

# Nadia Boulanger: The Musical Socrates Who Transformed Composition

*Boulanger had profound impact as music's greatest teacher; her spiritual approach inspired composers from Stravinsky, to Bernstein, to Glass*

"It is easy to see her as the most influential teacher since Socrates," Ned Rorem comments in his review of a book on Boulanger. Or, as Don Campbell expresses it, "To measure the potency of Boulanger's influence is impossible. As a tree is rooted firmly to the earth, she was rooted in the history and grammar of Western music." Or from violinist and composer Yehudi Menuhin: "In a world of such fluctuating and relative values... Nadia Boulanger is a fixed point—in itself an unbelievable achievement. But beyond this, she is a beacon and a guidepost for the many new generations which have flocked to her side during the course of her ninety years."

Nadia Boulanger was an energetic force of nature devoted to teaching musicians—especially younger musicians—truths about creativity in musicianship, composition, and interpretation. Her letters to Ruth Robbins reveal how, in her personally conservative way, Nadia lived by clear philosophic principles.

Among the soloists, conductors, composers, and arrangers who flocked to her side (and were significantly influenced by her) were Daniel Barenboim, Leonard Bernstein, Idil Biret, Elliott Carter, Aaron Copland, David Diamond, Roy Harris, John Eliot Gardiner, Philip Glass, Jean Françaix, Quincy Jones, Dinu Lipatti, Igor Markevitch, Astor Piazzolla, Léo Préger, Roger Sessions, and Virgil Thomson. In addition to so many well-known conductors and performers, other Boulanger disciples went on to be music department chairs or music professors at Harvard, Wellesley, Longy School of Music, Vassar, Mills College, and other colleges and universities.

Nadia's strong personality, musicianship, and active life have been well chronicled by Kendall and Campbell, as well as by Bruno Monsaingeon, Jérôme Spycket, Kimberly Francis, and Jeanice Brooks, not to mention in countless radio interviews, newspaper articles, and magazine profiles. She was the first woman to conduct the Royal Philharmonic of London, the New York Philharmonic, the Philadelphia Orchestra, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, among others. Her close friends included Igor Stravinsky, for whom she arranged a commission from Mr. and Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss to compose his *Dumbarton Oaks Concerto in E-flat*, and Leonard Bernstein, who sat at her bedside on her last birthday, September 16, a month before she finally slipped away at age 92 on October 22, 1979.

Before the Second World War, with an outstanding reputation as a conductor, organist, choral director, and teacher, Nadia Boulanger was a highly influential arbiter of aesthetic taste in the Paris salon culture. She moved among the aristocratic, the wealthy, and the famous. Countess Marie-Blanche de Polignac and Princess Winnaretta Singer de Polignac were among the great patronesses who provided funds for needy students, commissions for work, and support for musical events.

After the Second World War, the pre-War salon culture had disappeared. Winnaretta Singer, her most important patroness, died in 1943. Musical taste moved from the neoclassicism Nadia espoused to contemporary modernism. These changes meant Nadia would never again have the prominence she once enjoyed. Yet some continuity remained. Her post at the American Conservatory at Fontainebleau became her base of operations, and she hosted a one-woman salon culture on Wednesday afternoons in her spacious Paris apartment on Rue Ballu. She often spent a restful summer week or two at the palace of Prince Pierre of Monaco, nephew of Winnaretta Singer de Polignac, and prepared the music for the marriage of his son Prince Rainier to American actress Grace Kelly. She continued to be an activist supporter of great talent and continued to direct her coterie of people with substantial means or influence—American, British, and European—to support students and composers with scholarships, referrals, and commissions.

So was Nadia Boulanger a French Socrates?

"Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel."

"There is only one good, knowledge, and one evil, ignorance."

These are sayings of Socrates, but they represent one of Nadia Boulanger's fundamental beliefs: excellence is not easily obtained; it is earned through the hard work of learning. In a January 1943 card to Ruth, she hand-copied a quote from Charles Péguy:

Nothing is obtained without pain, and  
life is perpetual work. —Education can-  
not be conferred; it is obtained by work,  
and is communicated. —It is by reading  
that a man shapes himself and not by

reciting hand-books. And it is also by  
working, modestly—

In his incisive book *Lessons of the Masters* George Steiner holds that "the only honest, verifiable license for teaching, for didactic authority, is by virtue of example. The teacher demonstrates to the student his own grasp of the material." He goes on to emphasize the moral nature of teaching: "In regard to morality, only the actual life of the master has demonstrative proof. Socrates and saints teach by existing."

Whether Nadia Boulanger was either a Socrates or a saint may be up for debate, but she certainly lived her life according to strongly held moral and social values. Alone in the world when her mother Raissa died in 1935, Nadia learned to value and nurture friendships. The earliest extant letter from Nadia to Ruth, dated August 13, 1941, reveals that the two already had a relationship. After discussing sharing a house in Cambridge for the upcoming school year, Nadia then responds to unspecified help Ruth has offered: "...But I already thank you deeply. I cannot possibly do all what ought to be done and your help means a great deal to me."

