

## ***Untitled***

“Doucement le jazz, s’il vous plait”, Michel remonstrated one evening regarding the rock ‘n roll music playing in the background. I have often repeated that as a metaphor to fit most any appropriate occasion. Chapuis inhabited earlier times and centuries, kind of a Miniver Cheevy, born too late, and was curious and quizzical about those who only dabbled their history.

He spoke virtually no English. He confessed he knew the word “table”, which he pronounced, tay-BULL, followed by a laugh during which he covered his less than perfect teeth. Lenny Bruce thought that the word “lumber” was funny. Perhaps so.

I lived with Michel and family in his 11th cent chateau, Le Vieux Chateau, in France’s Cote D’Or on two occasions. Also, the maestro visited me and my wife Manon twice in the states, both in NY’s Soho, where I rented a house, and in Arizona, where I was music director at St. Michaels (Episcopal). He had come to NYC to perform a recital at Lincoln Center’s Great Performers at Lincoln Center Series. At that time I was taking jazz lessons with Lee Konitz at his apartment, to modest gain; possibly because I spent most of the hour talking about Michel, which seemed to interest Lee quite a bit. It did little to advance my jazz chops, however.

Michel’s wife, Denise, was a remarkable woman. She had taught ear training in the conservatoire, and was an excellent sight reader at the keyboard. She enjoyed playing 4 hand music on the piano to which she pressed me into service on occasion. Also, Denise was well familiar with the marvelous organ at the Collegiale in Dole and knew how to play it. A mother of a large, gifted and vibrant family, she sometimes sighed and that all she was good for anymore was “faire le Casserole”.

My wife Manon, who is a Chevalier des Artes et des Lettres, introduced me to Michel when he was one of the 3 associate organists at St. Severin in the Latin Quarter. I was recovering from a Fulbright sojourn to Munich from Juilliard and played a full-length evening recital at St. Severin to a packed church, thanks to my wife’s and her dad’s marketing expertise. The previous week none other than Gustave Leonhardt played a harpsichord recital there. But I did not meet Michel till I took a seminar for which he was well-known in the Pyrenees mountains of St. Bertrand de Cominges. To describe sumptuous lunch breaks prepared by Beatrice, in the fortress monastery garden of the hotel would not do them justice. Too Marvelous for Words, as the song goes.

Speeding up and down narrow twisting mountain roads, both hands on the wheel, Michel was in his element: he enjoyed exploring ancient caves with their primitive relic art forms and stalactites. I never recall seeing Michel drink wine (or practicing the organ): he preferred fruit juice.

Michel also would stop at convents and monasteries to demonstrate the organs and accompany chants directly from the Liber; a technique he honed from his days chancel organist at Notre Dame de Paris.

When staying with Michel, he already knew of my interest in blues music, particularly when I supplied music for a seminar soiree. That eventually led Michel to introduce me to a piano dealer who sold a piano to a cafe on the Place Concord in Dijon. I auditioned one evening to rousing response (the glamorous cafe was virtually across the street from the cathedral). I played 5 nights a week commuting from Jouhe to Dijon, playing about 5 hours a night. I came back to Le Vieux Chateau, my pockets bulging

with franc coins. Michel delighted in helping me count and wrap the coins. He got a kick out of the custom of tipping the piano player, as well as my surprising success at the cafe, relying most of his life on more legitimate earning procedures.

Later, while in Arizona, I arranged for Michel to do a super successful two week master-class in French classical style at St Michael and All Angels. I directed a successful weekly concert series there called Tucson Evenson Concerts following the weekly choral evensong service. During the university radio interview at Arizona University, Michel said that there are 600 some extant writings to this musicological discourse, if I heard right. I had also arranged for Tony Newman to come to Tucson later.

Recently at Men's Bible Breakfast at Trinity New Orleans, where I direct the Trinity Artist Series, we were informed that there are 600 thirty something precepts in the Jewish tradition. Strange numerological coincidence!

What prompts my rambling on about Michel Chapuis is learning of his death this past week in Dole, and the funeral service in the Collegiale church.

Never caring for his hands, he could be seen stacking rocks alongside his ample, spacious and vaulted "grange" across from his chateau. His hands did not have the appearance of those which play effortless ornaments. The prize winning recordings of complete Bach, Couperin, DeGrigny and others seemed to him of less merit than that he played cymbals in the military band.

His teaching was mostly by example. But at the same time, overflowing with musicological and biographical data i.e. there is a certain agreement that only appears in Roberday!

He said Muffat was a very special case (not sure which one). About that time, I played during Mass at Couperin's church, St. Gervais in Paris, in no small measure thanks to Michel, my wife Manon and her father Paul Jeunhomme. Now that organ is something to write home about.

About this time, in Paris, I also met another of my musical idols with whom I also performed and stayed close to - Memphis Slim, the noted Chicago blues composer, pianist/singer. I discovered that there was something extraordinary about both Slim and Michel; their musical accomplishments, regardless how great, were but a byproduct of who they actually were as people. Slim told me I talk too much; he was right, but I only did so to get his attention. Slim also visited me in NY, where I introduced him to Johnny Winter. I did try to copy both Michel's playing as well as Slim's. I did hang out with Virgil at the organ when he practiced late on Saturdays at Riverside; but that is another story.

To get back to Michel. His daughter, Claire, at dinner, to break a silence, as the family gathered round the medieval fire place, offered, "Albinas est emu". I am still embarrassed by that insightful observation, as keeping my emotions in check I considered crucial to my survival. One of the reasons I liked the organ over the piano is that I had the mistaken impression that it was less expressive, hence, less emotionally revealing!

I want to add these personal notes to complement the formal announcements of Michel's death that not only a pioneer and bulwark of Monument Historiques in France passed away but also a person of a very special gift, the likes of which we may not see again for some time. He enkindled and breathed a joyful, ebullient life into this narrow ancient niche of music called French Classical Style. Additionally, I must add, that he did on two occasions play some Franck, and, of course, the Marseilles!

I never was a very good student, so I probably could not have benefitted more from my encounter with Michel Chapuis, though I wish I had. I did spend a lot of time partying with his eldest son, the late Jean Marie, with whom I became close friends. Jean Marie taught me how to say, "Permettez moi d'avoir l'obligeance á vous offrir un feu", when offering to light a cigarette. Also, playing endless pin ball (flipper) with the youngest, Christoph, at the corner cafe, just outside the family compound. The cafe was run by a burly gent, Victor. "Christoph, reste tranqui!", I heard Denise cry out every so often to her energetic young son. I have often repeated that phrase to myself as well as to my wife. "Reste tranqui" became my mantra, and still is.

Furthermore, and not least, the complete set of Frank Zappa, James Brown and Johnny Hallyday recordings that Francois, one of his middle sons, possessed. I tried to listen to them all in one day - impossible. Just as at St. Bertrand, when I had access to an extraordinary musical library, particularly first editions Rameau and Widor, whose 9 or 10 symphonies I tried to read through in one sitting - not to be done!

And, of course, the dog, Nestor!!

Au revoir, cher Maitre et cher Ami! Thanks for the memories.

Albinas Prizgintas  
Director of Music Ministries (retired)  
Director, Trinity Artist Series  
(weekly concerts, Jazz Vespers' Patriotic Music Fest, Organ and Labyrinth)  
Trinity Church New Orleans