

Nadia Boulanger: A Tribal Leader Who Shaped 20th Century Classical Music

Exploring Boulanger's leadership, influence, and relationships, revealing how she inspired a diverse tribe of musicians to preserve classical music traditions.

If a tribe can be described as a people linked by social ties, with common culture, common dialect, and a commonly recognized leader, then when she met Ruth in 1940, Nadia Boulanger was a well-established tribal leader. Her tribal culture was based on belief in the transformative, spiritual power of music. The tribe's dialect originated at the Conservatoire de Paris where Boulanger was educated. It was nurtured and perfected in her Wednesday salons. It spread internationally through her lectures and performances, as well as her work at the American Conservatory at Fontainebleau, Longy School of Music, and a variety of American universities.

Widely diverse in nationality, social status, and gender orientation, the Boulanger tribe (often ironically referred to by her students as "La Boulangerie") attracted a number of notably strong-minded, independent, highly competent women. Take Annette Dieudonné (1896-1991) for instance. An early student who became a lifelong collaborator and supporter, she occupied Nadia's Paris apartment during the Second World War. In her role as the Paris Conservatoire librarian, as the Germans approached Paris, she buried the Conservatoire's valuable manuscripts in the countryside to protect them from bombs or confiscation. She was awarded the Legion d'honneur in recognition of her bravery.

Cécile Armagnac (1913-1997) began as a student of Nadia's in 1935. During the War, she served in the "ambulancières" (ambulance corps) and was awarded a Croix de Guerre for her service. Independently wealthy, she chose not the easy life available to her at the Armagnac estate, but to engage with her tribe to preserve a culture threatened by international chaos. She served as a founder and Secrétaire générale de la Fondation Nadia et Lili Boulanger.

Or take American sewing machine heiress Winnaretta Singer, Princesse de Polignac (1865-1943). Twenty-two years Nadia's senior, she was impressed by the younger woman who "presented herself so simply and modestly, yet whose quiet fervor for the music that she loved communicated itself so powerfully." The Princess dedicated her heart and purse to leadership in the arts and public service. From 1894 until her husband's death in 1901, the de Polignac salon hosted the first performances of Debussy, Fauré, and Ravel, among others. After her husband's death, she honored his memory with numerous commissions, including for Stravinsky's "Renard", Satie's "Socrate", Milhaud's "Les Malheurs d'Orphée", Poulenc's "Concerto for Two Pianos", and Kurt Weill's "Second Symphony". After she met Nadia Boulanger in 1932, she became a strong supporter of students, composers, and performances related to the Boulanger circle.

One could continue to list independent, competent women in Nadia Boulanger's orbit—Marcelle de Manziarly, Louise Talma, and Winifred Johnstone come to mind—but the point is that Nadia Boulanger was their commonly recognized leader. Why? What drew such strong personalities to her and how did she ignite their passion?

Recent literature on Boulanger understandably focuses largely on her musical career. Music is what animated her. Kimberly Francis convincingly demonstrates the depth and breadth of Boulanger's impact on taste, theory, and performance of 20th-century classical music in her incisive study of Boulanger's influence, "Teaching Stravinsky". Francis leaves little doubt Boulanger was the dominant strategist and tactician in the neoclassical arena. Jeanice Brooks highlights Boulanger's strongly felt belief that fidelity to the work itself is the principal goal of music. Fidelity to "works that stand for time"—those with enduring value, representing the highest culture of their time—creates a communal ritual. Performers, audience, and the work itself participate together in an evanescent unity of spiritual experience. Boulanger wrote to Stravinsky in 1938, "the work of art, to a certain degree, is an image of God."

Nadia Boulanger shaped, inspired, and prodded 20th-century musical taste, theory, and performance in a direction she knew to be correct. Music could and should bring out the better angels of human nature. She was a torch carrier who acted on her belief that the aim of music was to enable experience of the beauty of the soul. She poured seemingly limitless creative and productive energy into her musical projects, building cultural capital in her field of music. This passion was central to her character.

However, as with many extraordinarily talented people, Nadia Boulanger's personality was complex. Her correspondence with Ruth Robbins highlights her complexity. I am drawn to the mystery of the affectionate relationship Nadia had with my aunt Ruth, precisely because Ruth's value to Nadia was clearly unrelated to cultural capital. Ruth was of mediocre talent as a musician. She was not wealthy, well-known, or well-connected. When the 53-year-old Nadia met her in 1940, Ruth was a naïve 30-year-old striving to find her own identity separate from her family. Despite lack of sophistication or musical talent, Ruth struck a chord in Nadia's heart. Why and how did that happen? What value did Nadia find in her relationship with this unworldly Midwesterner? And from Ruth's perspective, what was it about Nadia that caused Ruth to feel awed, inspired, and enlightened?

No expert in music or music history, I have drawn upon a background in aesthetics, literary theory, psychology, and philosophy—both Western and Eastern—to consider the dynamic between mentor and mentee revealed in these letters. Viewed through a broad lens, these letters offer their insights into Nadia Boulanger's personal thoughts and beliefs, as well as the cultural currents of her times. The aesthetic

tradition she championed is an important part of what she imparts to Ruth in these letters, but they also reveal much about who she was as a person.

Applied to Nadia and her followers, a torch metaphor is apt. The flame—an evanescent experience of the highest spiritual beauty—survives only if its bearers do what is necessary. Without bearers, the flame ceases to exist.

This was Nadia's role and the role she inspired others to take on. Her ardor and faith may have peaked during the Second World War, but Nadia Boulanger lived to be 92. During the last four decades of her life, shared in her correspondence with Ruth, she experienced betrayal, death, shifting musical taste, and the gradual diminishment of her influence and capacities. In her letters, we witness a losing struggle to retain the tremendous momentum of her first fifty years. But she never lost her faith that carrying forward the torch of civilization is the highest calling in life.

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