

Vita GRUODYTĖ

Klaipėda University

Nadia Boulanger: from the Centre to the Periphery and from the Periphery to the Centre

ABSTRACT: Nadia Boulanger (1887–1979), a French composer, organist and conductor, was a phenomenon not only for her academic and intellectual life, not only through her influence on the musical world of the 20th century, where she remained an active participant for over 70 years, but also for the extensive geography of her influence. Attracting not only French composers and pianists, but also a large number of young American and European musicians, she became a strong Parisian anchor of the Western musical world.

Her influence on composers from Eastern Europe was probably the most significant. Paris between the two world wars was a Mecca for many of them (due to the government grants policy), so, after 1945, the silent influence of Nadia Boulanger's teaching continued through her alumni within the Soviet bloc, on the other side of the Iron Curtain – a barrier impermeable to Western cultural and artistic innovations. Her musical ideas were transmitted to future generations, thus remaining intact for several decades, as a memory of modern thought, authentic creativity and free spirit.

Our aim is to analyze the phenomenon that was Nadia Boulanger, and the impact of the exchanges between her thoughts and that of her numerous students, who, although geographically distant, remained culturally close. But also to show that during her long academic and musical career, Nadia Boulanger preached another modernism – a modernism, which was not related to technique (very important at the time of serialism) or to a passing fad, but rather to the inherent value of the work: thus, a modernism that is not limited in time.

KEYWORDS:

Nadia Boulanger,
pedagogy, *École de Paris*,
modernism.

Every musician knows the name of Nadia Boulanger, but few know what she was really like, because of her personal reserve, or sometimes because of a lack of documents (some were destroyed, others remained inaccessible until 2006 in the archives of the Paris National Library), or sometimes because of completely contradictory judgments about her personality.

Jérôme Spycket sums her up beautifully: “Venerated, feared or fought, she was as famous worldwide as the most prestigious performers or the best-known composers: although she was both, however, it was not for those talents that she was famous, but for her knowledge of music and her extraordinary ability to transmit it” (Spycket 1987: 9).

Teaching debut

It was precisely her ability to pass on that vast musical knowledge and love of music that left its mark on her countless students, from all over the world. She must have beaten not only the record of the largest number of students that a teacher can teach for a living, but also that of educational longevity: she taught for 75 years, and her workdays sometimes lasted without a break, from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m.: so as not to interrupt her course, she often took her meals at a small table, placed on her right, while continuing to work at the piano with the student. In the year of her death in 1979, she told a reporter: “I love my students, I love teaching... I have a huge, almost crazy pleasure to teach. One must understand and listen to them, and bring them to express themselves” (Spycket 1987: 186).

From 1905, when Nadia Boulanger began her teaching career, she would announce the start of each new school year (Fig., Spycket 1987: 26).

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Nadia Boulanger's announcement note for the start of new school year

In her announcement note, the most important was the last sentence: “Mademoiselle Boulanger accepts in these courses pianists who do not attend her classes, but just want to make music together”. Thus, right from the beginning, she was already establishing the bases of her educational vision:

First, a school is not a closed circle where only one’s own students are admitted; Secondly, music is not only taught, but also shared: so, music is first a personal experience which requires a tremendous amount of work, and then a collective experience which provides pleasure in sharing individual experiences collectively. “Thus were born the group lessons <...>, followed by a break around the samovar and Mrs. Boulanger [Nadia’s mother, of Russian origin] offering cups of tea and biscuits to her daughter’s students” (Spycket 1987: 26).

Nadia Boulanger immediately had a large number of students thanks to her teacher friends, much older than she was, like Raoul Pugno, Gabriel Fauré and Louis Vierne. Her close friend, Raoul Pugno, also sent to her her first American students.

