

# The life of French harpsichordist Huguette Dreyfus

## Part 1: Genesis of an artist

By Sally Gordon-Mark

*Obstacles cannot crush me. Every barrier only fires my firm resolve. He who is fixated on a star does not change his mind.*  
—Leonardo Da Vinci<sup>1</sup>

Huguette Dreyfus, France's *grande dame de clavecin*, the self-proclaimed "inexhaustible chatterbox,"<sup>2</sup> slipped away silently near midnight on April 16, 2016. She was a world-renowned concert artist and teacher and the most important harpsichordist of her generation in France. Exuberant, intelligent, and quick-witted, her attention was almost always turned outwards, keeping her personal world out of the realm of discussion. In conversation, this tacit barrier was intuitively respected. Being unassuming, she spoke little about herself and even less about her past. Therefore, extensive research, interviews, and access to her archives in the Bibliothèque nationale de France were required in order to bring to light her rich and vibrant life. Revealed were the energy, courage, strength of will, and discipline with which she conducted herself from an early age.

Her birth certificate reads "Paulette Huguette Dreyfus," but her doctor had made an error. Her parents had actually named her Huguette Pauline when she was born on November 30, 1928, in Mulhouse (Alsace, France). Her first ten years as the adored little girl of an

upper-middle-class Jewish family were secure and full of warmth. Her father, Fernand, owned two feather factories, one in Mulhouse, the other near Vichy. Neither Fernand nor her mother, Marguerite (née Bloch), were musicians, but they did love to listen to music.<sup>3</sup>

Pierre, Huguette's twelve-year-old brother and only sibling, took piano lessons. Huguette, aged four, asked for lessons too, but her mother told her that she was too young and only wanted to copy Pierre. However, the piano teacher, Madame Rueff, convinced her mother to give it a try, and it was soon understood that Huguette was motivated by music, not by her brother. At the end of the first lesson, she could read the notes. Because of health problems, Madame Rueff eventually recommended that Huguette study instead with the distinguished pianist Pierre Maire, a professor at the Ecole Normale in Paris, who also taught in nearby Epinal.<sup>4</sup> Comfortable playing in public from the very beginning, Huguette participated in two of his recitals, one in 1938, the other on July 2, 1939, when she performed the third movement from Beethoven's *Pathétique Sonata*.<sup>5</sup> She was ten. Two months later, World War II erupted.

The Alsace region on the border of Germany was the first to be evacuated. Huguette's father took his family to



Huguette Dreyfus, Mulhouse, c. 1934 (photo credit: Bibliothèque nationale de France)



Pierre, Marguerite, Fernand, and Huguette Dreyfus. Switzerland, circa 1944 (photo credit: Bibliothèque nationale de France)

Vichy, where they had friends. There she took lessons from pianist André Collard.<sup>6</sup> Huguette entered the Clermont-Ferrand music conservatory under a pseudonym, since Jewish children were not allowed to enroll. There may have been a teacher in Strasbourg who had connections there and referred her. When the Nazis commandeered the University of Strasbourg, its professors had already moved to the University of Clermont-Ferrand, which would become a hotspot of resistance. The now-nomadic Dreyfus family also spent time in Montpellier, where her brother was studying medicine.<sup>7</sup>

After Nazi soldiers occupied all of France in 1942, Huguette and her family crossed the Alps on December 10, settling in Lausanne where her father's sister lived. She enrolled in the Lausanne music conservatory for piano lessons at the "virtuoso" level. When the war ended, she received an attestation from the conservatory to be able to take her final exams in Clermont-Ferrand in March and June 1945, which she did, receiving first prizes.<sup>8</sup>

Pierre moved to Paris in 1945, and sixteen-year-old Huguette joined him, enrolling at the Ecole Normale de Musique to study with concert pianist Lazare-Lévy, whose illustrious students had included Clara Haskil. He had been a student of Louis Diémer, an important exponent of early music in the late 1880s. In 1920, Lazare-Lévy had been named professor at the Paris Conservatory, but he was forced to give

up his position during the Occupation, because of German anti-Jewish laws. His teaching was widely respected for being innovative and original with respect to fingering, technique, and analysis of music. Huguette later acknowledged his influence on her, particularly his guidance with technique. She concluded her lessons with him in June 1948, obtaining a diploma at the superior level.<sup>9</sup> She continued with counterpoint and solfège at the Ecole Normale in the fall and got a job there accompanying the vocal class of a Madame Kedroff, most likely the well-known soprano, Irene Kedroff, who had performed in a quartet under the direction of Nadia Boulanger.<sup>10</sup> In 1949, her parents moved to Paris, where her father purchased a large apartment in a stylish building at 91 Quai d'Orsay, on the banks of the Seine by Pont Alma. The family would live there for the rest of their lives.<sup>11</sup>

