

Mamusia: Paul Wolfe Remembers Wanda Landowska

Craig Smith

A native of Hico, Texas, Paul Wolfe received a master's degree in piano from the University of Texas-Austin in 1950. He subsequently continued his studies with Webster Aitken at Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh, where he also was a faculty member. From 1955 to 1959, he studied harpsichord, first with Denise Restout and then Wanda Landowska in Lakeville, Connecticut.

During the late 1950s, Wolfe recorded a number of discs for the label Experience Anonyme. The repertoire included music by Frescobaldi, Handel, and English harpsichordists from the Tudor era to the Restoration. The recordings were reissued in 1998 on two double Lyricord CD sets, under the general title *When They Had Pedals*.

In 1960 Wolfe moved to Rome, from which base he enjoyed a distinguished career as a touring harpsichordist throughout Europe for 13 years. He continued to perform in the U.S. upon his return. He was later director of admissions for the Manhattan School of Music and director of the preparatory school at Mannes College, both in New York. Wolfe, 82, now lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Paul Wolfe will never forget the first compliment Wanda Landowska paid him, nor her first reprimand. It was June 12, 1955, and the 26-year-old Texan had just auditioned to become a pupil of the venerable Polish harpsichordist. The scene was the big, sprawling house in Lakeville, Connecticut, where Landowska dwelt during the final years of her life with her secretary, Denise Restout, and her longtime companion and housekeeper, Elsa Schunicke.

"Yes, my first lesson there was on my birthday," Wolfe recalled. "The lesson was really an audition: I played varied piano repertoire for Denise, who was Landowska's assistant, and willing slave, and pupil, and an excellent harpsichordist.

"As I was going out, Denise said, 'Wait.' I learned later she went through a back door to the room where Landowska was sitting. It was her study. That house—it had sliding doors like a lot of old houses, connecting the rooms. Denise slid open a door, and there was Landowska, holding her right hand up to her cheek, like *this*, sitting in a chair in the center of the doorway.

"She was recovering from her first heart attack then. She had a blanket over her all the way up to her nose. She extended her hand, just her little finger, and said, 'Oh, I'm so glad you've come to me. Now you begin with Denise and when I'm well, I will teach you.'

"Then she said something else. 'You are very musical, my dear.' And I said, 'Thank you.' She flashed back, 'You can't thank me. I had nothing to do with it. And don't thank yourself. Thank God!'

"I was with her four years after that. I paid \$50 a lesson whether it was (with) her or Denise. After a certain point, I didn't pay for lessons. She just gave them to me. She didn't charge me, and that's something. She did like money. My last lesson was a few weeks before she died."

Q: How did you come to study with Landowska?

A: I was teaching at what was then called Carnegie Tech in Pittsburgh. Webster Aitken (friend of artist Paul Cadmus, and a noted Schubert and Beethoven specialist) was my teacher there. One day he said to me, "When are you going to decide?" I said, "Decide what?" He said, "Whether you're going to play the harpsichord or the piano." We had never discussed it! So I said I didn't know. He said, "Well, you go think about it, and you come to my house a week from today for tea with a decision."

So I went to his house and we sat down and had tea. He asked me if I had



Wanda Landowska, 1923, at Pleyel factory

come to a decision. I said, "I would like to study harpsichord." He said, "Uh-huh, I thought you would. All right. You can go two places. You can go to Yale and study with Ralph Kirkpatrick or you can study with Landowska." He said he could arrange either one. I said, "Landowska." And he said, "I hoped you'd say that."

Q: Do you remember your first lesson with Landowska herself, not Denise Restout?

A: It took place with her sitting in her chair by the harpsichord. She always sat in the chair unless she was demonstrating, which she didn't like to do. She started me with the (Bach) *Two-Part Inventions*. After that first lesson she said, "Now you take my copy and copy the fingering." And there was a fingering for every note of every Invention. Ha! It was the damndest fingering. I was like that (clumping fingers together). It was

impossible for me because she had such tiny hands.

