



BOULANGER'S MUSICAL INFLUENCES

By Neal Goren

Since *La ville morte* was first brought to my attention seven years ago, my wonderment over the score has only grown with each succeeding day. There has never been any mystery about the fact that Boulanger stopped composing in 1914 when the premiere of this opera was to have taken place but was canceled due to the outbreak of World War I. From then on, she downplayed her talent as a composer and actively suppressed her compositions. It came as a shock to her biographers when it came to light that she had gifted a copy of the score to Leonard Bernstein on one of her visits to the US in her later years, from which we can infer that she was proud of *La ville morte*. In attending a performance, it will be clear that her pride in the opera was well founded.

We ascribe greatness to every great classical composer for a different reason. Most exhibited their greatness through using the musical styles of the time in which they lived: they operated within the *lingue franca* of their age. I think of these composers as **synthesizers**, in that they synthesized the musical language of their time to create music that was uniquely theirs. Most of the great composers fall within this category: Bach, Mozart, Brahms, and scores of others. Then there are the **innovators** who took music to places no one had gone before, like Berlioz, Wagner, Debussy, and Schoenberg. There is no reason to value one category over the other. We choose our favorite composers for the power of their music and for their individuality.

As evinced in *La ville morte*, Boulanger clearly fell into the former category. She synthesized every skein of music that could be heard in early 20th-century Paris and wove them into something new and uniquely beautiful and emotive. Paris was the capital of musical innovation, attracting every great forward-thinking musician and composer of the era with its audiences hungry to hear the next big thing and the money to pay for it. It was here in 1913 that actual fist fights broke out among the audience members at the world premiere of Stravinsky's *Le sacre du printemps* as to whether this was music or an intended insult of presenting the audience with noise and calling it music. Nadia Boulanger was lucky enough to be born and raised in this milieu, and she made the most of it.

When asked about Boulanger's musical "style" in this opera, I respond that *La ville morte* is the love child of Parsifal and Mélisande, but with more passion. This is all too facile a summary for such a rich and varied score, to be sure, but it is not without merit. The influence of late Wagner and Debussy can be heard in every measure of *La ville morte*, which is unsurprising given that Paris was the epicenter of Wagner mania and the home of Debussy when Boulanger was composing the score between 1910 and 1914. Boulanger adopted Wagner's and Debussy's chromatic, highly-scented overripe harmonies that obfuscate tonality rather than defining it. To offset the sense of disorientation created in the listener, she, like them, organized her score motivically, both on a micro and macro scale. It would be very easy to ascribe names to the musical motives based on the surrounding text of *La ville morte*, as Wagner's epigones had done with his scores.

The other obvious influence on Boulanger as evinced in *La ville morte*, is that of her mentor Gabriel Fauré, particularly in the constantly shifting harmonic colors found in his later music. Other composers whose voices you may recognize fleetingly are Richard Strauss, Ravel, Rachmaninoff, and even jazz harmonies that were soon to be identified with Gershwin.

One way that *La ville morte* diverges from the music of all the composers mentioned above was in Boulanger's experimentation with pulse. All music from the Renaissance on exhibited an underlying steady pulse that could only be violated briefly in the course of a composition until the pulse eventually died at its end. The violation of a steady pulse that is heard in this opera can be traced to the music of Puccini whose music was widely heard in Paris at that time, and who felt that the pulse of the music should mirror the changing pulse of the characters singing, based on their emotional responses to the situations in which they find themselves. This compression and expansion of pulse is seen throughout *La ville morte*, where a new metronome mark can be found in nearly every four measures of the score.

Boulanger's mastery of contemporary compositional influences results in a score of incredible beauty, magic, and emotional power. It is an honor to belatedly introduce it to American audiences, 110 years after its aborted premiere.