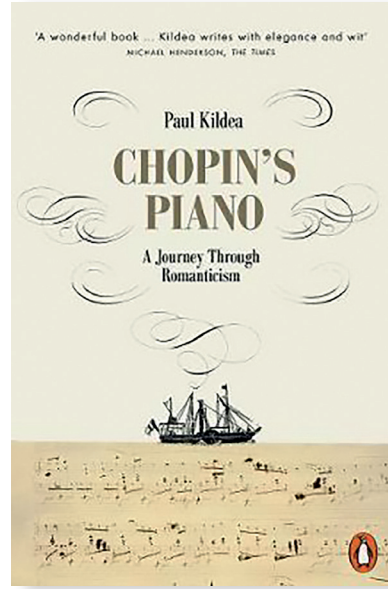


A wealth of other subjects are covered in the book, too numerous to discuss here. The book will have relevance to amateurs as well as professionals involved in the practical business of preparing instruments for performance and keeping them in a safe environment. But the book is of interest beyond the practical. Notwithstanding its somewhat prosaic title, Montals's *The Art of Tuning* is a fascinating read which provides not only valuable historical details for the student of the piano and practical advice in their care of instruments, but also opens a window on the social and intellectual times in which its author lived. Of all the nineteenth-century treatises on matters relating to the piano, this must count among the most absorbing of them all.



ANNA CHĘCKA review

À la recherche du piano perdu

*Chopin's Piano: A Journey
Through Romanticism*
Paul Kildea

Penguin Books 2019. Paperback, 349 pp.
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He worked with lathes and wooden mallets, adzes and gougers, fine-tooth saws, mandrels, casting moulds and kiln, pliers, pots of lacquer and glue. He cut spruce and local softwood, hardwood blocks and planks, sheets of ivory and mahogany veneer. He heated pig iron that, when molten, he poured into moulds, which he then slaked in cold water.¹

With this sensual, but at the same time remarkably concrete, description, Paul

¹ Paul Kildea, *Chopin's Piano: A Journey Through Romanticism* (Penguin Books, 2019).

Kildea begins his tale of a pianino from Majorca – the instrument at which Chopin composed the Op. 28 Preludes. The author takes us to Palma, Majorca, in the 1830s, to witness the birth of the instrument, and we imbibe its scent, even sense the weariness and torment suffered by Juan Bauza, who created this seemingly ordinary object in solitude. We note the enormous contrast between Bauza’s primitive working conditions and the burgeoning technology employed by such firms as Pleyel and Broadwood. The extraordinary future fortunes of this humble pianino would no doubt have consoled him through the laborious process of creating an instrument which already at the moment of its difficult birth had a ‘soul’:

Bauza had no inkling of his piano’s remarkable destiny: no conception of the astonishing music that would be composed and performed on it, or its sequence of owners – some distinguished, others not – or its uncanny ability to survive the most improbable, unfortunate circumstances.²

Intricately constructed around this pianino is the story of a pianistic watershed with Chopin to the fore, but also featuring – as the reader will find particularly moving – another long-term owner of this instrument: the legendary Wanda Landowska. This book, subtitled *A Journey Through Romanticism*, displays an impressive familiarity with historical details, affording us insight into charming nuances of Chopin’s life in Paris, which only occasionally seem to venture too far from the main plot of the story, namely, the fortunes of the pianino from Majorca. Yet even those digressions appear to be justified, for instance when they give us a better perspective on the nature of the liaison between Chopin and George Sand. One of the finest examples of how Paul Kildea

listens intently to the lovers’ fortunes is the beautiful and profound analysis of the portrait for which they posed together in Delacroix’s atelier on rue Notre-Dame de Lorette:

Delacroix captured something genuine and moving in Sand, who sits to Chopin’s right, cigar in hand, absorbing the music around her. The two are detached from each other, but their affinity is palpable. But it was in his depiction of Chopin that Delacroix really succeeded, for he caught something unguarded in his expression and pose – his steely concentration and noble bearing, but also his sense of isolation in company.³

Kildea also wins the reader’s heart with his ability to forge the account around the iconographic documentation included in the book. This creates a touching complement to the verbal narrative, which keeps us in suspense. The author shows us unknown portraits, photographs, passages from letters and manuscripts which themselves form a parallel narrative. As a writer, he has a knack for noticing the magic in material things. We experience this when reading about Chopin’s gloves, hats and perfumes, and also about the rolls of exquisite velvet from which Wanda Landowska’s concert dresses were sewn.

Although this book has many protagonists, the thread of the tale leads us from Chopin to Landowska, the main owners of the pianino from Majorca. The author succeeds in capturing the spiritual bond between the great harpsichordist and the ‘poet of the piano’. Landowska not only adored Chopin, but understood him profoundly, as she expressed in her comments on errors of interpretation she had noted in performances by her contemporaries.

