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Time Travel with Nadia Boulanger

Carol J. Oja

ARCHIVAL RESEARCH IS A BIT LIKE POKING AROUND AN ATTIC, and the Isham Memorial Library within Harvard's Eda Kuhn Loeb Music Library provides a richly curated opportunity to discover intriguing treasures. In contemplating this essay, I revisited my experiences with Isham's Nadia Boulanger Collection, which includes scores by her American students. After her death, Boulanger's estate distributed the manuscripts accumulated during a lifetime of teaching to one library from each country represented by her students, and the American documents went to Harvard.²⁵ Boulanger (1887-1979) reigned for decades as one of the most celebrated composition teachers of the twentieth century, especially through her longtime appointment at the American Conservatory in Fontainebleau, also through giving private lessons in Paris and teaching at its Ecole Normale de Musique. Marion Bauer and Aaron Copland were the first among a legion of young Americans to work with her. Thus Harvard's Boulanger Collection includes scores by a broad range of her American pupils, covering the gamut from Marc Blitzstein and Virgil Thomson, who studied with her in the 1920s, to Paul Chihara, who did so in the 1960s.

From a scholar's perspective, exploring primary sources anew can be like a chat with an old friend, mulling over encounters from the past through the lens of accrued experiences. During this latest stint with Boulanger's American legacy, I found my thoughts heading in unexpected directions: first to musing about lost voices in the historiography of mid-twentieth-century American music, then to probing Boulanger's saga at Harvard during World War II. Along the way, an interesting piece of women's history emerged. But I'm getting ahead of her as well as myself. Back to my beginnings at Harvard.

My first extended stint in the Eda Kuhn Loeb Music Library took place in the late 1980s, when, as a newly minted Ph.D., I held a one-year Mellon Faculty Fellowship and taught a freshman seminar on American concert-music composers during the 1920s. This residency turned out to be an early stage of research for my book, *Making Music Modern: New York in the 1920s*.²⁶ I quickly discovered that the library's collection of published scores by Americans from the first part of the twentieth century appeared

²⁵ Sarah Adams, Keeper of the Isham Memorial Library, email to the author, July 6, 2006. Given the extraordinary amount of immigration during the twentieth century, deciding the nationality of composers must not have been easy. It appears that the Boulanger estate made its determinations based on where a composer ended up. For example, Thea Musgrave, a Scottish composer with a long teaching career in the U.S., has manuscripts in the collection.

²⁶ New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.



Portrait of Nadia Boulanger and students, 1938. Credit: Radcliffe Archives, Schlesinger Library.

Photo research done by Christina Linklater and Kerry Masteller, Loeb Music Library.

to be comprehensive. In other words, someone had been systematically ordering contemporary imprints, and I was the lucky benefactor. I also delved into resources in other campus libraries, including correspondence between George Gershwin and Isaac Goldberg (a cultural critic who wrote the first book about Gershwin as well as an early study of twentieth-century American popular song); the papers of Edward Burlingame Hill (a composer of prominence in early twentieth-century Boston and longtime member of the Harvard faculty), and a cluster of American materials in the archive of Hans Moldenhauer (a German-born musicologist who emigrated to the U.S. in 1938 and compiled a substantial personal collection of twentieth-century scores). All these are housed in the Houghton Library.²⁷ That same year, I found myself looking

27 Re Goldberg: Isaac Goldberg (1887-1938) was a Harvard alumnus: A.B. 1910, A.M. 1911, Ph.D. 1912 ("Isaac Goldberg, 50, Author and Critic . . . Ex-Lecturer at Harvard," *New York Times* July 15, 1938). His books on contemporary popular music included: *Tin Pan Alley: A Chronicle of the American Popular Music Racket* (New York: John Day, 1930) and *George Gershwin: A Study in American Music* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1931).

Re Hill: E. B. Hill (1872-1960) was another Harvard product (class of 1894) and a student there of John Knowles Paine. *His Modern French Music* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924) grew out of his fascination with



Portrait of Nadia Boulanger with singers, 1938. Credit: Radcliffe Archives, Schlesinger Library.

