

Nadia Boulanger: Moral Leadership and the Spiritual Essence of Music

Nadia Boulanger's charismatic influence stemmed from her intuition, spirituality, and dedication to traditional aesthetics during a tumultuous era of artistic nihilism.

Nadia Boulanger influenced others profoundly. She had charisma. While the Greek root of "charisma" refers to a state of grace or favor that draws others into one's orbit, the word, even in modern usage, offers no clue as to how the mechanics of charisma work. Nadia Boulanger displayed a range of personal and psychological characteristics that help explain her charismatic effect on others.

Important among these may have been a heightened sense of perception. A highly sensitive person, someone with a high sensory processing sensitivity or 'SPS,' as neuroscientists refer to it, reacts somatically to nuances that may go unnoticed by others (Greven et al. 287-305). People with high SPS experience the environment with physical sensation. Listening to music, for example, they may feel physical sensations—being jarred by discordant tones, soothed by expected tones, or delighted by unexpected but right tones, experienced in the musculature of the breast as well as in the mind.

Although unproven, high SPS theory applied to social relations may mean hyperawareness of others, sensing in body language or tone of voice what another person does not express. High SPS would help explain how Boulanger knew with such certainty what was musically right or wrong. She could feel it in her bones. It would also help explain why she was able to build loyal long-term relationships. As a friend, teacher, or leader, she was present and understanding.

A different angle on Boulanger's character can be drawn from considering Carl Jung's four personality variables: sensation, thinking, feeling, and intuition. "The essential function of sensation is to establish that something exists, thinking tells us what it means, feeling what its value is, and intuition surmises whence it comes and whither it goes" (Jung 144). Boulanger was undoubtedly deeply endowed with the fourth of Jung's functions: a high intuitive, someone who sees patterns and relationships behind things, who can see the past in the present, and in the present see the future. High intuitive function is what enabled her to see the future of her protégés as she put them on the right path, for example, or experience a keen need to champion spiritual beauty in a battle against the tide of poor taste. Her desire to pour energy into supporting and guiding Stravinsky in the creation of his Mass arose because she knew it would be a work that would stand in time. High intuitive function would account for much of the urgency and passion in Boulanger's life and work.

A third trait to note is Boulanger's spirituality. She experienced tragedy and took on great family responsibility at a young age. For emotional support, she relied on spirituality, especially as experienced in the rituals of the church—a conviction not just of the existence of God but of his presence and interactiveness in all aspects of life. This carried over into her understanding and appreciation of music. She had faith in higher meaning accessed through spiritual experiences, and the greatness of great works of music was their ability to create such experience, especially for those who learned how to listen.

Such faith helps explain how she was able to rise above personal circumstance and devote her life to creating an ideal realm of communal spirituality through music. While Boulanger was devoted to Catholic ritual, I find it unlikely that she thought too finely about theology. Without considering how many angels can dance on the head of a pin or how to explain transubstantiation, she could simply experience the comfort of the Mass or feel connected to those she had lost with her annual ritual of memorial services for her mother and sister.

Not only highly sensitive, highly intuitive, and highly spiritual but also highly educated and highly cultured, Boulanger grew into her leadership role not merely due to strategy and tactics—although with her vast knowledge of the musical world she was born into and had navigated all her life, she certainly knew how to achieve her ends—but also because she filled a void in early and mid-twentieth-century culture.

She had passion, perception, and expertise. Many people sensed—with dread—that the decadence, Dadaism, and desire to "épater la bourgeoisie" flourishing in France during the fin de siècle and pre-World War I eras were far from the sublime heights of civilization. Who could they turn to? Who could articulate their concern with conviction and passion? Who could correct the course of cultural decay?

Nadia Boulanger addressed these concerns on a small scale with her circle of students. It was a natural progression for her classicist influence to grow in harmonic counterpoint to the cultural chaos of the first half of the twentieth century. And it was just as natural for her influence to wane during the self-satisfied 1950s and 1960s when civilization no longer seemed at risk.

Another reason for Boulanger's impact is that the aesthetic beliefs she espoused were deeply established in philosophical traditions. During a time of moral uncertainty and social unrest, her views were highly attractive to the educated and cultured. To contextualize Boulanger's beliefs, consider the conflict between a traditional noble view of aesthetics as the appreciation of truth and beauty versus the view of philosopher John Locke that art and poetry are "quite irresponsible and not troubled with truth or reality" (qtd. in Bowra 3).

