

Harpsichord & fortepiano

Vol. 18, No. 2 Spring, 2014

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCat)

LANDOWSKA AND THE PLEYEL: a Foot(pedalled) Note to the Harpsichord Revival

By Richard Troeger with Elaine Fuller

Having learned of the online publication of most of the Pleyel archives, we felt inclined to a largely irrelevant "research holiday," looking up the minutiae of the Pleyel production in relation to Landowska and the early music revival. A few details emerged that we thought might interest others. We wish to thank Eric Visscher, Director of the Musée de la Musique in the Cité de la Musique, Paris, and Brigitte Cruz-Barney, Assistant to the Director, for formal permission to quote from the online Pleyel archives.

All endnotes citing the Pleyel logs reference the website "Erard, Pleyel, & Gaveau Archive Collection," Musée de la Musique, Cité de la Musique, Paris).¹ Instead of pages in the company books, citations refer to the "Elements," the online units presenting log pages, for ready reference by the vast majority of readers. Thus, "Elem. 12 (1906-11)" would refer to Element 12 of the Sortie log for 1906-11; "Fabr. Elem. 23 (1910-17)" refers to Element 23 of the Fabrication log for 1910-17.

In the history of the early music revival, Wanda Landowska is of course one of the most significant names. It was she who played the most notable role in winning acceptance in the mainstream musical world for the harpsichord, and the principle of historically informed performance. She performed in important venues in many countries and played with major orchestras and conductors. Her instrument has been a barrier to her recognition by later generations although, the battle for classically based instruments won, greater appreciation of Landowska's accomplishments has emerged in recent years. Certainly, she provided a new face to the harpsichord revival. This article outlines her own access to her trademark instruments, aspects of their production by Pleyel, and a few considerations of the aesthetic behind the "Landowska model."

During her lifetime, as now, Landowska's name was synonymous with the Pleyel harpsichord: more specifically, the seven-pedalled Grand Modèle with 16' stop, introduced in 1912. Like a "Steinway pianist," she played the Pleyel harpsichord almost exclusively (barring some museum concerts early in her career)

and, at least during her years in France, Pleyel pianos.² Numerous instruments were placed at her disposal, and Pleyel often managed the transportation on concert tours. This much is well known; but the recent accessibility of the Pleyel sales and fabrication logs has revealed details which somewhat fill out the picture. The reader who is unfamiliar with Pleyel's approach to instrument serial numbers may want to take note of the next few paragraphs carefully, as this information is necessary for our discussion.

Pleyel's concert harpsichords, in addition to their other complexities, were endowed with not one or two identification numbers, but with three. Most usually cited is the Numéro de Sortie, which (as also for the pianos and in the same series) was assigned when an instrument left the factory. During the period in question, these are six-digit numbers with a caesura (à la Racine), e.g. 186 490. Next, and actually more informative, is the Fabrication number, assigned in the Fabrication Log at the time of the instrument's commencement. These numbers (again, used in one series for both pianos and harpsichords) consist of five digits sometimes

but not always represented with a capital F, as for example 38F381, which could also be notated as 38 381. The Sortie and Fabrication numbers are usually, but not invariably, stamped on the bass end of the wrestplank and underneath the instrument, as well as elsewhere. (The Fabrication numbers have sometimes mistakenly been thought to apply to the metal frames.) A third, consecutive numbering, used only for the Grand Modèle harpsichords, identifies them from No. 1 on. This triple system sounds orderly, even obsessively so, but, like the Clavecin Pleyel itself, it is unreliable. In perhaps four instances, the Grand Modèle numbers appear in the Sortie log, notated in the margin left of the serial number. Otherwise, they appear only on the instruments themselves, and by no means on all examples. Occasionally they are stamped along with the other numbers on the wrestplank and elsewhere. Thus, one of Landowska's favorite harpsichords is identified on the wrestplank as 192 665 / 51 / 80F463.³ On the other hand, another specimen omits the Sortie number and shows only 68F381 / 20.⁴

Nor does this instrument appear in the Sortie log, so far as we have found; and in this instance the Sortie number was not, as was usually done, added later in the Fabrication log. The Fabrication numbers reflect the actual date of construction, but the Sortie numbers seem sometimes to have been assigned well after the work was finished, perhaps even after the instrument had seen years of use. Thus, 174 900B / 54F970 was commenced in 1914 and apparently completed in 1923, but was sold only in 1930.⁵

This example further illustrates that it is not unusual to find Sortie numbers assigned that end in -50 or -00, which thus can be added at the bottom of the standard 50-entry log pages. Thus, 174 900 denotes a piano and is the last instrument of its log page; 174 900B was the number assigned to the harpsichord in question, added in the bottom margin. (These add-ons are often hastily scrawled in, contrasting with

the generally elegant regular entries.) This procedure occasionally occurs with the pianos as well, but the harpsichords seem to have had more complicated lives than their establishment relatives.

