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“Excellence in Execution” and “Fitness for Teaching”:

Assessments of Women at the Conservatoire Américain

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IN 1921 GERMAN-BORN AMERICAN CONDUCTOR Walter Damrosch and French conductor and composer Francis Casadesu opened a new school for American musicians in the Palais de Fontainebleau, just outside of Paris. This school, which became known as the Conservatoire Américain, was created to offer American musicians advanced training in performance, composition, and teaching. Over time, the Conservatoire produced numbers of successful composers, performers, scholars, and instructors such as Bathia Churgin, Aaron Copland, David Diamond, Dorothy de Val, Herbert Elwell, Pamela Frank, Helen Hosmer, Charles Rosen, Dorothy Rudd Moore, Andre-Michel Schub, Louise Talma, Augusta Read Thomas, and Charles Wuorinen.

Prior to the First World War American musicians frequently traveled to Germany and Austria for such education, which was not readily avail-

able in the United States' fledgling conservatories and schools of music. Female instrumentalists were especially drawn to study in Germany and Austria, where, following the model of Clara Schumann and other professional women, female concert artists were both comfortably situated as normal members of society and positively received in the concert hall as serious artists. The students who made this trek and enrolled in the *Hochschule* in those countries were serious practitioners, having exhausted their domestic resources for coaching and pedagogy, and they were, without exception, less interested in pursuing the more traditional path of becoming educators than in attaining careers as soloists. Pianist Julie Rive-King, violinists Camille Urso and Maud Powell, and cellist Elsa Reugger all left the United States to pursue further training in Germany and Austria, having found that the societal limitations placed on women in the

United States hampered their abilities to reach their full potential. With the advent of the war, however, travel to Germany was neither practical nor politically advisable. Seeing this as an opportunity to both help repay the assistance of their allies in the war and promote French culture above German culture in America, the French government assisted Casadesus and Damrosch in their venture. Because the Paris Conservatoire placed strict restrictions on its applicants in terms of age and nationality, Casadesus and Damrosch decided to hire members of its faculty during the summer to staff a summertime conservatory. Thus, the Conservatoire Américain opened its doors to some ninety American music students in June 1921, offering them three months of rigorous study.

In establishing the Conservatoire, Casadesus and Damrosch had three primary goals: that students of the highest level would be trained at the school by the best French musicians; that Franco-American exchange and goodwill would be cultivated on an advanced cultural and artistic level; and, most remarkably for its time, that men and women would be trained for professional careers on an equal basis.¹ In this article I examine this last tenet of the founders through the lens of the assessment of female students at the Conservatoire Américain.

Admissions assessments, internal examinations, and the granting of diplomas were three ways in which women were evaluated and taught at the Conservatoire. Drawing on the school's archival documents and the testimony of students, I show that despite both deliberate and unintended stereotyping and discrimination among some school policies and instructors, women at the Conservatoire did in fact receive educations equal to their male counterparts, in some cases surpassing them in overall achievement. The evidence presented here also establishes that the exit assessments—diplomas and prizes—made by the Conservatoire had

an impact on the acceptance of its alumnae as professionally qualified musicians. Although a full examination of their posttraining careers is outside the scope of this article, it is important to note that many women who graduated from the Conservatoire Américain went on to hold positions in American musical life as soloists, orchestra concertmasters and principals, chamber musicians, conductors, composers, instructors, and music school deans and heads. Women who attended the Conservatoire before the Second World War were often pioneering in their accomplishments and were among the very first American women to gain permanent orchestral positions, have professional chamber music ensembles, and hold positions of power within the musical education establishment. Women also continued to use the Conservatoire Américain as a way of refreshing their teaching credentials through the 1970s, and in more recent times it has served as a venue for connecting younger artists with leading female figures in French music such as pedagogue Isabelle Duha and composer Betsy Jolas.

Women entering and attending the Conservatoire Américain faced evaluations and assessments at numerous stages in the process of their education. They were judged on the basis of application dossiers and finances for admittance and on their skills, deportment, and achievement in several areas throughout the length of the school's three-month summer session. In the school's earliest days, women—who were highly recruited in order to fulfill the founders' goal of supporting equal education—were forced to deal with a dichotomous system in which some faculty members were able to view them as natural members of the music world and base their criticisms on skill and ability while others still struggled to accept women as the equals of the male students. Ironically, in light of these struggles, over the course of the Conservatoire's history, women—including Gaby Casadesus and Nadia Boulanger—made up half or more than half of the faculty and the majority of the student body, and they took up administrative positions at

1. Kendra Preston Leonard, *The Conservatoire Américain: A History* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007).

the school to a greater extent than their male colleagues.

Admissions

The admissions process for the Conservatoire Américain was developed through trial and error, a torturous route that allowed the entry of unqualified students, barred many talented musicians, and led to the breakdown of one of the school's primary goals for the school: that of attracting only the most finished and highly trained of American students to Fontainebleau for French training. As their memoirs and letters attest, many of the female applicants were conditioned by their parents and society to be more interested in Parisian shopping and the eligible bachelors they would meet during their summer in France (the mother of one student wrote in advance to ask whether excursions for shopping in Paris would be scheduled).² Because the frivolous concerns of those students registered first with the school's instructors, the more serious and dedicated women applying to the school were placed in a position where they were required to demonstrate their abilities through means other than their initial evaluations—one went so far as to have her state governor write on her behalf.³ One American teacher emphasized his student's dedication by stating that if accepted, she would "be bringing her Stradivarius violin," apparently hoping that the fact of her owning a serious instrument implied her seriousness about her study.⁴ The evolution of the admissions system bears examination, as it created a precedent that remained with the school for most of its existence and that strongly guided the curriculum and ethos of the institution.

In 1920 and early 1921, as plans for the school were being finalized in France, Damrosch was touring the United States, promoting the Conservatoire Américain. He personally provided the Conservatoire with extensive publicity in both print and spoken forms and saw to it that the school was being promoted by famous figures in the professional world. Given this expert and widespread marketing and the dearth of opportunities for American women to participate as full members of the musical profession in the United States, there is no wonder that there was enormous interest among potential female students.⁵ Damrosch and Casadesus eagerly anticipated the women's interest, but they did not expect the added complications of large numbers of amateur or unskilled applicants, the need for tuition fees beyond what had been anticipated, and the inability of the New York officers and volunteers of the school to test prospective pupils adequately.

Approximately one hundred students applied for admission to the Conservatoire Américain class of 1921, and ninety attended, with women comprising approximately 70 percent of the students.⁶ It is unclear from the records kept by the New York office whether those who applied and did not go to France were not admitted or simply did not attend. Neither copies of rejection letters nor records of students being denied admission exist in the Conservatoire's archives for this period, whereas notes indicating the various reasons why students who had been accepted but could not make the trip have been saved. While it is possible to infer that none of the school's first applicants were barred entry, this cannot be confirmed. What is known is that the first class of students was uniformly white and middle

2. Hilda Berkey, scrapbook (letters, diary entries, photographs, and other paper ephemera), unpagged, 1924, Conservatoire Américain/Gladden Archive, New Haven, CT. Hereafter cited as CAGA.

3. Application dossiers of 1921, Conservatoire Américain/Fontainebleau Archives, Bibliothèque municipale de Fontainebleau, Conservatoire Américain/New York Archives. Hereafter cited as BMF.

4. Application dossiers of 1921, BMF.

5. The status of women as professional musicians is discussed at length in Ralph P. Locke and Cyrilla Barr, eds., *Cultivating Music in America: Women Patrons and Activists since 1800* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) and Judith Tick, "Passed Away Is the Piano Girl: Changes in American Musical Life, 1870–1900," in *Women Making Music*, ed. Jane Bowers and Judith Tick (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

6. Scrapbook of the 1921 session, unpagged, BMF.

to upper class; only a few students were given scholarships to attend.⁷ It is also clear that the first group of students, both male and female, did not meet the musical standards of their professors, signifying a breakdown in the admissions system. Casadesus, Damrosch, and the school's faculty expected to welcome to Fontainebleau a student body of highly trained musicians already polished by American conservatories, and they were prepared to offer instruction accordingly. Instead, initial lessons and classes revealed that their students ranged from the decidedly professional to the entirely amateurish.⁸ Many had skills that would be considered intermediate at best, and those who were technically ready for more advanced instrumental or vocal training often lacked the requisite background in theory, harmony, analysis, and history.

