

Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

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The Challenges of a Modern Recording on a Pleyel Harpsichord

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As part of a series of contemporary harpsichord recordings for the record label Naxos, I recorded several works on a Pleyel harpsichord. With a reputation for inauthenticity amongst the early music community, Pleyel harpsichords occupy a unique place in the history and modern development of the instrument, and are most famously associated with Wanda Landowska (1879-1959). Manufactured by the French piano firm Pleyel, these harpsichords were a long stretch from what would now be considered an authentic instrument. The Pleyel harpsichord was a hybrid – half harpsichord, half piano, and largely modelled on existing piano designs; in effect, a plucking piano. The Pleyel was a rather majestic looking instrument, and with a slew of pedals to operate the manuals, looked considerably different from that of the historic harpsichord (illus.1). It was designed as an attempt to improve on antique instruments, but the finished result proved to be unnecessarily complex and difficult to maintain. Landowska herself had suggested the addition of a 16' stop and played an important role in the design of the instrument.¹ Her recordings on the Pleyel catapulted the instrument to the ears of the masses, and there are few who can compare to Landowska in terms of helping bring awareness of the instrument to the public at large. The many interpretive liberties documented in her recorded performances ensure that she remains a controversial figure within the context of the early music movement. Landowska was a true champion of the Pleyel, and long after her passing it remains firmly associated with her. I have always been captivated by these recordings – not only for the fascinating sound of the seemingly enormous Pleyel, but also for Landowska's entirely personal conception of the music she chose to record, most notably by J. S. Bach. In this article, I will consider my experiences of recording on the instrument, and why I keenly wanted to include the Pleyel in my recordings. This, along with consideration of the legacy Landowska left the instrument, and a reflection of the unique role that the Pleyel had in the modern revival of the instrument.

As a student in Montreal, Quebec in the early 2000s, I became interested in contemporary harpsichord repertoire, and was interested in seeking out examples of modern harpsichords. I have always believed, that whilst the revival (or modern) harpsichord may not be right for Bach and early music, it has a valid place in music history,

and is often the authentic instrument to use for many examples of early contemporary harpsichord repertoire. This is because revival instruments were the dominant type of harpsichord available for decades and were often the original type of instrument that a composer may have envisioned their work for. In Montreal, I managed to locate a harpsichord with a 16' stop, in an instrument by Robert Goble that had been owned by a professor at McGill University, where I was studying at the time. The discovery of a revival harpsichord like this had taken me years to find. Montreal was a city with no shortage of harpsichords (or harpsichordists) but seemingly almost all revival instruments like this had long been abandoned. Finding a modern instrument was a fascinating moment and I recall exploring the pedals of the Goble and adjusting the different registrations and hearing the 16' stop in person for the first time. Whilst the sound of the 16' on the Goble, did not sound exactly like the Pleyel I knew from Landowska's recordings, it was similar, and it was obvious that the 16' stop formed part of the integral sound that had made Landowska's recordings so distinctive. Moreover, it was obvious at once that this type of instrument would be ideal for so much of the contemporary harpsichord repertoire that I was familiar with.

In 2013, my first recording for Naxos was a disc of modern harpsichord concertos written since the 1970s. Given the age of these works, a modern harpsichord was never considered. However, my next recording *20th Century Harpsichord Music* (2015) included pieces that were appropriate to use on a modern type of harpsichord. I was keen to use a Pleyel, as I was intrigued to hear what a modern audio producer could make the instrument sound like. My producer for the series, Norbert Kraft, worked to brilliantly ensure the sound of the instrument was heard at its very finest. For this series, I was fortunate to be able to use a restored 1930s instrument located in Belvedere, California that Landowska had supposedly played years before when the instrument was in Toronto, Ontario. The first disc included *Suite Française* (1935) by Francis Poulenc (1899-1963); *2 Impromptus* (1959), *Harpsichord Sonata* (1958) and *Deux Pièces pour clavecin* (1935) by Bohuslav Martinů (1890-1959); *Deux Pièces pour clavecin* (1977) by Jean Françaix (1912-1997); and the *Dix Inventions* (1924-1927) by the oft-forgotten member of *Les Six*, Louis Durey (1888-1979).



