

Ignace Jan Paderewski (1860-1941)

by Wanda Wilk

The Polish Parliament proclaimed the year 2001 as the -Year of Paderewski" in commemoration of the 60th anniversary of his death

IN 1932 PRESIDENT FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT called him a "Modern Immortal" and two years later in a book written by author Charles Phillips, *The Story of a Modern Immortal*, the introduction began as follows, "It is difficult to write of Paderewski without emotion. Statesman, orator, pianist and composer, he is a superlative man, and his genius transcends that of anyone I have ever known. Those of us who love Poland are glad that she can claim him as a son, but let her always remember that Ignace Jan Paderewski belongs to all mankind. " Paderewski's personality was not one in a million, but one in a century. He was an "artist of such a distinctly pronounced individuality as to be an exceedingly rare occurrence - indeed phenomenal." He was a genius, an intellectual, a "statesman par excellence;" a beautiful orator in a language that was not his; a linguist who spoke no less than seven languages fluently; a great musician; a patriot; and most of all, a humanitarian who was so generous that every act of kindness to him was always returned manifold.



He was befriended not only by the most prominent people of his time, but by people from all walks of life. The King and Queen of Belgium broke official protocol by going out to the train station to greet him. He traveled all over the world from Africa to Australia and across the European continent; crossing the Atlantic more than thirty times. He gave more than 1500 concerts in the U.S., appearing in every state and drawing the largest crowds in history at a time when the solo recital was still in its infancy. Up until then, all artists appeared with others during a recital in order to give it interest and variety. He was the first to give a recital alone in the newly built Carnegie Hall in New York City, which held almost 3,000 people. He was such a great showman and drawing card that he could be his own rival, as the newspaper headlines raved in 1902. While his opera was being performed at the Met, he was giving his recital in Carnegie Hall, and both places were filled to overflowing.

He traveled throughout the U.S. in his own private railroad cars with several pianos, not only for practical purposes, but also because he enjoyed living in a grand style. Whole towns would go out to meet him and escort him to the concert hall or would just come to see his train pass by. Trainloads of people would come in from outlying towns to hear him play. Once when a train from Montana was delayed by a snowstorm he waited for the arriving audience before beginning his recital. His audience did the same whenever he was delayed. They could not get enough of his playing and would refuse to go home even hours past the end of his program. He gladly continued to play encore after encore. I was fortunate to have been in one of those audiences back in Detroit in 1938.

Why was this so? One reason was his magnificent physical appearance. His long, red hair inspired admiration and awe. The term "long-haired music" may have even started with him, before it took a more recent meaning with the hippie generation. Many musicians tried to emulate him, wearing the familiar top hat, long coat and long hair.

Just like Mickey Mouse, E.T. and Snoopy have been utilized in promotional events, Paderewski was popular enough to have Paderewski candies, Paderewski soap and numerous items, such as a Christmas toy of a little man with a black frock coat, white bow tie and a huge head of flame-colored hair sing at a piano. At the turn of a screw the little man's hands rushed up and down the keyboard while his head shook violently.

Paderewski's appearance, along with his blend of aristocratic refinement and power over the masses, was certainly what the time required. The main reason for his popularity, however, was his magnificent playing. Each recital was a "spiritual happening." He excelled in the art of producing beautiful and varied tone colors never before dreamt of in a piano - from the lightest and most sparkling to the most violent extremes, which sounded almost orchestral. He was known for having as perfect a touch as possible and he could literally make the piano sing; his pedaling was pure perfection.

Some musicians have acclaimed him as the greatest Bach exponent of his time and some of his Beethoven renditions cannot be surpassed. He was considered the best Chopin player of his time and no one could play the Liszt Hungarian Rhapsodies as he did.

He was an inspiration to painters and poets, and even composers dedicated their music to him. Sir Edward Elgar used various motives taken from Paderewski's "Fantaisie Polonaise" in his symphonic Prelude "Polonia" and Camille Saint-Saens dedicated a "Polonaise" for two pianos in his honor.

Although Paderewski aspired to be a great composer and considered it his most enjoyable pursuit, he devoted only a relatively small portion of his energies to it. He composed several dozen works, which include two operas, a symphony, two orchestral pieces with piano, a violin and piano sonata, several beautiful songs and many, many pieces for the piano.

