

## **Fernande Breilh-Decruck: Waiting for (Re)Discovery**



*For placement opposite first page of article:* Fernande Breilh-Decruck during her first stay in America, c. 1928.  
(Photo provided by H el ene Decruck)

## Introduction

Fernande Breilh-Decruck (1896-1954) was a gifted and extremely prolific composer who wrote at least twenty-three symphonic pieces, sixty-six chamber works, and a wide variety of compositions for solo instruments.<sup>1</sup> She also became the first female composer to write for *la musique de la Garde Républicaine* when she orchestrated her *Chant Lyrique*, Op. 69, for Marcel Mule and that ensemble.<sup>2</sup> However, standard musical reference books, such as *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* and *The Norton/Grove Dictionary of Women Composers*, contain no entries for her. Furthermore, with the exception of her *Sonate en ut dièze pour Saxophone alto mi b ou alto à cordes avec accompagnement de Piano ou Orchestre* (hereafter referred to as the Sonata in C-Sharp), which has recently become known in saxophone circles, her works have largely been forgotten.

I first performed Breilh-Decruck's Sonata in C-Sharp in a solo recital in Red Bank, New Jersey. The local newspaper covered my performance, and in an interview for the article, I mentioned that there was little information available about Breilh-Decruck, although she was evidently an accomplished composer. In an unexpected turn of events, Hélène Decruck, Fernande Breilh-Decruck's granddaughter, read this article online and contacted me to discuss her grandmother's life. She generously provided a wealth of source material; the document for my DMA degree, a study of Breilh-Decruck's life and saxophone works, was based on these sources. The present article will likewise offer a brief biography and survey of her compositions, with particular emphasis on her saxophone works. This article will also suggest possible reasons

why, despite being celebrated in her own time, she has been essentially forgotten by the music world.

The exclusion of Breilh-Decruck's music from the classical canon is a significant loss for modern musicians. Her catalogue of works contains an impressive number and variety of compositions. She wrote for a wide range of instruments in both orchestral and chamber music settings, including concertos for clarinet, harp, piano, saxophone, and violoncello.<sup>3</sup> She also composed smaller works for soloist and orchestra, among which are pieces for bassoon, harp, piano, trombone, trumpet, and voice.<sup>4</sup> In addition, she wrote a ballet—titled *Symphonic Orientale* and based on *A Thousand and One Arabian Nights*—and several other major works for orchestra, including *Suite Romane*, *Marathon-Marche*, *Symphonie Rimbaldienne*, and *Suite Française* for string orchestra and wind soloists.<sup>5</sup>

*Symphonie Rimbaldienne* is one example of a Breilh-Decruck work that critics embraced at its premiere, but which failed to gain international recognition. Inspired by Arthur Rimbaud's collection of poems *Les Illuminations*, it was premiered on November 28, 1943, by the *Orchestre des Concerts Lamoureux*, directed by Eugène Bigot.<sup>6</sup> Scored for orchestra, chorus, and voice, it was one of Breilh-Decruck's first large-scale orchestral works,<sup>7</sup> and one critic described it as having "charming pages of clear writing interspersed with delicate melodies in the way of Debussy."<sup>8</sup> Other reviews focused on Breilh-Decruck's musicality and on the originality of the symphony's structure.<sup>9</sup> One of its unique features is the replacement of the traditional slow movement with settings of six poems for solo voice and orchestra.<sup>10</sup> The fate of *Symphonie Rimbaldienne* represents the destiny of Breilh-Decruck's work as a whole: musically inventive

and admired at its premiere, it nevertheless failed to gain international exposure, in part because of the political and historical climate surrounding its composition.

In addition to the overall merit of her broad compositional output, Breilh-Decruck deserves to be remembered more specifically as a noteworthy composer for the saxophone. Long before most of her contemporaries, she recognized the saxophone's potential as a solo instrument. Her Sonata in C-Sharp has already earned a place in the canon of saxophone works,<sup>11</sup> but she wrote nearly forty pieces for the saxophone, only nineteen of which have been located. The works that have been found are extremely varied, not only in style, but also in ambition and their levels of difficulty. She wrote several pieces inspired by American jazz, one of which, *The Golden Sax*, is dedicated to Rudy Wiedoeft.<sup>12</sup> Her *Chant Lyrique* pieces are smaller, single-movement classical works that are ideal for intermediate and advanced saxophonists. The Sonata in C-Sharp and *Pièces Françaises* are more substantial multi-movement works that pose specific technical challenges, even for professional saxophonists. Breilh-Decruck also wrote at least five works for saxophone and orchestra: the Sonata in C-Sharp; an orchestrated version of *Chant Lyrique*, Op. 69; *Selmera Sax*; Concerto for Alto Saxophone and Orchestra; and *Jazz Toccata*.<sup>13</sup>

