

Harpsichord Playing in America “after” Landowska

Larry Palmer

The Power of the Press: “A Living Legend”

Nicholas Slonimsky (1894–1995), writing about harpsichordist Wanda Landowska for the French journal *Disques* in 1932, introduced his subject with a three-stanza poem. It begins:

Her fingers on the cembalo
Type out the polyphonic lore
Of Bach's Inventions—and restore
The true original edition
Unobfuscated by tradition.¹

Twelve years later, on the opposite side of the Atlantic, habitually cranky New York music critic Virgil Thomson (1896–1989), reviewed the Polish harpsichordist's Town Hall concert of 20 November 1944 under the adulatory headline “Definitive Renderings”:

Wanda Landowska's harpsichord recital of last evening . . . was as stimulating as a needle shower. . . . She played everything better than anybody else ever does. One might almost say, were not such a comparison foolish, that she plays the harpsichord better than anybody else ever plays anything . . .

. . . [Her] playing of the harpsichord . . . reminded one all over again that there is nothing else in the world like it. There does not exist in the world today, nor has there existed in my lifetime, another soloist of this or any other instrument whose work is so dependable, so authoritative, and so thoroughly satisfactory. From all the points of view—historical knowledge, style, taste, understanding, and spontaneous musicality—her renderings of harpsichord repertory are, for our epoch, definitive. Criticism is unavailing against them, has been so, indeed, for thirty years.²

It seems that the divine Wanda had accomplished her objective, half a century in the making, of restoring the harpsichord to a recognized place in the cultural consciousness of music lovers, both in Europe and in the western hemisphere. Her personal style, based on an innate rhythmic certainty, a turn-of-the-century impressionistic use of tonal color, and, not incidentally, her careful perusal of historical source materials had made her name virtually synonymous with the word *harpsichord*, at least in the collective consciousness of the public.

True Believers: Expatriated European and Native American Disciples

Landowska's acolytes dominated those American venues where harpsichords were played: **Alice Ehlers** (1887–1981), Professor Landowska's first student in 1913 Berlin, immigrated to the United States and taught for 26 years at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. Among Ehlers's fascinating oral history recorded vignettes she noted that Landowska did not talk much in those early lessons, but she relied heavily on playing for her students. Later, in Ehlers's own teaching, at least one anecdote retold by her student **Malcolm Hamilton** (1932–2003) showed that Ehlers was less than impressed at his derivative details copied from Landowska's style. When Hamilton added an unwritten trill to the subject of a Bach fugue Ehlers stopped him to ask why. “I heard a recording by Wanda Landowska,” he began. Madame Ehlers interrupted brusquely, “Wanda Landowska was a genius. You and I, Malcolm, we are *not* geniuses—spacially you!”³

Two more Landowska students holding American academic posts were **Marie Zorn** (b. 1907?), who promoted the Landowskian style in her harpsichord teaching at Indiana University from 1958 until 1976, and **Putnam Aldrich** (1904–1975), who married Wanda's own personal secretary Madeleine Momot in 1931 (with a somewhat-reconciled Landowska as witness for the bride). Eventually “Put” settled his young family in northern California, where he established a prestigious



Landowska on tour in Palm Beach, Florida, 1927 (collection of Larry Palmer, Momo Aldrich bequest)

doctoral program in early music at Stanford University.

In concert halls, Madame's final brilliant students, **Rafael Puyana** (born 1931), a South American of blazing virtuosity, and Texas-born **Paul Wolfe** (born 1929), both built solo careers in the decade following their teacher's death.

In 1961 Puyana played a concert at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, during my first year there as a doctoral student. Rafael, the scion of a wealthy family, toured the country with a Pleyel harpsichord (the instrument of choice for Landowska's students) and a personal driver. His Eastman recital was a dashing and colorful evocation of a Landowska program, including kaleidoscopic changes of registration; a repertoire firmly grounded in the major Bach works; but with at least one non-Landowska addition: his own harpsichord transcription of a *Canción* for piano by the Catalan composer Frederico Mompou.