Photo research done by Christina Linklater and Kerry Masteller, Loeb Music Library.

into Virgil Thomson's student experiences at Harvard in the late 1910s and early 1920s as a way of gleaning a sense of how one budding American modernist encountered the latest European trends. This was possible through Hill's papers, Thomson's own (in the Beinecke Library at Yale), interviews with Thomson, and documents about his undergraduate years in the Harvard University Archives.²⁸ Then as now, research in the Harvard libraries quickly yielded unforeseen possibilities.

My most sustained adventures that year, though, came from working with the Boulanger Collection, which had not yet been catalogued fully. I decided to focus my freshman seminar on manuscripts from the 1920s among the Boulanger materials,

the contemporary scene in France, which in turn was fostered by a broad-based leaning toward French art and culture in early twentieth-century Boston. This Francophilia must have laid the groundwork for Harvard's exceptional connection to Boulanger.

Re Moldenhauer: The archive of Hans Moldenauer (1906-1987), who taught for many years at the University of Washington, is now dispersed among many locations.

28 This research odyssey resulted in my article, "Virgil Thomson's Harvard Years," in *A Celebration of American Music: Words and Music in Honor of H. Wiley Hitchcock*, co-edited by Richard Crawford, R. Allen Lott, and Carol J. Oja (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990).

knowing how much students gain from a hands-on experience with artifacts of the past. So my class gathered occasionally in Isham's Merritt Room to discuss scores by early American modernists. The collection includes works of Marc Blitzstein, Roger Sessions, and Virgil Thomson but nothing by Aaron Copland or Roy Harris (who, like Copland and these others, was among the first generation of Boulanger's students to gain fame). Mostly, though, its holdings from that decade chronicle talents whose names never became mainstream, including Theodore Chanler, Israel Citkowitz, Robert Delaney, and Herbert Elwell. Plus, there's a wonderful wildcard: Robert Russell Bennett, who became one of the most respected orchestrators on Broadway. Before studying with Boulanger in Paris during the second half of the 1920s, he had worked at T. B. Harms as a copyist and arranger. A fascinating trajectory.

I had intended to shape this essay about the Boulanger Collection around my long-ago seminar. But then my attention began to roam. Since the 1980s, the collection has been catalogued, making it easier to grasp as a whole.²⁹ This time around I spotted a whole new group of American composers who thrived at mid-century. These included Arthur Berger, Paul Des Marais, Irving Fine, Gail Kubik, John Lessard, Robert Moevs, Harold Shapero, Elie Siegmeister, Claudio Spies, and Louise Talma, among many others—all approximately a generation younger than the modernists of the 1920s. Many (although not all) were initially trained at Harvard and then went on to work with Boulanger, either in the U.S. during World War II or in France. A substantial percentage became major composition teachers in American universities. (Kubik represented an exception to this, instead gaining a strong reputation in film.)³⁰

These composers shared something else as well: that is, a leaning toward neoclassicism, the aesthetic more widespread than any other in the mid-twentieth century. They constituted a "second wave" of neoclassicists, reinvigorating a momentum begun in the 1920s by Copland and his contemporaries.³¹ Placed in a regional perspective, many of these composers made up a Boston neoclassical group, which included those

29 The finding aide for Harvard's Boulanger Collection can be found at: <http://hcl.harvard.edu/libraries/loebmusic/isham/guides/boulanger.htm>. The Boulanger Collection arrived at Harvard in the fall of 1980. It was catalogued on RLIN in 1984, and it was inventoried completely between 1991 and 1994 by Carl Leafstedt, who was then a graduate student (Sarah Adams and Ginny Danielson, Richard F. French Librarian, Eda Kuhn Loeb Music Library, email to the author, July 25, 2006).

30 Berger, Fine, and Shapero taught at Brandeis (Fine began his teaching career at Harvard), Des Marais was based at UCLA, Lessard at SUNY Stony Brook, Moevs at Harvard and Rutgers, Siegmeister at Hofstra, Spies at Harvard, Vassar, Swarthmore, Princeton, and The Juilliard School, and Talma at CUNY's Hunter College.

