

## HARPSICHORD IN THE SOUND PICTURE OF THE XX CENTURY MUSIC, EXEMPLIFIED BY F. POULENC'S *CONCERT CHAMPÊTRE*

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### Summary

At the beginning of the XX century harpsichord went through a major revival. The builders', performers', and composers' approach to reconstruction of this instrument and its sound characteristics have created a whole new system of artistic allusions. That system was unexpected in the context of the instrument's history, yet logical, considering the aesthetic of the time. Original harpsichord pieces of the early–20<sup>th</sup>-century composers commonly embody mechanical or automatic movements, imitate life of a big industrial city, show evil underworld forces and at the same time allude to baroque aesthetics, the interest to which triggered the revival of the instrument. Paradoxically, the harpsichord in the beginning of XX century is seen as something new and fresh, something able to replace piano, which had already passed its high point. Yet, the harpsichord revival started thanks to the new generation's interest to the music of XVII–XVIII century. Poulenc's harpsichord concerto, known also as *Concert champêtre*, written for Wanda Landowska and her unique Pleyel harpsichord, is treated here as one of the brightest examples of the multiplicity of meanings of the harpsichord sound in early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Key words:** France, Music, Baroque, XX century music.

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### 1. Introduction

If the Baroque era witnessed the flourishing of harpsichord all over Europe, the subsequent Romantic period saw the instrument's fall into oblivion. The early music revival of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century approached the reconstruction of this instrument in a way that by today's standards would be considered experimental. To the ears of composers who grew up to the sound of fortepiano of Chopin and Liszt the newly revived harpsichord sounded less nostalgic and more mechanical and un-Romantic. This could be the reason why the imagery of early 20<sup>th</sup> century harpsichord music pays tribute to mechanical, automatic movements, attempts to depict the life of a big industrial city and show some evil underworld forces, and also some archaic of exotic sounds, following Paris International Exhibits' insights. The harpsichord in the beginning of XX century is seen as something new and fresh, something able to replace piano, which had already passed its high point. At the same time we know that harpsichord revival started thanks to the new generation's interest to the music of XVII–XVIII century, and therefore the music of the time expectedly gestured toward the bygone epoch. Stylistic demand and historical feel caused the intention to listen to the music of the past in its original and pure form. Poulenc's harpsichord concerto, known also as *Concert champêtre*, written for Wanda Landowska and her unique Pleyel harpsichord, is treated here as one of the brightest examples of the multiplicity of meanings of the harpsichord sound in early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## 2. Harpsichord in the 1st half of the XX century

The paradox of the harpsichord sound's semantics of that time consists of expected perception of the harpsichord as the purely baroque instrument with predictably nostalgic, neobaroque, neorococo, neoclassical connotations, but in the same time its new interpretation gave it the new image. Ralf Kirkpatrick in his article "The challenge of harpsichord" emphasizes these new paths in the interpretation of the harpsichord sound. Curious, that this problem is considered the "modern music problem" (*Kirkpatrick, 1946*).

After the period of bloom in XVI–XVIII centuries the harpsichord was superseded by another keyboard instrument – the piano. The start of revival of early music can be dated 1830-s: then Belgian musicologist and composer François-Joseph Fétis (1784–1871) organized in Paris historical concerts, and soon the idea, that early music should be performed on the appropriate instruments, was considered important. Already in 1880-s Paris Companies “Erard” and “Pleyel” had begun to produce the first “modern” harpsichords, the next year French pianist Louis Diemer successfully presented them in the “Historical concerts” at the World exhibition in Paris, so the active phase of the “harpsichord revival” had started. “The old French piano making companies of Pleyel and Erard exhibited three harpsichords, loosely based on a surviving Pascal Taskin harpsichord, at the Paris exhibition of 1889. So began the harpsichord's rebirth after almost one hundred years of neglect. Serendipitously, there was an increasing public interest in the performance of ‘music of the past’, so it was surely a timely renaissance” (*McAllister, 2018*). French Pleyel piano company, founded in 1807 and closed in 2014, constructed its first two-manual ‘Concert Grand Harpsichord’ with a significant sound variety, provided by set of pedals; in 1889 the instrument was presented at the World Fair and received great review. July 15th 1892 “L'Écho musical” describes it like: "matchless elegance, a marvel of refinement worthy of the famous firm whose name it bears [...] combining the delicacy and variety of timbre of instrument building of old with the precision and reliability of the modern"<sup>1</sup>.

