

An Appreciation of Canadian Organist and Composer Rachel Laurin (1961–2023)

By Gilles Maurice Leclerc

On 13 August 2023, Canada lost one of its most respected ambassadors of Canadian music. Rachel Laurin died of cancer after a brief illness, at age 62, two days after her birthday. Her loss was immediately met with tributes and shared memories online from around the world, all deeply mourning her passing. Many will choose to honour her by performing her remarkable music, fulfilling a wish she expressed early on when she learned about her health issues. I hope that this brief tribute will capture what she contributed to Canadian music and to organ music around the world.

I knew Rachel Laurin for more than 35 years. I first met her at St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal when I attended some of the Wednesday evening summer organ recitals, a series that Raymond Daveluy (1926–2016)—organist at the Oratory from 1960 until 2002—established soon after his nomination. Rachel was assistant organist of the Oratory for the last 18 years of Raymond Daveluy's tenure. These summer series introduced first-class artists from around the globe and, of course, both Rachel Laurin and Raymond Daveluy were always featured. Those evenings were memorable to anyone who enjoyed attending the series, with its beautiful setting of the Oratory



RACHEL LAURIN. PHOTO CREDIT: GILLES LECLERC.

Canadian composer and organist **Gilles Maurice Leclerc** was born in Ottawa in 1960. He studied organ with such noted teachers as Gerald Bales, Patricia Wright, composition with Steven Gellman and choral conducting with Agnes Grossman at the University of Ottawa and completed a Masters in Musicology at the same University in 1994. He has been organist at Saint-François d'Assise Church in Ottawa since 1978, and his music has been performed in Canada, the US and in Europe. His organ works were often featured during the Annual Festival of New Organ Music in London, and he gave an entire recital of his works at Westminster Cathedral in 2009. He retired from Library and Archives Canada in 2017 where over the years he had been a reference librarian, reference archivist and finally assistant archivist in the Private Music Collections Division. He released a CD of some of his organ works he recorded at his church in Ottawa in 2005.



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high above Montreal on Mont-Royal facing out over many gorgeous sunsets we would admire at intermission. Always impressive was the massive five-manual and 78-stop Von Beckerath organ that Mr. Daveluy presided over since its installation in 1960. And who can forget the incredible performances that thundered through the cavernous echo of the Oratory as the nave darkened over the evening. After the recitals, the guest artists and friends of Rachel Laurin and Raymond Daveluy apparently often gathered at a nearby restaurant for either a late meal or for drinks.

Her career

I got to know Rachel more after she moved to Ottawa. The Ottawa Centre of the Royal Canadian College of Organists warmly welcomed her as one of its members. She was named organist of Notre-Dame Cathedral Basilica in 2002 and, soon afterwards, she gave a stunning performance of the six symphonies by Louis Vierne (1870–1937) in two recitals given over two weeks.² Needless to say, all were more than impressed by her great talent. We knew, of course, that prior to her arrival, she had already performed and given masterclasses in Europe, and was already well-known in her home province of Québec.

Rachel Laurin's international career really took off after 2002 with recitals, commissions, and teaching engagements in Canada, Europe, and the USA. She was often featured as an organist and/or composer during national conventions of the American Guild of Organists (A.G.O.) and the Royal Canadian College of Organists (R.C.C.O.). Her last European recital was given in Switzerland in August 2022.

I was delighted to accompany her to London, UK, in 2007, when she performed my *Variations on Pange lingua* during the Annual Festival of New Organ Music that London-based Martin Stacey, a fine organist and composer himself, organized for about 8 years.

In later years, Rachel became a resident composer with Wayne Leupold Editions, which assured that all her organ works would be published. Twenty-nine of her compositions are available from this publisher.³

Her Music

Committed to writing music that was both accessible and beautiful, Rachel Laurin never delved into contemporary musical idioms, which often suffer from a lack of any audibly cohesive narrative—not to mention music—for the listener to follow along.

To hear Rachel's music is to know her; one clearly hears her love of life, her creativity, and her joy and energy in all that she undertook. Her humour, quick wit, cleverness, and her keen sense of

² The instrument, originally built by Joseph Casavant in 1850, was subsequently enlarged by his two sons, Joseph and Claver, in 1892. It was again renovated in 1999 by the firm of Guilbault-Thérien as part of a complete restoration of Notre-Dame Cathedral by Archbishop Marcel Gervais, the current Archbishop at the time who hired Rachel. He passed away a week before Rachel. More recently, Casavant Frères revoiced the instrument which enhanced its French symphonic character.

³ See the following link: https://theleupoldfoundation.org/product-category/root-catalog/?wl_composer=laurin-rachel.

observation all bubble out in every piece. One always felt an outburst of energy whenever she began any recital. From the first note on, one was carried on a wave of delight.

Her accessibility to—and awareness of—people around her, and her interest in supporting the development of young emerging artists, were always a joy to see. Her masterclasses, whether at R.C.C.O. and A.G.O. conventions or at Yale University, were much appreciated by their participants.

Some even travelled to Ottawa to work with her over short periods; it is a great gift for any pedagogue to have such an opportunity to teach others. In response to the OrgelKidsCAN competition announced in 2019, she eagerly composed a set of easy organ pieces for children who would discover the OrgelkidsCAN Kit;⁴ these were the winning entry in the competition that was set up to help celebrate the tenth anniversary of this music programme for children.

Her improvisations

It has been said that few become both great improvisors and great composers. Rachel Laurin had both of these gifts, in addition to being a great performer. She was influenced by her mentor, Raymond Daveluy, whom I consider one of Canada's outstanding improvisers, composers, and concert organists.

In her final years as a church organist, Rachel Laurin found a home for her faith and her music at St. Clement's (St. Anne's) Parish in Ottawa, where Holy Mass is celebrated in the Tridentine Rite of the Roman Catholic Church. One sensed Rachel's belonging at St. Clement's all the more in the wonderful homily that Father Erik Desprey, the parish rector, gave at her funeral that was celebrated there on Friday 18 August. Approximately 250 attended, including three past presidents of the R.C.C.O., Thomas Leslie, the organization's current president. Many members of the Ottawa Centre of the R.C.C.O., Rachel's relatives and friends, and parish members of St. Clement's. The choir, under the direction of Emily Maunder, provided music that had been selected by Rachel, and Gisèle Guibord, a good friend of Rachel's, accompanied the solemn Mass.

Her legacy

Soon after she was informed of her serious health issues, Rachel Laurin expressed a wish that her music would be played after her passing. And surely, it will be. It has become staple repertoire for hundreds of concert organists around the world, and essential works to be included in any organ recital. Her friends and colleagues who admired her so much can henceforth honour her memory and her music with countless future recitals.



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⁴ *OrgelKit* is a programme that was first developed in Europe to help introduce children to the pipe organ. Little instruments with a two and a half octave keyboard are provided for the children to assemble and then play.

She was the leading organist of her generation during a very vibrant period of organ music in Montreal, in Québec, and in Canada and can only be fully appreciated within that period when organ music in Montreal flourished with the arrival of three magnificent von Beckerath organs. The Royal Canadian College of Organist presented her an FRCCO (Fellow of the Royal Canadian College of Organists) Diploma in June 2023 for her outstanding contribution to organ music here and abroad, and after her passing, paid homage to her on its website.⁵

May her memory be a blessing to us all.

⁵ See the following link: <https://www.rcco.ca/news/13240620>.