31 I owe the phrase "second wave" to my friend and frequent collaborator Judith Tick, who generously offered a most helpful critique of this essay.

based initially at Harvard and eventually at Brandeis University.³² They wrote in a style that has largely been ignored or impugned in standard narratives of mid-twentieth-century American music. The very term “neoclassicism” and the aesthetic it represents are notoriously impossible to pin down, which is part of the problem. Boulanger was a well known proselytizer for the music of Igor Stravinsky, holding it up as model for her students, and Stravinsky, in turn, was one of the primary European composers whose music embodied the neoclassical aesthetic. That said, another intriguing pattern among this particular cluster of her American students led some to engage with 12-tone writing after World War II—doing so in varying degrees and with a remarkable range of individuality.

With my earlier focus on the 1920s, I had not paid much attention to these mid-century neoclassicists, but I believe we have yet to take the true measure of their contribution. In many ways, theirs is a story of the vagaries of artistic politics and academic success, also of the traumatic cultural disruptions caused by World War II. Not so long ago they constituted a central artery in American composition, holding positions of leadership while winning Guggenheims and other prestigious fellowships. Not all such figures studied with Boulanger to be sure, but Isham’s collection of music by her American students provides a solid starting point for anyone interested in pursuing this story. Contrary to recent studies exploring same-sex networks among Copland’s generation of neoclassicists, this subsequent wave seems to have been largely straight, representing a remarkably different demographic.³³ But then this generation stood apart from its immediate predecessors in many ways. Its adolescence and young adulthood unfolded during the Depression and World War II, inflected with little of the bohemian *esprit* of the 1920s.

That’s one tangent inspired by my recent foray in the Boulanger Collection. Another focuses on Boulanger herself, looking at her ties to Harvard and her place in local history.

With this particular thread, I wondered about the on-the-ground realities of being a gifted woman connected with an all-male institution during the late 1930s and the war years. I quickly realized that biographical accounts of the composers represented in the Boulanger Collection deliver a jumble of information about where exactly, in

32 Here are two examples of the disparaging comments about neoclassicism that are commonplace. Both center around Irving Fine. The composer Richard Wernick said that Fine wanted “to break out of the hermetic Boston neoclassical scene.” And David Diamond rued, “those Boston-Brandeis neoclassicists were a strange, isolated group.” Both are quoted in Phillip Ramey, *Irving Fine: An American Composer* (New York: Pendragon Press in association with the Library of Congress), 2005, 229.

33 The high percentage of gay men among the first generation of American neoclassicists has been probed provocatively by Nadine Hubbs in: *The Queer Composition of America’s Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

Cambridge, they studied with her.³⁴ Boulanger arrived at a transitional moment in terms of the relationships between Harvard's music department and neighboring institutions, which adds another piece to the puzzle.

Boulanger's link with Harvard reached back to the 1920s, when Virgil Thomson became one of her earliest American students in Fontainebleau. Ultimately, composers reached her through two routes. Like Thomson, many journeyed to France to join her studio, yielding the well-known trope about the "Boulangerie" and its impact on the history of mainstream twentieth-century American concert music. Harvard was an especially fertile feeder school, with a high percentage of its composition students studying in France with Boulanger under the John Knowles Paine Traveling Fellowship.³⁵ Much of Harvard's tie to this esteemed French pedagogue solidified during Walter Piston's long tenure there as a teacher of composition (1926-1960), when Boulanger became one of "Harvard's heroes," as the historian Howard Pollack has expressed it.³⁶

Other young composers, however, gained access to Boulanger while she was in the U.S. during several visits from 1937 until the end of World War II. While there, she gave lectures and concerts, and she traveled widely. But she established a home base in Cambridge, where she taught at the Longy School of Music, Radcliffe College, and Wellesley College. Two of these were women's institutions, suggesting that no matter how great Boulanger's fame or how decisive her impact on Harvard composers, she was female and Harvard remained the exclusive province of men. So when Boulanger first lectured at Radcliffe during the spring semester of 1938, Piston confronted gender restrictions by petitioning the Radcliffe administration to permit his students to study with her.³⁷ The response was positive, and the break with tradition was sufficiently momentous to be reported in the *New York Times*. Thus emerged a now-forgotten

