

Transparent Vapor:  
The Piano Music of Jehan Alain

By  
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## Abstract

In his short compositional career, French composer Jehan Ariste Alain (1911 – 1940) established a strong reputation in Parisian music circles. He received numerous honors and prizes from the Paris Conservatoire, showing his promise as a composer. After he was killed during the Battle of France, his sister, the acclaimed organist and teacher Marie-Claire Alain (1926 – 2013), encouraged his legacy through the publication and performance of his organ works, which have since become part of the standard repertoire for the instrument. The efforts of his family have helped cement his status as one of the foremost twentieth-century composers for organ.

Though known primarily for his organ works, he wrote a significant number of works for solo piano, few of which are known by pianists or music lovers in general. During his short compositional career, Alain developed a personal style that synthesized a variety of influences from his contemporaries in France, Gregorian chant, the philosophies of the Far East, and jazz. His solo piano works demonstrate an imaginative and original creativity, and display the scope of his compositional influences. This document will analyze the solo piano oeuvre of Alain through selected piano works, exploring the various influences and inspirations in his writings, and aims to introduce this largely unknown artist and his unique worldview to the piano repertory.

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## Introduction

There have been many significant composers whose deaths are considered “premature” by music lovers. Artists such as Franz Schubert (death at age thirty-one), Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (at age thirty-five), Felix Mendelssohn (at age thirty-eight), and George Gershwin (at age thirty-five) have left many to wonder what might have been had their talented lives not been cut short. Among the insurmountable losses of the First and Second World Wars, there were many artists who never returned home, their lives ending tragically too soon and leaving a cultural hole in major cities across Europe. The overshadowing sentiment of loss at the end of the Second World War is perhaps best summed up by Georges Auric:

From the very beginning of the war many of our finest musicians were mobilized. With the signing of the armistice, we realized that some would not come back; we knew them well enough to appreciate our country’s loss. But what of those who fell by their side: young students torn from their classes at the Conservatoire, forever unknown to the great public which they never had a chance to approach. We can only think bitterly of the precious things they might have accomplished.<sup>1</sup>

French composer Jehan Ariste Alain (1911 – 1940) was one of those young musicians whose lives were tragically cut short. Alain was born into a musical family and showed promise early in his life as a musician. Prior to the Second World War, Alain had achieved various honors and prizes at the Paris Conservatoire, and had established a reputation in Parisian music circles. After he was killed during the Battle of France, his sister, the acclaimed organist and teacher Marie-Claire Alain, encouraged his legacy through publication and performance of his organ works, which have since become part of the standard repertoire for the instrument.<sup>2</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> George Auric, “Paris Resurgent,” *Modern Music* 22, no. 4 (May–June 1945): 247.

<sup>2</sup> Craig R. Whitney, “Marie-Claire Alain, Master of the Organ, Dies at 86,” *New York Times*, March 3, 2013, accessed February 3, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/04/arts/music/marie-claire-alain-organist-and-teacher-is-dead-at-86.html>.

efforts of his family have helped cement his status, among organists, as one of the foremost twentieth-century composers.<sup>3</sup> There are currently at least five recordings of his complete organ works, as well as numerous recordings of individual works, and his centenary in 2011 was celebrated internationally.<sup>4</sup> His works have also influenced later generations of organists such as Maurice Duruflé and Petr Eben.

Though known primarily for his organ works, he wrote a significant number of works for solo piano, few of which are known by pianists or music lovers in general. During his short compositional career, Alain developed a personal style that synthesized a variety of influences from his contemporaries in France, Gregorian chant, the philosophies of the Far East, and jazz. His solo piano works reflect his imaginative and original creativity, traits found also in his adult writings and drawings. Alain's music displays the scope of his compositional influences and seems to be a direct expression of his worldview.

Jehan Alain, like many of those young musicians lamented by Auric, may have forever disappeared unknown in history were it not for his family, particularly his father and sister. The resources and research currently available on Alain was initially encouraged as a means of supporting his widow and children. His father, Albert Alain, worked with the publishing house of Alphonse Leduc to prepare three volumes each of his music for piano and organ.<sup>5</sup> His sister, Marie-Claire Alain, also contributed to his legacy, playing his music on tour throughout her life. All of these efforts, however, were concentrated on his organ works. His complete piano works have been recorded by pianists Daniel Fuchs, Claude Maradon, and Désiré N'Kaoua, but few

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<sup>3</sup> Joe Riley, "Jehan Alain," *Organists' Review* 97, no. 2 (May 2011): 37, accessed February 2, 2017, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=93817122&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>4</sup> Peggy Kelley Reinburg, "Celebrating Alain's Centennial: A Conversation With Helga Schauerte," *The American Organist* 45, no. 1 (01, 2011): 58, accessed February 5, 2017, <https://search-proquest-com/docview/853977378?accountid=14556>.

<sup>5</sup> James L. Denman, "The Keyboard Idiom of Jehan Alain: A Survey of Musical Structures in Representative Works" (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2008), 3.

other recordings of his works exist.<sup>6</sup> The Association Jehan Alain, based in Switzerland, has also contributed to Alain's legacy, preserving both the house organ and a harmonium of the family in addition to documents, manuscripts, and other memorabilia as more people, primarily organists, have learned of him.<sup>7</sup>

Because Alain drew freely from a variety of musical inspirations, Alexander Dichmont has argued that there is no reward for the would-be analyst who attempts to define an overarching compositional system in his works.<sup>8</sup> Instead, this document presents the solo piano oeuvre of Jehan Alain not with the intention to establish Alain as a standard of the piano repertoire, but to introduce this largely unknown artist and his unique worldview, which is directly expressed in his music and writings. Living in the early twentieth-century, Alain's music and personality reflect the changing times that students today can still relate to. This document will first present a brief biographical sketch before detailing the various influences one can find in Alain's piano works – octatonicism, exoticism, plainchant, and literature.

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<sup>6</sup> Denman, "The Keyboard Idiom of Jehan Alain," 1.

<sup>7</sup> "Association Jehan Alain," Association Jehan Alain, <http://www.jehanalain.ch/EN/index.php>.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander Alan Dichmont, "Jehan Alain (1911-1940): A Study of Aesthetic and Style." M.M. thesis, The University of Manchester, 1984.

