

Episode 1

Nadia Boulanger & the Longy School of Music : a French-American story

1. Intro

Mademoiselle... No first name, no last name, just *Mademoiselle*. That one word was used to refer to two of the most illustrious Frenchwomen of the 20th Century, along with the fashion industry feminist heroine Coco Chanel.

In the musical world, when people as different as Quincy Jones and John Eliot Gardiner, Aaron Copland and Astor Piazzolla, Michel Legrand and Philip Glass heard the word *Mademoiselle*, they all understood it correctly to mean Miss Nadia Boulanger, their dear friend or mentor, the priestess of music, the hidden figure behind most of the composers of the 20th century. Born in 1887, she lived to be 92 years old, and was both a witness to and a propeller of historical changes.

This *Mademoiselle* was a pianist, an organist, briefly a composer, then a teacher, a music educator and a conductor. She changed the way music was taught in her time and for generations to come. She exercised her influence in her hometown of Paris, as well as in the United States where she taught for several years at the Longy School of Music.

Her impact was exceptional; her (life) story is too.

Join us for 3 episodes dedicated to the life and legacy of Nadia Boulanger...

We will explore topics such as her stay in America, the importance in the development of the French-American relationship, her teaching relationships with the famous composers in her life and her larger role as a pioneer for the representation of women in music.

TITLE / Nadia Boulanger and the Longy School of Music - a French-American (love?) story. Music.

2. Mademoiselle, biographical elements

To picture Paris in 1887, the year Nadia was born, is a pretty easy task. There are the impressionist paintings that show the bustling city. Horse-drawn carriages and crowd of elegant women wearing Worth dresses. There are the pictures of the Eiffel Tower being built - at the time, only the four pillars had been finished. Descriptions in novels by Emile Zola and Guy de Maupassant. And there is the music, the enchanting, overwhelmingly beautiful music of César Franck, Camille Saint-Saëns and Gabriel Fauré, that was being made at the time.

Musique

Those were the sounds surrounding the young Nadia. She was the first surviving daughter of Ernest Boulanger, an esteemed opera composer, and his wife Raïssa. Raïssa Myschetsky, rumored to be a princess even though nothing is certain, was a mysterious and glamorous figure. She was born in Saint Petersburg where she met Ernest, — he was touring Russia as a conductor in 1874. Despite their 40 years age difference, Raïssa and Ernest fell madly in love. The young Russian woman moved to Paris where she dedicated herself to the education of her daughters. First Nadia in 1887, then Lili, in 1893, 6 years later.

When Nadia started playing the piano at 5 years old, her mother deemed it “a bit late”. But she soon caught up, studying with her father and, starting age 9, at the Conservatoire de Paris. In 1900, the year her father died, she was admitted to Paul Dukas’ piano accompaniment class and four years later, she won first prizes in organ, fugue and piano accompaniment. These prizes were paramount for her career : they meant she could be on her way to her true aim, a Prix de Rome. This award distinguished each year the best composer and meant a lifetime of contracts and financial safety.

Nadia made twice the final round for the Prix de Rome but failed to win. This meant she had to become a full-time teacher to earn a living. Meanwhile, her sister Lili won in 1913. She became the first woman to ever win the prize. Nadia and Lili were known as the Boulanger sisters, celebrities of their time.

Musique

During WW1, the Boulanger sisters dedicated themselves to the war effort. They focused on musicians to whom they sent care packages on the front line. They kept them informed of what was going on in the musical world through a weekly magazine they edited.

In 1918, Nadia’s world changed forever : Lili, age 24, died from a chronic illness - this was a defining moment - we will come back to it in episode 3.

After Lili’s death, Nadia moved on to the freshly created Ecole Normale de Paris and Centre Fontainebleau where she became a lead teacher. Both schools aimed to welcome foreign students who wanted to study in France.

Musique

3. Meanwhile in America...

Meanwhile, Nadia's future base of Boston was actively building a musical culture. It was originally dominated by German trained musicians and the music of German composers. In 1881, Henry Lee Higginson founded the Boston Symphony Orchestra, organizing it along the lines of Austrian and German orchestras. Up until WW1, the musical directors were German or Austrian imports, recruited in Europe.