Casadesus' desire for the Conservatoire to host only the best musicians America had to offer and his plans to train them to a point where they would acquire a *premier prix* (first prize) in just three months at Fontainebleau were threatened with abandonment or alteration. Instead of the critical screening methods Casadesus had hoped to create based on those of the Paris Conservatoire, the Conservatoire Américain was essentially an open-admissions program. Conducting student Stanley Avery wrote of his classmates: "We were really a more or less hit-or-miss crowd and there were some in the nearly 100 students who hardly knew what it was all about. Their approach and lack of receptivity must have astonished the scholarly professors who were put over us. But," he went on to say in defense of those who were properly prepared, "the majority came in earnest and were equipped to take the splendid instruction furnished."⁹

The failure of the school to select its students well can be traced to its inability to hold live auditions and its need for revenue to cover

operating expenses. The Conservatoire lacked trained personnel based in the United States to make admittance decisions based on live auditions. Although there was a New York office for the Conservatoire, it was staffed by music patron Mabel Tuttle and vocalist Francis Rogers, both of whom worked as volunteers on a part-time basis. Tuttle's other commitments and the demands of Rogers's career prevented them from screening prospective students, either in New York or as part of an audition tour to major cities, before the school's 1921 opening. Instead, applications for admission to the Conservatoire Américain's first session requested simply the prospective student's name, the course he or she wished to take, and letters of recommendation. These letters were almost always written by members of the clergy, bank managers, and personal or family friends rather than professional musicians or professors, indicating that the prospective students were themselves mostly unaware of the kinds of credentials they were expected to provide, such as lists of repertoire and concert engagements and a description of their studies and goals. A perfect illustration of this is seen in the application of the school's first enrolled student: Aaron Copland's teacher remarks in his letter of recommendation that his student always pays on time, but he says absolutely nothing about the young composer's talent or dedication to a life in music, and Copland himself presents no information regarding his ambitions or interests in composition and piano.¹⁰

As applications came into the office, Tuttle collected them personally and made initial evaluations. She commented on the suitability of each applicant in pencil or with a brief typewritten statement; the applications were then forwarded to the French Conseil d'administration. The exact criteria she used for accepting students are unknown, but generally it appears from her marginalia that almost every applicant with a good bank balance and a few positive character references could get in. Female applicants' materials are often marked with entirely nonmusical and

7. Application dossiers of 1921, BMF.

8. Application dossiers of 1921, BMF.

9. Stanley Avery, "The First Years," *Fontainebleau Alumni Bulletin*, June 1947, 3.

10. Application dossier of Aaron Copland, 1921, BMF.

often class-based comments, including “family is known in society,” “has been working as a schoolteacher,” and “will be accompanied by her mother.” Tuttle’s comments for male applicants deal more with their musical backgrounds, although a number of remarks reveal Tuttle’s eye for an applicant’s financial status, such as “can pay full tuition.”¹¹ Students’ race was also noted, and nonwhite students appear to have been admitted only under very certain conditions, at least during the period prior to World War Two. When the niece of legendary performer Josephine Baker applied in the 1920s, her application was marked “Pass?” by Tuttle, enquiring as to whether the young woman could pass for white in the Conservatoire’s all-white environment.¹² (Even well into the 1960s and 1970s administrators were still loath to put African American students on public programs because of race; composer Dorothy Rudd Moore and cellist Kermit Moore were only reluctantly allowed to perform in the 1969 Damrosch Memorial Concert, as administrators fretted over having not just one but two “Negroes” on the program. One African American student was referred to as “a real Watusi” by administrator Clarence Brodeur, and his wife, Marie, complained about admitting African American students, claiming, “They just don’t get it.”)¹³ A bias against Jewish students was also in place through the 1970s. While some Jewish students—like Copland—were accepted, a tacit quota seems to have been adhered to so as to limit their numbers. More than a few students with potentially Jewish surnames had their applications marked “Jewish?” in pencil, presumably by Tuttle or an assistant in the New York office, and potentially Jewish female students were assigned to room together in Fontainebleau.¹⁴ Not all of the application and acceptance data are complete, so it is dif-

ficult to judge to what extent gender, race, and religion were factored into a student’s eventual acceptance or rejection, but it is obvious from the existing documentation that it was not negligible. The class of an applicant, however, was clearly a criterion, as class indicators provided administrators with a sense of an applicant’s financial situation. For Tuttle these indicators included an applicant’s surname, hometown or neighborhood, teachers, father’s occupation, and references from clergy, bank managers, and others in upper-level social or socioeconomic positions.

The ability to pay full tuition was an essential element in the admissions process. A few scholarships were available to those students who appeared—from their scant admissions dossiers—to deserve them for reasons of merit combined with financial hardship, but most students were expected to pay the full rate, which averaged around \$300 for the three-month session and \$225 for the two-month session during the 1920s.¹⁵ As it became clear to the New York office that the French administrators had not secured enough money for a capital investment to maintain the school, Tuttle and Rogers became keen observers of statements attesting to bank balances and applicants’ requests for scholarships. Unfortunately, this situation allowed Tuttle and Rogers, who were instructed to enroll as many students as possible with the goal of at least 120 students per year, to accept both male and female students who were capable of paying full tuition but unsuited for the rigors the administrative French Conseil and faculty had planned. Scholarships were reserved for students who were already proven musicians or personally known to the faculty prior to applying. Enrollment records indicate that prior to the Second World War approximately one-quarter of all male students and up to two-thirds of all female students were not performing at the levels originally dictated by Casadesus.¹⁶

11. Application dossiers, 1921–28, BMF.

12. Notes of Mabel Tuttle and application dossiers, undated, 1920s, BMF.

13. Marie and Clarence Brodeur, letters, undated, 1968 and 1969, CAGA.

14. Application dossiers of the Conservatoire Américain, 1921–30s and undated, BMF.

15. Application dossiers of 1928, BMF.

16. Livre des élèves, records of attendance and achievement, 1925–73, BMF.

From a statistical point of view, female applicants tended to be less well prepared. Whether because of the lack of serious education available for many of them or the societal constraints that prevented many from pursuing preprofessional or professional training, many women attending the Conservatoire in 1921 and the years immediately following were relegated to the remedial and intermediate classes.¹⁷ Examination of the admittance dossiers provided by the students, the annotations made to these documents by the admissions officers, and class rosters reveals that most of these women shared several characteristics. They were all pianists, and they lacked training in music theory and history. Their more adept classmates (such as the sole female violin student and some other female instrumentalists and vocalists) were advanced in both the physical and intellectual aspects of their art.¹⁸ This indicates that the women who were more advanced had attained that point by some design: many of the female pianists had learned what they needed to become “accomplished” middle-class women, but these other students had pursued further training in terms of both expanding the range of the instruments they played and mastering more than just the fundamentals of theory and history. While none of the women’s individual applications from this period indicate study at institutions of higher learning specifically for music, the fact that some of them were placed into higher divisions of the solfège, harmony, and analysis classes certainly suggests that they were receiving training beyond occasional lessons or practices with friends and family members.

The school’s administrators and faculty made an interesting distinction between the men and the women who had been admitted without essential ability or training: the women were disparaged as dilettantes, while the men were considered to be furthering their educations. This inequality appears to have stemmed from the women’s social positions, ages, and fam-

ily structures. Application records during this period show that most women who attended were supported by their families, lived at home, were relatively young (still in their early twenties), provided little or no evidence of a performing career or the desire to attain one, and were not attending institutions of higher learning associated with preprofessional or professional musical training. Class photos show them to be conservatively dressed; if there were flappers among them, the records do not divulge this information. Most were from middle- or upper-class families, where the rudiments of music were generally a given part of a woman’s education. Therefore, it is possible to extrapolate that many of these applicants were familiar with music but were not professionals, would have their tuition and expenses paid for by their parents, and were attending not to achieve professional training but to gain some experience abroad, perhaps expand their social connections, and, at the same time, polish their skills in music and French, if they had any. Because of these factors it was easy for both men and professional women to stereotype these applicants. Gaby Casadesus, speaking of these students, commented that, for the typical student of this caliber, “she was in love with France [and] French-speaking, so she stayed. She said, I like to spend my summer in France, so she [studies] the piano, she pays the fee, and she tried to speak French.”¹⁹ The New York office also quickly realized that many of the applications it received were for sets of sisters (two sets of three and one set of four sisters attended the school as preformed ensembles in the 1920s and 1930s) and mother-daughter pairs. Once they arrived in Fontainebleau many of these older women—who were attending as chaperones for their children—decided to enroll themselves in order to brush up on long-forgotten skills or to learn new materials. This was an unexpected financial boon to the Conservatoire. By accepting these small familial groups the school brought in con-

17. Notes of the Conseil d’administration, December 1921, BMF.

18. Application dossiers of 1921, BMF.

19. Gaby Casadesus, interview by the author, July 20, 1999.

siderable tuition and fees.²⁰ The scrapbook kept by student Hilda Berkey in 1921 offers a peek into the life in Fontainebleau of these students.²¹ While it contains concert programs, the scrapbook is mostly taken up with photos of parties and outings, almost always comprised of equal numbers of men and women, sometimes paired into couples or grouped as a family. Calling cards pasted into the book exuberantly recall dinners out, boating parties, and dances. Curly handwriting reminds Hilda of her “new shoes!” and notes from her male friends in several cases include bits of notation and flirty lyrics referencing other students or events that occurred over the summer.