Paul Wolfe, not from a moneyed family, set out to make his name through recordings. I came to know him when Nick Fritsch of Lyrichord Records decided to reissue a number of their 1950s vinyl issues on compact discs and asked me to write an introductory article explaining harpsichord pedals. Wolfe's instruments—a 1907 Pleyel of wooden construct and a large concert instrument completed in 1958 by the young northeastern builders Frank Rutkowski and Richard Robinette—as well as programs that featured 17th-century works by Frescobaldi and the English virginalists, Spanish music, and all eight of the 1720 Handel *Suites*—presented both facile young fingers and an expanding repertory of early keyboard music to the American harpsichord scene.

A Contrarian's View of Landowska

During the autumnal years of Landowska's career, critics of her playing style were not legion. But one composer-critic who did not idolize the High Priestess of the Harpsichord was neo-classicist composer Robert Evett (1922–1975). In a 1952 piece for *The New Republic*, Evett wrote:

Mme. Landowska has seduced the brighter part of the American public into believing that she offers it an authentic reading of Bach and his predecessors. What this lady actually uses is a modern Pleyel harpsichord, an instrument that she employs as a sort of dispose-all. . . .

After fifteen years of incredulous listening, I am finally convinced that this woman kicks all the pedals in sight when she senses danger ahead. When she sits down to play a Bach fugue, I go through all the torments that a passenger experiences when he is being driven over a treacherous mountain road by an erratic driver, and when she finally finishes the thing it is almost a pleasure to relax into nausea.⁴



Ralph Kirkpatrick at his Dolmetsch-Chickering harpsichord, 1939 (Ralph Kirkpatrick Archives, Music Library, Yale University)

A Different Aesthetic: Ralph Kirkpatrick

Ralph Kirkpatrick (1911–1984), funded by a post-graduate John Knowles Paine Traveling Fellowship from Harvard University, set off for Europe in the fall of 1931 to hone his harpsichord playing skills. As described in his memoirs,⁵ the pre-eminent American harpsichordist of his generation had a difficult relationship with the priestess of St-Leu, eventually running off to Berlin for coaching and consolation with another Landowska student, the more congenial **Eta Harich-Schneider** (1897–1986). Kirkpatrick's public playing, beginning with concerts and recordings during the 1930s, sounded distinctly unlike Landowska's in its conscious avoidance of excessive registration changes and its near-metronomic regularity. Teri Noel Towe's description of Kirkpatrick's style, printed as a “disclaimer” in the compact disc reissue of these early solo recordings for Musicraft Records, puts it this way:

Some listeners confuse Ralph Kirkpatrick's tenacious and unwavering commitment to the composer's intentions with dullness and mistake his exquisite attention to detail and technical accuracy for dryness. These detractors would do well to listen again. There is a special beauty and unique warmth to Kirkpatrick's sometimes austere but always direct, “no nonsense” performances; his interpretations are always superbly conceived, often transcendent, and occasionally hypnotic. . . .⁶

For a balanced evaluation of Kirkpatrick the harpsichordist, one needs to sample some later examples from his extensive discography. A 1959 Deutsche Grammophon Archiv recording of Bach played on a Neupert instrument presents quite another aural document of a decidedly non-austere artist. And by 1973



Sylvia Marlowe in South America (photo credit: Conciertos Iriberrí, Buenos Aires; collection of Larry Palmer)

when I experienced Kirkpatrick's deeply-moving playing of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* at the Rothko Chapel in Houston (Texas), I reported in *THE DIAPASON* that “Kirkpatrick played magnificently with a prodigious technical command of the work as well as with spacious feeling for the overall architecture. . . .”⁷

At the very end of a more than five-decade career, and now totally blind, the aged master could allow his innate musical sensitivity to triumph. Despite his end-of-career tongue-in-cheek comments about preferring the piano, the Yale professor was the most highly regarded and recorded *native* harpsichordist in the United States during the period of Landowska's American residency.

Other noted American players of Kirkpatrick's generation included **Yella Pessl** (1906–1991) and **Sylvia Marlowe** (1908–1981). Marlowe's first instrument was a true Landowska Pleyel, by this time painted white, the better to be seen on the revolving stage of New York City's Rainbow Room, where Sylvia played jazz arrangements of classical favorites under the catchy rubric *Lavender and New Lace*. Deeply influenced by Landowska's playing, encountered while the New Yorker was studying with Nadia Boulanger in Paris, Marlowe's 1959 solo Bach recording for Decca demonstrates how much Madame's long musical shadow dominated the American harpsichord scene.

