The Artist’s Refuge: Idiosyncratic Properties of the Organ Language of Jehan Alain

by

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Class of 2011

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors from the College of Music

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2011
Introduction

It says a great deal about Jehan Alain that, within a few moments of listening to almost any one of his works, even the modestly informed listener may easily discern its composer. Emerging from a strong French tradition of specialized Organist-composers, Alain produced one of the most original organ repertoires in the 20th century during the span of his tragically short life. An omnivorous consumer of artistic influences, he synthesized 19th and 20th century French and Russian music, Indian music, Gregorian chant, Jazz, and North African Music to create a musical language distinct in both its materials and its emotive power.

I have selected three of works from Alain’s organ Oeuvre depicting a four-year period of his compositional career from 1932 to 1936: *Le Jardin Suspendu* (1934), *Deux Danse a Agni Yavishta* (1932), and *Deuxieme Fantasie* (1936). These works showcase Alain’s defining compositional techniques: complex networks of octatonic and modal collections, interacting through a variety of harmonic, melodic, and contrapuntal relationships; unconventional uses of organ registration as a means of harmonic augmentation as well as coloration; and controlled rhythmic fluidity, often delineating larger structural patterns within the context of the piece. During this period, the various strands of his musical language coalesced into a unique idiom he would expand upon up to the time of his death. Two of these works, *Le Jardin Suspendu* and *Deux Danse a Agni Yavishta*, present core elements of this language in a miniaturized format, laying the groundwork for his more expansive sonic palettes subsequently. The *Deuxieme Fantasie* consolidates and expounds upon techniques found in each, solidifying the components of Alain’s idiom and marking the beginning of his longer-form writing. Close analysis of these pieces reveals the work of a rigorous and highly idiosyncratic composer, one too often overlooked in the 20th century.
repertoire. I write this paper in honor of the 100th centennial of Alain’s birth, in the hope that it will bring to light some of the ingenuity of his compositional style.

**Biography and the Alain Family Organ**

Jehan Alain was born on February 3, 1911, into a family well-established in the world of French organ music. His father, Albert Alain (1880-1971) composed music for organ and worked at a number of churches in and around Paris, most notably at the parish of *Saint-Germain-en-Laye*¹. The younger Alain began substituting for his father at the organ as early as age thirteen, and the influence of the Catholic liturgical music he played would later on find its way into any number of his compositions. All of his four siblings were highly musical, too, and so the composer grew up in what his sister Marie-Claire would recall to be “a virtual flood of music”. While Albert taught his son basic organ technique, he also allowed him a great amount of leeway in his studies. The precocious Alain took particular pleasure in improvising² on the family salon-organ, a critical formative experience for him. Even after his induction into the Conservatoire Paris in 1929³, the Alain family organ remained his favorite compositional tool, one that he would use throughout the remainder of his life.

The presence of this instrument in his life was remarkable not in the least because Albert Alain had constructed it himself for his family. By the end of Jehan’s life, the family

organ comprised some twenty-five stops, an economy virtually unheard of for an instrument of its size:

Plan for the Alain Family Organ, as of 1929†

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<td>4'</td>
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<td>2'</td>
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The unique array of sounds available to Alain on the parlor organ influenced Alain incalculably in his compositional endeavors, and distinguished him from the general French trend of writing specifically for mammoth cathedral instruments. Many of Alain’s most distinct registrations utilize unconventional combinations of overtone stops, the like Nazard and Larigot, of which the family organ contains five. A similar emphasis appears on stops on the recit, or solo manual. These stops tend to have a soft, distant, refined voicing about them, and as we shall see it is the family with around which he built some of his finest works. It must be noted that Alain certainly had access to the larger instruments of the Parisian churches available to him, and as such it would be fallacious to view the predominance of these sounds as derivative of a limitation of the instrument he worked on. Rather, the subtlety of
the recit and the sounds of the Alain organ served as an inspiration to the composer, and are especially well suited to his predilection for evoking the foreign and the esoteric.

Alain’s insatiable appetite for all things exotic helps to explain the massive variety of influences he absorbed in the early years of his studies. He drew particular inspiration from the music he encountered at the 1932 French Colonial Exhibition, especially the modal, timbral, and rhythmic properties of North African and Indian systems. His introduction to these musics came at a highly productive time in his life; after a bout of life-threatening pneumonia rendered him incapacitated through much of 1931, his newfound strength provided him with a reinvigorated artistic fervor. Thus the “foreign” influences he picked up at this time synthesized with his studies of late 19th and early 20th French and Russian classical music, Gregorian chant, and Jazz, consolidating his distinct compositional voice.

The apparent oddities of Alain’s output often befuddled his instructors at the Conservatoire de Paris, a problem no doubt exacerbated by his suspicion of musical academicism. Still, he continued to pursue a course of training very much in line with the tradition of Parisian late 19th and early 20th century organist-composers. In 1933 he studied harmony under Andre Bloch and fugue under George Cassaude, winning the permiers prix in both. He would also begin an important study of organ

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5 Delacourt-Gommier, Auriele, “Jehan Alain”.
improvisation and composition under Marcel Dupre shortly thereafter. His final achievement of winning the *prix* in Dupre’s class marked in 1939, shortly before his death, marked the end of his academic career. In the interim lie two significant events in Alain’s life: his marriage to Madeleine Payane in 1935, followed two years later by the death of his sister Odile in a hiking accident. The latter took a keen toll on the composer, and works from the last two years of his life are often imbued with a profound sense of mourning (the central movement of his final organ work, *Deuils*, eulogizes his sister specifically).

His late preoccupation with mortality also foreshadows somewhat ominously his own premature death. Always adept at mechanics, Alain was recruited into French armed forces at the onset of World War Two as a motorcycle dispatch rider in 1939. After a brief evacuation to England in 1940, he returned to combat in France. On June 20th, he scouted an advancing group of German soldiers at Le Petit-Puy; abandoning his motorcycle to defend the town, he killed sixteen of them before being shot and killed himself. He was posthumously awarded the Croix du Guerre, and buried by the Germans with full military honors. That the composer continued to evolve musically right up to the end of his life renders his the loss all the more tragic. He had begun work on an orchestral scoring of the *Troix Danses* for organ earlier that year, the manuscript of which blew the window of the train was riding to his final engagement.