First Grands Modèles

Pleyel, of course, commenced making harpsichords in the late 1880s, but the first instruments with 16' did not appear until 1912. The first four or five examples of the new concert model were each made one-off, in 1912 and in 1913. The first (see Table 1) was commenced 1 April 1912. It officially left the factory June 11th, and seems to have been made concert-ready neck-and-neck with its mid-month debut at the Breslau Bach Festival (15-17 June 1912). The story is, that work (probably voicing) was being done even after it was set up on stage.⁶ Indeed, the Fabrication log shows entries for work performed on the first day of the Festival itself, and subsequently on June 29. One wonders how much preparation time Landowska had before her first public performance on her complicated new instrument, since it appears to have been rushed from the factory to Breslau. She may, of course, have taken delivery "on-site" with a couple of days to spare, practiced, pointed out shortcomings, and had them corrected at the last minute.

The history of the Pleyel 16' is clouded beyond its usual timbre by an unusual comment in the *Revue musicale S.I.M.* of November 1911. The anonymous critic gives a brief account of the "duel" between harpsichord and piano at the Eisenach Bach festival of September 1911. In the salon of the Hotel Fürstenhof, Landowska played Bach's Capriccio and the Chromatic Fantasy & Fugue on the harpsichord, these renditions followed by performances of the same works by Bruno Hinze-Reinhold and Friedrich von Bose on a Blüthner grand piano. (The two pianists were standing in for a suddenly indisposed Georg Schumann.) Critical response varied (and Joachin Nín and Landowska subsequently

Table 1: The First “Grands Modèles” Harpsichords

Number	Description	Commenced	Sortie	Log Source
No. 1 45F365 [157 050B?] * 161 447	“Clavecin Satinwood, Filets et Mouleurs acajou.”	1.4.1912	11.6.1912	Fabr. Elem. 123; no corresponding Sortie entry.
No. 2 47F945 161 447	“Queue Clavecin 3 pieds Satinwood, Mouleurs acajou.”***	11.11.1912	[no Sortie date] Sold 5.9.1913 to Julius Buths, Düsseldorf	Elem. 113 (1910-14); Fabr. Elem. 174 (1910-17).
No. 3 49F539 161 640 [Now in Illinois]	“Clavecin filets buis acajou moiré.”	26.5.1913	Sold 25.9.1913 to the Academie R[oyale de] Musique [Charlottenburg] Berlin.***	Elem. 115 (1910-14); Fabr. Elem. 206 (1910-17).
No. 4(?) 50F070 161 200Bis	9.8.1913 “Clavecin”.	15.7.1913	The entry is otherwise blank; the preceding sale date (for piano 161 200) is 30.9.1913	Elem. 110 (1910-14); Fabr. Elem. 217 (1910-17).
No. 4 or 5 50F499 162 320 [now in California]	24.11.13 “Clavecin acajou filets.”	3.9.1913	Sold 9.12.1913 to Mme. Lonby Bénois, Saint Pétersbourg.	Elem. 123 (1910-14); Fabr. Elem. 225 (1910-17).

* The late Bjarne Dahl had been given this Sortie number as that of the first Grand Modèle, but we have not found the number in either log

** The “3 pieds” notation is unique apropos of the Pleyel harpsichords. Either it is a mistake, or Dr. Buths requested three legs in the manner, perhaps, of the famous “Bach Harpsichord.” If Landowska acquired this as her second touring instrument, it would not be surprising for her to have required adoption of the usual five- or six-leg arrangement, which appears in the Curtis photograph. Similarly, 54F969, now with a cabriole stand, originally possessed the usual fluted legs mounted on blocks. (Conversation with Bjarne Dahl, 1995.)

*** (Information in brackets supplied from Fabr. log.)

exchanged fire about it in the pages of the *Revue*). The anonymous *Revue* critic attributes victory to Landowska, adding that she was well-armed with the harpsichord provided by Pleyel and its director Gustave Lyon: “For the cause of the harpsichord to triumph it was necessary to realize a harpsichord worthy of German construction [of Bach’s time]. The French manufacture has succeeded without a doubt. We cannot excessively congratulate our colleague, Mr. Gustave Lyon, who has expressly constructed [*construisit*] a harpsichord furnished

with a 32’ register [sic], an instrument of ample and profound sonority.”⁷

We have found no mention of the 16’ (or 32’) in the other accessible reviews (indeed, some German critics called the harpsichord’s tone monotonous); but the passage is puzzling since the first 16’ model, as mentioned, was not completed until over nine months later. According to the logs, Pleyel had made no harpsichords since 1909 (37F295-300) and these were 8’ models in two sizes (“grand” and “petit”).⁸ The next harpsichord on the stocks after them

was Grand Modèle No. 1. Unless the critic was confused after learning of the *forthcoming* instrument, it is possible that Pleyel prepared an existing instrument with an experimental 16' overspun strings replacing (probably) the lower-manual 8' (as had occurred on several antiques and is, in fact, a practice mentioned by Adlung).⁹ With stronger voicing to the remaining 8' (and with the nasale/lute still available as a softer stop), Landowska might have found such an arrangement more suitable for the odd circumstances of the "duel". Certainly in response to the Breslau performances, critical response of the time specified the great virtue of the harpsichord as being the clarity and "nuances" given to polyphonic textures, and the richness afforded to two-part textures, by the instrument's varied tone colours.¹⁰

