

Female Composers - a music podcast with a pinch of history:

Nadia Boulanger (episode 7)

The project "Women Composers - a music podcast with a touch of history" has been realised as a part of a creative scholarship from the Minister of Culture and National Heritage of Poland.



Ministerstwo Kultury
i Dziedzictwa Narodowego

MUSIC: *Nadia Boulanger - Trois pièces for piano: nr 2 [excerpt]*

Good morning! We're so glad you're here for today's podcast episode. Get ready to dive into the incredible journey of a woman who truly transformed the musical world in the 20th century. For more than seventy years, her cozy Paris apartment became the go-to place for composers from all over the globe. More than 1,200 students learned from her, including American modernists, brilliant Polish symphonists, the pioneers of Argentine tango nuevo, and even legends of jazz and film music.

Juliette Nadia Boulanger – a talented composer, conductor, pianist, organist, and most importantly, a teacher celebrated around the world. She was born in Paris during the 19th century and passed away there in the late 1970s. Who was this remarkable woman that even the greatest artists of her time admired and referred to with deep respect as "Mademoiselle"? Let's take a trip back to Paris in the late 19th century.

MUSIC: *Nadia Boulanger - Trois pièces for piano: nr 2 [excerpt]*

On September 16, 1887, Juliette Nadia Boulanger came into the world in the 9th arrondissement of Paris. She was welcomed into a family rich in musical heritage. Her father, Ernest Boulanger, was a famous composer and a singing professor at the Paris Conservatoire; he earned the esteemed Prix de Rome in 1835. On the day Nadia was born, he was already 72. Her mother, Raïssa Mychetskaya, was a Russian singer from an aristocratic background, and she was 43 years younger than her husband. Just six years later, on August 21, 1893, Nadia's little sister, Marie-Juliette, who would later be known as Lili Boulanger, was born.

Interestingly, little Nadia is really scared of music at first. The sounds make her cry. Everything changes when she's about five years old. One day, she hears an air raid siren outside her window, and she rushes to the piano, perfectly mimicking the sound and discovering her amazing ability to recognize pitches. From that moment on, music became her whole world.

Nadia's education moved along quickly. At the young age of nine, in 1896, she joined the Conservatoire de Paris. In the years that followed, she earned first prizes in solfège and harmony. She learned from distinguished masters at the academy, but her true turning point happened when she started studying with Gabriel Fauré, the famous composer, who guided her in composition and for whom she would soon become an assistant.

In April 1900, when Nadia was just 12 years old, her father, Ernest, passed away. This made things really tough for the family financially. As the oldest daughter, young Nadia stepped up to help her mom and her sister, who wasn't well. She started making money by playing the organ and piano, and also by giving private lessons. By 1904, she finished her studies at the Conservatory, earning top honors and first prizes in almost every subject: solfège, harmony, organ, and accompaniment.

MUSIC: *Nadia Boulanger - Trois pièces for piano: nr 1 [excerpt]*

As a talented young graduate, Nadia Boulanger had a big dream: to win the Prix de Rome, which is the most prestigious composition award in France. Women couldn't compete until 1903. Nadia tried her luck in the competition three times: in 1906, 1907, and 1908. Even though the rules let her come back in 1909 for another chance at the top prize, she decided to step back during the qualifying round.

In 1908, a big scandal broke out. During the preliminary round, instead of the usual vocal fugue, Nadia presented an instrumental fugue for strings to the jury. The traditional jury, led by Camille Saint-Saëns, was ready to disqualify her. The news made its way to the press, and the Minister of Arts stepped in. Nadia Boulanger was eventually allowed into the finals and won the Second Grand Prix (second prize) for her cantata "La Sirène."

Nadia created a lot of music. She worked with her good friend, the famous pianist Raoul Pugno. Together, they crafted the song cycle "Les Heures claires" and the opera "La Ville morte," which had words by Gabriele D'Annunzio. The opera was set to debut in 1914 at the Opéra-Comique.

But fate had other plans. In January 1914, Raoul Pugno passed away unexpectedly while touring in Russia. Just eight months later, the start of World War I put a stop to the plans for the opera. Nadia jumped into action, helping with humanitarian efforts and co-founding a group that supported students from French universities on the front lines.

The biggest shock, though, happened in 1918. Her younger sister, Lili Boulanger, a wonderfully gifted composer who made history as the first woman to win the Prix de Rome in 1913, passed away at only 24 years old.

Lili's passing leaves Nadia feeling really sad. Even though she continues to write a few more songs in the early 1920s, she soon makes a big decision: she stops making her own music. She believes her songs are "useless" compared to the brilliance of her late sister. She chooses to dedicate the rest of her life to two things: promoting Lili's work and teaching others.

