

HELP US TO SAVE WANDA LANDOWSKA'S CONCERT HALL AND GARDENS AT SAINT LEU LA FORÊT



Wanda Landowska's Concert Hall and Gardens (1927) constitute a "Sleeping Beauty" of rare importance to the history of performance, musical training and performance practice. Located in the village of Saint Leu la Foret, just beside Paris and bordering the "Foret de Montmorency".

A combination of good fate and great vigilance on the part of the current owners have managed to save the property, much of which has survived almost intact.

A legendary creation of great charm, Landowska's Concert Hall and Gardens communicate and celebrate the richness and relevance of the past - an elegant testimony to the imagination and determination of a major figure in the history of twentieth century musical creation. Thanks to the demonstrable impact of the timely rescue of worldwide cultural monuments, we have grown accustomed to the notion that modest projects merit the same historic preservation opportunities as grand ones.



Wanda Landowska designed, commissioned and baptized the *Temple de la Musique Ancienne* in an in-depth collaboration with the well-known French architect Jean-Charles Moreux (1889-1956). He was trained as an architect and landscape designer, and Landowska admired his rigorous but poetic classicism.

Landowska was nonetheless extraordinarily precise in all her ideas, from the position of the building within the surrounding gardens to the acoustic design and volume of the interior of the Concert Hall, the audience capacity for the concerts, teaching, public masterclasses and lectures and the final details regarding the construction materials.

As a miracle, the Concert Hall has retained its natural lighting from above, resulting from the architecturally unique glass roof and suspended glass ceiling, one among many of Landowska's original and essential concepts.

This design, incorporating radiant natural light, allowed an alternative to the traditional dark, forbidding concert venues designed for the nineteenth century symphonic repertoire from the traditional Parthenon of well-known composers.

Landowska's Concert Hall at Saint Leu la Foret is perhaps the only building of its type dedicated to concert performances and pedagogical activities to have been so meticulously designed by a musician of international renown. In addition to the hosting and promotion of one of France's first summer festivals, Landowska's activities at the *Temple de la Musique Ancienne* quickly transformed it into the worldwide learning center of the early music movement. The movement was effectively founded by Landowska at Saint Leu la Foret, and this movement is regarded as one of the most influential forces on musical interpretation and performance practice of our time.

Landowska indeed had a stroke of genius in selecting a location only twenty kilometers from Paris, which radiated such charm and purpose that musicians, writers, sculptors and music students from many countries – as many as fourteen at one time - would converge on Saint Leu la Foret to enjoy her Sunday afternoon concerts, public masterclasses and lectures. In keeping with a spirit of humanism which was intended to be savoured and enjoyed, her programming of events reflected the mission, demands and refined tastes of a master musician and master planner: research and performance of new or forgotten repertoire, a summer festival, an academy for early music, a musical instrument collection and an ideal venue for writing and recording.

In 1925, Landowska acquired the land on which the Concert Hall and Gardens were constructed. She immediately set forth plans for the creation of the *Ecole Wanda Landowska*, which, within just a few seasons, earned the reputation as the single most important and inspiring center for early music in the world. Her teaching had begun in the neighbouring house which she had acquired earlier, but the demand for a larger public masterclass and concert venue quickly became apparent.

On 3 July 1927, the Concert Hall was inaugurated before a full house, whose enthusiasm proved legendary. Landowska performed on the harpsichord and the piano, and her friend Alfred Cortot performed on the piano as well. Each and every French music critic was present to report on the success of the hall, the charm of the gardens and the exceptional playing of works by Bach, Couperin, Rameau, Chambonnières, Mozart and Pasquini.



The dedication of the *Temple de la Musique Ancienne* was a triumph, and attracted worldwide attention. Journalists commented on the near perfect acoustic of the hall and the charm of the gardens filled with the song of birds which so effectively complemented the ornamentation of the harpsichord... The circumstance created the ideal, relaxed atmosphere of which Landowska had long dreamed - the performer's opportunity to deliver and share an optimally memorable experience for the listener. Landowska perhaps described it best: "There is a deep feeling of peace and cheerfulness: one is far away from the world, yet in intimate surroundings".