34 The articles in *Grove Music Online* provide a prime example. They list Lessard as studying with Boulanger at Longy (article by Steven Mackey), Kubik doing so at Harvard (article by Alfred W. Cochran), and Shapero at Longy (article by Howard Pollack). Or, as is the case with the article about Spies, no location appears for where in the U.S. they worked with Boulanger (Spies article by Robert Pollock). The information for Lessard and Shapero is apparently correct. That for Kubik is not (but is discussed later in this article). (*Grove Music Online*, accessed July 20, 2006.) As for Spies, his biography on the website of The Juilliard School states that he studied with Boulanger at Longy (http://www.juilliard.edu/asp/fsnew/faculty_details.php?FacultyId=218&School=College&Division=Music accessed July 20, 2006).

35 In fact, so many Harvard composers did so that Arthur Berger declared there was a "tradition" of using that fellowship to go to France and work with Boulanger (Jane Coppock and Arthur Berger, "A Conversation with Arthur Berger," *Perspectives of New Music* 17/1 (1978), 52).

36 Howard Pollack, *Harvard Composers: Walter Piston and his Students, from Elliott Carter to Frederic Rzewski* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1992), 432.

37 Notice of Boulanger's appointments at Radcliffe appeared in the *New York Times*. First, there was an announcement that she would be a visiting lecturer at Radcliffe during the spring semester of 1938 ("Boulanger to Return," May 16, 1937), then that she was to give a series of "ten extra-curricular lectures for

piece of the “womanless history” that historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has dubbed “a Harvard speciality.”³⁸

“In the Classroom and on the Campus: . . . Radcliffe Permits Harvard Men to Join Music Course Given by Mlle. Boulanger,” read the *Times* headline, and the article stated that having “Harvard boys” taught by “a Radcliffe instructor” represented a “reversal of the usual system under which Radcliffe girls are instructed by the Harvard faculty.”³⁹ When Radcliffe President Ada Louise Comstock submitted her 1937-38 annual report, she noted the “innovation” represented by admitting “properly-qualified Harvard students” to study with Boulanger at Radcliffe.⁴⁰ This was five years before Harvard and Radcliffe students began sharing classes and ten years before the first woman became a full professor at Harvard.⁴¹

Thus, Boulanger’s access to Harvard students was remarkable for its day. She taught at Radcliffe again during the spring semester of 1939. This meant that the composer Irving Fine studied with her at Radcliffe, not Harvard; the same must also have been the case with Gail Kubik.⁴² What were the details of Boulanger’s Radcliffe appointment and who else studied there with her? That’s a tale waiting to be reconstructed.

Some Harvard students, such as Harold Shapero and John Lessard, worked with Boulanger at the Longy School of Music. She taught there while lecturing at Radcliffe, and in 1940 she signed a three-year contract with Longy, returning for a final semester in the fall of 1945.⁴³ Meanwhile, Longy was undergoing a shift in its connections with Harvard. Radcliffe and Longy had enjoyed reciprocity for some time, making it possible

registered students at Radcliffe College” during the spring semester of 1939 (“Notes of Musicians,” January 15, 1939).

38 Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “Introduction: Rewriting Harvard’s History,” in *Yards and Gates: Gender in Harvard and Radcliffe History*, ed. Ulrich (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 3.

39 Boulanger taught a “seminar for advanced students and a course in ‘Early and Modern Music—A Comparative Study’” (Eunice Barnard, *New York Times*, December 12, 1937).

40 Ada Louise Comstock, “President’s Report,” *Official Register of Radcliffe College: Reports of Officers 1937-38*, Volume IV/4 (Cambridge, MA: Published by the College, 1939), 6. This is available online: <http://hul.harvard.edu/huarc/refshelf/>

41 Re sharing classes: Ulrich, p. 4. Re first woman appointed: Jane Knowles, Radcliffe Archivist. Schlesinger Library, email to author, July 21, 2006.

