Trois Danses', with their highly complex rhythms.

It was interesting to learn about Alain's less well-known work, including the early 'Lucis Creator' variations of 1932. *La Suite*, a transcription for Les Amis de l'Orgue in 1936, showed his individual voice, and his two sketches 'Christe Eleison' and 'Amen' were fragmentary, beautiful pieces.

We learned that Alain was the organist at a synagogue in Paris, and there is a recording of him improvising there in 1938. He was influenced by oriental music, as is reflected in music such as *Deux Danses de Agni Yavishtha* of 1934. It was surprising to discover that the theme on which 'Variations sur un thème de Clément Jannequin' was based was not actually composed by Jannequin, but by Alain himself. However, Stephen felt that the freshness and 'tenderness' of this work are more important than its provenance.

Stephen also referred to the difficulty of finding a reliable edition of Alain's work. Jehan revised and recopied his own work repeatedly, and Marie-Claire, who remains the authority on editions and interpretations of her brother's work, was 14 when he died in 1940. In addition Helga Schauerte retained the scores of several works, so no one person has been able to see all the MS. However, Stephen recommended the most recent Barenreiter edition of Alain's organ music. (January, 2011).

Stephen illustrated his talk by a careful selection of recordings of the music. The sound of one of Alain's most 'Gregorian' works, the 'Postlude pour l'office de complies' in the resonant acoustic of the Abbey of Somme was particularly memorable.

This was a fascinating and thought-provoking lecture, introducing much music that I, for one, was unfamiliar with. A most enjoyable evening.

Stephen Jasper

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