Male students, on the other hand, were more likely to be already established in musical careers, had completed some formal music training in the United States, and were self-supporting. Men comprised one-third to slightly less than one-half of the student bodies of the school up until the 1940s, and the majority were in their thirties; a number brought wives and even children with them to Fontainebleau. If they were not up to par, such men were often described by the faculty and their contemporaries as self-taught or as attending as part of an educational side project: pianists who came to study organ or composition often found themselves in remedial classes or needing tutoring in areas unfamiliar to them. There is only one account of a group of male students being described in the same pejorative terms as were some equally undistinguished women, and the bulk of the complaint against them was that their “mentality” was not correct: these men had applied themselves to jazz rather than classical music, formed a band, and played for pay in the town instead of having attended required Conservatoire concerts and classes.²² For the administration of the 1920s and 1930s, students interested in jazz, the radio (harshly decried as an “abominable form of mechanical music” by composer and Conservatoire direc-

tor Camille Decreus), and other forms of music outside of the Conservatoire Américain’s teaching canon were clearly not serious about their studies and were wasting their time as well as that of their instructors. Only much later—after the Second World War—would experimentation with nonclassical styles become accepted by the administration.

Although the less prepared students were the ones who remained in the minds of the faculty and, perhaps, the other students, there were a number of highly talented and professional or preprofessional women admitted to the school during this time. They, too, were from the same elevated social caste as their less talented colleagues and were supported by their parents. Such women had to make sure that they were distinguished from the rest of the female student body by means of performance and institutionally recognized achievement once they had arrived in Fontainebleau.

Once students had passed the rather low hurdle of acceptance, the second part of the New York-based admissions process began, in which students were assigned rooms, courses, and private instructors. Single female students were assigned to rooms in the palace, often sharing suites of three or four students. Married female students lodged with their husbands, some of whom also enrolled at the Conservatoire or the École des Beaux-Arts, its architectural sister-school at the Palais. These women are more anonymous than any other students of this period: they are registered often only as the “Mrs.” of the attending men and often are not accorded recognition by their own first names even in class rosters.

In the first year of the Conservatoire’s existence, then, its student body included both highly qualified women and women whose recommendations and financial capabilities had allowed them admittance. The prepared students sometimes chafed at the remedial needs of the rest; and those who lacked the knowledge to participate fully, as their professors had anticipated, were left feeling frustrated and overwhelmed.²³

20. Livre des élèves, records of attendance and achievement, 1925–73, BMF.

21. Berkey scrapbook, CAGA.

22. Notes of the Conseil d’administration, November 1922, BMF.

23. Berkey scrapbook, CAGA.

The lack of adequate assessment of prospective students caused immediate concern within the faculty and administration of the Conservatoire Américain. At a Conseil meeting in December 1921 Francis Casadesus lamented the state of the Americans' solfège, theory, and dictation skills. The students' ignorance of music history and lapses in their performance technique were also disappointing.²⁴ As an evaluation of the applications would predict, faculty reports indicated that a significant part of the problem was the acceptance of young women who, while earnest and capable of paying their tuition, were not sufficiently prepared for the intense, high-level study the Conservatoire had been determined to provide. These reports may show that the mixed-gender faculty had retained negative societal views of young women's potential as serious artists. Certainly, there was some truth in their analysis, as seen in the numbers of women requiring remedial or preparatory class work or technical work. Yet while male students had not distinguished themselves much—if any—more than the women, they were not singled out for the labels of “dilettante” or “fun” that so many female students received.²⁵ In fact, some faculty and staff ludicrously criticized every aspect of female students' behavior beyond the practice room and studio. Women were reprimanded for doing laundry and hanging out their “unmentionables” to dry in their rooms in the château and for sitting in the windows to brush their hair, supposedly distracting the French soldiers stationed in Fontainebleau from their military drills.²⁶ The Palais staff insisted that an older woman be hired as a chaperone for the female students, reflecting a common attitude that women living on their own were neither respectable nor responsible enough to live unsupervised. Francis Casadesus pinned notices to the school bulletin board pleading for more restrained behavior on the part of the students,

and chaperones were hired to keep order and maintain the appearances of propriety among the “free-wheeling” Americans.²⁷

To their credit, Casadesus and Damrosch appear to have studied the faculty reports of incoming student abilities and achievements without any gender prejudices and determined that the problems were, in fact, with nearly *all* of the students, not just the women. They immediately set about making improvements on both sides of the Atlantic. Clearly, acceptance standards would have to be more stringent in order to ensure higher-quality students of both sexes. Damrosch was to prepare entrance exams in theory and history for potential students to take as part of the application process. Those who passed these exams would then be assigned a series of études to prepare for an audition in New York that was to be heard by Damrosch, Rogers, or one of their qualified associates or volunteers. If applicants were approved at these auditions, they would then receive another set of études to prepare for assessment at their first lesson in Fontainebleau. However, in choosing to accept only the students with the most potential as professional musicians, the Conservatoire would lose much of its capacity for income. While the French government had provided some funding for the establishment of the Conservatoire, its role as a financial sponsor diminished in the 1920s, a move that allowed it to provide more support for the Paris Conservatoire and the École normale de musique, founded in 1919. In order to alleviate this financial dilemma, patrons of the Conservatoire, including the Comtesse Montesquiou Fezensac à Bourron, the Comtesse Beneditti, Blair Fairchild, and others, granted annual scholarships of 5,000 francs to be given to the “less fortunate” students—the more talented but less wealthy students—so that the school might be less financially dependent on accepting those who could pay full tuition but not meet the school's musical requirements.²⁸

24. Notes of the Conseil d'administration, December 1921; Livre des élèves, records of attendance and achievement, 1921, BMF.

25. Avery, “The First Years,” 4.

26. Avery, “The First Years,” 4.

27. Notes of the Conseil d'administration meeting, undated (likely July–August 1922), BMF.

28. Notes of the Conseil d'administration meeting, December 1921, BMF.

This financial dependence, however, contributed to the Conservatoire's remaining an institution for white, middle- and upper-class students for nearly forty years, until African American and lower-income students began applying in the 1950s and 1960s.

Despite additional financial assistance from donors, the plan for stricter auditions never materialized because of the continued need for tuition to fund the school's operations and salaries. Instead, several compromise reforms were made: every student was to play an exam upon arrival for class placement; classes were divided into preparatory and superior divisions; guidelines for students' behavior and scholarly obligations were drawn up; and students, in order to be accepted, were required to sign contracts in which they agreed to attend all classes and complete assigned homework. Thus, one of the Conservatoire Américain's major intentions—that of educating only those “having already received a very complete musical instruction in the Conservatories and Music schools of America”—had failed.²⁹ It was not until after the Second World War that the standards for admittance finally became more strictly defined by ability. By asking potential students to provide recital programs, letters from their music teachers, and, finally, recordings, the school could more fully comprehend the levels of students applying to attend the school. However, even under the highly regimented directorship of Nadia Boulanger, which spanned 1949–79, a number of full-paying students, including men but more often women, were permitted to attend simply because the need for money was buffered by their tuitions.³⁰ Although women students slowly acquired a better reputation at the school, as the numbers of competent and even outstanding female performers and composers grew, approximately one-fifth of all female students through the late 1970s were still admitted solely for their ability to pay the full tuition

fees.³¹ Late in her life Boulanger explained her personal policy on students and payment to Roy Harris. Harris explained: “Those who have no talent, and those who have no money; these are not acceptable. There are those who have talent but little money. These she accepts. Those who have little talent but much money she also accepts. But those who have much talent and much money she says she never gets.”³²