A few days later, on August 18, 1941, Ruth writes to explain that the plan had fallen apart since the third party, another student, Julie, had backed out in part because she feared her social life would be constrained. "From the social point of view—well I haven't any," Ruth comments wryly, "what is very important to Julie means very little to me." In this letter, the clarity, honesty, and detail with which Ruth explains a sticky situation are exemplary. She alludes to her self-doubt, and how if she is not adequate for a musical career, she would welcome facing the truth now "and stop trying to be a musician," for she is "searching for something solid to stand on" and "does not count the cost."

Ruth acknowledges that she may be "oversharing" as we would put it today, but adds, "It is so easy to write to you about such things, and since I started, I could not stop. If I keep telling you that I feel you understand so deeply, it is because I am not used to it, and it overwhelms me." Nadia's prompt response is dated August 20, 1941:

Needless to say that your letter at first troubled me deeply, but...do not worry. I shall keep it, in order not to harm Mrs. Forbes who had been so nice about it. The fact that I was to teach a few hours a week had only relieved you from a third of the expenses, but...it is quite all right. Had I known we were undecided, perhaps this would be easier. But anyhow, the matter is now settled, decisions made, and you have no more to think about the house. Do not feel I am worried. It is my fault and I ought by now to avoid such things. Perhaps it is much better so, shall see you in Chicago on my way to Cambridge. If you leave before my arrival, do not inquire about the music, shall take it with me on the train.

Am not less happy to have you this winter in Cambridge, even if not so near. It means very much to me.  
Hastily, affectionately yours, N. Boulanger

Honest and to the point about a practical matter—housing—this response exemplifies Nadia Boulanger's laser focus on moving ahead to accomplish goals, without looking back or to the side. She does not touch upon the looming emotional issue in Ruth's letter: wondering if she should even attempt to be a musician.

Ruth clearly seeks reassurance from Nadia. Instead, Nadia offers, "Am not less happy to have you this winter in Cambridge, even if not so near. It means very much to me" and an apologetic "Hastily, affectionately yours" to reassure Ruth that the letter was written in haste to put the housing issue behind them while placing a bookmark on personal matters.

The 1941-1942 academic year, spent at the Longy School under Nadia's tutelage—even though they did not share a house—had a tremendous impact that Ruth wrote about in a May 1942 letter. The style is noticeably more relaxed than previous letters. Ruth writes that she is "bursting with something," then humorously adding, "If I don't get it out of my system, I shall probably turn into a camel and grow humps on my back which will be the result of unsaid things."

What she absolutely has to get out of her system is her deep gratitude:

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!

She describes an explosion of love for her teacher—not adolescent or sexual love, but a spiritual connection similar to the love students felt for Socrates, who awoke in his followers a sense of deep virtue connected with living ethically and thoughtfully. To describe her gratitude, Ruth then writes:

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.

Ruth was not the only one to explode with love for Nadia. Two decades earlier, in 1922, when Nadia was in her mid-thirties, Melville Smith was a recent Harvard graduate on a scholarship to study music in France. He wrote to his college friend, Bernard DeVoto:

The incomparable Nadia is as incomparable as ever. One day about a month ago, when my feelings were again at a zenith, I had the courage to profess the extent of my affection for her. Since then my feelings towards her have lost

much of their sexual stimulus and retained a deep love which I hope will endure. She understood me completely—she always does—and assured me that she is "extremely fond of me," but added "in a sort of maternal way" (was she serious?). At any rate, my former torment is gone, and if the sure fact of having stated what I thought was a deep emotion has diminished it, far better to have done so. Between us now exists a deep friendship and comradeship which is incomparable. What a woman!

Like Ruth, Melville Smith felt completely understood by Nadia and enjoyed an incomparable friendship and comradeship with her. He then goes on to explain why he believes that any sort of romantic love with Nadia would never be possible for him, or for anyone.

Perhaps when I see her again in Gargenville next summer—where I am to spend it, as last summer—a new stage will arrive in my feelings towards her. But at present, all is calm. It transpires—or rather I have verified what I had always heard—that the celestial Nadia has had the grand amour and with her characteristic decisiveness has banished it from her life forever (from the point of view from which the word "amour" is regarded in France). He was Raoul Pugno, the great French pianist, who died at the beginning of the war. To say that I admire her even more since knowing this is not necessary, to you! She is dead right—and the less French—for her mode of action. "Faire l'amour" is a common French expression—but unknown, I expect, to great souls.

One cannot help but draw a parallel to Alcibiades' response when his attempt to seduce Socrates is laughingly rejected:

What do you suppose to have been my state of mind after that? On the one hand I realized I had been slighted, but on the other I felt a reverence for Socrates' character, his self-control and courage; I had met a man whose like for wisdom and fortitude I could never have expected to encounter.

Similarly, Melville Smith saw Nadia as a great soul, above casual romance, living life on a higher plane. He was swept away by this powerful woman embodying clear moral and artistic values.

Was Nadia Boulanger the most influential teacher since Socrates? We cannot know, but certainly, for many people she opened doors of understanding, awakened a passion for the beautiful, and offered perspective on how to live a moral life.

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