

## A Landmark for Landowska

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"MAY I say that I find these new records very impressive?" The speaker was Wanda Landowska, the object of approbation some test pressings from her forthcoming recording of Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier," and the pride of accomplishment more than deserved. The year being but half over, predictions are rash. But we feel ourselves on eminently solid ground when we suggest that 1949 will go down in the history of recorded music as the year which saw the initial appearance of Landowska's complete "Forty-Eight." The incidence of a magnum opus with its most appropriate interpreter is seldom consummated with such happy perfection.

Landowska celebrates her seventieth birthday on July 5, but her admirers the world over need suffer no apprehensions on this account. With some artists the diamond jubilee would be tantamount to a fiat that further activity should proceed *rallentando* and *diminuendo*. Not so Landowska, who finds herself at seventy hard at work in the midst of her most ambitious undertaking for the phonograph. We spent the day with Mme. Wanda not long ago at her simple country home in Lakeville, Connecticut, and can assure her well-wishers that she climbs a steep hill with more alacrity than most people one-third her age, that her curiosity and search for perfection are as unflagging as ever.

Birthdays being a time-honored occasion for the backward glance, we asked Mme. Landowska to tell us a bit about her fruitful career. It began in Poland with a pattern not too different from most virtuosos: a musical family, talent discovered at an early age (four, to be exact), years of study (under Kleczewski and Michailowski, both devotees of Chopin), finally the break-away from discipline and emergence as an accomplished artist. But when Wanda Landowska set off on her own at the age of fourteen, her path encountered some unusual turns. For this young pianist had no desire to dazzle concert audiences of Europe



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in the accepted manner. "I have always been in revolt," she told us with obvious satisfaction.

The seed of revolt was Bach. At the close of the nineteenth century this composer had vanished from the piano repertoire. In his place interpreters of the day substituted sham Bachs which went under the names of Bach-Liszt, Bach-Taussig, or Bach-Bülow. The Cantor of Leipzig was then considered an inspired creator of choral and organ masterpieces, but as an artisan of keyboard music he was felt to be somewhat *démodé*. In a word, the late nineteenth century was convinced that Bach had no conception of how to exploit properly the capabilities of the keyboard. Having arrived at this conclusion, however, the virtuoso-composers of the time were not content to let Bach's keyboard writing lie fallow. If Bach's music was out of joint, they would take it upon themselves to set it right.

Almost alone in her belief, Mme. Wanda knew that, far from improving the music, Liszt, Bülow, *et al* had done it immeasurable harm. As a

fervent devotee of Bach (Artur Nikisch nicknamed her "Bacchante") she resented the manner in which he had been transformed and transcribed into an overstuffed romantic composer.

BUT in all honesty she had to admit that there was some method to the madness which prompted Liszt to encumber Bach's writing with anachronistic fireworks. For if one played Bach's works on the piano exactly as Bach had written them down, the music just didn't "sound." Landowska's first thought, then, was to play Bach on the instrument for which he wrote: the harpsichord.

"Some people are under the impression," she told us, "that I rediscovered the harpsichord, and that until I appeared on the scene the instrument had been only a museum piece. This is only partly true. Arnold Dolmetsch had already constructed harpsichords for Chickering in Boston and Gaveau in Paris, while the French firms of Erard and Pleyel had also brought out contemporary models of the instrument. But these harpsichords, if I may say so, were only——," Mme. Wanda closed her eyes groping for the right description, "well 'toys' is really not quite accurate, but it will do until we think of a more appropriate word. You see, these harpsichords did not exploit the grandeur and richness which one finds in the masterpieces written for the instrument. Wealthy amateurs would install them in their homes for the performance of easy gavottes and minuets. That is all. The harpsichord then manufactured was a quaint plaything, not a musical instrument in the truest sense.

"In the course of my tours I was able to examine old harpsichords in all the great museums of Europe, and I knew that these little gavotte players were a far cry from the *Roi soleil* of instruments for which Bach and the French clavecinists had written. After much research I brought to the Pleyel firm in Paris the results of my investigation, and they set to work on an instrument in line with my suggestions.

This instrument had several basic advantages over any other modern harpsichord. It was capable of greater brilliance and of more tonal variety, and it was the first modern instrument to give full justice to the sixteen-foot register, that essential set of strings for a deep, resounding bass. My new harpsichord made its debut at a Bach Festival in Breslau. That was in 1912, and Pleyel had to send a workman along with the harpsichord to finish it. The last touches were actually given on the stage in Breslau. How I had to pester them to complete the instrument on schedule! But then I have never had any patience with people who were late."

We managed to convey, as gently as possible, that some critics considered Landowska's harpsichord to be too modern, to possess more brilliance and varied registrations than anything Bach could possibly have possessed. Mme. Wanda shrugged her shoulders. "I cannot sign a guarantee that this is how Bach wanted it. But I feel it to be so. You know, there were no factories in Bach's day, and no standard harpsichord existed. I built mine as a 'symbol' of the early eighteenth-century instrument. To the best of my knowledge it is a faithful re-creation."

