

DAVID BRIGGS PLAYS PIERRE COCHEREAU



Improvisations of Pierre Cochereau in his centenary year 2024
performed by David Briggs on the J. W. Walker organ
of Exeter College Chapel, Oxford



BASE2 MUSIC







DAVID BRIGGS

TRACK LISTING

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|----|---|-------|
| 1 | Deux improvisations sur la Marseillaise | 07:32 |
| 2 | Berceuse à la mémoire de Louis Vierne | 07:02 |
| | Suite Française (transcribed by Jeanne Joulain) | |
| 3 | Kyrie | 01:29 |
| 4 | Flûtes | 02:52 |
| 5 | Basse de Trompette | 00:44 |
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| 8 | Scherzo Symphonique | 06:58 |
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I suppose it is true to say that most musicians, artists, writers, painters, and sculptors have people they look up to, in terms of significant influence. For me, this is certainly Pierre Cochereau, who was the Organist at Notre-Dame de Paris from January 1955 until his premature death in March 1984. I never met Cochereau in person, only in spirit, largely through the near-daily transcription of some of his most famous improvisations from Notre-Dame, which I wrote down over an 11-year period from LPs and later from CDs. I heard Cochereau in the flesh just once, when we attended a Messe Grand Orgue at Notre-Dame during a family vacation in Paris in August 1980. I'll never forget the mesmerising experience of hearing him improvise live: the massive crescendo-diminuendo of the Entrée, the piquant, impressionistic pointillism of the Offertoire, the post-romantic opulence of the Communion Fugue, and the scintillating frisson of the Final, during which nobody moved a muscle until the Final D major chord had finished reverberating. At the end of the Mass, the Dean of the cathedral announced, "et maintenant, Pierre Cochereau aux Grandes Orgues." It was like some extraordinary sacred rock concert, with the improviser seemingly assuming a semi-mythical status.

Although Cochereau showed definite signs of prodigy as a young musician, his father urged him to study law. He did so briefly, but it lasted less than a year, and then the brilliant 18-year-old Pierre commenced his studies at the Paris Conservatoire. His organ professor, Marcel Dupré, described him as "a phenomenon without equal in the history of the French 20th-century organ." Cochereau gained prizes in many complementary disciplines: organ, harmony, counterpoint, music history, and composition. In 1955, he was appointed to the world's most prestigious tribunal, Notre-Dame de Paris.

The organ sounded marvellous – we have recordings made by Cochereau from 1957-58 – but it was in quite poor condition. In 1962, Cochereau electrified the organ with a brand new console in the American style, made by Jean

Hermann. The organ gained a new and very controversial set of Chamades in 1970, voiced by Robert Boisseau, and the mixture work was altered according to the neo-classical ideal, including a 32-foot Grand Plein Jeu in the French Classical Style. The symbiosis between the Notre-Dame instrument and Cochereau's incredible genius in the art of improvisation made him world-famous. Cochereau loved living life very much in the fast lane – always in a hurry, nervously smoking his Gauloises sipping his Johnny Walker Red, driving his fast Citroën CX Prestige, and administering the Music Conservatoires of Le Mans, Nice, and finally Lyon.

In 1986, I had just started as Assistant Organist at Hereford Cathedral in the UK. I'd been in love with the improvisations of Cochereau since I was a nine-year-old choirboy at Birmingham Cathedral in 1970. Fortunately, all of his improvisations at Notre-Dame were recorded from 1968 onwards by his friend and close confidant François Carbou, founder of Disques FY/Solstice. Many are still available on the Solstice label, and for me, as for many others, they represent an almost daily source of musical nourishment.

The tradition at Notre-Dame on Christmas Eve was to improvise a huge fresco, most often on a well-known French carol. On 24th December 1968, the maître chose the French carol "Venez Divin Messie." I'd known this recording for several years, and in September 1986, I started to write it down. Little did I know that I was embarking on an 11-year project, transcribing many of his most famous improvisations at Notre-Dame, with the blessing of his family. I went through about four different cassette machines, with the endless start-stop, write down three or four notes, pause, rewind, start-stop, write down another few notes, pause, rewind. I worked out once that it took an average of four hours to write down one minute of music – so you could definitely say it was a labour of love.

It is an honour to have been invited to record this selection of my Cochereau transcriptions in order to mark the centenary of the birth of this extraordinary musician. I begin with two improvisations on La Marseillaise, originally from two significant state occasions at Notre-Dame. The first was recorded on the day of the funeral of President Charles de Gaulle in November 1970, when the cathedral was packed to the brim with thousands of visitors, silently wishing to pay their final respects. Pierre Cochereau was entrusted with the responsibility of providing a suitable, continuous musical backdrop, lasting several hours. The second, improvised at a Mass for Peace in 1977, in the presence of President Giscard d'Estaing, could hardly be imbued with a more profound, heartfelt emotion. "Redeemer of heathens," or in Latin "veni redemptor gentium"), BWV 659, distinctly presents this traditionally Catholic melody attributed to Saint Ambrose (c.330-397).

