

## Musical connections: Nadia Boulanger and her artistic legacy in Romania

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**Abstract:** *The article delves into Nadia Boulanger's artistic legacy in Romania, examining the profound influence of her teachings and the nuanced ways in which her distinctive personality resonated with Romanian musicians. Nadia Boulanger, a figure of intricate complexity, defies easy categorization, yet her indelible impact on the 20th century remains unquestionable. A composer, conductor, and educator, she became a beacon for virtually every prominent musician of her era. Moreover, her significance is heightened by the fact that she was one of the pioneering women in the field of composition. Nevertheless, there were also select Romanian artists who were fortunate recipients of her guidance. Through the prism of testimonials and meticulously preserved archival documents, we will summon their presence: Maria Cernovodeanu, Dinu Lipatti, Florica Musicescu, Cornel Țăranu. This commemoration stands as our tribute to 30 years of Francophonie in Romania and the craftsmen who contributed to it.*

Key-words: *Nadia Boulanger, Artistic Legacy, Francophonie, Creator Women, Pioneering, Archival Documents, Romanian heritage*

### 1. Introduction. “Two women, side by side, composing musical works...”

Nadia and Lili Boulanger are regarded as trailblazers in their roles as creative women. Certainly, there were composers in the decades and even centuries before them, such as Hildegard Von Bingen (1098-1179), Francesca Caccini (1587-1640), Barbara Strozzi (1619-1677), Fanny Mendelssohn (1805-1847), Clara Schumann (1819-1896), Cécile Chaminade (1857-1944), Teresa Carreño (1853-1917), Amy Beach (1867-1944). However, what distinguishes the Boulanger sisters is that they were among the first to tackle large-scale compositions, involving intricate vocal-instrumental arrangements, and made their livelihood from this endeavor. As musicologist Kimberly Francis aptly notes, it was perhaps an unprecedented moment in the patriarchal history of classical music: two women, side by side,

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composing musical works. It also evokes the final images of the two sisters together, before their lives, and indeed, the world and the 20<sup>th</sup> century, took an unpredictable turn. Unfortunately, fate was unmerciful to Lili Boulanger, who, as composer Cornel Țăranu shared with me in an interview, “showed great promise, she was a talented composer”; a relentless illness curtailed her destiny. However, it's imperative to acknowledge that, while this article primarily focuses on the persona of Nadia Boulanger and her influence in Romania, it is equally important to recognize her sister's individuality, their creative partnership, and the artistic synergy between them. Alongside all the attributes she possessed, Nadia played an unequivocal role - that of the ‘older sister’.

## **2. Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979): An enigma in music, an inspiration in education**

Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979) stands as a provocative figure in 20th-century history. She occupies a central position, yet remains somewhat enigmatic. While she taught composition, her own original body of work is not extensive. Her inclination towards historically-informed performance coexisted with a fervent advocacy for Stravinsky's neoclassical music. Her public persona exuded severity and discipline, yet her compositions resonate with profound intimacy and psychological sensitivity. Grasping the essence of Nadia Boulanger's personality proves a challenge; what is certain is that she ranks among the greatest musicians of her era. Her renown is such that scarcely a biography of any 20th-century musician omits her mention. Even the heroine in the renowned film ‘Love Story’ was slated to study with Nadia Boulanger in Paris, but, as we all know, she forwent it for... love.

Léonie Rosenstiel, Jérôme Spycket, Jeannice Brooks, Kimberly Francis, and Caroline Potter are some of the primary biographers who have delved into various facets of Nadia Boulanger's life and career, offering a diverse array of perspectives and insights about this illustrious musician. Additionally, Bruno Monsaingeon, a prominent French director and documentarian, has produced several films about Nadia Boulanger. Among them is ‘Mademoiselle’, a documentary featuring footage from her classes.

Born on September 16, 1887 in Paris, Nadia Boulanger spent over 70 years as one of the most influential educators of the 20th century. Over the course of her career, she mentored more than 1200 disciples, including renowned composers like Aaron Copland, George Gershwin, Leonard Bernstein, Philip Glass, Michel Legrand (a three-time Oscar winner for film music), Quincy Jones (producer of Michael Jackson's best-selling albums), pianist Daniel Barenboim, Dinu Lipatti, and conductor Igor Markevitch.