For the school year of 1949–1950, organist and musicologist Norbert Dufourcq chose Johann Sebastian Bach as the subject of his advanced music history course at the Paris Conservatory. While the conservatory had once owned period harpsichords, twenty-four of them were burned in 1816 and twelve sold at auction in 1822.<sup>12</sup> Fortunately, Dufourcq was able to obtain the use of a Pleyel harpsichord for his classroom. Huguette enrolled in his class that year, as did other future harpsichordists: Sylvie Spycet, Laurence Boulay, and Anne-Marie Beckensteiner. Conductor

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Huguette Dreyfus in her Quai d'Orsay apartment, Paris, c. 1949 (photo credit: Bibliothèque nationale de France)

Jean-François Paillard and singer Jacques Herbillon were also among her classmates. This intense focus on Bach's music surely made an impact on her: out of the 117 recordings she would make, thirty-six would be of Bach's works. Dufourcq inspired his class with a fiery enthusiasm that comes across on his radio programs;<sup>13</sup> she described him as "impassioned and lively." This class would forever alter the course of Huguette's life—it was the first time she would lay hands on a harpsichord.

Huguette took an aesthetics and music analysis class with Olivier Messiaen and a pedagogy course while at the Paris Conservatory. In autumn 1950, attracted by his personality, she joined the musical aesthetics class of Alexis Roland-Manuel. She had been listening religiously to his radio program, *Le Plaisir de la Musique*, transmitted live every Sunday at noon. This erudite composer, music critic, and radio broadcaster recognized her gifts and would become her ally; if anyone acted as her mentor, it would have been him.<sup>14</sup>

There was no harpsichord class at the Paris Conservatory, so Dufourcq created an unofficial one (referred to in conservatory records as an "annex"), inviting a former student, Jacqueline Masson, to teach it. Accompanied by her mother, Huguette auditioned for the class and was accepted along with Anne-Marie Beckensteiner and Laurence Boulay, but the class lasted for only eight months. On June 15, 1951, Huguette passed her exam, playing the Bach *Toccata in F-sharp Minor*, with Aimée van de Wiele, a former student of Wanda Landowska, on the jury.<sup>15</sup> Huguette had abandoned the piano for the harpsichord, but she did not know where to turn for the training she needed in order to play an instrument and a repertoire so uncommon at that time.

In the years following World War II in France, conditions for early music performers were quite different than they are now. It was difficult even to listen to early music; there were few recordings, and urtext and facsimile editions were not available. Most radio transmitters had been blown up during the war, and LP records and television did not exist. In order to hear the music they were studying, students had to sight-read manuscripts they found in French archives and libraries, write them

out themselves, and attend any concerts they could. There were no copies of historic instruments being constructed in France; contemporary harpsichords were expensive. Aix-en-Provence hosted the only music festival in the country, created in 1948. Since early music was little known to the public and there were few harpsichords, impresarios were skittish about scheduling concerts. Certainly there were not today's masterclasses, and only the Schola Cantorum and l'Ecole de Musique Ancienne offered early music courses in France.

Either Dufourcq or Masson recommended to Huguette that she take Ruggero Gerlin's summer class at the Accademia Musicale Chigiana in Siena, Italy. An audition there was mandatory, but she could not leave Paris. In October 1951, having survived the war, Huguette's father was killed when he was struck by a truck in front of their apartment building. Her brother was temporarily replacing another doctor in the south of France, so it fell on Huguette to help her mother while she continued to work and pursue her studies.<sup>16</sup> However, the following year she successfully auditioned for Gerlin. The Accademia granted her the first of three scholarships to assist with her travel and living expenses in Siena, there being no fees to pay.<sup>17</sup>

In June 1953, Huguette completed Dufourcq's comprehensive course—studies in French and foreign vocal and instrumental music—as well as Roland-Manuel's course, receiving nothing but the highest marks. On July 15, she arrived in Siena. Classes were scheduled annually from mid-July to mid-September. The Accademia had been founded in 1932 by Count Guido Chigi Saracini in the palace where he resided, because he "adored music but detested traveling," according to Huguette. Operas and nightly concerts were given in the palace theater. The Accademia had a library, well stocked with books and music scores, a notable collection of musical instruments, and an important art collection. To Huguette, it was like being in a dream.

