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The virtuosity and aesthetic beliefs of Wanda Landowska

The dedication of an article to such a distinguished scholar as Professor Z. M. Szwejkowski is always going to be an arduous task. The article should reflect his academic interests, but I do not dare to write about the early Baroque Italian style; it should be concerned with the performance of early music, but I do not feel able to discuss this in the Professor's presence; it should... The best idea I had was that of recalling that other Personality of Ancient Music, who opened up the new world of historical performance. There is also another incentive to write about Wanda Landowska — this year, 40 years after her death, we celebrate the 120th anniversary of her birth. It is a fitting occasion for a discussion of her ideas and achievements. In addition, we can take this opportunity to demonstrate that it was not only recently that women have played an important role in the world of performance and music aesthetics. Landowska was an essentially cosmopolitan woman. She received official French and Polish honours, although she spent the last decades of her life in Connecticut in the USA. The entire musical world held her in the highest esteem as the pre-eminent figure in the 20th century revival of the harpsichord, and a pioneer in the new historical approach to performing music.

Let's start with basic biographical data. She was born in Warsaw on the 5th July 1879 and started playing piano as a child. Both of her teachers were well-known Chopin specialists. These being Jan Kleczyński, and Alexander Michalowski, a professor at the Warsaw Conservatory, whom the young Wanda strongly admired for his musical ability. From the earliest years of her musical training she performed pieces by the Old Masters — Bach, Rameau, Mozart — with great enthusiasm, and she included the *English Suite in E minor* in her first public concert. It was the famous conductor Arthur Nikisch who heard her interpretation

of a prelude and fugue from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, and nicknamed her ‘Bacchante’.

Landowska was just sixteen when she went to study composition and counterpoint under Heinrich Urban in Berlin. Urban was especially famous in Poland as the teacher of Ignacy Jan Paderewski,¹ Mieczysław Karłowicz, Józef Hofman and many other musicians of that period. However, Landowska could not find common ground or a common language with Urban. It is significant that Karol Szymanowski, who was very familiar with Berlin’s musical society, also failed to hold a positive opinion of him. Szymanowski passed through Germany on numerous journeys, and preferred to send his pupils to Paris for further study. Landowska later said:

What did I learn? Nothing, really nothing. I was refractory to rules and laws. [...] My music was covered with exercises in which I had no interest at all. Counterpoint? Yes, but through the direct channel of Bach.²

At another time she also said

What is more, I was despised. I remember how Urban, my composition teacher, used to hum derisively fragments from *The B Minor Mass*.³

For a neophyte of Early music, the experience was bound to be difficult, but she did not change her belief in the power of 17th and 18th century art. In 1900 she moved to Paris and married Henry Law.

France was the promised land for the young artist. Landowska began public concerts there (firstly on piano), listened to new pieces by Debussy and Stravinsky, watched performances by Diaghilev, and studied baroque and pre-classical music. It was the period of the appearance of the first musicological works and publications, including *Archives des Maîtres de l’Orgue* by Guilmant and Pirro, and works by Quittard, Henri Expert and Albert Schweitzer. She initially worked on piano interpretations with Schola Cantorum, but shortly afterwards started playing harpsichord. It was a very serious and brave decision made at a very special time — the beginning of her career. But it was not only the decision

¹ The young Paderewski was very happy to study with Urban. He spoke of Urban with great respect in the correspondence concerning the composition of his *Overture*, which was completed under Urban’s direction.

² Denis RESTOUT, *Landowska the writer*, in: *Landowska on Music*. Collected, edited and translated by Denise Restout. Assisted by Robert Hawkins, New York 1964, 2¹⁹⁶⁵, p. 7.

³ Ibid., p. 354.

to use an instrument hitherto considered to be buried by romantics in musical junk that was significant. It was also a sign of a new approach towards music — more composer-oriented, less subjective, showing more respect towards traditional techniques and less concerned with technical virtuosity. Landowska was one of the first artists to intentionally study the history of music and simultaneously work on the improvement of practical skills.

