

# Cultivating Music in America

*Women Patrons and Activists since 1860*

EDITED BY

Ralph P. Locke and Cyrilla Barr

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## Mildred Bliss Tells Nadia Boulanger to Think of Herself for Once

*Annotated by Jeanice Brooks*

*Igor Stravinsky's Dumbarton Oaks Concerto was premiered as part of a program conducted by Nadia Boulanger on 8 May 1938 at the Washington, D.C., home for which the piece was named. The concerto was the result of a commission by the philanthropists Mildred and Robert Woods Bliss for a piece to celebrate their thirtieth wedding anniversary. The commission was apparently negotiated in the spring of 1937 by Boulanger, a passionate champion of Stravinsky's music. Early plans may have involved a first performance conducted by Stravinsky himself, but his poor health, which forced him to undergo a cure for tuberculosis in the spring of 1938, made the voyage to America impossible. The program was turned over to Boulanger, who presented the concerto with extracts from Bach cantatas (sung by the tenor Hugues Cuénod and bass Doda Conrad, who had both come from France with her for her American tour) and Stravinsky's own Duo Concertant for violin and piano*

*Mildred Bliss wrote the following letter to Boulanger (now in the Bibliothèque nationale, Paris)<sup>1</sup> a week after the Dumbarton Oaks concert, in the fluent but somewhat idiosyncratic French she normally employed in communications with the musician. She explains that her letter was delayed because of the sudden death of a close friend, whose admirable qualities she describes, the highest praise she can imagine is that he was "a useful citizen," the emphasis reflecting her own strong commitment to public service and her belief in the necessity of contributing to society in practical ways<sup>2</sup>. After explaining why her letter is late, Bliss discusses the arrangements for paying the composer and the participants in the concert. She wants Stravinsky's concerto to be named after Dumbarton Oaks, a gesture that seems to have had the desired effect of affording the mansion's owners at least a degree of anonymity (at its premiere in England later the same year the piece was identified as named "after the California house in which it was written")<sup>3</sup>. Throughout the letter Bliss's deep affection and regard for Boulanger is evident. She is concerned about Boulanger's tendency to overwork, as well as her penchant for dispensing money to her students rather than keeping it for herself<sup>4</sup>. And her reference to perfume and a negligé (which she did send to Boulanger's ship when she sailed for France, as a subsequent letter makes clear) seems to indicate a desire to help Boulanger to pamper herself more than she was generally inclined to do.*

*Bliss closes with a request for Boulanger's opinion on two letters, which she encloses, she does not discuss the content, but it is clear she values her advice greatly. Her trust in Boulanger's musical judgment worked to Stravinsky's advantage again the following year. Boulanger acted as Stravinsky's go-between with Bliss to arrange for the premiere of his Symphony in C during the fiftieth anniversary season of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra*

I. Wie will ich mich freuen *J. S. Bach*  
Mein Gott, verwirf mich nicht. 1685-1750  
Wie zittern und wanken  
Wohl aber dem  
Lass, Seele, kein Leiden.

HUGHES CUÉNOD and DODA CONRAD

II. Duo Concertant for violin and piano *Igor Stravinsky*  
Cantilène 1882  
Eglogue I  
Eglogue II  
Gigue  
Dithyrambe

SAMUEL DUSHKIN and BEVERIDGE WEBSTER

III. Beglückte Heerde, Jesu Schafe *J. S. Bach*  
Der Tod bleibt doch—Selig sind die Toten  
Es ist genug

HUGHES CUÉNOD and DODA CONRAD

IV. Dumbarton Oaks Concerto in Eb major *Igor Stravinsky*  
for small orchestra (1937-1938)  
First performance

Allegro  
Allegretto  
Con moto

1 Flute	3 Violins
1 Oboe	3 Violas
1 Clarinet	2 Celli
1 Bassoon	2 Double basses
2 Horns	

Under the direction of  
NADIA BOULANGER

*Dumbarton Oaks*  
May 8, 1938

Fig. 20. Program of a concert conducted in 1938 by Nadia Boulanger at Dumbarton Oaks (the home of Mildred and Robert Bliss) and featuring the world premiere of Stravinsky's *Dumbarton Oaks Concerto*, as well as other works by Stravinsky and Johann Sebastian Bach. Additional pages included the German texts of the Bach selections but no translations, perhaps reflecting how cosmopolitan the audience was expected to be. Photograph courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale, Paris.

Monday, May 16 [1938]

My very dear friend, what must you think of me? But listen to what has happened—it was downright cold in Wilmington, and the tours of gardens, museums and greenhouses left me with a cold that moved into my chest on my return. Thursday I worked with Beatrix Farrand (what an interesting woman, isn't she? you won her over completely)<sup>5</sup> until I was ready to collapse, and since then I haven't been able to leave my bed. My husband left by himself on Friday morning, arriving in Long Island about 5:30 to hear some tragic news: the sudden death of a very dear friend, with whom we were planning to stay from the next day (Saturday) until today! All four of us were together in Wilmington from Monday to Wednesday, planning to meet again two days later; the couple came home from the theatre Thursday in perfect health. At six o'clock—a cry and then the end . . .