When we read about her stay on Majorca in 1911, we sense that something important

2 Ibid., 5.

3 Ibid., 15.

is about to happen. The tension and mood are forged in masterful fashion: ‘The village was then much as Chopin had found it, though change was in the air’.⁴

On that pilgrimage, Landowska expects to find the Pleyel instrument, the arrival of which from Paris was impatiently awaited by Chopin, but she actually discovers there the unprepossessing pianino built in the workshop of Juan Bauza and immediately resolves to acquire it:

It belonged to Lorenzo Pascual Tortella, a local doctor [...] Tortella had bought the piano from Lapenas, a Majorcan family who traditionally spent the summer months in cell number four and who sold all the fixtures and fittings to him when they gave it up. ‘The piano aroused in me an emotion and an interest easy to understand’ – Landowska later told Ganche. ‘I would have liked to carry away the relic’. But Tortella rebuffed her offer, so the best Landowska could do was instruct a friend in Söller to buy it if ever Torella changed his mind.⁵

The pianino happily became part of the great harpsichordist’s collection. It lived with her and her husband on Motzstrasse in the Schöneberg district of Berlin, and there, shortly after arriving from Majorca, it was portrayed by the young photographer Alexander Binder. This photograph is one of the most magical images in the book: we see the interior of a room, without any inhabitants, and yet we sense the presence not only of the hostess, but of the pianino’s first owner.

Kildea is a master of hinting at emotions. Yet he allows us to quickly sense what he thinks about the figures he describes and what he feels for them. From the start, he makes us fond of Wanda Landowska, who as a young girl was highly critical about her own appearance, whilst retaining a huge

sense of humour (quite charming here is the photograph of a page from an exercise book containing drawings of a cupid and a heart pierced with an arrow and the names of her favourite composers). By contrast, however, it should be pointed out that the author also gives penetrating and evocative portrayals of negative characters. One such ‘black character’, who may be suspected of the grossest misdemeanours, is the French pianist Alfred Cortot. His fortunes are entwined in an interesting way with Landowska and her pianino from Majorca.

An excellent opportunity for introducing Cortot into the action is a photograph showing the two good friends: on 3 July 1927, Cortot and Landowska pose on the steps of a new concert hall in Saint-Leu-la-Fôret:

In the twelve summers that followed, Landowska’s salle was host to the most exciting developments in early music anywhere in the world. Renowned musicians – Artur Honegger, Jacques Iber, Vladimir Horowitz and Francis Poulenc [...] came to perform and listen, pupils to study, audiences to observe. She attracted writers too, and painters and sculptors: Edith Wharton, Paul Valéry and Aristide Maillol become friends.⁶

The most dramatic events befell the pianino and its owner during the Second World War. At this point in the narrative, the author serves the reader plenty of emotion and surprises. I will try to refrain from giving them away. I will just quote a telling passage concerning the above-mentioned ‘black character’: ‘His love of German music and culture left him blind to Nazism’s actions and deaf to the ideological arguments against Germany’s greed, militarism and cruelty, which were easily heard by those willing to listen. So at exactly the moment his old friend

4 Ibid., 167.

5 Ibid., 168–169.

6 Ibid., 184–185.

Landowska was fleeing Nazism, her life in danger, her possessions stored in sixty crates in a warehouse in Berlin, Cortot was rushing towards it.⁷

Paul Kildea also issues a stern assessment of Cortot's well-known biography of Chopin, *Aspects de Chopin*. He accuses him of misogyny, xenophobia and above all focussing on himself: 'There was a meanness in Cortot's outlook, a level of self-absorption he excused as the pursuit of high art. It is the same meanness he extended to George Sand, whom he thought unworthy of the artist with whom he associated himself so firmly and righteously [...] He is fierce about the treatise on music that Chopin haphazardly attempted to write with its very bad French (so Cortot thought), its many clichés and crossings-out, and lack of substance about the mystery of his art or even, more modestly, his teaching'.⁸ Yet apart from the insightful portrayal of Cortot, also appearing in this book are descriptions of other pianists known for their singular approach to the *24 Preludes*, Op. 28, including Arthur Schnitke (who, in the author's opinion, in his recordings of the Op. 48 Nocturnes and the Polonaise-Fantasy, Op. 61, 'is audibly attempting to wrest Chopin's crown from Cortot').⁹

Kildea changes into a poet-cum-critic when discussing Svyatoslav Richter's interpretation of the Preludes. On the Russian pianist's reading of the Prelude No. 4, he writes: 'The performance is so uncommonly slow, with rubato applied to every shift in the train of harmonies left unblurred by both tempo and pedal, the simple elongated aria in the treble stave given a wholly different sound from the accompaniment in the bass, the large vocal leaps spelled out almost gutturally, the whole thing aimless yet somehow also full of direction. Listening to it is disorienting.

There is such a strange, lurching suspension of expectations, as though Richter is employing words that have long since dropped from usage.'¹⁰

He goes on to relate that although Richter probably knew nothing about Valldemossa and the acoustics of the cell there or about the specific properties of the modest piano at which most of the Preludes were written, he succeeded in capturing something 'so personal, so timeless, with rubato unconstrained by time signature or modern convention: it is a perfect re-creation of a sound and style lost in the wholesale shift in how Chopin had come to be played'.¹¹

This book is written with a great deal of talent: we admire the vibrant style; we are kept in suspense and sometimes moved to tears. And all of this is accompanied by a great care taken over historical faithfulness, giving a voice to forgotten figures, discovering lost treasures and resurrecting them in our minds. A project that was initially planned as a doctoral thesis on the history of pianism turned into an intimate record of the fortunes of a humble instrument which nevertheless does not reveal all of its secrets to the reader. This tale of a piano from Majorca seems as unfinished and mysterious as the story of many a work of art.

7 Ibid., 227.

8 Ibid., 228.

9 Ibid., 248.

10 Ibid., 262.

11 Ibid., 263.