Boulanger, Nadia

Nadia Boulanger

* 16 September 1887 in Paris, France
† 22 October 1979 in Paris, France

Teacher, conductor, pianist, organist, composer.

“As a teacher, my whole life is about understanding others and not about getting others to understand me. What a student thinks, what they want to do – that is what is important. I have to try to enable them to express themselves, to prepare them for doing that which only they can.” (Nadia Boulanger, cit. Bruno Monsaingeon: “Mademoiselle. Entretiens avec Nadia Boulanger”)

Profile

One of the twentieth century’s most important figures in music education, Nadia Boulanger had over one thousand pupils and students. Gradually, she placed less and less emphasis on her own compositional talents and, as conductor, focused on promoting the works of her sister Lili Boulanger, Igor Stravinsky and those of her students. She was also actively involved in the renaissance of Early Music.

Nadia Boulanger was a charismatic teacher. During her 70-year career, she taught over one thousand students from all over the world (mostly France, Poland and The USA), including composers, performers, conductors and musicologists right across the age range from children (at the Yehudi Menuhin School among others) to teenagers and adults.

What distinguished her teaching from that of others was its musical and cultural diversity. Alongside Music History, Theory and general questions relating to performance style (interpretation etc.), Philosophy, Literature and the Visual Arts among others also featured. Nadia Boulanger inspired her students through her profound knowledge in all of these fields. Her musical horizon stretched from Monteverdi and Schütz through Bach, the Classical composers and the Romantics, right through to contemporary music. Here, she worshipped most of all the music of Igor Stravinsky, accompanying him through his many compositional phases. Nonetheless, despite the Schoenberg-Stravinsky controversy, one of her subjects of instruction was the Second Viennese School.

The focus of Boulanger’s teaching was the student’s individuality. Nadia Boulanger’s concern was to encourage the student’s musical individuality as soon as they could demonstrate a sound foundation; if the student’s musical-compositional identity was already established – as was the case with George Gershwin – Nadia Boulanger refused to take them on as students.

Boulanger was a very determined girl; the daughter of an ambitious mother, strict self-discipline was instilled in her from an early age. She sustained an enormous workload – comprising individual and group lessons, extensive correspondence and performances as organist, pianist and conductor – all with great commitment well into old age.

What completes the picture of Nadia Boulanger, in addition to being a teacher and performing artist, is the fact that she never married. The students and pupils in her circles were sometimes considered by her as a surrogate family, some of whom indeed became close friends and colleagues.

During her studies at the conservatoire, Nadia Boulanger was considered a very promising young composer. Her compositions were heavily influenced by her teacher, Gabriel Fauré, who greatly admired and encouraged her. In 1919 however, she gave up composition completely, the
reason being her firm belief that her work must be judged according to the same strict criteria she used to judge others’ work – and that her work would not meet those criteria.

She described her music as ‘pointless’ (“inutile”). It is believed that her sister Lili’s compositional success was influential in her decision to give up composing – even though Lili had died in 1918 – as well as her contact with Igor Stravinsky, whose music Nadia Boulanger greatly admired.

During the Second World War, Nadia Boulanger lived in the USA, where the witticism that there was a ‘Boulangerie’ in the town spread rapidly. Nadia Boulanger’s influence on US-American musical development should not be underestimated – even though many were highly critical.

After the war, Boulanger returned to Paris and discovered that a new generation of composers (Boulez and Messiaen, among others) had established itself. This generation orientated itself on the works of Schoenberg, rejecting Boulanger’s aesthetics. In these circles she was considered a reactionary. Nonetheless, she continued to teach with undiminished success until shortly before her death in 1979.

More on Profile

Cities an countries

Nadia Boulanger lived and worked primarily in France (Paris, Fontainebleu), teaching students from many countries – notably The United States, Poland, Russia and England but also Turkey, Japan and Argentina, among others. She was an active conductor in many countries including France, Russia, England and The United States, where she was also an acclaimed organist. Her mother, Raissa, was of Russian origin.