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7 Delacourt-Gommier, Auriele, “Jehan Alain”.
Properties of Octatonic Collections

Many of Alain’s works revolve around his manipulation of the pitch-set that has come to be known as the octatonic scale, (though I will use the more precise term collection), and as such it is useful to understand its properties, around which octatonic music is frequently constructed. As its name implies, the octatonic collection comprises eight pitches, forming a half-step whole-step pattern. The symmetry inherent in this structure means that only three possible transpositions of the scale exist- a fourth will simply result in a set identical to a pitch-set identical to the starting group (Messiaen, who worked substantially in “limited transposing modes”, called this “the charm of impossibilities). Pieter van den Toorn has assigned now-standardized classifications to the Octatonic collections⁹, and which I will use in my discussion. His system appears below:

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There are a variety of ways to conceptualize the resultant groupings; one of the most useful of these is as two fully-diminished seventh chords superimposed atop one another at a minor second interval. Imagining this, we find tonal “nodes” located on each constituent pitch of the lower chord. Each of these represents a possible tonal center, which may be manifested as either major or minor. Thus, an octatonic collection with a semitone interval starting on C would contain nodes at minor third intervals of C, Eb, F#, and A. All are equally valid candidates to be a tonal center, though octatonic music does not dictate the necessity of tonal anchorage and may just as easily be atonal. Common methods for generating a tonal gravity in octatonic music include pedal-points and repeated notes- techniques close to the
heart of the organ repertoire particularly. A creative musician may derive fascinating harmonies from linear chordal motion along this collection alone, but Alain takes these possibilities several levels further. His use of counterpoint, especially between matrices of opposing octatonic collections, ranks among the most innovative octatonic idiom of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century.

**Le Jardin Suspendu**

Completed in October of 1934, *Le Jardin Suspendu* marks the beginning of Alain’s mature period of Organ composition and a consolidation of his early techniques centering on the minor-third progressions of octatonic harmony. The tonalities found in *Le Jardin* underscore two essential influences began permeating Alain’s music at this time: first, his studies at the Paris Conservatoire with Paul Dukas, and his exposure to so-called “exotic” musics at The Colonial Exhibition of 1932\textsuperscript{10}.

Dukas’s composition class undoubtedly featured the use of third-related harmonic materials, both in works of his own like *La Peri* and the inevitable *L’Apprenti sorcier*, as well as in those of late-romantic Russian composers like Rimsky-Korsakov\textsuperscript{11}. While octatonic *collections* themselves do not always appear explicitly in such works- with the exception, perhaps, of Stravinsky, who by then was well-ingrained in the Parisian musical conscience- the consistent use of tonalities pivoting around the fully diminished seven chord implied harmonies from which the octatonic mode might be extrapolated. Richard Taruskin, in his examination of octatonicism in the music of Stravinsky, traces the origins of the collection in western music all the way back to the chromatic digressions of Schubert and especially

\textsuperscript{10} Delacourt-Grommier, Auriele, “Jehan Alain”.
Liszt\textsuperscript{12}, where motion by thirds amongst cycles of fifths produced momentary a feeling of stasis- a sensation late romantics would exploit in their invocations of magic and mystery. (The importance of a theorized octatonic scale in the composition of these later composers is uncertain; Olivier Messiaen, the seminal pioneer of octatonic possibilities, dismissed prior appearances of the mode as “timid” or mere harmonic by-products. Conversely, recent scholarship has increasingly awarded it a central role, notably in Stravinsky’s early ballets)\textsuperscript{13}. In any event, the mounting employment of such harmonic techniques distilled into the whole-tone and octatonic collections themselves, with the former corresponding to major third modulations and the latter to minor ones. In many ways, Alain and Messiaen’s treatment of octatonic modes represents the crystallization of this tradition. Their works from the 1930’s (Messiaen’s earliest example is probably his \textit{Banque Celeste} of 1928) reverse the relationship between harmony and mode, deriving chordal and melodic material directly from the octatonic pitch-set itself.

The effect of Alain’s visit to the 1932 Colonial Exhibition are more difficult to measure, but would undeniably prove an essential ingredient of his unmistakable, fantasy-laden aesthetic. At the exhibition, Alain encountered the musics of North Africa and India, both of which had a profound effect on him. Considering Alain’s predilection for music outside the canon, especially the angular rhythms of Jazz and the melismatic qualities of Gregorian chant, one can easily imagine how the complex, propulsive rhythms of these traditions might appeal to him\textsuperscript{14}. Alain was also clearly influenced by some of the unique melodic and timbral aspects of such music as well, which he would encounter in greater

\textsuperscript{13} Taruskin, “Chernomor to Kashchei: Harmonic Sorcery; or, Stravinsky’s ‘Angle’”, 73.
\textsuperscript{14} Delacourt-Gommier, Ariele, “Jehan Alain”.
depth during his residence in Algeria. Particularly, the *Maqam* modal/melodic system of Arabian and North African music influenced his own use of “synthetic” modes. Much of the “exotic” feel listeners identify in Alain’s organ music stems from the hybridization of such modes with frenzied dance rhythms and the mystical, floating harmonies of the octatonic collection. Although the former elements don’t appear in *Le Jardin Suspendu* in a technical sense, they factor prominently into many of Alain’s organ works (as we shall see), and certainly a sense of longing for the far-off and exotic permeates the feel of the piece. Indeed, the *Jardin* to which the title refers is none less than the fabled hanging gardens of Babylon, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