Women admitted only for their ability to pay remained, over time, white, middle to upper class, and either amateurs or schoolteachers. To the credit of the faculty, these women were given equal attention in their lessons, occasionally performed on programs for the student body, and interacted on an equal level with their colleagues. Elsie Watson was one such student. Watson attended the school for the first time in 1949 as a music school teacher from Detroit. Enchanted by the Conservatoire and by France, she returned for more than fifty summers, using the piano course to renew her Michigan public school teaching certificate and to keep up her own skills. Always intent on practicing at least four hours a day to improve her admittedly intermediate skills, Watson also found time to socialize and have her wedding dress made in Paris—with the help of her piano instructor, Alice Gaultier—the summer before her marriage. While never a virtuoso, Watson was competent at the middle levels of solfège and harmony. “I did very well at unison dictation, two part dictation and Hindemith rhythms. I mention doing well merely since it's out of the ordinary,” she wrote at one point.³³ She was also an outstanding chronicler of the Conservatoire and its personages. In her diary Watson wrote of many summers at the school, focusing on her modest accomplishments and her studies with the faculty and in classes and master classes she shared with the more advanced students:

29. Document of Francis Casadesus, August 8, 1919, BMF.

30. Casadesus interview.

31. Livre des élèves and Ethelston Chapman to Louise Talma, undated letter, 1962, CAGA.

32. Alan Kendall, *The Tender Tyrant* (Wilton, CT: Lyceum Books, 1976), 74.

33. Elsie Watson, diaries, July 12, 1954, in the author's possession.

I couldn't possibly have had a more wonderful summer. It's not all nice in retrospect, but all the time I was at school I reminded myself how much I was enjoying everything. I loved my [piano] lessons with [Alice] Gaultier and solfège class with [Annette] Dieudonné and I felt that, through my three lessons a week, I made a big improvement in French. If I had had a better background, I could have improved even more. . . . I enjoyed my lesson with [Robert] Casadesus and had a big thrill from the awarding of prizes—when I got a big [teaching] diploma and some sheet music—the Fauré “Impromptu ii,” and some Stravinsky songs for my third mention in the intermediate degree of solfège.³⁴

Watson went on to discuss her relationships with other students over time. Her diaries indicate that she was quite aware of the differences between the students admitted for their skills and those who could attend because of the size of their bank accounts, and she admitted that she struggled with the technical aspects of her repertoire and even more to memorize it. Of one master class with Clifford Curzon, open to all students, Watson recalled:

I played the Beethoven G major Rondo and it was a dismal failure. I couldn't even remember it and stopped two or three times—a very good effort, Curzon said and Mlle. Boulanger told me it was a very difficult piece. Naturally, I was very upset.³⁵

Despite her own failures, Watson explained in her diaries that she was part of a supportive group comprised of both top performers and the less able. Indeed, the less able students appear to have been cheering for those who they felt would go on to performing careers:

[My friends] Janise Seward and Leah Krohn won first place in voice, Ken Gordon in violin,

no first place in cello—my friend Betty Swanson tied for third and Luise Vosgerchian in composition. . . . To celebrate, about five of us from our table all went out to the Hotel Legis for a good dinner.³⁶

Over time, the administration of the Conservatoire began to emphasize the intensity and level of education that would be provided as a way to discourage less serious or able students from applying. The recruitment materials of 1966 insisted that “the Fontainebleau Music School is intended for advanced students and professionals who need further development and larger opportunities as well as refresher courses.”³⁷ Notice was given that without enough sufficiently advanced students, certain courses, including keyboard harmony and instrumental courses, would not be held. Boulanger herself argued at one time for admitting only the most qualified students and offering them full scholarships, but this ideal was impossible to reach from a fiscal point of view, and Boulanger's own directives as to the disbursement of scholarship monies were problematic. Firmly believing that a woman's highest calling was to be a mother, she required the New York administrators to make sure that scholarships to female applicants went to young, unmarried women only, although men of any age or marital status could receive scholarships.³⁸

Ultimately, the school's student body would remain uneven in regard to the essentials of ability, talent, and ambition. Although women were nearly always in the majority at the Conservatoire, Francis Casadesus' goal of educating the sexes equally was not immediately realized. By accepting students who lacked the basic skills needed to participate fully in the curriculum of the school, the admissions officers created a situation in the first years of the program in which women as a group were eas-

34. Watson diaries, undated, August 1950.

35. Watson diaries, July 19, 1960.

36. Watson diaries, August 18, 1954.

37. Publicity brochure for the Conservatoire Américain, 1966, 5, CAGA.

38. Notes of Marie Brodeur, undated, 1966, CAGA.

ily stereotyped as less serious and able students. Indeed, the administration's parallel failures to enforce standards and to finance its institution competently left both male and female students—but especially the women—in a position where they were required to prove themselves worthy of serious training through other means. This would come through distinction in competition and exams.

The *premier prix*

Before the admissions problems that would plague the institution emerged, Casadesus had fully expected that the Conservatoire Américain would provide its performers and composers with the education and training they needed to successfully compete for the coveted *premier prix* at the end of the summer. This award, understood almost universally as a badge of exceptional professional merit among musicians and used as a credential much like today's MM, DMA, and PhD degrees are, was usually earned by competing in grueling exams administered by the faculties of the major French conservatories. The exams for performers began with a juried recital of prepared pieces and could go on to include a performance of a new work on only a few hours' notice, sight-reading, and tests of other necessary skills. For composers, the competition for a *premier prix* was similar to that of the Prix de Rome but conducted on a more compressed schedule. The student's portfolio of works was examined, and then the student was assigned test pieces to compose while quarantined for the duration of the competition. No period or technique was off limits: composers could be asked to write a choral work in the style of Palestrina, a string quartet, or a choral setting of an unfamiliar text. At Fontainebleau students were expected to compete equally and with enthusiasm in these competitions, and the faculty made it known that only a limited number of *premiers prix* would be given; the top runners-up could expect to receive a *second prix* or a *mention honorable*—in essence, consolation awards for work that was worthy of some recognition but did not receive top marks. Others

would go home with nothing but some photographs and memories of a summer in France.

Of the twenty courses offered in 1921, including composition, counterpoint and fugue, conducting, organ, piano, violin, cello, harp, and voice, seventeen were to have *premier prix* competitions at the end of the summer. At the end of that summer, though, not a single composition student was judged worthy of a *premier prix* or even a *second prix*, though two honorable mentions were given. In the organ class just two *premiers prix* were awarded, with another two in the top piano class and seven in voice. No violinists were deemed good enough, nor were any cellists, harpists, or students of harmony, counterpoint, and fugue. Several *seconds prix* were issued, along with some honorable mentions.

These results—and the competitions that had led to them—were shocking to the faculty and administration. Although Casadesus had to have known that he was reaching for a highly unlikely goal in his aim to provide in twelve weeks what the Paris Conservatoire often took up to three years to do, the outcomes of the school's first year were nonetheless abysmal as a whole. Much of this was due, of course, to the admissions problems that had allowed so many unprepared students into the Conservatoire. However, among the students who did earn a *premier prix*, the breakdown of award winners is notable.

Men and women approved by their primary instructors to compete did so under equal terms in the 1921 competitions for a *premier prix*. All of the competitors presented themselves to the same jury under similar conditions, performed their prepared works, undertook sight-reading of the same unfamiliar piece, were briefly quizzed on history and theory, and awaited the jury's decisions. Of the *premiers prix* given, women received one of the two awarded in piano and four of the seven awarded in voice. Although it is a statistical fact that women slightly outnumbered men in the class of 1921, far more of the female students were recorded as unprepared and not allowed to participate in the competitions. Thus, this result indicates that

women who were serious about their studies and were permitted to compete acquitted themselves better than the men when it came to these ultimate assessments. Women also accounted for more than half of the *seconds prix* and honorable mentions in the instrumental and vocal courses. Clearly, despite the poor overall standings of the student body and the prejudice that stemmed from faculty displeasure with the less able female students, there were a number of talented and accomplished women in that first year. In fact, these results also raise the question of women whose initial assessments were incorrectly evaluated or who were not taught at an appropriately high level for their actual abilities. While common sense suggests that there must have been some highly proficient women who did not—for whatever reason—perform well in their first hearings or examinations, no records point conclusively to specific occurrences.

