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Rheinberger, Boulanger, and the Art of Teaching Composition¹

E. Douglas Bomberger

At first glance, it would be hard to find two musicians more different than Josef Gabriel Rheinberger (1839–1901) and Nadia Boulanger (1887–1979). He was a German Romantic composer who lived in nineteenth-century Munich, rubbing shoulders with Wagner, Strauss, and Hans von Bülow. She was a twentieth-century French musician who studied with Fauré, but gave up her own compositional aspirations to dedicate her life to teaching. A closer look at their lives and work, however, reveals similarities between these two musicians so different in time and place: both were devout Catholics, both called the organ their principal instrument, and both had a remarkable impact as composition teachers, particularly of American students. An examination of the teaching methods of Rheinberger and Boulanger further demonstrates that, although their musical backgrounds and personal musical aesthetics were very different, their teaching was so similar as to suggest some universal truths about the successful teaching of musical composition.

In 1904, Louis Elson wrote that Rheinberger “almost deserves a chapter to himself in an American history of music”² because of the large number of prominent American composers who had studied with him in Munich. Among the former Rheinberger students who played crucial musical roles in turn-of-the-century America were George Whitefield Chadwick, Horatio Parker, Frederick Shepherd

¹This paper was presented at the annual conference of the College Music Society in Portland, Oregon on 10 November 1995.

²Louis C. Elson, *The History of American Music* (New York and London: Macmillan, 1904), 252.

Converse, and Arthur Battelle Whiting. In addition to these men were other composers whose works were highly regarded in their day but are less well known today: Franz Xavier Arens, Frederick Field Bullard, Sidney Homer, Henry Holden Huss, Walter Raymond Spalding, and about sixty other American musicians.³ Nadia Boulanger likewise developed a reputation that attracted many American students. Beginning with Marion Bauer in the first decade of the twentieth century, she taught some of the most prominent composers of the twentieth century, including Elliott Carter, Aaron Copland, David Diamond, Ross Lee Finney, Philip Glass, Roy Harris, Douglas Moore, Walter Piston, Louise Talma, and Virgil Thomson. This last composer called her “a one-woman graduate school so powerful and so permeating that legend credits every U.S. town with two things—a five-and-dime and a Boulanger pupil.”⁴ That no other composition teacher had such a broad impact on American music as these two raises the question of what they did in their composition classes that was so effective. Fortunately, their students commented extensively on the goals, methods, and ideals espoused by these teachers, allowing us to form a clear picture of the values they held in common.

Boulanger herself said, “It is not possible to teach composition, only those things which help us appreciate it.”⁵ Rheinberger undoubtedly would have agreed, for both teachers disclaimed any credit for their students’ creativity and originality. Boulanger and Rheinberger concentrated primarily on the materials of music and, through these materials, strove to equip each student to attain his or her own creative goals.

³For further information on Rheinberger’s American students, see E. Douglas Bomberger, “Amerikanische Musiker als Studenten bei Josef Gabriel Rheinberger,” *Jahrbuch des Historischen Vereins für das Fürstentum Liechtenstein* 93 (1995): 317–36.

⁴Virgil Thomson, “Greatest Music Teacher—at 75,” *The New York Times Magazine* (4 February 1962): 24.

⁵Richard Forrest Woods, “Nadia Boulanger: A Diary of Lessons,” *The Diapason* 72/1 (January 1981): 1. Aaron Copland expressed a similar idea in “An Affectionate Portrait,” *Harper’s Magazine* 221 (October 1960): 49.

As the foundation of their teaching method, both teachers illustrated the principles of composition through reference to historical and contemporary models. Boulanger and Rheinberger were credited by their students with an encyclopedic knowledge of the repertoire, which then allowed them to illustrate solutions to nearly any problem with a concrete example. Aaron Copland wrote:

Nadia Boulanger knew everything there was to know about music; she knew the oldest and the latest music, pre-Bach and post-Stravinsky, and knew it cold. All technical knowledge was at her fingertips. . . . She had a teacher's consuming need to know all music functions, and it was that kind of inquiring attitude that registered on the minds of her students.⁶

Composer David Ward-Steinman, who studied with Boulanger in 1958–59, discovered firsthand her intimate knowledge of the techniques of Palestrina. One of his first assignments was to realize some exercises according to the rules of sixteenth-century counterpoint. When he submitted the completed exercises to Boulanger and saw her making corrections, he protested that he had done everything according to Jeppesen's book on counterpoint, which he knew well. Her response was a frosty, "Then Jeppesen is wrong." When he was able to check her assertion in the library, he discovered that her corrections had indeed been more faithful to the music of Palestrina than had Jeppesen's rules.⁷

For both composers, the ultimate example of solid craftsmanship combined with expressive genius was Mozart. Rheinberger held no other composer in such high regard, telling his students, "Mozart, überhaupt Mozart!" [Mozart, above all Mozart!].⁸ Boulanger expressed wonder at the mystery of Mozart in this much-quoted story she related in 1962:

⁶Aaron Copland, *Copland on Music* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1940), 87.