The structure of *Le Jardin Suspendu* cultivates a dream-like atmosphere by manifesting its relatively brief source material though a kaleidoscope of harmonic and coloristic variants, while consistently avoiding any real sense of stability or resolution. Alain subtitled *Le Jardin* with the designation *Chaconne*, and the piece holds generally true to its ancestral Baroque form. As such, it features melodic variations build around a core harmonic progression. However, Alain doesn’t limit himself to this format alone, simultaneously refracting his root harmonic and textural material through various octatonic permutations. He achieves this through use of Octatonic symmetry, which permits minor-third transpositions and chordal embellishments while staying true to the harmonic theme. The core progression comprises twelve measures, which are internally subdivided into groups of four. Each statement of this progression contains a miniature A-B-A song structure, in which a four-bar melody modulates up a minor third and then returns back. Alain reverses this pattern on the larger scale of the twelve-bar statements, alternating between modulations down and then back up a minor third instead. Since the first of these statements employs a C tonality, the resultant harmonic progression overarching the course
of the piece is C-A-C-A-C. Thus palindrome harmonic configurations occur on both macro and micro levels, mirroring the cyclical nature of the octatonic collections themselves.

Although Alain renders each permutation of the core progression distinctly, he also imbues the piece with a large-scale arc that reflects the A-B-A micro structure: the fourth statement of the progression is given a new tempo feel, *senza rigore*, as well as a unique triplet melody. It is also the only one to employ a notably different registration, pointing to Alain’s use of timbre to distinguish sections of material (a practice he would expand upon in subsequent works). Consequently, the fourth statement feels very much like a delayed B section, while generally resembling its siblings with respect to harmonic nature.

*Le Jardin* begins with a single voice droning on a flute in the positif at G5, followed shortly by the entry of three voices playing on a soft string (either a gamba or dulciana) in the recit. This latter texture will remain ubiquitous throughout the composition, and produces the primary harmonic context for all of its future events. Of these three voices, the upper two almost always operate in the third octatonic collection, while the lower voice stays in the second collection. This interlocking modal relationship immediately produces a number of fascinating harmonic possibilities impossible in “pure”, single-mode octatonic music. Recall that Octatonic collection III has potential tone centers over the diminished seven chord C-Eb-F#-A, spelled here enharmonically as C-Eb-Gb-Bbb\(^\text{15}\). Because collection II intersects collection III along this chord, it contains all possible tone-center pitches available in that group, but its intermediary pitches occur a semitone apart. Alain uses this relationship to harmonize the top and bottom voices in perfect fifths; because of the

diminished-seventh third symmetry of the collections, he is free to cycle through minor third modulations without changing mode.

**Le Jardin Suspendu, measures 1-8.**

Within the first four bars alone, this relationship yields one of *Le Jardin*’s most characteristic harmonic devices: the constant use of seemingly diatonic suspension, but ones that both appear and resolve outside the diatonic vocabulary. Alain typically generates such suspensions through the staggering of the second voice an extra quarter-note pulse, as we can see right from the start at measure one. Here, the descending fifth from Eb to D encounters the sustained G of the middle voice, which we expect to resolve to F# in both diatonic and third-collection octatonic voice leading. However, the whole group actually comes to rest on C, with the outer voices descending stepwise and the middle jumping to E (still a member of its collection, but skipping rather than stepping). In this fashion we arrive at a stable node of the third octatonic collection, but via a misleading, pseudo-diatonic territory. A similar use of polymodal technique occurs in measure three, where we find the same phenomenon in ascending motion. An Eb fifth climbs up to F against the same
sustained G, which seeks resolution in movement to A. This time, we are given an F major harmony, but only via an intervening Gb major chord. This change subverts any expectations we may have developed of such suspensions from the first two measures. Now, the third-collection octatonic node of Gb appears only fleetingly, yielding a full beat to F major and thus subjugating a “native” chord to a harmonically “foreign” region (albeit temporarily). Alain manipulates the middle voice in this fashion throughout the piece, injecting an insistent diatonic bent into its octatonic paradigm. It is also interesting to note the way the G drone in the positif reinforces the repetitive use of the pitch in the center right-hand voice. Alain likely selected G as a drone note in part because the predominant C and Eb triads share it as a constituent tone, enabling it to remain a static element amidst modulations. Yet G is the tonic of neither chord, and its persistence throughout the passage contributes to the floating quality of the music. While Le Jardin never achieves a firm sense of grounding or resolution, nor does it support any harmonic tension for very long. This, combined with his extremely spare use of the lower register, is Alain’s tonal rendering of the garden’s hanging vines—gentle sonorities figuratively “suspended” in the air above the listener.

The remaining four variations serve as a blueprint of sorts for Alain’s idiomatic devices, bearing the germs around which he would subsequently build much larger compositions. The first variation, beginning at measure 13, almost entirely resembles the theme at its onset; aside from the transposition down to A, only the first chord has changed, shifting to a minor sonority. However, upon our arrival at the “B” section of the variation, the bottom voice splits in two, adding another voice of the second collection to the general harmony. Another voice enters in the last four-bar area, and the voices in the second collection—now having supplanted the dominance of the two voices in the third—restate the
melody in the context of their own pitch-set. Rather than descend back down a third to A, these added factors push the harmonic trajectory further upwards. In the final two bars of the variation, all five voices shift to the as yet unseen first collection, terminating on a high Bb major chord. These harmonies are precisely replicated in the penultimate variation, which is by far the most idiosyncratic of the five. It is the only one not in common time, adopting a fluid metrical scheme to accommodate the meandering right-hand melody. Consequently, some of the suspended harmonies are stretched over extended time-spaces, resulting in prolonged areas of irresolution. The melody itself is perhaps the oddest and freest part of the piece, occupying no identifiable mode but emphasizing major third and minor second interval relationships.