Eventually Ms. Marlowe chose to play harpsichords built by the American maker John Challis, moving subsequently to those of Challis's apprentice William Dowd (with lid-paintings by her own husband, the artist Leonid [Berman]). Non-night-club recital repertoire included 18th-century classics, soon augmented extensively by commissions to prominent living composers. Thus, important works by Ned Rorem and Elliott Carter, to cite only two, came into being through Marlowe's sponsorship. Together with the impressive catalog of similar commissions from the Swiss harpsichordist **Antoinette Vischer** (1909–1973), Marlowe's initiatives helped to provide the harpsichord with an extensive, new twentieth-century musical voice.

Influenced by Kirkpatrick during student days at Yale, **Fernando Valenti** (1926–1990) switched from piano to harpsichord, and also played important new works by Vincent Persichetti (that composer's *First Harpsichord Sonata* composed in 1952) and Mel Powell (*Recitative and Toccata Percossa*). However, Valenti made his name primarily as the most exciting player of Domenico Scarlatti's sonatas and specifically as the first

harpichordist to record such a large number of them—359 individual works performed on his Challis harpichord in a series of albums for Westminster Records. In 1951 he was appointed the first harpichord professor at New York's Juilliard School. Several didactic books, published late in Valenti's career, are as colorful and insightful as his playing. Who could resist a chuckle at words such as these?

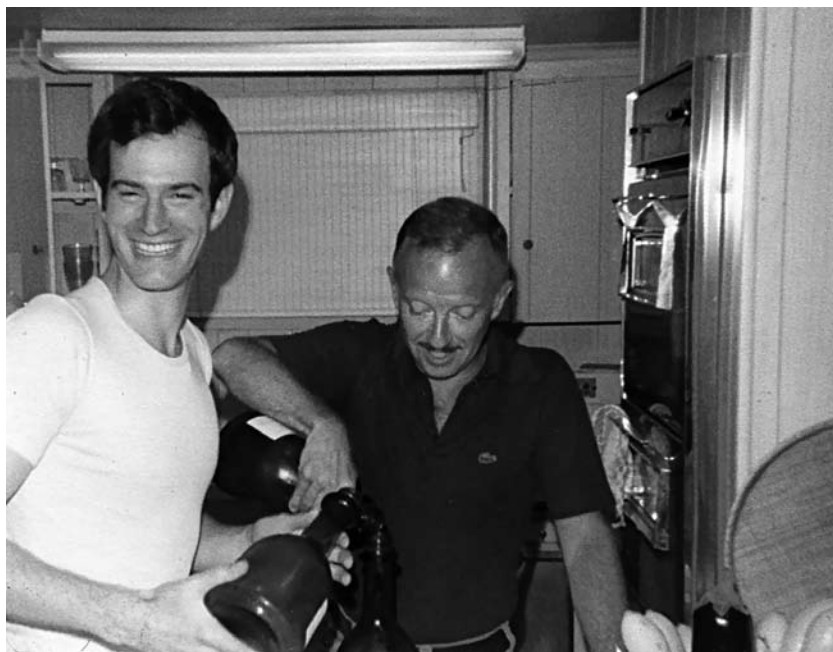
Many years ago I promised myself that I would never put in print anything that even vaguely resembled a 'method' for harpichord playing and this is it.⁸

One of the best-known harpichordists to study privately with Valenti was Berlin-born **Igor Kipnis** (1930–2002), son of the prominent bass opera singer Alexander Kipnis. The family moved to the United States in 1938, where both Kipnises became familiar names in the classical music arena. Igor was particularly noted for his comprehensive and innovative repertory, recorded extensively. His playing was thoroughly representative of a more objective style of harpichord performance.