The successes of the women in the class of 1921 were remarkable in terms of gender parity within the institution, but they were entirely overlooked in the near-panic that ensued following the release of competition results. At a time when Casadesus had probably anticipated heralding the success of his coeducational, international music school, faculty members were in an uproar. When the state of affairs did not improve significantly the following year in terms of the number of *premiers prix* awarded, the faculty demanded a change. Many of them, graduates of the Paris Conservatoire, claimed that to award a *premier prix* in a situation where so few students were worthy of any distinction at all would damage the weight of the prize. They successfully argued that to give the mostly inferior Conservatoire Américain students the same honors as Paris Conservatoire students was an insult to those who had received a *premier prix* from the Paris Conservatoire.³⁹ The two *premiers prix*, given to students of such vastly differing abilities, could not be considered comparable.

Casadesus and the Conseil agreed. If an

39. Notes of the Conseil d'administration, October 1923, BMF.

American wished to earn a true *premier prix*, she or he would have to do it in the same manner as French students—through the Paris Conservatoire's program. The fact that this program, however, admitted almost no foreign students was of no consequence to the administration of the Conservatoire Américain. Disappointed that his original plans would have to be jettisoned, Casadesus rolled out a new system of assessment for the Conservatoire Américain students. In addition to dividing classes into superior and preparatory sections, more regulations were passed by the Conseil in order to enable the better students to obtain the education initially intended for them. While composition and solfège students would continue to compete for a *premier prix* equal to that awarded by the Paris Conservatoire, students in the remainder of the courses would instead end their sessions by sitting for one of two types of diplomas, issued under the aegis of the Conservatoire but signed only by the student's individual professor. Rather than trying for the highest degree of recognition available to European music students, the Americans would be assessed as demonstrating either "excellence in execution" or "fitness for teaching"—designations similar to those given at the *École normale*.⁴⁰ Students in the upper divisions of their courses were permitted to attempt the performance diploma, and all students could ask to have their teaching abilities evaluated. "Superior" students were also strongly encouraged, if not required, by their individual instructors to take exams in solfège and analysis. Finally, all "excellence in execution" diplomas could be amended at the discretion of a unanimous jury to carry further distinctions of *bien* or *très bien*. Under circumstances where a "superior" student was not quite at the level for a full diploma to be awarded, he or she would receive

40. In the top levels of instruction for instrumentalists at the *École normale*, the following diplomas are given: *diplôme d'enseignement*, *diplôme supérieur d'enseignement*, *brevet d'exécution*, *diplôme d'exécution*, *diplôme supérieur d'exécution*, and *diplôme supérieur de concertiste*.

a diploma for performance marked *degré préparatoire*, a kind of honorable mention that was designed to encourage the student to return the following year for more study.

Thus, the practice of competing for the illustrious French prizes would slowly be phased out. By 1926, just five years after its opening as a prestigious “institution without precedent,” the Conservatoire Américain awarded most students diplomas or certificates either for “excellence in execution” (a *diplôme d’exécution*) or “fitness for teaching” (a *diplôme d’aptitude à l’enseignement*). Even with this change, the school asked professors to sign the diplomas individually because the Conservatoire did not want to take responsibility for a student’s level of competence or damage its fledgling reputation by seeming to endorse unworthy students.⁴¹ To indicate their investment in this replacement for the *premier prix*, Casadesus and the Conseil commissioned artist and architect Jacques Carlu to create elaborate documents for the awards. These do indeed generally bear the signature of a student’s private lesson teacher alone, though a few are signed by several members of the instrumental department faculty and some by the school’s director.⁴² In creating the diploma system, the Conservatoire had unintentionally begun a program that would prove to be both an opportunity and a barrier for women based on their own situations and tenacity.

The Diploma System

In developing the two-tiered diploma system, Casadesus and the Conservatoire’s faculty sought to provide more intense and level-appropriate instruction to those students who proved themselves early on in the session to have significant talent. For the remainder of the students the system offered training as potential pedagogues and something to aspire to if they returned for more summers at the school. The two designations carried connotations of both ability and

ambition, especially for female students trying to overcome music schools’ common stereotyping of women as preparing merely for careers as teachers rather than for careers as professional concert artists. These implications, coupled with the Conservatoire’s determination to educate men and women equally, led the faculty to give students curiously ambivalent advice. Male students were almost universally encouraged to pursue the diplomas indicating “excellence in execution” in their principal instrument or area. In contrast, female students were left to choose which accreditation to attempt either with little faculty guidance, leaving them to deliberate based on personal experience, or with mixed messages as to what option was the most realistic or desirable. Often the gender of the student’s professor was a source of influence. Women working with male professors—such as those who studied with pianist Isidor Philipp—often chose only to sit for teaching diplomas, perhaps convinced by their teachers that they might fail to persuade the jury of their competence in performance. Many women, reasoning that a teaching certificate would be better for their careers than no certificate at all, chose not to compete in the performance juries, which came first, lest they make a bad impression that might be remembered later.

Women schooled by Gaby Casadesus in particular were more likely to try for both performance and teaching certificates. These data seem to support the anecdotal evidence of her students that she encouraged them to reach their goals as performers and gave them the support necessary to succeed as individual artists. Elizabeth Powell, a student of Casadesus, testifies to her teacher’s will to see her female students succeed: not only did Casadesus help Powell prepare for her performance diploma, but she also arranged for Powell to remain in France following the summer session in order to work toward a solo debut recital. Of her decision to pursue both diplomas Powell wrote: “I told her I enjoyed teaching but *loved* playing for people and wanted to study. She volunteered that with a year’s study on technique I’d be equipped and

41. Notes of the Conseil d’administration, October 1923, BMF.

42. BMF and the private collection of Charles Kaufman.

ready to concertize! My head was in the clouds all day.” Unfortunately, Powell was pressured to return to the United States because of the impending Second World War. To make herself more marketable as a teacher and performer she sat for three exams before departing France: the performance and teaching diplomas and the top level of solfège. Her exams were not easy, she reported, but worth the effort:

All my professors were in a semicircle around a large table next to the piano; one looked directly into my face. After playing the Bach, Beethoven, and a Moszkowski etude for them I was questioned in piano pedagogy. I was limp as a rag when I came out of the examining room after twenty-five minutes of a fifteen-minute exam. . . . Monday morning I received both a teacher’s and a performer’s certificate as well as a solfège certificate, the only one granted in the school!⁴³

The historical evidence suggests that, rather than counseling their students to resign themselves to teaching careers, Casadesus, along with a number of the female voice professors and several male instrumental professors, embraced the idea of preparing women for complete citizenship in the world of professional music. During this period and especially during the Second World War industry assumptions about women in professional musical roles were changing rapidly. Although women such as Maud Powell and Ethel Leginska had appeared as soloists and even occasionally as conductors during the nineteenth century, female soloists had been expected to stick to certain instruments acceptable for women and to retire from the stage upon marriage. These former soloists could maintain their musical activities after marriage through teaching, which was acceptable, and through patronage, which was even more so. During the 1920s and 1930s, however, music critics and the public gradually became more accepting of women

43. Elizabeth Powell, “Coming Home” (a memoir), in the author’s possession.

as full members of the profession. Increasing numbers of stateside schools allowed women to enroll in programs once limited to men, including composition and conducting, and in instrumental programs outside of the traditional allotment of violin, cello, flute, and piano. Although female musicians were not widely accepted as permanent, professional orchestra members until recently, progress was being made and was recognized by Conservatoire instructors.⁴⁴

Based on this recognition, Conservatoire professors prepared women to take places in orchestras and to become university instructors, positions barred to women before the Second World War but opened during the conflict because of the loss of male players and instructors. For the first time, women were taught the necessary repertoire and materials to compete equally with men in auditions and competitions. Instrumental instructors in violin, cello, and harp all included major audition concertos and orchestral excerpts as part of the curriculum at Fontainebleau for their students, both male and female.⁴⁵

Not all of the women on the faculty were as eager as Casadesus to train students for performance diplomas and careers as professionals. Some women had mixed feelings, which inevitably led to confusion among students. Nadia Boulanger, herself celebrated for her achievements as a professional musician, held contradictory views of ideal womanhood. She strongly believed that women could do no greater good than to bear and mother children, yet at the same

44. Beth Abelson Macleod, *Women Performing Music: The Emergence of American Women as Instrumentalists and Conductors* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001), 20. Macleod cites the Radio City Music Hall orchestra manager in saying that any woman who desired an orchestra position would be judged on “musicianship and character and not at all [on] the fact of her being a girl.” She also includes membership lists of women in major orchestras from the 1940s through the 1980s showing that the numbers of women have changed little in that time, despite blind auditions and legal actions by female players who have experienced discrimination.