I did try to play them that way. She looked at me, at my hands, and said, "What are you doing?" I said, "Well, I'm trying to use your fingering." She said, "No. More than that. You're trying to imitate me. Look at my hand. Mine is little. Yours is big. It will never work. And if it *did* work, you wouldn't sound like me." God knows that was true.

One day in a lesson with Denise, I was playing something. She sent word down after the lesson—she called Elsa upstairs to where she had been sitting on the landing, where they had contrived a sort of sitting room—to tell me that I had used the wrong fingering in such and such a measure. And sure enough, she was right.

Q: How did you feel about that kind of tight control?



Paul Wolfe, sly smile

A: I didn't agree with that then. Her fingering, as I've said, just didn't work for me. Who it did work for, and the student I think sounded most like her, was Rafael Puyana. He was a real virtuoso. He was Colombian. He lives in France now. I heard him playing Giovanni Picchi and he sounded *exactly* like her. When I went, he was the only other student I know of she had.

But . . . people used to come see her all the time for coaching. She coached a lot of the German harpsichord ladies. (José Iturbi used to come a lot. Once Clifford Curzon came. She said to me, "Clifford came. He played a Mozart concerto for me. I taught it to him, you know. A long time ago." Then she stopped and smiled. "He still uses the same fingering.")

Q: She was in her late seventies then. Was her technique still solid?

A: She could put her hand on the keyboard cold and do the most amazing things, trills and scales and arpeggios. It was incredible. She just knew she had a God-given facility. Well, she *worked*, too.

Q: Did it ever fail her?

A: It slowed down toward the end. Toward the end, after she recorded that Mozart disc on the piano, she recorded the C-minor Partita and I don't remember what else. But the partita was . . . it was *old*. You could tell that she was failing.

CALIFORNIA LUTHERAN UNIVERSITY

ORVIL AND GLORIA FRANZEN 2012-2013 ORGAN PROGRAM SERIES

Friday, October 26, 2012, 7 p.m.
Shelly Moorman-Stahlman in concert.

Friday, February 8, 2013, 7 p.m.
Kyle Johnson in faculty recital.

Friday, March 8, 2013, 7 p.m.
Eric Kinsley and Kyle Johnson playing organ duets and works for two organs.



Shelly Moorman-Stahlman



Kyle Johnson



Kyle Johnson and Eric Kinsley

All events are free and the public is invited.

For more information contact CLU's Office of Campus Ministry at (805) 493-3228.



All events on the 1991 Steiner-Reck II-39 in Samuelson Chapel.

MAJORS IN ORGAN AND CHURCH MUSIC • WWW.CALLUTHERAN.EDU



1926 St. Leu: Boris de Schlaezer, Sacha Shiffrin, W. L., unknown, Georges Auric

Nobody knew *exactly* how old she was until after she died. That she guarded. Her birthday was the fifth of July. So was Elsa's. Every fifth she played for Elsa on the harpsichord, *Put another nickel in/In the nickelodeon. All I want is loving you/And music, music, music!*

Q: Her concert persona was famous. Maybe even a little made fun of.

A: I remember a concert, before I became her student. It was Halloween in 1950 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, where she played the (Bach) *Italian Concerto*. She wandered out onto the stage communing with Bach, staring up into the ceiling. She wandered toward the harpsichord. She sat down and her dress covered her feet and she didn't move, didn't move. She was setting up the pedals then, of course. Then with no hesitation she looked down and her left hand leaped on the bass like a hawk stooping, and her right hand followed. *BOOM, da dut da daa, daaa*. The audience was transfixed.

Q: What were her hands like?

A: Like this. They were claws. You can see that in the [few fragmentary] films made of her playing, at the house in Lakeville.

Q: Did she use technical exercises on the harpsichord, like the Brahms or Rachmaninoff or Czerny for the piano?

A: She didn't, really. She had finger exercises that you did away from the keyboard, which I found very hard. She finally stopped them. They cramped me. It made your fingers independent, if your fingers weren't completely independent by the time you got to her.