It showcases one of the repertoire’s most innovative registrations as well. Alain specifies an irregular registration of flute 4’ with a 5 1/3 nazar for this line. Because the stop’s sharpness relative to the flute, and because it sounds just a fifth above the fundamental- as opposed to a fifth and an octave, since normally an 8 foot stop would be used underneath- its tone does not sound like an overtone resonance of the fundamental. As a result, the listener perceives the nazar’s fifth as an independent voice above the actual played melody. Through clever manipulation of registration, Alain overcomes what would normally constitute an insurmountable technical obstacle, effectively writing for parallel lines in the leading voice while retaining a harmonic accompaniment in the left hand. The final variation exhibits a diluted version of this procedure, pairing the flute with a 2 2/3 nazar in fleeting, pointillist fragments of melodies. Tricks of registration to augment not just the coloristic nature of his work, but the harmonic elements themselves, would become one a characteristic technique in Alain’s repertoire. It also demonstrates the
composer’s sensitivity to the organ itself, which he treated not simply as a one-man orchestra, so to speak, but as an instrument with its own unique musical properties.

The matrix between diatonic and octatonic elements, another prominent element of Alain’s later work, informs Le Jardin’s third variation. Here, runs in the 4’ flute create a counterpoint with the reiterated material of the theme. Beginning in measure 25, the left-hand voice mutates slowly from a straightforward C major scale to a third-collection octatonic set, through the cumulative addition of flat accidentals. Bar 26 sees the addition of a myxolydian seventh, bar 28 a minor third degree, and by 31 a full octatonic tetrachord is articulated. While all of this is quite beautiful, it contributes little to the actual harmonic constitution of the passage. Later on, Alain would employ the nexus between modal and octatonic content to great effect.

However, we do get a sense that the originality of the composer informed his very early compositions (he was twenty-one when he began composing Le Jardin Suspendu), a genuine ingenuity that manifested itself even before he began studying composition seriously. From Le Jardin, we also gain some insight into the tribulations Alain’s idiosyncracies brought to bear on him artistically. Beside the title of the piece is inscribed a quotation in which he calls the suspended garden “the inaccessible and inviolable refuge of the fugitive artist”. From his writings and the accounts of friends and relatives, we know Alain was little understood at the Conservatoire de Paris; it is not a far leap, then, to understand the appeal of the artist’s haven he sought in the far-off and exotic. In this sense, the remote serenity of Le Jardin Suspendu is far more personal than we may initially realize, and provides deep insight into the man Alain as well as the musician.
Deux Danse a Agni Yavishta

If *Le Jardin Suspendu* is one of Alain’s most fully realized early explorations of a static meditative language, then 1932’s *Deux Danse a Agni Yavishta* is its agitated, rhythmically charged counterpart. Though composed two years prior to *Le Jardin, Deux Danse* better anticipates Alain’s later predilection for exploring the interface between octatonic collections and diatonic modes. Fresh from the 1932 French Colonial Exhibition, Alain’s writing drips with ferocious dance rhythms and innovative timbral effects; the influence of Stravinsky features prominently as well in the fragmented, frequently block-style assemblage of musical materials. Agni is the Vedic god of fire (in Sanskrit, the word Agni means both literal Fire as well as the Deity), and all Vedic rites include some sort of worship dedicated to him. While Alain’s familiarity with actual Vedic practices was no doubt limited at best, the listener can readily perceive the inspiration he derives from his “primitive”, ritualistic subject matter.

The first movement of the two, clocking at just over one minute, makes excellent use of spare melodic material over a frequently static harmonic accompaniment. The entirety of the movement occurs in a quick three (precisely one second per measure), with a strongly accented second beat. In this sense, the movement shares an unlikely kinship with Chopin’s use of Polish dances that emphasize the second beat of the measure; the inevitable associations of the exotic these pieces evoked in the elder composer’s listeners reflect Alain’s own aesthetic interests, but it is impossible to know the directness of such influences. The dance begins with a soft accompaniment played on the bourdon, with an Ab fifth on the weak first beat moving up to a half-note Eb fifth on the second. The forcefulness of the second beat, coupled with sheer repetition for the next twenty
measures, suggests an Eb tonality, albeit tenuously (Alain’s use of accidentals actually seems
to imply a key of Ab minor, though this is hardly useful analytically). The entry of the right
hand hautbois in the fourth measure complicates this ambiguity. It introduces a staccato,
two-bar melody that occupies the first octatonic collection— the one that doesn’t contain
Eb at all. This proceeding repeats four times, with a brief rallantando on the third. In this
manner, Alain leaves the listener to float in a nebulous harmonic territory, anchored to Eb
on the one hand but gravitating toward the B natural final of the octatonic melody on the
other.

At measure 13 Alain introduces the primary mode of motivic development in the
movement, the superimposition of the right-hand motif over itself in parallel intervals. In
this first instance, he elects to treat the melody canonically, staggering the entrance of the
second voice by a measure and transposing it up a tritone. Alain also modifies the melody
slightly such that the eighth notes at the end become a single quarter-note on B,
emphasizing the jarring minor-second interval that occurs on the third beat of each
measure. Subsequent contrapuntal uses of the melody operate similarly, altering minute
aspects of the phrase to produce diversity. Measure twenty-five explores a similar
relationship, with modal finals still at tritones (D and Ab). However, Alain places the
descending sixteenth note fragment at the end of the melody, lending it a more propulsive
feel and shifting the rhythmic interface between voices. The same motivic variant appears
from measure 36 to the end of the piece, in a shifting array of relationships. It manifests
first in parallel fourths, then canonically with the bottom voice inverted, and then
transposed up a tritone in the same configuration. Finally the bottom line begins moving in
parallel motion with the top again, harmonizing it in thirds over as the dance peters out to a
lone, sustained Fb.
The developmental sections of the movement are joined together by two transitional spaces of four bars apiece, at measures 21 and 32. While the harmonic locale of these areas is obscured slightly by the presence of colorative tones, the left hand and pedal lines clearly delineate tonalities alternating bar-to-bar between Ab and F. As such, they not only help to break up the flow of the piece, but also serve as a nexus between tonal/modal regions. Shifting chords and pedal tones on the first and third beats, rather than the typically emphasized second, juxtapose the accompanimental stasis characterizing the piece’s bookending sections. Note that all transpositions, both within sections and between them, occur along minor thirds or diminished fifths. In doing so, Alain exploits octatonic symmetries to evade modal modulation, resulting in a certain ubiquity of melodic pitch-set. By contrast, the use of parallel collections in perfect fourth at measures 30 and 36 recalls the poly-octatonic language of Le Jardin Suspendu.