Biography

Nadia Boulanger was the eldest daughter of Ernest Boulanger and his Russian wife, Raissa. She was an extraordinarily talented musician and, from the age of ten, began her extensive musical training at the Paris Conservatoire. She began teaching at the age of 17. In addition, she took part in the famous composition competition (Prix de Rome) twice, coming second in 1908. She worked closely with pianist Raoul Pugno, jointly composing, among others, the opera “La Ville Morte” (after D’Annunzio) and undertaking several concert tours together.

As time went on, her compositional output continued to dwindle and by 1919 she had stopped composing altogether, the reason for this being her opinion that her music was ‘inutile’ (pointless).

During her lifetime, Nadia Boulanger taught at her home, Rue Ballu in Paris, as well as in numerous schools, colleges and academies, including the American Conservatory Fontainebleu (from 1921), the Conservatoire Femina-Musica, the National School of Music, Paris (from 1920), the Royal College, the Royal Academy and the Yehudi Menuhin School.

Over and above her work as composition teacher, she performed as pianist, organist and also as conductor, where she dedicated herself as much to the renaissance of Early Music as to contemporary composers (including, among them, her sister Lili Boulanger, Aaron Copland and Igor Stravinsky).

During the Second World War, Nadia Boulanger lived in The United States and taught at Wellesley College, Radcliffe College and at the Juilliard School. Upon her return to France, she discovered that the new generation of the avant-garde had turned away from the Boulanger School. Nonetheless, she remained an educational institution across the whole of Europe and The United States until her death in 1979, aged 92, in Paris.

The eldest daughter of a composer and singing teacher, Nadia Boulanger grew up in a highly musical and intellectual environment with her father, her mother and her sister Lili, six years her junior. Aged 62, Ernest Boulanger married the 19-year old Raissa Mychtsky – a member of the Russian aristocracy (possibly even a princess) who had come to Paris in order to study singing. Nadia Boulanger came into contact very early with artistic and intellectual turn-of-the-century figures such as the composers Charles Gounod, Jules Massenet and Camille Saint-Saëns, as well as the pianist Paoul Pugno. Already at the age of ten, she began studying at the very traditionalist Paris Conservatoire with teachers such as Paul Vidal ( Accompaniment), Louis Viener and Alexandre Guilmant (Organ), Charles Marie Widor and Gabriel Fauré (Composition). The main focus of her training was on her studies in composition (Theory, Counterpoint, Fugue), where Gabriel Fauré was not only her role model as a composer but also as teacher. She won several prizes at the Conservatory, including the First Prize in Music Theory (1903), First Prize for accompanying at the organ and First Prize for Composition (both 1904).

The girls’ mother was very ambitious and strictly monitored the intensive studies of the eldest daughter (consider-
ably more so than with the younger, more delicate Lili). Ernest Boulanger died in 1900, a deep shock for the 12-year old Nadia, who then channelled her focus and energy into her musical training. In 1904, she successfully completed her studies at the Conservatoire and, at only 17 years of age, took on the task of breadwinner for the whole family: she began teaching. Further to her teaching, Nadia Boulanger also worked as a composer, preparing herself at the same time for the Prix de Rome; a competition she entered in 1907 and 1908. In 1908 she won Second Prize. The world had to wait until 1913 for the first woman to be awarded First Prize. The winner was Nadia’s sister, Lili Boulanger. An intense artistic partnership developed between Raoul Pugno and Nadia Boulanger: they composed several works together including the opera “La Ville Morte” by Gabriele d'Annunzio. They also undertook several concert tours together with Pugno as pianist and Boulanger as conductor.

In 1913, Boulanger met Igor Stravinsky; a meeting which formed the basis for a lifelong artistic partnership and friendship. Thanks to the patronage of Princess de Polignac (Winnetta Singer, heir to the Singer sewing machine fortune; one of Paris’s most important patrons of the inter-war period and married to Edmond de Polignac), Nadia Boulanger was able to focus more intensively on her work as conductor. It was not only through her salon that the art-loving princess instigated numerous regular concert performances (of works by Monteverdi, Schütz and numerous contemporary composers like Stravinsky, Manuel de Falla, Kean Françaix and Igor Markevich, among others), but she also engaged the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in order to give Nadia Boulanger the opportunity to appear in public as conductor (for example for the performance of Gabriel Fauré’s Requiem in 1937). Incidentally, Igor Stravinsky was also a beneficiary of Princess de Polignac’s patronage.

