

Remembering Wanda Landowska

(1879 -1959)

Most of us know Wanda Landowska as a harpsichordist, but few realize the scope of her work, the amount of her dedication, and the hardships she endured. The purpose of this article is to reflect upon some of Landowska's achievements. As Abram Chasins so aptly said, "it was over a half-century of backbreaking work, the fruit of a Bach scholarship and a dedication rare even in a realm in which dedication is a way of life".⁽¹⁾



Landowska was responsible for the renaissance of the harpsichord in addition to being a noted performer, musicologist, scholar, and teacher. In view of the circumstances Madame Landowska faced, her accomplishments seem all the more remarkable: she was interested in scholarship and performance practice in a period when virtuosity was in fashion. She had a wide range of interests in an age of specialization, and was a woman artist in a male dominated profession. She endured two world wars, lost most of her possessions to the Nazis, came to the United States with only a few belongings, three-hundred dollars and her Pleyel harpsichord. In addition to the above, and more importantly, she was interested in music of the past at the threshold of the twentieth century when composers were experimenting with innovative techniques. Although the twentieth century witnessed these new techniques in composition, the nineteenth century style of pianism continued to flourish. This style, dominated by Liszt who died in 1886, was characterized by virtuosity, flamboyance and public spectacle. Landowska believed that such flamboyance, if abused, could obliterate the true meaning of the music as it sometimes did in the prevalent interpretations of the music of Chopin.

In *Advice on the Interpretation of Chopin*, Landowska discussed what she believed to be the misconceptions regarding the performance of Chopin's works. His music, she argued, had been subjected to exaggeration especially in terms of tempo and dynamics. After studying Chopin's own instruments she stated, "in general, when Chopin chose an instrument, he always avoided those which were too sonorous. Most of the critics found fault with him for producing a small tone. But not only did he never try to correct this so-called fault, his greatest care was given to avoiding anything which could suggest pianistic noise".⁽²⁾

Composers such as Busoni felt they could "improve" upon early masterpieces by transcribing them to conform to the pianistic tradition. Landowska by contrast argued music was not a progressive art and that it could not be improved upon as could science or mathematics, quoting Victor Hugo, "The beauty of art lies in its not being susceptible of improvement art as art,

taken In Itself goes neither forward or backward".⁽³⁾ Landowska echoed Hugo's philosophy as follows, "Change a syllable In a poem and you will make the poem limp. Such precautions [by the editors] are not taken in music".⁽⁴⁾

Such editorial distortions were especially severe vis-a-vis Bach. Landowska was convinced that Bach's keyboard works should be performed In their original form and on the Instrument for which they were written, namely the harpsichord. Her Idea, at first received unfavorable response as people were accustomed to hearing piano virtuosi such as Busoni perform Bach's transcriptions on the piano. The harpsichord was thought of as a museum piece, beautiful to look at, but not suitable for the concert hall.

Landowska was not discouraged by the criticism she encountered, and persevered in demonstrating that the harpsichord was a superb concert Instrument, and that early keyboard repertoire was unjustly neglected. She Introduced her audiences to the harpsichord in a subtle way, first by performing one work on the harpsichord and the remainder of the concert on the piano. She gradually increased the number of harpsichord pieces until entire concerts were devoted to the harpsichord.

Still not content with the few imperfect instruments to be found in Paris around 1900, Landowska's ultimate goal was to recreate a harpsichord that would enable her to play works from the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries more convincingly.

After extensive studies of all extant harpsichords in museums and private collections throughout Europe (in which the chief engineer of the Pleyel piano firm participated), Landowska had a modern harpsichord built. It had two keyboards, and a well-balanced array of registers: two "8-foot", one "4-foot" and one "16-foot". The latter can be found In Bach's and Handel's time - they both used harpsichords with a 16" register. This lower register was necessary to properly render the contrasting tutti and solo passages, for Instance in Bach's Italian Concerto and other works. Since the registers, or stops on the harpsichords can be selected Independently or coupled at will, delicate textures may be obtained as readily as orchestral plenitude. The keys of the Pleyel harpsichord have the same width as piano keys. Landowska's reasoning was that while performing on both the piano and harpsichord during the same concert, a change in key size might pose some problems. Keeping the key size constant between the two Instruments would eliminate any confusion.