## I. Biographical Sketch

Described by his niece as the “genius who leapt ahead of others,” Jehan Alain was born February 3, 1911 in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, a suburb eleven miles west of Paris that overlooks the Seine, and was the firstborn child of Albert and Magdeleine Alain.<sup>9</sup> Jehan was born into a musical family. His father was the organist of a parish church in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, as well as a composer and organ builder.<sup>10</sup> Albert became a musician against the will of his own father, who was a furniture merchant, and Albert studied for more than ten years at the Paris Conservatoire, studying fugue, counterpoint, and composition with Gabriel Fauré and Charles Lenepveu; organ with Alexandre Guilmant; and harmony, in which he obtained the first prize in 1904, with Antonin Tandu.<sup>11</sup> Albert had also taken private lessons from Louis Vierne and Georges Caussade.<sup>12</sup> In Saint-Germain-en-Laye, Albert served as the organist in a church, so he had an impressive organ repertory, which was a large influence on young Jehan.<sup>13</sup> Most significantly, Albert took the initiative to introduce modern music to the small town, becoming music director and working with Abbé Clément Besse in improving and creating a new kind of religious music, one that would revive old dimensions of music such as Gregorian chant within the current avant-garde musical style.<sup>14</sup> This was a lasting influence on Jehan and his own music.

All of the Alain children learned music, but as the eldest, Jehan received the most musical attention from Albert. According to his father, “at the age of 3 years and 15 days,

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<sup>9</sup> Aurélie Decourt, *Une Famille de Musiciens au XXe Siècle: La Famille Alain* (Paris: Hermann Editions, 2011), 63. I am grateful to Dr. Daniel Burland, who assisted me by translating portions of this book.

<sup>10</sup> Reinburg, “Celebrating Alain’s Centennial,” 58.

<sup>11</sup> Aurélie Decourt, *Jehan Alain: biographie, correspondance, dessins, essais* (Chambéry: Éditions Comp'Act, 2005), 19. I am grateful to Zoé Hommertzhaim, who assisted me by translating portions of this book.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

[Jehan] finds out that one can play an air with both hands at an octave and begins to study ‘Le Petit Jesus’ in this way, starting over once he made a mistake.”<sup>15</sup> The children grew up in a house of music. Albert began building an organ inside the family home upon his marriage in 1910, and continued updating the instrument throughout Jehan’s lifetime.<sup>16</sup> By the 1920s, the home had a baby grand piano next to the Alain organ on the ground floor, as well as a second piano and two harmoniums, which allowed each of children to always have a keyboard on which to practice, a vital part of Jehan’s musical development.<sup>17</sup> The house often had two instruments being played simultaneously. Albert enthusiastically encouraged Jehan to pursue music, taking him along to the organ loft to turn pages as soon as he was able to read music.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, from a young age, Jehan learned about liturgical music, plainchant, and improvisations, and developed a fascination with the organ, becoming proficient enough by age thirteen to stand in for his father for Masses.<sup>19</sup>

As a young child, Jehan displayed the traits that would later influence his writings, as well as foreshadow his death. Described as a daredevil but at the same time dreamy and observant, Jehan was a “child bursting with energy and a limitless imagination.”<sup>20</sup> An athletic person, Jehan was a very skilled and daring cyclist. His brother Olivier recounts a story in which, with Jehan seated backwards on the handle bars and he on the seat, they would hurtle down the forest ruts, or Jehan would pull a girl’s ponytail while speeding by on a motorcycle.<sup>21</sup> Jehan saw what others would fail to notice; he was attentive to everyday things that, for him, held hidden

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<sup>15</sup> Decourt, *Jehan Alain*, 22.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Decourt, *Une Famille de Musiciens*, 63.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

magic, and was particularly inspired by nature.<sup>22</sup> A source of strong emotions, Jehan was not only inspired by still landscapes, but also the music he heard within those landscapes. He felt it was his task to translate the sensations of scenery into music: “How can I put it to you, this is swimming in the air, and I translate it.”<sup>23</sup> Having a sensitive nature, however, Jehan was prone at times to episodes of melancholy and anxiety. Denise Launay, a French organist and musicologist, commented on Jehan having a double personality similar to Robert Schumann.<sup>24</sup>

Jehan was not a dedicated school student in classical studies. He inherited his mother’s love of literature and beautiful language, so succeeded in French as well as drawing. However, since he had clearly demonstrated a musical calling, Albert allowed Jehan to drop out of school at age sixteen.<sup>25</sup> Albert taught him about harmony and then entrusted him to Augustin Pierson, the organist at the Cathédrale Saint-Louis in Versailles, for more advanced study in piano.<sup>26</sup>

Pierson gave a good technical foundation to Jehan, who, according to Olivier, had the temperament of a great pianist:

From a technical perspective, I have a vivid memory of his exceptional speed in the staccato part of *Tarass Boulba*, for example. And as for interpretation, I have heard him play, as few artists know how, Beethoven’s *Appassionata*, the *Fourth Ballade* of Chopin, Balakirev’s *Islamey*, Debussy’s *L’Isle Joyeuse* and several of the *Hungarian Rhapsodies* of Liszt, in which he displayed an indescribable fantasy and imagination.<sup>27</sup>

By the age of eighteen, Jehan was a young man very talented in music, playing piano and organ, well-versed in the liturgy, harmony, and improvisation, but still very whimsical, overflowing with an energy that was often out of control, in actions, in words, and in his music.

His enrollment in the Paris Conservatoire starting in 1929 marked a long period of training

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<sup>22</sup> Decourt, *Une Famille de Musiciens*, 64.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>24</sup> Decourt, *Jehan Alain*, 27.

<sup>25</sup> Decourt, *Une Famille de Musiciens*, 65.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

during which Jehan found his personal voice.<sup>28</sup> In 1929 and 1930, he wrote numerous works for piano, including some works of great originality, such as the *Etude de sonorité sur une double pédale* and the short pieces *Quarante variations*, *Thème et cinq variations*, *Etude sur un thème de quatre notes*, *Choral (Seigneur, donne-nous la paix éternelle)*, *Chanson triste*, and *Etude sur les doubles notes*, as well the *Berceuse sur deux notes qui cornent* and *Ballade en mode phrygien* for organ, among others.<sup>29</sup> At the Conservatoire, Alain studied harmony with André Bloch (1929), fugue with Georges Caussade (1930), composition with Paul Dukas (1933) and Jean Roger-Ducasse (1935), and finally organ with Marcel Dupré (1935).<sup>30</sup> The piano was Alain's instrument of choice until he enrolled in Dupré's organ class.<sup>31</sup> Unlike during his *collège* and *lycée* years, Alain was not a lazy student but worked hard, attaining first prize in harmony and fugue in 1933.<sup>32</sup> Alain thought very highly of his teachers, who in return respected Alain. Alain developed close relationships with Bloch, Caussade, Dupré, and especially Dukas, who was influential in helping him develop his compositional voice.<sup>33</sup>

Alain's education was not uninterrupted. He was preoccupied with several side projects and life events throughout his time at the Paris Conservatoire. The first major interruption in his education occurred in 1933, when he had to fulfill his mandatory two years of military service. Because he had dropped out of school as a teenager, Alain served in a low position and suffered from the basic material conditions and poor environment.<sup>34</sup> He coped by creating a military choir and directing his unit's band.<sup>35</sup> After the end of his military service in 1935, he married

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<sup>28</sup> Decourt, *Une Famille de Musiciens*, 70.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Decourt, *Jehan Alain*, 31.

