

Miller Theatre Program Notes

Composer Portraits: *Pierre Boulez*

Monday, December 6, 8:00PM

Few people here this evening will be able to remember a time when Pierre Boulez was not a commanding figure in the world of music. His early masterpiece *Le Marteau sans maître* had its first performance more than five and a half decades ago. His career as a conductor goes back almost as long. His music startled Stravinsky, and startles still.

His is a story that began in the small town of Montbrison, near Lyons, where he was born in 1925. He studied the piano as a boy, but what seems to have stirred his creative passion was hearing Stravinsky's *Chant du rossignol* on the radio. At 17, he broke away from family expectations and went to Paris to pursue his musical ambitions. Rapidly he absorbed what he needed, from Olivier Messiaen at the Conservatoire (1943-5) and from René Leibowitz outside (1945). Messiaen introduced him to music and ideas that were off the staid Conservatoire curriculum: rhythms based on irregularly grouped pulses, as developed in recent decades by Stravinsky, Varèse, and Messiaen himself, and music from Asian and African cultures. Leibowitz was Schoenberg's chief apostle in Paris.

Notations (1945)

Boulez was 19 when he wrote this set of 12 short pieces—still a student, seeing that the war would soon end, and determined to change the world. He was learning from Messiaen and Leibowitz; he was also learning to be himself, for these miniatures are so many snapshots of his emergent musical personality—in their resonant sonorities and abrupt gestures, their alternation between suppleness and intense stampede, and, not least, their dialectic between fixity (stubbornly repeated notes, the returning intervals of a 12-tone row rotated from piece to piece, ostinatos, such recurrent signals as the deep bass drumbeat in Nos. 2, 9, and 12) and explosiveness.

The twelve pieces have markings as follows: 1 *Fantasque—Modéré*, 2 *Très vif*, 3 *Assez lent*, 4 *Rythmique*, 5 *Doux et improvisé*, 6 *Rapide*, 7 *Hiératique*, 8 *Modéré jusqu'à très vif*, 9 *Lointain—Calme*, 10 *Mécanique et très sec*, 11 *Scintillant*, 12 *Lent—Puissant et âpre*.

Later in 1945, just 20, Boulez was taken on as music director of the theater company run by Jean-Louis Barrault and Madeleine Renaud, Barrault's wife; with them for 10 years, he gained practical skills, diverse experience (not least when they toured the Americas), and the freedom to compose. He started bringing the disruptiveness of Schoenbergian serialism, as he understood it, into domains of rhythm, color, and form. His ideal was a perpetual turmoil, influenced partly by the compressed rage and savagery he found in his favorite poets, Antonin Artaud and René Char. In his *Second Piano Sonata* (1947-8) he created a work at once immense—challenging the model of Beethoven's "Hammerklavier"—and intemperate, even auto-destructive. Music, in his view—a view influenced by his cherished post-surrealist poets and by his understanding of the historical moment—was to be hurtling and dangerous.

Soon, though, he was searching for new means of order in applying serial principles to durations, timbres, and dynamic degrees. In the first section of his significantly titled *Structures* for two pianos (1951-2), he produced a model of almost total predetermination, in which he set up a system and then transcribed its course, intervening little. He explored similar possibilities of organization in two studies he created at the new *musique concrète* studio in Paris. Such ventures, betokening an extreme objectivity, struck a chord with John Cage, whom he had met and befriended in Paris in 1949. For Boulez, however, they were a learning experience, to be followed by a return to Char, and to a more profuse musical poetry, in *Le Marteau sans maître* (1952-4).

This was an extraordinary achievement. It gave western music a whole new sound, mixing the timbres of voice, wind instrument, bowed string, plucked string, and percussion, and combining the musical heritages of Asia, Africa, and Latin America with that of Europe. At once vehement and calm, immediate and inscrutable, it has remained a ticking time bomb in musical history, neither divulging all its secrets nor losing its novelty during the ensuing half-century and more. It was at once hailed a masterpiece by colleagues including Stravinsky, who heard it when the young composer was invited to conduct it for the Monday Evening Concerts in Los Angeles in 1957 (his U.S. debut), and it made Boulez the intellectual leader not just of a small circle in Paris but of a Europe-wide movement. That position he maintained not only through his compositions but also through frequent articles, regular teaching at the Darmstadt summer school from 1955 to 1967, and, increasingly, conducting.

Boulez became a conductor as head of the *Domaine Musical*, a Parisian concert series he founded in 1954, and whose innovatory mixed programming (new music and 20th-century classics in the company of Gabrieli or Machaut) he took to his work in the late 1950s with the Concertgebouw and the German radio orchestras. He also began composing more often for large forces.

