

Landowska and Mozart

BY DONALD ALFANO

At the age of 77 Wanda Landowska commemorated the 1956 bicentennial of Mozart's birth by making a series of recordings in her Lakeville, Connecticut home. Although primarily associated with reviving the harpsichord and J.S. Bach's keyboard works, she was also an authority on Mozart. Musicologist Abram Chasins observed, "In Landowska's hands Mozart springs to life with vibrancy and breadth."¹ She considered the harpsichord the only appropriate instrument for Bach's keyboard music but believed Mozart's keyboard works could be performed effectively on the modern piano.

Landowska's primary contribution to Mozart scholarship was her study of 18th-century performance practice; that few others explored this area during her lifetime makes her accomplishments all the more impressive. To understand Mozart she studied music by Josef Haydn, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Johann Christian Bach, Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, and other composers whose works influenced him. She also studied Mozart's operas, which can provide clues to interpreting his keyboard works.

Some modern pianists deflate Mozart's music, making it sound thin and dainty; others inflate it, producing a heavy, ponderous effect. To avoid these twin perils Landowska recommended studying the original instruments of Mozart's time: "The re-

sources and effects of 18th-century instruments, the manner of manipulating them, constitute a study of prime and indispensable importance to all contemporary pianists. They instruct the pianist in the art of creating on the modern piano a special touch which will render the most faithful reproduction of the tonal aesthetics of Mozart's time."²

Controversy continues to rage over using the damper pedal in Mozart's

keyboard music. Because 18th-century instruments' shorter string lengths precluded the greater sonority possible on the modern piano, many performers contend that using the pedal sparingly or not at all produces a more authentic sound. Mozart's piano had a knee pedal that functioned like the modern damper pedal, and he regarded it favorably: "The device too which you work with your knee is better on his [Stein's] than on



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other instruments. I have only to touch it and it works; and when you shift your knee the slightest bit, you do not hear the least reverberation."³ Landowska believed that by using the pedal discreetly and avoiding an overpowering tone in the bass, a player could approximate the sound of the original instruments while preserving the inherent *bel canto* of Mozart's keyboard works.

Landowska's greatest contribution to Mozart interpretation is her study of ornamentation. Her article "On the trills in Mozart's keyboard works," published in the *Allgemeine Musik Zeitung* in 1912 and *Le monde musical* in 1913, states,

What would be described as the taking of 'peculiar liberties' was in Mozart's time the *sine qua non* of every performer. No virtuoso would have dared play certain phrases of Mozart as Mozart wrote them. There are many places, especially in the slow movements of his sonatas and concertos, that are merely sketched; they are left to the performer to be worked out and ornamented. Those performances which we respect today for their literal devotion would have been called ignorant and barbaric by Mozart's contemporaries; for it was in his art of ornamentation that the 18th-century interpreter submitted himself to his audience to be judged an artist of good or poor taste.⁴

In studying ornamentation Landowska examined 18th-century treatises such as C.P.E. Bach's *The True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*, as well as his *Six Sonatas for Clavier with Ornamented Repeats* (1760). Her most important teacher, however, was Mozart himself; Landowska studied the slow movements Mozart ornamented and applied the same principles to unornamented movements. In the "Coronation" Concerto, for example, she ornamented measures 70-71, which Mozart merely sketched.

"Coronation" Concerto, measures 67-71

Landowska ornamentation, measures 70-71

Landowska also wrote ornamentation and cadenzas for the Concertos in E \flat major, K. 271, F major, K. 413, A major, K. 414, D minor, K. 466, and E \flat major, K. 482, published by Broude Brothers. She had planned to publish cadenzas for the Concertos in C major, K. 415, B \flat major, K. 450, G major, K. 453, and A major, K. 488 but died before completing the project. In playing her own cadenzas Landowska followed another 18th-century performance practice. Mozart wrote cadenzas for only a few of his concertos, and according to Landowska, "They were usually written for a pupil or a contemporary performer; when Mozart himself played his concertos in public he always improvised the cadenzas."⁵ She used her two cadenzas for the Concerto in F major, K. 413 when she performed it with the Philharmonic Symphony Society of New York on February 22 and 23, 1945. Olin Downes commented in *The New York Times* that the "glory of the concert was Mme. Landowska's playing of the Mozart. . . . The entire performance was of course a model of style and of the difficult Mozart technique."⁶

Of the solo keyboard works, Landowska recorded the Sonatas in G major, K. 283, D major, K. 311, E \flat major, K. 282, D major, K. 576, and B \flat major, K. 333; the Rondos in D major, K. 485, and A minor, K. 511;

and her published transcription of Mozart's *Country Dances*, K. 606, originally for two violins and bass. Her performance of K. 283 illustrates how studying works in another genre enhanced her interpretation of the keyboard works. For the Andante she drew inspiration from Mozart's opera *La Finta Giardiniera*, noting, "There are many similarities between the Andante of the Sonata and Sandrina's aria 'Geme la Tortorella.' In it Sandrina compares herself to a plaintive dove."⁷ The parallels in tempo, key, character, and melodic contour are unmistakable, and both works were written when the composer was 18. In the third movement she found resemblances to the chorus "Giovinetto che fate all'amore" from *Don Giovanni*.

Sonata in G major, K. 283, third movement

"Giovinetto che fate all'amore" from Don Giovanni

It is not surprising that a harpsichordist excelled in Mozart; the composer played the harpsichord as a child and wrote his early keyboard sonatas as the instrument began losing popularity to the piano. Like many of the baroque works in Landowska's repertoire, these early sonatas are characterized by dance rhythms. She noted, "The ascendancy of the dance over the musicians of the past was very great indeed. Almost all music of that time was a dance in disguise."⁸ According to Landowska the first and third movements of K. 283 are dances, the first a minuet and the last a *forlana*, a rapid Neapolitan dance in $\frac{3}{8}$ or $\frac{6}{8}$ time.

Landowska's copiously annotated

scores of Mozart's keyboard works, carefully preserved in her Connecticut home by longtime companion Denise Restout, testify to her thorough preparation. One of the few artists to bridge the gap between musicology and performance, she best summarized her interpretive approach with the words, "Research to me has been a path to beauty." □

Footnotes:

1. Abram Chasins, *Speaking of Pianists* (Alfred Knopf, 1957), p. 121.
 2. Denise Restout, ed., *Landowska on Music* (Stein and Day, 1964), p. 307.
 3. Emily Anderson, ed., *The Letters of Mozart and His Family* (St. Martin's Press, 1962), vol. 1, p. 329.
 4. Restout, p. 308.
 5. *Ibid.*, p. 309.
 6. Olin Downes, *The New York Times*, February 23, 1945, p. 37.
 7. Restout, p. 317.
 8. *Ibid.*
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