42 Fine’s wife Verna stated that “Boulanger couldn’t teach at Harvard because she was a woman, so all the Harvard boys had to go to Radcliffe to take composition with her. That’s where Irving met her” (as quoted in Ramey, *Irving Fine*, 18). And I am speculating that Kubik must have worked with her at Radcliffe too (not at Harvard, as is stated in *Grove Music Online*, op. cit.).

43 Boulanger’s three-year contract with Longy was announced in “Notes of Musicians Here and Afield,” *New York Times*, June 2, 1940. Roy Rudolph, Librarian at the Longy School of Music, has kindly provided information about the dates of her employment there (email to author, July 12, 2006). See also Jean McBee Knox, *Longy School of Music: The First 75 Years* (Watertown, MA: Windflower, 1991, 47-48).

for a student to “correlate her academic work with music instruction.”⁴⁴ Harvard entered the mix in 1942, thus opening another avenue for students to gain access to Boulanger.⁴⁵ From what I have discovered so far, the need for giving male students access to Boulanger might well have jump-started the Harvard Music Department’s outreach to neighboring institutions.

During this same stretch of time, Boulanger vaulted the barriers facing women conductors in the United States. In February 1938, she became the first woman to conduct the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and one year later she reached the same milestone with the New York Philharmonic. Her biographer Léonie Rosenstiel has noted that Boulanger played down these gender advances, whether achieved in the classroom or on the podium.⁴⁶ And the BSO Archives has documented that very tendency: “During a rehearsal for her debut with the BSO, Boulanger scolded the all-male orchestra for their inattentiveness and lackluster playing. Asked whether she felt any apprehension about being the first woman to conduct the BSO, Boulanger replied: ‘When I am making my job I do not consider that I am a woman. I was born so and it does not astonish me.’”⁴⁷ With Boulanger’s appearance before the Philharmonic, the *New York Times* didn’t pay much attention to her femaleness, either, completely ignoring it in a review that was otherwise a total rave.⁴⁸ How ironic that the *Times* felt the Radcliffe ruling deserved coverage but made no mention of the concert’s historic significance!⁴⁹

In sum, then, Boulanger’s stature as a musician—and a French one at that—put her in a position to challenge entrenched gender biases, both at Harvard-Radcliffe and with American orchestras.

This is not the place for a lengthy discussion of any of the topics raised here, which range from Boulanger’s role in teaching a major cluster of mid-century American neoclassicists to her remarkable position in the integration of Radcliffe and Harvard. Rather, I offer them as reminders of how recurring encounters with primary sources

44 “Of Music Schools and Courses,” *New York Times*, September 11, 1938.

45 Elliot Forbes chronicled this collaboration with Longy and described himself as the “beneficiary” of an “arrangement, which made it possible for him to receive training from Nadia Boulanger” at Longy (in Forbes, *A History of Music at Harvard to 1972* ([Cambridge, MA]: Department of Music Harvard University, 1988), 102).

46 Léonie Rosenstiel, *Nadia Boulanger: A Life in Music* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), 303-4.

47 Caption for an exhibit chronicling the BSO’s history, as conveyed to me by Bridget Carr, Archivist for the Boston Symphony Orchestra, email, July 25, 2006.

48 Re *New York Times*: N.S. [Noel Straus], “Nadia Boulanger in Brilliant Debut: Appears as Conductor, Pianist, Organist and Choral Director at Philharmonic Concert,” *New York Times*, February 12, 1939.

49 Other New York papers, however, made much of the landmark status of the concert (Rosenstiel, *ibid.*).

can propel a scholar into time travel, making it possible to visit the past informed with evolving perspectives shaped by an ever-shifting present. Major research collections, like those of the Eda Kuhn Loeb Music Library, offer the tools to freshly conceptualize core historical issues, encouraging an ongoing dialogue with the people and events that make up our cultural heritage.

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