



"... the force of her personality is so overwhelming that one is ready to succumb."

## Bach's Will, Landowska's Testament

By ABRAM CHASINS

THE musical world has cause for celebration. It has now received in full an opulent legacy from Wanda Landowska\*: her completion of the forty-eight Preludes and Fugues from J. S. Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier," on LP for RCA Victor. Landowska herself calls this project her "last will and testament." We are fortunate to benefit from that "will" and to be able to express our gratitude directly for the benefaction.

I am certain of the reader's willingness to assume with me that the "48" are representative of Bach's maturest musical thought, and that Landowska is a supreme harpsichordist. May I also assume that none of us wants to become embroiled in that tiresome argument of the superiority of piano versus harsichord as the best instrumental medium for these works? As for the clavichord, there isn't the slightest doubt in Landowska's mind, or in mine, that Bach with a harpsichord at his disposal would hardly prefer to entrust the "Well-Tempered Clavier" to the limited domain of the clavichord.

In any event, the entire range of these diversified masterpieces has been realized on Landowska's Pleyel harpsichord with an eloquence, a variety of touch, phrasing and regis-

tration, an imagination and rhythmic inspiration which prove once again her absolute stylistic sovereignty.

The cause of music would be greatly advanced were it possible to prevent all but a handful of performers from playing or recording another note of Baroque music until they absorb and put into practice what is to be learned from this set.

This seems both the time and place to say firmly and publicly what is usually spoken *sotto voce* in scholastic conclave. Namely, that with appallingly few exceptions the performances of Bach's music in the concert hall and on recordings disclose that Baroque scholarship is still in the Dark Ages. It is an exceptionally dismal fact because illumination has been available for some time now and any real artistic integrity could acquire it. The sources, no longer inaccessible, include such recordings as the Landowska discs of the "Italian Concerto" and "Goldberg Variations" by Bach and of many works by his French, English, and Italian precursors and contemporaries. Had they alone been properly evaluated and utilized, some of our most famous conductors, instrumentalists, and vocalists might have saved themselves from innocently exposing an encyclopedic ignorance in taking Baroque music to the platform and to disc.

How is this possible, and how did it come to pass? Briefly, due to musical, theological, and social changes around the time of Bach's death, his music lay scattered and forgotten

for almost a century. It was re-assembled by nineteenth-century musicians who had the best will in the world but who knew little of seventeenth-century music and less about the man who synthesized it. So it was that Bach's music was revived, compiled, edited, and performed by a generation which spoke an entirely different musical language. A "tradition" which stems from the wrong century is responsible for the ubiquity of unreliable editions and stylistically distorted performances which are generally accepted today. Accepted, that is, by all except a small band of scholarly musicians and Landowska is one of them.

Whoever regards the pursuit of stylistic validity as an academic activity unrelated to the emotions will quickly discover his error when he hears in Book One the rich five-part polyphony which emerges from the constant arpeggio figure of the very first Prelude, the rhythmic vigor of the C sharp major Fugue, the beautiful melodic lines of the B flat minor Prelude, the tragic tension of driving dissonance upon dissonance in the last Fugue. In Book Two, Landowska's most recent achievements include the spaciousness of the A flat Prelude, and the powerful climax of its Fugue, the sonority of the three-part A major and B minor Fugues, and above all, the declamatory freedom of the A minor Prelude.

Such freedom of the heart stems from the severest discipline of the mind and body. It demonstrates a complete grasp of that improvisational age in which publication was rare and expensive, in which manuscripts were prepared mainly for the composer himself or for pupils and disciples. All of which, in addition to the figured bass notation, led to the labor-saving and time-saving device of writing scores in a musical Morse-code for those thoroughly familiar with the common practice of the day.

This left the performer free to ornament the skeleton. But how? That touchy subject inevitably brings forth the cliché which immediately stamps the uninformed: "It is purely a matter of taste." In all aspects of art, taste is certainly an essential, but taste must be based on knowledge. Many important things about ornamentation may be learned from hearing Landowska on these recordings, by listening and observing hard



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serve the name of musician because they pretend to love Bach. if not enough to assume a decent minimal responsibility toward him, and those lesson-sellers who do not deserve the name of teacher, are forewarned that examples such as Landowska's can do a lot for us, but only if they stimulate us to do more for ourselves.

In addition to intellectual integrity and instrumental mastery, Landowska possesses a magical individuality and expressiveness. Even when an interpretation or a tempo is at drastic variance with one's preconceived ideas, her convictions are so solidly grounded, her intentions so clear, and the force of her personality so overwhelming that one is ready to grant her conception, or, more usually, to succumb.