⁷Personal interview with David Ward-Steinman, 10 November 1995.

⁸Georg Hild, "Wie's beim Meister war," *Jahrbuch des Historischen Vereins für das Fürstentum Liechtenstein* 40 (1940): 156.

A few weeks ago I was listening with some friends to a new recording of Mozart's "Figaro." At one point we all simply stopped the music and stared at each other. An unbelievable miracle was unfolding, which we could not describe or even begin to understand. And what is most remarkable is that Mozart creates his mysteries with the most commonplace materials.⁹

It is significant that although they both helped shape the music of the future by training young composers, neither had any sympathy for ultra-modern techniques. For Rheinberger, this meant that he encouraged his students to write absolute music rather than program music and to avoid the seemingly aimless harmonic experiments of the late Romantics. For Boulanger, this translated to an antipathy for the 12-tone method of composition and an embracing of Stravinsky's neoclassicism because of its strong connection to the traditions of Western music. This fundamental conservatism was perhaps the biggest cause for complaint about both teachers, as both were accused at times of being insufficiently adventuresome in embracing new trends. There seems to have been considerable freedom for students to follow their own paths in later years, though, as each of the two teachers produced students who went on to compose in a remarkable diversity of styles. For both, style was secondary to the techniques of musical composition, which provided the necessary foundation for whatever the student chose to do in the future.

Both teachers demanded from their students—and illustrated themselves—a highly developed sense of inner hearing. Their legendary feats of score analysis are illustrated by two accounts from their students. Huss wrote,

I remember the case of a new student who had (I believe) just graduated from some North German conservatory. Mr. A (let us call him) submitted to Rheinberger's inspection a ballade for chorus and orchestra. . . . Mr. A stood anxiously awaiting a verdict at Rheinberger's

⁹Alan Rich, "The Busy Boulanger," *New York Times* (25 February 1962):9.

elbow, the latter meanwhile turning over the leaves at about the rate of speed a person would use who wished to see if the pages were correctly numbered. Mr. A lost patience at this apparent dilly-dallying, and as the last page was turned said, with ill-concealed impatience in his tones: "Now, Mr. Professor, I should like to show you some debatable passages; for instance, in the andante of the second part is the passage effectively scored?" "You mean this place," said Rheinberger, instantly turning to the place; "well, the first horn is rather high, but it will do." A few remarks of like tenor convinced the now astonished and almost dazed student that his new teacher had in the space of a few moments actually grasped all the salient and many of the minor points of the work of fifty odd pages.¹⁰

Virgil Thomson wrote of a similar skill in Boulanger:

What she does possess to a degree rarely matched is critical acumen. She can understand at sight almost any piece of music, its meaning, its nature, its motivation, its unique existence; and she can reflect this back to the student like a mirror. Suddenly he sees that which has caused him pain, struggle and much uncertainty unveiled before him, without malice or invidious comparisons, as a being to which he has given birth. Naturally he is grateful. His work has been taken seriously, has received the supreme compliment of having its existence admitted to be real.¹¹

In order to foster this sense of inner hearing, both teachers encouraged their students to compose away from the keyboard. In Rheinberger's class, all exercises were done on the blackboard. The teacher played the piano only when it became necessary to unravel what Huss called "a knotty point," in which case the student at the board was expected to hear and notate immediately what Rheinberger played. Sidney Homer wrote of this remarkable experience:

¹⁰H(enry) H(older) Huss, "Rheinberger as a Teacher," *The Musical Courier* 17/1 (4 July 1888): 18.

¹¹Virgil Thomson, "'Greatest Music Teacher'—at 75," 33.

