

Nadia Boulanger

Nadia Boulanger was born into a musical Parisian family. Her father, a well-known composer himself, taught at the Paris Conservatory and her mother was a classical singer. At the age of ten, Ms. Boulanger herself began studying piano, organ, and composition at the Conservatory, working with such renowned French composers as Paul Vidal and Gabriel Fauré. In 1908, at the age of 21, she won second place in the Prix de Rome, a prestigious French scholarship for young musicians.

After leaving the Paris Conservatory, Ms. Boulanger toured as a concert pianist and organist for ten years. Much of this time was spent working with the pianist Raoul Pugno, who supported her career, performed with her in concert, and collaborated with her on both a song cycle and a four-act opera. During this period, Ms. Boulanger also wrote over 30 songs, chamber music, and a work for piano and orchestra.

Ms. Boulanger's younger sister Lili was the better-known composer of the two, having become the first woman to win the Prix de Rome in 1913. However, Lili's work was hampered by illness, and she died of intestinal tuberculosis in 1918 at the age of 24. Ms. Boulanger was severely affected by her sister's death, and she gave up composing entirely in the early 1920s. Instead, she became a strong promoter of her sister's music, while concentrating her professional development on teaching and conducting.

Today, Ms. Boulanger is remembered as one of the most important composition teachers of the twentieth century. She taught privately from the age of 16, and quickly became the "teacher of choice" for young, aspiring European and American composers. Her numerous students included Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, Virgil Thomson, Philip Glass, Elliott Carter, Germaine Tailleferre, and her own sister. It is said that George Gershwin (already a successful Broadway composer at the time) traveled to Paris in the hope of studying with Ms. Boulanger, but was told that he was fine the way he was.

In addition to teaching privately from her Paris apartment, Ms. Boulanger taught at several French conservatories and music schools over the course of her long career. She was a founding member of the American Conservatory at the Palace of Fontainebleau, eventually becoming its director in 1948. She also taught collaborative piano accompanying at the Paris Conservatory.

THINGS TO KNOW

Born: 1887

Died: 1979

Profession

Teacher, composer,
and conductor

Genre of Music

Twentieth century-era
classical music



ON THE RECORDING

Track 8

Belmont Trio playing Three Pieces for Cello and Piano: I. Modere by Nadia Boulanger (arranged for guitar and piano)

BOULANGER

Ms. Boulanger spent many years in the United States, beginning with an organ tour in the 1920s. She later returned to live in the country during World War II, during which time she became the first woman to conduct the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, and the Philadelphia Orchestra.

She also spent this time teaching at the Peabody Conservatory and the Juilliard School, among other schools. After the war, she returned to France, although she often visited the United States to guest conduct and present lectures.

Within the musical circles of Europe, Ms. Boulanger also became known as a conductor. In 1936, she became the first woman to conduct the London Philharmonic Orchestra, receiving widespread acclaim for her performances. She premiered numerous works as a conductor, including music by her friend Igor Stravinsky and her student Aaron Copland. She was also a champion of the Renaissance, particularly composer Claudio Monteverdi, whose music she often programmed for her concerts.

Ms. Boulanger continued living and working at her Paris apartment until her death at the age of 92 after a long, full life. She is buried in the same cemetery plot as her sister.

The Prix de Rome

The Prix de Rome was an annual scholarship awarded to young artists by the French government from 1663 to 1968. Originally established during the reign of King Louis XIV (the “Sun King”), the awards were intended to foster the professional development of promising young artists. The first place winner in each category was given the opportunity to study at the Académie de France in Rome, Italy, for up to five years, paid for entirely by the French government.

Awards were originally given to students of painting and sculpture. In 1720, prizes for architecture were added as well, followed by music in 1803 and engraving in 1804. Many young winners of the Prix de Rome went on to have incredibly rich and productive careers. Music composition winners included Hector Berlioz, Charles Gounod, Georges Bizet, Claude Debussy, and Lili Boulanger. Still others tried and failed to win the award, including Ernest Chausson and Maurice Ravel, who tried a total of five times.

The prestigious award gradually declined in importance during the twentieth century, and was eventually abolished in 1968 by the Minister of Culture. Today, the French government sponsors several similar awards in various artistic areas. The governments of both Belgium and the Netherlands award separate prizes with the same name.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

Major Compositions

Les heures claires (poem setting)

La Sirène (cantata)

Interesting Facts

Taught Aaron Copland, among other composers.

Sister of composer Lili Boulanger.

Boulanger bingo

Directions: Randomly place the following 16 words and phrases in your blank bingo board. As each clue is read aloud, lightly mark an **X** through the matching square.

1803

George Gershwin

organ

Rome, Italy

1918

Juilliard School

Paris Conservatory

Sun King

Aaron Copland

London Philharmonic
Orchestra

Paris, France

twentieth century

Claudio Monteverdi

Maurice Ravel

Prix de Rome

United States

Boulanger bingo

Clues

1803: year in which music was added as a Prix de Rome award category

1918: year in which Lili Boulanger died and Nadia Boulanger ceased composing

Aaron Copland: one of Ms. Boulanger's most successful students

Claudio Monteverdi: Renaissance composer championed by Ms. Boulanger

George Gershwin: American composer who tried and failed to study with Ms. Boulanger

Juilliard School: Ms. Boulanger taught at this American music school

London Philharmonic Orchestra: Ms. Boulanger was the first woman to conduct this ensemble

Maurice Ravel: this composer attempted to win the Prix de Rome five times

organ: a keyboard instrument played by Ms. Boulanger

Paris Conservatory: Ms. Boulanger attended this French music school

Paris, France: city in which Ms. Boulanger spent most of her life

Prix de Rome: award granted to young artists by the French government

Rome, Italy: city where Prix de Rome winners moved to study

Sun King: royal figure who started the Prix de Rome award program

Twentieth Century: musical era in which Ms. Boulanger lived

United States: country in which Ms. Boulanger lived during World War II