On one matter I am not willing



## SPOTLIGHT ON THE MODERNS

## Stravinsky and His Firmament

**R**EADING Paul Henry Lang on Bach in these pages some time ago I kept thinking how appropriately Stravinsky's name could be substituted and how odd it is that the same characteristics when they turn up in this contemporary master are so often cited as deficiencies. Lang was discussing Bach's use of various regional styles (French, Italian, etc.), his continued interest in them even when they had gone out of fashion, and his revival of "long-past wonders of Netherlandish music." But he might just as well have been pointing to the way in which Stravinsky took the purest eighteenth-century classicism as inspiration for his Symphony in C, or studied the fifteenth-century Isaak for his cantata, establishing a connection between this contrapuntist and certain serial procedures (but not the atonality) of the recent Viennese school (Columbia 4899). Along the same lines, Stravinsky in his turn apostrophized Bach of the Brandenburg Concertos in "Dumbarton Oaks" and parts of "Danses Concertantes" in the way that Bach apostrophized his own Flemish predecessors (Concert Hall 1229, with Robert Hall conducting the Rochester Chamber Orchestra). And Stravinsky himself evoked this same Flemish school in his Mass (Vox PL-8630, with Margaret Hillis conducting the New York Concert Choir). I do not hesitate to carry my analogy even further and to maintain that Stravinsky, as Lang said of Bach, having surveyed the "musical output of the world . . . proceeded with Olympian sureness and grandeur to organize all this into apotheoses."

The analogy breaks off when Lang claims that Bach was "not a man of his time." For Stravinsky lives in an era when consciousness of the past is part of our present as it has never been before. Moreover, Bach brought a whole trend to a belated close, whereas today we are in the midst of consolidating our century's wealth of innovation. Finally, Stravinsky showed himself capable of being both "modern" and personal in the usual sense in his compelling early Russian works, and he may be heard in this vein in "Les Noces," which is sung in English on the Vox LP mentioned above. (It is also out on a new Vanguard LP recorded in Vienna in the original Russian.) The incisive rhythmic traits, the tricky ostinatos, the instrumental

ingenuity of "Les Noces" carry over into his later works much more than is granted by those who judge by superficialities. Nor may it be justifiably said that the Mass, because it draws on Flemish sources, is at all inferior to "Les Noces," which draws in precisely the same fashion on Stravinsky's native Russian sources.

But if Bach's genius was capable of exercising itself within his retrospective attitude, why need we make apologies when this attitude appears in others? It is not by virtue of his retrospection, but by virtue of his genius that Stravinsky has rewarded us with a steady supply of masterpieces over the years. Among them the Symphony in C occupies a position of eminence. Its availability in an authoritative reading with the composer conducting the Cleveland Orchestra affords us all the more reason to rejoice since it is almost never played. The filigree of solo parts in the "Larghetto Concertante," recalling "Apollon," would give any conductor pause in view of limited rehearsal time for concerts. But I suspect that the neglect of this, one of his noblest achievements, may be due to the same causes that relegated Bach's music to the shelf for the better part of a century after his death. Both composers require more than average attention to detail, to interweaving of elements. Surface novelty is not their aim, nor gross effects to arouse torpid ears. As in a Bach fugue, the austerity of the Mass or "Dumbarton Oaks" may be easily mistaken for aridness. The converse is also true. For the charm of "Danses Concertantes" may be mistaken for frivolity.

To the younger generation of the eighteenth century, launched on the new homophonic trend, Bach was old-fashioned. But Stravinsky has had vast influence as a medium through whom the new synthesis of past and present has been conveyed. Of all the young men who have come under his dominion I doubt that any has responded more violently to the implications of Stravinsky's achievement than Harold Shapero. It would almost seem by design that this highly gifted New Englander's Symphony for Classical Orchestra (1946) has been issued by Columbia the same month as the Symphony in C in a reading by Bernstein that has uncommon vitality, breadth, and spaciousness of sound (ML 4889). I stress "implications"

since the two works are actually quite different in quality. Stravinsky's has a Mozartian elegance (with even a suggestion of the opening accompaniment figure from the G minor Symphony) while Shapero's emulates the sweep, fullness, drama, and long eventful codas of Beethoven—to all of which he comes surprisingly near at times. (I hear some of my readers murmur, "I could do this pastiche too, but it's not worth the time." All I can say is, just try. See if you can come up with Shapero's momentum, tunes, and developments.) But where Stravinsky absorbs his stylistic allusions into a thoroughly new context, Shapero tends to be literal, though a certain jazzy sauciness—a bravado—betrays him as a contemporary. Occasionally Shapero seems to drive himself on to fill preordained proportions, and here lies the main difference from Stravinsky, who