Of the two dances, the second relies upon modular constructions delineated by timbral qualities even more so than the first. Here we see Alain taking an even more extreme approach to structure, creating a fully realized composition through the careful arrangement of building-blocks without any real kind of development. The flow of the entire movement hinges on alternation between just two thematic fragments. Each theme is defined by a distinct registration, mode, and melody, which remain largely unaltered throughout the piece. They are subject to transpositions, but variations to actual harmonic or melodic content reflect a minimalist’s restraint (the one notable exception being the difference between the statement of the second theme and its subsequent iterations).

The first of these themes exhibits a unique use of modality to generate a prolonged sense of tonal uncertainty. This theme opens the movement, and utilizes 8’ and 4’
foundation stops in all of its appearances. Both the melody and accompaniment present immediate challenges; while the pedal part does spell out a D minor chord, it touches D only fleetingly, lingering on a descending sixth from F to A for the duration of the melody. The right-hand part begins life as a short figure harmonized in minor thirds from B, and repeats twice, adding an additional third each time. Analysis of the constituent notes yields a pitch-set containing all white notes except for C, which is sharp. Herein lies the crux of Alain’s harmonic tension; while the brief references to D in the bass tentatively establish it as a tonal center, the B underlying the right-hand chords achieves similar status by virtue of melodic gravities.

*Deux Danse a Agni Yavishta, 1st movement, measures 8-17.*

We might construe the pervading sonority, then, as a D minor chord with an added major sixth (albeit spelled in a highly unstable fashion), or a half-diminished seven on B (a highly unstable chord in the first place). While it would be useless to argue which of these possibilities constitutes the *actual* center, we would be equally at fault to dismiss the passage as atonal. Rather, Alain establishes a hierarchy of pitch importance in which B and D push and pull around the more neutral, sustained tones F and A. Normally this harmony
would crave resolution, but over the course of the passage it is so constantly affirmed that
the ambiguous sonority becomes a sort of tone-center unto itself. The music is, somewhat
paradoxically, grounded by its own prolonged tensions.

Deux Danse a Agni Yavishta, 2nd movement, measures 1-8.

The second theme, appearing in measure six, has several guises that elude common
categorization save hints of melodic unity. The first of these, appearing at measure six,
approximates octatonicism—though the Db accidental falls outside the would-be collection.
With a diminished-chord sonority and melody resembling that of the opening passage, it is
also the only instance in which the relationship between the two themes may be readily
perceived by the listener. The next statement of the second theme, at measure 20, is by
contrast refreshing in its harmonic clarity and sharpness of registration (foundations 8’ 4’ 2’
1 1/3’). It employs a synthetic mode built from Ab, consisting of a major pentachord beneath a minor tetrachord (Ab-Bb-Db-Eb-F-Gb). As such it has a bit of an “Eastern” feel to it, pronounced by the use of modulations between the tonic and the myxolydian seventh. Alain preserves the overall contour of the ascending melody, but renders it in a quicker sixteenth-note form. The final version, directly succeeding this one, synthesizes the previous two approaches. It emerges as a ghostly reflection on flutes 8’ and 4’ in the recit, underscoring impressionist added-second harmonies. It also combines the mode of the second variation with the exact melody of the first, highlighting the nexus between diatonic and octatonic tetrachords. While these passages hardly represent traditional diatonicism, they hold quite firmly to a distinct tonal center. Not once over the duration of the movement does this material interact directly with the first theme. Consequently, the relationship between the two depends purely on the dynamic juxtaposition of opposing levels of tonal stability.

*Deux Danse a Agni Yavishta, 2nd movement, measures 20-27.*
One noteworthy modification of the first theme does take place at measure 41, where Alain compresses the entire melody into four beats, as opposed to five. Hence we hear a familiar musical territory- the theme has already been stated twice before- but stated with increased urgency. Subtractive and additive rhythms play an important part in the composer’s later works, but the seeds of those devices date back to the beginning of his serious work, as evidenced by this passage.

What is immediately apparent from *Deux Danse a Agni Yavishta* is a mastery of miniaturized forms. Both movements fit comfortably into a four-minute time span, and both are woven entirely from a fabric of concise two-bar motifs. Yet within this short space is contained a rich musical environment- and a diversity of moods- which, nonetheless, all seem well-integrated into the whole. The result is a work that, like *Le Jardin Suspendu*, comes across as highly programmatic. It is rewarding, then, to indulge in a bit of speculation over the ways Alain paints his subject matter, though of course we cannot know his intentions for sure. Certainly the work has a dualistic nature, in its diptych format an in its shiftiness of tone. The concept of dualism factors prominently into the Vedic treatment of Agni, who is simultaneously a destroyer and a giver of life (played out elementally in his associations with fire on the one hand, and water on the other). More specifically, the use of two oboe voices in the first movement may reference the timbre of Indian nagasvaram, a double-reed instrument played in pairs at man Hindu ceremonies. In any event, a good performance of *Deux Danse* certainly has the power to carry us to a far-off place, a formidable accomplishment for such a short and economical work.
Composed in 1936, the *Deuxième Fantasie* consolidates the textural and modal elements we find gestating in *Le Jardin Suspendu* and *Deux Danse à Agni Yavishta*. The task of dividing Alain’s works into stylistic phases remains difficult, owing on one hand to the brevity of his life and on the other to the remarkable aesthetic unity apparent of his oeuvre, even in his very early works. Yet the *Deuxième Fantasie* can fairly be said to mark Alain’s most important creative period, one which would see the production of more extended works and a fuller integration of octatonic, polymodal, and timbre-based constructs. Not coincidentally, these tend to rank as his most popular works, though only *Litanies* has truly entered the standard organ repertoire.