Progressing my studies, I came to the realisation that the keyboard works of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries ought to be played on the instrument for which they were composed, the harpsichord. This idea took complete possession on me, and I decided to carry it out. I started to look for an instrument. The modern reconstruction made around 1900 by Erard and Pleyel were not the ones I dreamed of. At the beginning, however, I had to use them as they were.⁴

Her first recordings were on piano, or rather on the ‘reproducing piano’. Using this system, a piano performance could mechanically mirror the movements of keys and pedals on specially prepared rolled paper. The reverse process gives us a very close approximation (much more so than early gramophone) of the pianist’s performance. We are now able to listen to those early performances re-mastered by the Fonč company on CD edition, and on the gramophone recording *The Welte Legacy Album*⁵. Both recordings reveal Landowska’s rather ‘romantic’ style of playing. Her interpretation of Liszt’s music demonstrates incredible finesse, quite pianistic (yet very separate) articulation and a very subjective “romantic” treatment of metre, tempo and dynamics. This recording sounds unusually modern when compared with Leslie Howard’s version from 1989⁶, which won the Grand Prix de Disque of Liszt Association.

Later, Landowska changed her stylistic approach. In 1903, for the first time, she played a public concert on the harpsichord. In 1909 she published her book, an expression of her artistic credo — *Musique ancienne* (translated into English in 1924 by William A. Bradley in the aftermath of her first great success in the United States). She quickly

⁴ Ibid., p. 9.

⁵ “Fonè 90 08 CD.” includes Landowska’s transcriptions of waltzes by J. Lenner, and which are played in a very polished manner, and Sonata n. 15 in D major, K. 576 by W. A. Mozart; “The Welte Legacy Album” published in 1985, incorporates her interpretation of Berlioz–Liszt *Danse des Sylphes* from *Damnation de Faust*.

⁶ Hyperion CDA 66346.

achieved popularity both as a virtuoso — touring Europe from Spain to Russia — and as a writer/musicologist working for prestigious magazines such as *Musica*, *Mercure de France* and *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*.

The year 1912 brought a significant change. During the Breslau (Wrocław) Bach Festival, she unveiled a new instrument, which had been built by Pleyel according to her specifications. It was a large, two-keyboard harpsichord, with additional 4' and 16' registers. We now know that her concept of Bach's instrument was not quite exact, particularly in the construction of the plectrum mechanism and the use of an iron frame, which allows the use of thicker wires with higher tension. However, most importantly, one could hear what Landowska meant by a 'home organ'.⁷ There was an instant response and great international success. In 1913 Landowska was nominated Professor of Harpsichord at the Königliche Hochschule für Musik in Berlin. Unfortunately, the First World War halted her career. Together with her husband, she was interned in Berlin.

In 1919 they returned to Paris. Shortly afterward, Henry Law died in a car accident. In spite of this personal tragedy Wanda Landowska's success continued during the following years. For the first time in the twentieth century, she performed the continuo part in Bach's *Matthäus-passion* on the harpsichord; in 1921 she published a new version of *Musique Ancienne*. In the same year, she gave a lecture and a concert at Versailles as part of the International Art Congress, after which a reviewer said "the amphitheatre was overcrowded at the expense of the other amphitheatres at the Sorbonne where scholarly dissertations were being read before empty benches." She held master classes at the Ecole Normale de Musique in Paris and in 1923, she encouraged Manuel de Falla to write a modern piece for the harpsichord.⁸ However, it was

⁷ In an interview with James Fasset on 20th November 1949 in Rochester (a copy included in Donald R. JONES' *An Analysis of Poulenc's 'Concert Champêtre'*, MA dissertation Rochester 1950) Landowska says: "you know the sharpness of the harpsichord is what I love, and it is so precise. [Fasset] But it has a terrific variation of color, too. [Landowska] Very much. It is like an organ. You know, the harpsichord was called in (the) eighteen century the organ of the «l'orgue de la maison.» [Fasset] «The organ of the home.» [...] [Landowska] «The organ of the home.» And this is a very good expression and this is true, because it has something, this richness of register: this is the quality of the harpsichord. And this is why you have the impression that you (listen) to an orchestra. [Fasset] It does give that impression. [Landowska] Yes, it does, because you hear the flute and violin and sometimes you hear very deep and sombre 16-foot, the very thick string."

François Poulenc's *Concert Champêtre* that became the most famous piece dedicated to Wanda Landowska.