Q: What about manual and registration changes?

A: She *loved* to work on that. It was the inspiration of the moment. She said, "There are no rules for registration." She loved to use the 16-foot stop up an octave and crawl around between the two keyboards, and have the accompaniment going on the upper, and the melody with her thumbs on the lower.

Q: It sounds like she played a lot like an organist.

A: I guess she did. I never said that, though. If I had even thought it, she would have killed me.

Q: Was Landowska Romantic in her approach?

A: Not Romantic exactly; she wanted richness. But one day, I made a big kind of *ritard* nuance in the middle of something, and she stopped me. She said, "You learn to play in time first, then you can do that." She used *rallentando* in her own playing but never with students. I guess she thought we were bad enough without that kind of encouragement.



Lakeville house

Q: You said she gave you a little piece first off. What was it?

A: I don't think I ever played that piece in public. It was Couperin. I can't remember which one it was. It was not an important piece. It was very melodious and simple. But, it was hard!

Q: Hard, how?

A: Hard to make it work on the harpsichord, and she knew it. I played it over and over the whole time I studied with her. Not every lesson, but over the years for four years. When I left, I was still playing that piece.

About that time I began to record and the first thing I did was pieces from a collection called *The Mulliner Book*. She worked with me on those. We did a big set of variations by Thomas Tomkins. I loved it and so did she. Called "Fortune, My Foe." She knew all the repertoire cold.

She said to me in the middle of one lesson, "Oh, why must you always go off to record or play? Just come to study." She said that to me, the day I moved to Lakeville to work with her—because her health was so fragile, you had to be sort of on hand.

I remember I went for a last lesson before I recorded once. I was going into New York that day. I played for her and she said, "You're nervous." I said, "Yes, I am." She said, "I'm not, so you have no reason to be."

Q: Did you ever penetrate beyond the main rooms in the house?

A: I got up as far as the landing, where she had that kind of sitting room. It was a big landing. There was a little, little, room with a single bed, and a window, off the landing. That's where she slept. Once I came to a lesson and she was banged up. She laughed and said, "Oh, my dear, you know, my big nose is always going first." She had gotten up in the night and tripped on the rug by her bed, and fallen down, right on her nose.

Q: You quickly became close to her, you said. How was that?

A: After several months of study—I later realized I had proven myself—there was a little ceremony. I was hidden upstairs to the hall landing, that improvised sitting room, to see Landowska. Very clearly *alone*. I was somewhat alarmed. But she quickly put me at ease.

"Now, my dear, it is time for you to call me Mamusia," she said. "In Polish, that means Little Mother. It is very important that you call me that because it means



Landowska at Lakeville (undated)



Paul, early to mid 1960s, 'High above some lake in Switzerland. If we look wrinkled, remember we had driven two whole days.'

we are very close. No more Madame Landowska. From today, Mamusia."

She continued, "In my life I have loved two people: my brother Paul, and Elsa. Now you must live up to them." She then kissed her index finger and pressed it to my cheek. I can't remember anything about the rest of that day.

Q: It sounds like you were almost a son of the house.

A: After lessons we would go have *gateaux*, a snack, in the kitchen. Sandwiches and cake and stuff Elsa made, and tea. She loved tea and always had three cups. Two empty and one filled. She would pour hot tea in one cup, then pour some of that in an empty cup, then pour some into the other cup, and go back and forth. I have no idea why.

Whenever I left, there was always something waiting for me in the car. Elsa must have sneaked out of the kitchen and sneaked it to me. Something she had baked, or even programs from Landowska's earlier years concertizing.

Q: What about her personal appearance?

A: She liked red, I know that. She wore bright red lipstick. Her concert dress was dark red, made for her by Elsa. Elsa made all her things, including the robes she wore around the house. She usually wore her hair up and knotted as you see in the pictures, but sometimes it would start slipping off to one side or the other.