## **Biography of Fernande Breilh-Decruck**

According to a biography provided by granddaughter H  l  ne Decruck,<sup>14</sup> Delphine Joan Fernande Breilh was born on December 25, 1896, in the town of Gaillac in southwest France. When she was eight, she enrolled at the *Conservatoire de Toulouse*, where she was awarded First Prize in Music Theory in 1911, First Prize for Piano in 1913, and Second Prize in Harmony in 1917. She subsequently enrolled at the *Conservatoire National Sup  rieur de Musique de Paris*. While at the Paris Conservatory, she earned First Prize in Harmony in 1921, Second Prize in Counterpoint in 1921, First Prize in Fugue in 1922, and First Prize in Piano Accompaniment in 1922. Some of her more notable teachers were Jean Gallon and Marcel Dupr  . In 1922, she began teaching harmony; included among her students was Olivier Messiaen.<sup>15</sup>

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Figure 1: Maurice Decruck, Vibrator Reeds advertisement, c. 1930  
(Photo provided by H  l  ne Decruck)



Figure 2: Maurice Decruck (second from right) with Billy Arnold's Parisians, c. 1928.  
(Photo provided by H  l  ne Decruck)

In 1924, Breilh married Maurice Decruck, who was a double bassist, clarinetist, and saxophonist. After receiving First Prize in Double Bass at the Paris Conservatory that same year, Maurice became a member of the *Orchestre des Concerts Lamoureux* (Figure 1). He also played saxophone with Billy Arnold's Parisians, a jazz orchestra (Figure 2).<sup>16</sup> Shortly thereafter, between 1928 and 1933, the Decrucks lived in America, a significant relocation for several reasons. First, this was a time when Fernande Breilh-Decruck began to give solo organ recitals that included her own music; her first recital took place on April 5, 1929, at the John Wanamaker Auditorium in New York City (Figure 3).<sup>17</sup> After this successful concert, additional performance requests were quick to follow. Also, Fernande began to compose in earnest during this time,

producing numerous piano and organ works, as well as two concertos, one for organ and one for cello.<sup>18</sup>

