Harpischord Playing in America “after” Landowska

Larry Palmer

The Power of the Press: “A Living Legend”


Her fingers on the cembalo
Type out the polyphonic here
Of Bach's contrapuntal restoration
The true original edition
Unclothed by tradition

Twelve years later, on the opposite side of the Atlantic, habitually cranky New York music critic Virgil Thomson (1920–2000), referring to the harpsichordist's Town Hall concert of 20 November 1944 under the adjudicatory lead of “Definitive Benediction,” wrote:

Wanda Landowska's harpsichord recital of last evening was so stimulating as a needle-doctor... She played everything better than anybody else does. One might almost say, were not such a comparison Irish, that it improved her dereliction better than anybody else ever plays anything of hers... I'll try playing the harpsichord... I remind one and all ever again that there is nothing like Wanda Landowska for piano. There does not exist in the world today, nor has there existed in the last five centuries, another artist of this or any other instrument whose work is so dependable, so authoritative, and so thoroughly satisfactory... From all the points of view—historical knowledge, style, taste, understanding, and spontaneous musicality—no artist to-day can vie with Madame Landowska's... Her personal style, based on an instinctive, absolute, turn-of-the-century impressionistic use of tonal color, and not incidentally, her careful perusal of historical source materials had made her name virtually synonymous with the word harpsichord, at least in the collective consciousness of the public.

True Believers: Expatriated European and Native American Disciples

Landowska's acolytes dominated those American harpsichord programs that were played: Alice Ehlers (1887–1981), Professor Landowska's first student in 1913 Berlin, immigrated to the United States and taught for 26 years at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. Among Ehlers's fascinating oral history recorded vignettes she noted that Landowska did not talk much in those early lessons, but she relied heavily on playing for her students. Later, in Ehlers's own teaching, at least one anecdote retold by her student Malcolm Hamilton (1932–2003) showed that Ehlers was no different. At the subject of a Bach fugue she began to construct and a large concert instrument that was being played by Rafael Puyana, Alice Ehlers stopped— as well as all the others present— to hear the brilliant playing of the modern harpsichord in the furthest corner of the room performed by Frescobaldi and the English virginalists. Spanish music, and all eight of the 1720 Handel Suites—presented both facile young fingers and an expanding repertory of early keyboard music to the American harpsichord scene.

A Contrarian's View of Landowska

During the autumns of Landowska's career, critics of her playing style were not legion. But one composer-critic who did not idolize the High Priestess of the Harpsichord was neo-classicist composer Roland Everts (1922–1975). In a 1952 piece for The New Republic, Everts wrote:

Music. Landowska has seduced the heart but not the brain, in believing that she offers it an authentic reading of Bach and his predecessors. We do not, after all, wish to modernize Pleyel harpsichord, an instrument that she employs in a sort of disguise all over the world... After fifteen years of incredulous listening, I am finally convinced that this woman kicks all the pedals in sight when she senses danger ahead. When she sits down to play a Bach fugue, I groan. Sometimes the passage in which she is being driven over a treacherous mountain road by an erratic driver, and when she fi
nally finishes the thing it is almost a plea to relax into nausea...

Robert Kirkpatrick at his Dolmetsch- Chickering harpsichord, 1939 (Ralph Kirkpatrick Archives, Music Library, Yale University)

For a balanced evaluation of Kirkpatrick’s tenacious and unswerving commitment to the composer’s intentions with fullness and mimic his exquisite attention to detail and technical accuracy for dramatic effect. Despite these detractors would do well to listen again. There is a special beauty and unique warmth to Kirkpatrick’s sometimes austere, but always direct, “nononsense” performances; his interpretations are always superbly conceived, often transcendental, and occasionally hypnotic...

A Different Aesthetic: Ralph Kirkpatrick

Ralph Kirkpatrick (1911–1984), funded by a post-graduate John Knowles Paine Traveling Fellowship from Harvard University, set off for Europe in the fall of 1931 to hone his harpsichord skills. As described in his memoirs, the pre-eminent American harpsichordist of his generation had a difficult relationship with the priestess of St-Leu, eventually running off to Berlin for coaching and consolation with another Landowska student, the more congenial Eta Harich-Schneider (1937–1986). Kirkpatrick’s public playing, beginning with concerts and recordings during the 1930s, sounded distinctly unlike Landowska’s in its conscious avoidance of excessive registration changes and its near-metronomic regularity. Teri Noel Toovey’s description of Kirkpatrick’s style, printed as a “disclaimer” in the compact disc reissue of these early solo recordings for Musical Records, puts it this way:

Some listeners confuse Ralph Kirkpat
rick’s tenacious and unswerving commit
ment to the composer’s intentions with fullness and mimic his exquisite attention to detail and technical accuracy for dramatic effect. These detractors would do well to listen again. There is a special beauty and unique warmth to Kirkpatrick’s sometimes austere, but always direct, “nononsense” performances; his interpretations are always superbly conceived, often transcendental, and occasionally hypnotic...