While Nadia Boulanger taught in the United States, collaborating with esteemed institutions like the Juilliard School and the Yehudi Menuhin School, her primary base remained her family's apartment in Paris, situated on the renowned rue Ballu, no. 36. Musicologists reverently refer to this place as a “pilgrimage site.” Here, she imparted her wisdom for seven decades, from the outset of her career until her passing at the age of 92.

### **2.1. Biographical details**

Nadia Boulanger's arrival into the world coincided with her father's 72nd birthday, Ernest Boulanger (September 16, 1815 – April 14, 1900), a distinguished figure in Parisian high society. He was a composer, a recipient of the coveted Prix de Rome in 1835, a member of the Academy of Fine Arts, a Knight of the Legion of Honor, and a professor of singing at the Conservatory. His union with Raissa Mychetsky, a Russian student 41 years his junior, bore testament to his unconventional spirit.

Encouraged by her father, Nadia embarked on her musical journey at the tender age of nine, delving into the realms of organ and composition. Raised in an environment that seamlessly blended aristocracy with the intellectual cream of Paris, she grew up amidst the vibrant tapestry of the city's musical and social scene. The family salon was a gathering place for luminaries such as Gabriel Fauré, an intimate associate of the Boulanger family, as well as Charles Gounod and Camille Saint-Saëns.

Between 1897 and 1904, Nadia Boulanger pursued her studies at the Paris Conservatory, honing her composition skills under the guidance of Gabriel Fauré and mastering the art of the organ with Charles-Marie Widor. Her triumph in 1908, clinching the Second Prize for composition at the esteemed Prix de Rome competition, marked a pivotal moment. This competition held paramount significance in the realm of French art; a young composer's entire Conservatory training was meticulously geared towards capturing the top honors. The laureates were rewarded with a scholarship to immerse themselves in studies in the eternal city of Rome.

From the inception of the American Conservatory in Fontainebleau in 1921, Nadia Boulanger took on the role of a professor, eventually assuming the mantle of its director from 1949 until her passing in 1979.

Simultaneously, she embarked on an illustrious conducting career. In 1936, she etched her name in history as the first woman to command the London Philharmonic Orchestra; soon after, she took the reins of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1938. Over a span of three months, she dazzled audiences with over a hundred recitals and concerts. Her baton also danced to the rhythms of the New

York Philharmonic, the Philadelphia Orchestra, and the Washington National Symphony Orchestra. In 1956, Nadia orchestrated the musical landscape for the nuptials of Prince Rainier III of Monaco and the luminous American actress, Grace Kelly. This event further cemented her legacy as a maestro of both musical and social realms.

### **3. Nadia Boulanger and her Romanian disciples**

#### **3. 1. Maria Cernovodeanu (1900 - 1968)**

Many Romanian musicians embarked on the journey to Paris to study with the renowned musician. Among them are composers Alfred Alexandrescu, Vladimir Cosma, Marius Constant, Tudor Ciortea, Alexandru Costovici, Dinu Lipatti, as well as pianists Crimhilda Cristescu, Rodica Şuţu, and, from Cluj, maestro Cornel Țăranu.

One of the most important ambassadors of the Boulanger school in Romania was none other than the well-known Maria Cernovodeanu, herself a creator of a piano school.

Every child in Romania who wished to study the piano encountered “The Little Piano Method” authored by her, a publication that emerged over half a century ago at the State Publishing House for Literature and Art in Bucharest. As the musicologist Viorel Cosma rightly calls it, it became “the primer of our keyboard,” being the source of knowledge for the instrument for the majority of students in Romanian music schools and high schools.

Maria Cernovodeanu, nicknamed the “mother of prodigious children,” was herself a prodigious child, but abandoned her solo aspirations because of a heart problem, focusing with passion on a brilliant career in music teaching.