Having been granted the first of four scholarships, Jill Severs entered the class in 1953 along with Huguette, Jacqueline Masson, Françoise Petit, Sylvie Spycet, and Anne-Marie Beckensteiner. Kenneth Gilbert joined them the following year. The class remained small every



1953 harpsichord class: Jill Severs, Silvie Spycet, Ruggero Gerlin, Huguette Dreyfus, Jacqueline Masson, Accademia Chigiana, Siena, 1953 (Photo courtesy of Jill Severs)



Ruggero Gerlin, Accademia Chigiana, Siena, Italy, c. 1955 (Photo courtesy of Jill Severs)



Ruggero Gerlin and il Conte Guido Chigi Saracini, Accademia Chigiana, Siena, c. 1955 (Photo courtesy of Jill Severs)

year. Huguette audited classes by George Enesco and Andres Segovia. Students she met over the years from other classes included a twelve-year-old John Williams, Narciso Yepes, and Claudio Abbado. Jill remembers, "After the war, to discover Italy in the early 1950s was a revelation; a new world of warmth, beauty, colour, hope and optimism."<sup>18</sup> The summers spent in Italy affected Huguette deeply, as did the warm Italian temperament. Every morning she would go to the same bakery for coffee and the Siennese specialty, *panforte*. If she did not appear, it was assumed that she was ill, and the owner would bring her a tray of tea and sweets. Huguette would later

say that with memories like that, she could never have been a pessimist.<sup>19</sup>

Ruggero Gerlin, born in Venice, had come to Paris to study with Wanda Landowska in 1920. He eventually served as her teaching assistant, and they often performed together on European tours. During the lessons at the Accademia, Jill Severs heard him sometimes refer to Landowska as "*ma mère*."<sup>20</sup> Their close collaboration was cut short by World War II. Landowska, fleeing the Nazis, left for New York in 1940, and the following year, Gerlin returned to Italy. He settled in Naples, where he taught harpsichord at the prestigious Conservatorio di San Pietro a Majella. After the war, he

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#### ON LEGATO

"Throughout my life there has been a singing within me — is not every production of music really connected with singing? — and even as a boy, urged on by an inward singing, I was searching for a *legato* and for shadings of touch at the piano, in order to impart to the played melody a songlike character."

Bruno Walter

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returned to Paris where he stayed until his death in 1983.

Although his “admiration for her was without limits,” Gerlin did not use or teach Landowska’s technique, which surprised Huguette. He also preferred a Neupert to a Pleyel, Landowska’s favorite, but Huguette did not ask him why. He was very sensitive, and if he thought his response could be construed as criticism of Landowska, Gerlin would withdraw into himself, according to Huguette.

Gerlin’s classes were held in French, and Huguette found them intense and tiring.<sup>21</sup> There were three classes a week, lasting four hours each, during which the students remained silent.

I recognize, having taught a lot since, that he was absolutely correct in imposing this. Even if the students are talking about things concerning the class, it is very disturbing for the professor and very disturbing for the students’ concentration. So we were in prayer for four hours and we learned a ton of things. Gerlin was extremely meticulous. . . . He had an intelligent way of teaching fingering. . . . Above all, the fingering had to be adapted to the interpretation, that is to say, to the musical phrase.

The students generally worked on music by Bach, Rameau, Couperin, and Scarlatti, the quartet that would dominate Huguette’s concert programs later.

At first, the class shared a Cella harpsichord, “a sort of false copy of a Pleyel made by an Italian maker.”<sup>22</sup> Jill remembers it being hard to play expressively on the Cella with its hard and unresponsive touch. It was later replaced by a Neupert, which was “extremely different from a Pleyel” and was for Huguette “a complete discovery,” an improvement on the Pleyel. The Neupert was “called the Bach harpsichord at the time, 8’ and 4’ above, and 8’ and 16’ below.”

Gerlin was extremely meticulous. . . . We could spend hours on two measures for the quality of the sound. Touch was extremely important, fingering, analysis of a work. . . . At first, the interpretation was left to the discretion of (the student), which was discussed at length. He did not always agree and if he didn’t, there was no question of arguing afterwards. . . . In the end, he always won.<sup>24</sup>

But his comments were always respected. Jill Severs has kept her copies of music with fingerings he noted, all this time.