For a balanced evaluation of Kirk
patrick’s harpsichordist, one needs to sample some later examples from his extensive discography. A 1959 Deutsche Grammophon Archiv recording of Bach played on a Neupert instrument presents quite another aural document of a de
cidedly non-austere artist. And by 1973

When I experienced Kirkpatrick’s deeply moving playing of Bach’s Goldberg Variations at the Rothko Chapel in Houston (Texas), I reported in The DIAPASON that “Kirkpatrick played magnificently with a prodigious technical command of the work as well as with spacious feeling for the overall architecture... At the very end of a more than five-decade career, and now totally blind, the aged master and all his innate musical sensitivity to triumph. Despite his end-of-career tongue-in-cheek commendation of the Yale professor was the most highly regarded and recorded native harpsichordist to the United States during the period of Landowska’s American residency.

Other noted American players of Kirkpatrick’s generation included Yella Pessl (1906–1991) and Sylvia Marlowe (1908–1981). Marlowe’s first instrument was a true Landowska Pleyel, by this time painted white, the better to be seen on the revolving stage of New York City’s Rainbow Room, where Sylvia played jazz arrangements of classical favorites under the catchy rubric Landow

Sylvia Marlowe in South America (photo credit: Consilientes Intern, Buenos Aires; collection of Larry Palmer)

ske and New Lace. Deeply influenced by Landowska’s playing, encountered while in New York, Marlowe was studying with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. Marlowe’s 1959 solo Bach recording for Decca demonstrates how much Madame’s musical shadow dominated the American harpsichord scene.

Eventually Ms. Marlowe chose to play harpsichords built by the American maker John Challen, moving subsequently to those of Challen’s apprentice William Dowd (with lil-fonts by her own husband, the artist Leonid Berman[?]). Non-night-club recital repertoire includ

ed 18th-century classics, soon augment
ded extensively by commissions to prodi
gent living composers. Thus, important works by Ned Rorem and Elliott Carter, to cite only two, came into being through Marlowe’s sponsorship. Together with the impressive catalog of similar commissions from the Swiss harpsichordist anto

Sylvia Marlowe in South America (photo credit: Consilientes Intern, Buenos Aires; collection of Larry Palmer)
harpsichordist to record such a large number of them—359 individual works performed on his Challen harpsichord in a series of albums for Westminster Records. In 1951 he was appointed the first harpsichord professor at New York’s Juilliard School. Several didactic books, published late in Valenti’s career, are as colorful and insightful as his playing. What could result a chuckle at words such as these?

Many years ago I promised myself that I would never put in print anything that even vaguely resembled a “method” for harpsichord playing and this it is.

One of the best-known harpsichordists to study privately with Valenti was Berend Stoeter-Igor Kipnis (1926–2002), son of the prominent bass opera singer Alexander Kipnis. The family moved to the United States in 1918, where both Kipnises became famous names in the classical music arena. Igor was particularly noted for his comprehensive and innovative repertoire, recorded extensively. His playing was thoroughly representative of a more objective style of harpsichord performance.

Winds (or Strings and Quills) of Change?

One of the great services rendered by Kirkpatrick was his fervent advocacy for the historically inclined instruments of Frank Hubbard and William Dowd. As the years went by, these musical machines emulated ever more closely those from earlier centuries; albino, with some drollishly 20th-century materials, such as the plastic tubing for jacks and plectra. But with keyboards built to various harpsichord dimensions; sensitive, light actions; and registers deployed in a way that an 18th-century composer might have expected, together with the absence, for the most part, of the outstretched register and pedals, these light and agile instruments gave the new generation of players sensitive tools for performing the music of the past. Emulating Hubbard and Dowd, a number of builders, in Boston and other American venues, and throughout the world, joined the “surge to the past,” and thereby changed both the dynamic and the expected sounds of harpsichord revival instruments.