Alain’s exploration of broader musical palettes was facilitated in part by his studies of composition and improvisation under esteemed organist Marcel Dupré (his previous studies at the Conservatoire de Paris included only harmony and improvisation). Under Dupré’s tutelage, Alain gained confidence in his ability to sequence his unruly compositional ideas over longer time spaces. The economy of material in his miniatures informs these longer works too, as we can see from the *Deuxième Fantasie*: the entire seven-minute work explores just two relatively succinct themes. Nor does Alain sacrifice the improvisational, often sporadic quality of his earlier period; it comes as little surprise that he bases the scheme of the piece on a pedagogical form Dupré taught his improvisation students, called *Theme Libre*¹⁶. A tripartite form, *Theme Libre* resembles a *sonata allegro* with a truncated recapitulation. In his *Cours Complet d’Improvisation a l’Orgue*, Dupré specifies an exposition

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consisting of three themes, in the format of a phrase followed by a “commentary”\textsuperscript{17}. Alain allows himself some liberties in this respect, altogether omitting a third theme but expositing the first longer than stipulated.

\textit{Deuxième Fantasie} also draws on the composer’s fascination with timbres as an organizational principle. Indeed, Alain considered the textural quality of his registrations essential not only to the interpretation of his pieces, but to their conception. Shortly before his death, he happened on a radio broadcast of a concert by Noélie Pierront, featuring his \textit{Trois Danses}. Though typically reticent to comment on his own work, he wrote several letters, including one to his father, describing the experience of hearing the pieces:

“Concerning my works, I was amazed. It seemed to me that, whatever the worth of these three pieces, it is much more to be found in a certain quest for timbre, much more than in the construction or the originality of the lines and the harmony”\textsuperscript{18}. One of Alain’s most ingenious methods of structural integration of color is the “coding” of motifs with an initial stop or family of stops (foreshadowed in the painting of sound-blocks from \textit{Deux Danse à Agni Yavishta}). These motifs may then be augmented by overtone stops to obscure the previously expressed harmonic or melodic material, but retain their timbral identity at the unison level. \textit{Deuxième Fantasie} similarly draws on additive and subtractive registration schemes to augment its changes in speed, especially the recitative-like passages bookending the toccata section. We shall see how such techniques apply specifically to the work later on.

\textsuperscript{17} Denman, “The Keyboard Works of Jehan Alain: A Survey of Musical Structures in Representative Works”, 64.

\textsuperscript{18} Schuarte, Helga, “Jehan Alain and his \textit{Deuxième Fantasie}”, \textit{The American Organist}, Volume 24, Number 6 (June 1990), 66.
Coloristically speaking, the composer’s affinity for the subdued, distant sonorities of the recit or solo manual shines through particularly in this particular work, and we once again sense that the Alain family parlor organ was never too far off. Alain recalled of his first practice after his prolonged illness, “The tonal plans meant nothing at all to me... Only the Recit, with its distant and sustained, refined, even frigid sonorities (you know the gamba stop with such a pure sonority), this was the only keyboard which meant something to me”\textsuperscript{19}. Not coincidentally, the first theme finds its expression in the pure, lucid tones of the quieter foundations and flutes, stops characteristic of the recit. Similarly, the registration of the second theme is dictated in part by the presence of the cromorne in the recit, one of the atypical properties of the Alain organ\textsuperscript{20}. The score calls for sharper, more abrasive stops only at climactic points in the music; since such stops were largely unavailable on a parlor organ, such registrations indicate that Alain did intent for performances of his works on fuller instruments. Consequently, his pervasive use of acoustically refined solo stops must not have stemmed from the limitations of his compositional instrument\textsuperscript{21}, but rather from his own desire for clarity and nuance.

Indeed, from the work’s opening harmonies the listener discovers a complex network of modal voice relationships that demand such transparency. By tracing the relationship between the five voices in the first thematic statement (eight bars altogether), we may acquire a better sense for how the composer assembles his ethereal harmonic idiom. Alain employs a sort of polymodality build on pivoting four- and five-note collections, many of which are recurrent but manifest uniquely in each voice. These collections may be

\textsuperscript{19} Schuarte, Helga, “Jehan Alain and his Deuxième Fantasie”, 66.
\textsuperscript{20} Dzubris, Linda, “Six French Organs and the Registration Indications in L’Œuvre d’Orgue d’Jehan Alain”.
\textsuperscript{21} Schuarte, Helga, “Jehan Alain and his Deuxième Fantasie”, 66Schuaret, 66.
divided into two categories: four-note groups containing half-step whole-step patterns, or groups of chromatic notes spanning up to a major third interval. The opening theme, for example, comprises three stacked patterns of whole-step, half-step, whole-step. The initial melodic tetrachord of F#-G#-A-B hinges on F# two a lower transposition (C#-D#-E-F#), and pivoting upward again on the low B (B-C#-D-E). Marie-Claire Alain suggests that her brother drew this first theme from the chant *Exultabunt Domino*, a tune he would be familiar with from playing the Catholic burial mass.

![Musical notation]

*Exultabunt Domino* chant

Alain’s use of *Exultabunt Domino* as a theme demonstrates the power of his fragmented language to interface with diverse pitch-collections, a property he exploits to great effect in *Deuxième Fantasie*. Note that the tetrachord groupings Alain has selected are the only two possible half-divisions of the octatonic collection, and share the symmetrical nature of their parent. These groups also intersect numerous other modes; in particular, the whole-step, half-step, whole step “Dorian” tetrachord occurs at least once within every diatonic mode. Such is the case with *Exultabunt Dominio*, seen in an F# transposition (measures 1-3) that suggests octatonic collection two when combined with the underlying B major harmony. Thus the composer cleverly manages to refract his theme through the lens of octatonic and polymodal territories, while leaving his liturgical source melody intact from its original form.