Change came from violinist and composer Charles Martin Loeffler who was German by birth but became devoted to French musical and literary culture when he studied in Paris. In 1882, he moved to Boston where he became Second Concertmaster of the BSO. He was also a sought-after composer and soloist, a favorite of Bostonian patron of the arts Isabella Stewart Gardner. As a composer, Loeffler employed modern French harmonic style. He also drew heavily on French literature in his tone poems and song settings.

Another important figure was George Longy who was born in France in 1868 and received his training at the Paris Conservatoire. He was recruited by Higginson in 1898 as principle oboe, a position he held until his retirement in 1925. Soon after his arrival in Boston, Longy embarked upon a series of projects that had a profound effect on the musical life of his adopted city. In 1899 he became conductor of the Boston Orchestral Club, a mostly amateur orchestra with some professional players.

In 1900, Longy founded the Georges Longy Club, an all wind ensemble modelled on a similar Parisian one. It was a novelty for Bostonians to hear programs involving only wind instruments (with piano when needed). This ensemble also provided Longy with an opportunity to introduce Boston audiences to unfamiliar contemporary repertoire, especially that of his French compatriots.

The most enduring legacy of Longy's musical activity was the School he opened on October 1, 1915 at his apartment on Hemenway Street in Boston. An account of the inception of the school written by William C. Mason was included in *The Purple Book*. It was published in 1925 to commemorate the first decade of the School and to honor Georges Longy upon his retirement as Director:

"...a school for Solfege in Boston, which had nothing of its like in its musical life. It was founded for the purpose of teaching music in a correct, thorough and scientific manner, the intention of the instruction based on those of the Paris Conservatory."

The founding of the Longy school coincided with WW1 and a rise of anti-German sentiment in the US. This hit close to home as the BSO's German music director, Karl Muck, was interned on grounds of treason. He had been accused of refusing to perform the national anthem at Symphony Hall. Muck's replacement was a Frenchman, Henri Rabaud. He promptly recruited some compatriots for the orchestra. Many of these musicians joined the school's faculty.

Musique

4. The road to Longy

Paris rose surprisingly quickly from the chaos of the war. It was a time of incredible buoyancy and *joie de vivre*. A time you can read about in Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*. Everyone was in Paris, buying books at the famed bookshop Shakespeare and Company, and drinking at La Coupole. F. Scott Fitzgerald and Pablo Picasso, Sylvia Beach and James Joyce, Gertrude Stein and Sergei Diaghilev, Darius Milhaud and Igor Stravinsky were mingling in the cafés of Montparnasse and Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

As far as music is concerned, the French-American relationship was taking form. The French operated a school to teach American soldiers how to play military band music. It was directed by the pianist Francis Casadesus, in cooperation with American conductor Walter Damrosch and General John J. Pershing. After the war, Casadesus and Damrosch came up with another plan a school of fine arts and music in one of France's grandest castles, the Palace of Fontainebleau.

Fontainebleau had been a residence of kings and emperors, particularly favored by Napoleon. And musicians studied with Nadia in the beautiful setting of the residence, surrounded by a gorgeous park. The Conservatoire Américain ran classes only for the summer, 3 months a year. As Nadia loved to say : "summer is the best time to work". The purpose was to give students a taste of French education and culture.

It was the summer of 1921. Mademoiselle was in her early thirties. Her austere beauty entranced many of her students. Future Longy director Melville Smith confessed to having been in love with her. She epitomized the modern woman, speeding through the countryside around Fontainebleau in her own automobile. Among the many American students was a promising young composer by the name of Aaron Copland. He wrote in a letter to his brother Ralph, "This intellectual Amazon is not only professor at the Conservatoire, is not only familiar with all music from Bach to Stravinsky, but is prepared for anything worse in the way of dissonance. But make no mistake ... A more charming womanly woman never lived. »

Copland later told stories about the hostility to American music he encountered even from a fellow artist like Marcel Duchamp. Traveling to Europe, they met on an ocean liner. The Frenchman told Copland to forget art and become a businessman like his father, claiming "America is a place of business". So it was refreshing and energizing for him to hear Nadia Boulanger express nothing but enthusiasm for America and particularly jazz. "Her faith in the future of America is striking", Copland wrote, "But her faith does not rest on a blind sympathy, but in testimony of the works she already knows."

