

Wanda Landowska - An Artist to Remember

Wanda Landowska was a groundbreaking musician, a visionary performer who brought the Harpsichord and its music back from oblivion.

She exerted an enormous influence on 20th century music, because (almost singlehandedly) she brought about a revival of Baroque, Renaissance and Classical music, particularly the music of major composers such as J.S. Bach, Handel and Mozart. An outstanding keyboard performer, she was a member of the European cultural and political elite of her time. She used her talent and charm to bridge the separation between player and audience, a significant shift in twentieth-century performance practice.

At the end of the 19th century there were practically no playable Harpsichords. The instrument was viewed as an ancient artifact to be seen in a museum at best. It had gone out of fashion a century earlier, and most of the surviving instruments were destroyed in the class struggle that followed the French Revolution.

Wanda Landowska approached Pleyel -- a leading Piano building company of the turn of the last century --to recreate the harpsichord. She worked with engineers at Pleyel to develop the prototype of the modern version of the instrument. She was an extraordinarily talented player, and she worked with great passion to rediscover and interpret early scores for 'her' instrument. This task was an extremely difficult task, because it required encyclopedic knowledge of the style and performance practice of the period 1600-1800. These musical traditions had been forgotten, and needed to be rediscovered and reinterpreted with contemporary eyes and ears.

Landowska's charisma as a player and as a person enchanted audiences; she made Early Music and the Harpsichord popular in major concert halls around the world and in recordings. Her fame helped her when, as a Jew, she needed to flee from Nazi-occupied France, where she had created her own school and performance space.

Landowska settled in the USA in the 1940s, in Lakeville, Connecticut, and continued her extraordinary career as a concert and recording artist. She was not merely an advocate of the past --she met with countless personalities of her own times -- composers, writers such as Leo Tolstoy, thinkers and politicians, and inspired them with her vision of music and culture. Two remarkable modern harpsichord concertos were written for her by Francis Poulenc and Manuel De Falla.

Nowadays Landowska's memory lies somewhat dormant. As a result of her pioneering work and a worldwide renaissance of historical performance practice, the Early Music and Harpsichord scene developed explosively after her death in 1959. Subsequent scholars and performers recovered more detailed knowledge of historically informed performance styles, and left Landowska's technique and the instruments she had developed behind. Yet without her pioneering efforts, the early music world would never have developed in the way we know it today. It is clear, too, that Landowska's passion, talent, vision and approach to music and audiences is still meaningful, still modern, and extremely valuable to listeners and performers.

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