The role of the United States in her renown as a pedagogue

America has played a major role in the world-renown of Nadia Boulanger. Through word of mouth, young Americans flooded in. During the First World War, in 1915, she created with her sister, composer Lili Boulanger, the “Franco-American Committee” to help musicians who had become soldiers. Thus, naturally, it was Nadia Boulanger that Walter Damrosch, head of the New York Symphony Orchestra, asked to found the American Conservatory in France. It was opened in 1921, in Fontainebleau, and Nadia began to teach harmony. She revolutionized this discipline. “It’s no longer dry harmony: it is music. Besides, she herself says at the end of her life: ‘I teach music – it’s easier to say music’” (quoted by Spycket 1987: 60). In fact, she changed at will all the disciplines which she taught: First, at the *École Normale de Musique* (which was a private higher Conservatory, founded by Alfred Cortot), and later, from 1946 at the *Conservatoire National Supérieur de Paris*, where she eventually held the position of professor of accompaniment.

One could say that the American Conservatory in Fontainebleau was a springboard in Nadia Boulanger’s international career: at the invitation of Walter Damrosch, she toured the United States and England. There, as conductor or organist, she gave concerts; as a teacher, lectures and she participated in radio programs. Her lectures were a huge success. Their originality was ‘live’ music, performed by her own vocal ensemble, which illustrated her words, thus turning her lectures into lecture-recitals. She brought

her vocal ensemble everywhere. It was thanks to this group that Nadia Boulanger could revive the major works of music history, such as the *Madrigals* of Monteverdi, which had remained 'forgotten' for 300 years, or most of J.S. Bach's cantatas, Fauré's *Requiem*, Poulenc's *Concert for organ*, Schütz's *Resurrection*, or Carissimi's *Jephtah* and others.

These various activities of Nadia Boulanger, like the well-reported tours, the first recordings with her vocal ensemble of important works which had so far remained unknown, her radio broadcasts on the BBC, the first performances of contemporary works, concerts with major American orchestras, such as the orchestras of Boston, Washington, Philadelphia or New York, all of this allowed her to be regarded as the greatest pedagogue of her time. For most American composers, Nadia Boulanger was inspiring American music. For Spycket, "it is clear that between 1924 and 1937, the period of her second trip to America, the "*Boulangerie*" (according to an expression invented by one of her students) will become the most world-renowned "club" in the field of music education" (Spycket 1987: 78).

She started to get students from all over the world: a large number coming from Poland and other countries of Central and Eastern Europe but also from Asia, Latin America, etc.

These various activities show several things: for her live music was very important, more important than talking about music, and old music was essential to the understanding of modern music. Her manner of arranging pieces in her concert programs was entirely new. According to Conrad, "she juxtaposes centuries and schools in a way that always surprises and sometimes shocks. She doesn't care about chronology, or so-called 'irreconcilable differences' between composers. Opposing works, comparing them, bringing them close together in a musical or sometimes literary sense, taking into account the relations of their tone and their aesthetic character are the principles which she obeys. She gets outstanding results"; "Her goal was the pleasure of hearing" (Conrad 1995: 57, 84).

Paris between the wars

Paris between the wars was a center of attraction for most young artists; cultural life was extremely rich there. Many countries in Central and Eastern Europe had set up a system of government scholarships for many young artists who wished to improve their standards in the capital of the arts.

It should be noted that Nadia Boulanger, unlike many French people, spoke English, a language she had learned with her first American students, and this allowed her to communicate with a larger number of foreigners. In reading the memoirs of Lithuanian

composer Jonas Nabažas, who came to France in 1937, we see that this point was important. He describes the atmosphere of one of her lessons: “We were 11 or 12 people. <...> Of all nationalities, a Romanian, a Dutch woman, a Chinese man, an English man, three English women, Antanas Račiūnas and I from Lithuania and only a few French people. <...> Nadia Boulanger asked me to give my opinion. She said, “Say it in Russian, maybe I will understand a little”. I spoke Russian, it was difficult for her, and she replied in German. I laughed: “Aber ich verstehe deutsch sehr wenig”. Then she said – “what a Tower of Babel!” Because there were a lot of English people, she spoke a lot in English, but for us it was irritating, because we didn’t get it. The Chinese man alone was happy because he understood both French and English” (Nabažas 2007: 158–159).