Musique

Melville Smith was convinced Nadia was just what the American musical scene needed. "She is just right for a Harvard man!", he told Virgil Thomson. It helped that Na-

dia was esteemed by the greatest composer of the time, Igor Stravinsky. Stravinsky had sought her out to supervise his younger son's musical education. They engaged in a professional courtship that brought them to collaborate on the edition of some of Stravinsky's works such as the Symphony of Psalms. Nadia also brought Stravinsky in as a co-teacher for a composition course at the Ecole Normale de Musique de Paris.

Musique : Symphonie des Psaumes

5. At the Salon de la Princesse de Polignac

Instrumental to Nadia's career was her friendship with the Princesse de Polignac who was - despite her name - American. Born an heiress to the Singer sewing machine fortune, Winnaretta married into one of the most prestigious aristocratic French families, the Polignac, in 1893. Her salon on the beautiful avenue Henri-Martin welcomed concerts by Chabrier, Debussy, Ravel and Franck... Winnie as her friends called her was also passionate about avant-garde music. She commissioned work most notably from Stravinsky, Poulenc, and Germaine Tailleferre.

Nadia Boulanger performed as an organist in the princess's atelier as early as 1917. She may have been introduced to her by her former teacher Gabriel Fauré, who was a great friend of the Winnie. The two women got along well and Nadia became a sort of musical adviser to the princesse. They shared an interest in the Swiss Russian composer Igor Markevitch, Diaghilev's last discovery and Nadia's student.

At the end of 1932, Polignac began to attend Boulanger's Wednesday afternoon sessions with her students. These sessions held at Nadia's apartment rue Ballu focused on Bach's cantatas. The rugs were rolled up, folding chairs were brought in and 30 to 50 students gathered to sing, with the orchestra parts played at two pianos. Nadia stood at one of the piano, and directed from there. She regularly stopped to comment a particular passage.

Musique - concerto de Brandebourg

Nadia's first concert at the Salon took place in June 1933. A chorus of 30 and an orchestra of 22 players and organ performed extracts from 9 different Bach cantatas as well as a Vivaldi concerto and the fifth Brandenburg Concerto. Mademoiselle was aware of how influential the princesse de Polignac was. Her daily diaries show how flattered she was by her attention and support.

Mademoiselle also started her famed group of singers, made of both professionals and amateurs, for the Salon. Those who were fortunate enough to attend these musicals spread the word about the quality of the singing and the unusual content of the programs, so that Nadia and her singers were soon asked to give public concerts. It was a huge success : they gave more than 50 concerts for the year 1937 alone. This success and Winnaretta's continued support brought Mademoiselle to expand her scope to the UK and the USA.

6. International tours and conducting career

Nadia had started conducting in concert halls as early as 1912. It was not an easy endeavor for a young woman, as the profession was completely male-dominated. But Nadia had a precious ally: her former professor and rumored lover, the pianist Raoul Pugno. Mademoiselle Boulanger and Pugno got hired as a team. In the summer of 1913, they embarked on a concert tour of French spa towns. In December, they left together for Russia. But on the night of their first Moscow concert, Pugno was too sick to play. Sergei Rachmaninoff was contacted to take his place as the soloist, but he refused, as he was terribly afraid of germs. The concert was cancelled and Pugno died in early January.

After that shock, Nadia stopped conducting for a long time. But on February 13th, 1934, twenty years after that fateful Russian trip, she made her Parisian debut as a conductor. She directed the orchestra of the Ecole Normale thanks to the princesse de Polignac's connection with director Alfred Cortot. Two years later, she was offered a job conducting concerts at the luxurious Hotel George V. Anthony Lewis, a responsible for the BBC, had studied with Nadia at Fontainebleau. He invited his former professor to London for a series of five programs which were recorded by the BBC. They focused on French vocal music from the French Renaissance to the present day, including two premieres by Poulenc : "Litanies à la Vierge Noire" and the fifth of his "Sept chansons".

