**Boulanger, Lili (Juliette-Marie Olga) (1893-1918)**

Laura Hamer

Born Paris, 21 August 1893; died Mézy, 15 March 1918

French composer

**Summary**

Lili Boulanger was a French composer and the first woman to win the *Prix de Rome* in musical composition. Born into a musical family and prevented by illness from following a full musical education at the Paris Conservatoire, she mainly studied at home with her sister Nadia and Georges Caussade, although she enrolled in Paul Vidal’s composition class at the Conservatoire in 1912. In 1913, she won the *Prix de Rome* for her cantata *Faust et Hélène*. Boulanger’s text-setting and use of form are reminiscent of earlier French composers, especially Massenet and Fauré, though her musical language and innovative use of timbre are more experimental. Her late works, including *Pie Jesu*, moved towards polytonality. Debussy was an important musical influence on her style, as evidenced by her choice of Symbolist texts. Grief, mourning, and isolation are important themes within her work, as is her devout (though liberal) Catholicism.

**Long Entry**

Lili Boulanger was born into a musical family. Her father, the composer Ernest Boulanger, came from a family of Parisian musicians (his mother, Marie Julie Boulanger, was an opera singer, and his father, Frédéric Boulanger, was a cellist); her mother, Raïssa Mischetzky, was a trained singer, and her sister, Nadia Boulanger, eventually relinquished her own compositional aspirations to become a conductor and one of the most influential musical pedagogues of the twentieth century. Ernest Boulanger, who was forty-three years older than his wife, was already seventy-seven when Lili was born. A strong attachment developed between Lili and her elderly father, although he died when she was only six. Grief and mourning remained important themes of her work throughout her life. At the age of two, Lili contracted bronchial pneumonia. Although she recovered in the short term, her immune system was permanently weakened, and she suffered from intestinal tuberculosis for the remainder of her short life. She was afflicted by near-constant sickness, frequently ill with viral infections and flare-ups of her condition. As her illness was incurable, it was well known that she would eventually die of it, and her short life was effectively governed by her fragile health.

Although Boulanger’s precocious musical talents were recognised in early childhood, her sickness prevented her from pursuing a full musical education at the Paris Conservatoire, as her elder sister Nadia did, and she was largely reliant upon private lessons. She studied at home with Nadia and, from 1910, with Georges Caussade. These lessons from Caussade were intended to prepare Lili to enter the *Prix de Rome* competition, which Nadia had been struggling with since 1906. Although Nadia obtained a Deuxième (Second) Grand Prix in 1908, she failed to achieve her ultimate ambition of winning the first prize. When Nadia eventually gave up the competition in 1909, Lili was determined to continue her sister’s attempts to win the prize, which their father had been awarded in 1835. She entered the Paris Conservatoire in January 1912 so that she could bolster her preparations by following Paul Vidal’s composition class. Lili Boulanger entered the *Prix de Rome* competition for the first time in 1912, although that year she failed to get beyond the first round. In 1913, at the exceptionally young age of only nineteen, she became the first woman to win the Premier Grand Prix de Rome in musical composition for her cantata *Faust et Hélène*. Feted as a feminist triumph in some quarters, Lili’s victory brought her much national and international press attention. Significantly, the publishing company Ricordi offered her a monthly stipend for first refusal of publication of her works, which allowed her the financial security to concentrate on composition.

Although Lili’s first trip to the Villa Médicis in Rome was curtailed by the outbreak of the First World War, she completed her song-cycle *Clairières dans le ciel* (1914), with texts drawn from poet Francis Jammes (1868-1938), whilst in Italy. Back in Paris, she supported the war effort by founding, with Nadia, the Comité Franco-Américain du Conservatoire National (French-American Committee of the National Conservatoire), which supported musician soldiers. She returned to the Villa Médicis for a number of months in 1916, where she worked upon her operatic setting of Maurice Maeterlinck’s play *La Princesse Maleine* and large-scale (choral, orchestral, and soloist) settings of *le psaume 129 ils m’ont assez opprimé*, *le psaume 130 du fond de l’abîme*, and *vieille prière bouddhique*. Deteriorating health, however, forced her to return to France. She continued to battle her increasingly deliberating illness throughout the final two years of her life by working on compositions she had already begun. During the last two months of her life, she dictated her final composition, *Pie Jesu*, to Nadia. It was performed at her funeral. She died in March 1918, at the age of only twenty-four.

Lili Boulanger’s text-setting and use of form are reminiscent of earlier French composers, especially Massenet and Fauré, though her musical language and innovative use of timbre are more experimental. Her late works, including *Pie Jesu*, moved towards polytonality. Debussy was an important musical influence on her, and further evidenced by her choice of texts by Symbolist poets (Jammes and Maeterlinck). Expressions of isolation and alienation – important subjects of Symbolist art, though possibly also prompted by the extensive periods of time she was forced to spend alone throughout her life – are an important theme of her work, and particularly notable features of *Clairières Dans Le Ciel*. Her devout, though liberal, Roman Catholicism was another important theme of her work. Her faith influenced her choice of religious subject matters, including her settings of Psalms 24, 129, and 130.

**List of Works (Selective)**

1913 *Faust et Hélène*

Winning *prix de Rome* cantata for orchestra, chorus, and vocal soloists

1914 *Clarières dans le ciel*

Song-cycle for voice and piano, after texts by Francis Jammes

1916-8 *La Princesse Maleine*

Operatic setting of Maurice Maeterlinck’s play

1916-7 *Le psaume 129 Ils m’ont assez opprimé*

Large-scale setting of psalm 129 for bass/baritone solo, male choir, and orchestra

1916-7 *Le psaume 130 Du fond de L’abîme*

Large-scale setting of psalm 130 for alto solo, choir, and orchestra

1916-7 *Vieille Prière bouddhique*

Buddhist prayer, translated by S. Karpelès, for tenor solo, choir, and orchestra

1918 *Pie Jesu*

For treble solo, string quartet, organ, and harp

**References and Further Reading**

Rosenstiel, L. (1978) *The Life and Works of Lili Boulanger*, London: Associated University Presses.

(Accessible biography of Lili Boulanger.)

Fauser, A. (1997) ‘Lili Boulanger’s *La Princesse Maleine*: a Composer and her Heroine as Literary Icons’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, cxxii: 68–108.

(Discussion of *La Princesse Maleine.*)

Fauser, A. (1998) ‘*La guerre en dentelles*: Women and the *Prix de Rome* in French Cultural Politics’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, li: 83–129.

(Discussion of the first ten years during which women were allowed to enter the *prix de Rome* [1903-13], culminating in Lili Boulanger becoming the first woman to win the musical composition branch of the competition in 1913.)

Potter, C. (1999) ‘Nadia and Lili Boulanger: Sister Composers’, *Musical Quarterly,* lxxxiii/4: 536–56.

(Overview of the comparative careers of Nadia and Lili Boulanger.)

Potter, C. (2006) *Nadia and Lili Boulanger*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

(Study of the comparative careers of Nadia and Lili Boulanger, including detailed discussion of their music.)