<sup>31</sup> Reinburg, "Celebrating Alain's Centennial," 58.

<sup>32</sup> Decourt, *Jehan Alain*, 31.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

Madeleine Payan, a childhood friend, which marked the end of his carefree years as a student.<sup>36</sup> The deep love and affection between them is apparent in his letters to her, but the marriage also brought new responsibilities that forced him to focus on giving lessons to earn a living to support a growing family, and less time to spend on his studies.<sup>37</sup>

In the space of a few years from 1936 to 1938, Alain produced such masterworks as *Deuxième Fantaisie*, *Variations sur un thème de Clément Janequin*, and *Litanies* for organ, which were inspired by the turbulent political and social context of the time. During the 1930s, the political struggles of Third Republic France reached a climax when the Popular Front coalition won the 1936 parliamentary elections, only to have to the political alliance fall apart two years later. At the same time, the Spanish Civil War brought the tensions between fascist and communists across Europe to the breaking point, even as Basque refugees fled across the Pyrenees into France.<sup>38</sup> Alain's music seemed to express this climate of tension and anguish, even as life brought him its greatest joys with the births of his children.<sup>39</sup>

The year 1936 saw Alain's first successes. Employed as the organist for the Synagogue de Nazareth in Paris, he also gave piano and organ lessons privately and picked up a few hours of teaching at the Saint-Erembert school in Saint-Germain-en-Laye.<sup>40</sup> He then won first prize for composition from Les Amis de l'Orgue with his *Suite pour orgue*, a composition that he had been working on since at least 1934.<sup>41</sup> This organization would help him from then on to publish his works and to give concerts. His first child, daughter Lise (also referred to as "Mazile") was also born during the spring of 1936. This sparked the renewal of Alain's wonderment of early

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<sup>36</sup> Decourt, *Jehan Alain*, 44.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Decourt, *Une Famille de Musiciens*, 84.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

childhood, a continuation from when his youngest sister, Marie-Claire, was born when he was age fifteen.<sup>42</sup>

His successes continued in 1937, when Jean-Yves Daniel-Lesur invited him to perform recitals for the La Spirale concerts.<sup>43</sup> Alain also completed his most significant organ works, *Litanies* and *Second Danse: Deuils* (now a part of the set *Trois Danses*) by August of 1937.<sup>44</sup> However, tragedy struck the family the following month, when his sister Marie-Odile was killed in a mountain climbing accident on Mont-Blanc, during a family vacation.<sup>45</sup> This tragedy brought out more clearly the anguished side of his personality in his music. His grief for his sister weighing upon his highly sensitive nature, just as much as the rising tensions in the world around him.<sup>46</sup> At age twenty-six, his darker and more somber side became more apparent, reflected in his writings in his notebook that seem to foretell his own fate: “Those who live for a short time must live everything faster and more intensely” and “Always kiss your wife and your little girl as if you were seeing them for the last time.”<sup>47</sup>

The year 1938 brought more recognition for Alain’s talent, as well as the realization of Alain’s long-term goals. Les Amis de l’Orgue featured Alain in a concert at La Trinité, along with other young French composers including Daniel-Lesur and Olivier Messiaen.<sup>48</sup> On May 16, 1938, Virginie Schildge-Bianchini gave the first performance of *Litanies* in the United States.<sup>49</sup> He continued composing more music as well as editing manuscripts to be published by Hérelle.<sup>50</sup> His second daughter Agnes was born this year as well.

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<sup>42</sup> Decourt, *Jehan Alain*, 24.

<sup>43</sup> Decourt, *Une Famille de Musiciens*, 85.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Decourt, *Jehan Alain*, 46.

<sup>46</sup> Decourt, *Une Famille de Musiciens*, 86.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

Alain failed to win the organ competition at the Conservatoire in May of 1938, and after much hesitation, he re-enrolled there in 1939. His failure to achieve that was mostly due to Alain being unable to devote the necessary time to his organ technique and improvisation exercises, since he was preoccupied with working and his growing family.<sup>51</sup> Finally, in June 1939, with encouragement from his wife, Alain reapplied and won the first prize for organ.<sup>52</sup> However, the onset of war interrupted Alain's life. In August 1939, Alain was called to military service again. During the period known as the *Drôle de Guerre*, he again served as the director of a choir, in addition to playing for Masses and musical plays for the officers. Alain struggled again during this time, unable to compose.<sup>53</sup>

Tragically, Alain's life was cut short soon after the German invasion of France began. A skilled motorcyclist, a passion he retained from his childhood, Alain was a dispatch rider, assigned to reconnoiter the German advance on the eastern side of Saumur.<sup>54</sup> On June 20, 1940, he encountered a company of German soldiers, who attacked and eventually cornered him. Asked to give up his medals, he used all the bullets in his gun and tried to kill as many as he could, wounding as many as sixteen soldiers according to witness testimonies.<sup>55</sup> He died a hero, buried the same day near the place where he died. According to the citizens in the area, music manuscripts blew out of his sidecar and drifted throughout the countryside in the days after his death.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Decourt, *Jehan Alain*, 47.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Reinburg, "Celebrating Alain's Centennial," 60.

<sup>55</sup> Decourt, *Jehan Alain*, 248.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

## II. Musical Influences in Selected Works

“Everything is in silence. I have to find the place where my music is hidden. It rarely appears, but when it does, it drifts up like a pure, transparent vapour.”<sup>57</sup>

For Alain, music was his primary form of expression. During the eleven years of his compositional career, Alain produced at least 169 works in various genres.<sup>58</sup> Extensive research and interest has been concentrated in Alain’s organ works, but the majority of Alain’s solo instrumental pieces are for the piano.<sup>59</sup> In his short twenty-nine years of life, Alain synthesized a novel and personal compositional voice. Alain was not a lonely person but had only a small social circle, none of which were fellow composers.<sup>60</sup> His major concern with music was to share with his family, friends, and anyone else, wanting to communicate with his peers, as well as seeking validation to know he did something well.<sup>61</sup>

The strong influence and admiration of his father as a musician and composer was crucial to Alain’s development and cannot be understated. First, Albert was a key role model for Jehan in being a passionate church organist. Unlike Albert, whose father was unsupportive of his chosen career path, Jehan was encouraged by his father to pursue a musical path, trained in ideal musical conditions from his youth, and had an example through Albert of what a professional and successful musician could be.<sup>62</sup>

Jehan also grew up surrounded by the constant presence of church music. Through Albert and the Abbé Clément Besse’s initiative to reintroduce Gregorian chant into services, the

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<sup>57</sup> Farr, “Jehan Alain,” 22.