So, for students from Central and Eastern Europe who did not speak French, there were not a lot of possibilities: either the Russian Conservatory of Paris, where one spoke Russian, or Nadia Boulanger, who spoke English. Nadia Boulanger taught at the *École Normale de Musique*, which was a private conservatory and therefore more easily accessible to foreigners. But choosing between two institutions was not always easy. For example, two Lithuanian composers already mentioned, Antanas Račiūnas and Jonas Nabažas, after attending classes with Nadia Boulanger at the *École Normale*, and then with Alexander Tcherepnin at the Russian Conservatory of Paris, decided to return to the *École Normale* because “It would be a shame to be in France, with French people, and to return to Lithuania with a Russian diploma” (Nabažas 2007: 180).

Students who came to Nadia Boulanger often had solid classical backgrounds. They came to Paris to feel the pulse of the time of modern music. In most cases, what they lacked was not the techniques, but a projection into their own future that they obviously wanted more ‘modern’ than what they could expect in their own country. They lacked a vision of themselves in the musical continuity, in a more universal musical context. Paris at that time was an extraordinary cultural mix, while countries in Eastern and Central Europe were looking for their modernity and their own musical expression. But curiously, most young composers arriving in Paris discovered their own roots rather than the Parisian influences. For example, Vytautas Bacevičius, the most modern composer of Lithuania between the two world wars, was very moderate and ‘nationally-minded’ during his Paris period, which may seem odd. Astor Piazzolla arrived in France in 1954 and also found his roots: indeed, after hearing his tango improvisations, Nadia Boulanger said, “That’s your path! Drop symphonic music and dedicate yourself to tango” (Spycket 1987: 82). We can find the same emigrant’s nostalgia in Stravinsky’s *Memoirs*: “<...> my sadness of being away from my country was partly compensated by the joy I felt at immersing myself in reading Russian folk poetry” (Stravinsky 1971: 63).

Thus, physical distance caused a sharper national consciousness. And the role of Nadia Boulanger was not to force all her students to become modern and write like this or that great composer, or even to remain limited by their national influences, but rather to help them find their own path. Jeremy Menuhin said, “She literally asked the student – or rather she ordered him! – to have confidence in himself. She knew how to stimulate, how to extract the best from him, how to make him leave the classes in a state of complete exhilaration, exaltation” (Conrad 1995: 244). Therefore Nadia Boulanger as a pedagogue was exceptional; she did not teach techniques, or even ‘music’, as she said, but she taught musical self-knowledge. She allowed students to discover what they really were. She pushed them, sometimes violently, into their own selves. Emile Naoumoff recalled: “Being her student did not mean blind obedience to her wishes, but really ‘learn to learn oneself’, even surprise, or contradict her, because beyond talent, she was looking for personality, character and will. She helped you forge your own key, it was up to you to open the doors to yourself, you, full of ‘inner voices’ and ‘weak beats that are so strong’, counterpoint, harmony – from jazz to serialism – you, fed with culture and aesthetics, with Valery and Shakespeare, with pictures of Le Nain and prayers of Machault or Stravinsky. Without cliquishness she used bold diagonals, for she had that rare gift of an alchemist, handling skillfully an explosive cocktail” (Conrad 1995: 241).

When Nadia said to George Gershwin who insisted on learning with her: “What can I do for you?” (Spycket 1987: 84), it only meant that he had already found his path in her eyes, and she had nothing to add. This also meant that the jurisdiction for her as professor stopped there, and Gershwin – in this case – must now continue his musical path alone.

The basis of her teaching was old music, but she also remained concerned about her time. Modern music for her was a natural extension of musical history, where ancient music is a starting point from which a composer must find his own language. In fact, it was the acquisition of the music library of French musicologist Henri Expert, which enabled her to acquire great knowledge of the past and feel musically, through scores, the continuity of musical history, and transmit it to her students.