From 1921 until her death, Nadia Boulanger taught at the American Conservatory Fontainebleu founded by Walter Damrosch in 1920 (Conservatoire Américain Fontainebleu). These summer courses were taken by mostly American students. Boulanger also taught at other institutions, including the Conservatoire Femina-Musica, at the Paris Conservatoire in 1915 (as assistant to Gabriel Fauré) and the National School of Music, Paris (from 1920). In 1935 she took over Paul Dukas’ composition class at the Royal Academy, the Royal College and at the Yehudi Menuhin School. Further to this, she also taught from home on the Rue Ballu throughout her entire life; teaching which became an institution in itself – an integral part of Paris musical life and a magnet for students from all over the world.

Even though the focus of her studies had been set on composition from very early on, Nadia Boulanger did not appear in public as a composer after 1919. The more she taught, the less she composed. In her own words, she said of her farewell to composition, “If I am absolutely sure about one thing, then it is the fact that I have given up composing. I have written pointless music and I am so strict with other composers, I should therefore be just as strict with myself.” (in Monsaingeon, 1981, p.21) Nadia Boulanger spent the years 1940-46 in The United States, where she gave lectures, taught at the Juilliard School in New York (among others), hosted concerts and appeared as conductor.

As such, she was the first woman to conduct world-renowned orchestras (for example the New York Symphony Orchestra and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in 1937). In 1947 she became Maître de Chapelle in Monaco, where she led Stravinsky’s Mass at the wedding of Grace Kelly and Furst Rainier in 1956.

Nadia Boulanger received numerous awards, including Honorary PhDs from Oxford and Harvard. She was Fellow at the Royal College of Music in London, a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and of the Order of Arts and Letters. She was also awarded the Legion D’Honneur.

More on Biography

Reception

Nadia Boulanger’s earnings as a teacher are heavily disputed in France. She was less well-known in German-speaking countries; side-lined as she was by the Viennese School for being an advocate of Stravinsky’s music. She never took active part in the Stravinsky-Schoenberg controversy but was nevertheless subject to scathing criticism by Schoenberg himself.

Nadia Boulanger’s greatest contribution was to American music. Dozens of students from The United States followed Aaron Copland in order to study with her, thereby securing her status as one of the most significant influences on twentieth century music.

As a teacher, Nadia Boulanger was one of the defining figures of twentieth century music. Due to the controversy between Stravinsky and Schoenberg, Boulanger – a
Boulanger, Nadia

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List of Works

Nadia Boulanger’s previously known works comprise mainly vocal works (cantatas, choral fugues), a virtuoso work for piano and orchestra (Rhapsody Variée), some chamber music and the opera “La Ville Morte” which she composed together with Raoul Pugno.

Reertoire

Nadia Boulanger was a much sought-after organist and also appeared as pianist with Dinu Lipatti (Einspielungen). As conductor, she campaigned to have her sister Lili Boulanger’s works performed. She also conducted a wide range of other works including Early Music repertoire (Monteverdi, Schütz), Gabriel Fauré (Requiem) and Igor Stravinsky, to name but a few.

Research

The most important point of contact for materials on Nadia Boulanger is the “Fondation International Lili et Nadia Boulanger, Paris”. Since Nadia Boulanger fought a lifelong campaign to keep as many personal documents as possible from being published, locating sources is quite difficult.

Nadia Boulanger never committed her teaching methods to paper. All that exists is a selection of lesson transcripts, film documentaries and students’ descriptions or reminiscences. The only realistic way to create a comprehensive picture of Nadia Boulanger as the twentieth century’s most influential teacher of music is to talk to her surviving students.

According to testament documents, a case containing unspecified contents may be opened 30 years after Nadia Boulanger’s death (in 2009). The case is said to contain documents such as letters, manuscripts and scores, etc. and is being held at the Bibliothèque National de Paris.

Authority control

Virtual International Authority File (VIAF):
- http://viaf.org/viaf/61731139

Deutsche Nationalbibliothek (GND):
- http://d-nb.info/gnd/119007401

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