Among Kirkpatrick’s allies in promoting these new “old” instruments were two Fullers—his student Albert (1929–2007) and the notated David (born 1927), and harpsichordist/conductor Miles Morgan and William Chris-tie. As the 1960s gave way to the 1970s, nearly every emerging teacher and player in the country seemed to be joining the pedal-less crowd. In 1966 I met Dr. Joseph Stephens and played the Hubbard and Dowd harpsichord in his Baltimore (Michaelmas) class. Shortly thereafter I ordered my first instrument double. It was delivered at the beginning of January 1967, and there happened for so many play-ers in our small musical world, that sensit ive instrument taught me as much as the hours spent studying with two of the finest teachers imaginable: Isolde Ahlgrimm (at the Salzburg Mozarteum), and Gustav Leonhardt (during two memorable July participa-
tions in his master classes at the annual Haaren Summer Organ Academies).

Influential European Artist-Teachers

Both of these superb artists made significant contributions to harpsichord playing in the United States. Ahlgrimm (1914–1965) through her teaching in Salzburg, Vienna, and during summer-long guest professorships at Oberlin and Southern Methodist University, as well as several American concert tours organized by managers, but aided and attended by her grateful students. Until recently, Ahlgrimm’s place in the story of the 20th-century harpsichord revival has been little celebrated. With the publication of Peter Watchorn’s major study Isolde Ahlgrimm, Vienna and the Early Music Revival, that deficiency in our history has been rectified!

Leonhardt (born 1928), surely the most recorded of post-Landsowska harpsichordists, has influenced virtually every harpsichordist from the second half of the 20th-century forward. His students seem to be everywhere. Even the most cursory of enumerations would include many of the leading teachers in the U.S. Oberlin’s first full-time professor of harpsichord Lisa Crawford, Michigan’s Edward Parmentier, Boston’s John Gibbons, University of New York at Stony Brook’s Arthur Haas, Florida State’s Garry Latrevenna, Illinois Charlotte Mattal, and, particularly during the 1970s and 80s, my own large group of harpsichord major students at Southern Methodist University. In the spirit of the early music excitement of those decades, SMU conferred its first doctorate on Leonhardt in 1984, citing the Dutch harpsichordist’s advocacy of “performance on period instruments,” as well as his “commitment to both stylistic authority and artistic sensitivity in recreating music of the past.”

To this day, more than 25 years after the conferment of that honorary degree, Leonhardt still refers to me in communications as his “Doktor-Vater.” Whereas Ahlgrimm referred to herself as a biological phenomenon since she “got more children the older she became,” Leon-hardt’s humorous salutation presents me with a similar phenomenon, the “son” as father to the “father.” At any rate, I am pleased to have Dr. Leonhardt as my father to the “father.”
And our Polish mother, Wanda Landowska, that vibrant musician who has brought us together for this celebration of her musical legacy.

Some Information about Added Aural Examples

This paper was presented at the Berlin Musical Instrument Museum on November 14, 2009, during a symposium in conjunction with the exhibition Die Dame mit dem Cembalo [The Lady with the Harpsichord], in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Wanda Landowska’s death. The topic was suggested by the museum’s curator Martin Elste, who organized the event. To remain within an imposed time limit, I chose to include only seven short recorded examples, each one a performance of the same final 25 measures from the third (BWV 971) ending of J. S. Bach’s D minor Clavier Sonata, digitized on Pearl [Great Virtuosi of the Harpsichord, volume II, GEMM CD 9245]. Example Three: Ralph Kirkpatrick again, 20 years later, recorded in a thrillingly theatrical performance played on a powerhouse Neupert instrument for Archiv [198 032] (LP).

Example Four: Sylvia Marlowe, like Landowska, played on an instrument by Pleyel, recorded in 1959 for Decca [DL 710012] (LP).

Example Five: Leading Bach authority Isolde Ahlgrimm, recorded 1975, playing her 1972 David Rinho harpsichord, recorded by Philips [6580 142] (LP).


Example Seven: Andrew Appel played a 1966 harpsichord by Bukowsky and Robinette in his 1987 recording for Bridge Records [BCD 9005], concluding the musical examples in just under four minutes! Fortunately for the wordy, the next, and final, presentation of the two-day seminar was given by British record collector extraordinary Peter Adamson, comprising a fascinating sound and image survey of early harpsichord recordings.

Notes


5. Ralph Kirkpatrick, Early Years (New York: Peter Lang, 1982).


The OHS’s Harpsichord Editor since 1969, Larry Palmer is author of the pioneering book, Harpsichord in America: A Twentieth-Century Revival, published by Indiana University Press in 1989 (paperback second edition, 1995). Of six international advisors for the Berlin commemoration, two were Americans: Teri Noel Towe (New York) and Palmer (Dallas). Poster and postcard images for the exhibition featured an anonymous caricature belonging to Palmer, the gift of Momo Aldrich, first secretary to the icon—Landowska.