MUSIC: *Nadia Boulanger - Vers la Vie Nouvelle [excerpt]*

We're taken back to the 1920s and 1930s. Nadia Boulanger's world centers around her family apartment at 36 Rue Ballu. It was here, every Wednesday afternoon, that famous group lessons and gatherings happened, with notable figures like Igor Stravinsky, who became a dear friend and collaborator of Nadia. Nowadays, the part of the street right in front of her old home is named Place Lili-et-Nadia-Boulanger.

In 1919, Alfred Cortot and Auguste Mangeot started the École Normale de Musique in Paris. Nadia was invited to teach harmony, counterpoint, and musical analysis there beginning in 1920.

However, the big moment that made her famous around the world happened in 1921. The Conservatoire Américain de Fontainebleau was established in the Palace of Fontainebleau, a school aimed at nurturing the finest talents from the United States. Nadia Boulanger became its cornerstone and, starting in 1948, its director.

It was at Fontainebleau and the Rue Ballu that a wave of young Americans started to show up. The first was Aaron Copland, who got there in 1921. Nadia saw his talent right away. After Copland finished his studies, Nadia went with him to the United States. In 1925, she played the organ part in the world premiere of Copland's Symphony for Organ and Orchestra in New York.

The list of her students from this time sounds like a music encyclopedia: Virgil Thomson, Walter Piston, Elliott Carter, and Roy Harris. But her impact reached beyond America. The young Polish composer Grażyna Bacewicz also traveled to Paris and learned from Nadia from 1932 to 1933.

How did Mademoiselle teach? Her approach was quite strict. It required complete mastery of the craft—counterpoint, harmony, and reading scores in old clefs. Students had to memorize all the works of Johann Sebastian Bach, including The Well-Tempered Clavier. However, she never forced her own style on anyone. She always emphasized that her job was to help each student discover their own unique voice.

In the 1930s, Nadia Boulanger shattered another barrier—this time as a conductor. It was quite rare to see women on the conducting podium in professional symphony orchestras back then. In 1936, she took the helm of the London Philharmonic Orchestra, and in 1937, she directed the whole program with the Royal Philharmonic Society in London. By 1938, she made history as the first woman to conduct the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and in 1939, she led the New York Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall and the Philadelphia Orchestra. Critics were thrilled with her precision and the way she conducted without a baton, relying solely on her expressive hands.

During that time, she created groundbreaking recordings of Claudio Monteverdi's music, helping to spark a revival of early music all around the globe.

MUSIC: *Nadia Boulanger - Trois pièces for piano: nr 3 [excerpt]*

The start of World War II made Nadia Boulanger leave France. In 1940, she made her way to the United States, where she stayed throughout the war until early 1946. She kept on teaching, giving lectures at important American universities, like the Juilliard School in New York and the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore.

In January 1946, Nadia made her way back to the liberated Paris. She began playing piano accompaniment at her old school, the Paris Conservatoire, and shared her knowledge of analysis and composition mainly through private lessons in her well-known apartment on rue Ballu and at the American Conservatoire in Fontainebleau. Her reputation was already legendary, drawing generations of students from all over the world to Paris after the war.

In the 1950s, a young film and jazz composer named Quincy Jones reached out to her—he would go on to produce Michael Jackson's legendary albums. Jones remembered that Boulanger said to him, "Your music will never be more than who you are as a person. You need to live first to have something to write about."

Other amazing composers also found guidance from her. In the 1960s, a young Philip Glass learned from her, spending two exciting years under her mentorship on a Fulbright scholarship, perfecting his counterpoint skills before diving into his well-known minimalism. The Argentinian genius of revolutionary tango, Astor Piazzolla, also took her class. It was Nadia who helped him uncover his unique identity. When Piazzolla shyly confessed to playing in nightclubs and shared his tango with her, Boulanger helped him see that the academic-style symphonies were holding back his real talent.

Nadia Boulanger had a huge impact on the development of 20th-century Polish music. Her cozy apartment in Paris turned into a welcoming spot for the young Polish avant-garde. Captivated by her strict dedication to technique and neoclassical style, many artists who would go on to shape Polish musical culture traveled to Paris to learn from her.

One of her dearest and most cherished students was Grażyna Bacewicz. Boulanger was in awe of her endless energy and amazing technique, showcasing the Polish pianist as a shining example for her other students. Zygmunt Mycielski spent many years learning from her, becoming not just one of her students but also a close, lifelong friend. Later on, he guided her during her postwar trips to Poland, where she had the honor of serving as a juror at the International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition.