<sup>58</sup> Riley, “Jehan Alain,” 36.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

<sup>60</sup> Decourt, *Jehan Alain*, 34.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

church attracted great musicians such as Maurice Emmanuel and Georges Houdard, as well as other artists such as painter Maurice Denis, who was equally passionate about Alain's research and shared his goal for a new religious art that would revive the old dimensions of worship.<sup>63</sup> The group's effort attracted amateurs and critics from Paris who noted the originality of the Gregorian songs, as well as the quality of the choir and singers.<sup>64</sup> Being around this creative activity encouraged Jehan to create new, avant-garde works for the church.<sup>65</sup>

Once at the Paris Conservatoire, Alain began a long period of training in which he solidified his personal language. Alain benefited from his long years as a student at the Conservatoire, during which he was introduced to many influences that would be found in his music. Like a number of his peers, Alain attended the Colonial Exposition in Paris in 1931 and was captivated by the reconstruction of the temple of Angkor Wat, discovered foreign music, and confirmed his taste for new harmonies and rhythms.<sup>66</sup> In about September 1930, Alain confessed his fascination with exoticism in a letter to his friend Lola Bluhm: "I love old Oriental things, poems with opium and stories with purple lanterns, I love this atmosphere."<sup>67</sup> He also continued expanding on his interest in ancient music and writings that he inherited from his father. Through his friendship with Bluhm, he was introduced to the poetry of Omar Khayyam (1048 – 1131), which he quoted as inscriptions for several works.<sup>68</sup> Alain became fascinated with the lute tablatures of François Campion (1686 – 1748), which was introduced to him by Louis Baille, and applied himself to transcribing them for organ.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Decourt, *Jehan Alain*, 20.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Decourt, *Une Famille de Musiciens*, 71.

Again, as stated previously by Dichmont, there is no overarching compositional system in Alain's works.<sup>70</sup> This section will instead detail some of the more prominent influences found in Alain's works, namely the contemporaneous musical trends in harmony (octatonicism), literature as inspiration, exoticism, and religion. His use of diverse sources of inspiration created a kind of music that was very personal, in which the language was created according to the inspiration for it, the form emerging at the same time as the work itself. Form and technique in his music were of secondary importance to the musical emotion they served.<sup>71</sup> According to Claude Rostand, a French musicologist, this seemed to parallel the goal expressed by Franz Liszt: "The ideal would be that every subject would have its own particular form, from which it could not be separated."<sup>72</sup> Similarly, it is a bit like the compositional approach of Schumann, evoked by the German word *phantasieren*: "to dream, to give oneself over to imagination, to hallucinate, to wander, to improvise."<sup>73</sup> Most importantly, Alain hoped that his music would ooze magic and cast a spell upon the listener. He loved to quote from Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*, "Now that's magic."<sup>74</sup> Alain wanted, in his own terms, "an ecstatic music."<sup>75</sup>

### Contemporaneous Musical Trends

Alain had received a solid foundation from his father and Augustin Pierson before entering the Paris Conservatoire, and his teachers at the Conservatoire quickly recognized his gifts and potential. There was a reciprocity in admiration between Alain and his teachers, as evidenced in their letters to each other. When Alain was ill with pneumonia in 1933, Bloch

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<sup>70</sup> Dichmont, "Jehan Alain," 20.

<sup>71</sup> Decourt, *Une Famille de Musiciens*, 80.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

wrote to Alain's father, "Please tell my dear student and friend to not worry too much about the class. He first needs to be strong again and, with his natural gift helping him, he will very quickly catch up on the weeks he has missed."<sup>76</sup> Marcel Dupré forgave Alain's repeated absences, too, taking into account Alain's natural talents in improvisation.<sup>77</sup> Aside from being Alain's teacher, Dupré was a close friend of the family, having been a classmate of Alain's father, and would write to Albert, saying that Jehan was "sweating music."<sup>78</sup>

His time at the Conservatoire helped him to write in a more sophisticated manner. Though Alain composed in an irregular rhythm during his first six years at the Conservatoire, it was a time of creative outbursts and experimentation. Alain began to compose chamber music as well as songs for voice, and his musical ideas became bigger and more structured.<sup>79</sup> His knowledge in theory allowed him to overcome previous difficulties and constraints as he learned the rules to better transcend them by the grace of his inspiration.<sup>80</sup>

His teachers at the Conservatoire were fundamental in developing Alain's personal voice. Dukas was especially influential.<sup>81</sup> At the center of Parisian musical life, Dukas exemplified the thinking musician in the early twentieth century as a composer, critic, scholar, editor, and teacher at the *École Normale* and Paris Conservatoire.<sup>82</sup> Dukas "abhorred musical excesses and often called for a return to form, structure, and classical values," and as a professor, he insisted that "students must both have careful instruction in theory, and also learn the classics."<sup>83</sup> His

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<sup>76</sup> Decourt, *Jehan Alain*, 32.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>82</sup> Kristin Taavola, "Paul Dukas' 'Rameau Variations': Some Thoughts on the Origin of His Harmonic Language," *Theory & Practice* 40 (January 2015): 151.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 151-152.

compositions, though few in number, display the codification of his own training at the Conservatoire with Théodore Dubois's *Notes et études d'harmonie* and incorporate a liberal use of modal mixture, extended chords involving the use of ninths, elevenths, and fourteenths above the tonic, and unorthodox resolutions of the dominant.<sup>84</sup> By the time Alain entered the Conservatoire, Dukas also was fluent in utilizing octatonicism, which was adopted by many French composers from Russian composers such as Rimsky-Korsakov and Balakirev, with the whole tone and octatonic scales appearing in Dukas's music, as well as works by Claude Debussy and Olivier Messiaen.<sup>85</sup>

Through analyzing Alain's use of the tritone, third relations, the whole tone scale, and other treatment of the octatonic collection, one can draw a clear connection between Alain and other French composers active in the early twentieth century, such as Dukas, Debussy, and Messiaen.<sup>86</sup> One of the clearest examples of Alain's use of octatonic sets, specifically in his piano works, is the *Petite Rhapsodie ("Boeuf Mode")* (1931).<sup>87</sup> Its overall form is that of a miniature rondo, preceded by twelve measures of introduction and the last "A" section acting as a three-measure codetta (see figure 1).<sup>88</sup>

	Intro	A	B	A	B	A
Measures:	1-13	14-20	21-62	63-70	71-86	87-89

Figure 1: Large scale form of Alain, *Petite Rhapsodie ("Boeuf Mode")*.

<sup>84</sup> Taavola, "Paul Dukas' 'Rameau Variations'," 154.

<sup>85</sup> Denman, "The Keyboard Idiom of Jehan Alain," 40.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 3-4.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 82.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*.

