

Correspondence between Charles Tournemire and Joseph Bonnet regarding the removal of the choir organ and the construction of the accompanying organ (Summer 1930)

"Everything in my house is dark and may remain so, unless your intervention saves me from a dreadful thing... And it was to happen to me at the end of my life... at 60 years old!! ».

Taking advantage of the absence of Charles Tournemire, who had gone on holiday to his house in Ushant, the Chapel Master of the Basilica, Jules Meunier, had given his consent to the parish priest, Canon Verdrie, for the construction of a "youyou"¹ under my great organ... to accompany his herd," he wrote to Joseph Bonnet in August 1930.

"The ignoble House of Cavaillé-Coll, which lends itself to the lowest tasks, has accepted! We're talking about the invisibility of the device! How do you expect us to be able to hide 8 to 900 pipes at least. We would spend 85,000 francs for this beautiful work, while I am waiting to complete my organ... I'm totally overwhelmed.

Already 4 years ago, this Miller had already told me his desire (!) to do this infamous work. I was so angry that I replied, "If you set yourself in motion, I will stir up the whole musical and organist world. In the meantime, I'll talk to d'Indy about it, and he says, "Don't let this happen. Out of respect for art, and for our master." I may add, and for myself... This Miller declared that the present organ, ingeniously arranged in the chancel, could not, even if repaired, render it any service. Now, you remember, in the time of Rousseau (who had this organ built) and who, all things considered, was worth infinitely more than this stupid and nefarious fellow, managed this Mercklinade wonderfully. This Miller, on the other hand, claims that the singers do not hear this organ. This is not true. It is the aforementioned Kapellmeister who hears and will never hear anything... And then, sounds that would come from above, and that would not be those of my organ. What an abomination.

This is what I ask of you, for your sake. The priest, ignorant of the things of music, allows himself to be enveloped by the vicious intrigant² in question which cultivates these ladies of the Faubourg. I don't think there's the slightest idea of what I am or imagine myself to be... If Franck suffered atrociously, and was despised by the parish priest of Ste Clotilde, I believe that he considers me a sort of under-the-top sacristan!!

I saw it the day before yesterday – I made the journey from Ushant to Paris, on purpose to see it. I protested vigorously against his crime. He replied that he had given the order (in a purely ecclesiastical tone) to build the cork. I insisted, telling him a thousand and a thousand things. I told him that I had prayed a lot to be heard by him. Nothing helps. Then I remembered the tears of Franck, so unhappy, misunderstood, ill-treated by the priest and Rousseau!! »

In a "absolutely confidential" letter from Charles Tournemire to Joseph Bonnet – Paris, 9 September 1930, Tournemire saw only one solution: an intervention by Bonnet himself with the parish priest of Ste Clotilde.

"Insist that the chancel organ be repaired and kept where it is. Say the layout is perfect. Light it up. He holds you in high regard (you're lucky). You can save me. Say that for the sake of art, for Franck and for me, for the famous organ of Ste Clotilde, and in order not to destroy the harmony of the double gallery, one cannot think of desecrating all this! Talk also about the inevitable noise that the motor of the unwanted instrument would make. [...] If you succeed in your high mission, I will bless you a hundred times, and God will rejoice in you. Request an appointment as soon as possible. There is a hurry because Avenue du Maine, in this den of criminals, must prepare plan and execution... »

In his reply to Tournemire, Joseph Bonnet was very sorry that he could not meet his request. To tell the truth, Bonnet's position was delicate vis-à-vis the parish priest of Ste Clotilde, and this intervention could be detrimental to his musical career in Paris.

A few days later, Tournemire made one last attempt with Joseph Bonnet, who knew Paul Léon well, who worked for the French Historical Monuments Service: "Could he do nothing to safeguard the harmony of the double tribune?" Again, his answer was negative.

Subsequently, Tournemire bore a grudge against Bonnet and later wrote:

"Bonnet behaved with cowardice. He doesn't want to support me: selfish nature, very personal!! I had asked him to go and see the parish priest of Ste Clotilde about my organ business... He doesn't want to go, under false pretexts. We should not be surprised at anything from men!! » (letter from Charles Tournemire to Alice Lesure, L'Herbe, September 21, 1930).

Despite the protests of many personalities from the musical and clerical world, the instrument was indeed built by the Pleyel-Cavaillé-Coll company.

¹ Orgue de chœur

² He refers to the vicar of the parish, the very worldly Father Arthur Mugnier (1853-1944), who spent more time in the salons than in the confessionals.