Illus.1 Pleyel Harpsichord (1930s) in Belvedere, California
(Photo: Drew Kelly Photography).

One of my initial concerns when putting together the first Pleyel album was that, whilst I had spent the previous ten years following my time in Montreal unearthing and photographing revival instruments across the US I did not have regular access to a revival instrument, least not regular access to the highly complicated Pleyel. Given the scarcity of these harpsichords, I had spent almost no time at a functioning Pleyel. Of the instruments I had been able to visit over the years, only a handful had been in playing condition. As such, I only had a few days to quickly become familiar with the instrument from a performance perspective. I discovered a steep learning curve to understanding this complex machine. It meant rapidly developing a range of new techniques to ensure the recording was a successful one. One of the best surviving instruments I had spent time with was Landowska's own instrument, which is now stored at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. The instrument is still used for performances and regularly maintained. One performer once commented to me of the immense difficulties they had experienced in trying to figure out the complicated instrument with only a few hours before a live concert at the Library of Congress.

Spending a few uninterrupted days at the Pleyel prior to the recording, what struck me most was the sheer diversity and choices of registrations that were available on the instrument. It was surprisingly challenging to find an appropriate balance that would be considered both tasteful to the music along with appropriately showcasing the capabilities of the instrument. Demonstrating a wide range of registrations has been something I have sought to achieve in all my subsequent Pleyel recordings, as I wanted to showcase the instrument as best I could. I freely admit I found the range of choices daunting. This

was further complicated by having to quickly learn how to efficiently use the seven registration pedals. Particularly on earlier Pleyel instruments like the one I was using, the narrow pedals on different instruments often have different functionalities and were further complicated by having certain pedals that operate when some are pushed in one direction, with others operating the opposite way ('reverse positive' pedals), e.g. some strings are engaged when the pedal is pushed down, and other sets of strings are engaged when the pedal is nudged up. I can understand why the petite Mme Landowska may have had fewer difficulties than many with the size of the pedals, but I was less successful, and adjusting the closely packed pedals together in a way that was both quick and avoided excess noise was tricky. Again, with more time to practice, I am sure I could have developed these skills further, but fundamentally whilst the design might have worked for Landowska, there was an obvious reason why Pleyel decided to update the design and streamline the pedals in later models. I do maintain that a very positive and useful modern innovation is the coupling function of the two keyboards via a foot pedal. It eliminates the need for a manual shove coupler and is highly useful in allowing a performer to swiftly and efficiently couple the manuals with your hands never needing to leave the keys.

The seemingly endless number of combinations of registrations that can be achieved on the Pleyel helps give the instrument real character, and as challenging as this can be, it does help make time spent at the instrument a real joy. I found it often surprising to discover what the instrument is capable of. Registration choices like those Landowska might have favoured can be heard particularly in the opening tracks of *20th Century Harpsichord Music* in the *Suite Française* by Poulenc. The neoclassical music pairs well to the sound of the Pleyel and by varying registrations, helps create an effective regal, almost orchestral sound. Poulenc's work originally featured a harpsichord part in the orchestral score, along with wind instruments and percussion which was later transcribed for piano. I found this work transferred well to the Pleyel, and Poulenc was very familiar with the Pleyel, having had a strong friendship with Landowska resulting in fruitful collaborations with her and the instrument. Looking through the Landowska archive in the Library of Congress some years ago, there were many personal correspondences between the two which help tell the story of their strong friendship. Poulenc had been keen to write for the Pleyel and Landowska had guided him carefully, after experiencing some difficulties with the Harpsichord Concerto that had been written for her a few years previously by Manuel de Falla.² Given this, I did feel that bringing this work to the Pleyel was appropriate.

I have introduced many friends and colleagues to Pleyel instruments over the years, and their reaction is almost universally the same – the first comment is invariably how quiet the instrument is. I would suggest that the Pleyel produces a volume that is quite comparable to that of a historic harpsichord, and the notion of an excessively loud instrument is a myth perpetuated by the heavily miked recordings of the mid-20th century. These recordings suggest the Pleyel to have an enormous, booming sound, which really is not the case. In fact, certain stops when isolated give a totally contrasting sound to anything ever heard on a recording by Landowska. For example, the 4' stop when played alone has a totally twee and remarkably pure tone, especially in the upper register of the instrument. Equally, the 16' stop alone produces a brooding, gentle and sonorously rich tone.