The piece utilizes both whole tone collections, as well as the three octatonic collections.<sup>89</sup> In the introduction, Alain creates a polarity between the pitch centers of A and Eb, and utilizes the notes of WT1 [C#, D#, F, G, A, B] for all the pitch materials throughout, except for the topmost note on the last beat of each bar (see figure 2).<sup>90</sup> Alain's near-strict adherence to the collections and uses of octatonic subsets prolongs the tension throughout the work until the final chord of E-flat major in measure 89, which is free of any complicating dissonances.<sup>91</sup>

The image shows three systems of musical notation for the introduction of Alain's *Petite Rhapsodie*. The first system (measures 1-5) is marked 'Lent' and 'pp'. The second system (measures 6-11) continues the melodic and harmonic development. The third system (measures 12-13) shows the final two measures of the introduction, ending with a chord in E-flat major.

Figure 2: Alain, *Petite Rhapsodie*, mm. 1–13.

<sup>89</sup> Denman, "The Keyboard Idiom of Jehan Alain," 6 and 84.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 82-84.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 88.

Alain frequently utilizes the juxtaposition of pitches a tritone apart, as he did in *Petite Rhapsodie*. Another piece that prominently features the tritone is the *Étude sur un thème de 4 notes* (1929). The opening melody of four notes outlines a whole tone scale descending from F#4 to C4 (see figure 3).<sup>92</sup>



Figure 3: Alain, *Étude sur un thème de 4 notes*, mm. 1–3.

The miniature *Heureusement, la bonne fée sa marraine y mit bon ordre* (1931), written for Marie-Claire’s fifth birthday, also utilizes the tritone for structural organization. The melodic line, composed solely of notes from OCT(1,2) [C, D-flat, E-flat, E, F-sharp, G, A, B-flat]—except for an F5 in measure 6—is supported by a series of chords in the left hand that are mostly whole-tone clusters.<sup>93</sup> Both the melody and bass line in the first four measures span a tritone, and the registral extremes of each line combined spell a diminished-seventh chord of G3–D-flat4–B-flat4–F-flat5 (see figure 4).<sup>94</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Denman, “The Keyboard Idiom of Jehan Alain,” 52.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*



Figure 4: Alain, *Heureusement, la bonne fée sa marraine y mit bon ordre*, mm. 1–4.

Another piece that displays Alain's assimilation of the octatonic language is *Thème varié à 5/8* (1930). With five variations in a 5/8 time signature, the work is characteristic of Alain's rhythmic and metric flexibility. It features the clear melodic line and open, transparent scoring typical of his organ writing (see figure 5).

Andante ♩ = 144  
avec une sonorité chaude et un peu éteinte

*mf*

*diminuendo* **Cédez** **Tempo** **Sans rall.**

*p*

Figure 5: Main theme of Alain, *Thème varié à 5/8* (1930), mm. 1–11.

## Exoticism

Like many during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in France, Alain was fascinated by the music and philosophies of the Far East. “Orientalist” music and art appeared in France as early as the 1860s.<sup>95</sup> By the end of the 1920s, trends of exoticism appeared in diverse media such as dress, furniture, décor, and literature. Debussy was famously inspired by his viewing of the Javanese gamelan in 1889, but Elaine Brody, in *Paris: The Musical Kaleidoscope*, notes that the exposition featured other musical experiences: “French organists were at the top of their profession. Widor, Guilmant, and Dubois, among others, gave fifteen organ recitals. Rimsky-Korsakov conducted two concerts of Russian music, and a Russian choral group . . . performed.”<sup>96</sup> The French fascination with Russian music grew to a frenzy by the twentieth century: “When Serge Diaghilev and his troupe streaked across the artistic firmament of Paris in 1909, his dazzling achievement astonished even the sophisticated citizens of the French capital.”<sup>97</sup>

The influence of exoticism on Alain is clear through his letters and music. Alain listened to Borodin, Mussorgsky, Balakirev, Rimski-Korsakov, Albeniz, and de Falla on his phonograph and expressed admiration for their melodic and harmonic colors.<sup>98</sup> The Colonial Exposition of 1931 was as inspiring to Alain as the Universal Exposition of 1889 had been for Debussy. It is important to note that authenticity was not of the highest priority for the Exposition organizers, so the exoticism as demonstrated in Alain’s music is also not deemed authentic – “Let us not forget that at the exhibition, Balinese dances and African music were mixed unscrupulously in

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<sup>95</sup> Denman, “The Keyboard Idiom of Jehan Alain,” 31.

<sup>96</sup> Elaine Brody, *Paris: The Musical Kaleidoscope, 1870-1925* (New York: George Braziller, 1987), 77-78.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*, 87-88.

<sup>98</sup> Decourt, *Une Famille de Musiciens*, 79.

the same show . . . The musical exoticism of Jehan is also less than authentic, as several examples show.”<sup>99</sup>

Alain enthusiastically wrote of his love of exoticism to Lola Bluhm in 1940, shortly before his death:

I have just spent a wonderful half hour! I found the occasion that I had been looking for six months: in a dirty bistro and smoky like all bistros for soldiers, I sat in the corner . . . with two friends: an “Oranais” (person from Oran) and a Perpignan. I was able to talk for a long time while smoking and drinking beer and they wanted to take off the mask, talk a little about their country, their real country: much more Spain, Algeria, Argentina. . . They enchanted me, whispered fandangos, flamencos, malaguenas, and others. These songs which, like your Moroccan records, stir in me the most prodigious and make me crazy. . . If there is in me a musical fiber, it is that of this music. When they were singing, I seemed to hear my native tongue speak. . .”<sup>100</sup>

Alain concludes the letter: “This music that the Conservatoire ignores, that the musicians judge puerile or monotone, that the comic musicians vainly try to caricature by pinching their nose, without lingering on a subject without trial. . . But we “understand,” do we not?”<sup>101</sup>

Jazz was also part of this exoticism that Alain enjoyed, saying that he was “drawn to it as much as he dread[ed] it.”<sup>102</sup> Marie-Claire recounted that Alain listened frequently to jazz records.<sup>103</sup> At the time, jazz in France was understood as an African music and so was understood using the same exoticist language as was applied to North African and Asian music.<sup>104</sup>

An early example of exoticism in Alain’s music is the piece *Togo*, composed in 1929 and the earliest piece to be included in the collected piano music published in 1944.<sup>105</sup> Alain reused

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<sup>99</sup> Decourt, *Jehan Alain*, 35.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> For a more detailed discussion of jazz being received as an African music in France, see Jeffrey Jackson, *Making Jazz French: Music and Modern Life in Interwar Paris* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>105</sup> Denman, “The Keyboard Idiom of Jehan Alain,” 44.

a melody from a short sketch he wrote in 1928, *Fox-trot de l<sup>e</sup> classe*, inspired by his love of jazz.<sup>106</sup> Francois Sabatier cites this piece as noteworthy in emphasizing the rise of exoticism in France after 1918: “The success of the Negro art reached its apogee in the 1920s and music took part in it, under the influence of Africa itself (*Danse du Tchad* by Jean Rivier in 1928, *Togo* by Jehan Alain in 1929, *Tam-tam* of Henri Tomasi in 1934, *Rhapsodie malgache* by Raymond Loucheur in 1945) or of the genera from the black continent but revealed in America.”<sup>107</sup>

According to James Denman, “The French-African colony of Togoland had been granted self-rule in 1927, a development that would have been in the French national consciousness of the time. Given Alain’s attraction to the exotic, we may imagine *Togo* to embody his own musical commentary.”<sup>108</sup> The melody and harmony are free of any traditional harmonic association with each other – because of this, Alain employs rhythmic means to convey a sense of phrase, doing so by relaxing the rhythmic motion (see figure 6).<sup>109</sup>



Figure 6: Alain, *Togo*, first line.

