

Nadia Boulanger's *La ville morte* becomes a classic in Athens

- Gerald Malone
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Credit: Greek National Opera

On 19 January 2024, **Nadia Boulanger**'s stillborn opera, *La ville morte*, first embarked on with her lover Raoul Pugno on 22 May 1910 was triumphantly brought to life by American conductor Neal Goren in the **Greek National Opera House**, Athens.

Welcome to **Part II** of nothing less than an operatic odyssey, the quest to confirm Nadia Boulanger as a composer, up there with her recognised position as music's greatest teacher of the twentieth century. It's only taken 114 years!

So far, so bizarre. Who? Why? How? What? A New York opera company, Catapult Opera, headed by Goren, persuaded the Greek National Opera to

enter a co-production deal to stage the unperformed opera by Boulanger, a French music teacher – with scant reputation as a composer – who died in 1979, featuring an American cast and an American director, Robin Guarino.

A sceptical Sunday Times sub-editor, much relied on in my days as editor of The Sunday Times Scotland, had an apt phrase for such a combination of unlikely circumstances when assessing the value of a news story. The redoubtable Matt Lynch would opine loudly down the newsroom: “It’s no real!”

Well, Goren, an irrepressible impresario and talented musician has made it real. Driven in his search for little-known operatic gold dust – his 2022 *Hanjo* at New York’s Skirball Center is a good example – Goren has a talent for achieving the impossible, elbowing insurmountable obstacles aside, meanwhile discovering up-and-coming singing talent to bring *joie de vivre* to his productions.

Metaphorical rats shimmying speedily up drainpipes would be left in the slow lane by Goren on manoeuvres.

I walked the length of the lake in front of Athens’ Stavros Niarchos Cultural Centre which houses two opera houses, the Renzo Piano glass-fronted building glistening in the dark evening, a magical space set amidst graffiti-festooned suburban grot where, even in a January chill, Athenians were munching deep-fried unmentionables from a random mobile caravan canteen with an ominously smoking chimney.

The £816 million complex, housing two performing auditoriums, the Greek National Library, a Delta Michelin-starred restaurant and several delightful cafés, was funded entirely by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation and donated to the state in 2017. Cultural life in Athens has been transformed. Stavros Niarchos was a shipping billionaire from the 1950s who vied with his counterpart Aristotle Onassis for fortune and cover stories in Paris Match.

In the café pre-performance I bumped into a squad of Goren’s guerrillas, flown in for the premiere, overheard discussing the production in American accents. An easy target for [Reaction’s opera critic](#). Among them was Robin Guarino, a seasoned opera stage director, with New York Met productions of Richard Strauss’ *Der Rosenkavalier* (2009) and Mozart’s *Così fan tutti* (2013) on her lengthy dance card, who was directing *La ville morte*.

So, what's it all about, Nadia? *La ville morte* is an intimate piece suited to Guarino's chamber opera setting. We are in Mycenae, in the late 19th century, close to the scene of an archaeological dig. No prizes for guessing how the co-production with the Greek National Opera was leveraged.

There are four characters, Héb , her brother L onard, an archaeologist, husband and wife Anne and Alexander. The setting is Anne and Alexander's home and the site of the archaeological dig.

The opera is based on a work, *La citt  morta*, by Italian playwright, Gabriel D'Annunzio, also a soldier, politician, scandalous lover, and general bad boy who deserves an opera all of his own. D'Annunzio was part of the late 19th-century Decadent movement, turning away from naturalism and favouring the mystical and sensuous, blended with verismo.

When Boulanger and Pugno met him in Paris in 1910 it took only a month to complete a contract securing the operatic rights. They were taking over from composer Jean Roger-Ducasse, a friend of Boulanger's who had given up on the project.

La ville morte is about the complex relationships among H b , L onard, Anne and Alexander. They are pals in a m nage   quatre. Anne, who is blind, feels responsibility for H b . H b , in turn cares for Anne and helps her with her blindness. Alexander is in love with H b  and L onard is plagued with incestuous feelings for his sister.

Watching the opera and the tortured, conflicted feelings of all the characters unfold I could not resist the thought that Boulanger and Pugno had chosen the work because it was autobiographical.

She was Pugno's lover. He was married and thirty-five years older than she. Their families were interlinked, with country houses adjacent in Gargenville, a few miles to the northeast of Paris. They were perhaps living a lie in their own ville morte.

Whatever, when Pugno died in 1914 on a concert tour in Moscow and the First World War broke out, Boulanger shelved the opera. Perhaps she had lost the heart for it. Although the couple frequently quarrelled – the notes on the original score are testament to that – their personal and musical lives were so intertwined that when Pugno died Boulanger followed a life course as teacher, not composer. No mentor. No composing.

Back from Grangeville to *La ville morte*. Héb  is reading Sophocles's *Antigone* to Anne in her house. H b , clearly troubled, wants to leave. Does she sense her brother's incestuous fascination? Alexander appears cradling a dead lark, a harbinger of trouble ahead. Only in this production it looked like a stonking black raven, probably because a lark would have been too small to be visible.