The Berceuse à la mémoire de Louis Vierne and the Toccata: Marche des Rois both formed part of a celebrated LP entitled L'Extraordinaire Pierre Cochereau, released on the Philips label in April 1970, and represent the maître at the undisputed zenith of his powers. The Berceuse is based on the work of the same name by his illustrious predecessor, Louis Vierne. Cochereau incorporates Vierne's theme into his own voluptuous palette, producing a work of rich harmonic generosity as well as formal cohesion. The Toccata is a model of pivot-note modulation, never staying in the same key for more than a few seconds, and driving forward with all the energy of some colossal sonic tidal wave. The Scherzo Symphonique (October 1968) shows Cochereau in fully extroverted mode, with truly Horowitzian manual technique and consummate control of formal structure, balancing two contrasting themes (one rhythmic, one lyrical) with seemingly effortless panache. Not a single note is wasted.

The Suite Française (transcribed by Jeanne Joulain) and the Triptyque Symphonique both emanate from the celebrated, multiple award-winning

1977 double LP set entitled L'Art de l'Improvisation. I recall purchasing this recording at the gift shop in Notre-Dame in August 1980, while on a family holiday. It was so frustrating not being able to listen to it until we returned home, 10 days later! The Suite Française was designed as an 'Evocation de l'Instrument du XVIIIe', with a compendium of short movements improvised specifically in the French classical style, much in the manner of composers François Couperin and Nicolas de Grigny. The registration plan for these short movements was exactly the same as in the original 18th-century compositions: a Plein Jeu (Kyrie) with the cantus firmus strongly stated on the Pedal Trompette stop, expressive, gentle movements for the Flutes and Tierce en taille, a distinctly perky Basse de Trompette, and finally an Offertoire, featuring the magisterial, sizzling Grand Jeu of Cornets and Reeds. Pleasingly, it was possible to recreate this sound world rather authentically on the Exeter College Walker instrument. The Triptyque Symphonique is a monumental and extremely moving work in three sections – Introduction and Scherzo, Fugue and Final – with the template for the original 1977 recording proposed by French organ historian Claude Noisette de Crauzat. The middle movement, a rare example in Cochereau's recorded output of a fully-improvised, complete fugue, remains strictly contrapuntal to the end, and surely gives J. S. Bach a run for his money with its sense of sheer, cumulative inevitability.

The final Toccata has all the energy of a fully-fledged electric storm, the kind that any pilot would divert around by at least 60 miles to avoid being buffeted by the associated up- and downdrafts. The final hugely extended cadence in G major provides a sense of safe musical and spiritual arrival, imbued with its reassuring halo of diatonicism and well-being.

Text: David Briggs

When Olivier Latry, the organist titulaire of Notre-Dame de Paris, played the inaugural recital of the 1994 J. W. Walker organ at Exeter College, Oxford, he famously described the instrument as a “French organ with an English accent.” But what exactly is the story behind this remarkable and pioneering instrument—the first-ever 19th-century French-inspired chapel organ in any of the Oxbridge colleges?

The history of Exeter's current organ begins in the late 1830s. Fellows of Exeter were among the first in Oxford to embrace what is now known as the Oxford Movement, a religious movement seeking validation and authenticity in the teachings and traditions of the ancient church. This movement also sought to revive or re-imagine the colourful liturgical actions of the pre-Reformation Church. Worship was transformed: the stark simplicity of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, with its stripped-back rituals, began to be embellished and expanded. Colour and movement, vestments, and music were increasingly centred around the altar, where the earthly and the heavenly met in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

The Fellows of Exeter realised that their Jacobean chapel, dominated by its large pulpit with barley twist columns, was not fit for this expression of faith. Consequently, in 1853, they decided to build an entirely new chapel, designed by Sir George Gilbert-Scott, one of the stalwart architects of the Oxford Movement. Gilbert-Scott chose 13th-century French Gothic as the style for Exeter College Chapel, a pioneering choice in 1850s England. Indeed, as architectural historian Geoffrey Tyack has argued, with his design for Exeter Chapel, Gilbert-Scott was the first English architect to do so. The most well-known French Gothic building (though not the only one) to inspire Gilbert-Scott for Exeter Chapel was, of course, the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris.



In 1860, one year after the chapel was dedicated, William Hill, Britain's most acclaimed organ builder at the time, built the first organ for the new building. Gilbert-Scott designed its façade, making Exeter Chapel one of the few worship spaces where the organ façade and the building were designed concurrently by the same architect. That very façade is still in place to this day.