Another piece that clearly demonstrates Alain’s interest in exoticism is the *Choral et variations*, more appropriately called *Mythologies japonaises*, composed in 1932. The piece

<sup>106</sup> Denman, “The Keyboard Idiom of Jehan Alain,” 44.

<sup>107</sup> Decourt, *Jehan Alain*, 35.

<sup>108</sup> Denman, “The Keyboard Idiom of Jehan Alain,” 45.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

features an initial choral theme followed by five “variations,” each of which contains a small inscription alluding to a Japanese myth. The Japanese mythologies are based primarily on two early eighth century books, the *Kojiki* (A.D. 712) and *Nihongi* (A.D. 720).<sup>110</sup> Alain does not mention this work in his letters or personal notes, so it is unclear what compelled him to write it. However, the recurring theme found throughout the variations (see figure 7) leads this author to believe that it represents Izanami, the goddess of creation and death and the first wife of the god Izanagi, as this pair, unlike many other deity pairs, are featured throughout many myths.<sup>111</sup>

Choral varié (1) ♩ = 112

mf con sord. senza sord. dim.

con sord. dim.

Figure 7: Alain, *Mythologies Japonaises*, primary theme.

### Plainsong/Religion

Alain’s parents practiced a Jansenist-tinged version of devout Catholicism.<sup>112</sup> In addition to the traditional values of “love thy neighbor,” charity, and forgiveness, Jansenism also

<sup>110</sup> Ron Smith, *Mythologies of the World: A Guide to Sources* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers in English, 1981): 129.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Decourt, *Jehan Alain*, 22-23.

emphasized the value of work, of pain, of overcoming difficulties, and the insistence on sin and weakness of mankind.<sup>113</sup> Alain's parents instilled these same values in the children, and these shaped and guided Alain's worldview, particularly his thoughts on the two World Wars, which he viewed as punishment sent to the French for their sins.<sup>114</sup>

Alain's father also taught Jehan the mysteries of Gregorian chant. Albert gave Jehan a taste for modality, in the forms defined by Maurice Emmanuel, as well as a taste for unaccompanied solos and a pure melodic line.<sup>115</sup> Albert had amassed an extensive music library, which Jehan freely accessed. He drew upon many of the old masters, which he found in a collection edited by Felix Raugel.<sup>116</sup> His knowledge and love of ancient music was expressed on the manuscript copy of *Variations sur un theme de Clément Jannequin*, which he gave to Pierre Segond: "It must be possible for a 20<sup>th</sup> century musician to preserve the soul of this ancient music. The language doesn't matter, only the spirit speaks."<sup>117</sup>

Alain's religious influence may also be traced to the works of Charles Tournemire, particularly *L'Orgue mystique*. Tournemire's most extensive composition, *L'Orgue mystique* is a group of fifty-one sets of five pieces each, covering the cycle of the Roman Catholic liturgical year with each set being based on the Gregorian chants of the day.<sup>118</sup> The musical language utilized in the work became an important legacy for the following generation of organists. Those who were receptive to this kind of liturgical music diversified their compositions in regards to genre, harmonies, and use of instrumental timbres when used in a liturgical context.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Decourt, *Jehan Alain*, 23.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Decourt, *Une Famille de Musiciens*, 77.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>118</sup> Vincent E. Rone, "A Voice Cries Out in the Wilderness: The French Organ School Responds to the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church," (PhD diss., University of California Santa Barbara, 2014), 59.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 76-77.

Composers such as Alain consciously or unconsciously assumed roles of “mystic philosophers,” or at least “liturgical commentators,” after Tournemire’s example.<sup>120</sup>

Most of Alain’s religious influences are found, as would be expected, in his organ works, with Alain utilizing Gregorian chant in one of two ways: when it is exposed in short phrases but interrupted with phrases of free composition or imitation; or when several Gregorian fragments are presented in a piece.<sup>121</sup> The first method appears in *Variations sur Lucis Creator* (1932), which consists of a five-voice harmonization of the Gregorian hymn followed by two lengthy variations of the melodically unaltered cantus firmus first presented in the pedal line.<sup>122</sup> *Postlude pour l’Office de Complines* uses five different chants from the Sunday office of Compline, the melodies superimposed over a slow pulse.<sup>123</sup>

Of his piano works, one that clearly demonstrates the religious influence in Alain’s music is *Ecce Ancilla Domini*. Also known as the Angelus, *Ecce Ancilla Domini*’s inscription reads, “Ecce ancilla domini/Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum,” or “Behold the handmaid of the Lord/Be it done unto me according to thy word,” from the Gospel of Luke. Written in a loose theme and variation form, the piece presents a theme (see figure 8) containing chant-like characteristics (based very loosely on the *Ave Maris stella*<sup>124</sup>), which Alain then develops throughout the piece in different voices and keys.

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<sup>120</sup> Rone, “A Voice Cries Out,” 76-77.

<sup>121</sup> William James Dorroh, Jr., “A Study of Plainsong in the Organ Compositions of Six Twentieth Century French Composers” (PhD diss., George Peabody College for Teachers, 1978), 34 and 104.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>124</sup> Kenneth Huber, phone interview by author, April 15, 2017.

ECCE ANCILLA DOMINI  
 Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum  
 Saint Luc Ch.I



Figure 8: Alain, *Ecce ancilla domini*, mm. 1–8.

