

Nadia Boulanger

History is full of eminent musicians who shaped the course of western classical music. Of these, there are a handful of composers whose influence is perhaps beyond measure. But one composition teacher was so influential that her students rank among the most prominent musicians of the twentieth century in modern classical music, jazz, and popular music. In the middle of the 20th century, any composer wanting to be taken seriously made the trip to study in Paris with Mademoiselle at the Boulangerie. Nadia Boulanger was a great teacher in part because of her distinguished teachers and colleagues who taught her about compositional technique and style. Additionally, her own experiences as a young composer, though her career ended abruptly in 1922, contributed to her immense teaching capacity. Nadia Boulanger is well known for her contributions as a pedagogue, but her own compositional career is often overlooked.

On September 16, 1887, Raissa Myschetsky and Ernest Boulanger welcomed a new daughter, Juliette Nadia Boulanger. Ernest Boulanger, a composer, musician, and professor, shared Nadia's birthday and turned 72 the day his daughter was born (Spycket). Six years later, Raissa gave birth to Marie Juliette, better known as Lili, on August 24, 1893. Lili was never a healthy child, and suffered her first bout of pneumonia at age 3 (Spycket). Raissa was 42 years younger than her husband, and the couple had separate bedrooms, according to middle-class convention of the time (Rosenstiel). She was a strict and protective mother for Nadia and Lili, overseeing every aspect of their lives and education.

As a young child, Nadia reviled every form of music, hiding in her mother's skirts or shrieking when she couldn't get away from it. It was, perhaps, a simple and effective way of getting her parents' attention. But when Raissa was pregnant with Lili, Nadia's distaste for

music changed overnight into an all-consuming passion for it. She began listening in on all the music lessons her father gave, and dedicating herself to mastering the traditional French musicianship courses (Rosenstiel). Nadia's musical ability progressed very quickly, and at age nine she entered the Paris Conservatoire to study solfege, organ, and composition (Spycket). Her then retired father supervised her musical studies until his death on April 14, 1900. Nadia was twelve, and Lili just six when their father died at age 84. In 1904 Raissa moved the family to 36 rue Ballu where Nadia lived until her death on October 22, 1979 (Spycket).

The Conservatoire brought Nadia in contact with the French elite in the world of music. There she met teachers, classmates, and, later, students who greatly affected her musical career. One of Nadia's earliest compositional influences was Gabriel Faure. She began studying with Faure in 1901, and his quintessential French style shows heavily in her works. In particular, the twelve songs or melodies published in 1909 are highly evocative of Faure's works (Kendall). Ravel and Boulanger took classes together while Ravel was already an established composer, and both competed for the Prix de Rome (Rosenstiel). Nadia was also a great admirer of Stravinsky, and saw many of his works which first premiered in Paris. Stravinsky's *Octet for Winds*, which premiered in 1923 was panned by critics after the first hearing. But Nadia was deeply impressed by what she perceived as a new style for Stravinsky and believed it would serve as a new compositional model, though she acknowledged the piece was difficult to understand at first listening (Rosenstiel).

Another mentor was Raoul Pugno, a figure of extreme importance in Nadia's life. They met at the Conservatoire, and Pugno, 25 years her senior, took a keen interest in her studies and performances. The Boulanger apartment on rue Ballu was only a short distance from Pugno's apartment, and Madame Boulanger rented, and later bought, a summer retreat near Pugno's summer home in Gargenville (Spycket). Raoul Pugno was a lifelong friend and supporter of Nadia's, and their close relationship generated gossip about a possible affair between the young

musician and her mentor, a notorious womanizer (Spycket). Pugno started out primarily as an organist and composer, but he is most well-known for his later years as a concert pianist. Over the years, he and Nadia gave many concerts together, and he often referred students to her. Pugno sent Nadia her the first American students, who became an important part of her later teaching career (Spycket). The two collaborated on *La Ville Morte*, an opera based on a D'Annunzio novel which the author personally adapted for the libretto (Rosenstiel). Though written in 1910, the opera received little interest until 1914, after Pugno's death in January of that year. *La Ville Morte* was set to premiere in November at the Opera-Comique, but the outbreak of the Great War in August terminated all efforts in that direction (Rosenstiel).