Fast-forward over 120 years: Like Gothic Revival architecture of the Victorian age, high-Victorian organs also fell out of favour during the intervening decades. As a result, the original Hill organ of Exeter Chapel was enlarged and rebuilt several times, eventually reaching a state of disrepair by the late 1980s. While the early post-WWII period in Britain was marked by interest in so-called neo-classical organs, loosely modelled after the organs J. S. Bach would have used in the 18th century (a pioneering Oxbridge example being the 1965 Frobenius organ of Queen's College Chapel, Oxford), the last quarter of the 20th century saw a growing inclination towards French Romantic organ music and the instruments suited to that style. Composers such as Franck, Widor, Vierne, Dupré, Tournemire, and Duruflé became of particular interest, and many young British organists travelled to France to study the legacy of these composers with eminent French organists.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Oxford organists began to feel the absence of an instrument suited to this repertoire in their college chapels. The ageing 1960s organ of Exeter Chapel eventually paved the way for the first French-inspired organ in Oxbridge, replicating a process similar to the one that had led to the construction of Gilbert-Scott's chapel in the 1850s. In both cases, while the renovation and improvement of the existing structure was not out of the question, a craving for something new and exciting influenced the planning process, and in both cases, French models shaped the outcome. Thus, Exeter achieved a highly fortuitous meeting of two styles that, in their original French contexts, frequently constitute a uniquely successful ensemble: French Gothic architecture and the symphonic instruments of the French master organ builder Aristide Cavaillé-Coll, found in many French cathedrals, churches, and chapels.

The late David Sanger, one of Britain's most notable organ pedagogues during the 1980s and 90s, served as consultant for the new organ at Exeter College and was the first organist (until David Briggs in 2024) to record a solo organ CD on the instrument. However, the instrument would not exist without the initiative, determination, and resilience of Richard Tanner, the organ scholar at Exeter from 1989 to 1992, and now the Director of Music at Rugby School. It was Tanner who generated the momentum to build a new organ at Exeter College. His successors, Robert Sharpe and Charles Cole, as organ scholars, were also involved in realising the project.





Pierre Cochereau

Pierre Cochereau was born on July 9, 1924 in Saint-Mand , near Paris. In 1929, after a few months of violin instruction, he began to take piano lessons with Marius-Fran ois Gaillard. Marguerite Long became his piano teacher in 1933, and three years later, Paul Pann say. In 1938, Cochereau was introduced to the pipe organ by Marie-Louise Girod, a student of Marcel Dupr . He continued his organ studies with Andr  Fleury and Paul Delafosse, whom Cochereau succeeded as titular organist at St. Roch in Paris in 1942.

After one year of law studies, Cochereau decided to dedicate himself to a musical career, and entered the Conservatory of Paris in 1943. He left the Conservatory in 1949 with first prizes in harmony (class of Maurice Durufl ), music history, fugue and counterpoint (class of No l Gallon), composition (class of Tony Aubin), and organ (class of Marcel Dupr ). In September 1948, Cochereau made his first recital tour to Hungary. One year later, he married Nicole Lacroix, a pianist and composer, with whom he had two children: Jean-Marc (1949–2011), conductor and late director of the Tours Conservatory, and Marie-Pierre, a professional harpist.

In 1949, at age 26, Pierre Cochereau was appointed director of the Le Mans Conservatory, where he stayed until 1956. In 1955, he succeeded L once de Saint-Martin (1886–1954) as titular organist at Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris.

In 1956, his recording of Marcel Dupr 's *Symphonie-Passion* opus 23 was awarded the Grand Prix du Disque. The same year, Cochereau made his first of 25 recital tours to the United States.

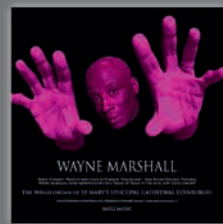
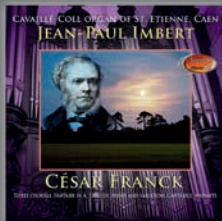
In 1961, Cochereau became director of the Nice Conservatory, which he left in 1979, accepting the directorship of the Lyon Conservatory.

Pierre Cochereau died during the night of March 5, 1984, in Lyon, suffering from a cerebral hemorrhage. He was buried at the Cimet re Belleville in Paris.

Pierre Cochereau had a worldwide reputation as a concert organist and especially as a brilliant improviser. In his improvisations, Cochereau had created a musical language that was eminently personal, recognizable as of the opening notes. Stylistic influences regarding counterpoint, formal structure, and harmonic language, included composers such as Marcel Dupr , Maurice Durufl , No l Gallon, Olivier Messiaen, and Florent Schmitt.

Andr  Fleury, who was one of Cochereau's first organ teachers, reported, "He already showed great gifts, perhaps a bit overly attracted, in the study of improvisation, by the search for the pretty harmony, rather than the strict exercise of contrapuntal discipline." Many years later, Fleury said, "As one day we were en t te   t te, I asked him if he worked on improvisation. 'Never,' he replied. 'What I do at Notre-Dame and in concert serves as practice.' Such gifts, when one thinks of his harmonic language, so subtly refined, and what force of concentration to give a form to all those riches!" In regard to Cochereau's formidable improvisational skills, Marcel Dupr  said about his former student, "Pierre Cochereau is a phenomenon without equal in the history of the contemporary organ."

As a composer, Cochereau left several organ works, chamber music, and choir compositions. Many of Cochereau's organ improvisations were transcribed and published. Text Courtesy Grandes Orgues de Chartres.



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Designed by Laurence Dickie at www.vividaudio.com.

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