That is why Nadia Boulanger disliked systems, like dodecaphony or later, serialism. For example, for her, Berg’s *Lulu* “may be a masterpiece, but it certainly irritates!” (Conrad 1995: 246). She studied the scores, listened to the works, but she didn’t adhere to them. One can understand her point of view. According to her, “we all carry inside ourselves the music we are going to create. It is also difficult to write a masterpiece on the basis of one system or another. These phenomena appeared in all periods of history. They appeal to those who have no certainty” (Conrad 1995: 187). Moreover, Nadia Boulanger

also said, “It just seems to me that many people have nothing to say and rely on a system to hide from themselves the fact that they have nothing to say. But the system has never stopped anyone from expressing himself or being a genius. And if you have nothing to say, no matter what system, you cannot preach” (Monsaingeon 1980: 117).

Between the hypotaxis of Schoenberg and the parataxis of Stravinsky

Nadia Boulanger was radically partial to Claude Debussy and French music, and especially Igor Stravinsky, who was very important in the Parisian musical context of the interwar period. According to René Dumesnil, “the art of Stravinsky seemed more bare, more *dynamic*. <...> We will talk only about dynamism and nakedness” (Dumesnil 1946: 23). After the *Rite of Spring*, the influence of Stravinsky in France was more important than that of Schoenberg. If Adorno spoke about “restoration” (for Stravinsky) and “progress” (for Schoenberg), Pierre Boulez evoked “simplification” and “excess” (Dumesnil 1946: 313). According to him, at the beginning of his life as a composer, Stravinsky “operates a masterful reduction of musical vocabulary – abolishing, for a time, the cultural reference; in any case, the developed cultural reference, because the ethnic reference exists in a completely natural symbiosis. <...> He gives new meaning to the words of the tribe” (Boulez 1981: 319).

Stravinsky, unwittingly, was probably a perfect example for composers coming to Paris with the baggage of their national schools and the sensitivity of their ‘ethnics’. Indeed, he showed how to express oneself in a modern way without abandoning one’s own roots. Nadia loved the daring combinations. For example, she said to her Japanese students: “I beg you, keep being Japanese and become universal for other reasons”. She explained: “I try to make my students find their origins and avoid turning them into fake Parisians, just because they came to work in Paris. Universality is not an uprooting” (Monsaingeon 1980: 62).

Nadia Boulanger’s choice between Stravinsky and Schoenberg was placed on another level: between the vertical and horizontal music, between counterpoint and harmony, between melody and sound aggregate. For her, music was horizontal. “Her dominant passion was the pulse and its inevitability. <...> The ability to read music horizontally had similar importance. All music has its origin in the vocal line. <...> Reading music vertically is a negation of this origin and this truth. However, some music was composed vertically and thus, can be understood and executed only in this manner. Nadia Boulanger avoided this music” (Conrad 1995: 239). She sought to awaken in her students, performers and composers, the perception of this linearity, of musical fluidity and sim-

plicity: “<...> her analyses brought out the refinement, but especially, the simplicity of the musical texture. I owe her my love of simplicity and I search it in my interpretations”, confided conductor Oleg Caetani, alias Markevitch (Conrad 1995: 240).

For Nadia Boulanger Schoenberg’s music was too ‘hermetic’. She said that “to understand music, we must be able to feel it intellectually and affectively: each of these factors alone is insufficient” (Spycket 1987: 148). The “Hypotactic and organicist” compositional approach of Schoenberg, in the words of Raffaele Pozzi (Pozzi 2003: 361), leaves little place for national affectivity, unlike the paratactic and cubist style of Stravinsky. Bojan Bujic considers the tendency of Stravinsky to merge the national components with those that embody modernity, as a “qualitative Hegelian leap by which the nationalism inspired by early romanticism turns into its opposite – the foundation of a style that aspires to the anti-romanticism” (Bujic 2003: 177).