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Deuxième Fantasie, measures 1-8

Alain forms the harmonic accompaniment to this first theme in a fashion similar to his manipulation of the melodic motif itself, building chords from voices operating in their own tetrachordal and chromatic groupings. Frequently, the activity of the bottom voice reflects that of the top, while the central voices provide chordal color via juxtaposing collections. In bars 1-3, the low Bb descends a Dorian tetrachord from B to F#, doubling the *Exultabunt Dominio* motif in the top voice. The lower right-hand voice orbits B on A and C, further sketching out an implicit B-octatonic feel to the passage. The upper left-hand voice, however, traces a slowly descending chromatic line from F# to Eb, diluting the pure octatonic harmonization. Its descent from E natural to Eb also precipitates broader shift in the measure three from tetrachords derived from the second octatonic collection to ones present in the third collection, which does not sustain B as a tonal center. When the bottom voice reaches F#, it “pivots” to this latter collection, exclusively utilizing its constituent notes until the end of the phrase at measure eight. The melodic line soon follows suit, mutating to the Dorian tetrachord C#-D#-E-F# in measure four. These shifts are in part anticipated by the sustained C in the middle left-hand voice (C being a potential tonal node of the third
collection), and affirmed as it ascends up to E using a third-collection tetrachord (C-C#-D#-E).

Surprisingly, its arrival falls over a harmonically related collection but on a chord of pointed E minor, emphasized by the arrival of an E pedal point in the tonic. From here, both the pedal and the melody follow Dorian tetrachords belonging to the first octatonic collection, while the left-hand voices continue in the third until the very end of the phrase. The ending chord, an ambiguous combination of E minor and its relative major G, does belong singularly to the first collection. Yet during the actual statement of the theme, no one collection takes priority. Each collection unfolds itself in fragments, undercutting a preceding octatonic transposition, and likewise fades out as the next transposition emerges. This process also transpires within a very brief period—about twenty-five seconds—during which Alain never allows any one octatonic collection to assume precedence before another supplants it. Consequently, we strain to hear the chord progressions as characteristically octatonic, as listeners might identify in Messiaen’s music of the same period. The diversity of sounds resulting from Alain’s interplay of collections is truly vast, spanning pure triads to crystalline clusters to semi-diatonic combinations reminiscent of bebop. The impossibility of hearing these chords modally, or as a product of functional relationships, lends them a unique beauty.

By contrast with the opening construction, Alain’s second theme eschews complex harmonic development to explore new territories in rhythm and melody. Its first appearance occurs at measure twenty-six, unexpectedly interrupting the ‘commentary’ on the second statement of the Exultabunt Dominio motif. All harmonic motion ceases, and the left hand and pedal sustain a massive chord superimposing A major over Eb major. In
this moment, the tone of the piece surges from distant and contemplative to primal and ritualistic; the harmony clearly refers to Stravinsky’s use of tritone-related major chords for the same purpose in *Petrushka* and *Le Sacre du Printemps*. It is also the first prolonged presence of a single octatonic area, both A and Eb representing nodes of the third collection. The second theme first sounds over this static texture, in a disarmingly incongruent mode of E natural. According to Marie-Claire Alain, this is a modification of a traditional Jewish tune he picked up at his job as a synagogue organist23. (It’s hard not to appreciate both Alain’s eclecticism and his spiritual warmth for pairing a Christian theme with a Jewish one). It is difficult to determine to what extent the motif present here resembles its original form, due partially due its idiosyncratic rhythmic treatment as well as its unusual pitch-set (E-F#-A-A#-B-D#-E). Later on, F natural is introduced as well). Nonetheless, its registration in the cromorne, and recitative-like trumpeting quality, may allude to the call of a shofar. The controlled *rubato* rhythmic contour- a quintuplet grouping centered in the melody- as well as delicate ornamentation and oddly placed accents also evoke North African taksim. As the melody unfolds, Alain elaborates it increasingly, and the underlying harmonies converge into E major with a suspended A#.

![Deuxième Fantasie, measures 26-30](image)

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This brings us back to a restatement of the opening theme at measure 36, a tritone away from our starting point at B. Moving into the development section, Alain employs a unique technique in registration to freshen his previously stated material. As the *Exultabunt Domino* motif returns, he adds a nazard in the positif to the original registration. Due to the sharpness of its high fifth, conventional wisdom dictates that a nazard should be used in conjunction with louder stops so that the tone fuses with the stop playing at the fundamental. However, because of the softness of the salacional, the nazard instead has an intensified impact, obscuring the harmonic clarity of the upper two voices. In this fashion, Alain’s registrations transcend their traditional role of timbral shading; they become a means of augmenting harmony more subtly than with actual notated pitches. The crescendo achieved by an additive stop process in measures 46-49 borrows from this technique as well. Although stacking louder stops to synthesize a crescendo was hardly new by the 1930’s, he toys with the sequence to peculiar effect. The addition of overtone stops (the nazard and mixture) happens before the louder ones at unison level, making for a more piercing attack than one might expect. The momentum generated through this buildup helps foment a dramatic transition into the development section, illustrating the importance of registration in delineating the structure of Alain’s work.

We reach the development section via a further development of the second theme, characterized by accenting chords in the left hand and pedal. This section differs substantially from the exposition in its disposition, with a new *presto subito* tempo and fluttering toccata figurations in the right hand. It also marks the closest thing to a purely octatonic region in the piece, mitigated only by a stretched chromatic melody appearing in the top voice and doubled in the pedal. Here Alain frames the collection in terms of its in terms of its dissonances, emphasizing minor second and tritone intervals. As the
development progresses, these figurations move slowly cycle downward, reaching a low point at F3 before reversing direction. He thus counterbalances the general lack of harmonic motion with one delineated by register, producing a general “U” trajectory from measures 60-73.