Although Landowska thoroughly researched the original instruments and copied down literally hundreds of pages of documentation on the music, (in a time when there were no photocopy machines) she was nevertheless criticized: If she was so interested In authenticity, why did the instrument look so unusual? How could she produce an "authentic" sound on such a large instrument? Landowska's response was that no two instruments were alike as they were all hand-made. Also it was possible to vary the sound by using the stops - Landowska's sole purpose In creating her own harpsichord was to be able to perform a variety of styles and use a wide range of sounds.

After a long struggle convincing the public that the harpsichord most authentically represented the keyboard works of J.S. Bach, and other early keyboard repertoire, Landowska's instrument became accepted.

The Pleyel company constructed many harpsichords based on Landowska's model. Each instrument bears the following Inscription: "The lower register called sixteen foot, was Incorporated In the Pleyel harpsichords beginning 1912 at the request and according to the suggestions of Wanda Landowska."⁽⁵⁾

Aside from being credited with the revival of the harpsichord, Landowska was the first great performer to support her Interpretations with musicological research. Most Important to her were aesthetic and descriptive analyses of the music - probing the composers' thoughts. She was interested in more than examining structure and form: "I am not spurred on by a vain desire to uncover hitherto unknown facts, but by a wish to penetrate the composers' thoughts".⁽⁶⁾ In her wish to "penetrate the composers' thoughts", Landowska felt that It was essential to immerse herself in every aspect of the composers' environments'.

According to Denise Restout, longtime companion and pupil of Madame Landowska, extensive research and thoroughness of preparation carried over into her teaching. Miss Restout explained that Madame would check to see if a student knew what she felt to be important about a particular piece of music and its composer, theoretically, biographically, or historically. If a student was lacking in any of these areas, Landowska would refer the student to the appropriate sources either in her own library or one nearby.

Miss Restout, recalling the thoroughness of Landowska's preparation, explained how the artist was fascinated by pieces of all dimensions referring to The Harlequin in the first book of harpsichord pieces by Couperin. "Although she knew Couperin's music intimately, she was so fascinated by the rhythmic structure of this sixteen measure piece she decided to devote an entire week to studying only The Harlequin. She didn't want to think about anything else".

Landowska did not limit herself to the study of keyboard music. She also studied the Bach cantatas, oratorios, passions, and chamber music in order to further her understanding of his keyboard works. Most importantly, she firmly believed that the study of early music constituted substantial nourishment for any keyboard player, and that It was impossible to do justice to Bach's music without studying the works that he studied and from which he himself drew Inspiration: "The plan of every keyboardist should include the complete works of Bach in their original version. And to understand Bach better, students should study the works of the great and lesser French, German, Italian, and English masters who were Bach's predecessors, contemporaries, and successors".⁽⁷⁾

The study of the pre-Bach repertoire was a harbinger for Landowska's performance and research of the Well-Tempered Clavier, a work closely associated with Landowska and one she studied for fifty years. She was one of the first scholars to prove that the Well Tempered Clavier was written for the harpsichord and not the clavichord. The widespread confusion arose from the erroneous title Well Tempered Clavichord supplied by editors, such as Busoni, and biographers of Bach, Forkel and Spitta.

