

# Harpsichord & fortepiano

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# LANDOWSKA AND THE CLAVICHORD

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By Richard Troeger

*This little commentary was originally intended as a postscript to my article in the last issue on Landowska and the Pleyel firm. I have expanded it slightly.*

Wanda Landowska's public stance favouring the harpsichord "versus" the clavichord is well known. It quite possibly stemmed from a perceived need to affirm the former against the dynamically responsive clavichord's "natural successor," the piano. (Argument on this basis of the "natural progression" from the one instrument to the other is still heard in conservative circles, usually presented by people who have never played a clavichord, or who only saw one once at a safe distance.) However, Landowska seems generally to have kept one or more clavichords in her instrumentarium. Two four-octave antique clavichords, at least one in playing condition, are known to have been in her collection at St. Leu-la-Foret.<sup>1</sup> The inventory prepared by the Nazis, who confiscated Landowska's possessions in 1940, mentions three clavichords, with no details given.<sup>2</sup>

It is possible that one of the three confiscated clavichords was made by Pleyel, for Landowska requested a clavichord from Gustave Lyon in a letter of May 14, 1908 (readers may view the letter in its original French at the end of this article. She announces that Guido Adler of the University of Vienna has invited her to play harpsichord and clavichord at a music festival celebrating Haydn. She is already quite familiar with an antique clavichord that would be available to her, and remarks that Bösendorfer has just built "an instrument under the name of: Clavichord imitation but I am not acquainted with this instrument. Needless to tell you, dear friend, that I would prefer to have a Pleyel clavichord." She continues that "the construction

of this instrument is much less complicated than that of a harpsichord" (a point which is nominally accurate) and closes, "What do you think, dear Friend?"<sup>3</sup>

The Pleyel company, to its directors' credit, was adventurous, manufacturing various unorthodox instruments, and it seems possible that they tried their collective hand at a clavichord. I have looked through relevant pages in the Pleyel archives between mid-1908 and mid-1909, but found no mention of a clavichord, so in Vienna in 1909, Landowska presumably played on the original instrument in the collection there. However, in an article from 1981, Ralph Kirkpatrick mentions seeing a Pleyel clavichord at St. Leu in 1931-32, and an instrument that partly appears in a photograph taken there, c1930, may well be the clavichord in question. The picture (slightly blurry, and never to my knowledge published) shows Landowska seated at a harpsichord in her concert hall. To the viewer's right, situated along the side wall, and cut off by the edge of the image, appears a rectangular instrument with a very shallow case. The case depth (front to back), bright white naturals, rectangular inset over the keys, highly reflective (French-polished?) inner lid, and the fluted, tapered legs all suggest Pleyel. Indeed, the legs are virtually identical in design to those on the Pleyel harpsichord in the same photograph. Although the instrument could also suggest a square piano, there are no knee levers apparent, and no pedals. Kirkpatrick mentions the heavy bass strings and considered the instrument completely useless. However,

his story of having only the Pleyel concoction to indicate, when a fellow student at St. Leu remarked that she had never seen a clavichord, seems questionable.<sup>4</sup> At least one of the antique clavichords seems to have been on frequent display in the St. Leu concert hall.

Soon after arriving in America in December, 1941, Landowska acquired a 1942 Challis clavichord, a particularly weak-toned instrument which I saw at the Lakeville house in 1977. But it would seem that Madame was willing to upgrade. My records on the Dolmetsch/Chickering clavichords include a note concerning No. 9 of the series (dated 1906), to the effect that Landowska suggested to its owner, Wallace Fowlie, that he should present it to her. (Fowlie, later a celebrated professor of literature, was the instrument's third owner.) The clavichord's present owner, Larry Palmer, could not confirm this story for me, and the source for the anecdote is, sadly, lost; but it is echoed precisely in the account given me by the owners of D/C No. 23 (1907/08), formerly the property of Dolmetsch pupil Arthur Whiting. Encountering this clavichord in the late 1940s, Landowska liked it very much and hinted broadly to the owner that "This instrument is precisely what I need." As one of the family members told me in 1997, "Nothing came of it."

Letter from Landowska to Gustave Lyon in 14  
May 14 1908

XIV mai 1908

*Cher ami,*

*J'ai reçu une lettre du professeur Guido Adler, directeur de l'Université de Vienne, qui vient de m'engager pour toute la durée du Congrès Musical de Vienne et pour les « Fêtes de Haydn » (moi de mai 1909). Il me demande de jouer du clavecin et du clavicorde. Ils ont un vieux clavicorde dans leur musée je le connais très bien et j'ai déjà joué dessus. Bösendorfer a construit cette année un instrument sous le nom de : Clavichord imitation mais je ne le connais pas. Inutile de vous dire,, cher ami, que je préférerais avoir un clavicorde Pleyel. La construction de cet instrument est beaucoup moins compliquée que celle d'un clavecin. Celui de Bricqueville comme modèle est trop petit.*

*Qu'en pensez-vous cher Ami ?*

*Mille amitié de nous deux*

*Votre Wanda Landowska*

<sup>1</sup> In his memoirs, pianist Arthur Shattuck mentions such a clavichord kept in Landowska's Paris apartment and casually "strummed" (to Landowska's disapproval) by visiting pianist Fanny Bloomfield Zeisler, during a crowded party. S.F. Shattuck, *The Memoirs of Arthur Shattuck* (Neenah, WI: privately printed, 1961), 107-08.

<sup>2</sup> Willem de Vries, *Sonderstab Musik* (Amsterdam University Press, 1996), 219. I should remark that at least one of the antique clavichords survived and made its way eventually to a collection in Montreal.

<sup>3</sup> Original (French) text given in Jean-Claude Battault, "Landowska-Pleyel, la diffusion du Clavecin Pleyel dans le monde," 3 (online p.35), in Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, *Wanda Landowska et la musique ancienne*, (Paris: Cité de la Musique/Musée de la Musique, 2011). Translation R.T.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ralph Kirkpatrick, "On Playing the Clavichord," *Early Music* 9/3 (July, 1981): 294.