The new bloom of the harpsichord replied an idea of the taste changing in the beginning of the century, reflected in the new music as well as in the early music performance. Sound, long absent in the classical music tradition, came back from the depth of centuries. The music of line, rhythmically precise and well-articulated, followed to the post-romantics dynamic's palette. Composers began to treat piano as a medium of a new music colours, so as the harpsichord, which began to seem less archaic. The harpsichord, primarily revived as a proper instrument for the early music, in the same time kept the freshness and power, suitable for the modern music, and quite a few composers have written for it in the beginning of XX century – there are about 40 composers' names, some of them – well-known. Often this music appeared for certain performers, without idea of being published. Some of it is piano music, which also can be played on harpsichord, and some of it can be called “true” harpsichord music, written with a deep consideration. “Among those works written directly for the harpsichord there are varying degrees of success, according to the composer's familiarity with the instrument, but mostly according to the nature of his musical style. ... Many modern composers use the specific color of the harpsichord in combination with other instruments. Among the best known and most successful ensemble pieces are Falla's Harpsichord Concerto” (*Kirkpatrick, 1946: 273–276*). Harpsichord works of that time, written by Falla, Poulenc and their contemporaries, show great stylistic variety, from archaistic to contemporary, from earlier, preclassicist styles to experiments.

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<sup>1</sup> “Pleyel harpsichord”, Musical Instruments Museum, accessed July 15, 2019. URL: [//www.mim.be/pleyel-harpsichord?from\\_i\\_m=1](http://www.mim.be/pleyel-harpsichord?from_i_m=1)

The harpsichord pieces – or pieces equally good for piano and harpsichord – appeared thanks to Bohuslav Martinu, Jules Massenet, Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Ottorino Respighi, Richard Strauss, Karl Orff, Ernst Krenek, Louis Durey. Some of the best are not perfectly suitable for harpsichord, but linear music and counterpoint, clear rhythm and jazz sound good on the harpsichord. Evidently, piano sound effects can not work on the harpsichord – like, for example, too widely spaced chords or jumps. Harpsichord texture supposes other effects, which were not evident for composers of XX century: close spacing of voices for the thickness, two or three widely spaced voices for thinness; harmonic intensity can be emphasized by the speed and direction of arpeggios.

“Skillful composers and continuo players in the eighteenth century managed the progression of their parts to indicate the fluctuations of musical expressivity. By thickening and thinning textures, by tying and repeating notes, by adding and subtracting voices, by doublings and innuendos, they managed to express the preparation and resolution of dissonances and to reinforce the fundamental harmonies. By the same devices they were able to provide accents, rests, intensifications and relaxations of the rhythmic phrase. – mentions Kirkpatrick. – The inflection of a melody was controlled not only by its own inherent structure but greatly aided by the conduct of simultaneous or accompanying parts. The vocabulary of broken chords known to the XVIIIth century accompanist of recitatives was endless, and it is regrettable that Falla seems to have realized this only partially. Fast motion, either in broken chords or stepwise, produces the greatest volume and brilliancy of sound. Slow motion especially requires skillful syncopations and interlocking parts, incorporation in the actual texture of the natural accents and shadings, to achieve the psychological tension which is substituted for sustained sound“ (*Kirkpatrick, 1946: 273–276*). The imaginary “sharpness” of the harpsichord sound can be balanced with other effects; the possibilities of two keyboards also give the option of simultaneous contrast in color. This all looks like technique needed to be rediscovered in the XX century – we know that at least thanks to evidences of the collaboration between musicians-performers and composers.

The intermission of innovations and tradition, “modern” and “ancient” was very important interaction in XX-th century culture. Thus, the early music revival in that time and the transformation of harpsichord from historical into the modern instrument had influenced on the XX-th century composers' work – says Kirkpatrick. One of the aspects of this intermission in that time is the use of the instruments, once forgotten and firstly revived for the performing of the music of the certain periods.