45. Kendra Preston Leonard, “‘Two Hard Etudes and a Schumann Number’: American Women, Mentoring, and Repertoire in France, 1921–1951,” *Journal of the International Alliance for Women in Music* 12, no. 2 (2006): 9–14.

time she pursued her own career with a ferocity and determination that left little time for interests outside of music. For her, then, the desire to be a good musician was an all-or-nothing proposition. Boulanger was blunt with her students, urging those whom she found lacking in talent or drive to teach if they must for reasons of economic survival but to take solace in their presumed abilities to raise a family and to focus on that endeavor to the exclusion of other interests. Unaware of her beliefs, a great number of female students who flocked to Boulanger—having viewed her from afar as a role model and potential mentor—were disappointed. In addition to offering what sounded to many women like a patronizing suggestion to go home and breed, Boulanger could also be irrationally belittling even to the best students. Elizabeth Powell, who studied organ and harmony with Boulanger in addition to her lessons with Casadesus and was in a perfect position to compare the two women, initially found Boulanger to be an inspiring teacher, but her opinion soon changed:

She had no patience with less than perfection and said to me after a poor [organ] lesson, "Tell M. Panel [the organ teaching assistant] that your teacher wept in your lesson!" . . . Terribly discouraged, I wavered between studying only with M. Panel and dropping organ altogether. The latter finally won and I began to concentrate on piano alone.⁴⁶

Boulanger's early students at the Conservatoire Américain frequently praised her teaching, but during the 1930s Boulanger developed a controversial teaching style that would continue through the end of her life. Rather than teaching broadly to an entire class, she singled out individual students from within a class for special attention. Very few of these students were female. Boulanger's male students were advised to take mistresses rather than to marry so that the concerns of family life would not distract them from their serious musical work. Perhaps

46. Powell, "Coming Home," n.p.

dealing with her own internal conflicts between her desire to have a fully realized musical career and her beliefs about the proper role of women, Boulanger all too often projected mixed messages to her female students, telling some accomplished musicians to give up their careers while encouraging a select few others. Adding to the problem was Boulanger's growing reputation outside of France. In the United States and Great Britain Boulanger's tours as a conductor and lecturer had created a mystique about her that for many students would be shattered in her classrooms at Fontainebleau. Musicologist Susan Weiss, who attended the Conservatoire in order to study with Boulanger, the Pasquier Trio, and members of the Casadesus family, wrote of her experiences that "the young women were not treated as serious candidates for professional careers in music, particularly by Mlle. Boulanger. She once asked me why I would choose a career in music when I could be a medical doctor."⁴⁷ Composer Patricia Morehead has commented that after telling Boulanger that she was to be married to a fellow student, "my private lessons after our announcement were mostly about my duties as a good wife."⁴⁸ Former student Virgil Thomson noted a disturbing decline in his teacher's once-nurturing persona during this period. He complained to Fontainebleau alumni Aaron Copland that he was revolted by the aura of infallibility that surrounded the pedagogue, writing that "she lives in a temple of adulation and knee-bending that is disgusting."⁴⁹

Just as Powell quit her studies with Boulanger after a series of unpleasant encounters, many other students also dropped her classes or switched instructors. Attrition was a major problem, with one-third to one-half of all students—both men and women—dropping out of Boulanger's classes before the end of the session.

47. Conservatoire Américain alumnae survey, Susan Forscher Weiss, respondent, in the author's possession.

48. Ted Shed, "Patricia Morehead Interview," 2003, http://iawm.org/articles_html/Shen_morehead_interview.html, accessed January 19, 2007.

49. Anthony Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson: Composer on the Aisle* (New York: Norton, 1997), 99–100.

One woman was chastised to the point of tears in an overcrowded harmony class, and another student escaped from a particularly long lesson by exiting through a classroom window into the château's gardens. Elsie Watson wrote in her diary on one occasion that she had survived Boulanger's harmony class "unscathed" but more often reported that classes could be tense. "No big fireworks," she noted one day, "but everyone was expecting them at any moment."⁵⁰ Focusing increasingly on the very youngest of her students (some of whom were as young as nine), Boulanger came to alienate many of the college-age or older women who had come to France specifically to study with her, and Thomson's analysis of her aggrandizing self-image was repeatedly played out in her dealings with students. Harpist Lillian Phillips attended the Conservatoire in 1963, a year after Weiss, and sent an account of her dealings with Boulanger to the Conservatoire's New York office:

Boulanger's Master Classes: are they to exploit her one or two most talented [students] and make complete fools of the others? I saw too many people made fools of and ridiculed by her—adults and even college professors. Maybe this is European teaching, but I went to all of those classes of hers and they were a waste of time. . . . Yes, I learned a tremendous amount: How not to teach.⁵¹

For Marie Ellen de Bolt, who also attended in 1963, Boulanger's teaching was not the only difficulty; she found the pedagogue's general attitude toward many of the female students problematic. Beginning in the late 1950s, Boulanger had begun to advance the view that students taking refresher courses or attending the school to satisfy public school continuing education requirements for teachers—often paying full tuition and contributing significantly to the school's

concerts and coffers—should no longer be considered full participants at the school. A number of women who worked as music teachers in public schools—some with polished and some with rudimentary skills—attended Fontainebleau for these very reasons, and to ask for the necessary certificate proving attendance and study had long been a common request. Once Boulanger had determined not to welcome these students, though, she became openly hostile to women requesting their certificates, explaining in blunt terms the shortcomings and inabilities that made it impossible for her to endorse their study at the Conservatoire.

De Bolt, an established instructor, wrote that after being denied the standard paperwork by Boulanger after spending her summer working with the piano faculty and Annette Dieudonné *and* receiving a teaching diploma, she approached the faculty for help. What she was told did not imply that Boulanger was a supportive and equalizing force; rather, Boulanger's presence required an almost feudal system of assessment in which self-deprecation and the obsequious honoring of one's "betters" were guidelines for behavior:

Later one of the instructors explained how best to heal my offence. I should not tell her (Mlle. Boulanger) that I was studying what I wanted in the school. Rather I should apologize for not choosing to become one of her students as I felt unworthy of her honored instruction.

She continued:

While Mlle. Boulanger may be very famous and very inspiring to certain students, she endangers the very existence of the school through her lack of ability to manage it. In truth, I would say her fame has not improved her character but created a god-like sense of being capable of no error.⁵²

50. Watson diaries, undated.

51. Lillian Phillips to Georgia Vraz, September 22, 1963, CAGA.

52. Marie Ellen de Bolt to Georgia Vraz, October 6, 1963, CAGA.

For the women who experienced such alterations with Boulanger, the goals of the Conservatoire were not only unmet but obliterated. Summing up Boulanger's unpleasant tendencies in working with students, Conservatoire board of directors member Marie Brodeur confessed that "Nadia has always been brutal since I have known her; that is, since 1924. She used to frighten people so that they could not answer, or would not answer the most simple question, for fear of ridicule or sarcasm."⁵³ This is not to say that students received no mentoring at all from the pedagogue but that her assistance to female students was limited and her manner of teaching harsher than what many students felt they could endure. This was especially true for women, who were regularly disregarded in favor of male students.

For the few women who showed the kind of promise and temperament suited to Boulanger's own personality, including a student's willingness to submit herself to the severe lifestyle of her professor, Boulanger was an excellent champion. Perhaps the most striking case of her advocacy for a female student is that of Louise Talma. Talma, who studied with Boulanger for some seventeen years, is perhaps the best known of the pedagogue's female students from the interwar period. First arriving in France with her mother as a chaperone, the young pianist and composer was quickly taken into Boulanger's inner circle, becoming a close confidante of her mentor. In working with Talma, Boulanger expressed none of the doubts she did with many of her other, often older female students. Because of Talma's youth Boulanger was able to mold the younger woman into a facsimile of herself: Talma converted to Roman Catholicism, with Boulanger as her godmother, devoted herself exclusively to teaching and composition, and grew up, like her teacher, to be a single woman whose "family" was comprised of her students and supporters. Talma's education under Boulanger was thorough and all-encompassing, spanning the range

of music history and aural and compositional skills. Through daily private lessons and weekly group classes at her home studio in the rue Ballu and during summers at Fontainebleau, Boulanger drilled Talma on harmonic progressions and structures at the piano, dictated difficult and complex exercises, and fiercely but productively scrutinized every note of the younger woman's compositions, resulting not only in Talma's multiple performance and teaching diplomas but also in her success within the Conservatoire Américain's even more ruthlessly judged prize competitions. When in 1938 and then again in 1939 Talma won the Conservatoire's prestigious Prix Stovall for composition, which was judged in 1938 by Igor Stravinsky and carried with it a considerable cash prize, she was also teaching some of the school's solfège classes, though she continued as a student of Boulanger in composition and organ. With Boulanger's support and promotion, Talma became established as a composer in her own right, her music widely recognized and frequently performed. In time she sent her own most talented students—ironically, nearly all of them men—to Boulanger for the same kind of intense education she herself had received.