Born on November 24, 1900 in Bucharest, Maria displayed exceptional musical talents at an early age. From the age of seven, she received guidance in the intricacies of the piano from her aunt, Eliza Cernovodeanu. Considering that two of her father's sisters had settled in Paris - one a chemist, the other a pianist - at the age of 13, Maria traveled to France to be examined by a specialist cardiologist and, especially, to be heard by Alfred Cortot. Although the maestro suggested she continue her piano studies, the doctor forbade her from any physical and intellectual activity until she remedied her heart condition. Upon her return to the country, she continued her private studies in Bucharest. At the age of only 14, she impressed in a brilliant recital in Galaţi; a year later, Maria Cernovodeanu became a student of Maestro Jora for theoretical studies, of Mihail Andricu for chamber music, and of Ghermani Ciomac for piano lessons. Her precarious health forced her to abandon the idea of a solo piano career, thus the war years from 1916 to 1918

confirmed her pedagogical talents. She returned to Paris where she attended Alfred Cortot's courses, then specialized in piano pedagogy for children with professors Nadia Boulanger and Wanda Landowska. She returned to the country to put her entire experience into practice at the Conservatory in Bucharest. The most distinguished disciple of the teacher was the pianist Grigore Bărgăoanu. Maria Cernovodeanu passed away on March 25, 1968, after a titanic battle with illness, but she managed to publish the famous and beloved "Piano Method" which confirmed her title as "the mother of prodigious children."

### **3. 2. Dinu Lipatti (1917-1950)**

Dinu Lipatti was among the distinguished disciples of Nadia Boulanger, commencing his composition studies in 1935, following the counsel of Mihail Jora. He frequently shared the stage with the Maestra, performing in concerts for two pianos (1937), and even recording Brahms' Op.52 Waltzes (1938).

The National Library of Paris houses a remarkable collection of letters received by Nadia Boulanger during her illustrious and extensive pedagogical career. Among these, forty-two bear the signature of Dinu Lipatti and were dispatched between 1936-1950. Grigore Bărgăoanu, one of the eminent biographers of this great pianist, curated their correspondence in the volume "Dinu Lipatti, Letters, Vol. 1. Correspondence with his teachers: Mihail Jora, Florica Musicescu, and Nadia Boulanger," published by Grafoart Publishing House, under the auspices of the Cultural Center Casa Artelor. While the volume may be open to debate from an editorial standpoint (omitting specific details regarding documentary sources and document codes), it provides a lucid portrayal of Dinu Lipatti's personal and artistic evolution, as well as his profound connection with Nadia Boulanger. The disciple confided in his mentor, seeking counsel and support, and warmly recommended other students.

"Among the French instructors, none left such an enduring and enriching imprint on Dinu Lipatti as Nadia Boulanger; perhaps none succeeded in unlocking his complete emotional and artistic reservoir," as stated by Grigore Bărgăoanu in the preface of the volume (Lipatti 2012, 11). During his tenure studying under the woman he affectionately referred to as his 'spiritual mother,' Lipatti made his initial recordings at His Master's Voice (including Brahms' Op. 39 and Op. 52 Waltzes) and composed several significant pieces: "Concertino in Classical Style," "Concertant Symphony for Two Pianos and String Orchestra," and the „Concerto for Organ and Piano," dedicated directly to Nadia Boulanger. Their collaborative journey spanned their lifetimes, evolving into a profound spiritual communion. Initially addressing her as "Dear Mademoiselle" and signing as "Your devoted Dinu Lipatti," Lipatti

gradually transitioned to more intimate expressions such as „My dearest Nadia” or “My dear Nadia.”

Upon receiving the disheartening news of Dinu Lipatti's premature departure, Nadia Boulanger communicated with the singer Doda Conrad in this manner: „The shocking news of Dinu's passing has left me utterly devastated. I now seek the tranquility required to apprehend his message in solitude. What a calamity his departure is! Yet, how much radiance he leaves behind!”

Indeed, Lipatti held an esteemed place in Nadia Boulanger's life; as Maestro Țăranu attested, “a photograph of Dinu Lipatti was a constant presence on the teacher's piano, alongside those of Stravinsky and the then-Pope, Paul VI.” (unpublished interview with the author, 2023)

### **3.3. Florica Musicescu (1887 – 1969)**

In 1958, during the inaugural George Enescu Festival, Nadia Boulanger graced Romania as its distinguished guest of honor. It was on this occasion that she had the privilege of meeting the illustrious pianist Florica Musicescu, one of Romania's foremost music educators and mentor to Dinu Lipatti. A rich collaboration flourished between these two musicians, culminating in Florica Musicescu's invitation, in 1959, to the American School of Art in Fontainebleau under Nadia's guidance, to lead an interpretation course.

