

NADIA BOULANGER: A TRIBUTE

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A CHARACTERISTIC aspect of the present musical era is the increasingly important role played by women. Among them certainly one of the most commanding figures is the French composer, organist, teacher and conductor, Nadia Boulanger, whose expanding career has recently assumed added significance for America, where her visits are becoming more frequent and her affiliations more definitely established.

It is not easy to measure or even to define Mlle. Boulanger's influence for it has been manifested in many ways that do not fall within the established categories of musical attainment. But without doubt it is potent, pervasive and altogether exceptional in the revelation of a tremendously vital personality. Her career is without parallel, not only because it is a woman's but because it embraces such varied and at the same time such positively directed activity. The only figure in music history at all suggestive as a prototype is Clara Wieck Schumann, and even here the differences are probably greater than the similarities.

Nadia Boulanger was born in Paris, of French and Russian parents with a distinguished musical ancestry. Her mother, the late Mme. Ernest Boulanger, née Princesse Mischetsky, was an accomplished singer. For twenty-seven years her father taught singing at the Paris Conservatoire where, as a student, he won the Prix de Rome. He also composed operas for his mother who was a member of the Opéra Comique. She in her time had been a first prize winner at the Conservatoire where in 1797 Frédéric Boulanger, Nadia's grandfather, had carried off first honors in 'cello playing.

Indicative of her great sensitivity is the story that Nadia as a child wept and hid under the piano whenever she heard a musical tone. At the age of five she was already reading music fluently.

Her later record as a student at the Conservatoire was astonishing. She not only obtained first prizes in harmony, counterpoint, fugue, organ and accompaniment, but in 1908 won the second Grand Prix de Rome with her cantata, *La Sirène*.

When her sister Lili appeared on the scene and, in 1913, still further upset tradition by winning the first Rome Prize, Nadia voluntarily stopped composing, and dedicated herself to the guidance of this delicate girl. The untimely death of Lili in 1918 was a tragedy intensifying Nadia's devotion both to her sister's memory and to her music. During Lili's career she developed the selflessness and intelligent cooperation which set the pattern for her extraordinary later role as a teacher.

Today she not only holds regular classes at the Ecole Normale de Musique, but also has an enormous following of private pupils. Since the summer of 1921 when she joined the faculty of the American Conservatory at Fontainebleau, this number has been greatly augmented by Americans and other emigrés. As an organist she has assisted her teacher, Alexander Guilmant, at the Church of the Madeleine and she appears often in public recitals. In 1925 she made a lecture-recital tour of the United States. Last year the French government, which has awarded her the cross of the Légion d'honneur, sent her on a second visit to this country to observe educational methods. When she returns late this January she will teach and lecture at Radcliffe College. Recently her interest has turned to conducting, and she now leads a group of singers in Paris who give special attention to early choral music. With this group, a year ago, she introduced London to the *Requiem* of her beloved master, Gabriel Fauré, a work she will present here in February as guest-conductor with the Boston Orchestra. Last fall her appearance with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in London marked another departure from tradition. It was the first time that organization had been directed by a woman since its foundation one hundred and twenty-six years ago.

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This is the simple factual outline of Mlle. Boulanger's life. It does not of course supply a complete picture nor explain the importance of her role in contemporary music. To adequately suggest what she has meant to the great number of artists and students

whom she has inspired with enthusiasm and affection, seems almost impossible.

The leading impression of anyone with whom she comes in contact is unquestionably one of inexhaustible creative energy. Her nature combines to a rare degree both masculine aggressiveness and womanly charm. But this energy is the dominant, the motor power which conditions every phase of her broadly constructive life, gives her such unusual clairvoyance, and encourages other creative artists to identify themselves in her.