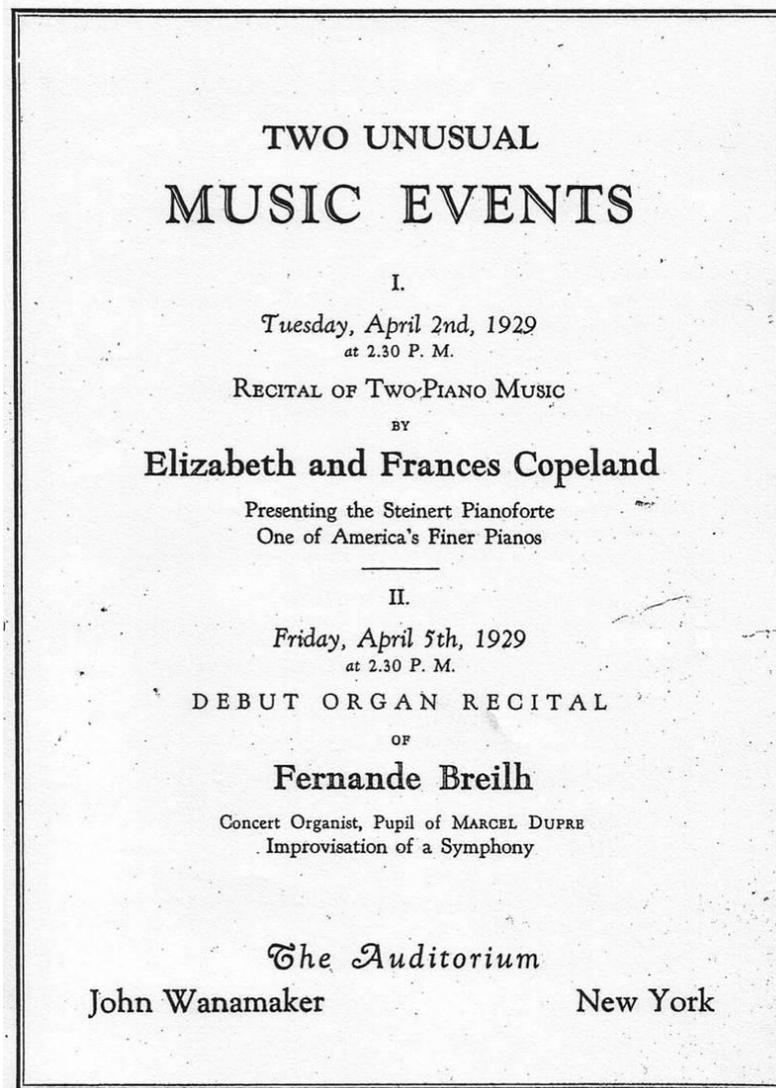


Figure 3: Concert flyer for Fernande Breilh-Decruck's American recital debut, 1929.  
(Provided by H el ene Decruck)

According to H el ene Decruck, their arrival in America was eventful for Maurice, as well. In 1928, he was appointed as double bassist and later, saxophonist, of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of Arturo Toscanini. An article in *Musical Truth*, a trade

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magazine published by Conn to promote their instruments and the musicians who played them, reported that Maurice:

thrilled directors and fellow musicians, as well as the public, with his perfect rendering of unusually difficult solo passages. Playing solo for the first time with Toscanini, he executed the E<sup>b</sup> alto saxophone solo in Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* with such superb fidelity that the musicians arose en masse to congratulate him and the great maestro said to Scipione Guidi, then concert master: "At last here is a saxophonist who is a perfect musician and plays in tune with the other woodwinds."<sup>19</sup>

Unfortunately, in 1932, Maurice lost the use of one of his hands due to an accident. Unable to perform with the orchestra, he moved back to Paris and founded a publishing company, *Les Éditions de Paris*, that same year. One of Maurice's top artists at the time was Edith Piaf.<sup>20</sup>

Fernande stayed in the United States for another year, concertizing and composing. During this time, she wrote many pieces for woodwinds, including a saxophone quartet for Marcel Mule and the *Quatuor de la Garde Républicaine*. She returned to France in April of 1933 and, in 1937, moved to Toulouse with her three children to take up a teaching post at the Toulouse Conservatory, where she was appointed Professor of Music Theory (Figure 4).<sup>21</sup> Maurice, meanwhile, remained in Paris to run his publishing company. Fernande held her teaching position at the Toulouse Conservatory until 1942. During this period, she concertized and began to write numerous large-scale compositions, including operas, symphonies, and concertos.<sup>22</sup>



Figure 4: Business card of Fernande Breilh-Decruck during her tenure at the Toulouse Conservatory, c. 1937.  
(Photo provided by H  l  ne Decruck)

In 1942, Fernande moved back to Paris, both to be with Maurice and to devote herself to composition and the performance of her works. Several of her orchestral pieces were premiered or performed by the *Concerts Colonne* and *Lamoureux Pasdeloup*, with conductors such as Eug  ne Bigot, Paul Paray, and Jean Fournet. Several of these premieres were reviewed positively, including those of her Concerto for Piano and Orchestra and her Concerto for Harp and Orchestra.<sup>23</sup>



Figure 5: Fernande Breilh-Decruck at London Terrace, New York, c. 1947  
(Photo provided by H  l  ne Decruck)

In 1947, Fernande began her second extended stay in America (Figure 5), which lasted until 1948. During this final residency, she wrote her first film scores, though she continued composing chamber music pieces, as well. In 1948, she was appointed Professor of Harmony and History of Music at the Municipal School of Music at Fontainebleau and moved back to France. Upon her return, marital difficulties came to a breaking point, and she officially divorced Maurice in 1950. In 1952, she suffered a stroke, which ultimately led to her death in 1954.<sup>24</sup>

## A Composer Forgotten

Fernande Breilh-Decruck's fall into obscurity came about as a result of two factors: her legal rights as a woman—specifically as a French woman—and the wartime climate in which she composed and premiered most of her works. The publication history of one of her works, *Chant Lyrique*, Op. 69, illustrates the gender-based barriers faced by French women of Breilh-Decruck's time. The work was written in 1932 and published by *Éditions Selmer* in the same year.<sup>25</sup> Although the title page identifies F. Decruck as the composer, the copyright is under the name of her husband, Maurice Decruck.

