



Boulanger, Nadia (1887-1979)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Nadia Boulanger in 1925.
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Perhaps the greatest teacher of musical composition in the twentieth century, Nadia Boulanger greatly influenced modern classical music. One of very few women in a male dominated field, she was nonetheless a significant presence in the careers of many of the best known twentieth-century European and American composers.

Forsaking her own career as a composer because she predicted that it would be undistinguished (though her cantata *La Siréna* won second prize in the Prix de Rome in 1908), Boulanger devoted her life to teaching the principles of motion, harmony, and rhythm to the hundreds of students who came to her tiny Paris studio.

Born on September 16, 1877 of a French father and Russian mother, Boulanger was suited to a life dedicated to music by virtue of her heritage. Her father's father had been a composer and his mother a singer for the Opéra Comique. Ernest Boulanger had been a composer and music professor himself when he met and married Nadia's mother, Raissa.

Although Ernest was 63 when Nadia was born, he and Raissa imparted the family love of music to Nadia and her sister Lili, who became a well-known composer but who died at the age of 24. Throughout her life, Nadia remained devoted to her mother and sister. She held annual memorial masses for them after their deaths and tirelessly promoted her sister's music.

Boulanger entered the Paris Conservatory at the age of 10 and won several prizes for her compositions. From 1908 to 1918, she was a teacher of harmony at the Conservatory. In 1921 she was appointed professor of harmony, counterpoint, and composition at the American Conservatory of Music in Fontainebleau. She continued these teaching duties until her death, becoming Director of the American Conservatory in 1950. She also taught at the École normale de musique in Paris and at the Paris Conservatory.

Boulanger's roster of students included many who would later become internationally famous, from Philip Glass to Burt Bacharach. She taught so many prominent American composers that her influence on modern American music has been tremendous.

Among her students were many prominent gay composers who have helped define modern American classical music, such as Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, Leonard Bernstein, David Diamond, Marc Blitzstein, Gian Carlo Menotti, and Ned Rorem.

Among her female students were Ruth Anderson, Cécile Armagnac, Marion Bauer, Suzanne Bloch, Peggy Glanville-Hicks, Helen Hosmer, Thea Musgrave, and Louise Talma.

Along with the famous classes she taught in her Paris studio, Boulanger also toured energetically to lecture and conduct. During her 1939 American tour, she gave 102 lectures in 118 days, and also became the first woman to conduct the Boston Symphony, the New York Philharmonic, and the Philadelphia Philharmonic.

She grew impatient with public amazement over what she had accomplished despite being a woman. She snapped at one reporter, "I've been a woman for a little over fifty years and have gotten over my initial astonishment."

Fiercely self-sufficient, Boulanger defied tradition to live an independent life. She created an opening for women in what had formerly been a male domain.

It is not certain that Boulanger was a lesbian, but it is likely that she was. She was protective of her privacy and a practicing Catholic, so she may have had conflicting emotions about sexuality in general. Although she allegedly avoided Gertrude Stein's salon because of its "flagrant homosexuality," she did frequent the more discreet salon of Princess de Polignac (Winnaretta Singer), whose lesbianism was also well known.

Boulanger continued to preside over her exacting, yet gentle lessons until her death on October 22, 1979, aged 92. Her principal heirs were her former student Cécile Armagnac and her long-time personal assistant, Annette Dieudonné.

Boulanger's attitude toward her craft is perhaps best expressed in a quotation of hers from Alan Kendall's biography, "The art of music is so deep and profound that to approach it very seriously only is not enough. One must approach music with a serious rigor and, at the same time, with a great, affectionate joy."

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Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.