

An excerpt from George Copeland: Incomparable and Alone, my lecture on the life of the American pianist George Copeland (1882-1971).

In 1915, Copeland played in a series of recitals featuring the infamous dancer Isadora Duncan. Duncan was quite a character, almost obnoxiously so; she was just as famous for her outsize personality as for her dancing. Before their first joint recital, with Duncan dancing to Copeland's performances of Chopin, Duncan refused to rehearse, often drawing Copeland into delightful conversation about nothing until their rehearsal time was up. The day of the first recital arrived, and Copeland was gripped with terror. As they waited in the wings, she saw sweat beading his brow. "You mustn't panic, George. You are simply giving a Chopin recital. Pay no attention to me at all. I'll be there only because I can't dance without music. But your music is the important thing."¹ She was forty minutes late to another performance, deaf to the shrieks of the panic-stricken stage manager. Her response to his cries? "Don't worry my dear, American audiences must be taught repose."²

Three years later, with Copeland's career stalled, Merle Armitage, a manager who worked for the impresario Loudon Charlton, heard Copeland perform in Boston and proclaimed him an "enigma." "Why was this artist, the peer of the world celebrated pianists (more interesting than most) known only in Boston and New York?"³ Armitage conspired with Charlton and Henry L. Mason of Mason and Hamlin pianos to promote Copeland's career.

¹ Frederic Bradlee, *George Copeland: Inimitable and Alone* (Unpublished manuscript held in the NYPL George Copeland papers, date unknown), 15.

² *Ibid*, 16.

³ Merle Armitage, *Accent on America* (New York, NY: E. Weyhe, 1944), 185.

Armitage, Charlton and Mason, possibly remembering the successful 1915 recitals, concocted a plan to pair him with a group of six Duncan students, dubbed “The Isadorables.” Anna, Therese, Irma, Lisa, Margot and Erica were convinced members of the cult of Isadora, going so far as to legally take her last name for their own. Copeland would play solo numbers as well as the dance pieces, the Isadorables would cavort, and the Chickering Piano Company would provide the pianos and a tuner to be used in the 90 engagements performed across the country. Six pianos were used: after a concert in one city, the piano would be shipped five or six stops ahead to ensure that a concert grand would be available in every city on the tour route. Copeland was expected to bring a large part of his repertoire; in addition to an enormous Chopin group, he performed a Debussy set that usually included his own arrangement of *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, as well as works of MacDowell, Schubert, Albeniz, Grovlez and his own transcription of Chabrier’s *España*. This was Copeland’s chance to make a national name for himself, and it seemed the gambit might pay off. Everywhere the troupe went, it was he who received the lion’s share of positive press. This flood of rave reviews for Copeland was due in part to the unfortunate fact that the Isadorables couldn’t dance. From contemporary descriptions of their performances, it seems that the Isadorables struck various poses, formed tableaux, and generally pranced around the stage in time to the music. Some reviewers politely discussed the beautiful movements of their hands, while others were cruel enough to point out their balletic deficiencies. A critic for the Chicago Daily Tribune couldn’t mask his disgust: after praising Copeland, he let loose. “Mr. Copeland shared the afternoon with six girls, knuckle-kneed and well-nigh naked, who danced, after a fashion, while Mr. Copeland played Chopin, Schubert and

Gluck...Mr. Copeland would have been better and, no doubt, far less popular without Lisa, Erica, et al.”⁴ Six years later, when mentioning a Copeland theatrical engagement in NYC, the same critic couldn’t resist another slap at the unfortunate sextet. “Copeland may be recalled as a good pianist...who played Chopin while a group of foolish girls danced interpretively all over the stage.”⁵ Armitage points out in his memoirs that the audiences were attracted to the event by the large posters displaying the six “well-nigh naked” Isadorables in provocative poses. Once the performances began, however, the audiences belonged to Copeland.⁶

Naturally, this disparity in acclaim led to bitter feelings on the part of the Isadorables, who demanded that something be done. Loudon Charlton tried to appease them by asking local managers to use a smaller font for Copeland’s name on the program cover, thus making the event THE ISADORABLES...with George Copeland. Copeland discovered this in Pittsburgh; he waited until the audience arrived, then stood in the wings and primly announced that unless every program was collected and its cover removed, he would not perform. For all subsequent performances, his name was listed in the same size as the Isadorables.⁷

There were two trans-continental tours with the Isadorables; it is not hyperbole to suggest that this was the absolute height of Copeland’s career. Reviews spoke admiringly of his abilities, describing him as a “pianist of brilliance,”⁸ one going so far as to say (in the age of Rachmaninov, Hofmann and Friedman!) that Copeland was “one of the biggest of the day’s pianists.”⁹ It’s ironic that Copeland’s greatest success forever

⁴ F.D., “Sunday’s Sounds in the Music Halls,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 5 May, 1919, 23.

⁵ F.D., “This Thing and That About the Theater,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 1 May 1925, E1.

⁶ Armitage, *Accent on America*, 185.

⁷ *Ibid*, 185.

⁸ Frederick B. Moore, “Duncan Dancers’ Art Eloquent,” *LA Times*, 21 November 1919, 18.

⁹ 1919 Clipping from a Chicago Paper, Author, Paper Unknown.

linked his name with a group of amateur hoofers; perhaps this sort of triumph was too much to bear. In the spring of 1920, he abruptly broke his contract with Chickering, abandoned the Isadorables and sailed for Europe.