She was *very* flirtatious. She loved to flirt with men. *And* women. In those years, one wore ties. The very first time I went to a lesson I wore a tie. She loved to get round in front of me and play with the knot. She would look up and say in a winsome voice, "I always have to straighten men's ties, don't I, Elsa?" She was just five feet tall, if that.

Would you like the option of an all-digital version of THE DIAPASON? For information, contact Jerome Butera: 847/391-1045; jbutera@sgcmail.com

Reserve your ad in
THE DIAPASON
2013 Resource Directory.

Contact Jerome Butera:
847/391-1045
jbutera@sgcmail.com

Deadline: November 1

*A Precious Gift
from the Past
for the Present
and the Future*

Supremely beautiful and blendable tonal color – a Gift from the Venetian School of organbuilding, a monumental part of our great heritage. The result: a versatile and flexible palette to make possible your finest work.

Intriguing? Let us build your dream.

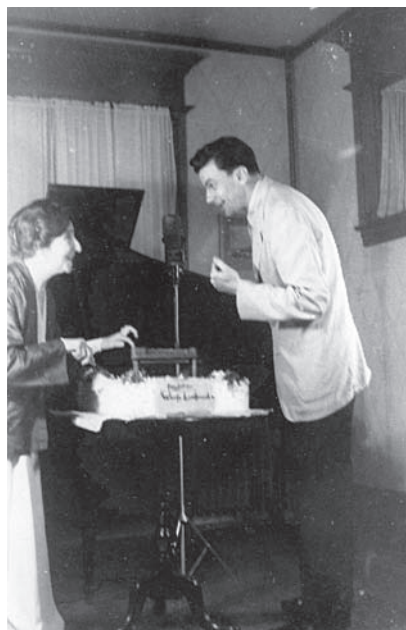
Fratelli Ruffatti

Builders of Fine Pipe Organs to the World
www.ruffatti.com

Via Facciolati, 166 • Padova, Italy 35127 • organs@ruffatti.com • In the U.S. 330-867-4370



Landowska at harpsichord, Elsa (left) and Denise



Landowska and her birthday cake July 5, 1954 with Ralph, her engineer



With very affectionate wishes, dear Paul, and for your friends Russell and Charles... and for Sam too! Denise

Note from Denise to Paul with photo of Landowska

Beverly Merrill owned the record company Experience Anonyme, for which I recorded. I said to Beverly once, "Why don't you come up and meet Landowska, and we'll have dinner, and then you can drive back to New York." She came. It was summer. We sat on the front porch. She and Landowska sat in the glider and Landowska could not keep her hands off Beverly.

Q: Landowska was married early on, and her husband died, according to Denise's memoirs of her.

A: Landowska was married to Henri Lew, pronounced Lev. They were both Poles. They were both in Berlin before the First World War broke out. Before that they had been in Paris. As foreigners, they were confined to Berlin for the whole of the war. She taught at the Hochschule. She always credited Lew with getting her interested in the harpsichord because she played so much Bach.

Somewhere in the midst of all that she decided Mr. Lew needed a mistress. They had married when she was young. And she found Elsa. She found her and chose her to be the mistress.

Q: How could she arrange that?

A: She could arrange *anything*! She was very beautiful, Elsa was. She also was engaged then and her fiancé shot her in the face, and they couldn't remove the bullet. One side of her face was paralyzed; you can see it in the photographs.

According to a tale of Putnam Aldrich, an early student, after the end of the war, Lew went to the train station and bought two tickets for Paris for Elsa and himself. On the way back home he was hit by a truck and died. So Elsa and Landowska took the tickets and went to Paris! They were already lovers.

Q: When did Denise come into the picture?

A: She was a student. She grew up in St. Leu, where Landowska lived and taught for so long, from after the First World War. And at some point she started studying. She was taught to tune, which was *very* important to Landowska,

and she did all those secretarial things. She was very smart and well-educated. When the Nazis invaded and Landowska knew she had to leave France, there was a big decision, who would go with her to America, Denise or Elsa. They decided Denise would be more useful to Landowska, so Denise went. I think Elsa spent the war in Andorra.