This curious situation arises from the intellectual property rights of married women in France at that time. As Carla Hess explains, France recognized two sets of rights to an artistic work: the “moral rights” and the “legal rights” (the latter of which would, in America, be called “copyright”). A married woman could be recognized as the author of an artistic work, such as a novel or musical composition. As such, she had the “moral right” to the publication. However, until 1965 (eleven years after Breilh-Decruck's death), the French legal code did not give married women the legal right to their work.<sup>26</sup> While strange to modern observers, the lack of formal legal rights for French women dates back to the Napoleonic Code of 1804, which essentially declared married French women to be minors in all legal matters.<sup>27</sup>

This issue surrounding copyrights has created some confusion as to who actually composed Fernande Breilh-Decruck's works. For instance, in the 2003 edition of Jean-Marie Londeix's *A Comprehensive Guide to the Saxophone Repertoire*—the foremost reference for saxophone literature—Fernande and Maurice shared a joint listing that indicated dual authorship of Fernande Breilh-Decruck's compositions<sup>28</sup> (the 2012 edition corrects this).

The byzantine copyright situation may have also complicated Breilh-Decruck's relationship with publishers. For instance, in a letter addressed to a "Mr. Selmer," Breilh-Decruck requests the royalties from her publications.<sup>29</sup> She acknowledges that her husband owes the publisher money and mentions that the publisher may be holding back her royalties as a penalty; she argues, however, that she and Maurice manage their accounts separately and contends that her royalties should not be held as payment for her husband's debts. It is not clear how successful this argument was; what is evident, though, is that her status as a married woman presented hurdles that a male composer would likely not have faced.

Despite the barriers she confronted as a female French composer, Breilh-Decruck was a beneficiary of cultural circumstances in wartime France; she reached her greatest successes as a composer during the German occupation of WWII Europe.<sup>30</sup> Between 1941 and 1944, her performances and the premieres of her works headlined at least six prominent regional concerts, according to flyers from that time.<sup>31</sup> Between 1940 and 1944, she composed over twenty works, and at least nine of her pieces had premieres.<sup>32</sup> Breilh-Decruck was also involved in musical societies such as the *Association des Concerts Lamoureux*<sup>33</sup> and *Union Catholique du Théâtre et des Artistes pour le Languedoc*,<sup>34</sup> which continued to present classical concerts despite the war (Figure 6). The fact that the Toulouse and Paris concerts were even reviewed points to the existence of a thriving cultural community in both Vichy and occupied France. (During the German occupation, most of France was divided into two zones: the Unoccupied Zone, which was under Vichy rule, and the Occupied Zone, which was more directly under the control of the Nazis. Toulouse was in the Unoccupied Zone, or Vichy France; Paris was in the Occupied Zone.) In spite of the popular perception of a restrictive wartime environment, Breilh-Decruck's career

provides evidence that ordinary French cultural life did, to some degree, continue in Vichy and occupied France. This bolsters the historical view, put forth by such scholars as Robert Gildea and Philippe Burrin, of the German occupation as a time when French life continued relatively normally, instead of experiencing a massive disruption.<sup>35</sup>