What a strange sight for an outsider who should occasionally look in! A long bare room badly lit by gas. A small gray-bearded man with burning eyes and expressive hands; twenty absorbed students watching a blackboard on which notes were being written, waiting breathlessly in absolute silence for the next progression: a beautiful passage in the alto, a thrilling touch in the tenor, a delicate, satisfying melodious step in this or that voice—the whole *sounding* wonderful. Sounding! When you could hear a pin drop? Yes, every student was listening, and the little white notes were sounding out clearly as they were written.¹²

Of all the techniques, skills, and knowledge that they shared with their students, both Rheinberger and Boulanger felt the most crucial was the study of counterpoint. Rheinberger's classes at the Akademie der Tonkunst in Munich were simply called "Kontrapunkt," despite the fact that they also embraced harmony, form, and instrumentation. During the three-year course of study, Rheinberger's students worked from simple two-voice counterpoint through various forms of fugue, fughetta, and canon at all intervals, to six- and eight-voice choral textures. The counterpoint exercises were begun as a class on the blackboard, with each student taking a turn adding a measure. The unfinished exercises were then completed individually as homework.

Boulanger's students also testified to her predilection for counterpoint. Philip Glass, for instance, says that he spent five or six hours daily on counterpoint exercises during his student days in Paris.¹³ One might ask what place counterpoint has in the minimalist music of Glass, but he cited these exercises as an important factor in boosting his confidence in his technique. The emphasis on counterpoint is a reflection of one of Boulanger's overriding principles, the concept of "la grande ligne." She felt that music of the late nineteenth century had become too preoccupied with harmony, losing sight of the traditional importance of melody. Her interest in the

¹²Sidney Homer, *My Wife and I* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), 34.

¹³Interview in *Mademoiselle: A Portrait of Nadia Boulanger*, directed by Dominique Parent-Altier (Bloomington: Indiana University Audio-Visual Center, 1987).

interaction of melodic lines led to a fascination with early music, particularly the works of Monteverdi, whom she considered one of the five greatest composers of history, along with Bach, Beethoven, Mozart and Stravinsky.¹⁴

Copland wrote, "All Mademoiselle's pupils wrote, among other things, motets and a passacaglia."¹⁵ Both he and Virgil Thomson wrote passacaglias of such high quality that they were later published. Rheinberger also required each student to write a lengthy variation set on an eight-measure theme in triple meter, a passacaglia in all but name. Engelbert Humperdinck's piece has been published, and Parker's fulfillment of this assignment may be seen in the Parker Collection at the Yale University Library.¹⁶

In order to foster an appreciation for vocal textures, Boulanger brought her students together on Wednesday afternoons to sing part-songs and motets, especially the madrigals of Monteverdi and the motets of Bach. Rheinberger began in the first year of his counterpoint classes with simple vocal textures and progressed to eight-part choral texture by the end of the third year. This emphasis on vocal writing helped shape the career of Horatio Parker, who had never written a vocal piece before his arrival in Munich. Under Rheinberger's guidance he produced several large-scale works for chorus, and by the mid -1890s his oratorio, *Hora Novissima*, had earned him the reputation of America's leading choral composer.

If an overriding concern with counterpoint was common to both teachers, there were additional technical matters on which they agreed. Both teachers insisted on intimate familiarity with all clefs. Huss advised prospective students to brush up on alto and tenor clefs before arriving in Munich, in order to avoid embarrassment at the placement examination, which was performed at the blackboard before the whole faculty. Boulanger had her students sight read in

¹⁴Woods, 3.

¹⁵Aaron Copland and Vivian Perlis, *Copland: 1900 through 1942* (New York: St. Martin's, 1984), 78.

¹⁶Hans-Josef Irmen, *Engelbert Humperdinck als Kompositions-Schüler Josef Rheinbergers* (Cologne, Germany: Arno Volk and Vaduz, Liechtenstein: Josef Rheinberger-Archiv, 1974), 114–32.

all clefs during lessons, changing clefs with each measure and chiding them if they stumbled.¹⁷

The word that is used most often to characterize the teaching of both Rheinberger and Boulanger is "discipline." Both teachers felt that before one could write freely and originally in his own style, a composer needed to master the rules of traditional music theory, particularly counterpoint. Copland reports that Boulanger subscribed to the Stravinsky maxim, "If everything would be permitted to me, I would feel lost in this abyss of freedom."¹⁸ She once told a student, "Loose is not beautiful, loose is loose."¹⁹ A byword for Rheinberger was, "Über den Zwang zur Freiheit!" [From constraint to freedom!].²⁰ Both teachers were known to tell their students, "For now, you must do it my way, later you may do it your way."²¹

Both teachers also demanded a fanatical attention to detail, and their classes were primarily devoted to analysis at the most minute level. Elliott Carter cites this detailed study as a factor in allowing him to appreciate the intricacies of great music: "It's such a pleasure to me now to hear certain of the simplest progressions in the music of Bach and realize that there could have been many other voice-leading, and that the one that has been chosen is especially meaningful coming as and where it does in a particular work."²² Rheinberger likewise devoted so much attention to the details of voice-leading that the class often covered no more than sixteen measures in a two-hour session.²³

¹⁷ Woods, 3; Suzanne R. Hoover, "Nadia Boulanger," *The American Scholar* (Fall 1977): 498.