They landed in New York on Pearl Harbor Day and were on Ellis Island. Waiting and waiting. Every now and then someone would call out, "Wanda Lou! Wanda Lou!" She and Denise just huddled in a corner and wondered who in the hell Wanda Lou was. Finally it got figured out.

Q: When did you start your own concert career?

A: She died in 1959 and my recordings were well known by then. I made my harpsichord debut concert in Town Hall in 1960 and that's when I went to Italy, because of that good review. The manager of the Spoleto Festival invited me to play—there wasn't one in Charleston (SC) then. That was the third year of the festival.

A manager from Milan heard me play and contacted me at the end of the festival. He said, "Are you going back to America?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Do you have any concerts?" I said, "No." And he said, "Stay. I will arrange them." I toured for 13 years. I was based in Rome most of the time. I would put the harpsichord in the station wagon and off we'd go. It stuck out of the back. You can see that in the photos from the time.

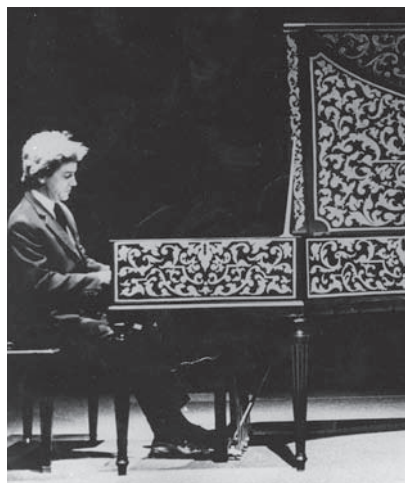
Q: Where did you tour?

A: The Netherlands, Switzerland, all over Italy. I began in Sicily. No, I never played in Germany. London? Yes, I did. Andrew Porter got me with some manager, who was OK. Andrew said, "For God's sake, don't play in Wigmore [Hall]. Go to this manager and let him get you somewhere different." I ended up playing in St. George's, Hanover Square, Handel's church. It had wonderful acoustics. Then I played in Oxford.

Q: What about this instrument sitting here?

A: This was made for me in 1968. Another earlier one I took to Spoleto, and I sold it to a man named Jerome Hill. Those instruments, and this one, were made for me by a company called Rutkowski and Robinette—Frank Rutkowski and Robert Robinette. Their first shop was in Connecticut. They went to New Haven to restore the instruments in the Yale collection. They were invited at the insistence of Ralph Kirkpatrick. Then they moved their shop to New York and finally to Hoboken. They only made harpsichords. They did begin to do historical models and copied a lot of Kirkman harpsichords.

Q: What other unusual things do you remember from your years with Landowska?



Paul's final concert, Frick Collection, NY

A: Well, when Glenn Gould did the *Goldberg* [Variations] in 1955 I was studying with her and Columbia sent her the records. I said, "Mamusia, what did you think?" She said, "He's a monkey!" "Well, what did you say to Columbia?" "I wrote them a very nice, brief letter and said 'Thank you very much for the discs'. Of course, she recorded for RCA.

Also, she used to talk to me about Ralph Kirkpatrick. She would say, "Why does he hate me so?" I told her, "I'll tell you in one word. Talent."

Q: Do you remember when Landowska died?

A: Yes. I had taken my last lesson a few months before. I was staying with friends in the South for the summer. I was at breakfast when (harpsichordist) Albert (Fuller) came in and said, "Wolfie, Landowska has died." I called the house and got through. Denise said, "My dear, don't think of coming all that way." But I said, "I must." Albert said, "I'll go with you."