For Boulanger, the creation of music is a sacred act aiming to bring out the highest, most spiritual part of human nature. Such connection between art, emotion, and morality is described as early as the fourth century BCE. "Catharsis" in Aristotle's *Poetics* is "the purgation or cleansing of the emotions of pity and fear." Moreover, like Aristotle, Boulanger saw the importance of structure, of following the rules, in the creation of great art:

When Aristotle prescribes that a tragedy must have a beginning, a middle, and an end, he is again being faithful to one of the principles of his general philosophy. A tragedy, like every other product of art or nature, has its own unity as an individual thing. . . . The action of a play must be complete (teleios), just as the life of the good and happy man in the *Ethics* must be complete. (Bambrough 410-411)

Aristotle's vision of art influencing human emotion and morality is by no means unique, or even uniquely European. The connection between music and ethics was a basic tenet of Confucius, as well: "My young friends, why do you not study the Odes? The Odes can stimulate your emotions, broaden your observation, enlarge your fellowship, and express your grievances" (Chan, "Analects 17:9" 47). The Odes, or Book of Songs, a collection of folk lyrics related to early agrarianism, celebrates the rhythms of life with simple cadences and images.

When in the fifth century BCE Confucius asks, "Why do you not study the Odes?" he venerates a far older oral tradition—chanted or sung verse passed down, generation to generation, since before the dawn of Chinese written history—collected and recorded during the time of Confucius to become a foundation stone of the Confucian canon.

Music and ritual, as represented by the tradition of the Odes, were essential to the development of morality. "If a man is not humane (jen), what has he to do with ceremonies (li)? If he is not humane, what has he to do with music?" (Chan, "Analects, 3:3" 24). Music and ritual were foundational to humaneness or benevolence to fellow humans, a cardinal Confucian virtue. The words "let a man be stimulated by poetry, established by the rules of propriety, and perfected by music" may have been uttered by Confucius 2,500 years earlier, but they are not far from describing the role Nadia Boulanger saw for music in the twentieth century (Chan, "Analects, 8:8" 33).

Interestingly, another early Daoist philosopher, Zhuangzi (fourth century BCE), expressed something similar to Boulanger's belief that the work itself embodies an ideal that musicians can only attempt to attain: "Chao Wen was a famous lute player, but the best music he could play was only a pale and partial imitation of ideal music."

The Way—truth beyond words—is an ideal path of existence in harmony with the universe. However, later in the same passage, Zhuangzi says, "The torch of chaos and doubt—this is what the sage steers by." The sage accepts things as they are, even if to people seeking established values, things appear chaotic, doubtful, and needing explanation (Watson 37). While Confucianism focused on maintaining and developing humaneness via ritual and respect for tradition, Taoism was a disruptive philosophy that encouraged questioning all established beliefs, practices, and standards. Safe to say, Boulanger was more Confucian in outlook than Taoist.

In 1938, Boulanger wrote to Stravinsky that "the work of art, to a certain degree, is an image of God" (Brooks 251), referring to the sublime experience of music. A first-century CE Greek treatise, *Peri hypsous*, or *On the Sublime*, argues that sublimity, evoked by the highest level of rhetoric, is not due merely to technique or style but "is the echo of greatness of spirit." The treatise, once commonly attributed to the third-century rhetorician Longinus, holds that the sublime "is a thing of the spirit, a spark that leaps from the soul of the writer to the soul of his reader."

The author cites both Genesis and Zeus to emphasize the enlightened spark of artistic creation: "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light"; and "Father Zeus, kill us if thou wilt, but kill us in the light." He held that sublimity is a quality or feeling distinct from mere emotion, for not all emotion is noble or true. The sublime, he holds, arises from five sources: great thoughts, noble feeling, lofty figures, diction, and arrangement. The first two are a gift from heaven, or genius, while the latter three are arts that can be learned (Preminger 819). The *Peri hypsous* view of art and genius is at the heart of Boulanger's commitment to Stravinsky. He had mastered the art and he had native genius—a spark from heaven.

The relationship between art and "divine breath" is key to Sir Philip Sidney's *The Defense of Poesy*, written in the late sixteenth century:

Only the poet, . . . lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than Nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in Nature. . . .The heavenly Maker . . . who, having made man to His own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature: which in nothing he showeth so much as in Poetry, when with the force of divine breath he bringeth things forth far surpassing her doings. (Sidney 138-139)

As with *Peri hypsous*, the combination of art and genius brings forth experiences that surpass nature and transcend the material world.