Thus, the style of Stravinsky appears as a means of providing universality (on the basis of neo-classicism) to ‘ethnic’ music, or, in Boulez’s words, music of the ‘tribe’. Boulez saw two trends in classicism: one which seeks to find the total objectivity of “pure music”. The other, which is based on a historical dialectic to characterize a new “universality of style” (Boulez 1981: 65).

‘The universality of style’ offered by classicism was precisely the basis on which the ‘national’ character of music lost its limiting aspect.

Moreover, during the period of compulsory return to old-fashioned musical language in the postwar Soviet bloc, the emphasis on neoclassicism was placed on another level: between the wars one had to go beyond nationalism, to gain access to universality, while after the war, one had to overcome the uniformity of classicism, imposed by ideology, to become national. It may be just a coincidence, but Lithuanian composer Bronius Kutavičius who in the 1970s allowed Lithuanian music to make a ‘qualitative leap’ (speaking both modern and nationally authentic languages), was a pupil of composer Antanas Račiūnas, who studied in Paris with Nadia Boulanger.

The paratactic style of Stravinsky perfectly agreed with the vision of the musical history of Nadia Boulanger. For her, history is not linear. Nor is it for Stravinsky, for whom “immediately preceding times, move away from us temporarily, while others, far from us, become familiar” (Stravinsky 1971: 101). Jean Jacques Nattiez also highlights the non-linearity of musical evolution: “If we look closely, it is clear that the moments of invention, revolution or rupture, so characteristic of the twentieth century, go side by side or alternate with phases of extension or of return to styles of the past <...>” (Nattiez 2003: 41–42).

This is exactly what Nadia Boulanger preached, namely a history of music in which the work is seen only by its own aesthetic value, not by its place in a particular timeline, or a particular school: for her a Bach cantata was as modern as the *Rite of Spring*. Modernity has no temporal dimension; it is more the ability to express our personality. Boulanger said: “It is important to be yourself. The danger is badly assimilated influences. Debussy’s personality was so strong <...> that he stopped many of those under his influence from being themselves. <...> There are also those who have continued to make the repeated chords of the *Rite of Spring*” (Spycket 1987: 80). For her, being yourself required “a drastic technique; without a thorough technique, you can do nothing to express what you feel most intensely. <...> All a teacher can do is help students develop the abilities that allow them to manipulate tools (demand their constant attention, their constant presence, teach them continuity...) but on what they will do with the tools, the teacher has no possible action” (Spycket 1987: 80).

It is difficult to summarize in a few words the impact of Nadia Boulanger on her countless students. I will finish this paper by citing the testimony of one of her students, which evokes what seems to me to be the core of her influence on several generations of performers, conductors and composers: “Having worked with Nadia Boulanger, means being marked for life, perhaps not so much in one’s musical mode of expression, which evolves necessarily, but in one’s innermost being” (Spycket 1987: 152).

Leaving a mark on students “in their innermost being”, is probably the highest satisfaction a teacher could hope for. And that’s probably the only real experience one is able to transmit, in one’s turn, apart from technique, to future generations.

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Nadia Boulanger: nuo centro į periferiją ir nuo periferijos į centrą

SANTRAUKA. Turėdama didžiulį talentą perteikti neišsemiamas muzikos žinias ir begalinę meilę muzikai, Nadia Boulanger traukė prie savęs studentus iš visų pasaulio kraštų. Nuo pat pradžių jos pedagogika pasižymėjo atvirumu: pirma, ji neturėjo ambicijų kurti uždara mokyklą, kuriai priklausytų tik jos pačios mokiniai; antra, jai buvo svarbu, kad muzikos būtų ne tik mokomasi, bet ja ir dalijamasi: muzika yra asmeninė patirtis, suteikianti galimybę individualiais patyrimais dalytis kolektyviai.