Contrary to the symmetry of the registral contour, a reductive rhythmic device generates increasing forward momentum throughout the passage. The initial rhythm of the toccata figuration occupies a space of two beats, characterized by a three-three-two grouping of sixteenth notes. This grouping represents the only explicit use of North African rhythm in the piece, and quite directly resembles the Arabic *Wahda* cycle. *Wahda* comprises a four-beat cycle divided as such: D - - T - - T - - . (In this notation, D stands for “dum”, a low-pitched drum stroke, and T for “tek”, a high one. Dashes indicate rests). We might regard the lowest note of the figuration as a “dum”, as it is always the lowest note of the set; the barring delineates the second group of three. The final two eight notes of the group are tied, again setting them apart and rendering the final “tek” in the sequence. At measure 65, Alain subtracts a sixteenth-note from the first three-note grouping of each figure, converting them into a two-three-two set of septuplets. He further diminishes the pattern to six notes beginning at measure 71, removing the final pulse. As the passage progresses and the arpeggios become shorter and shorter, we consequently feel a gradual broadening towards its conclusion. Some of his contemporaries also incorporated additive and subtractive rhythmic processes into their work, but Alain’s use of such techniques serves markedly different ends. Messiaen, most notably, augmented and diminished his rhythms incrementally with short durations, in an attempt to eliminate metric regularity. Here the duration of the altered figure remains the same, leaving the quarter-note pulses intact, but forcing the durations of the individual notes to expand slightly so as to fill the
time-space. As such, this process might be regarded as a long-form structural device, precipitating the return of the theme over the whole course of the development. The tension generated in this section comes to a head in measure 74, where the toccata figuration spins itself into runs and the first theme sounds in pedal octaves. The alternation of ten, twelve, and eleven note polyrhythms in the left-hand line destabilize the regularity of the rhythm, perpetuating a relaxation of energies. Thus, the irregular sequencing of polyrhythmic figures serves as a counterbalance of sorts to their previous inertial function.

The construction of this transition, and the recapitulation itself, are odd in that they seem to continue developing the material, even as the piece comes to a close. The transition leading into the final thematic statements further expands the Jewish hymn melody, as though to pick up right from where we left off at the beginning of the development. As part of this elaboration, polyrhythms are again employed to the end of temporal elasticity, culminating in an exhaustion of sorts at measure 104. The first theme finally returns here in Bb, but does not receive a complete articulation. Instead, Alain hybridizes his themes into one, integrating the Jewish hymn into the harmonic and melodic fabric of the *Exultabunt Domino* motif. This synthesis nicely illuminates the relationship between the piece’s themes in ways we likely have had yet to perceive, lending a pleasant sense of closure to the proceedings. The *Deuxième Fantasie* ends, as do so many of Alain’s works, with a tone of mystery or uncertainty. The composer supplies one last trick of registration in the final four measures, switching out the gamba for a subdued flute douce. We scarcely recognize the presence of the flute until the gamba drops out on the final E minor chord, leaving us with an unexpected change in timbre at the very last second. It is also interesting to note that this E minor chord marks the first appearance of the tonic (as indicated by the key signature) throughout the whole of the composition. Yet its arrival
hardly feels like a resolution, and we once again feel the mercurial tenuousness of Alain’s
tonal conception.

Conclusion

The Deuxième Fantasie hardly represents the end of Alain’s development, and throughout the rest of his three remaining years composing he would continue to expound upon the musical foundations he started building so early in his musical career. The fiery dance rhythms of Joies and the soaring, mystical harmonies of the Suite pour Orgue take root in the adventurousness of earlier works like Deux Danse a Agni Yavishta and Le Jardin Suspendu. While it is impossible to know where further exploration of these territories may have led him, Alain carved out a distinct and remarkable musical niche in the short time that he had. As such, I wish to point out several aspects of his language unique to the composer, and possibly an overlooked influence on later generations of musician.

Perhaps the most exceptional of all Alain’s innovations is his manipulation of simultaneously occurring modal and octatonic sets. His music bursts with a freshness of harmony spun through a matrix of overlapping collections, in a fashion largely without precedent. This idiom of modal networks takes many forms, from dense, contrapuntal textures to wavering, frozen soundscapes, but always has something new to say. What’s more, the rigorous assembly of such interplay never seems to compromise the spirituality of the music; on the contrary, many of his most beautiful moments draw their power from his painstaking balance of tonality and ambiguity. Second, almost no other composer has employed specialized organ registration to such heights. Alain realized the power of the organ to generate harmony as well as timbre. Through careful control of volume and register, many of the stop combinations play with the dichotomy between voices moving in
parallel versus coloristic synthesis. It is all the more painful, then, to think of the lost orchestration of *Trois Danses*, and to speculate about what sort of colors he might have coaxed in an orchestral setting. Lastly, Alain may not have been alone in his use of elastic rhythm, but his application of such devices to determine long-form structural elements was certainly among the first. Contrary to Messiaen’s erasure of pulse, his language highlights the passage of time, incrementally accelerating or slowing the music via small changes over wide areas. Many complex rhythmic systems developed by many subsequent composers, from Elliot Carter to Steve Reich, were anticipated in this music. His inclusion of Arabic rhythmic patterns of North Africa, too, cultivated a resource virtually untapped by Europeans before him.

As with all great composers who die in the prime of life, Alain’s work tantalizes us with the ghosts of unfinished works, and those yet to be written. Yet the output that we are left with—around 120 works (many of which are piano and chamber groups as well as organ)—is substantial and highly rewarding to performers and listeners alike. Because of his relatively small output, and perhaps because of the predominance of organ music in his repertoire, most of Alain’s music has fallen into neglect; even amongst organists, only *Litanies* has truly permeated into the core repertoire. We do ourselves a great disservice in the abandonment of this body of work, and it is my hope that in this year of Alain’s birth, the recitals and concerts honoring him will bring a more lasting attention to his genius. Rarely is the musical world given a voice so genuine and so original.