Other talented Polish musicians also learned from her challenging classes: Wojciech Kilar, Romuald Twardowski, Marta Ptaszyńska, Stanisław Skrowaczewski, and Michał Spisak. Witold Lutosławski had plans to study with "Mademoiselle," but his dreams of moving to Paris were sadly interrupted by the war that began in 1939. Boulanger's connection with our country was a two-way street – she truly appreciated Polish sensitivity and hard work, and in 1934, the Republic of Poland recognized her by awarding her the Commander's Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta for her amazing efforts in promoting Polish culture.

Nadia Boulanger kept working right up until her last days, even though she faced challenges like worsening eyesight and arthritis that made it hard for her to play the organ in front of others. She taught her lessons from her bed in her apartment, still having her amazing hearing and sharp mind. In 1977, the President of France honored her with one of the country's top awards – the Cross of the Grand Officer of the Legion of Honor.

Nadia Boulanger passed away in Paris on October 22, 1979, at the age of 92. She was laid to rest in Montmartre Cemetery, right beside her cherished sister, Lili.

MUSIC: *Nadia Boulanger - Vers la Vie Nouvelle [excerpt]*

Throughout her life, Nadia Boulanger steered clear of strict theories. She never penned a textbook on harmony or composition, believing that music is a vibrant, living thing, not just a set of rules. Her true legacy isn't found in scientific writings, but in the countless individuals she inspired and guided.

If we were to take away Nadia Boulanger's students from the story of world music today, we would miss out on Copland's American classics, Quincy Jones's film scores, Philip Glass's minimalism, the Polish avant-garde, and Argentine tango nuevo. No one else in the history of Western music has had such a wide-ranging, cross-genre impact on the sounds of the modern world.

Aaron Copland often talked about her incredible musical memory, strong-willed nature, and one-of-a-kind approach to her art. He remembered, "Mademoiselle knew everything about music. She could recall every note, every medium, and every style from the Renaissance to modern tunes. She understood a piece before you even had a moment to think it over. Madame Boulanger never let me make the tiniest mistake. She had an amazing, almost scary, ability to sense what was wrong or lacking in discipline in a score." Philip Glass shared a similar experience with her remarkable ear and strictness, describing the lessons as a time of great harmonic discipline: "When I showed her my pieces, she would focus on one note on page 30 of the score on a large orchestral sheet and say, 'This bass doesn't match this melody on page 12.' She had X-ray vision and ears. Nadia Boulanger shaped my technique. She kept reminding me that if you don't master your craft, your imagination will be trapped by your own ignorance."

Equally deep and thoughtful, yet filled with incredible wisdom, were the memories shared by the famous producer and arranger Quincy Jones, who spent important moments of his learning in her class: "Nadia Boulanger used to tell me, 'Quincy, there are only twelve notes. Until God gives us a thirteenth, you need to learn everything those twelve notes have done before you and what they can do now.' She taught me with the same love and care she gave to Copland or Astor Piazzolla. She helped me grasp the structure of music. It was her who built the foundation for all my future work with orchestras and jazz." For Astor Piazzolla, a lesson with Boulanger turned into a moment of complete artistic awakening and personal freedom, as he later wrote: "When I felt embarrassed about my tango, she asked me to play one on the piano. When I finished, she looked deeply into my eyes, took my hands, and said: 'You fool!

This is the real Piazzolla, not those symphonies. Never let this go!' In that one moment, she silenced the academic snob in me, and a new Astor Piazzolla was born."

Polish composers, who formed a really strong group in her Parisian class, also benefited from her amazing talent for bringing out their own unique voices as young composers. Wojciech Kilar remembered her mainly as a mentor who valued the independence of others: "Nadia Boulanger never asked anything from any composer. You came to her for a chat, and if you had a piece, you showed it to her. She always found a way to highlight the best in the composer without pushing her own views." Her close friend and longtime student, Zygmunt Mycielski, captured the essence of her Parisian apartment on Rue Ballu by saying, "Several generations from different continents came here to listen, think, and love music. She was our guiding star, the ultimate judge, and someone who taught us a deep, almost sacred, responsibility for every note we wrote on paper." The renowned American composer Ned Rorem added to this picture of her endless, daily commitment to her art, admiringly noting, "Nadia Boulanger lived in a world where music was the only air to breathe. Her energy was contagious, and her focus on her students made you feel that in that brief moment, nothing else in the world mattered except the beauty of your counterpoint."

MUSIC: *Nadia Boulanger - Trois pièces for piano: nr 3 [excerpt]*

THE MUSIC CORNER

Nadia Boulanger's *Trois pièces pour piano* is a delightful collection of piano miniatures, crafted in June 1914 in Rome during a meeting with her talented younger sister, Lili. These pieces were never published while Nadia was alive, as she was quite critical of her own abilities and eventually shifted her focus from composing to her remarkable teaching career. Musically, these three unnamed, brief miniatures showcase a Post-Impressionist flair, reminiscent of the styles of Gabriel Fauré and Claude Debussy. The first movement (in D minor) enchants with its still, deeply expressive mood, requiring careful control of the left hand. The second movement (also in D minor) introduces more dramatic, flowing melodies, while the lively and whimsical third movement (in B minor) surprises with bold harmonies and expressive note repetitions in the right hand. Even though the composer regarded them as minor works, these miniatures are captivating examples of her compositional talent, blending technical simplicity with a quest for modern sounds.