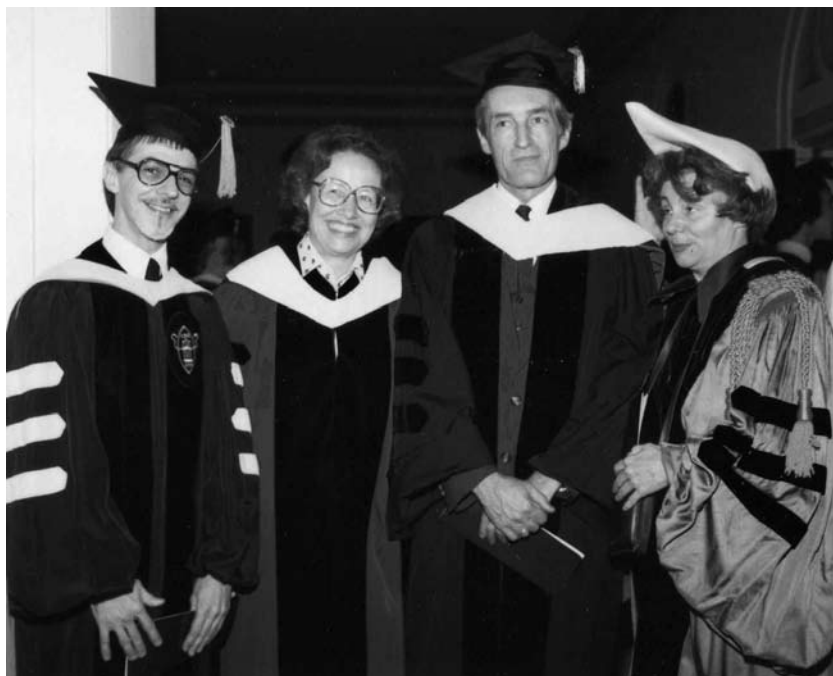
Winds (or Strings and Quills) of Change?

One of the great services rendered by Kirkpatrick was his fervent advocacy for the historically inclined instruments of Frank Hubbard and William Dowd. As the years went by, these musical machines emulated ever more closely those from earlier centuries, albeit with some decidedly 20th-century materials, such as the plastics used for jacks and plectra. But with keyboards built to various baroque dimensions; sensitive, light actions; and registers deployed in a way that an 18th-century composer might have expected; together with the absence, for the most part, of the sixteen-foot register and pedals, these light and agile instruments gave the new generation of players sensitive tools for performing the music of the past. Emulating Hubbard and Dowd, a number of builders, in Boston and other American venues, and throughout the world, joined the "surge to the past," and thereby changed both the dynamic and the expected sounds of harpichord revival instruments.

Among Kirkpatrick's allies in promoting these new "old" instruments were two **Fullers**—his student **Albert** (1926–2007) and the not-related **David** (born 1927), and harpichordist/conductors **Miles Morgan** and **William Christie**. As the 1960s gave way to the 1970s, nearly every emerging teacher and player in the country seemed to be joining the pedal-less crowd. In 1966 I met Dr. **Joseph Stephens** and played the Hubbard and Dowd harpichord in his Baltimore (Maryland) home. Shortly thereafter I ordered my own first Dowd double. It was delivered at the beginning of January 1969. As has happened for so many players in our small musical world, that sensitive instrument taught me as much as had the memorable hours spent studying with two of the finest teachers imaginable: **Isolde Ahlgrimm** (at the Salzburg Mozarteum), and **Gustav Leonhardt** (during two memorable July participa-



Andrew Appel and his teacher Albert Fuller (Fire Island vacation) (courtesy of Andrew Appel)



Commencement day at Southern Methodist University, 1984; from left: Larry Palmer, Eleanor Tufts (professor of art history), Dr. Leonhardt, Alessandra Comini (professor of art history)

tions in his master classes at the annual Harlem Summer Organ Academies).

Influential European Artist-Teachers

Both of these superb artists made significant contributions to harpichord playing in the United States: Ahlgrimm (1914–1995) through her teaching in Salzburg, Vienna, and during semester-long guest professorships at Oberlin and Southern Methodist University, as well as several American concert tours organized by managers, but aided and attended by her grateful students. Until recently, Ahlgrimm's place in the story of the 20th-century harpichord revival has been little celebrated. With the publication of Peter Watchorn's major study *Isolde Ahlgrimm, Vienna and the Early Music Revival*,⁹ that deficiency in our history has been rectified!

Leonhardt (born 1928), surely the most recorded of post-Landowska harpichordists, has influenced virtually every harpichordist from the second half of the 20th-century forward. His students seem to be everywhere. Even the most cursory of enumerations would include many of the leading teachers in the U.S.: Oberlin's first full-time professor of harpichord **Lisa Crawford**; Michigan's **Edward Parmentier**; Boston's **John Gibbons**; University of New York at Stony Brook's **Arthur Haas**; Florida State's **Karyl Louwenaar**; Illinois' **Charlotte Mattax**; and, particularly during the 1970s and '80s, my own large group of harpichord major students at Southern Methodist University. In the spirit of the early music excitement of those decades, SMU conferred his first doctorate on Leonhardt in 1984, citing the Dutch harp-

ichordist's advocacy of "performance on period instruments," as well as his "commitment to both stylistic authority and artistic sensitivity in recreating music of the past."