In "Clavichord or Harpsichord: for which were Bach's FortyEight written?", Landowska explained that the world clavier was used to denote any keyboard instrument, and not specifically the clavichord. She also expressed that It would have been impossible for Bach to compose anything in equal temperament on the clavichord stating: "In Bach's time, the clavichord could not be quite accurately tuned, for the reason that it was not yet Bundfrei (unfretted): that is, the same string was used to produce two and at times three different tones (or sounds)."⁽⁸⁾ As a result of Landowska's findings, and at her suggestion, the E. Kalmus Publishing Company reverted to the original title of the WellTempered Clavier around 1950.⁽⁹⁾

Thorough research also went into the Goldberg Variations another one of Landowska's companions. Her findings were penned In an article "Sur les Variations Goldberg" which appeared In Revue Musicale (May 1933). Landowska gave the first complete performance of the work in 1933 at The Ecole de Musique Ancienne, a school which she founded in 1927. The

school, at Saint-Leu-LaForet, a few miles north of Paris, was a centre for the study of early music open not only to harpsichordists and pianists, but to singers, Instrumentalists, artists, writers and poets.

The outset of World War 11 forced Landowska's school to come to an end. The Ecole de Musique Ancienne at St. Leu was ransacked by the Nazis and Landowska's library and many of her instruments were seized. Landowska and her faithful pupil Denise Restout managed to escape to the south of France and in 1941 sailed to the United States where Landowska, aged 62, rebuilt her life teaching and performing.

Their arrival in Lakeville Connecticut took place in 1947. The home is indicative of Landowska's wide range of interests - books on French literature, philosophy, history in addition to heavily annotated scores, manuscripts, photographs and other mementos dominate the first floor. When I visited Miss Restout, she proceeded to show me about the large Victorian home. "Everything is just as it was as when she was here," exclaimed Miss Restout. "The only difference is the pictures of Landowska herself". Restout added laughingly, "she would not have displayed pictures of herself on the wall"

What was it like to spend a day with the great Landowska? "It was marvellous. She would love to take long walks, at times for two hours at a stretch. It was during these walks that she claimed she did her best practicing. Being inspired by the mountains and the lake, she would then return to her harpsichord and play what she practiced mentally. She would then go for another walk and repeat the procedure. Madame also loved to work at night sleeping four or five hours at most. Beside her bed were pencils, paper, books, and a phonograph, so if she couldn't sleep, she would either write, read, or listen to music".

Preparing to record the Well-Tempered Clavier of Bach, which Landowska referred to as her "last will and testament", is another example of how she immersed herself in music in order to uncover its intricacies. "Even though she had known the work for fifty years, she studied the music as if she never saw it before", observed Miss Restout.

Recordings of the Well-Tempered Clavier and many other pieces took place in the Lakeville home during the final years of Landowska's life. She preferred the intimate atmosphere of her home to that of a recording studio. Still permeated by this inspired atmosphere, the Lakeville home is also a centre for study where Miss Restout teaches piano and harpsichord. After Landowska's death in 1959, Miss Restout compiled, edited and translated from the French many of Landowska's notes on music, entitled, *Landowska on Music*, (New York: Stein and Day, 1964.) She is also writing Landowska's biography - an undertaking suited only to one so closely associated with the artist.

Visiting the home that Landowska loved so much is a gratifying experience. I felt as though I was visiting the great Landowska herself as much as Denise Restout. Miss Restout shared the same feeling; when asked how long she actually studied with Madame Landowska, she smiled and replied, "I still am".

Notes

1. Abram Chasins. *Speaking of Pianists*. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1957.) p. 92
2. Wanda Landowska. "*Advice on the Interpretation of Chopin*". *The Etude*. trans. Florence Leonard. February 1926. p. 107
3. Wanda Landowska. *Music of the Past*. (New York: Alfred

Knopf, 1924) p. 15

4. Ibid. p. 69

5. Denise Restout, ed. Landowska on Music (Briarcliff Manor, New York: Stein and Day, 1964). Plate 14

6. Ibid. p. 164

7. Ibid. p. 363

8. Wanda Landowska. "*Clavichord or Harpsichord: For which were Bach's 'Forty- Eight' Written?*" *The Dominant*. November, 1927. p. 12

9. Denise Restout, ed. Landowska on Musk. p. 145.

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