We mentioned earlier some composers writing for harpsichord; we can continue with a name of an outstanding Italian composer and pianist Busoni, who got acquainted with harpsichord during his visit to the Early music “prophet” – Arnold Dolmetsch, and used the sound of the instrument in the opera “Choice of the bride” (1912). C. Debussy in 1915 planned, but did not realize, the concept of the Sonata for oboe, french horn and harpsichord, presumably, inspired not just by admiration of Couperin and Rameau, but also by his work on editing of Bach's sonatas for harpsichord and violin. Among the melodies with the harpsichord accompaniment the most remarkable is the song by Moris Ravel with Lyrics of the French Renaissance poet Clement Maro “About Anna, playing harpsichord“. Ravel probably saw harpsichord at the salon of the couple Polignac: the spouses liked baroque and had a XVIII century instrument. The Rameau's “Dardanus” was produced in their house. Harpsichord was probably involved in some other concerts in this location like the 1922s premiere of De Falla's “El retablo de maese Pedro” in the Polignac's salon. The piece was ordered by princess Polignac who inspired and financially supported composers in such a manner. Compositions were devoted to her and

performed in her salon for select company – so usually they were chamber by their nature. Falla was inspired by Spanish artists of XV–XVI centuries and ancient Castilian folklore, including Catalonian villancico and Christmas songs. The composer also includes harpsichord and lute into the score. There is an evidence, that in case of absence of harpsichord composer and his colleagues turned piano to the “harpsichord”, putting some newspapers paper to the strings.

### 3. Wanda Landowska and The Pleyel Harpsichord

The earliest attempts of harpsichord revival showed inability to get rid of piano sound atmosphere, to avoid habitual/familiar aesthetics. Early XX century experiments with the instrument’s construction showed deep attachment to the piano, which reflected in construction elements of newly built harpsichords. One of such physical embodiments of the idea of the dual perception of harpsichord and his connections with piano sound atmosphere, so common for the XIX century, was The Pleyel harpsichord. Made upon request of Wanda Landowska, the most significant harpsichordist of the 1st half of the XX century, it launched the harpsichord revival in her hands. Polish by origin, in 1900 with a well-established reputation as concert pianist Wanda Landowska moved to Paris and soon devoted herself to the harpsichord promotion, though the instrument then considered hardly worth serious consideration. Her idea was to obtain a reliable and bright instrument for her recitals. Thus Landowska asked the help of Pleyel, and together with their chief designer she sought out and studied as many harpsichords as she could find, becoming a true ambassador of the company. On her request Pleyel from 1912 added the 16' register to the instrument. “The total tension of strings dictates the use of a cast-iron frame ... In yet another departure from classical practice – and presumably at Landowska's express wish – Pleyel designed the two keyboards to be only about 1/2" apart, possible to play both manuals at the same time with one hand, a feature often exploited by Landowska” (*Richard, 1979*). Despite the study of seventeenth and eighteenth-century harpsichords preserved in museums, in particular, made by Ruckers, Couchet, Blanchet and Taskin, the Pleyel instrument is not an exact copy of historic instruments. The outer design looks like piano case. There are the classic 3 sets of strings, 2 x 8' and 1 x 4', also a nasal register and lute register, but they are controlled by pedals, absent in earlier samples. This instrument was supposed to be more resistant the climatic circumstances and frequent transportation.

Thanks to Landowska exceptional fame and her pioneering the rediscovery of early music brought her and Pleyel Grand harpsichord to Auguste Rodin's studio in 1908. This instrument is fully restored now and was even involved into the lecture demonstration by famous modern harpsichordist Skip Sempe.

Despite Landowska’s remarkable influence on Historically Informed Performance (HIP), the HIP representatives nowadays often consider Landowska’s own interpretations of early music bygone and inauthentic. Frank Hubbard says: “Undue emphasis was laid on the ability of the harpsichord to vary its tone color. . . . These instruments produced an enormous variety of sounds, all bad. However, Pleyel was blessed by the genius of a young Polish pianist named Wanda Landowska, who in a transcendent exercise of pure imagination found a way of using even the Pleyel to make viable music” (*Hubbard, 1984: 8*). As critical was also Sir Thomas Beecham, describing the sound of the Pleyel Harpsichord as “the sound of two skeletons copulating on a tin roof in a thunderstorm” (*Duchen, 2001*). The second half of the XXth century brought new standard of the factory instrument – wooden-case models with softer sound.