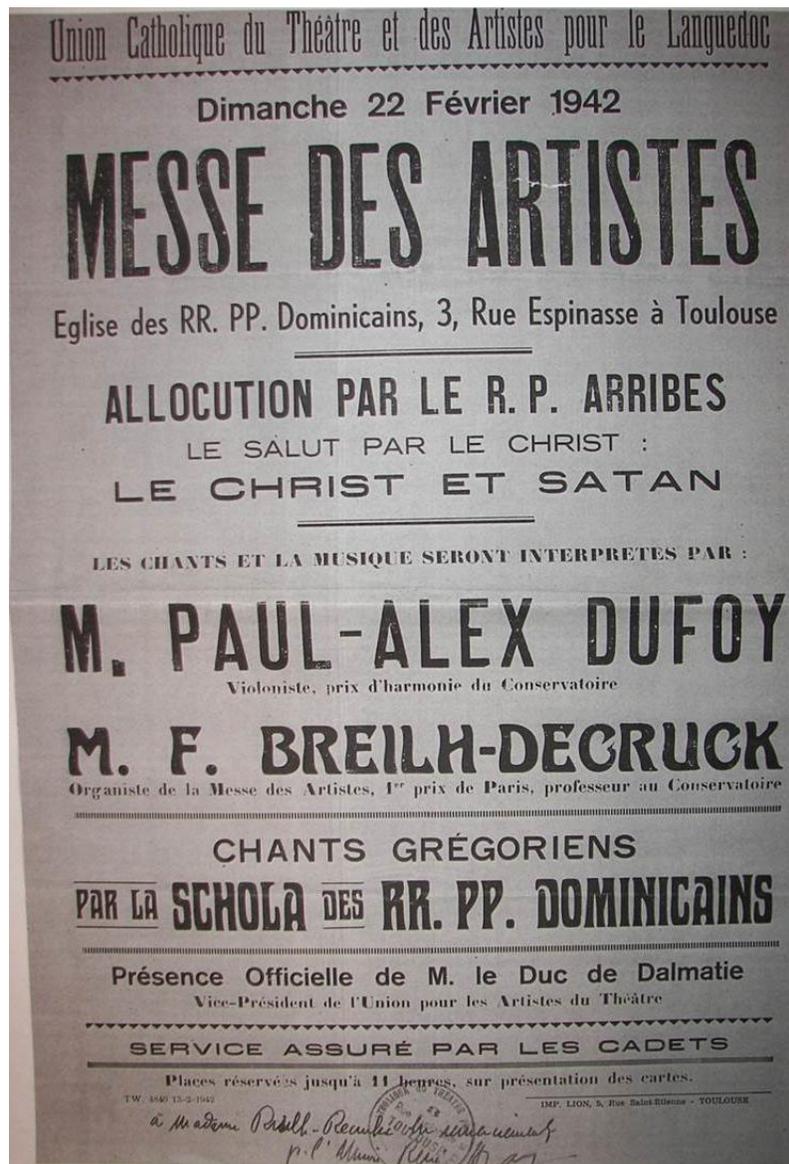


Figure 6: Concert flyer, *Union Catholique du Théâtre et des artistes pour Languedoc*, February 22, 1942.  
(Provided by Hélène Decruck)

That Breilh-Decruck had so much recognition and was so active during the war makes her subsequent obscurity all the more puzzling. To understand it, one must recognize the peculiarly insular environment of the wartime cultural scene and the reaction that followed the Allied victory. During the war, there was an exodus of important French artists from France,<sup>36</sup> and the works of Jewish composers, such as Darius Milhaud, were banned.<sup>37</sup> In Toulouse, Fernande was a member of the directing committee of the *Union Catholique du Théâtre et des Artistes pour le Languedoc*, which was devoted to promoting the works of Catholic artists exclusively, and was part of the Vichy effort to reinstate the church at the center of French government.<sup>38</sup> After the war, there was a reaction against those who had collaborated with the Germans or with the Vichy government, which was widely viewed as a puppet regime for the Nazis.<sup>39</sup> Breilh-Decruck's position as a directing member of a committee affiliated with Vichy, coupled with the fact that she left for the United States in 1947, lend credence to the theory that she may have been viewed and judged as a Vichy collaborator. (One interesting counterpoint to this "collaborationist" view of Breilh-Decruck is that, simultaneously with her activities on the committee, she also wrote extensively for the saxophone—an instrument banned by the Nazis. This potentially subversive activity points to the complexities and contradictions of artistic life in Vichy and occupied France, along with the difficulty faced by anyone trying to make a "black and white" judgment about Breilh-Decruck.)

While prior to the war Breilh-Decruck had concertized widely (including in America), during the war it appears that her only performances and premieres were in France. From source materials gathered by her family and this author, it appears that she had even fewer performance

opportunities after the war. Then, in 1952, five years after WWII had ended, she suffered a severe stroke. While unofficial and undocumented, the postwar anti-collaborationist reaction may have pushed Breilh-Decruck's works and career into obscurity, from which she never recovered.