Although his manner was reserved and his moods not always easy to fathom, Gerlin was very gracious. According to Jill Severs, neither silence nor pieces were imposed. The silence came naturally as a result of the intensity of the lessons and the concentration they required, and students could choose to play the pieces that they had selected to prepare. To her, his lessons were a source of “discoveries and inspiration.”<sup>25</sup> If he was reserved in his expression of emotions, he always spoke passionately about music.

Anne-Marie Beckensteiner, who had married Jean-François Paillard in 1952, took the class the following year, while her husband searched for manuscripts in Italian libraries. She later wrote:

Gerlin’s lessons were exciting, and he noticed Huguette’s touch very quickly, her “pretty little round hand,” as he used to say, and had her show her hand position to us as an example. We began with the (Bach) inventions with two and three voices, and Huguette’s facility in playing them so easily, with so many colors, with such facility of expression and phrasing, overjoyed Gerlin. . . . He did not content himself with the inventions, very soon—Scarlatti. And what a school it was for us!!! The Count, all dressed in white, often proposed musi-

cal evenings. (Huguette) had an unquenchable thirst for music and the harpsichord was truly “her” instrument.<sup>26</sup>

Each summer session ended with a concert in which Huguette, Jill, and Kenneth Gilbert were always invited to play. Count Guido Chigi Saracini was usually in attendance. As Jill Severs recalls, “Those chosen to perform in the beautiful white and gold Sala di Concerto were presented with an enormous bouquet of red or white carnations.”<sup>27</sup> Gerlin would be Huguette’s sole *maitre*, and she attended his classes in Siena for a total of eight summers.

From 1954 on, Huguette worked tirelessly, playing continuo and accompanying other artists in concert. She also taught privately, an average of ten students a month. Although her days were filled with appointments noted in her neat, roundish penmanship without flourishes, her evenings were spent going to the opera and concerts. With virtually no teacher ten months out of the year, one of the ways she studied was by listening to music.

Her day began at 8:00 a.m. at the Salle Pleyel, where she rented a practice room.<sup>28</sup> Huguette joined her first ensemble, the Quatuor Instrumental de Lutèce, in 1954. In January 1956, they recorded a disc, her first, of unpublished Boismortier and Naudot sonatas, fruits of the research encouraged by Dufourcq. She also played continuo in Robert Dalsace’s ensemble Fiori musicali, the Fernand Oubradous Orchestra, Maxence Larrieu’s Instrumental Quartet, l’Orchestre Lamoureux, and Le Collegium Museum de Paris, directed by Roland Douatte.

On July 28, 1956, invited by Roland-Manuel, she played in a chamber group on his program, *Le Plaisir de la musique*, the first of 194 radio appearances. Wanting to learn more about performance practices, Huguette studied for three years with Antoine Geoffrey-Dechaume, an important figure in the early music revival. Having been initiated into early music by Arnold Dolmetsch, he studied period treatises and published an influential book at the time, *Les Secrets de la Musique Ancienne*. She liked him and thought him interesting, but stopped seeing him finally because she could not bear his “absolute fanaticism” with regard to historical performance practices.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, what she did learn from him, based on French music and texts, was important because it included *basso continuo*. She was also in frequent contact with the French musicologist Marcelle Benoît, another student of Norbert Dufourcq.

In November, she would turn thirty, the usual age limit for conservatory studies and harpsichord competitions. If she were to have a career, she would have to distinguish herself. She needed an instrument of her own. Ever since childhood, she had been determined to be a musician. Huguette was doing everything she could to lay the foundations for a career, but the clock was ticking. ■

### To be continued.

*Born in New York City, Sally Gordon-Mark has French and American citizenships, lives in Europe, and is an independent writer, researcher, and translator. She is also a musician—her professional life began in Hollywood as the soprano of a teenage girl group, The Murmaids, whose hit record, Popsicles & Icicles, is still played on air and sold on CDs. Eventually she worked for Warner Bros. Records, Francis Coppola, and finally Lucasfilm Ltd., in charge of public relations and promotions, before*



Pierre Maire at right, Paris, undated (postcard from the archives of Marie-Françoise Martin-Scheuir, courtesy of Pascal Scheuir)



Norbert Dufourcq’s class at the Paris Conservatoire. Jacqueline Masson at Pleyel, Norbert Dufourcq to her left. First row: Huguette Dreyfus, 3rd from the right. Second row: Jean-François Paillard, Anne-Marie Beckensteiner, far right. Conservatoire de musique, rue Madrid, Paris, c. 1949 (photo courtesy of Robert Trnka)

a life-changing move to Paris in 1987. There Sally played harpsichord for the first time, thanks to American concert artist Jory Vinikour, her friend and first teacher. He recommended she study with Huguette Dreyfus, which she had the good fortune to do during the last three years before Huguette retired from the Superieur regional conservatory of Rueil-Malmaison, remaining a devoted friend until Huguette passed away.

