

Nadia Boulanger and Ruth Robbins: An Unexpected Friendship That Helped Preserve Musical Legacy During WWII

The profound bond formed during wartime between musical genius Nadia Boulanger and her modest student Ruth Robbins lasted for decades until Boulanger's death in 1979.

Nadia was at a low point when she arrived in the United States. She felt worried and guilty about those left behind. She saw everything she believed in—spiritual faith, humanitarianism, music, beloved musicians—under threat. Four months after her arrival, in her March 18, 1941 letter to Doda Conrad, she wrote:

I drag with me the shame of having left (and though I couldn't have done otherwise, that doesn't change anything at all). I carry around my old incurable wounds, whose healing would make me despair: they are all that remains to me of a past that was so sweet, so dear and so beautiful, that, if I were allowed to choose [whether or not to heal], my decision would be without hesitation.

After this brief poetic wallow in misery, Nadia sets her sights on regaining beauty:

Nevertheless other duties call, and we have to find again our enthusiasm and our energy.... We will set ourselves to work, and we will run up against obstacles that we will end up, if not vanquishing, at least diminishing; we will be touched to the bottom of our souls by the music of a poor man, as miserable as we are, in fact, and however sad and miserable he was (after all, just like us), because it was given to him to encounter God, and to make us encounter Him, everything—even our most profound and legitimate distress—will take on a different color. And between friendship and art, we will quickly find again the real meaning of life, its beauty and our love for it.

Jeanice Brooks highlights that this letter to Doda Conrad “ties her musical work to her sense of loss, viewed not as trauma to be overcome or forgotten but as pain that can be transformed by music into a renewal of life. The epigraph that had always accompanied invitations to the Mass in memory of Lili Boulanger — ‘I offer to God all my sufferings so that they may fall again upon you as joy’ — seems to encapsulate Nadia’s understanding of the musical work, and her own work in interpreting it.”

When Nadia arrived in the United States and first met Ruth, she was in crisis. Her sense of loss was overwhelming, and she needed to find her direction again. This period also may have been a turning point in Boulanger’s view of her own role and the roles of all who fought with her against the tide of hatred and fear that came with war. She could only agonize over the fate of those left behind, but with fellow exiles like Doda Conrad and Igor Stravinsky, and with the support of her American students and benefactors, she could fight the war on the side of humanism. As the reality of her exile came home, she realized she and her tribe of humanists were in fact engaged in a life and death battle for the spirit of civilization.

In 1942, Ruth wrote to Nadia asking how her study of music could compare with becoming a nurse or working in a factory:

So many times I wonder if it is not just selfishness that makes me return to Cambridge to have another year of music as full and rich as last year. I love it so, but realize that I have contributed nothing and probably will contribute very little along that line, and would probably be much more useful as a worker in an airplane factory or as a nurse.

In her response Nadia ties Ruth’s study of music to addressing the greatest problem of their era—the threat to civilization.

...this problem of values, of education, of tradition, of thought, of art is so great that we have only to stop for a minute to think of history, to have the answer... There must be men to fight, making the gift of their best years, of their life to save what the one who cannot fight, or women must defend of not less precious treasury. Done to escape is awful, done to develop is what has to be, if one fights not only against, but also for what is more than life, and what gives real meaning to Victory.

To fight “for what is more than life, and what gives real meaning to Victory” is an aesthete’s battle cry, with musicians as foot soldiers in a war to preserve beauty and truth. Is battle metaphor in her description of music a new phenomenon? This is a great question for musicologists to answer. Knocked flat with the invasion of France in 1940, by 1942 she clearly had rebounded. She channeled anxiety and despair into a new aesthetic militancy and determination to fight the good fight.

There was a wealth of young talent in Boulanger’s advanced music theory classes of 1940-1943 at the Longy School. Nineteen-year-old composer and piano prodigy Douglas Allenbrook (1921-2003) had started writing serious music at thirteen and went on to become an illustrious composer. Twenty-four-year-old Canadian talent Jean Papineau-Couture (1916-2000) had stellar career in music education and composition and, through Nadia Boulanger, became an ardent follower and associate of Stravinsky. Twenty-one-year-old Harvard student Harold Shapero (1920-2013) had just completed his *Nine-Minute Overture*, a work that caught the ear of Aaron Copeland and won the Rome Prize in 1941. Seventeen-year-old Claudio Spies (b. 1925), his secondary education in Chile completed, came to study at Longy and the New England Conservatory on his way to becoming a close friend and supporter of Igor Stravinsky and distinguished professor of music at Harvard, Vassar, Swarthmore, Princeton and Juilliard.

For Nadia, engaging with these young students must have been a balm that helped assuage the trauma of leaving France. This was not a class in performance or technique, rather a lecture, with the students grouped around the grand piano in Boulanger’s airy classroom on the second floor of the Longy School. She opined from the piano bench, using the keyboard to demonstrate. If Ruth lacked the precocity and talent of many of her classmates, nonetheless her maturity, intelligence, and quiet logic would have served her well in this class. She earned the 3rd award in counterpoint and the 2nd award in theory. In her grade report at the end of the 1942-1943 school year, Boulanger rated Ruth low in musical talent, but high in “Application: effort, faithfulness in preparation....” In Ruth, she found a student who was earnest, hardworking, intelligent, and good humored, even if not overly talented.

Nadia took to Ruth from the beginning. The earliest letter we have from Nadia to Ruth, dated August 1941, nine months after Nadia’s arrival at Longy, discusses sharing a house. Ruth had been generous, making a scholarship contribution on behalf of Boulanger’s students, which was split 50-50 between Léo Préger and a scholarship fund for American composers. Clearly from the beginning there was a level of trust and communication between Ruth and Nadia.

