



While a piano reduction of Nadia Boulanger's *La Ville Morte* survives, the original orchestral score is lost, leaving many all-important questions to the imagination.

HIGHLIGHT

Back from the Dead

The celebrated Nadia Boulanger's *La Ville Morte* surfaces in Athens, then in New York



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In her precocious youth, Nadia Boulanger harbored hopes of glory as a composer. But as the world was to discover, her true calling lay in music education. Her seven-decade series of at-home salons in her native Paris began while she was still in her teens. The moths drawn to her flame included such dissimilar specimens as Daniel Barenboim, Elliott Carter, Aaron Copland, Philip Glass, Quincy Jones, and Astor Piazzolla, not to mention the music-mad Princesse de Polignac. At 90, her spine still as straight as that of Mary Poppins, her mind still as sharp as a sibyl's, the legend everyone called "Mademoiselle" briskly dismissed her creative output of yesteryear as "inutile," or useless. "Not *bad*," she added, "because I had craft."

A more flattering assessment comes from the conductor and impresario Neal Goren, among the most driven and inventive champions the medium of chamber opera has ever seen. Over the past quarter-century, the catalogue of his productions has included such landmarks as Haydn's *The World on the Moon* in a planetarium, Catán's *Rappaccini's Daughter* in a rose garden, and Cavalli's *Heliogabalus* in a cabaret straight out of *Cabaret*. Now his attention is on *La Ville Morte* (The Dead City), composed by the twentysomething Boulanger in an unconventional partnership with her erstwhile mentor Raoul Pugno, 35 years her senior. But for the outbreak of the First World War, their joint effort (both are credited) would have received its premiere in 1914, at the Opéra Comique.



Boulanger with her mentor Raoul Pugno in 1910.

“She couldn’t have thought it terrible,” Goren said by e-mail while en route to Athens, where he conducts *La Ville Morte* through January 28. “Leonard Bernstein wrote that she presented him with a piano-vocal score on a trip to New York. The music is gorgeous, relentlessly so. It synthesizes all the musical styles she would have encountered in Paris at the time—not just Debussy and Fauré, who was one of her teachers, but also Wagner (a lot), Puccini, and Richard Strauss, and surely some lesser lights, too.”

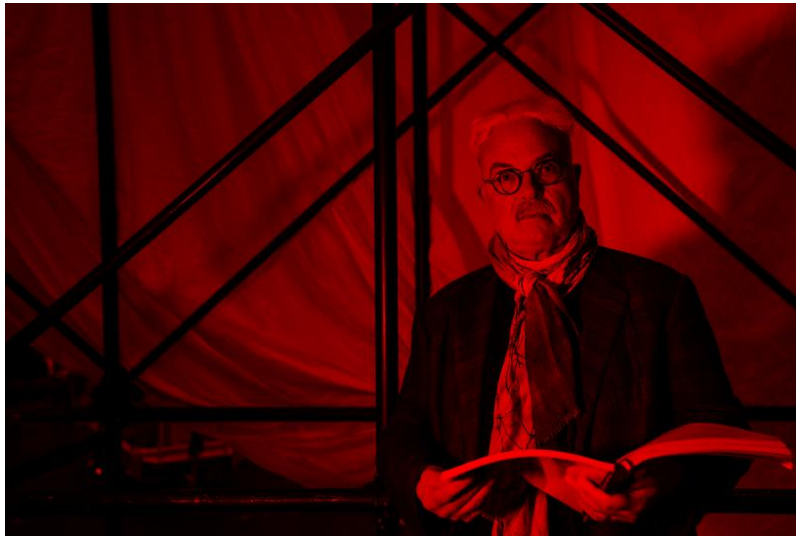
The claustrophobic, symbol-heavy libretto—adapted by Gabriele D’Annunzio from his play of the same name—takes place at and around a sun-scorched dig where an archaeologist is unearthing the grave of Agamemnon, slaughtered at his homecoming from the Trojan War. Apart from the archaeologist, the dramatis personae include his slavishly devoted sister and his worshipful best friend.



Four's company. A brother, a sister, a best friend, a wife make up the full cast of *La Ville Morte*.

And then there's Anna, the best friend's blind wife, who intuits entanglements of the heart the others do their best to smother. Though at first Anna seems a background figure, that's not so. To scramble our myths, Anna's the Sphinx in the labyrinth. D'Annunzio wrote the part for his on-again, off-again romantic partner Eleonora Duse, the noted Italian tragedienne, and she eventually did perform it in Milan. But the premiere, in Paris, went to Duse's French arch-rival, Sarah Bernhardt.

Exhuming *La Ville Morte* has taken some doing. For one thing, D'Annunzio's play is talky in the extreme—not unlike Maurice Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, which Debussy set a decade earlier and slashed without compunction. Boulanger and Pugno worked from D'Annunzio's own adaptation of his play, which owes much to Maeterlinck, but at a guess, they lacked Debussy's killer instincts. "I spent the first eight months of the COVID lockdown cutting the opera to focus its musical power as well as its action," Goren says. "I cut the entire chorus, which never sings text, only vowels." A hovering confidante called the Nurse bit the dust as well. Goren's version will clock in at a trim 95 minutes, plus intermission.



Neal Goren, the conductor of *La Ville Morte* and founder of Catapult Opera.

But a more crucial challenge remained. While a piano reduction of *La Ville Morte* survives, the original orchestral score is lost, leaving the all-important questions of instrumental color, texture, and weight to the imagination. Goren's solution has been to order up a performing edition for an ensemble of 11 players. The composers Joseph Stillwell and Stefan Cwik did the honors under the watchful eye of David Conte, a prominent Boulanger protégé.

“Boulanger’s living students all studied with her near the end of her life,” Goren notes. “Those with whom I consulted agreed that she would have strongly preferred a minimal chamber orchestration with no excess, and that is what we commissioned. Since then, I have learned that she had planned on having a *huge* orchestra, which makes me conclude that her aesthetic evolved. In my opinion, the harmonies are so incredibly rich and sumptuous that the chamber orchestration only distills their power.”

A co-production between the Greek National Opera and Neal Goren's company, Catapult Opera, founded in 2019, La Ville Morte is on in Athens until January 28. It transfers to the Skirball Center at N.Y.U. in April

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Hellermann 2023