This noble view of art was summarily discarded by the mechanistic thinking of Locke in the seventeenth century. His metaphysics of material cause and effect was at the base of both the scientific revolution and the Industrial Revolution. What more proof can you ask of Lockean validity? Art, music, and poetry were brutally cast aside. Locke considered poetry mere wit or cleverness "to combine ideas and thereby to make up pleasant pictures and agreeable views in the fancy." In Locke's view, such cleverness "is quite irresponsible and not troubled with truth or reality" (qtd. in Bowra 3).

The industrial and scientific revolutions undermined traditional faiths and at the same time gave rise to the "dark Satanic Mills" that poet William Blake, in 1810, questioned could ever be blessed with the divine. The Romantics saw the moral and imaginative sterility of the Lockean universe and, in reaction, celebrated the spiritual power of the individual imagination to rise above and beyond Locke's reality-grinding machine. Keats's close to his 1819 "Ode on a Grecian Urn" ("Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know") could crudely be considered a middle finger extended toward Locke, as if saying, "You idiot! You missed everything important."

The Romantics piled it on, enthusiastically and ecstatically weaving imaginative webs throughout the nineteenth century. At the same time, freed both of the restraints of traditional faith and of the Lockean trap of mechanical productivity, new unconstrained schools of thought and practice arose. Decadents expressed sickness at the world, delight in perversion, and belief in the freedom to make their own rules. Poet Charles Baudelaire celebrated the perverse in *Les fleurs du mal*, published in 1857. He begins the preface ("To the Reader") with,

If rape, poison, dagger and fire,
Have still not embroidered their pleasant designs
On the banal canvas of our pitiable destinies,
It's because our soul, alas, is not bold enough!

And concludes it with:

It's Boredom!—eye brimming with an involuntary tear
He dreams of gallows while smoking his hookah.
You know him, reader, this delicate monster,
Hypocritical reader, my likeness, my brother!

Writer Oscar Wilde so brilliantly and openly flaunted his disregard for convention in the 1890s that he was convicted of gross indecency and spent two years imprisoned in Reading Gaol for his crime. In the early years of the twentieth century, the anti-art movement of Marcel Duchamp metastasized into Dadaism, a wild, no-holds-barred nihilist movement that questioned whether there was such a thing as meaning after all. The Dada Manifesto, introduced by poet and author Hugo Ball in 1916, makes a mockery of language itself:

How does one achieve eternal bliss? By saying dada. How does one become famous? By saying dada. With a noble gesture and delicate propriety. Till one goes crazy. Till one loses consciousness. How can one get rid of everything that smacks of journalism, worms, everything nice and right, blinkered, moralistic, europeanised, enervated? By saying dada. Dada is the world soul, dada is the pawnshop.

Ball and other Dadaists believed society was in a terrible state, disliked philosophies that claimed ultimate truth, and held that meaninglessness is a guiding principle of life.

People of good faith, people who believed in humanism and the perfectibility of man—already disturbed by the rise of decadence, meaninglessness, and nihilism—were shocked when the First World War laid waste to remaining hopes. The Great War, seemingly a product of the same Lockean logic as the Industrial Revolution, decimated Nadia Boulanger's generation of Frenchmen as she entered her thirties.

Hope that the end of the Great War would bring political peace and international understanding decayed quickly during the 1920s. A current of doubt and despair was in the air. The horrors of the Great War had spawned a new wave of decadence, with an epicenter in Weimar Berlin. In his last novel, *Metropolis*, Philip Kerr, who displays a deep understanding of Weimar Germany in his fiction, quotes George Grosz, one of the Dada movement's leading artists:

My drawings expressed my hate and my despair. I sketched drunks, puking men, men shaking their fists at the moon. I drew a man, his face filled with horror, washing blood from his hands. . . . I drew a cross section of a tenement house: through one window could be seen a man beating up his wife; through another two people making love; from a third hung a man, his body covered with flies. I drew soldiers without noses, war cripples with crab-like steel arms; I drew a skeleton dressed as a recruit having a medical for medical duty. I also wrote poetry.

In the 1930s, National Socialism grew into a hateful and increasingly menacing movement. Self-deluded statesmen strutted the European stage as international tensions heightened. Then France was invaded. "Can no one save us from this insanity?" was no doubt a question on the minds of many when Nadia Boulanger fled France in 1940. The highest values of European civilization were under mortal threat. Would the nihilism of the Dadaists and the tribalism of the Nazis overcome the quest for truth and beauty that had defined the highest achievements of Western civilization?

Nadia Boulanger, to her core, knew this could never be allowed to happen. The death of Enlightenment marriage of truth and beauty would be a catastrophe beyond measure and comprehension. In this sense, she had no choice. The die was cast. She had no choice but to put all her energy and all her devotion into the struggle against chaos and depravity.

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