Such a rigging as just suggested for an 8' model might have been an experiment that inspired Pleyel's later, quite short 16' scaling: for the 8' and 16' strings in a Pleyel grand share a common (bi-level) nut and the 16' bridge is rather close behind that of the 8'. (Indeed, a c1930 Pleyel brochure cites the so-called Heyer-collection Silbermann harpsichord [actually Gräbner, 1774, sometimes listed as 1744], and also the 1786 Joachim Swanen instrument, as bases for the Pleyel 16', not even mentioning Hass. The Gräbner had had its lower 8' replaced by a 16' course at some point in its history.) The Pleyel 16' employs covered strings throughout the compass, producing the characteristically dark, plummy timbre.

In defense of the critic regarding the low register: if the instrument included 16' strings and Landowska doubled octaves in the Chromatic Fantasy as she did in later performances, he indeed perceived an actual 32' effect.

The second grand modèle (161 447 / 47F945) was made not long after the first, thanks to the enthusiasm of Julius Buths. In a letter of 22 August 1912, Landowska's husband Henri

Lew (styled Lew-Landowski) writes to Gustave Lyon that Buths has been urgent in requesting that Lew and his wife arrange for him to have an instrument identical with the new 16'-model Pleyel, which he had heard and played at recent festivals.¹¹

Buths was an important musician, director of the Dusseldorf conservatory and himself a harpsichordist; he played second harpsichord in the Bach Double Concerto in C at Breslau, along with Landowska. As the logs show (cited in Table 1), his instrument was begun in November 1912 and ready 5 September of the following year.¹² It duplicated No. 1 in its satinwood veneer as well as its musical components.

A third exemplar was started a half-year later, for the Berlin Hochschule, where a chair in harpsichord teaching had been created for Landowska. I have myself seen No. 3 (discovered startlingly and unexpectedly among a group of early 19th-century pianos) and can give some details concerning it. The general look is slightly less massive than the later examples, and with one rather than two legs at the tail. As on earlier Pleyel harpsichords, there are two wooden knobs on the bentside to secure the lid for travel. Overhead dampers and the fine-tuners ("Chevilles d'Alibert") were already in use on pre-1912 Pleyels. I had expected all-wood framing, but the tri-level hitchplank appears to be made of brass. I cannot recall details of the wrestplank and my photographs are unclear on this point, but like its relative No. 162 320 (see below), it may possess a metal pinblock as well.¹³

The soundboard grain of No. 3 is canted parallel to the 4' bridge. (Later instruments sometimes canted it the other way, and many parallel to the spine.) There is no Landowska inscription on the jackrail, and the music desk is simpler in design than later.¹⁴

The feature I had been curious to see on No. 3 was the metal strip with knobs at top and bottom, located toward the bentside edge of the cheek and correspondingly on the spine. This

oddment appears in several photographs of the earlier Pleyel grands (for instance, Landowska playing at Versailles, 1921). (See Photo 1 at www.hfmagazine.info/uploads/images/PHOTO-1-Wanda-versailles.jpg). Surprisingly, it was not there. This metal entity, when present, is the outer manifestation of a tubular bracing system that runs, parallel to the registers, at upper and lower levels in the general area of the gap.¹⁵ If omitted or subsequently removed, the choice was a mistake, for No. 3 was badly warped. When restored, it required a heavy iron bar beneath and extensive repair of the multiply cracked soundboard. The tone of the restored instrument, rather clumsily voiced in Delrin, was shallower and duller than that of later examples; but perhaps I had not caught it at its best.

Grand Modèle 162 320 (cited already; see Table 1) is either the fourth or fifth 16' model, as will be discussed below. Although this instrument includes the tubular bracing system, it nonetheless developed a warp at some point. Like No. 3, it possesses a columnar pedal support and a single leg at the tail. As noted already, its pinblock is brass; the metal hitchplank is made in sections.¹⁶

When Landowska departed Germany to tour in Switzerland in 1919, she took her harpsichord with her but appears not to have made any claim upon No. 3. The aforementioned Harpsichord 162 320 had been sold shortly after completion, so perhaps Landowska used a single instrument for some little while. However, it is notable that two distinct instruments, both in satinwood and both without metal plate, appear in photographs of Landowska from the period 1921-25. (Only two harpsichords are known to have been made in satinwood before 1923, and the next one, 54F970, was made with a full metal plate, whose tripartite division of the wrestplank area is unmistakable in photographs.) The two early satinwood instruments can be seen in photographs (some unpublished) taken in her

Paris apartment. One such (See photo, this page) shows what is quite likely No. 1, given the lyre-shaped pedal support which also appears in the oft-reproduced silhouette from the World War I era.¹⁷ This harpsichord also appears in photos of Rainier Maria Rilke visiting Landowska in her Paris apartment; in one of these, the pedal lyre is again visible.¹⁸



Photo: Landowska in her Paris apartment.