## Conclusion

Two main factors explain why Breilh-Decruck has been largely forgotten by history. First, she was a woman who composed at a time when female French artists faced significant legal and societal obstacles. Second, she had her greatest successes as a Vichy-affiliated artist, for which she appears to have been ostracized after World War II.<sup>40</sup> These circumstances, along with her divorce from saxophonist Maurice Decruck—formerly a strong champion of her music<sup>41</sup>—most likely led to the neglect of this important twentieth-century French composer.

Considering the volume and quality of her output, Fernande Breilh-Decruck deserves to be rediscovered. She completed at least twenty-three orchestral works, seventeen works for voice and piano, sixty-six chamber music pieces, six pieces for organ, eight for piano, and six etude and exercise books.<sup>42</sup> The quality of her work was acknowledged by her contemporaries, from the praise of newspaper and magazine critics, to recognition by major musical figures such as Marcel Dupré, who called her “a composer of the first order.”<sup>43</sup> In particular, her value to the classical saxophone is unmatched, as she composed nearly forty works for the instrument, five of which are for saxophone and orchestra.<sup>44</sup> To date, her full contribution to the repertoire of classical saxophone is unrecognized, as most saxophonists are not aware of Breilh-Decruck’s works aside from the Sonata in C-Sharp. Her activity as a musician and composer in wartime France is also valuable to musicians seeking a historical perspective of World War II-era culture and artistic life. Hopefully, with the resurgence of performances of her Sonata in C-Sharp and other works, more saxophonists—and musicians in general—will recognize her singular compositional voice as a critical contribution to mid-twentieth-century music.

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- <sup>1</sup> H  l  ne Decruck, "Catalogue Partiel" (unpublished manuscript, 2003), PDF file; H  l  ne Decruck, "  uvres de Fernande Breilh-Decruck pour instruments    vent" (unpublished manuscript, 2003), PDF file.
- <sup>2</sup> Jean Maillard, "Hommage    Fernande Breilh Decruck" (unpublished manuscript, February 9, 1955), PDF file.
- <sup>3</sup> H  l  ne Decruck, "Catalogue Partiel"; H  l  ne Decruck, "  uvres de Fernande Breilh-Decruck pour instruments    vent."
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Fernande Decruck, "Symphonie Rimbaldienne" (Toulouse, France: Concerts Lamoureux, 1943. Published in conjunction with *Symphonie Rimbaldienne* premiere.)
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> J.D., "Review of *Symphonie Rimbaldienne*," *Les Nouvelles Continentales* (December 18, 1943).
- <sup>9</sup> Serge Moreux, "Musique Pure," *La Gerbe* (December 23, 1943); Marcel Delannoy, *Les Nouveaux Temps* (December 5, 1943); P.B., "Concerts et r  citals," *Paris Sou* (January 1, 1944).
- <sup>10</sup> Fernande Decruck, "Symphonie Rimbaldienne" (Toulouse, France: Concerts Lamoureux, 1943. Published in conjunction with *Symphonie Rimbaldienne* premiere.)
- <sup>11</sup> The Sonata in C-Sharp has gained increasing prominence over the years and is now well-known in saxophone circles. In the 1950s, Marcel Mule released a recording of the "Andante et Fileuse" movement on his *Le Saxophone, vol. 1*. More recently the entire sonata has been included on recordings by well-known saxophonists Claude Delangle, Jean-Yves Fourmeau, and Nicolas Proust. Even in the past year (2012), at least two new recordings—by saxophonists Steven Page and Michael Ibrahim—have contained the Sonata in C-sharp. The sonata was also one of the required pieces for the 2012 North American Saxophone Alliance Biennial Conference Solo Competition. Significant live performances include a performance at the 1982 Saxophone World Congress by James Romeo, according to Joren Cain's 2010 dissertation, "Rediscovering Fernande Decruck's Sonate en ut# pour saxophone alto (ou alto) et orchestre: A Performance Analysis." Also, Claude Delangle performed the sonata at the NASA 2010 Biennial in Athens, Georgia. In addition, the work has been the subject of increasing scholarly attention, including Joren Cain's above-referenced dissertation.
- <sup>12</sup> Fernande Decruck, *The Golden Sax*. (unpublished manuscript, 1934). PDF file.
- <sup>13</sup> H  l  ne Decruck, "Catalogue Partiel"; H  l  ne Decruck, "  uvres de Fernande Breilh-Decruck pour instruments    vent."
- <sup>14</sup> H  l  ne Decruck, "Biographie de Fernande Decruck" (unpublished manuscript, 2004). PDF file.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> H  l  ne Decruck, email message to author, October 20, 2004.
- <sup>17</sup> "Two Unusual Music Events" (New York: John Wanamaker Auditorium, 1929. Published in conjunction with Fernande Breilh-Decruck recital, April 5, 1929.)
- <sup>18</sup> H  l  ne Decruck, "Biographie de Fernande Decruck."
- <sup>19</sup> H  l  ne Decruck, email message to author, October 20, 2004.
- <sup>20</sup> H  l  ne Decruck, "Biographie de Fernande Decruck."
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.