Improvisation I sur Mallarmé "Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui" (1957)

Improvisation II sur Mallarmé "Une dentelle s'abolit" (1957)

An achievement may also be an impasse. *Le Marteau sans maître* was Boulez's breakthrough piece, but it was also an ending. It pushed detailed prescription to an extreme. With its short movements, it left the problem of large-scale form waiting. And its composition coincided with the dissolving of the unanimity with which he and his young colleagues had been speaking at the start of the 1950s. In the new atmosphere—less compelled, more reflective, more individual—he turned from the abrupt word-spates of René Char, an elder contemporary, to the finely shaped enigmas of Stéphane Mallarmé, last of the great 19th-century French poets.

This was a turn, too, from construction to improvisation—precisely, in the first place, to two "improvisations on Mallarmé" he wrote in 1957 while beginning two instrumental projects: his *Third Piano Sonata* and the second book of *Structures* for two pianos. Both those works also have their Mallarméan aspects. In particular, Boulez was excited by the recent publication of the poet's notes and drafts for a "Book" of manifold mutability, a collection of leaves and dossiers that could be read in innumerable ways—a labyrinth of words. This notion of form seemed to answer the needs of the new serial music as Boulez saw them. Tonal music had been defined by a gravitational kind of harmony, and therefore by linear form, urging towards the final cadence. Serial music, by contrast, was "a universe in perpetual expansion." There was no endpoint, nothing to limit how and where the music took its course. A stream that was in fact limitless—a structure allowing many different orderings of events—might therefore provide a new homogeneity between material (especially harmonic material) and form.

To endlessness, though, there is no end. *Structures II*, including numerous segments that can be differently placed according to the players' choices and signals, was not so much finished as abandoned in 1961, and the *Third Sonata*, after more than half a century, remains work in progress. As for the two *Improvisations sur Mallarmé*, though they may have originated as quick homages to the writer who meant most to Boulez at the time, they gave rise to an elaborate work, *Pli selon pli*, that did not reach its definitive shape until 1989—a work that unveils fold by fold, pleat by pleat (the title comes from a Mallarmé poem other than those set in the work), what Boulez has called a "portrait of Mallarmé."

The first two *Improvisations* were scored for soprano with a percussion ensemble emphasizing tuned and metal instruments, an ensemble appropriate to the white, bright, scintillant imagery of the poems—though Boulez arranged the first for larger resources to take its place in *Pli selon pli*. Mallarmé's sonnet here sees a swan on a frozen lake, white on white, struggling to get airborne; its plumage is also the poet's pen (plume), unable to reach the deep ice of the unformed that is the imagination. Yet a poetic act is happening even while it is being disavowed: the swan becomes the Swan. Boulez responds to all this not only in his music's luster but in having his vocal lines bounce among fixed pitches, in retrieving fragments from his own birth as an artist (extracts from his *Notations*, scored to make interludes) and in recreating the poetic structures, for the four parts of the sonnet are clearly distinguished. So they are in the second sonnet, where again the ensemble's cascades and resonances, together with the singer's floating trails or isolated syllables, answer the imagery of whiteness, translucency, evanescence, and birth.

Unset and therefore unsung, and yet implicit in every measure, is Mallarmé's most revolutionary poem, *Un coup de dès*, in which words spill across the pages as if on the point of escaping. Boulez wanted his music, similarly, to be in flight.

The mobile forms of *Structures II*, the *Third Sonata*, and *Pli selon pli* were an aesthetic choice, and a response to what Boulez saw as the musical situation, but they spoke, too, for a composer who was finding it harder to satisfy himself creatively. Works were abandoned after a single performance (*Poésie pour pouvoir* for orchestra and tape), discarded as projects, or kept in a perpetual state of incompleteness. Meanwhile, his conducting career began taking off. He gave his first concert with the Berlin Philharmonic in 1961, conducted *Wozzeck* at the Paris Opera in 1963, made his U.S. orchestral debut with the Cleveland Orchestra in 1965, and, that same year, appeared at Carnegie Hall for the first time, with the BBC Symphony. Soon he was to conduct at Bayreuth (*Parsifal*, 1966) and Covent Garden (*Pelléas et Mélisande*, 1969), and with most of the leading orchestras in Europe and the United States. His repertory, steadily expanding, now embraced Mahler and Beethoven, and he was making some highly charged recordings, especially of Debussy.

The combination of immense gifts with a vision for the musical future was irresistible, and he was appointed concurrently principal conductor of the BBC Symphony (1971-4) and music director of the New York Philharmonic (1971-7), which required him to broaden his repertory still further (if not as far as to

Tchaikovsky) and also meant losing some of the distinctive cold fury of his musicianship. Yet his legendary ear, the smart directness of his gestures (abjuring the baton), and his growing experience all combined to make him a superlative orchestral technician and a compelling performer. He remained, too, determined to change musical life. Many of his Philharmonic programs would still seem revolutionary now, more than 30 years later: Schoenberg's *Variations* between symphonic works by Brahms and Schumann, for instance, or early Stockhausen to shake up a sequence of Mozart, Schumann, and Prokofiev. He also introduced downtown concerts of new music, "informal evenings" devoted to modern classics, and weeks of "rug concerts" that brought a student audience to Avery Fisher Hall.