Alain's most famous work, *Litanies* (1937), is also perhaps Alain's clearest expression of religious influence. Composed shortly before the tragic death of Marie-Odile, the work was originally titled *Supplications*, and it may have served as a source of comfort for Alain after the accident.<sup>125</sup> The inscription attached to the beginning of the work reflects Alain's mourning: "When the Christian soul no longer finds new words in its distress for imploring the mercy of God, it repeats incessantly the same prayer with a fervent faith. Reason reaches its limit. Faith alone follows its ascension."<sup>126</sup> He elaborates in instructions to Bernard Gavoty regarding the work's performance: "When you play this piece, you must give the impression of an ardent evocation. The prayer is not a complaint but an irrepressible hurricane that overthrows everything in its path. It is also an obsession: one must fill the ears of men . . . and of the Good

<sup>125</sup> Jack Mitchener, "A Lesson on Alain's Litanies," *The American Organist* 44, no. 11 (November 2010): 58.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

Lord! If, in the end, you do not feel exhausted, then you will neither have understood nor played as I want it.”<sup>127</sup>

Composed in 1930, *Choral*, inscribed *Seigneur, donne-nous la paix éternelle*, reflects Alain’s invocation of a prayer. The opening inscription translates to “Lord, give us eternal peace,” while the final inscription reads “I want the square earth/I want to tear this blue sky/I want to see behind/I want my temples to break under unreasonable monstrosities/Lord, give me eternal peace.” The piece is short (one page) and takes the form of a condensed double variation (ABABA). Its initial two-measure phrase, repeated three times in succession at each statement, is reminiscent of the significance of the Holy Trinity within the Catholic church (see figure 9). The three “A” sections are reminiscent, to this author, of the three “thy-petitions” (“thy name,” “thy kingdom,” “thy will”) found in the Lord’s Prayer.

*Seigneur, donne-nous la paix éternelle.*



Figure 9: Alain *Choral*, mm. 1–5.

## Literature

Alain’s grandmother, Alice Alberty, was also an excellent pianist, and Alain inherited from his grandmother not only his musical talent but also an attachment to literature and a gift

<sup>127</sup> Mitchner, “A Lesson on Alain’s Litanies,” 58.

for poetic expression.<sup>128</sup> His mother Magdeleine also enjoyed literature and would frequently recite favorite poems from memory. She taught the children fairy tales as well as the great works and poems, cultivating in her firstborn a taste for beautiful language and sound of words.<sup>129</sup> Not only was the content of the poetry fascinating to Alain, but also simply the sounds of the spoken language intrigued him. He would frequently create words simply to enjoy the sounds of that kind of spoken, vocal utterance.<sup>130</sup> Alain enjoyed the play of words, as depicted in his writings and drawings.<sup>131</sup> There are approximately 460 letters and writings currently in possession of the Alain family, as well as more than 260 drawings.<sup>132</sup>

As previously mentioned, Alain enjoyed the poetry of Omar Khayyam, introduced to him by Lola Bluhm, and occasionally used passages from the poetry as inscriptions for his works.<sup>133</sup> Alain also went through a medieval phase, writing in Gothic letters and signing his name as *Jehan Escholier*.<sup>134</sup> He was fascinated with the poems of François Villon (1431 – 1463?), a French poet of the late Middle Ages, particularly the *Ballade des pendus* (“Ballad of the hanged”), which Villon supposedly wrote in prison while awaiting his execution.<sup>135</sup> He drew the poem on the wallpaper in his bedroom, and it eventually served as the basis of his piano work *Dans le rêve laissé par la Ballade des pendus de François Villon* (1931), one of Alain’s longer piano works.<sup>136</sup> The piece’s rhetoric is hypnotic, successfully creating a trance-like state with

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<sup>128</sup> Reinberg, “Celebrating Alain’s Centennial,” 58.

<sup>129</sup> Decourt, *Jehan Alain*, 22.

<sup>130</sup> Huber, phone interview.

<sup>131</sup> Decourt, *Jehan Alain*, 28.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>134</sup> Decourt, *Une Famille de Musiciens*, 78.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

occasional unsettling dreamscapes with its repetitive figurations, similar to Ravel's *Le Gibet* (see figure 10).

**III**

Dans le rêve laissé par la  
ballade des pendus de Villon.

**Pas trop vite**

*pp (dans le son)* *éloigner*

*simile*  
*progressivement*

Figure 10: Alain, *Dans le rêve laissé par la Ballade des pendus de François Villon*, mm. 1–4.

**Très lent**  
Sans presser ni ralentir jusqu'à la fin

**PIANO** *pp* *un peu marqué*

*Sourdine durant toute la pièce*

*p expressif*

Figure 11: Ravel, *Le Gibet*, mm. 1–7.

Alain's signature piano work, *Tarass Boulba* (1936), highlights the advanced technique Alain possessed as a pianist. As his brother Olivier recounted, Alain was a talented pianist, citing specifically his impressive staccato technique in this work.<sup>137</sup> Alain also states of his technique in a letter to Denise Billard: "I worked a lot on Schumann's ten first *Etudes symphoniques*. This is a masterpiece. It classifies you as a composer. What a force! This is no doubt music. It is convenient to work on, and as a difficulty level in general, this is something that fits me: double notes and octaves, that suits me!"<sup>138</sup> These technical aspects are found throughout *Tarass Boulba*.

The inspiration behind this work is unclear, as the subtitle for *Tarass Boulba* is *Encelade, Icare etc.* *Tarass Boulba* is a romanticized historical novella by Nikolai Gogol, first written in 1835 and then revised in 1842.<sup>139</sup> Its plot describes the life of an old Cossack, Tarass Boulba, and his two sons, Andriy and Ostap, who studied at the Kiev Academy before all three joined the war efforts of the Cossacks against Poland. Though the novella is an obvious influence, less clear are the references to *Encelade* and *Icare* who are characters from two separate Greek myths. Enceladus was one of the Giants that fought in the war against the Gods, and Icare refers to the myth of Icarus, the son of Daedalus who sought to escape from Crete and died from hubris. Alain did not write anything about this work to clarify the inspiration behind it. However, two facts are readily apparent of the work: first, that it was inspired by some kind of literature, and second, it contains virtuosic aspects that exemplify Alain's technical proficiency as a pianist. There exists speculation, however, that Alain sought to evoke all these proud and combative heroes in a single piece (see figure 11). The theme's incessant and driving rhythm

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<sup>137</sup> Decourt, *Une Famille de Musiciens*, 65.

<sup>138</sup> Decourt, *Jehan Alain*, 64.

<sup>139</sup> Hubert Juin, "De Tarass Boulba à Tchitchikov," *Esprit* (1940-), no. 252 (July/August 1957): 144.

finally gains height towards the end of the piece before ending in a crash, signifying the characters' smashed hopes after pursuing dreams they are ultimately unable to attain.<sup>140</sup>

## TARASS BOULBA

Encelade, Icare *etc.*

The image shows a musical score for the piece 'Tarass Boulba' by Alain, measures 1-7. The score is written for piano and consists of two systems. The first system is marked 'Souple' and 'p' (piano), with a 'marcato' section at the end. The second system is marked 'Presto' and 'f' (forte), featuring triplets and a 'poco a poco cresc. e accel.' (poco a poco crescendo and acceleration) section.