The other early satinwood harpsichord appears in a photograph of Landowska and her class at the Curtis Institute, Philadelphia. (See Cover Photo.) Here she taught from 1925 to 1926 and gave presentations for the next few seasons. This instrument possesses columns for the pedal support (typical of most later examples) and the metal knobbed entity on the cheek, as well as lid retainer knobs as on No. 3. Details of the veneer grain show the Curtis harpsichord to be identical with the instrument played by Landowska in her apartment, in another photo c1922-3, and with the harpsichord played by de Falla in the oft-reproduced 1930 photograph of him recording

his Concerto.¹⁹ This is, very likely, Grand Modèle No. 2, reclaimed from the estate of Dr. Julius Buths, who died in May 1920. The instrument can of course be heard on the de Falla recording and, most likely, on Landowska's first electric recordings made at Camden, N.J. in the Spring of 1926, just after her year of teaching at Curtis. (Camden is five miles from Philadelphia.) The instrument has a peculiarly shallow tone on both the Landowska and de Falla recordings. Later Pleyels, whatever their faults, had a deeper resonance.

Given only two satinwood instruments, the harpsichord that appears in the 1921 Hall of Mirrors photograph is, likely, No. 1. It does not have the lid-retaining knobs of the Curtis picture, although it shows the knobbed metal strip toward the bentside. Like No. 3, this putative No. 1 has a single leg at the rear, evident also in the instrument (almost certainly No. 1) showing in a photograph c1917-19 of the Landowska/Lew Berlin apartment.²⁰

What may be one more grand modèle (chronologically it would be no. 4) appears in the logs, Harpsichord 162 200Bis / 50F07, commenced less than two months after No. 3 (see Table 1). Neither Sortie nor Fabrication log gives any particulars as to purchaser, price, or decoration, nor of size or disposition. This may have been an 8' model, or even a Grand Modèle, made for ordinary rental purposes. If it was another satinwood 16' model, it is conceivably this, rather than the Buths harpsichord, that appears in the Curtis photograph, etc. Since Landowska's name never appears in the logs except regarding her actual purchase of two instruments later in her life, the largely blank log entries may imply that she was provided with a second concert harpsichord shortly after receiving her first. In any case, she would require two, for the heavy, high-tension strings quickly work through the 305 hard leather plectra, and when one instrument was being reworked, the other would take over: hence,

the appearance of both in her Paris apartment at different times in different photographs. For Landowska's first American tour, Pleyel provided four harpsichords, placed in various urban centres. This arrangement avoided continual long-distance shifting of instruments, but would also have prevented any one instrument from becoming *hors de combat* with tired and broken leathers.

Hiatus and New Impetus

Landowska had been, of course, detained in Berlin throughout World War I, although she was free to research, teach, and even perform. However, between her absence from the international scene and wartime conditions generally, Pleyel's harpsichord making languished. A group of six 16' instruments was begun, or at least scheduled, in July 1914, numbered 54F969-74.²¹ These, however, seem scarcely to have made much progress until the early 1920s.

Whether these instruments were originally intended to possess full metal plates, or this rather major change in design was implemented only when actual construction commenced, it is impossible to tell; but it seems likely that all of the final products were thus furnished. Three of them certainly were made with the new approach, and it would be impossible to superimpose the metal plate, with its tripartite division of the stringband, jacks, pins, etc., upon a pre-existing instrument of the earlier design.

It is often said that the metal plate was introduced in anticipation of Landowska's first (1923) tour of the U.S., and if that tour gave stimulus to recommencing the 54F900 series, then perhaps the statement is true. However, the warping of at least two of the first few grands, if showing early, may have suggested the change by mid-1914. After all, as Pleyel avows in the c1930 brochure, the instrument carries tension of some 3,000 kg (at A435).

Of these six instruments, two were sold immediately.²² Another went in 1924 to an

Italian dealership.²³ It was shortly bought by Alice Ehlers and remained with her for over half a century. (It may be seen, along with her questionable playing technique, in the 1939 film "Wuthering Heights".) Two at least (sold much later, in 1928 and 1930) probably served Landowska on her tours.²⁴ One of them, 54F970 / 174 900 / 7, in satinwood, is the instrument that appears in the full-length plan-view photographs of a full-plate Pleyel harpsichord that are frequently reproduced in the literature (including the internet).²⁵

As mentioned, the first few concert harpsichords were each made one at a time, but some of the earlier, smaller instruments and nearly all harpsichords following the delayed 1914 group were made in batches of a half-dozen to 10 or more. Pleyel is often cited as making two harpsichords annually, but after a slow start, there was a burst of activity in the 1920s and early '30s, which then subsided. While only perhaps 10 concert harpsichords had been at large by the early '20s (and there was no sale recorded from approximately late 1924 to mid-1926), by the mid-30s some 60 to 65 grands modèles had been made and sold. (No. 60, 196 048 / 80F472 left the factory in 1937).²⁶ Table 2 shows fabrication groups as far as 1930.

