



2023-2024 Musical Interludes

Pedagogues & Protégés | Nadia Boulanger

*Celebrating the musical legacies of three illustrious educators, their students, and their contemporaries*

Program Notes

By Brian Lauritzen

In classical music, lineage (admittedly, an ambiguous and complicated term in this particular context) often weaves an intricate web connecting composers, mentors, and protégés. Perhaps the single most influential figure in 20th century classical music was **Nadia Boulanger** (1887-1979), a luminary whose pedagogical prowess shaped generations of composers. Today's concert offers a glimpse into the wildly diverse array of composers who were influenced by Boulanger's guidance, each contributing their unique voice to the sound of classical music in the 20th century.

We begin with **Gabriel Fauré's** (1845-1924) Piano Quartet No. 1, Op. 15, specifically its majestic first movement. Fauré was 42 years older than Boulanger and therefore obviously not one of her students. However, he was close friends with the Boulanger family and one of the most important musical figures in both Nadia and her sister Lili's musical development. In return, Nadia Boulanger later championed his works for many years, especially his *Requiem*, which she conducted with the New York Philharmonic in 1962, becoming the first woman to conduct that orchestra. Fauré's music mirrors what Boulanger would eventually emphasize in her own composition studio: clarity, elegance, and emotional depth. This quartet's opening movement exemplifies Fauré's mastery of lyrical melodies and subtle harmonic shifts, elements that Boulanger undoubtedly appreciated and nurtured in her students.

Boulanger is an example of a great pedagogue who was not a prolific practitioner of the craft she taught. (A modern day example of this might be the incomparable violin teacher Dorothy DeLay, a non-performer whose students included Itzhak Perlman, Gil Shaham, Anne Akiko Meyers, and Nadja Solerno-Sonnenberg to name just a very few.) But the music we do have from Boulanger, including these *Three Pieces for Cello and Piano*, showcase her poignant expression and keen sense of form, a testament to her own talent and her influence as a teacher.

The so-called Dean of American Music, **Aaron Copland** (1900-1990), also studied with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. With Copland (and several of the other composers on this program) we see laid bare Boulanger's incredible skill at helping each individual student find his or her own voice. She did not churn out a school of mini-Boulangers. Instead, she teased out what motivated each of her students and what made their music unique and helped send them down that path. This haunting *Nocturne* by Copland is a piece that reveals his experimentation with impressionistic harmonies and evocative atmospheres. Though Copland's studies with Boulanger were brief, her insistence on clarity and structural integrity left an indelible mark on his compositional style, evident in the subtle craftsmanship of this nocturnal gem.

From Copland to Gershwin. And perhaps we should pause here to fully comprehend the powerful influence that this incredible woman had on the sound of American classical music. Copland. Gershwin. Two absolute giants of music in our country. (And there were many, many more Boulanger students from the U.S. in her studio.) **George Gershwin's** (1898-1937) *Three Preludes* are miniature masterpieces that epitomize his fusion of classical and jazz idioms. Boulanger

actually rejected Gershwin as a full-time student for fear she might stifle his already unique voice. She did, however, help refine his exploration of harmonic language and rhythmic vitality and his music is a reminder of her encouragement of innovation and individuality in composition.

**Alberto Ginastera's** (1916-1983) *Pampeana No. 2, Op. 21*, transports us to the vibrant soundscape of Argentina, where Ginastera emerged as a leading figure in Latin American classical music. Ginastera was deeply influenced by Boulanger's teachings during his time in Paris. It was, in fact, Aaron Copland who connected Ginastera with Boulanger. (Ginastera had studied composition with Copland previously.) The *Pampeana No. 2* is a thrilling display of rhythmic drive and folk-inspired melodies, reflecting Boulanger's championing of diverse cultural influences in composition.

From the sultry rhythms of rural Argentina, we pivot to the urban landscapes of Buenos Aires with **Astor Piazzolla's** (1921-1992) *Libertango*. Piazzolla, another of Boulanger's students, revolutionized the tango with his innovative approach, blending traditional forms with elements of jazz and classical music. When Piazzolla played some of his classically-inspired pieces for Nadia Boulanger, she had a lukewarm reaction. When he gave her some of his tango music, she became very excited and told him that's where his compositional future lay. Piazzolla's *Libertango* brims with passion and virtuosity, a testament to his bold artistic vision nurtured by Boulanger's open-minded guidance.

**Philip Glass's** (1937- ) *String Quartet No. 3, "Mishima,"* takes us on a hypnotic journey through minimalist landscapes, where repetitive motifs gradually unfold into mesmerizing tapestries of sound. Glass's formative encounter with Boulanger in Paris left an immeasurable mark on his compositional approach, instilling in him a sense of discipline and clarity that permeates this gorgeous quartet.

Finally, we conclude with a new version of an old classic: **Leonard Bernstein's** (1918-1990) music from *West Side Story*. A hallmark of American music, this collection of iconic tunes is a thrilling synthesis of classical, jazz, and Broadway. Today's version receives its first performance and has been arranged by composer and pianist Wesley Chu for one piano four hands. Bernstein's multifaceted genius was nurtured by Boulanger's encouragement of eclecticism and experimentation, evident in Bernstein's dynamic score rich with propulsive rhythms and poignant melodies drawn from the streets of New York City.

If this concert does anything for you beyond, hopefully, bringing you a sense of joy, I hope it also gives a profound sense of gratitude for Nadia Boulanger, whose guiding hand shaped the course of 20th-century music, leaving an enduring legacy that continues to inspire and enrich generations of composers and listeners alike. Quite simply, classical music would not be what it is without Nadia Boulanger.