In her recordings, Landowska was relatively conservative in terms of her own registration choices, especially given the range of options available. This was likely down to practicalities, as arrangements of pedals can be quite complex to set, and many combinations would be challenging to engage midway through a piece, complicated by the narrow pedals. However, unlike the opportunities Landowska had, with the joys of a modern recording, much more flexibility can be allowed in pausing and adjusting stops during recording. I did, however, favour well established registrations, such as the unison between the 16' and the 4' stops – a choice which was well-utilised in recordings by Landowska. It produces a sound that is highly distinctive on the Pleyel. During my own travels in the US, I had the good fortune to cross paths with two of Landowska's former students, Irma Rogell (1918–2013) in Boston, and Hilda Jonas (1913–2014) in San Francisco. Both students were keen to discuss their time with Landowska with me and to show and discuss registration choices that Landowska had encouraged them to favour on the Pleyel.

One of the more frequent discussions that tends to arise is one relating to Landowska's technique, which is often accompanied by a photo of her playing. Comments are often made that describe her hands as 'claw like', or similar. Whilst it is true that Landowska did develop an unconventional method of playing the harpsichord, her technique was rooted in what worked well on the instrument she had. It is important to remember that she was not playing a harpsichord, she was playing a Pleyel harpsichord, which was no ordinary instrument. Even with just a single 4' stop engaged, I would suggest the ivory harpsichord keys are heavier than what you would find on a typical 8' stop of a historic harpsichord. When multiple stops are engaged, you need to apply a surprising and often quite significant level of force upon

the keys to ensure the large and heavy jacks rise enough to ensure that each plectra evenly strikes the string. This is especially true when the 16' set of strings are engaged, particularly when playing chords in the lower registers of the keyboard. The bass strings on the 16' stop are very thick – described in a 1979 article as 'massive'.³ During the restoration of this particular instrument (skilfully completed by Philip M. Cucchiara of Cleveland, Ohio), I watched painstaking updates and improvements being made to the instrument, such as lead weights, that had been packed and embedded into the sides of every note and jack, being carefully removed. When exploring the intricacies of the instrument, it appeared that weight was crammed into every nook. This, coupled with the heavy mahogany case and iron frame, resulted in a substantial weight to the instrument. In terms of approaching this heavy keyboard (illus.2), almost anything anyone has ever learnt about effective harpsichord playing must be radically adapted and reshaped when sitting in front of a Pleyel. Given the unusual level of resistance against the strings, I find it hard to even compare to a modern piano.

With the heavy weight to the keys, I found that the Pleyel is not always the most adaptable instrument, and there were works I found did not work as effectively as I might have thought. For example, I had planned to record *L'Insectarium* (1953) by Jean Françaix, as a bonus work for the recording, but found that with the heavy touch and slow response time of the keys, the humour of the work was lost and that the work was ineffective and sluggish on the Pleyel. Some years later, I performed the work on a modern Neupert 'Bach' harpsichord, an instrument with a vastly lighter touch and superior engineering, and the piece worked well. A 1960s recording by Marga Scheurich also utilises a Neupert to perform the work, and Scheurich exploits a wide range of charming registrations available on the Neupert to bring character to the work. However, there are always exceptions to the rule, and a work I would never have thought would have transferred well to the Pleyel is Michael Nyman's dazzling *Harpsichord Concerto* (1995). This was recorded live on a Pleyel by the exceptional Jory Vinikour, and illustrates that the instrument can be highly effective in contemporary music post-1950s. I would go as far to suggest the sound of the Pleyel produces a warmer tone to the amplified modern Neupert instrument, which the premiere recording of the piece was produced on.

Following the *20th Century Harpsichord Music* album, I recorded two subsequent discs, *British Music for Harpsichord* (2016) and *Vincent Persichetti – Harpsichord Sonatas* (2017), both for Naxos. The Pleyel harpsichord is again included several times on both albums for compositions where I consider the Pleyel to be an authentic choice. These include works from the 1930s and



Illus.2 Pleyel keyboard (Photo: Drew Kelly Photography).