¹⁸Copland and Perlis, 63.

¹⁹Laurence Rosenthal, "Confronting the 'Next Impossible': Musical Studies with Nadia Boulanger," *Parabola* 14/1 (1 February 1989): 83.

²⁰Josef Schmid, "Joseph Rheinberger—der große Lehrer, Mensch und Freund," *Jahrbuch des Historischen Vereins für das Fürstentum Liechtenstein* 40 (1940): 141.

²¹Schmid, 140; Nadia Boulanger, "A Composer is Born," *Music Journal* 20 (April 1962): 48.

²²Allen Edwards, *Flawed Words and Stubborn Sounds: A Conversation with Elliott Carter* (New York: Norton, 1971), 50.

²³Felix Kircher, "Joseph Rheinberger in der Kontrapunktstunde," *Jahrbuch des Historischen Vereins für das Fürstentum Liechtenstein* 40 (1940): 167.

Both teachers insisted on neat and accurate scores, even in exercises. Rheinberger told his students, "Get used to using good, clear notation early, and you will save yourself much vexation later."²⁴ For Boulanger, attention to detail was a way of life. Elliott Galkin, when he told Boulanger that he thought it was of minor importance to draw bar lines with a ruler, received the response, "A composer who does not draw bar lines with a ruler is like a gentleman who neglects to shave in the morning or who has a button missing from his coat." Galkin, who went on to become director of the Peabody Conservatory of Music, had to admit that he was guilty of both transgressions that day.²⁵

This discipline and attention to detail were reflected in their respective attitudes toward punctuality. Felix Kircher wrote of his former teacher, "Rheinberger himself usually appeared punctually at eight a.m.; he was very seldom late, and if so, he always apologized with utter politeness. One could easily tell that he could not stand lateness by the students."²⁶ Copland wrote, "No one ever came to a Boulanger class late more than once; her disapproval could be annihilating."²⁷

Their attention to detail was supported by a tremendous capacity for concentration and hard work. Georg Hild, who studied with Rheinberger during the last two years of his life, wrote that the teacher gave no indication of weariness during the strenuous two-hour classes, that he never missed a day because of illness, and that he was never late for class.²⁸ Boulanger continued teaching past her ninetieth birthday, still maintaining a full schedule. Both teachers devoted six days a week to their classes, and both used a system of scheduling that may have contributed to their ability to keep up

²⁴Hild, 153. Ironically, Rheinberger's class notes, preserved in the Josef Rheinberger-Archiv in his birthplace of Vaduz, Liechtenstein, show that he developed a hand tremor in later life that made it difficult for him to write legibly.

²⁵Quoted in Alan Howard Levy, *Musical Nationalism: American Composers' Search for Identity* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983), 56.

²⁶Kircher, 167.

²⁷Copland and Perlis, 63.

²⁸Hild, 149.

their interest and energy. Copland recalled, "She had an unusual method of rating her students: the poorest ones were taught on Monday. On each successive day in the week the quality improved, so that by Saturday she was teaching her best students. Then, in each category, she put the poorest students earliest each day, so everyone knew that those who came late on Saturday were Mademoiselle's favorites."²⁹ Rheinberger arranged his three counterpoint classes similarly, so that the lowest level met on Monday and Thursday, the second level on Tuesday and Friday, and the advanced class on Wednesday and Saturday.

All of the similarities discussed thus far have to do with the working methods of Rheinberger and Boulanger. What is perhaps most important, and what seems to have been most memorable to the students, was the way each teacher related to them personally. Curiously, both teachers were accused of showing a preference for foreigners, and indeed their most successful students came to them from abroad. Boulanger considered it part of her mission to help develop the national music of countries that had not yet established their own traditions in art music.³⁰ Likewise, Kircher characterized Rheinberger's classroom as "a miniature league of nations."³¹ For both teachers, though, talent was the only important criterion for acceptance and encouragement of a student.