Costume ball – Wanda Landowska surrounded by her students on the portico steps of the Temple de la Musique Ancienne.

Every year, from May until the end of July, programs of overwhelming originality attracted audiences of both connoisseurs and professionals of music world. The first seasons featured easily accessible repertoire, then, with time and initiation from Landowska, following seasons ventured into rare and unknown works of major caliber, including the historic first harpsichord performance of Bach's Goldberg Variations on 17 May 1933. Landowska dared to abandon outmoded programming traditions in favor of entire programs dedicated to the Sonatas of Scarlatti, the Suites of Rameau, the Suites of Couperin or the Suites of Handel.

The public masterclasses and lectures, which were open to harpsichordists and pianists, as well as other instrumentalists - violinists, flutists, oboists, cellists - and singers, provided training in which Landowska shared the secrets of her research, observations and discoveries. Landowska frequently demonstrated at the harpsichord or the piano, and students and auditors alike went away from the masterclasses with both renewed inspiration and the dream of returning.

Among her original plans was to complement the concert offerings at the *Temple de la Musique Ancienne* with the foundation of an instrumental ensemble for early music performance.





*Ruggero Gerlin, Wanda Landowska and Amparo Iturbi performing on the concert platform of the auditorium.
The 1737 cabinet organ from Landowska's collection is visible in the background.*

The popularity of Landowska's events at Saint Leu la Foret attracted countless friends and followers: the composers Georges Auric, Henri Sauguet, Arthur Honegger, Jacques Ibert, Francis Poulenc; the pianist Vladimir Horowitz; the literary world with Georges Duhamel, Paul Valery, Jacques de Lacretelle, Edith Wharton, Adrienne Monnier; painters and sculptors including Aristide Maillol, Antoine Bourdelle, Jacques-Emile Blanche. The film maker Jean Gremillon was also a frequent visitor. And, of course, Landowska's students of her *Temple de la Musique Ancienne*: Ralph Kirkpatrick, Putnam Aldrich, Ruggero Gerlin, Aimée van de Wiele, Isabelle Nef, Gusta Goldschmidt, Lucille Curzon and Denise Restout.

In 1935/36, Landowska made a series of recordings in the Concert Hall which included several major harpsichord works of Bach. These groundbreaking interpretations, nurtured and created in the almost dreamlike atmosphere of the property at Saint Leu la Foret, virtually immortalized her life there. They are considered to be among the most remarkable recordings of the twentieth century.

Landowska's international celebrity, her valuable property in Saint Leu la Foret and her Polish-Jewish ancestry had attracted the attention of the Nazis in 1939. Though Landowska was a French citizen, *Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur*, the threat was real, and she was urged by friends and admirers to leave Saint Leu la Foret, abandoning her house, concert hall, gardens, the prized collection of antique and modern keyboard instruments and the priceless library. A woman of pure courage and willpower, and convinced that the events were only temporary, Landowska left Saint Leu la Foret with two suitcases on the 10th of June 1940. She will never see it again.

Recent archival research concerning the Nazi confiscations in France during World War II demonstrates that the September 1940 pillage of Landowska's Saint



Leu la Foret estate - over fifty crates, the contents of many having never been retrieved - represented the first and the most important cultural theft in France which victimized both a Jewish musician of worldwide influence and a distinguished resident of France. A surviving Nazi document from January 1941 refers to the contents of Landowska's Concert Hall and house at Saint Leu la Foret as "*abandoned Jewish property*", thereby denying the government-protected return of her belongings under the category of "French cultural property".

The preservation of Landowska's Concert Hall and Gardens will offer both a living memory to a remarkable series of past events, prolonged by the preservation of an unforgettable venue for a future continuation of its original imaginative purpose.

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