#### 4. Wanda Landowska and Poulenc's "Concert champêtre"

Many composers of that time addressed their opuses to Wanda Landowska. Those compositions are mainly stylization of the XVIII century music. But the pieces, written under Landowska's guidance, are considered the first really outstanding modern pieces for harpsichord. The most bright among them belong to Manuel de Falla and Francis Poulenc. Landowska, visiting Spain for the concert tour, took part in de Falla's work on the "El Retablo" and helped him to feel the harpsichord specifics. Later Falla created for her the Concert for harpsichord, flute, oboe, clarinet, violin and violoncello. In the author's foreword, addressed to the performers, the composer emphasizes the role of the harpsichord, which should "sound as bright it is possible".

In the end of 1925 Landowska wrote: "For the first time harpsichord lives new, modern life in the Falla's piece. Why? Because Falla is the 1st, who made an attempt and was able to understand harpsichord fundamentally, ... he worked with me for long, comprehending the nature and advantages of this instrument and investigating thousands possibilities < ... >, instead of trying to reproduce ancient effects or manners. De Falla is the first, who, studying harpsichord, opened in it fresh and unused sources of the modern inspiration" (*Palmer, 1993: 3–14*). Later Falla created a Harpsichord concerto; in the Paris premiere in Pleyel's hall Falla played solo part himself, twice – on the piano and on the harpsichord. Poulenc heard it and was so much impressed that in 1927–28 in response to a personal ask of Landowska and with her advise had written his Concert champêtre FP 49. Poulenc mentions, that they were concentrated on keyboard writing and choice of instruments. He told in 1929: "keyboard writing and choice of orchestra instruments were the main purpose of our the most extensive research. ... we achieved the score, the external simplicity of which will possibly surprise you, but effect of which remains, however, rich and diverse" (*Palmer, 1979: 10–11*). Landowska used to say she "adored" playing it as it made her "insouciant and gay!" After a private performance in which Landowska played the solo part and Poulenc played the orchestral parts on the piano, the piece's public premiere was in 1929 at the Salle Pleyel in Paris.

It was the first serious orchestral work of Poulenc in the concerto form. This piece, like many others in that period, was written for the Pleyel contemporary harpsichord and also existed in a version for piano, quite similar to the original one. Modern harpsichord, much more loud and powerful, than the XVII–XVIII ones, balanced soloist and orchestra by the sound's scale. The piece gives connotation to Baroque music, with harpsichord as one of its symbols, both in terms of its melodic and harmonic language and in its structure. It has three movements: Allegro molto – Adagio – Allegro molto; Andante: Mouvement de Sicilienne; Finale: Presto très gai. Mouvement de Sicilienne in the 2<sup>nd</sup> movement and clear allusion with Gigue in the beginning of the Finale (quickly transforming into the very classical texture) are emphasizing this idea. "In fact, the orchestra is a large one with full brass and percussion sections and it is only Poulenc's skillful scoring which preserves the textural balance. The result of all this is a fiery three-movement work which sandwiches turns of Baroque-like ornamentation in between twentieth century riffs to marvelous effect. The work is in fact a delightful study in contrasts. Passages in major and minor modes alternate and the delicate texture of the harpsichord splashes across great, slashing brass chords and amid the thunder of percussion. Even the setting and inspiration for the piece are somewhat contradictory: A self proclaimed city dweller, Poulenc's idea of a rustic setting included mostly the outskirts and

near environs of Paris, situated near Landowska's forest retreat<sup>2</sup>". About his concerto Poulenc said, that for citizen like he is the most attractive countryside is in the suburb of Paris, where the "XVIII-th century house dreams between the fields feeding Paris". That was said having in mind also Hermenonville, where Landowska lived in 1923, and also the meaning of the word Rustic according Rousseau and Diderot.

In the time when 30-years-old composer was creating his masterpiece, the understanding of the harpsichord was varying between stylisation and interpretation this timbre as industrially noisy, representing the big city. In the interviews of that time Poulenc explains: "I wanted to use harpsichord the way in the same time modern and French, but not being stylisation. I wanted to prove that harpsichord is not a decrepit and poor instrument, which is of mainly historical interest, but on the contrary, it was and is accomplished and rich. It has his own specific character, its own possibilities, its timbres, which an other instrument can't replace" (*Palmer, 1979: 10–11*). Articulation here is written down according to the baroque principles, which is quite specific as soon as in real baroque is supposed but not often written literally.