On the eve of the course's commencement, in the spring of 1959, the celebrated French pedagogue, now a close friend, conveyed the following sentiments: „What a chance for our students to benefit from your knowledge and enthusiasm, from everything that burns within you.” (Paladi 2012, 74)

Florica Musicescu's reflections on this experience are also chronicled: “The utmost satisfaction derived from the advanced courses I conducted in Fontainebleau, at the American School of Art, under the guidance of the eminent teacher Nadia Boulanger. The rooms were consistently filled, and those who listened to me displayed an extraordinary level of attentiveness, leaving, I believe, content. I still vividly recall the inscription on the classroom door, yet untouched at my initial lecture: 'Master Arthur Rubinstein.' I regarded it with genuine emotion, as I followed in the footsteps of one of the great contemporary musicians.” (Paladi 2012, 73).

Following the conclusion of the courses, Nadia Boulanger addressed the Ministry of Education in Romania, expressing exceptionally commendatory sentiments regarding the courses led by the Romanian maestra: “An exceptional embodiment of your country's cultural wealth. She came to guide our students and bequeathed to them, along with invaluable advice, an indelible memory of human

and artistic grandeur. The splendid courses that illuminated music, the piano, life—we owe these abundantly to Mrs. Musicescu's keen intelligence, sensitivity, and masterful expertise." (Paladi 2012, 74).

This week-long course witnessed the participation of 25 young individuals from diverse regions of the United States. The repertoire they presented was not prescribed; each performer selected pieces according to their own preferences. Florica Musicescu's inclusion among the faculty of the advanced classes, alongside the eminent masters of music, and the general enthusiasm with which the course was embraced, substantiates our assertion that our teacher was regarded as a figure of prestige and renown.

#### 4. Coda

As mentioned earlier, a crucial aspect of this presentation lies in understanding the dynamic between the two sisters. While Lili Boulanger is now recognized as a pioneering female creator, much of this recognition is owed to Nadia, who tirelessly championed her sister's musical legacy. Nadia, on the other hand, is etched in history as an unparalleled educator, while Lili remains a promise tragically unfulfilled.

The First World War left an indelible mark on humanity, profoundly influencing the musical styles and approaches of both sisters. Lili produced monumental compositions, including "De profundis" for soloists, choir, orchestra, and organ—an evocative expression of the era's suffering and sorrow. Another notable work, „Ancient Buddhist Prayer" (1916), can be interpreted as a heartfelt plea for peace on behalf of all of humanity. Moreover, „For the Funeral of a Soldier," composed between 1912-1913, premiered during the tumultuous war years and featured a male choir accompanied by an orchestra.

In stark contrast, Nadia's creations delved into realms of great musical and psychological intimacy, exemplified by "Winter Evening." The piece introduces us to a mother awaiting her husband's return from the front, pouring out her love for him and their son. Caroline Potter astutely points out that the melody specifically addresses intimate, feminine matters—matters that, in a poignant manner, departed from Nadia's real-life situation as an unmarried woman without children. Furthermore, the language employed in this composition diverges significantly from the neoclassical Stravinskian style she ardently promoted. The emotionally charged romanticism of her music stands in stark contrast to the stern and resolute public persona she cultivated assiduously as an educator.

In alignment with this perspective, the words of contemporary writer Irene Vallejo come to mind. In her work, "The Infinite in a Reed. The Invention of Books in the Ancient World", the author beautifully captures the ancestral creative essence of women: "Throughout history, women have told stories, sung ballads, and woven verses of love by the fireside. [...] They were the first to weave the universe using threads and looms. They intertwined verbs, wool, adjectives, and silk. This is why texts and fabrics share so many words: the warp of a story, the knot of an argument, the thread of a tale, the unravelling of memories, the crafting of a discourse, the weaving of a plot. Thus, ancient myths speak of Penelope's loom, Ariadne's thread, and Scheherazade's enchanted tapestry." (Vallejo 2019, 526)

Ultimately, irrespective of her pursuits, woman, through her intrinsic makeup and aspirations, emerges as a creative force.

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