From Table 2, it can be seen that some three-dozen large instruments were built in approximately five years. (In addition, a smaller model, the "Reduit" was commenced in the late '20s. For example, a group of 10 of these appears for 4.4.29, 76F383-392.²⁷ No further Fabrication logs have appeared online, but it is evident from fabrication numbers showing in the Sortie log (1930-54), that further groups were made soon after those listed in Table 2. The appearance of numbers 80F463-66, 80F471-72, and 81F946-948 and 81F951 suggests further groups of six to a dozen instruments.²⁸

A few of these were sold many years later, but Sortie listings for later sales generally show later Fabrication series numbers, such

as Harpsichord 85F603 (202 826), sold to the University of Kansas, December 26, 1951 for FF1,578,000.²⁹ It would seem from the dated sales in the Sortie log of the more usual Pleyel products bearing 85F numbers (for example, pianos 85F736 and 85F229, both sold 4.3.41³⁰) that the 85F harpsichords sold in the early 1950s were likely made as early as the late 1930s. As with the 54F series, interrupted by World War I, it is conceivable that these instruments, even if commenced in the 1930s, were completed only 10 or 12 years later. Harpsichord sales appear to have been slack during the war years, although a Grand Modèle went to a Dr. Kutz in Frankfurt am Main on April 12, 1941³¹ and a "Reduit" model (made 1929) was purchased December 17, 1942 by a buyer who signed himself simply "General der Luftwaffe, Paris".³²

Boom Economy in Harpsichords

Landowska is well known for acting as a sales agent for the Pleyel harpsichords, which she seems to have done from at least 1912 or 1919 until her last years.³³ Her Ecole de Musique Ancienne (St. Leu-la-Forêt) opened in 1927, and it is likely that this factor stimulated Pleyel's production. Certainly, the names of several of her well-known students appear in the Sortie logs. These include Aimée van der Wiele and Lucille and Clifford Curzon.³⁴ Other notable purchasers include M.S. Kastner and Marguerite Roesgen-Champion.³⁵ The latter also procured, in 1926, the famous 1889 harpsichord (Louis XV decor) that had been used by Louis Diemer, one of the first-built group of three.³⁶ Some few of the instruments do not turn up in the Sortie log, e.g. that bought by Putnam Aldrich (c1930). Many other customers were, doubtless, Landowska students of less renown, for instance, one Mme. Lucia de Garcia of Buenos Aires, who studied with Landowska ca. 1929-30 and brought a harpsichord to Buenos Aires.³⁷

Altogether, some two-dozen individuals, few of whom are known today, acquired grands

Table 2: Fabrication Groups of Pleyel Concert Harpsichords to 1930

Fabrication No.	Log date	Citation
54F969-74	15.7.1914 (completed 1922-23)	Fabr. Elem. 30 (1914-26)
68F377-88	[n.d.; 1925 or 1926]	Fabr. Elem. 14 (1914-26)
73F002-009. Entry date coordinates with 74F317, although many pages earlier.)	23.5.27	Fabr. Elem. 108 (1926-37)
74F317	(One instrument only.) 23.5.27	Fabr. Elem. 134 (1926-37) *
78F072-86	16.10.29 (5 Grands Modèles, 10 Reduits)	Fabr. Elem. 209 (1926-37)
79F253-62	13.3.30	Fabr. Elem. 233

* Although appearing many pages later in the log, the log date for this single instrument is the same as for the 73F002-009 group.

modèles. On the other hand, the names of certain of Landowska's better-known pupils do not seem to appear in the logs of the period: for instance, Gusta Goldschmidt and Ruggero Gerlin. The latter, being in long-term association with the St. Leu school, was perhaps spared having to buy an instrument. The concert model was also bought by at least three radio stations, two concert halls, five piano dealers (not including those for Manuel & Williamson), and five conservatories. Altogether, by 1942 and including a minimum for St. Leu usage, some 56 of a putative 60 to 65 grands modèles are accounted for. The company naturally retained some few for rental purposes. Harpsichord sales seem to have remained sporadic after the boom of the period 1926-40.

Certainly, the Pleyel was the deluxe harpsichord of the time; and as a specialty item of the firm, it was priced as such. Around 1930, the larger grand pianos without special decoration ranged in price from FF10,000 to an extreme of around FF20,000. For example, Piano No. 190 650, a Queue 3 model in "pal. nat." (natural rosewood), was sold in December 1930 for FF19,500. Three months later, in March 1931, a "Clavecin grand modèle" in mahogany with no unusual features, No. 190 659, was sold for the then-normal figure of FF30,000.³⁸ The price rose

across the years from FF7,000 or more in 1913 to FF20,000 in 1923 to a range of FF30,000 to 40,000 in the 1930s.³⁹ With the currency fluctuations of the early 1950s, the standard price seems to have wavered, always well above FF1,000,000.