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- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> H  l  ne Decruck, "Catalogue Partiel"; H  l  ne Decruck, "  uvres de Fernande Breilh-Decruck pour instruments    vent."
- <sup>26</sup> Carla Hess, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001): 56-78.
- <sup>27</sup> Dorothy McBride Stetson. *Women's Right in France*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987): 149.
- <sup>28</sup> Jean-Marie Londeix, *A Comprehensive Guide to the Saxophone Repertoire* (Cherry Hill, NJ: Roncorp Publications, 2003.)
- <sup>29</sup> Fernande Breilh-Decruck, letter to M. Selmer, March 18, 1938.
- <sup>30</sup> Dr. Walter P. Scott, letter to author, March 15, 2003. (Dr. Scott is a relative of Fernande Breilh-Decruck and was her host during her second extended stay in America.)
- <sup>31</sup> "Messe Des Artistes," (Toulouse, France: Union Catholique du Th  atre et des artiste pour Languedoc, November 16, 1941. Concert flyer); "Messe Des Artistes," (Toulouse, France: Union Catholique du Th  atre et des artiste pour Languedoc, November 23, 1941. Concert flyer); "Messe Des Artistes," Toulouse, France: Union Catholique du Th  atre et des artiste pour Languedoc, February 22, 1942. Concert flyer); "Recital d'Orgue donne au benefice des   coles Libres" (Luchon, France:   glise Paroissiale de Luchon, November 17, 1942, Concert flyer); "H  l  ne Bouvier et Pierre Jamet," (Paris: Concerts Pierne, February 6, 1944, Concert flyer); "Concerts Lamoureux," (Paris: Concerts Lamoureux, November 28, 1945, Concert flyer).
- <sup>32</sup> H  l  ne Decruck, "Premieres auditions" (unpublished manuscript, 2003), PDF file; H  l  ne Decruck, "Catalogue Partiel"; H  l  ne Decruck, "  uvres de Fernande Breilh-Decruck pour instruments    vent."
- <sup>33</sup> H  l  ne Decruck, "Biographie de Fernande Decruck."
- <sup>34</sup> "Messe Des Artistes," (Toulouse, France: Union Catholique du Th  atre et des artiste pour Languedoc, November 16, 1941. Concert flyer).
- <sup>35</sup> Robert Gildea, *Marianne in Chains: Daily Life in the Heart of France During the German Occupation*, (New York: Henry Holt & Co. 2002); Philippe Burrin, *Living With Defeat: France Under the German Occupation, 1940-1944*, (London: Arnold, 1996).
- <sup>36</sup> Alan Riding, *And the Show Went On: Cultural Life in Nazi-Occupied Paris*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 2010), 145.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., 147.
- <sup>38</sup> "Messe Des Artistes," (Toulouse, France: Union Catholique du Th  atre et des artiste pour Languedoc, March 30, 1941. Concert program.)
- <sup>39</sup> Riding, 157.
- <sup>40</sup> Dr. Walter P. Scott, letter to author, March 15, 2003.
- <sup>41</sup> Maillard, "Hommage    Fernande Breilh Decruck."
- <sup>42</sup> H  l  ne Decruck, "Catalogue Partiel"; H  l  ne Decruck, "  uvres de Fernande Breilh-Decruck pour instruments    vent."
- <sup>43</sup> Marcel Dupr  , letter to Mme. Craig, October 9, 1928.
- <sup>44</sup> H  l  ne Decruck, "Catalogue Partiel"; H  l  ne Decruck, "  uvres de Fernande Breilh-Decruck pour instruments    vent."