**T**HE subject of the harpsichord could have been pursued indefinitely, but our hostess wagged an admonishing finger. "That is enough about the harpsichord. Let us talk about the music I play. For this is what matters."

Constructing the correct instrument was really just a beginning in Landowska's struggle to accord old music its full due. There remained the problem of interpreting the music as Bach and his contemporaries would have done. "I soon learned that this required more than merely giving a literal interpretation of the score. For instance, there was the matter of ornaments. The great French composers, and Bach himself, have written out 'realizations' of their ornamentation. But though they spell out the notes for

us, they do not tell at what tempo the notes should be played, or how they should be phrased, or where breathing places should be allowed. This in spite of what Couperin and other musicians have written.

"Then consider the difficulty of filling out the ornamentation of a composition when none is specifically indicated. Many people do not realize that it was the custom of eighteenth-century virtuosos to improvise their own ornamentation. If one plays the *Sarabande* or the *Passacaille* of Handel's Suite in G minor exactly as it is printed in the Handel Society edition, one will be doing a grave injustice to Handel's intentions. The basic structure must be amplified by the performer. Listen to my recording of this music and you will hear what I mean." We asked whether she arrived at her "improvisations" through research or intuition. "A mixture of both," was the answer. "They are not axiomatic. Another musician will perform them otherwise. That is the charm of this music. It is necessary, though, to have a thorough historical background. I learned to play Bach through early French music. This was the right avenue. But remember one thing: a harpsichordist must have imagination. If he does not possess this priceless quality, he should choose another instrument, or perhaps even another profession."

It would consume the entirety of RECORDINGS were we to set down all that Mme. Wanda told us about the art of playing Bach. She disabused us of the prevalent notion that subtleties of touch have no effect on the harpsichord. It appears that touch can affect harpsichord tone as much as it does piano tone; only the means differ. She explained how she discovered that reverberations and sympathetic vibrations within the harpsichord are the key to its successful use. "The vibrations take the place of the piano's pedal. I have come to exploit them more and more, for otherwise the sound can be very dry." She told us of the importance that imperceptible fluctuations of tempo hold for her. "My playing is very free; but the more I am free, the more I am controlled." She emphasized how every phrase must be studied and practised with the most painstaking care.

"Come, I shall show you what I mean." And we went over to a piano. "I shall play you a simple chord. Bach wrote it vertically, but it should of course be spread out in playing." Landowska sat far back on the chair, relaxed, her eyes almost at the level of the keyboard, and struck the broken chord. It alone would have been worth the 100-mile journey to Lakeville. Each component was weighted precisely so that subsidiary parts spoke

## My Favorite Records

**Wanda Landowska** lost a large collection of records as a result of the Nazi invasion of France. She is now rebuilding it in this country. Readers may be surprised at the inclusion of "Porgy and Bess," but Mme. Landowska assured us that she considers this album among her special treasures. She feels that Gershwin is underestimated by serious musicians, and she finds "strong ties between his writing and sixteenth-century lute music." The Solesmes album of Gregorian chant, however, is the recording she values above all others.

**GREGORIAN CHANT.** *The Solesmes Abbey records.*  
**DES PRÉS AND OTHERS:** *Liturgical music. Dijon Cathedral Choir.*  
**MONTEVERDI:** *Madrigals. The Nadia Boulanger recording.*  
**POULENC:** "Petites Voix." *Robert Shaw and the Victor Chorale.*  
**FALLA:** "Seven Popular Spanish Songs." *Conchita Supervia.*  
**RAVEL:** "Ma Mère l'Oye." *Koussevitsky conducting the Boston Symphony.*  
**STRAVINSKY:** "Les Noces." *Stravinsky conducting.*  
**VERDI:** Act III Prelude. "La Traviata." *Toscanini's old recording with the New York Philharmonic.*  
**CIMAROSA:** *Oboe Concerto. Leon Goossens and Liverpool Philharmonic under Sargent.*  
**GERSHWIN:** "Porgy and Bess." *Servitzky and the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra.*

with less insistence than basic ones, while in the spacing between notes there were infinitesimal nuances of timing. It can in all truth be said that Mme. Wanda packed more musical meaning into that sonorous chord than many artists do in a complete partita. It spoke, as no words can, of the extraordinary refinement which this great harpsichordist can command, and its vibrant contours still echo in our ears.

**D**ID any reader stumble, perhaps, over the word "piano" above? It is not generally realized that despite her vigorous espousal of the harpsichord Mme. Landowska retains more than a fondness for the piano. We took a chance and asked the Polish expatriate whether she ever played Chopin. We rather expected a stony answer, for the romanticism of Chopin is a far cry from the classic idiom which one associates with Landowska. The reply was gentle. "But of course. I love to play Chopin." This gave Mme. Wanda  
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