Talma herself described the education she received at Fontainebleau, stating explicitly that it was more thorough than the musical education she would have gotten had she remained in the United States and that she had to "relearn" the practices of harmony when she enrolled at the Conservatoire. Asked about these differences, Talma replied,

[Boulanger's method at the Conservatoire] was very much stricter in Harmony. . . . [Strictly realized eighteenth-century-style voice leading was] for her to make the finest musical statement you could with the given material. She didn't [accept] any thing which was simply correct. It had to have beauty.⁵⁴

53. Marie Brodeur to Peggy and Quinto Maganini, September 6, 1966, CAGA.

54. Louise Talma, interview by Luann Dragone, January 21, 1995, transcript at <http://www.omnidisc.com/Talma/Biography.html>, accessed December 22, 2006.

Although success stories like Talma's were not uncommon as the Conservatoire's staff became more competent at placing students into appropriate class levels and with the best teachers for their needs, the process of advancing the status of women in higher musical education was nonetheless a slow one. Despite the more progressive instructors on the faculty (Casadesus, Philipp, violinist Maurice Hewitt, and cellist Paul Bazelaire among them), women were still not equally represented in the student body's overall achievement. Records indicate that from the time diplomas were introduced until 1930, less than 5 percent of female students were awarded performance diplomas, while more than half received diplomas for their pedagogical abilities. In several cases women who took the performance jury were given honorable mentions stating that their performance was "preparatory" in relation to the diploma; that is, while they did not completely fail in their attempts to attain the "excellence in execution" rating, they were deemed by the faculty as not quite proficient enough to be given it either.⁵⁵ Women were frequently encouraged to obtain teaching diplomas because a teaching diploma from the Conservatoire and letters attesting to a student's return visits for continued coursework were considered acceptable documentation for schools that required yearly teacher training for their staff.⁵⁶ Over time, most Conservatoire professors learned to handle these matters carefully, fully understanding the political, professional, and emotional importance of the diplomas. A number of these instructors, upon learning of Boulanger's reluctance to sign the necessary paperwork for teachers, began to do so in her stead as a way to encourage those students to continue practicing and to return to the school for study with more tolerant professors. They encouraged teaching certificates as practical matters but also provided their more capable students with the training that could prepare

them to be composers and concert musicians. As a result, women began to sit for both exams. The Conservatoire's records indicate that the numbers of students granted both teaching certification and performance recognition rose during the 1930s, holding steady throughout the pre-World War II period.

None of this is to say, however, that all American women studying at the Conservatoire were equally encouraged. The faculty was acutely aware of the consequences of bestowing their blessings on all of their students: not only would their credibility decline, but their most promising students would resent and rebel against the anointing of the less talented. Honesty with students was essential. Numerous students of Casadesus, Boulanger, and other faculty were gently endured, spending summers in their studios without ever receiving encouragement to sit for either of the diplomas or to go on to more advanced study in Paris or elsewhere. Students with truly incontrovertible barriers to learning music—poor aural abilities and skills, lack of physical coordination, or the inability to grasp theoretical concepts—were not invited to apply for return summers and were denied entry if they applied again. As the admissions process began to require more detailed letters of recommendation, transcripts, and eventually audio materials, such students became increasingly rare, although even within the last ten years at least one subpar student was admitted mistakenly when two applicants' names were confused, and several older amateur performers were allowed to participate fully in one summer session when they financed a portion of the piano rentals for the school.⁵⁷

By the time the Conservatoire Américain was moved to the United States for the summer of 1940 to operate away from the war in Europe, male and female students had reached parity in terms of both internal recognition via the diploma system and industry-wide career advancement. Student records of the late 1930s indicate women achieving performance diplo-

55. *Livre des élèves*, various dates, BMF.

56. Marie Ellen de Bolt to Georgia Vraz, October 6, 1963, CAGA.

57. Joe Kerr, interview by the author, July 2000.

mas in piano, composition, solfège, harmony, cello, and voice at a rate regularly matching or surpassing men's accomplishments (even on a purely statistical basis, taking into account the fact that female students typically outnumbered male ones). In 1925 16 percent of all female students received performance diplomas, with 35 percent of all men receiving one. By 1930 68 percent of all female students received performance diplomas, along with 75 percent of the male students, and in 1951 75 percent of all women and 54 percent of all men were awarded performance accolades. The student alumni bulletins of this time also announce with regularity the professional accomplishments of students of both genders. These announcements indicate that male and female students who had studied in France after the First World War were achieving professional success at a near-equal level, the main exception being the continued exclusion of women from many major symphony orchestras, though this was later reversed.⁵⁸ Although the school continued to admit and work with students who, but for their money, would have been otherwise unacceptable, the number of such students declined over time: faculty assessments from the later 1930s and the 1950s show that only between 10 and 12 percent of the students who took private lessons were routinely marked by their professors as insufficiently trained for advanced work.⁵⁹ By the mid-1960s Boulanger, in her capacity as director of the school, had declared that students who were both talented and financially unable to afford advanced training should be offered places before any other applicants, with offers of scholarships to accompany their letters of acceptance.⁶⁰

During the Second World War Casadesus

and her husband managed a version of the Conservatoire Américain in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, incorporating a handful of faculty from the school and striving to preserve its curriculum. This program catered to both new students and alumni who wished to continue their Francophile education, including solfège, French repertoire, and French pianistic technique, even though the war prevented them from being abroad. Because of the wartime situation it is not surprising that over the course of this Conservatoire-in-exile's existence from 1940 to 1945 some 85 percent of the students were women. Just as women began replacing men in popular music, such as in big bands and jazz ensembles, so too did they become more present in art music.⁶¹ Performances and appearances in the United States by Boulanger and Gaby Casadesus as well as by their students continued to promote the image of talented, competent women as professional musicians in roles other than that of the neighborhood piano teacher or elementary school chorus-mistress. Casadesus was especially visible during this period, performing for relief agencies—once with Albert Einstein as guest violinist—in addition to paid solo and ensemble performances.⁶²

Attitudes toward women and work in general changed significantly during the war, with propaganda shifting from encouraging women to be homemakers to endorsing the work efforts of women outside the home. Employment studies show a jump of 14.6 million women working outside the home in 1941 to 19.4 million in 1944.⁶³ Class barriers weakened as women of differing backgrounds and races found themselves working together in factories, on railways, and in laboratories, learning that, like men, they could “work their way up.”⁶⁴ Within

58. Statistical analysis based on enrollment figures and records of diplomas awarded, 1925–73, some years missing, BMF. Christine Ammer currently estimates that only 25–35 percent of orchestral musicians are female, even as we enter the twenty-first century. Christine Ammer, *Unsung: A History of Women in American Music*, 2nd ed. (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 2001), 258.

59. Professors' dossiers and assessments, 1936–39, 1950–54, 1957, BMF.

60. Notes of Marie Brodeur, ca. 1965–66, CAGA.

61. Ammer, *Unsung*, 136.

62. Gaby Casadesus, *Mes noces musicales* (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1989), 118–48.

63. http://www.nebraskastudies.org/0800/frameset_reset.html?http://www.nebraskastudies.org/0800/stories/0801_0135.html, accessed January 5, 2005.