To this day, more than 25 years after the conferral of that honorary degree, Leonhardt still refers to me in communications as his "Doktor-Vater." Whereas Ahlgrimm referred to herself as a biological phenomenon since she "got more children the older she became," Leonhardt's humorous salutation presents me with a similar phenomenon: the "son" as father to the "father." At any rate, I am pleased to have Dr. Leonhardt as my most distinguished graduate!

Ah yes, students—the new generators of harpichord playing in America. Too many to list, but perhaps one graced with multiple "As" may serve as representative—**Andrew Appel**, American, who completed his doctoral studies with Juilliard harpichord professor Albert Fuller in 1983, and now carries on that line from his teacher, who had been a pupil of Ralph Kirkpatrick, who was . . . and here we could circle back to the beginning of this essay. May Andrew Appel represent the achievements of so many of our fine young players: the late **Scott Ross**, the with-it **Skip Sempé**, the sensitive **Michael Sponseller**, the delightful teaching colleague **Barbara Baird**—Americans, all!

Ultimately all of us are indebted to those European "explorers" who have provided our inspiration and training: French/English Arnold Dolmetsch, Austrian Isolde Ahlgrimm, Dutch Gustav Leonhardt: all contributors to the variety and richness of the harpichord's presence in our contemporary musical life.



Isolde Ahlgrimm, 1959 (collection of Larry Palmer)



Andrew Appel (photo by Lloyd Schloen, courtesy of Andrew Appel)



Landowska at her St-Leu home, late 1920s (photo by Momo Aldrich; collection of Larry Palmer)



Landowska in her Lakeville, Connecticut home, 1949 (photo by Else Schunicke; collection of Larry Palmer, Momo Aldrich bequest)

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Landowska Symposium poster with anonymous caricature of the great harpsichordist (collection of Larry Palmer)



Landowska in her Lakeville, Connecticut home, 1949 (photo by Else Schunicke; collection of Larry Palmer, Momo Aldrich bequest)

And our Polish mother, Wanda Landowska: that vibrant musician who has brought us together for this celebration of her musical legacy.

Some Information about Added Aural Examples

This paper was presented at the Berlin Musical Instrument Museum on November 14, 2009, during a symposium in conjunction with the exhibition *Die Dame mit dem Cembalo* [The Lady with the Harpsichord], in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Wanda Landowska's death. The topic was suggested by the museum's curator Martin Elste, who organized the event. To remain within an imposed time limit, I chose to include only seven short recorded examples, each one a performance of the same final 25 measures from the third (*Presto*) movement of J. S. Bach's *Italian Concerto* (BWV 971)—with an individual duration of between 30 and 40 seconds.

The first example demonstrated one of the most unforgettable of all my musical experiences: Landowska's unexpected slight agogic hesitation between top and bottom notes of the climactic downward octave leap in measure 199, the

last return of that wonderfully energetic opening theme. Taken from her 1936 recording for EMI [reissued in *Great Recordings of the Century*, CDH 7610082], it served as an aural measuring rod with which to compare the following recordings, made "after" Landowska.

Example Two presented the young Ralph Kirkpatrick playing his early 20th-century Dolmetsch-Chickering harpsichord, captured in a 1939 recording for Musicraft, digitized on Pearl [*Great Virtuosi of the Harpsichord*, volume II, GEMM CD 9245]. Example Three: Kirkpatrick again, 20 years later, recorded in a thrillingly theatrical performance played on a powerhouse Neupert instrument for Archiv [198 032] (LP).

Example Four: Sylvia Marlowe, like Landowska, played on an instrument by Pleyel, recorded in 1959 for Decca [DL 710012] (LP).

Example Five: Leading Bach authority Isolde Ahlgrimm, recorded 1975, playing her 1972 David Rubio harpsichord, recorded by Philips [6580 142] (LP).