Madame Boulanger pushed Nadia into a musical career at an early age after the death of Ernest Boulanger in 1900. With Ernest's death, the family's main source of income vanished, and the Boulangers struggled through a few years. Nadia received her first paycheck in July of 1904 for playing organ accompaniments at a primary class presentation at the Trocadero Palace (Spycket). In 1906, she made her compositional debut with the premiere of *Versailles*. Nadia also taught piano lessons during this time for extra income. The majority of Nadia's works were written, published, or premiered between 1906 and 1910. It was in this time period that she competed in the Prix de Rome competition three times. She competed in 1906 and 1907, and in 1908 was awarded a Second Grand Prize, which did not carry with it the trip to Rome (Rosenstiel). Nadia set the required vocal fugue for instruments, an act which angered some of the competitions judges, including Saint-Saens.

The upset of the 1908 competition also handicapped her during her next Prix de Rome attempt in 1909. Many of her supporters were no longer acting as judges and advisors to the competition. Due to politics and sexism, Nadia lost the 1909 Prix de Rome entirely (Rosenstiel). However, she rewrote the 1909 *Roussalka* and premiered it as *Dnegouchka*. No prior Prix de Rome cantata had been publicly performed, as the libretto and musical theme technically

belonged to the competition. The work received mixed reviews, and prompted the Menestrel's critic to observe "As for the cantata of Mlle Nadia Boulanger, *Dnegouchka*, assuredly an interesting but convoluted work, I admit that I need to hear it a second time in order to appreciate it fully." An old friend of Ernest Boulanger's, Hillemacher, wrote Nadia to congratulate her, saying "my two hands added, with all their power, to your beautiful success" (Rosenstiel). Nadia's 1908 Second Grand Prize was the highest honor a woman had yet achieved in the Prix de Rome. But just five years later, Lili Boulanger won First Grand Prize, becoming the first woman in any category to be awarded that distinction. Nadia shared in her sister's triumph, as she had tutored Lili in music and composition since Lili's poor health prohibited her from entering the Conservatoire until 1912 (Spycket).

Nadia Boulanger's compositional career lasted approximately from 1906 until 1922, with a collection of songs set to poems by Camille Mauclair. These songs were her last published works (Spycket). Nadia's earlier compositions were generally tonal, featuring essentially tonal chords but with many suspended dissonances. She pushed the boundaries of tonality as far as they could go, but her rhythmic vocabulary was rather conservative, especially in comparison to contemporaries like Stravinsky (Irvin). Her later pieces, particularly the set of Mauclair songs, were more austere, and her tonal vocabulary even more remote, featuring prominent neomodal and atonal elements (Irvin). However, Nadia considered her own compositions lacking in greatness, and her own perfectionism drove her to give up composing and instead focus on teaching. Others saw the value and beauty in her compositions, as Faure told her late in his life "I'm not sure you did the right thing in giving up composition." Nadia demurred, and Faure responded by playing from memory and exercise she had written at age 14, commenting "still, there was something in that" (Monsaingeon).

After 1922, Nadia focused on what she felt to be her true gift: teaching. Every Wednesday until her death she held classes in her apartment at 36 rue Ballu in Paris (Spycket).

Nadia's students include Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, Virgil Thomson, and countless others. Though Nadia spent nearly sixty years of her life focused on teaching, she did not give up her own musical career entirely. She continued to conduct and perform, and was the first woman to successfully conduct many major orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic and Boston Symphony Orchestra (Rosenstiel). Nadia Boulanger's music is still performed, though her work does not receive the same interest as that of her sister, Lili. Nadia's decision to stop composing early in life surely diminished the output of a great female composer of the 20th century.

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