Dauguma jos mokinių jau turėjo solidų klasikinį pagrindą. Jie atvyko į Paryžių tam, kad pajautų modernios muzikos pulsą: jiems trūko ne technikos, o jų pačių projekcijos į ateitį, kurią Paryžiuje matė modernesnę, nei galėjo tikėtis savo šalyse. Jiems trūko savęs pačių vizijos muzikos tęstinume, universalesniame muzikos kontekste, tačiau fizinis atitrūkimas dažnai išprovokavo emocinį sugrįžimą prie savo šaknų. N. Boulanger stengėsi padėti savo studentams atrasti nuosavą kelią, o ne kopijuoti vieno ar kito garsaus kompozitoriaus stilistiką arba užsidaryti tautinėse įtakose. Galėtume sakyti, kad ji dėstė ne muzikos pažinimą, o muzikinį „savęs pažinimą“.

Modernią muziką N. Boulanger matė muzikos istorijos tęstinume. Būtent dėl šios priežasties ji skyrė daug dėmesio ankstesnių amžių muzikos analizei ir nemėgo uždarų sistemų – nei dodekafonijos, nei vėliau – serializmo.

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI:

Nadia Boulanger,
pedagogika, Paryžiaus
mokykla, modernizmas.

N. Boulanger visuomet išliko Claude'o Debussy, Igorio Stravinskio pusėje. Ten, kur Adorno įžiūrėjo priešpriešą tarp „restauracijos“ (Stravinskis) ir „progreso“ (Schoenbergas), o Boulezas – tarp „redukcijos“ (Stravinskis) ir „pertekliaus“ (Schoenbergas), N. Boulanger matė skirtumą tarp horizontalios ir vertikalios muzikos, tarp kontrapunkto ir harmonijos, tarp melodinės linijos ir sonorinio agregato. Jai muzika buvo horizontali, todėl ji stengėsi ir savo mokiniams perteikti muzikos lineariškumo, jos tekamumo pojūtį ir šio pojūčio sąlygotą interpretacijos paprastumą.

Priešingai nei hermetinis ir hypotaksinis Arnoldo Schoenbergo stilius, parataksinis Stravinskio mąstymas ne tik puikiai atitiko pačios N. Boulanger muzikos bei muzikos istorijos viziją, bet ir buvo tinkamesnis inspiracijų šaltinis kompozitoriams užsieniečiams, atvykusiems su savo tautinių mokyklų bagažu. Stravinskio pasiūlytoje stilistikoje universalumas (neoklasicistiniu pagrindu) galėjo susiliesti su „etniniu“ jautrumu. Būtent dėl šio universalumo tautinis aspektas turėjo galimybę prarasti muzikinės kalbos ribotumą. Beje, paradoksalu tai, kad tarpukariu Vidurio ir Rytų Europos kompozitoriui, norinčiam būti moderniam, reikėjo peržengti tautiškumo įtakas, o pokariu, norint būti moderniam, privalomo sovietinio estetinio imperatyvo (sugrįžimo į neoklasicizmą) kontekste reikėjo visų pirma peržengti dabar jau uniformizuojantį universalumą.

Taigi, Stravinskis parodė, kaip galima būti stilistiškai moderniam nepaneigiant savo šaknų. N. Boulanger taip pat buvo svarbu, kad jos mokiniai netaptų netikrais paryžiečiais. Ji propagavo modernizmą, kuris būtų susietas ne su kompozicine technika ar praeinančiomis madomis, bet su kompozitoriaus gebėjimu atrasti asmenines išraiškas. Jai buvo svarbi muzikos istorija, kurioje kūrinys vertinamas ne dėl savo vietos toje ar kitoje chronologijoje, toje ar kitoje mokykloje, o dėl savo imanentinės vertės. Taigi, jos modernumo samprata nebuvo susijusi su laiko dimensija. Šia labai individualia samprata ji giliai paženklino savo mokinius, ir tai, matyt, vienintelis dalykas, kuriuo Mokytojas galėtų iš tiesų didžiulis, ir kartu vienintelis patyrimas, kurį Mokinyms savo ruožtu gali perduoti ateinančioms kartoms.