By May of 1942, Ruth was exploding with love for her new-found mentor who opened doors to truth and beauty.

There is no way for me to describe to you what this year's work has meant to me (and music is only a *small* part of it), but it has created quite a problem. All my life I have dreamed of having such an experience and of working with someone in whom I had absolute confidence, and now that I have had it, and am having it, I do not know what to dream about anymore! I often wonder why I, of all the millions of people on this earth, should be one of those fortunate few to have been let out of the mist and shown where I am and why, and where I must go, and to be helped along the way. It is such a wonderful discovery. In order to thank you in a tangible way, I am enclosing a check which I hope will make it possible for someone else to study with you who might not otherwise have the opportunity. [13 August 1941]

The 53-year-old Nadia certainly appreciated the wealth of talent in her Longy classes, yet she had the strongest appreciation for perhaps the least talented. Long experienced working with younger people, and with her highly sensitive perceptiveness, she could easily see Ruth's character, and she liked it. It was much the same character Winnaretta Singer Polignac saw in Boulanger herself when they first met in 1932. As described by Sylvia Kahan, Polignac was struck that Boulanger "presented herself so simply and modestly, yet the quiet fervor for the music that she loved communicated itself so powerfully." Did Nadia Boulanger see something of her younger self in Ruth? When she first met Polignac, Boulanger's faith and fervor had not yet been tested by the cultural and social destruction she witnessed in the run-up to the Second World War and the Nazi invasion of France. Ruth may have reminded her of her innocence.

If so, Ruth's modest ambition to improve herself while contributing to a better world, her quiet wit, and her firmness of purpose, likely rekindled in Nadia an earlier and more optimistic version of herself. In mid-crisis—while re-orienting her life and re-defining her values—she may have found in Ruth an innocence and faith in the future similar to what once had been her own.

On her part, Ruth was immensely struck by the wisdom and vision of her new mentor. She had "absolute confidence" in Nadia. Such trust and adoration were no doubt welcomed by Nadia in her time of duress.

In fact, Nadia clearly says as much. In an August 1942 letter, she writes to Ruth: "for old as I am, the only hope and consolation is found in you, the young ones, and your affection and your confidence are great comfort."

In October 1943, an exhausted Nadia decided to take a long-needed rest from her overbooked teaching schedule at Longy and in Baltimore, to spend a few months at the Montecito estate of Arthur and Georgette Sachs. She promptly wrote to Ruth to come immediately: "Go tomorrow to the ticket office."

This relationship was of great emotional value to both parties. Nadia benefitted from the companionship and enthusiastic assistance of a modest, honest, good-humored admirer with whom she got along easily. Ruth was enraptured by Nadia's world of refinement, elegance, and moral clarity. With Nadia's affection and support, Ruth was welcomed into her inner circle, both in the United States and, after the War, in France. After their travels together in the U.S. in 1962 Nadia wrote to Ruth, "How strange it will be to go on without you—and how sad—but, these weeks will always remain with me. Such a gift of oneself is a blessing, and it has given to all these journeys a character of confidence, of rest, of intimacy quite unique." Ruth's upbeat manner inspired confidence in Nadia, her relaxed manner allowed Nadia to rest, and her directness made intimacy easy.

Their affection for one another remained strong until Nadia's death in 1979. Ruth carried her memories of Nadia in her heart until her death in 2005 at age 95. Ruth's last years were in a cottage on a family compound overlooking the San Francisco Bay. Her beloved grandnieces, Nathalie and Gabby, lived across the lawn. To amuse them Ruth would often read passages from Nadia's letters. Wonderful turns of phrase emerged, as Gabby wrote, "Things like, 'How big is our shranked world? I am here and you are there, and that makes all the difference,' or 'Read all what is not written and believe me to be, as ever, your, N.B.'" What is fascinating about these phrases is not just unusual grammar. They also convey a sense of the grand and universal that reflects the heights from which Nadia Boulanger viewed the world.

One anecdote, already alluded to above, had a profound effect on Gabby. Perhaps it captures in narrative form something important to Nadia, and important to Ruth, as well. As Ruth told her grandniece, on one of her summer visits to France in the early 1960s, she was driving Nadia from the south, through the night, back to Paris for an important engagement the next day. Intent on making it to Paris, Ruth was surprised when Nadia told her to turn off the main road to visit Chartres Cathedral. In pre-dawn, they approached the west portal and entered the cathedral, passing under the magnificent tympanum of the left door featuring Christ floating above on a cloud supported by two angels. Once inside, one can only imagine what was in their minds. Surely, they were silent, perhaps quiet whispers between them. Nadia must have felt great emotional comfort to be within the embrace of the magnificent cathedral. I imagine her running through her mind passages from Stravinsky's Mass and Bach's Mass in B Minor, feeling the aptness of the music to the ritualized space of the Church. No doubt she cast her eyes on the artifacts she loved and took in the vaulted heights, expanses, and mysterious qualities that made one feel God's presence. As dawn grew, she may have noted how light gifted by God illuminated the stained glass art of man, creating within the viewer a sense of connection and holiness.

Church and religious ritual had never been a part of Ruth's life. Yet Nadia opened a door to beauty and gave Ruth a sense of purpose and value she never before had. Ruth repeated the story of this visit to her grandnieces and others. It made a good story; the experience had made a deep impression on her. Was this story important to Ruth because it encapsulated a truth she had learned from Nadia? Nadia had plenty of drive, clear purpose, and important engagements, but all to one end, to create and experience beauty. Ruth, that morning, may have looked up at the growing colors of the filtered dawn and felt deep gratitude for Nadia Boulanger's greatest gift to her: how to put beauty at the center of life.