Commanding orchestras on both sides of the Atlantic, and maintaining connections with others, he was giving over 100 concerts a year during this period. Composition was almost out of the question—though he did produce the uncharacteristically monumental and somber *Rituel* for orchestra (1974-5), one of several works to emerge from a composition kit ("...explosante-fixe...") he had made quickly in 1971 as a memorial to Stravinsky.

Since 1967 he had been living in Baden Baden, in south-west Germany, having left Paris very publicly when his proposals for musical reform were ignored. At the end of his New York stint he once more made Paris his professional center, helping shape the institution the government was making for him: the Institut de Recherche et de Coordination Acoustique/Musique (IRCAM). He drastically scaled down his conducting to leave just the Ring at Bayreuth (1976-80), occasional concerts with the Ensemble InterContemporain, resident at IRCAM, and a few other engagements. Meanwhile, he began learning the new language of computer music, which he spectacularly displayed in *Répons* (1980-4), for six soloists on tuned percussion (including piano and harp) with mixed ensemble. The sonic glamor of ripples and resonances went back through his music as far as to *Le Marteau*, but the electronic transformation and spatial redisposition of the sounds were new.

Dérive 1 (1984)

For *Répons*, Boulez created a set of six chords drawing on the musical notes in the surname of the Swiss patron and conductor Paul Sacher: E flat ('Es' in German), A, C, B (again to be read in German, as H), E, D (to be understood Frenchwise this time, as ré). These provided material also for a short tribute he composed to mark the 80th birthday of his friend and supporter William Glock, former head of music at the BBC. The scoring is for what was already by then a standard lineup formed by adding a percussionist to the instrumental quintet required for Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire*: flutist, clarinetist, violinist, cellist, and pianist. Besides suggesting how the piece is a spin-off from a larger project and from its basic cipher, the title has connotations of being offshore; what we hear is a meandering flow of drifting derivatives.

Boulez stayed working at IRCAM intermittently into the 1990s, producing the definitive version of "...explosante-fixe..." as a concerto for modulated flute and chamber orchestra (1993) and *Anthèmes II* for violin and electronics (1997), though this was also the period of his first extended work for live resources since the 1970s, the flowing and lustrous *sur Incises* (1995-8). At the same time, he began to increase his conducting commitments again, and to re-record much of the repertory closest to him (Debussy, Stravinsky, Bartók, Webern, Ravel, Mahler) while also adding new music (albums of Ligeti and Birtwistle as well as his own works) and allowing himself to expand a little (Strauss, Bruckner, Scriabin, Janáček).

Dérive 2 (1988/2006)

Pursuing, and pursued by, his ideal of music as "a universe in continuous expansion," Boulez has remained committed to openness. For the last 30 years he has been occupied with a set of orchestral pieces, *Notations*, elaborating those piano miniatures from the very start of his creative life. Other plans seem to have been left in abeyance indefinitely.

A catalogue of fragments, however, is probably not what he ever had in mind. At least since he began his orchestral score *Figures—Doubles—Prismes*, half a century ago, he has been held by the idea of music of long duration, music that would contain within itself continuous expansion. In the last 13 years he has finally completed two such works, each of them lasting about three-quarters of an hour: *sur Incises* for piano, harp and percussion in triplicate, and *Dérive 2*, scored for a similar but smaller group (piano, harp, vibraphone and marimba) with four wind players (cor anglais, clarinet, bassoon and horn) and three strings (violin, viola and cello).

Like *sur Incises*, which was developed from a short piano piece, *Dérive 2* makes its expansion from tiny origins, once again the Sacher chords invented for *Répons*. It was intended as an homage to Elliott Carter on his 80th birthday, though its growth long outlasted that occasion (as, happily, did the ordained recipient). More than a birthday present, it is an essay in notions of time that Boulez has drawn from Carter, and also from the music of

Ligeti and Conlon Nancarrow—not to mention Beethoven, whom he has cited as a model creator of slow music embracing a lot of rapid activity. What comes from the more recent colleagues is the idea of periodicity, at many levels, from that of beat to phrase or even section—indeed, at so many levels, and at levels upon levels, that the elementary phenomena of pulsation and repetition are often blurred. Characteristic Boulezian harmonies march pretty well all through, while the surface activity may be dazzling, surprising, exciting and, at times, graced with the less common trait in this composer's music of humor. The work proceeds like a river, sometimes dashing through rapids, where the instrumental lines crash against one another and break up, sometimes entering pools of harmonic reflection. There are passages where the beat is strong and others where movement is flexible. Small groups of players can join in a dance; soloists will occasionally emerge to sing; references may range from Debussy to the modern jazz of Boulez's youth.

After a provisional version of 2002, which he recorded, the composer almost doubled the length of the piece in the revision he completed four years later. Now there is, after all, an end—an exhilarating triumph of pulse and togetherness, and of musical stamina.

Dérive 2 remains the work Boulez completed most recently, but he is at work on orchestral versions of the fifth and eighth of the *Notations*, and has other projects in sight...

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