64. Rosie Pictures: Select Images Relating to American Women Workers during World War II, items 7, 10, 20, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

the American musical community female soloists were acknowledged more and more as natural products of national and international training and less as rare occurrences. Louise Talma received two Guggenheim Fellowships, the first woman to do so. By the end of the 1940s, as women were first being hired by regional and metropolitan professional orchestras (women-only orchestras excepted), female students at the Conservatoire had been studying orchestral repertoire and audition-worthy concertos for two decades.⁶⁵ As a result, Conservatoire alumnae were readily accepted into the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the New York Philharmonic, the New Haven Symphony, and the Roanoke Symphony. The Tucson and Rhode Island symphonies boasted Conservatoire alumnae as their concertmasters. In Chattanooga an alumna was the director of the symphony by the end of 1949, and other female students had become the choirmaster and music director for the American Church in Rome, the live classical program director for the Canadian Broadcasting Company, and a programming and response coordinator for CBS. Alumnae of the Conservatoire Américain could also be found on the faculties of Ball State University, the Cleveland Institute of Music, the Curtis Institute of Music, the Detroit Conservatory, Grinnell College, Hunter College, Indiana University at Bloomington, Juilliard, McGill University, Mary Washington College, the New England Conservatory of Music, Oberlin Conservatory of Music, the Peabody Conservatory, Skidmore College, Temple University, Vassar College, the University of Arizona, the University of Kansas, the University of New Mexico, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, the University of South Dakota, and the University of Virginia. The era of women being limited to teaching out of their homes had ended; these professors had full careers as musicians based in academia.

When the Conservatoire Américain reopened at the Palais de Fontainebleau in 1946, its practices of assessment had changed again. The fac-

65. Ammer, *Unsung*, 250–51.

ulty no longer issued diplomas but instead held a series of competitions for the most populous fields of study: violin, piano, organ, composition, and chamber music. Starting with the class of 1950, more women enrolled in composition courses and took conducting classes than had done so previously, and this number only increased over time. Overall, the rates of women studying in multiple areas that had previously been the domain of male students had increased, and over a third of composition and piano prizes went to women between 1950 and 1973, when records for these prizes ceased being reliably recorded by Conservatoire administration. During those twenty-three years women accounted for exactly one-third of all first prizes, 43 percent of all second prizes, and 48 percent of all honorable mentions, an increase over prior years in relation to the student body's male-to-female ratio.⁶⁶ Women of color were also more regularly admitted and, despite misgivings by less tolerant administrators, were assessed by juries without apparent prejudice: composers Julia Perry and Dorothy Rudd Moore were both highly praised award winners in the 1950s and 1960s.

After Boulanger's death the Conservatoire slowly stopped internal assessments of achievement for its students beyond annual competitions for composition and chamber music performance. Instead, administrators and instructors met at the end of each session to determine a handful of prizes for select performances, including prizes for the best performance of a work composed at Fontainebleau, best chamber music performance, best performance of a French work, and best solo performance. The reason for the decline in prize giving and competitions was one of pragmatism: the prizes simply didn't matter as much anymore outside of the confines of the Conservatoire

66. *Livre des élèves*, records of competitions from 1950 to 1973, omitting the years when competitions were not held (1956, 1957, 1958), BMF. Specifically, 28 out of 56 *premier prix* winners were female; 31 out of 72 *second prix* winners were female; and 76 out of 158 honorable mentions (of all levels) were female.

Américain itself. Performance careers were starting to be made at earlier and earlier stages of a musician's life through recordings and, increasingly, international contests. While a prize from the Conservatoire was a nice accolade, it did not carry the weight of a medal won at a major competition such as the Queen Elisabeth or the Tchaikovsky. As public schools in the United States toughened their requirements for teachers to renew their certification within their home states, the teaching certificates or participation certificates for teachers that the Conservatoire had issued lost their value as well. By the turn of the twenty-first century, students attending the Conservatoire's four-week program were recognized at the end of each session with only a laser-printed certificate of participation. The time and need for other materials attesting to a student's capabilities had passed.

Conclusion

The assessments of female musicians at the Conservatoire Américain had the most impact on the women who received documentation of their achievements during the school's first thirty years of existence. Although Francis Casadesus did not meet his goal of providing the most exclusive and equal education to the most talented of American musicians, his school was nonetheless able to identify and instruct those students whose abilities and drive made them candidates for such tutelage. Therefore, even though many of the women who attended the Conservatoire would never be excellent, fully professional musicians, those who did impress the faculty and administration were usually accorded the pedagogical attention, awards, and honors that their male counterparts enjoyed. Moreover, because no reports of substandard students or problems with recruitment were ever made public, the school's name was never tarnished. For American musicians the Conservatoire was one of the most elite establishments they could hope to enter, and to have received any kind of prize or diploma from the school was a highly regarded mark of distinction that carried significant weight for students returning to the United States.

For the women who received a *premier prix* or a diploma either for performance or for teaching, these materials had a substantial impact. In the school's earliest years these documents allowed women to show physical proof of their abilities as judged by some of the leading European musicians of the day. They helped conservatories and other music schools in the United States assess a candidate's background and experience and served as qualifications for teaching positions, a fact that cannot be underestimated in terms of its impact on these women's careers. In tandem with a live audition, a performance diploma from the Conservatoire was strong enough to win several female students places on the rosters of agents, enabling them to pursue performance careers on a more professional level than if they were unrepresented: Maria Montana, who won a *premier prix* in voice (as Ruth Kellogg Waite, her birth name), presented her Fontainebleau credentials to the press through her management before her 1939–40 season in New York and was hailed for her “experience and taste” by the *New York World-Telegram*, and Lucy Tibbs Clark signed with Alfred Lyon Management and toured Europe in the late 1930s as an acclaimed piano recitalist.⁶⁷ As time went on, performance diplomas, though carrying less weight than the *premier prix* awards, were recognized as official confirmation of study at the Conservatoire and attainment of individual professors' approval in terms of achievement and competitive placement within the school. Teaching diplomas, ironically (considering their background as an award for the less talented of the student body), were used as even more formal certification well into the 1970s, when they still served as state-accepted qualifications for public school music teachers needing continuing education credits. For the recipients of these documents, then, the assessments they were given—and the physical fact of

67. Promotional materials for Maria Montana, issued by Milton Bendiner, management, in the author's possession. The quote from the *New York World-Telegram* is given as January 19, 1939. Clark's information is from the *Fontainebleau Alumni Bulletin*, April 1957, 7.

those evaluations in the form of a *premier prix* or a diploma—were important, if not essential, materials for their careers. The impact of holding a *premier prix* or a performance diploma meant that to the public, the holder was a new artist who was highly trained and capable of undertaking such a career, regardless of her gender, and a teaching diploma indicated to the outside world that its bearer was a graduate of the prestigious school at Fontainebleau, where she was assumed to have been trained in all of the most stringent European methods and approaches to harmony, theory, solfège, and related subjects. This patina of proficiency assisted many Conservatoire alumnae in their goals of further musical training and professional pursuits.

Women who did not receive diplomas or formal recognition of their work at Fontainebleau still had a role to play in shaping American music, and that was through patronage. The *Fontainebleau Alumni Bulletin* recorded not only the performances of former students but also the activities of those not engaged in performance or teaching. Its pages make clear that even students who attended the Conservatoire without any serious intentions of making a musical career were not removed from the music world. A number of women were on the boards of music schools, orchestras, and opera companies. An alumna chaired the Music Committee of the National Arts Clubs, and alumnae served on the boards of the Metropolitan Opera Guild, the Detroit Symphony, the National Association of American Composers and Conductors, and the National Music Teachers' Association.⁶⁸ Unsurprisingly, musical groups with Conservatoire alumnae involved in determining repertoire and engaging soloists tended to prefer French artists and composers as well as

works specifically taught at the Conservatoire. Conservatoire alumnae, both performers and patrons, also share a common interest in new music: performers were more likely to program it for themselves, and patrons worked with their boards to support such performances.⁶⁹

Ultimately, the Conservatoire's role in assessing—and then preparing—women for musical careers during the first part of the twentieth century helped to create a new class of American musician: the truly professional woman who was every bit as talented and well trained as her male counterpart. Women capable of attaining the requisite levels were readied for such careers by having already worked at the same level as the male students in their Conservatoire classes, and they had witnessed gender equality among musicians in Europe. Many of these new professionals were also from a generation in which working women would be more common and in which marriage did not necessarily mean the end of a career. Although the initial purpose and practice of the Conservatoire's assessment practices evolved over time, it is evident that they served an important role in the establishment of both groups of musically well-educated patrons and a female professional elite in American music.

Note

I would like to thank editor Suzanne Cusick and the two anonymous reviewers of this article for their very valuable insights and suggestions. I would also like to express my appreciation to the librarians of Swarthmore College, who have granted me access to college library resources and collections.

69. Early data on this have been gleaned from the *Fontainebleau Alumni Bulletin's* member news and articles. I plan to undertake further, more detailed study of the exact influences of women trained in Europe on American musical taste, including repertoire and performance styles.

68. *Fontainebleau Alumni Bulletin*, 1949–59.