

Nadia Boulanger Remembered

The personal recollections of Albert Alan Owen.

I studied composition in Paris with Mlle. Nadia Boulanger for two years in the late 1960s and early 1970s. I continued visiting her periodically until shortly before her death in October 1979. The last time I saw her was the Christmas of 1978, she was very frail of body, but her mind and tongue were as sharp and incisive as ever.

I first heard of Nadia Boulanger through reading Aaron Copland's "On Music", an excellent book. At the time, I was a typically lazy schoolboy living the colonial life in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), practising the piano reluctantly, composing poor Debussyesque piano pieces, playing in a Rhythm and Blues Band and writing love songs. Something in Copland's description of her struck a chord. In the middle (culturally) of nowhere my destiny was decided.

In 1966, I moved to England to study music, the piano primarily. I was, to say the least, "off the pace". I was fortunate in my teachers. Harold Craxton, the grand old man of English piano teaching, took me in hand, and I improved rapidly. I was introduced to the "real" world of music. I studied composition with Patrick Savill, who was, likewise, an excellent teacher and purveyor of knowledge, again I improved at a pace.

London in the mid 1960s was, of course, the mecca for a young R&B man, and I gorged myself on John Mayall et al. I also went to concert after concert of contemporary music looking for a similar buzz, but found none. Nothing clicked! Here I was, an apparently conventional music student, learning piano and composition with fine teachers, but effectively a "square peg in a round hole". Creatively stranded somewhere between the mighty world of Classical Music and my beloved Rhythm and Blues.

On the piano, by 1969, I had progressed to a point where I needed to study with a teacher who could guide me towards the highest level, so I went to Paris to learn with Jacques Fevrier. As soon as I reached Paris, I took Copland at his word and, without an introduction, asked Mlle. Boulanger to accept me as a pupil. She did!

In, what seemed like, no time at all, she helped me (to clumsily continue the metaphor) square my circle. She helped me come to terms with and, ultimately, creatively exploit my naturally acquired, though inherently contradictory musical personality. Only a very great teacher could have done this. Only a sensitive teacher with a truly open mind could have guided one such as me through these crucial formative years.

What was she like, this musical colossus? I hope that these memories of my time with her will give you, the reader, some idea of her genius and her extraordinary, indeed unique, gifts as a teacher and a person.

FIRST LESSON

My first lesson with Mlle. started somewhat awkwardly. I sat next to her at the piano and when reaching down to pick up my case, money fell out of my pocket and all over the floor. An already nervous me was now even more unsettled. I spent the next few moments on my hands and knees under the piano picking up my loose change, much to her amusement! She had a mischievous sense of humour.

From the first moments of this first lesson, I knew that Nadia Boulanger was special. I was gently, but firmly, interrogated. It did not take her long to find out that I was both ignorant and naive. I was also painfully shy and quiet.

When I mentioned that I had been doing Bach Chorales, she was outraged. I was told, most firmly, that doing Chorales should be the culmination of one's contrapuntal and harmonic studies. They were not to be done lightly; they were not there to be used as mere educational canon fodder. Here was my first taste of her moral and musical rigour.

A lesson taught and a lesson learnt. As we know, Bach's Chorales are on of the highest point of our art.

When I later told this all to Janet Craxton (Harold's daughter and one of this centuries finest oboeists), she told me that the single greatest musical experience of her life, was hearing Nadia Boulanger playing Bach Chorales on the piano.

And thus, I started my formal training in counterpoint. What counterpoint it was! None of the slack and sloppy English approach!

EARLY LESSONS

I dislike the term, so loved by our U.K. institutions - "music techniques". What I studied with Mlle. Nadia Boulanger was musical technique - (singular)! The superficiality, almost to the level of pastiche, that characterises so much of the training today, was not how Nadia Boulanger approached things.

The contrapuntal task she set was simple (sic). In species, one had to write several versions of a line against a Cantus Firmus. No sequences; no repetition; no consecutives between bars etc. "Everything is forbidden." Only go on to 3 parts when you have mastered 2 parts, and so on.

Imagine, if you will, a particular experience I had with Mlle. I had managed to complete what I thought to be a perfect piece of work. No mistakes at all. Her reaction? "Ah, my dear Alan, but it is not beautiful."

I should point out that when I went to Paris, I was also functionally deaf. Hefty doses of Hindemith's Elementary Training for Musicians, under the watchful eye of the ever patient Annette Dieudonne, effected a cure.

A MOST AMUSING LESSON FOR Mlle.

On one occasion, Mlle. feeling that my musical persona could benefit from having more oomph, asked me, as an exercise, to set a dramatic passage from Shakespeare. When I had completed this task, she asked me to sing it. I proceeded, sotto voce. Impatiently, she stopped me. I was told to make more noise. (My efforts, even now, can in no way be described as singing.) She persuaded me to lose my inhibitions. "Musicians must sing", no matter how unpleasant the result. "We must never be embarrassed, go on, I won't laugh".

Well I sang out with gusto! I noticed, out of the corner of my eye, that Mlle. was chuckling. My vocal efforts were that awful.

Strange thing, since that day I have never been inhibited in the slightest by my terrible voice.

A PAINFUL LESSON FOR ME

My lesson on one occasion took place immediately before her famous Wednesday afternoon class. Towards the end of my time, as all were gathering in her anti-room (full of wonderful photographs given to her by many of the 20th Centuries greatest figures), Mlle. asked me to play an harmonic sequence and run it chromatically through the keys. I couldn't do it! Again and again I came unstuck. Again and again she asked me to try again. "How can you call yourself a musician, if you cannot perform such a simple task." No good, I still couldn't do it. Half an hour into the time when the class should have begun, she gave up on me.

