

# Coffee Break

with Vincent Dubois

With this article, we are pleased to introduce a new series highlighting interesting people with a variety of backgrounds, skills, and expertise. Vincent Dubois is one of the most acclaimed organists in the world. He studied at the Paris Conservatory and, in 2002, won the top prizes at two international competitions: the Recital Gold Medal at Calgary, and the Grand Prize at Toulouse. After serving as organist of the cathedrals of Saint-Brieuc and Soissons, Dubois became one of the organistes titulaires at Notre-Dame de Paris in 2016. He is also professor of organ interpretation and improvisation at the Hochschule für Musik (University for Music) in Saarbrücken, Germany, and maintains a busy recital career. Vincent Dubois spoke to Alex Hodgkinson.



Vincent Dubois (photo: Klara Beck)

As well as my work at Notre-Dame and my teaching in Saarbrücken, I am fortunate to give concerts in Europe, in the United States, in Asia—so many countries all over the planet! I would say it's about 60 solo recitals in 2025. I look forward to returning to the U.S. in October and November, when I will be performing in New York, Maine, Pennsylvania, and Michigan.

My wife, Marie-Andrée Joerger, is a brilliant classical accordionist, and about eight years ago we founded a duo to give concerts. The accordion is a very sensitive, very expressive instrument, and the colors and textures balance the organ very well. And so we make a duet, which is the second big part of my artistic life. This year we have about twelve concerts together, in many places, including the Berlin Philharmonie.

We have arranged lots of pieces originally written for accordion solo, or organ solo, or orchestra. There is an amazing accordion concerto, the *Opale Concerto*, by French accordionist Richard Galliano (b. 1950), a friend and collaborator of Astor Piazzolla. We have arranged it for accordion and organ, with me playing the orchestral part. We also play organ repertoire, including Bach trios, *Dieu parmi nous* by Messiaen, Franck's *Prelude, Fugue, et Variation*, and so on.

In February, I recorded a solo CD at Notre-Dame, the first recording since the reopening of the cathedral. It will be released on the Erato/Warner Classics label and is a diverse program including music by several former organists of Notre-Dame: Vierne, Pierre Cochereau, and Claude Balbastre (1724–1799). So there is a lot going on at the moment!

At Notre-Dame, there are actually five organists: two choir organists and three *titulaires* of the *grand orgue*, plus an adjunct *titulaire*. We share the playing of the Masses and Vespers, with one of us “on duty” every week from Saturday to Friday. The organists, we collaborate well together, *pour l'intérêt commun* [for the common interest].



At the end of services we can play some repertoire, but during the service we improvise. We might base our improvisation on the Gregorian chant sung that day, or we might be inspired by the texts that are read during the Mass. So long as it is appropriate for the liturgy, we are totally free about the music we make.

**The Notre-Dame fire was devastating**, and a terrible shock. My colleague Johann [Vexo] was playing the services that day. He called me—I was in my car, and he was crying. I've never heard him cry. He told me, "The cathedral is burning, the cathedral is burning." I got home and turned on my TV and could not believe what was happening. I was in front of my TV the whole night, praying, calling the other organists to see if one of us had news. At about six the following morning, we heard from one of the sacristans that the nave is saved, the organ is saved. It was a miracle. Remarkable.

The organ has been fully restored, and we can say, you know, it's the same. There are no changes inside the organ. The voicing is the same. Some of the console technology has been updated, but it doesn't affect in any way the sound.

But what has changed when you play the organ and when you hear it in the nave is the clarity of the high pitches. It is now totally different. I mean, the voicing is the same, but the way the sound develops in the nave creates a clarity we have never heard before. The reeds, I have not noticed any difference about them, but the mutations, the mixtures are all totally bright.


And what is also remarkable is that before the fire, we had about eight seconds of echo. And it's the same now. But when the nave is full of people, before it was like three seconds, maximum, of resonance, and now it's five. Because the stone has been cleaned, we have won two seconds, at least, of resonance when the church is full, which is really very nice.

You have to adapt your playing, of course, depending on how full the building is. When the cathedral is empty—so for the recordings, for example—the microphones need to be close to the organ, and you have to pay really close attention to what you hear back from the acoustic, otherwise it can be a real mess.

Inside the building, what is remarkable is the whiteness of everything. For the next ten years or so, we're able to see the cathedral as it would have looked in the Middle Ages. It hasn't looked so clean, so pristine, for over 800 years. So now is an opportunity to see the cathedral in its full glory.

**The best piece of advice I have ever been given** is to enjoy life as much as you can, because life is one and very short! And of everything in life, it is the human side that is the most important thing.

*Vincent Dubois is represented in the United States by Karen McFarlane Artists Inc. (ConcertOrganists.com).*



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