We drove and drove and drove. Hours and hours. Finally we got to Lakeville and parked. Denise came out and said, "Who is that with you in the car?" I said, "It is a friend of mine, Albert Fuller, who

PALAIS DES BEAUX-ARTS
BRUXELLES
« SALLE DE LA ROTONDE »
« Leo Concerto de L'Atelier » a. s. b. l.
JEUDI 21 NOVEMBRE 1968 à 20 h. 30
RECITAL
DE CLAVECIN
PAUL
WOLFE
PROGRAMME :
J. S. BACH
CONCERTO ITALIEN
SUITE ANGLAISE EN LA MINEUR
PARTITA EN RE MAJEUR
PAUL WOLFE, gradué à l'Université du Texas, fut un des derniers brillants élèves de la célèbre claveciniste WANDA LANDOWSKA. Il a donné en Amérique, de nombreux récitals et a joué sous la direction des Maîtres NEWELL JENKINS et LEOPOLD STOKOWSKI. En Europe, il a débüté au Festival de Spoleto (Italie) et a donné par la suite de nombreux récitals en Suisse, Italie, Hollande et à l'ATELIER de Bruxelles.
La Presse de Florence dit : « Maître complet de son instrument et par la technique et par son interprétation. Il laissa à son auditoire un souvenir magique. »
PAUL WOLFE voyage avec son clavecin, construit par Frank Rutkowski (N. Y.).
PRIX DES PLACES : 155, 125, 85 francs (taxe comprise) 50 % de réduction aux membres de l'Atelier, Etudiants et Artistes.
Réservation : L'ATELIER, 51, rue du Commerce, Bruxelles. Tél. 11.20.65. C.C.P. 639.91 CENTRE D'INFORMATION, place de Brouckère. Tél. 18.05.29 PALAIS DES BEAUX-ARTS, rue Ravenstein. Tél. 12.50.45

Paul Wolfe, Brussels program, 1968

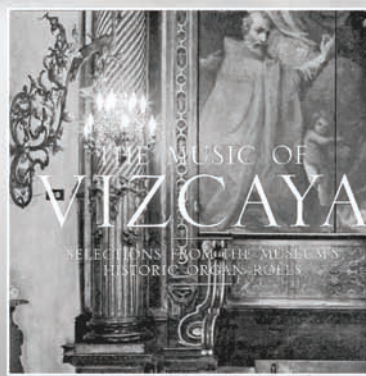
drove all this way with me. He is a harpsichordist and a pupil of Ralph Kirkpatrick's. Would you mind if he came in?" She said no, so we went in.

Landowska was lying in the living room on a bier. She was all in white, in one of the gowns Elsa made. There were a few flowers around, but not many. And Denise and Elsa were the only people there, plus Albert and me. And we stayed a bit, and then we left. ■

Craig Smith, treasurer and publicist of the *Albuquerque American Guild of Organists chapter*, is a writer and editor specializing in music and arts issues and personalities. He was music critic and staff writer for The Santa Fe New Mexican for 20 years before taking up freelance writing. He holds an MM degree in voice performance from the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

THE OHS CATALOG

SHEET MUSIC ♦ BOOKS ♦ RECORDINGS



THE MUSIC OF VIZCAYA

Enjoy this new CD featuring the organ of Vizcaya Museum and Gardens. Designed by M. Welte and Sons of New York, the organ may be operated manually or by an automatic electro-pneumatic roll player above the keyboard. This unique recording showcases the rolls of organists Gigout, Bossi, Eddy, and Lemare.

Available at the OHS for \$19.98.

IN STOCK FOR IMMEDIATE SHIPMENT!
NOW CHOOSE FROM OVER 5,000 TITLES!
ORDER ANY TIME ONLINE: www.ohscatalog.org



ORGAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY
P.O. Box 26811 Richmond, VA 23261
Telephone: (804) 353-9226
Monday-Friday 9:30am-5:00pm ET
E-mail: catalog@organsociety.org

SHIPPING

UPS shipping to U.S. addresses, which we recommend, is \$8.50 for your entire order. Media Mail shipping is \$4.50 for your entire order. Shipping outside U.S. is \$4.50, plus the cost of air postage, charged to your VISA or MasterCard.