

## **In memoriam Solange Corbin – On the third anniversary of her death**

Solange Corbin was one of these rare persons one can never forget, even after having seen them but one time only or just for a few brief moments. My initial memory of her is rooted in an impression she made when I first saw her at the “East and West in Music” Congress, which was held in Jerusalem, in 1963. She was then a tall woman radiating beauty that, with a most spiritual look, spoke about the Gregorian chant – spoke and sang. Her nobility stood out even at that impressive assembly, where were gathered some of the greatest personalities of the musicological and musical world – Zoltan Kodaly, Maud Karpeles, Antoine Cherbuliez, Paul Collaer, Jacques Chailley and others.

That first image of her never left me, even when I became at last her pupil in the Ecole des Hautes Etudes of the Sorbonne, in Paris, where she held a chair for a quarter of a century. My studies with her proved to be one of the most fascinating experiences I have ever had. There, the genuine greatness of her character revealed itself to me; her teaching and her devotion to her pupils were incomparable.

While anyone from all corners of the country or from anywhere in the world was permitted to enroll at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes, nevertheless, each one of her pupils, from the first class onward, was given the maximum of attention by Solange Corbin. She devoted even her free time to us (Saturdays and Sundays included), doing her best to help us as rapidly and as thoroughly as possible. She aided us in organizing our work, ever heartily encouraging and gently urging, never forcing. Always she stimulated us, fertilizing our minds, enlarging our scope and enriching both our intellects and our souls.

Belying all the usual pitfalls inherent in her particular field of research, Medieval Music – a field that runs the risk of being treated in a dull and desiccated way – a lesson with Solange Corbin was the complete antithesis of anything dead or dry. Her vitality and vivid temperament brought life to even the merest remnant of a medieval manuscript. She was gifted in combining a profound erudition and scientific discipline with human warmth and direct involvement. It was as if she were there, in the time and place where the music she spoke of was being created and performed. To experience her teaching was unforgettable. For me she was and shall remain the epitome and perfect model of researcher and teacher, a talent that combined itself in her person with both modesty and complete selflessness.

Even as she grew older, her beautiful face and her expression remained alert; she was always ready to accept new ideas, new ways of thinking. She admired those who worked hard and detested only laziness. Sparkling in her energy, her responses were so rapid as if to caution that even one second might not be wasted – that life itself is but a passing moment to be pressed to its fullest worth.

Solange Corbin de Mangoux was born on the 5th of April 1903, into an old and noble family, known since the 16th century, in Vorly (Cher), in the district of Bourges, in Central France. She studied music both in Bourges and in the Schola Cantorum, in Paris – piano, solfège, harmony and organ. From the beginning, her main interest was Gregorian chant and church music. Until she was relatively mature, she remained with her parents in the country, helping to manage and enjoying the family farm. Then, feeling the need to deepen and extend her musical and musicological activities, she undertook her work in the Ecole des Hautes Etudes, where she devoted her first researches to the medieval music of Spain and Portugal. During the years of the Second World War, while traveling to Spain and Portugal, she became actively involved in the Resistance, and maintained contact with these lands, more than once having saved the lives of certain members of the Resistance movement.<sup>1</sup>

The early years of her research resulted in a thesis completed in 1944 and published in 1947 entitled, *Essai sur la musique religieuse portugaise au Moyen Age*. This work was prepared under the guidance of Louis Halphen and Pierre David. In 1946 she completed her studies under the tutelage of Paul-Marie Masson and went on to Basel to continue research with Jacques Handschin, then to Rome to study with Dam Mohlberg and Mgr Angles.

After the war she concentrated on her great thesis *La notation musicale neumatique. Les quatre provinces lyonnaises: Lyon, Rouen, Tours et Sens*. This monumental work, guided by the professors Samaran, Lebegue and Chailley, was her these d'état, after the completion of which she was appointed professor in the Ecole des Hautes Etudes, a post she retained until her demise.

From the 1950's on, Solange Corbin remained one of the world's leading musical medievalists, contributing her knowledge to all the important musical and literary dictionaries and encyclopedias of France, England, Germany and Italy.<sup>2</sup> Her writing was concise – not a single superfluous word – presenting the essence of her vast erudition with an incredible simplicity in a "matter of fact" style. Above all, her written work (as had her teaching) sparkled with life and involvement, emanating a vitality, which combined a profound knowledge with deep human warmth.

She was the first musicologist to accomplish a most detailed comparative research in the field of neumatic notation. Her studies in the domain of liturgical drama (mainly the Ms Orleans 201) resulted in the performance of her transcription of the *Ludus pascalis*;<sup>3</sup> with the help of pupils and assistants, systematically she scoured the old libraries of France, seeking out medieval musical notations and cataloguing many of them.

While at her teaching post at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes she was often invited as guest lecturer to important universities, among them Harvard and Cambridge. Her last and most important contribution to the field of teaching was the founding of a department of musicology in the University of Poitiers, the medieval city she so admired, and where she not only taught about music but also created a Collegium Musicae Antiquae. For her musicology was never a dead science, it was a living art.

If most of the writings of Solange Corbin are known only to specialists, one book she wrote for the general public: *L'Église à la conquête de sa musique* (Gallimard, Paris, 1960), which is a popularized version of the history of medieval church music, remains no doubt the best book of its kind. Her direct and vivid style is here apparent in its utmost beauty. Especially interesting are the chapters dealing with Synagoga music and its relation to ancient music sources of the church. One cannot imagine a better and deeper understanding or a clearer explanation of the subject even from a well-rooted Jewish scholar.<sup>4</sup>

Solange Corbin died in Bourges, on the 17th of September, 1973;<sup>5</sup> with her decease Jewish musicology, too, lost an admirable friend.

## NOTES

1. For details, see the article of Denise Jourdan-Hemmerdinger in *Revue de Musicologie*, 1973, p. 314.
2. For a detailed bibliography of her writings, see the article of Dominique Patier, Gerard Le Vot and Marie Gallais in *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale* janviers-mars 1974, pp. 87-93.
3. The ORTF Ancient Music Group directed by Charles Ravier recorded this work.
4. The book appeared one year after Eric Werner's *The Sacred Bridge* (London, New York, 1959) and was written parallel to this one.
5. See the funeral oration by Jacques Chailley in *Revue de Musicologie* 1973, p. 312.