Seventeen years of harmony, of health, of happiness; of joyful and productive life; two sons and a daughter; civic and social responsibilities; two households, involving serious financial obligations; in sum a *useful* citizen. And now, the happiness over, and shock and immense sadness and the weariness of solitude. Poor woman, I feel this deeply and am heart-broken not to have been able to help her during the first days of her great grief—my husband accompanied hers to the end. Tomorrow he comes back from New York and once more I will thank God for his goodness to me.

There it is, dear Nadia, the reason for my silence, which must have surprised you.

I left you reluctantly. Every hour spent with you enriches one's life. You have not only a vast amount to give, but you are generous, and the poorer one is the more you offer of yourself.

And now, for business:

*Stravinsky*: second cheque, completing the fee as we agreed, sent May 4. Hope to write him tomorrow. Sam [Dushkin] is taking him program with signatures, etc. Sent a telegram the 9th as you know. We would like the Concerto to be associated with the name Dumbarton Oaks, not our name.

*Dushkin*: is leaving day after tomorrow the 18th on the *Normandie*—cheque sent.

*Webster*: all in order

*Jacobsen*: letter thanking him will go off tomorrow and cheque will be sent as soon as I know the sum of the fees and expenses of the orchestra.

*Conrad*: Wanted very much to send his fee before his departure on the *Normandie*, but can't, not knowing the sum. Will be very obliged to you, dear friend, to let me know what it is, as well as his address in Paris.

*Cuénod*: Ditto

The enclosed cheque is for the conductor. With a certain hesitation I ask her to keep it for herself, knowing that she is capable of emptying every penny into the pockets of others.

Even a postcard to tell me that you have been able to rest would be welcome. And be



good enough to tell me again the date of your departure and the name of the ship. I will send the pattern for the negligé and some perfume to you there! How frivolous!

But, my dear good friend, I *beg you not* to wear yourself out. I know in advance everything you could reply about the quality of life and not its length! But I object that quality and moderation are worth more sustained generosity! There! Am I ungrateful to preach to you when I should only tell you of my gratitude?

I felt so much all that you gave of yourself so that the the work of the Master would be properly performed. He will know of it and will be infinitely grateful. As for us, it is difficult if not impossible to tell you how grateful we are. If I add their part of our thanks for Sam and Sasha [Jacobsen]—how much they gave of themselves, those two.

The memory of that anniversary music is uniquely sweet. The music itself—the serenity of Bach, the vitality of Stravinsky; the vibration of your intelligence; the cooperation of the artists and the *anima* that enveloped you—and the dawn of awakening that etched itself in the soul of Schilling—all together will light the way for us for a long time to come.

Enclosed, two letters. After you have read them, please send them back to me with your comments. I am especially eager to have your opinion.

Good night, anniversary friend! It is pleasant to think that from now on you are part of Dumbarton Oaks, where my heart will always be—

Mildred

#### NOTES

1. Bibliothèque nationale, Département de la musique, N.L.a. 56, pièces 240–41. Translation by Jeanice Brooks.

2. The Blisses' commitment to these ideals was manifested not only in support for music and musicians. They donated Dumbarton Oaks to Harvard University in 1940 to found a research center for the study of medieval and Byzantine art and archaeology; Robert's collection of pre-Columbian art, formerly on loan to the Corcoran Gallery, became the nucleus of the museum section of the mansion, along with Mildred's extensive gardening library. The 27-acre grounds were donated at the same time to the District of Columbia for use as a public park. These private donations were augmented by service on innumerable boards of various charities, arts organizations, and institutes of medical research. The remarkable music room has remained in use for concerts by chamber ensembles and noted soloists—see John Thacher, *Music at Dumbarton Oaks, 1940 to 1970* (Glückstadt, Germany: privately printed, 1977).

3. Review by "E. E" in the *Daily Post* (Liverpool), 5 November 1938. Sir Jack Westrup's review in the *Daily Telegraph* (London), 5 November 1938, similarly states, "There was a new concerto by Stravinsky entitled 'Dumbarton Oaks' (the name of a house in California)." The anonymous *Times* (London) reviewer (7 November 1938) also thought Stravinsky was living in the house when the concerto was written.

4. The latter continued to be a problem in Bliss's relationship with Boulanger. A Janu-

ary 1942 letter (Bibliothèque nationale, N.L.a. 56, pièce 263) expresses Bliss's reluctance to take back a check she had written to Boulanger in order to write four new checks (totaling the same sum) to four of Boulanger's students. Bliss acquiesced to Boulanger's request, but insisted that Boulanger make it clear to the students that the money was a gift from their teacher and not from Bliss.

5. Beatrix Farrand was the landscape gardener who designed the grounds of Dumbar-ton Oaks with Mildred Bliss.