I felt dreadful, all her other students had heard me, and now I had to sit with them for the next couple of hours, a musical failure!

Cruel? Yes! Was she justified? Again, yes! Music demands certain skills. If you don't have them, there is "no hiding place."

This is just one example of how tough she could be.

LONG HAIR, KITES, HANDS, SERVANTS AND SHORT SIGHT

On one occasion, Mlle. noticed that my hair was getting rather long. It was very fashionable in those days, and I was, as my own children are today, a "fashion victim". I was also wearing a rather lurid pair of purple trousers. "Alan", she admonished, "one must distinguish oneself through individuality and not singularity." She was always watchful of her pupil's personal development, nothing went unnoticed. Like all great teachers, she knew that it was not enough just to teach the subject, one had also to teach the person!

A most notable characteristic of Nadia Boulanger's teaching were the fascinating and unpredictable tangents that the lessons often took.

She once confessed to me her fantasy to go and fly a kite. Like a young child, her face lit up as she speculated on the joy that she would feel should the chance present itself.

On another occasion, we took time off to wonder at the construction of our hands. Our bodies were a God given miracle.

She described what it was like to be short sighted. Mlle., when I knew her, was very short sighted and used a magnifying glass with an in-built light to study scores. Rather than bemoan her handicap, she perceived the distortions that she saw as an abstract source of mysterious and beautiful images.

Typical of her time and social position, Nadia Boulanger had servants; a delightful family who shared her apartment and looked after her and us students. During the course of a lesson, she asked me to lower a blind. "I had better not ring the bell, as I think he is rather annoyed with me." It had obviously been a hard morning and Nadia was showing a sensitivity to another person quite untypical, in my experience, of the French upper class.

NADIA BOULANGER ON OTHER MUSICIANS

Mlle. was quite forthright in her opinions of other musicians. When giving a master class at The Royal Academy of Music, she was scathing in her criticism of all but one (A piece by Morris Pert (who went on to become one of the world's leading percussionists)), of the compositions that were presented to her. Attempting to shield one of his students from her stinging remarks, a particularly distinguished Academy Professor was put in his place in no uncertain terms.

Befitting a musician of her quality and stature, her judgements carry an enormous authority.

For the record :

- Stravinsky - The greatest 20th Century composer.
- Menuhin - Gave Mlle. her most memorable and moving experience when she heard him as a young boy.
- Boulez - The finest ear of any living musician.
- Dinu Lippati - On the anniversary of his untimely death, Nadia devoted her class to him and his work. His integrity was held up as a beacon to us students.
- Messiaen - On his teaching methods, she charged him with producing "lots of little Messiaens."
- Barenboim - Mlle. had a very high opinion of his work with The Paris Orchestra, which she felt had been transformed by his musicianship and rigour.
- Jacques Fevrier (my piano teacher) - On hearing that I was a pupil of his, she said "It is best that I say nothing!" He, in turn told me to ignore anything she told me about piano playing - "The woman is mad!" Some history here!
- Zimmerman - A great pianist.
- Ashkenazy - Not a great pianist.

NADIA THE MUSICIAN

Her phenomenal skills are well known and documented. I was and remain in awe. She told me that she had been able to play The 48 (Bach Preludes and Fugues), by memory ,at the age of seven. I suggested that for me this would be impossible! Nonsense she replied. "Do one a week, it will take you less than a year."

My recollection, is that Mlle. knew everything - every significant piece by every significant composer - by memory! Imagine that! No musical task was beyond her.

She once told me why she did not compose. I paraphrase - "Although I could write better music than most of what is being written today, I do not, because I am not a real composer."

This is an attitude that I endorse wholeheartedly. Merely being able to write music effectively, does not mean that the writer is a composer. Who is and who isn't is, like Pirsig's "Quality" (Zen and The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance) is easy to recognise but very difficult to define.

VALERY and STRAVINSKY

It seems to me, that these two men were amongst the most significant influences on Mlle.

I would go so far as to say that in the case of Stravinsky, Nadia's devotion clouded her, in other ways almost infallible, sense of judgement. He could do no wrong! Certainly, Les Noces is one of, if not The, greatest works of this century, but surely the turgid Symphony in C is one of the worst to be written by a major composer.

Valery is too much for me, I am simply not clever enough to cope with his work.

NADIA AND MY MUSIC

It will be obvious by now, that I was a difficult pupil for Mlle. When I came to her, I was not a proficient musician, let alone a skilled one. Also, I was instinctively "out of step" as far as compositional orthodoxy was concerned.

"The problem with your music Alan is too much parallelism".

This "problem" is the basis of my style.

Thus, she was faced with the task of helping me to become a skilled composer, whose core values were in direct conflict with what she knew, valued and understood. Over time, she came to appreciate the problem that I faced.

"God help you, when you understand what you are doing!" she said in one of my lessons. She understood that I was on my own, technically, musically and, to some extent, culturally isolated, with no technical or historic foundations on which to fall back. It is testimony to her teaching, that the note manipulating technique that she, literally, drilled into me has enabled me to move myself forward. Her example, as an exemplar of the values of integrity, rigour and moral courage that were a byword for her life and teaching, is always with me.