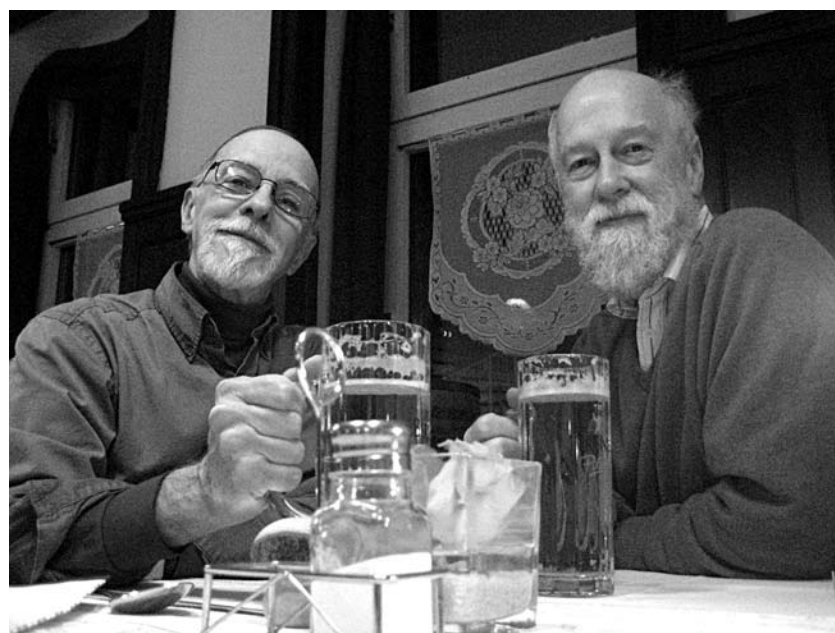
Example Six: Gustav Leonhardt utilized the sound of an actual 18th-century historic instrument for his 1976 recording on a 1728 Hamburg harpsichord by Christian Zell. Seon [Pro Arte PAL-1025] (LP).

Example Seven: Andrew Appel played a 1966 harpsichord by Rutkowski and Robinette in his 1987 recording for

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The final two: Palmer and Peter Adamson after a late afternoon of presenting!

Bridge Records [BCD 9005], concluding the musical examples in just under four minutes! Fortunately for the word-weary, the next, and final, presentation of the two-day seminar was given by British record collector extraordinaire **Peter Adamson**, comprising a fascinating sound and image survey of early harpsichord recordings. ■

Notes

1. Nicholas Slonimsky, *Writings on Music* (New York: Routledge, 2005): v. 4 "Slonimskyana," p. 161.

2. Virgil Thomson, *The Art of Judging Music* (New York: Knopf, 1948), p. 61. Quoted in Larry Palmer, *Harpsichord in America: A Twentieth-Century Revival* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 123.

3. Palmer, *Harpsichord in America*, p. 78.
4. Robert Evett, "The Romantic Bach," *The New Republic*, 28 July 1952, pp. 22–23; quoted in Palmer, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

5. Ralph Kirkpatrick, *Early Years* (New York: Peter Lang, 1985).

6. Teri Noel Towe, Notes for Pearl GEMM CD 9245: *Great Virtuosi of the Harpsichord*, II, 1996.

7. Palmer, *Harpsichord in America*, p. 147.
8. Fernando Valenti, *The Harpsichord: A Dialogue for Beginners* (Hackensack, New Jersey: Jerona Music, 1982), Introduction.

9. Peter Watchorn, *Isolde Ahlgrimm, Vienna and the Early Music Revival* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2007). For an account of an earlier Ahlgrimm student's introduction to the harpsichord, see Larry Palmer, *Letters from Salzburg: A Music Student in Europe 1958–1959* (Eau Claire Wisconsin: Skyline Press, 2006).

THE DIAPASON's Harpsichord Editor since 1969, Larry Palmer is author of the pioneering book, Harpsichord in America: A Twentieth-Century Revival, published by Indiana University Press in 1989 (paperback second edition, 1993). Of six international advisors for the Berlin commemoration, two were Americans: Teri Noel Towe (New York) and Palmer (Dallas). Poster and postcard images for the exhibition featured an anonymous caricature belonging to Palmer, the gift of Momo Aldrich, first secretary to the iconic Landowska.

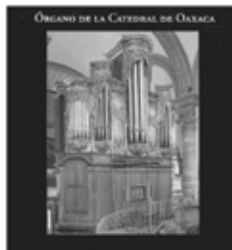
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