During Sally’s residence in France, she organized a dozen Baroque concerts for the historical city of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, worked as a researcher for books published by several authors and Yale University, and being trilingual, served as a translator of early music CD booklets for musicians and Warner Classic Records. She also taught piano privately and at the British School of Paris on a regular basis. In September 2020, she settled in Perugia, Italy. In May 2023, Sally will be the guest editor of the British Harpsichord Society’s e-magazine Sounding Board, devoted entirely to the memory of Huguette Dreyfus. For more information: [www.sallygordonmark.com](http://www.sallygordonmark.com)

### Notes

1. *Les Carnets de Léonard de Vinci* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1942), volume I, page 98 (translation by the author).
2. Huguette Dreyfus, radio interview by Marcel Quillévéré, “Traverses du temps,” *France Musique*, Paris, 2012.
3. Françoise Dreyfus, interview by the author, Paris, July 25, 2016.
4. Huguette Dreyfus, interview by Denis Herlin, Paris, December 8, 2008.
5. Recital program in the author’s personal collection.
6. Having studied with Paul Dukas, Alfred Corton, Yvonne Lefébure, and Nadia Boulanger, Collard became an eminent pianist, as did his daughter, Catherine Collard.
7. Huguette Dreyfus, interview by Denis Herlin, op. cit.
8. Bibliothèque nationale de France, VM Fonds 145 DRE-3 (12).

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid. Irene Kedroff and her family had emigrated from Russia to Paris in 1923, where her father formed the Quatuor Kedroff consisting of Irene, her parents, and her cousin Natalia.

11. Françoise Dreyfus, interview, op. cit.

12. Florence Gétreau, “Les précurseurs français: Moscheles, Fétis, Méreaux, Farrenc, Saint-Saens,” *Wanda Landowska et la renaissance de la musique ancienne* (conference in March 2009), under the direction of Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger. *Musicales Actes Sud/Cité de la Musique*, Paris, October 2011. [citedelamusique.fr/pdf/insti/recherche/wanda/pdf\\_complet.pdf](http://citedelamusique.fr/pdf/insti/recherche/wanda/pdf_complet.pdf).

13. “Concerts de Paris,” *Radiodiffusion Télévision Française*, March 10, 1960, INA ID PHD88011289.

14. Huguette Dreyfus, video interview by Rémy Stricker, June 7, 2015. Youtube.

15. Olivier Baumont, “La classe de clavecin du Conservatoire de Paris,” *La Revue du Conservatoire*, 30/11/2016, URL: <https://larevue.conservatoiredeparis.fr:443/index.php?id=913>.

16. Françoise Dreyfus, op. cit.

17. Accademia documents in the author’s personal collection.

18. Jill Severs, “Tribute to Kenneth Gilbert,” *Sounding Board* xv, The British Harpsichord Society, <https://www.harpsichord.org.uk/sounding-board-issue-15/>.

19. Huguette Dreyfus, interview by Denis Herlin, op. cit.

20. Jill Severs, video interview by the author, August 24, 2022.

21. Huguette Dreyfus, interview by Denis Herlin, op. cit.

22. Huguette Dreyfus, interview by Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, Wanda Landowska symposium, Paris, March 5, 2009.

23. Jill Severs, video interview by the author, August 8, 2022.

24. Huguette Dreyfus, interview by Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, op. cit.

25. Jill Severs, interview, op. cit.

26. Anne-Marie Beckensteiner-Paillard, her tribute to Huguette Dreyfus, <https://www.clavecin-en-france.org>; also her interview by author, Saint-Malo, October 23–25, 2016.

27. Jill Severs, “Tribute to Kenneth Gilbert,” op. cit.

28. Agendas (1955–1967), Bibliothèque nationale de France, VM Fonds 145 DRE-3 (5).

29. Huguette Dreyfus, interview by Denis Herlin, op. cit.