World War II

Photographs suggest, as do the exigencies of running a small conservatory based on fragile leather plectra, that a fair number of Pleyel's products made their way to and from the St. Leu establishment. These included Landowska's personal harpsichords in home and concert hall and instruments for student practice. The Pleyel firm often provided instruments for tours both within Europe and further afield. In the course of using so many of the harpsichords produced, it seems that Landowska eventually settled on two harpsichords which she retained as her favourites, and it is here that the story takes on a better-known, and tragic, turn. Not long after Landowska fled St. Leu in June 1940, the invading Germans looted her establishment of her 10,000-volume musicological library, antique instruments, and her three personal Pleyel instruments (two harpsichords and a piano).⁴⁰ It is chilling to find entries for these instruments in the Sortie log, e.g. the following:

192 406 79 260 28.4.32 Clavecin Gd. modèle acajou

29 Oct. 40. *Einsatzstab Hotel Commodore Paris*
30,000. *Autentes Allemandes*.⁴¹

The Hotel Commodore was the initial Paris headquarters for the ERR (Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg), the Nazi agency in charge of looting valuable art objects from those of Jewish origin.⁴²

This instrument (also numbered 48) may have been destroyed, but the other stolen harpsichord (192 665 / 80 463 / 51) is famously known to have surfaced at an Allied officers' building in Bavaria. It was returned to Landowska in the later 1940s, after passing through the Pleyel firm for refurbishment.⁴³ In brief: Doda Conrad, the basso singer heard in the 1937 Boulanger/Monteverdi recordings, was a friend of Landowska's who assisted her relocation to New York in 1941. When he was appointed as an officer in charge of finding and reclaiming artworks stolen by the Nazi regime, Landowska requested that he keep a lookout for her instruments. Expecting better luck finding a needle in a large haystack, he nonetheless put out an alert, and was surprised when it bore results.⁴⁴ It was this harpsichord that was used for Landowska's last 10 years of recording, from WTC I, No. 9 on.

The other instance in which Landowska's name appears in the Pleyel logs is the following entry (Elem. 43 [1930-54]):

194 188 *Clavecin G Mod acaj pommelé* 7 Feb, 41
Wanda Landowska St. Leu-la-Forêt 30000 1200⁴⁵

In another well-known story, this is the instrument purchased for Landowska by her Swiss student Isabelle Nef and shipped to her teacher in the south of France. Landowska repaid Nef when she was able to do so. The harpsichord was apparently used for Landowska's last European concerts (given in Switzerland) and for concerts, recitals, and recordings throughout the 1940s and early 1950s. It came near being badly damaged during the voyage to America, when a large metal object in the ship's hold crashed down just beside it.⁴⁶

Landowska was concerned about having only the single instrument, in case anything should happen to it (and later refused to move her beloved No. 51 to New York for recitals or even recording). She could not countenance switching to instruments by John Challis, although the latter made an effort in that direction. During the 1940s, she borrowed No. 60 (196 048 / 80F472) from Arthur Shattuck, the American pianist, who had lived abroad for many years but had recently returned to New York. Reportedly, she requested that he make her a gift of it, but he was unwilling to do so.⁴⁷

Between 1977 and 2001, I made the occasional pilgrimage to the Landowska house in Lakeville and played (briefly) several times on No. 51. (The sound, soft and remote, strongly recalled the timbre of Landowska's Scarlatti recordings of 1939/40, rather than the later RCA recordings.) To my surprise, the action was considerably lighter than that on other Pleyels I had run across. (It had probably not been re-leathered since the 1950s, so the plectra were worn. Then too, it actually played, which is not always the case with these creations.) I did not feel it polite to ask to take anything apart, but I was told by Marie Zorn, who studied with Landowska in the mid-1950s, that lead weights had been removed from either the key levers or the jacks, or both. It would seem, in fact, that the Pleyel actions became lighter over the years. I have played on one of the 54F900 series, after it was restored by Bjarne Dahl; the action's weight, even without anything plucking, was amazingly heavy and, with stops engaged, vastly more cumbersome than even later Pleyels, let alone any historical actions.⁴⁸ What it had been like with simultaneous plucking (Pleyel's solution to the issue of staggering) is almost unimaginable, but I had occasion to supplement my imagination when I encountered one of Gavin Williamson's former Pleyels, kept in good condition with simultaneous plucking complete. What might be called wasted effort was considerable. It would

appear that Pleyel suspected that something was wrong, for actions I have encountered from the 1930s instruments are more reasonable (and they repeat very well), and those post-World War II actions lighter yet. (I have seen very few examples of these.) It is telling, however, that Landowska complained about the Pleyel piano provided at a 1938 recording session, remarking that its action was too heavy: in fact, heavier than that of a harpsichord.⁴⁹

The Fabrication logs made available thus far leave off in 1930 and the Sortie logs in 1954, so a total for Pleyel's output cannot be given here. A fair number of the later harpsichords were purchased from the U.S., including what appears to be the last, No. 210 242 / 21870. (A new Fabrication numbering developed at some point.) The keyboards are stamped GAVEAU and dated 1965. The instrument was sold in January 1975, to one Robert Bashlow (died 1975) for the sum (not including shipping) of FF32,500.⁵⁰

Concept

Many have pondered how artist and maker arrived at their eventual solution. One cannot expect a complete authenticist movement to spring fully-formed from Zeus' Victorian brow — let alone that of Gustave Lyon.