Her love of music is contagious, the depth and sincerity of her feeling immediately apparent, and the clarity of her judgment swiftly and forcibly communicated. It is impossible to believe she has not materially shaped modern French music even though she has deliberately withheld her own visible contribution to it. The modern French school has probably received an impulse toward greater force and coherence through her active personal interest in the work of Schmitt, Roussel, Poulenc, Migot and many others. The long list of composers with whom she has been associated may be extended to include Dukas, Roger-Ducasse, Milhaud, Honegger, Ravel and Stravinsky. She effectively encouraged wider and more intelligent appreciation of their music at a time when it was less well known than it is now, thus accelerating its general acceptance. Particularly noteworthy is the ardor with which she has continued to champion the cause of Stravinsky, who, incidentally, collaborates with her in the instruction of the composition classes both at the Ecole Normale and the Fontainebleau Conservatory. The younger Parisians too, owe her a definite debt, among them Jean Françaix and, most outstanding of her emigré pupils in recent years, Igor Markévitch.

To the contemporary American school Mlle. Boulanger has been a godmother. Scattered about this country are literally hundreds of musicians who have benefited by her training. A large majority of the prominent younger composers have studied with her or at least consulted her from time to time; in the top ranks now are men like Copland, Harris and Piston, her pupils in the early twenties.

Not only theory students and composers, but organists, of course, and other instrumentalists, even singers come to her door.

A surprisingly substantial number of concert artists have at some time stolen off to the rue Ballu for special coaching. Apparently there is no tonal medium of which Mlle. Boulanger does not possess a comprehensive understanding; the number and perfection of her musical skills are astonishing. Composers bring her elaborate orchestral scores and are amazed at the quick grasp of content and the ability to detect at a glance errors in the most remote corners of the transposing parts. The fluency of her score reading is equally impressive; anyone who has heard her play the Beethoven quartets at the piano, has experienced something very close to a miracle.

The secret of this magnetism, which creates a fraternity of admirers and disciples, is due partly to the personal interest she takes in her pupils as individuals. Not only their artistic life, but their social, psychological and economic problems are her concern. This personal attention, particularly valuable to Americans caught in the cross-currents of intellectual Paris, has had the natural effect of drawing some pupils into position of dependence upon her and of interdependence among each other. At one time this following attained so marked a character that it was smilingly referred to as the "Boulangerie."

However, the Boulanger "school" must not be judged by its undergraduates alone. Many talented composers, who received their initial impetus and inspiration from her, have emerged to go their own ways and make their independent marks, creating modes of expression as different from hers as they are from each other. It is this achievement more than any other, that has brought special fame and honor to Mlle. Boulanger as an educator.



The tempo of her life, as she speeds back and forth from her summer home at Gargenville to Paris, and from Paris to Fontainebleau, meeting appointments and classes by the dozen, makes the business day of an American corporation-head seem leisurely by comparison. It is not uncommon for Mlle. Boulanger to teach twelve consecutive hours a day and top this off by attending or participating in a concert in the evening, after which she will take care of her extensive correspondence or plan courses until three in the morning and begin all over again at eight.

This Spartan existence, almost devoid of recreation or luxury, is something she cannot do without. It is, paradoxically, her one great source of pleasure. And yet its monastic severity results neither in constraint nor feverishness, but liberates energies and provides, as no other plan of life could, the independence essential to her truly creative power.

Her method of transmitting this force to others is more intuitive than scientific. It is achieved by skillfully and wisely adapting her approach to the needs of each pupil. She has a horror of dogmatic systems, and has never been willing to write a theory text. But she is too deeply rooted in French scholasticism to be oblivious to the value of its discipline, and she has always been too intelligent to be its dupe. Anchored in the Fauré tradition, which bridged a transition period in French music and, impregnated with the inevitable French passion for order, she is at heart a classicist whose sympathies, spurred by an unusually acute spirit of inquiry, have taken her far in two directions, the future and the past. Meeting in her, these extremes have formed a synthesis by which she achieves her own interpretation of the present.

Enriching characteristics of this unique temperament are a tolerance, a catholicity of taste, a liberation from all that is commonplace, and an ability to instill in others her own disinterested appreciation of every genuine manifestation of beauty. Eclecticism in her is so broad that it seems to embody contradictory allegiances. Equally curious, and perhaps inexplicable even to herself, is her apparent willingness to give as much pedagogical attention to a mediocre talent as to a potential genius.

If there is any explanation for the breadth of her sympathies and imaginative scope, it is perhaps that she is efficiently operative both as human being and as artist. With her dynamic vitality, she generates a current that constantly seeks and uncovers in music whatever is alive and translatable in terms of human experience.