Figure 12: Alain, *Tarass Boulba*, mm. 1–7.

### Conclusion

One of the terrible results of the tumultuous first half of the twentieth century was the tragic loss of many talented young artists. As cited by Elizabeth Ann Wallace, an anonymous writer in *Literary Digest* noted that forty-seven painters, “mostly young and already of some reputation,” were lost in World War I, and makes the point that the artistic reflection of society “would be compromised by this loss.”<sup>141</sup> Alain was sadly one of those whose lives were cut

<sup>140</sup> Huber, phone interview.

<sup>141</sup> Elizabeth Ann Wallace, “The Effect of War on the Lives and Work of Piano Composers and the Evolution of Compositional Technique in War-Related Piano Pieces from 1849 through the Second World War” (PhD diss., Texas Tech University, 1990), 181.

short too soon. So significant is this fact that his brother Olivier entreats readers of Decourt's book to remember that "all the texts and drawings are the works of a young man, aged 19 in the first letters, and only 29 at the time of his death."<sup>142</sup>

Even in his short life, however, what Jehan Alain left behind displayed his personal voice and innate gifts. Alain was clearly a talented musician and composer on the cusp of success. As Marie-Claire recalled:

He used to write as one breathes, very quickly, without the help of any instrument, on a corner of the table or on the commuter train, taking notes on ideas, large fragments or even entire pieces, on long sheets of white paper on which he drew the lines himself with a fountain pen, for as long as his inspiration lasted. [...] His ideas was very clear, one could see it in the early drafts; its whole shape would be there, he was simply correcting a few details: it was as if the work had already ripened in his mind and then he would put it down on paper. Even his manuscripts in pencil are almost completely free of cross outs, and his written music was very confident.<sup>143</sup>

One can only wonder what Alain – so similar in ways to other great composers such as Schumann (in temperament) and Chopin (personal synthesis and improvisatory gift) – may have accomplished had he lived a full life. Alain's approach to color and harmonic language, the breadth of influences that shaped his music, his keen expression of his world view, and his sympathetic character, emotionally and philosophically, makes his character and music worth exploring.

One should play Alain's piano works not because they are necessarily an important contribution to the standard piano repertoire, but, as Olivier Alain states in the preface of the collected piano works, "It is the very life of a man, a complex man, fertile in dazzling explosions

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<sup>142</sup> Decourt, *Jehan Alain*, 30.

<sup>143</sup> Decourt, *Une Famille de Musiciens*, 73.

with subtle strokes, that needs to be revived.”<sup>144</sup> Or, perhaps best summed up by Alain himself in the preface of his piano works:

You will find here a series of impressions. With a few exceptions, one should not look for a lesson or a reasoning, but a passing vision. I have not always marked the interpretation I wish, which is nevertheless the most important thing in these small pieces whose simplicity might make them seem impoverished or bizarre, fruitless or unpleasing. Besides, this interpretation is absolutely variable. But my goal would be reached, and it would be a great joy for me, if one of you, readers, suddenly found himself in one of these lines and would be stopped, touched, and then proceed having received a little of that sweetness that bathes you when you have met a friendly glance.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Jehan Alain, *L'Oeuvre de piano* (Paris: Alphonse Leduc & Cie., 1944). I am grateful to Zoé Hommertzhaim, who assisted me by translating portions of this book.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

## Appendix

### Chronology of the Solo Piano Works

This chronology is based upon the list of works as found in the Gommier Catalogue<sup>146</sup> and at Jehan Alain, *site officiel*.<sup>147</sup> Asterisks indicate those included in the collected piano works published by Alphonse Leduc.

Date	Title
June 1929	*Togo
November 1929	*Etude sur un thème de quatre notes
1929	Chanson triste
January 1930	Ballade en mode phrygien, for organ or piano
February 1930	*Thème et cinq variations
April 1930	Quarante variations
August 12, 1930	Adagio
August 1930	*Ecce ancilla Domini
October 1930	*Seigneur, donne-nous la paix éternelle (Choral)
October 1930	*Etude de sonorité sur une double pédale
October 1930	*Etude sur les doubles notes
December 1930	Pour le défrichage
1930	Lettre à son amie Lola pour la consoler d'avoir attrapé la grippe
February 23, 1931	Mélodie-sandwich
February 1931	*Petite rhapsodie
March 1931	Verset-Choral, for organ or piano
April 1931	*Lumière qui tombe d'un vasistas
May 1931	Histoire sur des tapis, entre des murs blancs
August 10, 1931	*Heureusement, la bonne fée sa marraine y mit bon ordre
August 22, 1931	Nocturne, soir du 22 août 31
September 26, 1931	26 septembre 1931
September 1931	En dévissant mes chaussettes
October 4, 1931	*Dans le rêve laissé par la Ballade des pendus de François Villon
March 1932	Le rosier de Mme Husson
August 1932	Trois minutes : Grave, for organ or piano
1932	*Choral et variations (Mythologies japonaises)
1932	Fugue en mode de fa, for organ or piano
1932	*Trois minutes : Un cercle d'argent, for piano or organ
1932	*Trois minutes : Romance, for piano or organ
1932	Chant donné, for organ or piano
February 1933	Premier Prelude profane (Wieder an), for organ or piano
March 6, 1933	Deuxième Prélude profane (Und jetzt), for organ or piano

<sup>146</sup> Jacques Gommier, *Catalogue des Manuscrits musicaux de Jehan Alain en la possession de ses enfants*, (Manuscript, Le Pecq, 1979).

<sup>147</sup> Jehan Alain, *site officiel*, "Son oeuvre." <http://www.jehanalain.com/> (accessed February 5, 2017).

January 1935	Andante
1935	Fugue
1935	De Jules Lemaître, for organ or piano
1935	Fantasmagorie, for organ or piano
1935	Nocturne
1935	Suite monodique: Animato
1935	*Prélude
1935	Prélude et fugue
1935	Suite monodique: Adagio, molto rubato
1935	Suite monodique: Vivace
April 17, 1936	Berceuse
October 1936	*Tarass Boulba
1937	Quand Marion
1937	Nous n'irons plus au bois
1937	Final pour une sonatine facile
1937	*Suite facile: Barcarolle
1937	Idée pour improviser sur le Christe eleison
1937	Idée pour improviser sur le deuxième Amen
September 8, 1938	Monodie, for organ or piano
1938	Le petit Jésus s'en va-t-à l'école
undated	Une scie
undated	*Il pleuvra toute la journée
undated	Sur le mode ré, mi, fa
undated	Amen
undated	Un très vieux motif
undated	Théorie
undated	Le gai liseron
undated	Sonata
undated	Mephisto
undated	La peste
undated	Comme quoi les projets les plus belliqueux
undated	Le bon Roi Dagobert
undated	*Histoire d'un homme qui jouait de la trompette dans la forêt vierge

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