A general-purpose harpsichord was desired (as was still the case a half-century later, with French-style doubles appearing ubiquitously). The consistency of early schools of making was probably not fully recognized c1912: there are many references at the time to the immense diversity of surviving harpsichords. It is understandable that with the concert aesthetic of the time, a large instrument was considered necessary, as well as the colour resources lauded in 1912. Known Hass 16' models offered even more elaborate dispositions than the grand modèle; it is surprising that these instruments do not seem to have been seriously considered except by Landowska herself. One wonders how Pleyel would have interpreted the Hamburg approach.

A primary factor in establishing Landowska's aesthetic seems to have been her early contact (1900) with the three-manual Hass of 1740, recently the property of her student, the late Rafael Puyana. It is known that this instrument, which she never saw again after her first contact with it in 1900, became, in a way, her dream-harpsichord. (Indeed, when it turned up c1950, she wept when looking through a detailed set of photographs of it that was sent her.) Through the pedals and the hands-spanning-the-keyboards technique, she could emulate certain "orchestrations" that she perhaps conceived as possible on the 1740 instrument: sometimes restricting the 16' to reinforcing the bass; generally, making contrasts of registration. Of course her registration went beyond that, but in fact, it was not so multi-coloured as the often more arbitrary effects made by players of the next generation, such as Fernando Valenti, George Malcolm, and even Ralph Kirkpatrick. As is generally conceded, the notion of technological progress seems to have been embraced by makers as diverse as Pleyel and Dolmetsch — and in ironic contradiction to Landowska's own campaign against the notion of progress in the arts. One notes fatalistically that at least two letters by Henri Lew stoutly maintain that the newer construction techniques do not alter the historical accuracy of the instrument's tone.⁵¹ Certainly, later cases of "replicating the sound" have also been rather at fault, although as so often, it is a question of degree.

Even during Landowska's last years, the heavy impasto of the Pleyel was ceding to the more direct tone and subtler articulatory layering characteristic of the classical harpsichord. The pendulum nonetheless continues to swing, and over the last decade this curious harpsichord of essentially Victorian inspiration has again been heard in concerts and recordings. One wishes their current practitioners healthy plectra and good workout habits.

¹ (<http://archivesmusée.citedelamusique.fr/en/pleyel/archives.html>)

² In fact, she preferred the Steinway, as is clear from her comments during a 1938 recording session described by Diana Mathot, "Landowska in Aufnahmestudio," in Martin Elste, *Wanda Landowska: Die Dame mit dem Cembalo* (Mainz: Schott, 2010), 118-19.

³ Personal observation.

⁴ Personal observation.

⁵ Fabr. Elem. 30 (1914-26).

⁶ Conversation with Denise Restout, November 1983.

⁷ *Revue musicale S.I.M. [International Musical Society]* (November 1911): 80, in Elste, 63; Transl. Richard Troeger.

⁸ Fabr. Elem. 246, 1906-11.

⁹ Adlung, cited in Frank Hubbard, *Three Centuries of Harpsichord Making* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 265.

¹⁰ Cf. the review in *Die Musik* 11/21 (August 1912): 152-53.

¹¹ Quoted in Elste, 72. Lew adds that he and Wanda are not expecting a commission.

¹² Elem. 113 (1910-14); Fabr. Elem. 174 (1910-17).

¹³ Information on No. 162 320 / 50F499 supplied by Curtis Berak, Los Angeles.

¹⁴ The inscription, crediting Landowska with the inclusion of the 16' stop, seems to have been introduced only in the 1920s. Not all players welcomed it. Gavin Williamson and Philip Manuel, the Chicago duo-team, owners of four large Pleyels, had the inscriptions planed off and more varied texts substituted. Gavin Williamson told me that when Landowska borrowed one of their instruments for Chicago concerts c1943, her eye caught the change and although she said nothing, she performed a classic double-take.

¹⁵ Information courtesy of Curtis Berak and Bjarne Dahl.

¹⁶ Information courtesy Curtis Berak. How it and No. 3 came to find themselves in California is unknown, as seem to be the present whereabouts of No. 1 and 2.

¹⁷ Collection of Richard Troeger. The print was dated 1922 on the reverse side by Denise Restout or Elsa Schunicke. Silhouette by Otto Wiedemann, before 1918. Reproduced in Elste, 70.

¹⁸ Reproduced in Elste, 91 and 93.

¹⁹ Photo reproduced in booklet (p. 22-23) accompanying *Composers in Person*, EMI Classics, 2008, CD. EMI 7 54836 2.

²⁰ Elste, 83.

²¹ Fabr. log, Elem. 30 (1914-26).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Elem. 125 (1924-30).

²⁴ Fabr. Elem. 30 (1913-26), regarding sales dates.