Anne encourages Alexander to give a bouquet to H b . Does she feel her blindness makes her inadequate? She is certainly setting the scene for a flirtation. L onard appears from the tomb of Atreides having made some exciting discoveries. Alexander rushes off to see the riches for himself. H b  tells L onard he is wabbit and needs to rest. She takes him off to bed.

From the get-go, the plot is rich in innuendo, double entendre and potential misunderstandings. The audience clearly sees the complex dynamics, but they do not seem to be realised fully by the actors themselves who are drifting, unaware, towards the emotional rocks.

Act II takes place in the excavated tomb, set at a lower level than the house, allowing a simple transition by the cast. Backstage projections underpin the change of scene. Alexander begs H b  to run away with him. Anne arrives and she and H b  explore the tomb. Has Anne overheard? L onard appears. Anne and H b  go to investigate the nearby Perseia fountain, a curtain raiser for the tragic denouement.

L onard confesses the incestuous lust that is tormenting him to Alexander. Both men are stunned into silence. Tantalisingly, whether or not that lust has been physically consummated remains a moot point. The audience is left, cleverly, in the shadowlands of doubt.

In Act III Anne is convinced, mistakenly, that H b  and Alexander are having an affair. She confronts L onard who becomes frantically jealous and leaves in a frenzy. H b  appears and Anne tells her she "knows" of the affair with Alexander, hinting she may now end her own life in the Perseia fountain.

Anne leaves. Innocent H b  is appalled and is about to run after Anne when L onard appears and accuses his sister of lusting after Alexander.

The musical scene darkens as L onard, who hypocritically insists H b  remains pure – the cheek of the potentially abusive b*****d – orders H b  to wait for him by the Perseia fountain. This is the high point of the opera.

A beautiful aria is sung by Héb  to Antigone and Cassandra, calling on her mythological sisters to come and receive her in death. H b  knows what her increasingly deranged brother has in mind.

Act IV finds H b  lifeless, being guarded by L onard. It is a shocking moment. No long post-drowning Puccini-style death aria for her. Alexander finds them and, while overwhelmed with grief, surprisingly shows little anger. Each character's natural reactions are tempered by the knowledge that they carry their own burden of guilt.

Anne appears, groping in her blindness, brushes against H b 's foot, regains her sight and the opera ends. Physical and spiritual enlightenment.

The pace of the production matched the taught D'Annunzio libretto. Today's librettists would do well to study D'Annunzio and learn how to convey a complex narrative in flowing lines without anodyne repetition of glib phrases. The work was beautifully set by designer Andromache Chalfant, founder of Coffey Street Studio, Brooklyn.

David Conte, an American composer and one of Boulanger's last pupils, has scored the work for a string, wind and piano ensemble of eleven. The scale works perfectly. Apparently, Boulanger had envisaged a grand orchestration, but that would have destroyed the intimacy of the work.

Goren has asked me to mention Conte's assistants who helped with the project: 'Conte oversaw the orchestration, but did not do it himself. It was the work of two of his former students who are now colleagues on the faculty of San Francisco Conservatory. Their names, are Joseph Stillwell and Stefan Cwik. David would want them credited.

Goren speculates that if she had revisited the work towards the end of her life, in the light of experience Boulanger would have preferred his spare approach. But second guessing is idle. It just works. This orchestration is pitch-perfect. Conte was a brilliant choice for the gig.

Boulanger and Pugno's music is of high quality. While easy on the ear and lyrical, being a Boulanger product, it never descends to banality. Unexpected intervals hold the listener's attention. This is no masterwork, but an important addition to the repertoire, nonetheless.

In this day and age of political correctness and avoidance of uncomfortable truths, it took some chutzpah to cast a singer, mezzo-soprano, Laurie Rubin, blind from birth, in the role of Anne.

Nothing was made of it in the programme. But as the performance progressed and Anne was sometimes on her own on stage, typing on her braille typewriter, or feeling her way tentatively round the set the penny slowly began to drop. This superb singer was actually blind.

At the curtain, it became obvious as the beaming Rubin was sensitively ushered to her curtain call and looked straight ahead, through the audience, unseeing. As remarkable as Goren's courage in casting was Rubin's in agreeing to take on a role in which she poignantly ended up regaining her sight. She helped turn the emotional dial of this already highly charged evening up to the max.

Soprano, Melissa Harvey sang Héb . Harvey specialises in early music and has had gigs with many concert organisations. Goren has a knack of pulling top class rabbits out of unlikely hats – remember [Abigail Fischer in Hanjo](#) – and in casting Harvey he has done it again.

Lyric tenor Joshua Dennis from Santa F , as L onard, and the resonant American baritone Jorell Williams, as Alexandre, completed this talented lineup. Dennis particularly assumed the character of the troubled L onard convincingly.

La ville morte will move on from Athens to New York in April. En route Goren and Harvey will give a presentation at the Metropolitan Opera Club at the behest of Reaction's opera critic to help raise awareness in Manhattan of this important new addition to the operatic canon.

The Boulanger circle is complete. Teacher, performer – and now composer. I like to think that Nadia would not have to rap Neal Goren over the knuckles – her preferred method of student torture – for his efforts. *La ville morte* is a towering accomplishment.