

Marilyn Mason: Dupré, *Le Chemin de la Croix*

Henry Russell

In 2007 Marilyn Mason celebrated her 60th year of teaching at the University of Michigan. She has taught at the university since 1947, making her the longest-tenured faculty member in the institution's 190 years. On March 12, at Hill Auditorium, Dr. Mason played an impressive performance of Dupré's *Le Chemin de la Croix*, with Malcolm Tulip, Professor of Theatre, reading the Claudel poems.

In writing his opus 29, *Le Chemin de la Croix*, Marcel Dupré was inspired by the meditations written in 1911 by Paul Claudel (1868–1955), diplomat, poet, and social activist who called France to revive its culture on the basis of its Catholic roots rather than futilely attaching itself to Nazism or Communism. Claudel's career was part of the great awakening of Christian faith that occurred after World War I had shattered faith in merely secular reason. Like Mauritian, Gilson and Bernanos in France or T. S. Eliot and C. S. Lewis in England, Claudel made new the language, to reacquaint the modern world with the ancient verities that built the West.

Dupré first performed "Le Chemin" in February 1931 as improvisations played between the reading of the poems. He wrote the score the following year and played the composition each year from 1934–71 at St. Sulpice in Paris.

The 14 Stations of the Cross are an ancient meditation on the hours of Christ's sufferings and crucifixion, developed as early as St. Bernard of Clairvaux and St. Francis of Assisi. While it was often typical to use the biblical passages that underlie eight of these stations or moments, Claudel uses a harsher, less immediately reverent language that reflects the hard-heartedness with which modern men and women look upon the sufferings of anyone, much less in a God to whose very existence they have grown insensitive.

Malcolm Tulip's dramatic interpretation of these meditations captured that hard-edged, unsentimental view of those who believe that the burdens of a century of mechanized warfare are so great that they can afford to denigrate the infinite suffering of their Creator. That sense is vividly portrayed when the narrator asks, at the fall of Jesus under the weight of the cross, "How do you like the ground you created?" Yet the narrator is inevitably overwhelmed by the sorrow and the suffering of innocence, even as he is ever more disgusted by the endless violence of Christ's tormentors.

It is this dialogue between persecution and pity that Dupré and Mason captured in majestic fashion. It seemed that every sound that the organ could evoke was included in Mason's performance—for instance, the tender and compassionate music of the Eighth Station, where Jesus comforts the women of Jerusalem, and the wrenching sound of the reed choruses as their voices imitate the hammer blows in Station Eleven as Jesus is nailed to the cross. A series of slides projected on a large screen provided visual analogues from great art of these familiar scenes. The images provide a point of reference for which the eyes are initially grateful, but as the music takes hold, they become less important and the spo-

ken word and the endlessly varied music makes one want to look at things which eye hath never seen.

This is a virtuoso piece for poet, composer, organist, and actor. Like a closet drama, it works to contain, in a miniature and even ordinary setting, an unimaginable splendor and size of theme and musical achievement. Those who attended both the majestic *St. Matthew Passion* on Good Friday and this quintessential recital on March 12, both at Hill Auditorium, were shown how the infinite can express itself in both the most grandiose and most personal of settings. It is a great tribute to the University of Michigan and its musicians that such meditations on what lies at the heart of existence still find a place in its arts. Marilyn Mason is to be deeply thanked for having the vision and the artistry to give this great treasure to the university community as her own Easter gift.

—Henry Russell, Ph.D.
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Marilyn Mason and narrator Malcolm Tulip

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