²⁵ It appears for example in *Diapason* 70/8 (July 1979):17; Claude Mercier-Ythier, *Les Clavecins* (Paris: Expodif, 1996), 129; and on the internet at <http://www.pianosesther.be/pleyel.htm> (misdated 1938).

²⁶ Cf. Elem. 62 (1930-54).

²⁷ Fabr. Elem 175 (1926-37).

²⁸ Elems. 26-62, 69-78 (1930-54).

²⁹ Elem. 130 (1930-54).

³⁰ Elem. 78, (1930-54).

³¹ (Elem. 78, 1930-54).

³² (Elem. 86, 1930-54).

³³ Manuel & Williamson, who studied with Landowska before the St. Leu school opened, bought their instruments through piano dealerships. Gavin Williamson told me that Landowska was furious to learn that she had not been informed of their desire for a second pair of instruments (bought through Steinway (cf. Elem. 78, 1924-30)

and that their scheduled lesson was abandoned that day--whereupon they reclaimed the lesson fee left on the salver by the door.

³⁴ Elem. 18 (1930-54); Elem. 105 (1924-30).

³⁵ Elem. 15 (1930-54) and Elem. 55 and 73 (1924-30).

³⁶ Elem. 137 (1888-92).

³⁷ Elem. 119 (1914-24).

³⁸ Both instances appear in Elem. 8 (1930-54).

³⁹ Elem. 123 (1910-14), Fabr. Elem. 30 (1913-26), and Elem. 17 (1930-54).

⁴⁰ The story is told quite fully in Willem de Vries, *Sonderstab Musik*, (Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam: 1996), 217-29. The list of Landowska's stolen instruments appears on p. 219. It is grimly amusing to see that the ERR (Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg) agents, like everyone else, had difficulty deciphering the numerals stamped on the instruments: the Fabrication numbers for two of the instruments are misreadings. Although Landowska's personal goods were of course stolen outright, it seems that the Pleyel firm was reimbursed by the ERR for her on-loan Pleyel instruments. This point seems implicit in the log entries, and is touched on in de Vries, 229.

⁴¹ Elem. 26 (1930-54).

⁴² de Vries, 119.

⁴³ Elem. 28 (1930-54). As mentioned, Landowska's instruments when on loan did not show her name in the logs. The 1940 confiscation annotation was the first purchase indication; it was subsequently crossed out and a new entry added in red ink: "14.3.55 Wanda Landowska New York 285250 \$US805". Either the instrument was returned for further work in 1955, or payment for the c 1946 refurbishment (or the instrument itself?) was delayed until then.

⁴⁴ Elste, 144-45. In the documentary, "Landowska: Uncommon Visionary" (Attie/Goldwater Productions), Doda Conrad can be seen telling the story himself.

⁴⁵ Elem. 43 (1930-54).

⁴⁶ Conversation with Denise Restout, April 1994.

⁴⁷ Conversation with Denise Restout, 1979. Miss Restout expressed to me immense indignation over Mr. Shattuck's requesting the return of his instrument. It seems that he telephoned some years later to remark that he had recently wanted to play it and he asked if the key had been left behind. "We could have used it, all that time!" she exclaimed.

⁴⁸ This instrument (184 344 / 54 969; cf. Elem. 88 [1924-30]), its inner lid decorated with pseudo-roccoco pen-and-ink drawings by Bernard Naudin was intended for an Art Deco exhibition in Paris, 1925, but was rejected by the exhibition committee as insufficiently modern. (See Gaston Cherau, "On refuse le clavecin decoré par Bernard Naudin," *Art vivant* [15 Jan. 1925]:12-13.) It was sold in 1928 to a Mr. MacCormick, one of several husbands of the celebrity and would-be opera singer Ganna Walska (noted for once being pelted with vegetables when attempting to sing in tune in Havana). This unfortunate harpsichord was left in Paris throughout World War II apparently undisturbed, and shipped to Mrs. Walska's California residence in the early 1950s. Noticing some years later that it did not function, she looked into restoration but decided against paying for same. Purchased from her estate in 1986, it required complete re-construction. In addition to mould, all fabric parts had been consumed by insects. (Conversation with restorer Bjarne Dahl, 1995.)

⁴⁹ Mathot, in Elste, 120.

⁵⁰ Information supplied by Charles Gunn.

⁵¹ See Lew's comments in Jean-Claude Battault, "Landowska-Pleyel, la diffusion du Clavecin Pleyel dans le monde," p.3 (online p.36-37), in Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, *Wanda Landowska et la musique ancienne*, (Paris: Cité de la Musique/Musée de la Musique, 2011).



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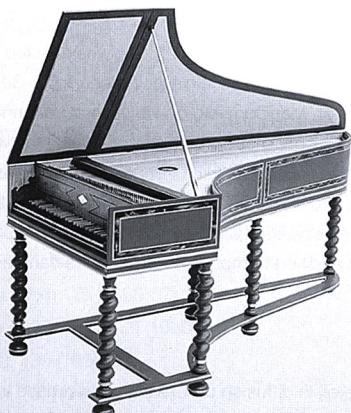
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