The reports on the personalities of these two musicians contain some contradictions. It seems that both were candid to a fault, and this resulted in encouragement for some and wounded egos for others.³² One of Boulanger's maxims was, "As long as I am exacting,

²⁹Copland and Perlis, 64.

³⁰Hoover, 498.

³¹Kircher, 168.

³²As famous teachers, both had to endure the indignity of having their work castigated in print by disgruntled former students. Hild reports that a former Rheinberger student by the name of Karl Gleitz published a polemic in which he attacked the teacher for his preference to foreigners, among other things. David Diamond's memoirs contain an unflattering account of his tempestuous studies with Boulanger. A recently published letter from Virgil Thomson to Aaron Copland in 1931 shows that he also had lost much of his respect for Boulanger's teaching (*Selected Letters of Virgil Thomson*, ed. Tim Page and Vanessa Weeks Page (New York: Summit Books, 1988), 100-1).

there is hope. If I am nice, that is a bad sign."³³ A recent biography states:

She had no use for the weak; once she found them out—and this was true for those who performed under her direction as for her own students—she went after them relentlessly, pushing them to the limit in a way that seemed cruel: many were those who burst into tears beneath the lash of severity, sometimes even in the presence of other musicians. Even some well-known artists fell victim to these humiliating scenes, so painful for a third party to witness, but which left Nadia Boulanger as unmoved as a block of marble.³⁴

Rheinberger's technique was perhaps not so direct. He was known instead for his sarcasm with weak students, as illustrated by an anecdote related by Josef Renner:

Looking through the work of a student, Rheinberger remarked, "This spot in the horn part sounds horrendous!" The student, completely disconcerted, said timidly, "But, Herr Professor, it is only supposed to be played pianissimo."—"That is exactly the same," answered the Master, a smile playing around the corners of his mouth, "as if someone were to go to confession and say: 'Reverend, I have told a lie, but I told it very softly.'"³⁵

The rarity with which they gave compliments made their encouragement even more gratifying to gifted students like Copland. He wrote, "The confidence she had in my talents and her belief in me were at the very least flattering and more—they were crucial to my development at this time of my career."³⁶ Hild reported that the seldom-heard compliment, "This piece can be performed," would set off a joyful celebration in Rheinberger's class.³⁷ Both teachers

³³Quoted in Rosenthal, 79.

³⁴Jérôme Spychet, *Nadia Boulanger*, translated by M.M. Shriver (Stuyvesant, New York: Pendragon Press, 1992), 71.

³⁵"Anekdoten," *Jahrbuch des Historischen Vereins für das Fürstentum Liechtenstein* 40 (1940): 249.

³⁶Copland and Perlis, 64.

³⁷Hild, 153.

were notoriously parsimonious with flattery, but they were always ready to give an honest compliment for a job well done, which deepened their students' respect for their sincerity.

Finally, both teachers paid the ultimate compliment to their most talented American pupils with actions rather than words. On 25 January 1885, during Horatio Parker's final year as an organ and counterpoint student of Rheinberger, the teacher entrusted him with the solo part in the premiere of his *Organ Concerto in F*, op. 137. On the same concert, he arranged for the premiere of Parker's own setting of Psalm 23 for soprano soloist, harp, organ, and women's chorus.³⁸ This generosity was matched by Boulanger forty years later, when she commissioned the unknown Aaron Copland to write a piece for organ and orchestra to be performed on her American tour in 1925. The premiere of that piece was the beginning of Copland's American career. When she first mentioned the idea of writing this piece for an instrument for which he had never written, he asked, "Do you *really* think I can do it?" She pointed at her student and replied, "You can do it."³⁹

Josef Rheinberger and Nadia Boulanger lived in very different surroundings, but their approach to teaching was remarkably similar. Both believed in disciplined study of the masterworks of the past as models for student composition, both stressed counterpoint above all other skills, both had a fanatical attention to detail, and both were completely candid with their students, praising good work and correcting poor work. While it would be naive to claim that this is the only way to teach composition, the subsequent success of so many students reflects an unmatched impact on two generations of American composers. Their methods and ideals continue to offer much that is worthwhile for those who are guiding the next generation.

³⁸*Elfter Jahresbericht der Königlichen Musikschule in München* (Munich: Wolf, 1885), 35.

³⁹Copland and Perlis, 92. Boulanger also arranged for a concert of American works in Paris on 5 May 1926 that was important for the growing international reputation of the young generation of American composers.