

Michel Chapuis (1930-2017)
An obituary by Kenneth Shenton



With the legitimate heirs to César Franck, Alexandre Guilmant, Charles-Marie Widor, Louis Vierne and Marcel Dupré going about their business with total dedication, the world of French organ music has never been short of iconic figures. In more recent times, the names of Pierre Cochereau, Jean Guillou, Oliver Latry and Naji Hakim have all rightfully achieved international recognition. But for record collectors, three names stand out, each with a catalogue that few others could match: Marie-Claire Alain, André Isoir and the late, Michel Chapuis, who died on 12 November 2017, aged 87.

Born on 15th January 1930, the organ first cast its spell on Michel Léon Chapuis when a young boy growing up in Dôle in the Jura. An early pupil of Jeanne Marguillard, by the age of twelve, while accompanying Mass in his local collegiate church, he was already totally engrossed in studying both ancient music manuscripts and organ building techniques. His prodigious gifts were subsequently nurtured by René Mahlherte, Emile Poillot and Edouard Souberbielle at the École César Franck before, in 1951, he became a prize-winning pupil of Marcel Dupré at the Paris Conservatoire.

Remaining in Paris after graduating, while serving as Organist at the Parish Church of Saint Germain-l'Auxerrois and then St Nicholas-des-Champs, Chapuis undertook a course of training in the art of organ building. Moving to the Latin Quarter in 1964, when Titular Organist of St Séverin, while there he revived the pre-Revolution practice of having several organists to share the duties. Previously he had served as accompanist to the Choir of Notre Dame Cathedral. His final appointment came in 1995, when he moved to the Palace of Versailles as Organist of the Chappelle Royale.

As a performer, having taken a very conscious decision to specialise in performing music of the 17th and 18th centuries, Chapuis was an early pioneer in the application of historically informed performances. Effortlessly building an enviable reputation for musical insight and selfless integrity, he successfully maintained a non-stop global career as a top-flight concert artist. Making his English debut at the Royal Festival Hall in April 1969, Chapuis returned many times over the years. In 1978, winning great critical acclaim from audiences and critics alike, he toured America for the first time.

Happily, many of his pioneering solo performances endure courtesy of a large and extensive discography, more than 70 recordings in total. Particularly dear to his heart was the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, Dietrich Buxtehude, Vincent Lubeck, Nicolaus Bruhns and Johann Nikolaus Hanff, whose works, using many of Europe's finest instruments, he recorded in their entirety. Further consolidating his reputation

were his many individual recordings, initially all issued in LP format, of old French masters such as Marchand, Corette, Dandrieu, Balbastre, Couperin and Titelouze.

Lying at the heart of his output remains the handsomely presented boxed set of the *Complete Organ Works of Johann Sebastian Bach*. Originally released between 1966 and 1970 on the Telefunken label, these ten LPs feature five lesser known European instruments: the Schnitger organ at Zwolle in the Netherlands, the Anderson organ in the Church of the Redeemer, Copenhagen, the Klappmeyer organ of St Nicholas, Altenbruch and the modern Beckerath instrument in St Paul's Church, Hamm, Westphalia. As always with Chapuis, the tempi had sparkle, his performances panache.

A decade earlier, Chapuis had become the star of record producer Bernard Coutaz's ambitious and pioneering project dedicated to historic instruments, *Orgues Historiques d'Europe*. Travelling to remote locations, squeezed into the back of Coutaz's soft top Citroen 2CV, the instruments recorded ranged from the late 15th to the 18th centuries, as did the repertoire which had hitherto been little explored on disc. With Chapuis also appearing as a backing artist for the English counter tenor, Alfred Deller, the recordings, later issued on CD, remain one of Harmonia Mundi's crowning glories.

In 2004, with Chapuis now well into his 70s, he appeared in a series of three DVDs. On each, very much at ease when talking to camera, he demonstrates his improvisational gifts using a selection of iconic French instruments. With the first two films covering the music of France's Classical and Romantic traditions, on the third, Chapuis turns his attention to the German Style. For this he uses the 2004 organ of Saint-Louis-en-l'Île, Paris. Built by Bernard Aubertin, both player and builder are linked by the French *département* of Jura, where Chapuis grew up and Aubertin has his workshop

His earlier arrival at St Séverin proved propitious coming as it did with a welcome opportunity to update and refine the church's somewhat venerable organ. Successfully rebuilt by Alfred Kern in 1965, here Chapuis created an unusually stunning instrument that immediately enhanced both the liturgical and cultural life of the church. Two years later, his restoration of the mid-eighteenth century instrument in the Basilica of St Christophe in Belfort attracted universal praise. Noted for the warmth of its voicing was his subsequent rebuild of the two manual Sarre-Union instrument. Likewise, his successful updating of the historic Isnard organ in the church of St Maximin, Thionville.

Headlines were made in 1996, when he was serving as the recording secretary of the state commission overseeing the restoration of the 1740 organ in the Gothic Cathedral of St Benignus, Dijon. Originally built in the French style by Bavarian organ builder, Karl Josef Riepp, in 1988, when the authorities decided to restore the instrument, they awarded the contract to German organ builder, Gerhard Schmid. €1.8 million worth of public money later, Chapuis angrily called off plans to give the opening recital, unhappy that the instrument's French Baroque sonority had been badly compromised by the more Germanic elements in Schmid's highly controversial restoration.

As a scholar, Chapuis' early reputation was forged with research into the music of the 17th century French composer, Marc-Antoine Charpentier, the greatest of all composers of the *grand siècle*. Working from autograph sources housed in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris, having skilfully reconstructed the *Messe de Monsieur de Mauroy*, Chapuis was then part of the team that committed the work to disc. No less impressive was his bold realisation of the wholly improvised multiple organ interludes that lie at the heart of the composer's *Messe a 8 Voix et 8 Instruments*. Chapuis later distilled his extensive knowledge into the definitive *Au Style Classique Francais*.

His contribution as a teacher has been immense. In 1956, aged 26, he was appointed a Professor at Strasbourg Regional Conservatoire. From 1979 until 1986, he taught at the Bescançon Conservatoire, before joining Oliver Latry, Michel Bouvard and Loic Maillié in the organ department of the Nationale Supérieur de Musique de Paris. In later years his scholastic credentials found a ready outlet at summer schools, and festivals worldwide. He rarely missed the annual organ academies, be it at Dollard in the Netherlands or back in Provence at Saint Maximin. With classes and courses by day and a public concert of Baroque music each evening, Chapuis was in his element.