



Wanda Landowska at the harpsichord in 1907.

## Landowska, Wanda (1879-1959)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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Wanda Landowska, a member of Natalie Clifford Barney's famed lesbian salon, was almost single-handedly responsible for the revival of the harpsichord as a performance instrument in the twentieth century. In her enthusiastic research to uncover the forgotten music and performance styles of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, she paved the way for today's interest in authentic performances of early music on original instruments.

Landowska, born July 5, 1879 in Warsaw, Poland, was a musical prodigy who began playing the piano at the age of four, and from a very young age was trained at the Warsaw Conservatory. At fifteen, she went to Berlin to study composition, and, although she was a rather rebellious student, began to win prizes in major competitions for her songs and piano works.

While in Berlin, she met Polish folklorist Henry Lew, who encouraged her research and performance of early music, and assisted her in writing her book, *Musique ancienne* (1909). In 1900, she married Lew and moved with him to Paris, where she was able to gain a greater audience.

While the relationship was a mostly supportive one, Landowska wished to be relieved of the sexual aspects of marriage. Accordingly, she arranged a ménage à trois, by hiring a maid who would also function as Lew's mistress. The situation was apparently satisfactory for all involved, and, even after Lew died in 1919, the maid remained in the musician's service until the latter's death.

Landowska's fame grew quickly, and in 1903 she gave her first public performance on the harpsichord, an instrument that, by the nineteenth century, was considered "feeble" in its dynamics and rendered obsolete by the piano. Landowska ferociously championed its use through her performances and writings; she commissioned the construction of new harpsichords; and, in 1913, she returned to Berlin to establish a class devoted to the instrument at the Hochschule für Musik.

In 1920, Landowska settled in Paris, where she became a frequent guest in Barney's circle, often providing musical accompaniment for the various artistic functions of the renowned lesbian salon.

While she toured extensively and recorded during the 1920s, she also began another phase of her career by establishing the École de Musique Ancienne near Paris, which attracted students from many nations. She was recognized as one of the great music teachers of her time, and was rumored to have engaged in a rivalry with Nadia Boulanger, the other great female musical pedagogue, for the romantic affections of a number of young women in their tutelage.

In the 1930s, Landowska met Denise Restout, who became, in turn, her student, her life companion, and the preserver of her artistic legacy.

Landowska's fame and success continued to grow through the 1930s, but, with the Nazi invasion of France in 1940, she lost her school, her property, her extensive library, and all her instruments. She and Restout

escaped to southern France and then to Lisbon and finally arrived in New York as refugees.

Although Landowska had virtually nothing left to her but her talent, she nonetheless re-established herself in the United States as a performer and teacher. Through the 1940s, she toured extensively and made her landmark recording of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, a work she restored to performance on the instrument for which it had been composed.

She continued to work tirelessly until her death on August 16, 1959, at her home in Lakeville, Connecticut. After her death, Restout devotedly edited and translated her writings on music.

Landowska was decorated by the governments of Poland and France, and she was widely respected by her fellow musicians. She thoroughly transformed the performance and reception of early music in the modern period, and, through her pioneering efforts, the harpsichord is frequently heard in many diverse musical genres today.

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### **About the Author**

**Patricia Juliana Smith** is Associate Professor of English at Hofstra University. With Corinne Blackmer, she has edited a collection of essays, *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera*. She is also author of *Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women's Fiction* and editor of *The Queer Sixties* and *The Gay and Lesbian Book of Quotations*. She serves on the editorial advisory board of [www.glbtc.com](http://www.glbtc.com).