

Nadia Boulanger (1887–1979)

Juliette Nadia Boulanger, who was born in Paris on 16 September 1887 and died on 22 October 1979, was a French pianist, organist, teacher, choir mistress, conductor and composer. She was the elder sister of composer Lili Boulanger.

For more than 70 years, Nadia Boulanger was one of the most influential composition teachers of the twentieth century, counting among her 1,200 students several generations of composers, including George Gershwin, Leonard Bernstein, Michel Legrand, Quincy Jones and Philip Glass. Her music is closely associated with that of the American Conservatory at Fontainebleau, which she directed from 1949 until her death.

Early career as a pianist and organist

Nadia Boulanger began studying the organ and composition at the age of nine. In 1903, she became the assistant organist for the organ in the Eglise de la Madeleine. At the Paris Conservatory, she was a student of Louis Vierne and received an outstanding education. At 16 years old, she won first prizes for organ, accompaniment and composition.

In 1907, Nadia Boulanger was appointed to teach piano and accompaniment at the newly created Conservatoire Femina-Musica. In 1908, she won the Second Grand Prix in the Prix de Rome composition competition for the second time.

A female conductor and Conservatory director

In April 1912, Nadia Boulanger became a conductor, leading the orchestra of the Société des Matinées Musicales.

Her sister, Lili Boulanger, died in 1918 at the age of 24. A composer like Nadia, Lili left behind an important body of work. Nadia declared that she would no longer compose, and devoted herself to musical direction, sharing her sister's work and, above all, teaching. She continued to pursue her impressive teaching career until her death.

Nadia Boulanger began teaching at the American Conservatory at Fontainebleau when it was founded in 1921. From her first session, she established a reputation as an outstanding teacher who apparently knew all there was to know about Western harmony and tonality.

She made her Paris debut with the orchestra of the École Normale in February 1934. At the end of that year, she conducted the Paris Philharmonic Orchestra at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées.

In 1936, she was the first woman to conduct the London Philharmonic Orchestra.

In November 1937, she was the first woman to conduct a full-length concert by the Royal Philharmonic Society in London.

The following year, she conducted the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, the Philadelphia Orchestra and the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington.

Links with Monaco

Through Winnaretta Singer-Polignac, Nadia Boulanger became a friend of Prince Pierre of Monaco (1895–1964), the father of Prince Rainier III (1923–2005), and was appointed chapel master at the Prince's Palace for the funeral of Prince Louis II in 1949. She was also involved in developing and executing the musical programme for Prince Rainier III's accession in 1950 and his marriage to Grace Patricia Kelly in 1956. When Prince Rainier III created the Prince Pierre of Monaco Foundation as a tribute to his father in 1966, Nadia Boulanger was naturally appointed as a member of the Musical Council. On 30 September 1967, a prestigious concert was held in Monte-Carlo to mark her eightieth birthday. The programme was illustrated by Marc Chagall.