A fascinating extension of this French aesthetic in Polish music was Nadia Boulanger's artistic connection with Kazimierz Serocki, a key figure in the postwar avant-garde. The talented composer visited Paris in 1947–48 on a scholarship from the Ministry of Culture and Art, where—like many other Polish composers—he refined his skills under the guidance of the legendary "Mademoiselle." While Serocki is mainly known for his powerful orchestral sounds and sonorism, it was during his time in Paris that he developed a strong sense of formal discipline and textural nuance, which can be heard in his well-known miniature cycle "Dwarves" for piano (first composed in 1949). This charming suite for children, ultimately

made up of seven movements inspired by Polish folklore (including the Krakowiak, Kujawiak, and Oberek), engages in a surprising conversation with the aesthetics of Boulanger's *Trois pièces*. Although Serocki roots his works in traditional dance rhythms, he approaches his mentor's miniatures with a focus on extreme conciseness, technical accessibility for performers, and a wonderfully refined, fresh, and rich harmony. By blending the post-impressionist color sensitivity he learned in Paris with his own cultural heritage, Serocki crafted a series that, like Boulanger's miniatures, demonstrates that the full richness of modern musical expression can be captured in a small form using simple technical means.

MUSIC: *Nadia Boulanger - Trois pièces for piano*
Kazimierz Serocki - Krakowiak, Kujawiak

"Vers la vie nouvelle" is a touching piano piece by Nadia Boulanger from 1915, created during the tough times of World War I. It was dedicated to her sister Lili, who was very ill, and this composition served as a personal escape from the horrors of war, while also trying to find a glimmer of hope in a world filled with crisis. Nadia premiered the piece in Paris in 1917, blending late Romantic drama with modern French harmony. While the title "towards a new life" hints at the promise of rebirth after the war, feelings of anxiety, nostalgia, and deep regret are clearly woven into the piece's rich texture. This work became one of Boulanger's final compositions, and soon after, she decided to stop writing music altogether to focus on teaching.

MUSIC: *Nadia Boulanger - Vers la vie nouvelle*

Books and Scientific Publications

- [Nadia Boulanger and Her World](#) (Jeanice Brooks, 2020) – The latest, monumental biography and analysis of Boulanger's impact on 20th-century music. [Link to publication](#)
- [Nadia Boulanger: A Life in Music](#) (Léonie Rosenstiel, 1982) – A classic, highly detailed biography describing her personal and professional life. [Link to book](#)
- *The Tender Tyrant: Nadia Boulanger, a Life Devoted to Music* (Alan Kendall, 1976) – A biography focusing on her rigorous yet loving teaching methods. [Link to book](#)
- [Mademoiselle: Conversations with Nadia Boulanger](#) (Bruno Monsaingeon, 1985) – A collection of fascinating conversations conducted with the artist towards the end of her life. [Link to book](#)

Articles and Online Texts

- Nadia Boulanger: The most influential teacher since Socrates (BBC Music Magazine) – An article analyzing her massive influence on American and European composers. [Link to article](#)
- Nadia Boulanger – Biography (Fondation Internationale Nadia et Lili Boulanger) – The official biography on the website of the foundation that cares for the legacy of the Boulanger sisters. [Link to article](#)

- The Woman Who Shaped the Sound of 20th-Century American Music (The New Yorker) – A biographical essay about Nadia's relationships with her most famous students, including Aaron Copland. [Link to article](#)

Interviews and Audio Archives

- Nadia Boulanger Interview (1974) (WNYC Archives) – A unique radio interview in which Boulanger talks about her philosophy of art and working with young talents. [Link to interview](#)
- An Interview with Nadia Boulanger (Composer Magazine Archive) – A transcript of a conversation about compositional technique and the music of Igor Stravinsky. [Link to text](#)

Movies and Video Materials on YouTube

- [Mademoiselle: Nadia Boulanger](#) (Documentary by Bruno Monsaingeon) – A legendary documentary film containing unique footage from Boulanger's lessons and interviews. [Link to YouTube](#)
- Nadia Boulanger: Masterclass on Fauré, Stravinsky and Bach – Archival footage showcasing Nadia Boulanger conducting classes with students. [Link to YouTube](#)
- The Woman Behind 20th Century Music (Podcasts & Lectures) – An educational video introducing her figure to younger generations of music lovers. [Link to YouTube](#)