During that same London trip, in November 1936, Nadia became the first woman to conduct the London Philharmonic Orchestra for the British premiere of Fauré's Requiem. Her faithful patron Winnaretta Singer de Polignac funded the evening which was a major critical and public success. Despite or because of this success, there was tension between the two women. In 1938, the princesse wrote to Nadia : "You say my attitude has changed... If I never see you anymore, is it my fault? It is you who is always (busy fortunately) and not me". She was nervous about Boulanger's growing international reputation, and particularly worried that she might want to move to the United States.

Boulanger and her singers performed in salons and private concerts, then moved into large concert halls, television, and radio. Their success was crucial to the twentieth-century reception of older music and to the dissemination of new works. Boulanger and Polignac shared interest in Fauré, Stravinsky, Poulenc, Markevitch, and Françaix, among others. Pieces by these composers were mainstays of the group's programs.

7. First of sex to conduct the BSO

An East Coast resident opening the *New York Sun* On February 15, 1938 would have read a long article about the French Mademoiselle, in a section called “News of Women”, under the catchy title : « Woman who refused to teach George Gershwin -First of her sex to conduct Boston Symphony

Madame Nadia Boulanger, famous French musician is being rushed by Harvard boys who want to enter her classes.

Smashing tradition is such an old story to Mme Nadia Boulanger that it has lost its thrill. She has been doing it all her life.

Mme. Boulanger is the fragile little French lady who has just arrived here to become visiting lecturer in music at Radcliffe.

Boys from Harvard are standing in line to sign up for her classes, which in itself is an upset. Usually, it's the other way around. Girls from Radcliffe straining at the leash to get into the classes of some famous Harvard don.

Before she leaves, she will disintegrate still another old Boston custom; for she will be the first woman guest conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

It's the sort of honor that would send most women musicians straight into seventh heaven, but she is matter-of-fact about it. A Boston reporter asked her how it felt to be the first woman conductor of the famous old orchestra, and she said :

« I've been a woman for a little over fifty years, and have gotten over my initial astonishment. « As for conducting an orchestra, that's a job. I don't think sex plays much part. »

Along with these witty quotes, that same article gives us a picture of what fifty-one year-old Nadia looked like at the time :

“She stands around five feet four in her low-heeled shoes. She has white hair, done into a soft roll piled up on the back of her neck. She has bright, birdlike eyes. Candidly, this interviewer can't say offhand whether they are blue, brown or gray. But they are alert and inquiring.

She wears black shoes and stockings, and usually, black gowns, which manage to give the impression of a uniform. There's usually a silver chain around her neck, and an old-fashioned sunburst in her black tie”.

The journalist particularly focused on her hands : “Talking to her, you have to watch very closely to observe three things, because you have trouble taking your eyes off her hands. They are the most eloquent hands since Bernhardt's. Swift as swallows, graceful as swans, they express every emotion with a richness and a vigor that makes mere speech seem inadequate.

She can register indifference, indignation, enthusiasm, despair, irritation, without opening her mouth.”

And the article concludes : “Mme Nadia is refreshing, At heart, she is a music teacher.”

Musique

8. The outbreak of WW2

After touring the United States, Nadia Boulanger was back in France in 1939. She spent the summer with her dear friend Igor Stravinsky who had just lost two beloved members of his family, his daughter and his mother. The Fontainebleau school had been closed because of the threat of war, and all foreign students were urged to return home. Stravinsky retreated to Boulanger's summer cottage in Gargenville and took up residence there in July. Boulanger turned her home into a center for cultural discussion that summer, and both Paul Valéry and Edward Forbes visited to meet with her and Stravinsky. Stravinsky read to the guests his Harvard lectures, tentatively entitled "Poétique musicale".

When World War 2 started, Stravinsky immediately left for the United States. Nadia Boulanger waited patiently. She kept herself busy by helping some of her students to leave France and taking part in concerts to finance the war. Her way out came from her former American student, the organist Melville Smith who was about to be named head of the Longy School of Music. By July 1940, a few weeks after the French capitulation, she had accepted a teaching post at the school. On December 6th, after an excruciating wait for a visa, she left Paris for Cambridge, Massachusetts.

