



Lili with fellow Prix de Rome finalists,  
1913



## Lili Boulanger: An Iron Flower

Lili Boulanger was exceptionally talented, born into musical (and perhaps Russian) aristocracy in 1893. Her father Ernest, an opera composer, professor at the Paris Conservatory, and past winner of the prestigious Prix de Rome for composition, was the scion of generations of musicians; her mother, Raïssa Mychetsky, was a purported Russian princess. Sister Nadia, six years her senior, would become a leading light of the Paris Conservatory and the most influential music pedagogue of the 20th century. Fauré, Ravel, Widor, and other luminaries of the French musical world were family friends and mentors. It was Fauré who discovered that 2-year-old Lili had perfect pitch. Tragically, all of Lili's brilliance and education were ultimately at the mercy of her body. After a childhood bout of bronchial pneumonia weakened her immune system, she suffered from poor health and often debilitating illness throughout her life.

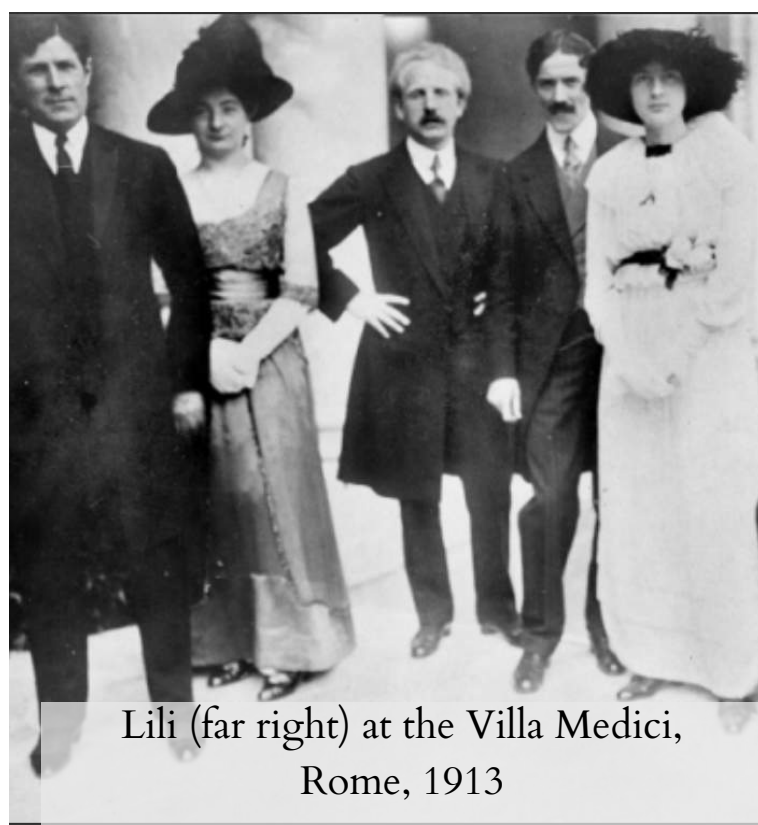
Lili was determined from age 16 to win the Prix de Rome. Nadia had tried and failed to win four times, held back largely by politics. Her compositions were considered by her teachers Charles Widor and Raoul Pugno to be the best of the field, but she was a woman. Lili studied intensely and first undertook the grinding competition in 1912, but was forced to drop out due to illness. She made another attempt the following year, deploying her own political stratagems (she solicited letters of support from teachers and mentors), and even used her own physical fragility as a tool. As Anna Beer notes in her chapter on Boulanger (Beer, Anna. 2017. *Sounds and Sweet Airs: The Forgotten Women of Classical Music*. London: Oneworld), Lili masterfully used her frail, willowy body and deliberate femininity to show the judges that her womanhood posed no threat to the academy. At the competition, she did not actively conduct her entry cantata, but stood demurely before the musicians, clad in white, with her eyes downcast and did not beat even a single measure. (This, however, only after rehearsing the musicians within an inch of their lives, and with the steady presence of Nadia at the piano). Her strategy paid off, and in 1913, aged 19, Lili Boulanger became the first woman to win the Prix de Rome.

Part of the award was a contract with the renowned Italian publishing house Ricordi, and Lili pulled off yet another impressive feat. The highly respected symbolist writer, Maurice Maeterlinck (author of *Pelléas et Mélisande*) granted her rights to compose an opera based on his *La princesse Maleine*, a work that even Debussy was not permitted to set. Lili never stopped composing during the last four years of her life, despite the horrors of the Great War and her own tremendous suffering from ill health. She wrote some of her most beautiful works for voice, settings of Psalms 24, 129, and 130; was by all reports nearly finished with her opera (sadly, only fragments are extant); wrote a large, innovative orchestral work, *Old Buddhist Prayer*; and finished a smaller instrumental work when her final, debilitating illness struck late in 1917. Her last works—a symphonic poem, *D'un matin du printemps*, and *Pie Jesu*—Lili dictated to Nadia from her sickbed.

On March 15, 1918, Lili Boulanger died, and the world lost a brilliant composer. Nadia mourned her sister for the rest of her days. Perhaps in recompense for the beloved sister lost too soon, Nadia dedicated her life to teaching, and although always a demanding taskmistress, looked upon her students as her own children. Robert Shafer, the City Choir of Washington's artistic director and a student of Nadia's for 10 years, remembers "Mademoiselle" as "the most warm and loving person I have ever met in my life. When my son was born...she invited him to all the receptions after concerts; she had a signet ring that she would let him play with...I later learned that she was like this with all her close students who had children. It was as though not only her students were her children, but [she delighted in] her 'children's' children as well."

Nadia continued to champion Lili's music, and thus the genius of Lili Boulanger has never been entirely forgotten. Her work is still performed, and we can only imagine the heights to which she might have ascended had she not left the world so soon.

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Lili (far right) at the Villa Medici,  
Rome, 1913