1940s by John Jeffreys and Lennox Berkeley, and some of the earlier sonatas by Vincent Persichetti. I would suggest the Persichetti CD is probably the recording that offers the widest demonstration of the range and capabilities of the Pleyel. This was because, by this point on my third time recording with a Pleyel, I better understood the instrument and was more comfortable with trying to push boundaries. Harpsichord Sonatas One, Three, and Five by Persichetti are recorded on the Pleyel, and include some of the clearest illustrations on a modern album of the range of different sounds of the Pleyel. The use of varied registrations in the sonatas help to highlight some of the fascinating harmonic language and often whimsical melodies and idioms that Persichetti has embedded into his more serious formal and structural compositions. Persichetti's harpsichord writing matured greatly over the decades, and in his later sonatas written from the late 1980s and beyond, the Pleyel begins to feel more out of place. It becomes clear that Persichetti's style of composing for the harpsichord is increasingly becoming more refined as he starts to turn more to historical textural idioms, resulting in a historic harpsichord being more successful at conveying these later sonatas. For these works that require a much lighter and crisper texture, I turned to a magnificent Flemish double by Kevin Fryer. Whilst Persichetti for the most part gave only a handful of indications of what registrations he intended (more information is available in the later sonatas), a series of dynamic indications provides clues as to what registrations might

best suit the music. I feel that Persichetti would have appreciated the capabilities of the Pleyel – especially considering how effectively he coaxed complex, and often unexpected sonorities into so much of his band and orchestral music.

Since the 1970s, the Pleyel and revival harpsichords have long become unfashionable, and deemed inauthentic. However, they do represent an important stepping stone in the development and revival of early music. As inauthentic as they are for early music, they have an authentic and totally valid place within music history and there is often an entirely feasible reason as to why they should be included for performances of earlier contemporary harpsichord music. Simply put, this is because much of this earlier repertoire is far superior on the modern harpsichord when compared to a historic counterpart. Poulenc's masterpiece *Concert Champêtre* (1927-28), which is filled with Pleyel harpsichord-inspired nuances throughout, is probably the best example of a work that should be performed on a Pleyel. However, Landowska did face mounting criticism, especially during the latter years of career, for choosing to favour the Pleyel on her recordings of early music. She addressed these critics as follows:

At no point in the course of my work have I told myself, 'This is the way it must have sounded at the time'. Why? Because I am sure that what I am doing in regard to sonority, registration, etc., is very far from the historical truth. To the purists

who say to me, 'This was done in such a manner; you should conform, etc'.... At no time in the course of my work have I ever tried to reproduce exactly what the old masters did. Instead, I study, I scrutinize, I love, and I recreate.⁴

For an instrument so steeped in inauthenticity, I must comment I found the experience of recording on this old fashioned, yet oddly nostalgic Pleyel to be a highly enjoyable and exciting experience. Having heard the Pleyel in recordings for years, it was a rare opportunity to get to work with one, let alone record on one for Naxos Records. It may be inauthentic and outdated, but I loved the experience and would like to explore it more in the future. After spending time working closely with the Pleyel, it was easy to see why Landowska grew so protective of it. The Pleyel is a different, and unnecessarily complex machine, but oddly captivating to play, along with being one of the most interesting curiosities to have

blossomed out of the fledgling early music revival scene of the past century. Through Landowska, the Pleyel helped give the harpsichord a global presence, and in no small part inspired the revival of interest in early music. Whilst there is no question of the importance of ensuring authenticity in performances of early music, it is great to see a growth of interest in authentic performance practices of contemporary harpsichord music as well. In my mind, authentic performance practices are equally important, regardless if you are dealing with music that was composed in 1733, or for compositions from 1933.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Many of the later Pleyel harpsichords feature a written dedication to Wanda Landowska.
- ² See Chapter 8 of Carol A. Hess, *Manuel de Falla and Modernism in Spain, 1898-1936* (Chicago, 2002).
- ³ *The English Harpsichord Magazine*, ii/5 (1979).
- ⁴ Wanda Landowska and Denise Restout, *Landowska on Music* (New York, 1964), p.356.

Clavichord

Discography



A comprehensive listing of audio and visual recordings of the clavichord 1931-2020

Francis Knights

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