She arrived in America after stops in Madrid and Lisbon and a difficult crossing of the Atlantic. In Cambridge, Nadia found herself on well-known ground. Mademoiselle spoke excellent English, she had toured the United States for concerts several times, she had many friends and contacts there.

9. Her stay at the Longy School of Music

In the Longy archives, one can find a lengthy correspondence between Nadia and the administration to agree on the smallest details of her contract. In the end, her contract detailed her teaching plan : courses, private lessons, lectures and concerts. She taught harmony, counterpoint and fugue, composition, she lectured on Bach cantatas and Beethoven sonatas, and also conducted the chorus for performances of Bach cantatas (in connection with the Bach cantata course).

Longy School advertised her public lectures on Bach and Beethoven everywhere - in specialized magazines like Musical America or Musical Courier and in general newspapers such as The Boston Globe. Bach was on Monday, and Beethoven on Thursday.

Professionally, Nadia was thriving, but personally it was a difficult time in her life. Her letters reveal that she struggled with a form of depression. On March 17th 1941 she wrote an emotional letter to Igor Stravinsky :

My dear friend,

I am ashamed not to have written to you yet, but I am very busy, and I am also experiencing a severe emotional crisis. . . . The sense of shame that I have for leaving at such a time weighs very heavily on my soul. I should have known, but then again, what to do differently. To help them over there, I had to take on this other task.

Anyway, as you can see, things aren't going very well . . .

I didn't know how much I loved France, how much I need her, and how much, in her weakness, I would feel her greatness. How we have served her poorly, we Frenchmen, whose flesh and spirit were formed by her, her traditions, her faith . . .

What have we done with this heritage that was our honor and for which we were responsible? To wake from this horrible nightmare, since that is what our national life has been, we understand all too suddenly, and there are not enough tears to offer to God. It has nothing to do with sentimentality, rather, it's an awakening of conscience—such a thing is worth experiencing a weighty crisis for. We are seen cruelly in a merciless reflection, the result is well worth the suffering . . . Forgive me for all of this makes no sense except to me. But I am so alone with respect to this that I have to open my heart. And who would be able to understand like you? But there is no luck in being honored with such weighty confidences as this. This doesn't matter, it is well worth it, because how many men are beating their breast at this moment?

One wouldn't think that, in seeing this interminable and useless letter, that I have little time. But it is easier to say everything, in complete disorder, than to choose, eliminate, refuse, and give form . . .

Give my love to Vera, and don't worry, I'm done. I send my love. I miss you both terribly, and I want to hope that we will see each other soon . . . some day.

Yours, Nadia

Stravinsky replied to this unusual display of emotion and sadness by affirming his love for Mademoiselle. Soon after, Nadia took a long time off and traveled to the West Coast. She spent a few months with the Stravinskys. In 1943, the composer dedicated his Sonata for 2 pianos to her.

Musique - sonate pour deux pianos

10. Back to France

After the war, Nadia who had suffered from *mal du pays*, was anxious to get back to Paris. Upon her arrival in 1946, she found a much changed city, impoverished and tried by the horrors of the German occupation.

Yet, Mademoiselle went back to business as usual, in the apartment rue Ballu where she and Lili had lived as children. Every Wednesday at 3 p.m, the doors opened for a select group of her Conservatoire students and foreigners such as Philip Glass.

She also became the head of the Conservatoire américain de Fontainebleau. Smart, driven young composers kept crossing the Atlantic to study with her - that is how Phi-

lip Glass and Elliott Carter came to be her pupils. The French-American connection that Nadia embodied never weakened. It is still to be felt nowadays, aligned with George Longy's heritage, at the Longy School of Music. Her teachings have remained a staple of curriculum to this day.

Teaching was indeed the mission of her life. Asked by a Boston reporter back in 1938 if she didn't find teaching boring at times, she answered : "*I have been teaching for 34 years. If I had been boring myself I would have wasted all that time. No, I love teaching - always, there is a possibility you will uncover a genius*". Indeed she uncovered quite a few - we will explore that in our next episode.