It is a dialogue between my harpsichord, my lofty and aristocratic harpsichord and the very big orchestra. It was something very interesting and piquant.⁹

It was also in 1923 that, after a concert in Geneva, she published in *Tribune de Genève* her analysis of interpretation of Mozart's music with a particular interest on ornaments. In the autumn her first American tournée took place. Landowska played with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Leopold Stokowski and made her first gramophone recordings. Her unquestionable reputation as the champion of early music was confirmed by the foundation of her private school (*Ecole de Musique Ancienne*) in St-Leu-la-Forêt (north of Paris) and a collection of historical instruments.

In 1940 she fled her home having behind her instruments and books, subsequently moving to USA. She settled in Lakeville (Connecticut), which was known for its great concerts, recording and academic activity. Her final achievement was the registration of the whole of J. S. Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier* in 1949. Landowska described her detailed analysis of Bach's masterpiece (published together with the records in 1954) in this way:

It is simply the story of my experiences as the worker in music, a worker who jots down her impressions, prelude after prelude, fugue after fugue.¹⁰

Wanda Landowska died in Lakeville on 16th August 1959.

Everything about Wanda Landowska reminds us that she was one of those very special personalities who had a major influence on musical performance in the second half of the 20th century. She played the role of a primer for the modern revival of the harpsichord. All her activities — teaching, writing, concert performances and establishing a private museum of instruments (first in France, then in the USA) — together formed the long-lasting drive towards "historical thinking" in the performance of music. Can we imagine the achievements of Marriner, Koopman, Pinnock or Hogwood without the 'cembalo'? Today, we do not

⁸ Three years later, he also composed a concerto for harpsichord and chamber ensemble.

⁹ Interview with J. Fasset.

¹⁰ Denis RESTOUT, *Landowska.*, op. cit., p. 22.

today dispute whether it is necessary to learn about early music, about the aesthetics of era passed; today, we argue how to understand works which are several hundred years old. Landowska was the first to break the mistaken romantic belief that the artist should only follow their own feelings and express themselves without recourse to the original score. She was born too early to achieve wider fame in the field of performance aesthetics. Many of her ideas, revolutionary as they were, could not be understood by her contemporaries, and were lost. It was as only in the 1960s that the opinions found in her writing were rediscovered, and her performance ideology widely disseminated. And by the late 1970s, these new — yet old — approaches to playing the Old Masters in a more appropriate way were called ‘historical performance practices’. Thus, we can say that she was a kind of prophet to musical performance aesthetics.

Landowska never called herself a scholar; her self-image was much more modest. Instead, she called herself a musician. In the cited quotation above, she describes herself as ‘the worker in music’, but the expectations she placed on herself were enormous:

Every interpretation should be studied and thought out; and the more it is, the more it gives us the impression of natural inspiration.¹¹

Was she ahead of her time? Almost certainly. And that was why, talking about her colleagues — professional virtuosi — she later said;

I really don’t know what I am doing among them; I have no contact with them. They are on their guard with me, thinking that I am a ‘learned’ musician. But I, aware of the little I know, feel ill at ease with them. For this reason, I live apart. They take it for aloofness.¹²

This is the most likely reason why Landowska, the famous performer who taught so many good harpsichordists, did not have direct successors in the field of performance aesthetic. This is strange, if we remember how often she tried to clarify and demonstrate her point of view, and how active she was in making known the rules of historical interpretation.

Without a review of her biographical data, it is difficult nowadays to imagine the difficulties she faced, since, to us, her ideas are so elementary. But let us remember her essential ideas. Landowska’s basic

¹¹ Wanda LANDOWSKA, *Music of the past*, Alfred A. Knop, New York 1924, p. 101.

¹² Denis RESTOUT, *Landowska.*, op. cit., p. 26.

stance was the negation of progress in music. In the history of art there is always a struggle of generations, styles and schools. Mediaeval *Ars Nova* claimed to be better than *Ars Antiqua*, the Dutch masters worked against the Burgundy School, *seconda practica* was directed against Roman renaissance polyphony, and so on. It was, however, Romanticism that put the ‘creation of the New’ at the forefront of artistic activity, treating precedents as something less valuable. Landowska argues against this:

I am quite willing to believe that progress exist in science, in mechanics, in industry; but who will kindly explain to me wherein consist real musical progress and whereby the most modern composer is necessarily superior to Bach, to Mozart, to Palestrina? [...]