His two most powerful and inventive piano works are the Sonata, Op. 21 and the Variations and Fugue, Op. 23. Since they require a powerful piano technique, Paderewski himself predicted that they would never be too popular. (...)

His intimate friendships with many of the leading statesmen of Europe and America paved the way for future political activity. He undertook the task of preparing a document which later became the basis of President Wilson's fourteen points for a peace settlement at the close of WWI. On January 23, 1917 the President wrote in Point Thirteen, "I take it for granted ... that statesmen everywhere are agreed that there should be a united, independent, autonomous Poland."

The Versailles Peace Treaty was signed in 1919 with Paderewski as Poland's Prime Minister. A pianist's hands helped to shape a new Poland, which had not existed as a country for more than 100 years. He became Poland's first delegate at the Council of Ambassadors and the first Polish delegate to the League of Nations. At Geneva he was looked upon by everybody as a great patriot and distinguished statesman. His speeches were considered among the finest oratorical achievements of the League. When he spoke at the League of Nations in 1920 in Geneva, he received a standing ovation before and after his speech. He spoke for more than an hour without notes in

French and repeated the same in English. He was the only speaker who did not use an interpreter.

Robert Lansing, the American Secretary of State, wrote about him in his book, *The Big Four*, "What Mr. Paderewski has done for Poland will cause eternal gratitude. His career is one which deserves to be remembered not only by his countrymen, but by every man whom love of country and loyalty to a great cause stand forth as the noblest attributes of human character."

I could speak on and on about Mr. Paderewski, about his many humanitarian deeds—as a pianist Paderewski earned more money than any other pianist in the world, but he also gave away that fortune all over the world. I could also mention that he lived long enough to see his country's freedom imperiled again in 1939 and how without hesitation he again rose to the occasion to use all his efforts to free his country. It was during a huge outdoor parade demonstration in New York that he fell ill from exposure and exhaustion and died soon thereafter in 1941 at the age of 85.

His funeral mass in St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York was attended by 4,500 inside and 35,000 outside with statesmen and leaders from all over the world. He was buried at Arlington Cemetery in Washington, D.C. by presidential decree in an action taken only once before. The U.S. Army gave 19 salvos, the highest any chief of state can receive. He was laid to rest under the mast of the battleship *Main* and was to remain there until he could be transported to a Free Poland for burial. This event took place in 1992.

Although Paderewski is back in his beloved land, his presence is still visible here in the U.S. His heart is interned at the Church of the Black Madonna in Pennsylvania. Here at Forest Lawn the life-size portrait of this great man remains for all mankind to see, thanks to the vision of another "great" man, Dr. Hubert Eaton. Thank you.

We are indeed fortunate that we are also able to hear not only the music that Paderewski composed, but also his legendary performances of the music of other composers. His playing of Chopin's piano music has been described as incredible and incomparable! A total of more than a hundred recordings of his music and of his piano playing have been preserved on duo-art piano rolls and old vinyl long playing records, which have been re-released on to tape cassettes and compact discs. At least fifty CDs are readily available at this time from your local record shop, Polish-American gift shops or online.

For more detailed information about his music and discography, visit the Polish Music Center's web site (March Newsletter & Composers) at www.usc.edu/go/polish-music.

About the Author:

Wanda Wilk is the President of the Friends of Polish Music and Founder and Honorary Director of the Polish Music Center at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. She holds a Master's in Music degree from the University of Southern California, specializing in Polish music. In 1979/80 she organized the music section and presented 17 programs of Polish music for the Polish Cultural Exhibit at the California Museum of Science and Industry. In 1982 she organized the Szymanowski Centennial at USC, a very successful two-week long celebration. In 1985 she established, with her husband Dr. Stefan P. Wilk, the Polish Music Reference Center (now called the Polish Music Center). As its first director she served for eleven years without monetary compensation, presenting lectures on Polish music throughout the U.S.



She initiated an on-going Polish Music History Series overseeing the first five monographs as its editor and produced a CD with pianist Nancy Fierro featuring music by Polish women composers Maria Szymanowska and Grazyna Bacewicz. She has received many awards for her promotion of Polish music. Her most cherished are the Gold Medal from the Polish Composer's Union in 1985 and the Cavalier's Cross, Order of Polonia Restituta, with a certificate signed by Lech Walesa in December 1995.