"Concert champêtre" was one of the Landowska's favourite compositions, and she propagated it actively, constantly played in different countries. Concert was warmly met by the contemporaries and entered to repertoire of many harpsichordists and pianists; but, according to words of Poulenc himself, "each performance of the harpsichord piece on piano is inevitable distortion because the harpsichord is as far from piano, as piano from an organ" (*Poulenc, 1954*). Poulenc writes for harpsichord also the French suite after XVI century composer C. Gervaise (1935) and uses the sound of instrument in the cartoon "Sleeping beauty" by A. Alexieeff, where it reflects mystic forces (1936).

## 5. Further path of harpsichord music in the XX century

The pieces of Falla and Poulenc marked the transformation of the instrument from an old to modern. Instead, numerous compositions, created in the same years, were mainly stylizations. There is an information about the intention of Igor Stravinski to write the Concert for harpsichord. In 1930s the number of harpsichord compositions grows. Pleyel's Company, harpsichords manufacturer, even ordered compositions from some composers, granting for that studio with instrument. Boguslaw Martinu in 1935 created for harpsichord Two pieces and the neobaroque Concert. An ensemble, accompanying Harpsichord in this piece, involves piano, which creates an interesting juxtaposition to harpsichord, echoing this trick from C.P.E.Bach concerts. Often composers see in harpsichord an alternative to piano – as B.Bartok, for example, mentions in the foreword to his piano series "Microcosmos" (1926–1937).

In 1940s harpsichord music was also written by Milhaud, Henri Sogé, Jacques Iber and others; some composers (Stravinsky, Hindemith, Britten) put the harpsichord to the opera scores. Starting from the 1940s, harpsichord music appears mainly taking into consideration certain harpsichord players or following their order, among them Sylvia Marlow in the USA and Antoinette Wisner, later – Elisabeth Chojnatska in Europe. The list of names itself (Berio, Cage, Kagel, Ligeti, Xenakis, Gubaidullina, Denisov, Shnittke) shows transmission of harpsichord from its "neoclassic" role into avangard instrument. There are also such a special examples as P.Breiner's Concerto grosso after Beatles' songs.

<sup>2</sup> Morrison, Michael, «Francis Poulenc Concert champêtre, for harpsichord & orchestra, FP49», accessed 17.07.2019. URL: [s://www.allmusic.com/composition/concert-champêtre-for-harpsichord-orchestra-fp-49-mc0002356889](https://www.allmusic.com/composition/concert-champêtre-for-harpsichord-orchestra-fp-49-mc0002356889)

Harpsichord attracted composers with its timbre specifications and registration possibilities, use of terrace-like dynamic, quickly changing of registers thanks to the pedal system, use of fixed timbre for the totally serial music. Sometimes, among other tuning experiments, the upper keyboard of the double-manual harpsichord, tuned with the quarter tone difference, served to creation quarter-tonal music (*Klaas de Vries, "Murder in the dark", five quartertone pieces for harpsichord, 1985*). Various tuning of two keyboards created other variants of pitch changing in the music of Pierre Bartolome, Hans Cender and others.

## 6. Conclusions

The general description of the harpsichord music in XX century would be very difficult task, considering its variability, but it's still possible to outline the most significant path of its evolution. The most common allusion to the harpsichord sound, its "ancientness", was widely popular, and the earliest harpsichord compositions of the XX century were connected with attempts to revive the atmosphere of the "old times", looking so poetical on the dramatic edge between centuries. Further in 1920–30 the clear, linear, graphical harpsichord sound portrayed anti romantic, neoclassical tendencies. The next expansion of stylistic domain made harpsichord sound in the music of the creators of the avangard as well as jazz, cinema-music and even folklore. For example, in 1924 Wanda Landovskaya recorded "Auvergne bourre" in her own arrangement on the harpsichord.

The Early music and early instruments revival, including harpsichord, found its place in the numerous domains of composers' creativity in XX century despite its specifics, challenging for the composer. The process of the transformation of the historical harpsichord into the modern instrument shows its the huge communicative potential. The most special thing about this concerto-its versatility of characters, the very typical for the French culture phenomenon since Montegne's Essays. That means, that all ideas or thoughts, appearing in the piece, are brought together with the clearly visible and very charming personality of the author. Poulenc said: my music is my portrait. So, with the great ease Poulenc combines Gregorian chant, hints on gigue or siciliane with polka, military signals, rustic woodwind ensembles, recitatives, Mozart-like texture, which are producing colorful, bright, full of life portrait of Francis Poulenc.

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