Music is not a schoolgirl who passes sedately from one class to another and who, in our day only, has just obtained her diploma.

Each form, each genre, each style may have its rise and its decline; and when a musician says that Rameau’s harpsichord compositions seems to him inferior to Couperin’s, he may be right, the genre, the form, the character being close enough to make it possible to frame an objective judgment more easily than if it were a question of Palestrina and of Brahms; but what would you say if, asking to have defined the difference between Homer and Dumas fils, someone answered you, without taking a trouble to reflect: “Dumas fils is much superior, for he came several centuries later”?¹³

The above quotation demonstrates Landowska’s very specific style. It also, however, defines a question which is still alive: “is he/she really a virtuoso playing/singing, let us say, Dufay?” An affirmative answer is directly given by the great popularity of early music performance over the last decades. I still remember a vocal competition several years ago where one of the young altos was not treated seriously because, instead of singing Puccini, Verdi or Tchaikovsky she preferred an aria by Handel! At many music schools still exists the deep belief that the ‘real’ virtuoso only performs music from the 19th century or from a contemporary repertoire, with a few exceptions like Handel or Bach (of course, only Johann Sebastian). Elsewhere in her book, Landowska writes:

Like real plebeians, we regard ourselves as kings who have slaves for ancestors. [...] Whence this certainty that our music surpasses that of past centuries? Who can tell us whether Beethoven, Schumann, Chopin, Wagner, Liszt are superior to Bach, Handel, Mozart, Couperin, Haydn, Rameau?¹⁴

¹³ Wanda LANDOWSKA, *Music.*, op. cit., pp. 14, 16.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 32.

The only difference at the moment is that Haydn, Mozart, Bach, Couperin or Rameau are beyond discussion. But what about older music?

The other great issue discussed by the champion of the harpsichord is style of performance. Landowska reacts angrily to the idea that there is only one ‘proper’ style of music, especially early music. She says sarcastically: “Old music should be played slowly” — another general formula which is applied to all music of all epochs and of all nations! I am not quite familiar with modern trends in music education. But just 20 years ago this general rule was still extant! And there are still organists who would today agree with this, and might say that “Bach should also be played rhythmically”. Landowska might well have asked about Bach’s works in the Italian or French style — “Why then play a Bach *gigue* like a prayer?”

Landowska worked hard to introduce shorter musical pieces to the concert repertory, or unknown composers such as Scarlatti, who only became popular through her performances. We are able to listen to these pre-war productions thanks to collections re-mastered and published by Pearl Gemm¹⁵. Unfortunately, the recordings from 1928 and 1935 are technically weak, but one can hear the basic elements of her technique — sharply rhythmical and agogical contrasts, a simple and precise articulation, use of appropriate ornaments and use of registers to emphasise the formal ceasuras. When discussing different styles from the past, she gives only one piece of advice — the artist must know the unique style of the piece and it is not correct to think that all Bach compositions are in the same style.

And we must know the spirit, the sentiment, the taste and the atmosphere of the epoch in order to understand these and to give a more or less accurate reflection of them. When, instead of this, we proceed in accordance with a unique principle of severity or of sobriety, we arrive to those uniform performances where the performers mull over their selections with the same invariability grave, impassive air.¹⁶

Another related aspect of her work which deserve mention are the transcriptions. We should remember that Landowska was faced with a large number of arrangements by piano masters — such as Liszt, Tausig, Hummel or Busoni — for concert use. There is a remarkable quote, attributed to Busoni, who looked at her hands and said “with

¹⁵ Pearl Gemm CD 9019 and 9498; see also the very interesting recording of *Chromatic phantasy in D minor* on EMI CDH 7610082 by Wanda Landowska.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 86–87.

such hands you will never be able to achieve anything”¹⁷. Landowska on many occasions indicates Busoni’s mistakes, not only in his arrangements but also in his publications (like the well-known discussion about the double dot in *Fugue D Major* from the first book of *Das Wohltemperierte Klavier*). She also disputes other editions by Hummel or Bülow, always defending the composer’s original concept. To elaborate her point of view, she recalls an anecdote from a meeting with Rodin, who, when it was suggested to him to reconstitute an antique sculpture, rejected the offer, answering: “But, Madame. it is because I do not feel capable of doing so; and even if I did, I should never dare”. Landowska treats music in the same way and describes the behaviour of her contemporaries with animosity:

And these grinders, scarcely fit to sharpen knives, efface the effigy of the most marvellous genius on the pretext of bringing it up to date.¹⁸

Later, she says the same in a more polite way:

The stamp of genius is removed from marvels of art on the pretext of accommodating them to our modern exigencies.¹⁹

It is not possible to discuss in detail Landowska’s arguments concerning the use of historical instruments (in particular the harpsichord) and all the various technical aspects. But, regarding the popular opinion of progress and the power of contemporary music, she believes that:

Sonorous strength is neither a merit nor a defect, for the simple reason that the quantity of sound in music is an entirely secondary consideration. It is quality which counts, and its correct employment. [...] No, sonorous power is neither a sign of progress nor a sign of decadence. It is intimately allied to the taste and the aesthetic conceptions of a generation — in a word, to the style of the epoch.

Landowska had no doubt that old music is real art, regardless of its length or function. She thus insisted on including various miniatures in her concert programs. In one of her last public concerts — or rather “lecture concerts”²⁰ — she played short dances by Antoine Francisque (1575–1605) from *Trésor d’Orphée* and talked about those pieces and their history with the audience. Many of these miniatures subsequently

¹⁷ Denis RESTOUT, *Landowska.*, op. cit., p. 373.

¹⁸ Wanda LANDOWSKA, *Music.*, op. cit., p. 69.

¹⁹ Denis RESTOUT, *Landowska.*, op. cit., p. 99.

²⁰ Fragments published on CD (GEMM CD 9019 Pearl) in 1993 under the title *Musique ancienne*.

became famous. The prevalent elements of her keyboard technique were not only a variety of musical colours, but also very vivid articulation and rhythmical sharpness. We may see this by listening to her *Le tambourin* by J. Ph. Rameau in 1935 — one of her most famous productions.

The remarks and comments in her books and articles are still relevant today — especially within the field of baroque and classical ornamentation, measures and tempos. There is a revealing example in the chapter entitled *Tradition*, which proves that it is not possible to play early music properly without historical knowledge. Landowska reviews the diverse definitions of the terms ‘Andante’ and ‘Andantino’. The result is unexpected- the contemporary meaning of these terms are quite opposite to older meanings.

To close the portrait of this great artist, one might mention a list of further topics which cannot be discussed in such a short article, namely her compositions, her involvement with the popularisation of forgotten composers and their pieces, her popularisation of Polish music (Landowska was one of the first to bring the names of Jarzębski, Zieleński, Pękiel and Mielczewski to the attention of an international audience) and her essays on music. But I would like to end this paper with a story which, I feel, best portrays the role of Wanda Landowska. Arthur Nikisch, the great Austro-Hungarian conductor, the conductor of several of the best European orchestras (including *Gewandhaus*) and a great performer of romantic music, said to her one day “How can you play the *Chromatic Fantasy* on the harpsichord? What an aberration!” Surprising?

Wojciech M. Marchwica
WIR TUOZOWSTWO I POGLĄDY ESTETYCZNE
WANDY LANDOWSKIEJ
(Streszczenie)

Artykuł poświęcony jest Wandzie Landowskiej, której 120. rocznicę urodzin i 40. rocznicę śmierci obchodzimy w tym roku. Przedstawiono tu pokrótkie dzieje życia artystki, podkreślając wielki wpływ, jaki miała na sztukę wykonawczą XX wieku. Wszystkie dziedziny jej aktywności — wykonawstwo, nauczanie, piśmiennictwo, aż po utworzenie prywatnego muzeum instrumentów — były wyrazem myślenia „historycznego” o sztuce wykonawczej. Landowska zdobyła uznane całego świata muzycznego. Rozwinęła nowoczesną technikę klawesynową, a jej interpretacje cechowały się witalnością i niezwykłą świeżością. Jej pisma i wypowiedzi o muzyce świadczą o głębokiej wiedzy, wnikliwości i intuicji autorki w odczytaniu i interpretacji muzyki dawnej.