

21. D'un vieux jardin

Trois Morceaux, No. 1 (1914)

Lili Boulanger
(1893-1918)
arr. William Melton

Boulanger, Lili

(born Paris, August 21, 1893; died Mézy, March 15, 1918)

Boulanger's family had a distinguished musical past: her grandmother Marie-Julie had been a well-known mezzo-soprano on the stage, her grandfather Frédéric a noted cellist. Her father Ernst was a cellist, composer (who won the First Prize of Rome in 1835 for his cantata *Achille*), and Conservatoire professor, and her mother, Princess Raissa Mischetzky, oversaw Lili's early education with great care. Baptized as Marie-Juliette Olga Lili, their daughter was raised in a household where intellectual pursuits were championed. Frequent guests included Gabriel Fauré, who noticed the toddler's musical gifts, as well as Charles Gounod, Jules Massenet and Camille Saint-Saëns. A bout of bronchial pneumonia left Lili burdened with chronic illness. Her beloved father died in 1900, and the girl began to compose shortly afterwards (resulting in the song *La Lettre de Mort* at age 11). She learned piano, organ, cello and harp before finally deciding on a composing career at the age of 17. Teachers included her mother, her older sister Nadia (1887-1979), and Fauré, as well as Georges Caussade and Paul Vidal from the Conservatoire faculty.

In 1913 Boulanger won the First Prize of Rome for the cantata *Faust et Hélène*, becoming the first woman to be so honored. *Le Monde Musical* wrote, "Mlle. Lili Boulanger already shows a fortunate preference for transparent melodies, an almost astonishing gift for the theater, an admirable naturalness in expressing passionate feelings, and strong creative powers [...]." The First World War forced a break in Boulanger's scholarship studies in Rome, and she turned to war charities. As her health worsened she continued to compose (on her deathbed dictating her *Pie Jesu* to her sister Nadia), and she died outside of Paris in 1918 at the age of 24 (the cause, "intestinal tuberculosis," was diagnosed after the fact as Crohn's disease). Claude Debussy, an admirer of Boulanger's music, died less than two weeks later, and the war would rage on until an armistice was achieved late the same year. Left unfinished was Boulanger's opera, *La Princesse Maleine*, Maurice Maeterlinck's tale of a princess who had lost her kingdom to war and lost her beloved, as well.

Boulanger completed more than 50 works in her brief creative life, ranging from the intimate song cycle *Clairières dans le ciel* (1912) to the large-scale *Vieille prière bouddhique* for chorus and orchestra (1917). A view into her personal impressionistic style can be had in *D'un Vieux Jardin* (*From an old Garden*; 3 *Morceaux* for piano, No. 1). The manuscript, now housed in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, is dated June 3, 1914, and was published by Ricordi in 1918 with a dedication to Lily Jumel. As Dominique Jameux observed of another of Boulanger's works, "The contrapuntal textures and slight chromaticism place her music in the French mainstream of the period." Indeed, Albert Roussel, Arthur Honegger, Francois Poulenc, and Olivier Messiaen were all strongly influenced by Boulanger. Her sister Nadia – who will be remembered as one of the 20th century's most distinguished musicians, the compositional mentor of Lennox Berkeley, Aaron Copland, Jean Françaix, Walter Piston and many others – put it succinctly: "My sister Lili, *she* was the composer. She was already an important composer when she died at 24. She was six years younger than I was, and she turned me into a teacher."

Text by William Melton