

BOULEZ le MAÎTRE

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If one had to single out just one figure whose contribution to 20th century music has been inestimable, it must surely be Pierre Boulez. Not only by his own ground breaking compositional output but also by his pioneering programming of 20th century music in concerts globally as a conductor of many of the worlds greatest orchestras. Born in 1925 we almost lost Boulez to a career in higher mathematics and engineering as these were his first major studies and intended career but thankfully he went to the Paris Conservatoire and attended Messiaen's composition and analysis classes in 1942 as well as counterpoint with Vauraboug-Honegger and 12 note technique with René Leibowitz and never looked back.

Together with Stockhausen, Boulez quickly rose to fame (or notoriety) with compositions that pushed instrumental virtuosity to new extremes using total serialisation of all musical elements sparked off by Messiaen's *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités* (1949) and the crystalline precision of the works of Webern. (Speaking of notoriety and notorious comments, it's interesting to remember that all three composers, Messiaen, Stockhausen and Boulez all made derogatory remarks about the future of opera in Western music with Boulez orating the now famous quote that all opera houses should be burnt down yet all three in their later lives have major involvement with opera, Messiaen's *St. Francis of Assisi*, Stockhausen's *Licht* cycle and of course Boulez' conducting work on Wagner's *Ring* cycle and it is rumoured that he himself is to write an opera at some stage). Boulez has said that 'serialism' was a short period in the 50's that gave composers strict discipline and rigid constraints, but in turn that forces one to find solutions where you think there are no solutions. Works of this period include *Structures Bk 1*, *Notations* (piano), *Sonatina* (flute / Piano) and *Sonata* for 2 pianos. By the time of the immensely significant *Le Marteau sans maître* Boulez was beginning to go beyond these constraints, trying to make the discipline more flexible, as he says " if you have too strict a discipline,

it kills your ideas". As a person of great intellect he became associated with many writers and artists of the time, including Paul Klee, Theodor Adorno, Jean Genet, Michael Foucault, Mallarmé and René Char whose poetry supplied the text for *Le Marteau sans maître*.

People often remark: "I don't like 20th century music - it has no tune" we've all heard this. Boulez points out that it pays to remember this same remark was said of Beethoven and Wagner when their music was heard for the first time. As with painters of the 20th century, who increased their colouristic palette and changed perspectives to enrich their language, so musicians also began to enlarge their melodic vocabulary, and it is melody that is the key to *Le Marteau*. This work is for small ensemble of alto flute, xyloimba, vibraphone, percussion, guitar, viola and mezzo soprano and is divided into nine sections five of which are purely instrumental including three 'commentaries' on the poems which also have no vocal part. Boulez uses an ornamental vocal style of writing where melodic lines are decorated (ornamented) by groups of little (grace) notes so there is a complete absence of chordal accompaniment. This style of writing looks to two different musical traditions: 1) Gregorian chant where the lines were sung without accompaniment and where figures were constantly ornamented and 2) the Far Eastern vocal traditions of Japanese and Chinese song which also has a strong tradition of ornamental vocal lines. *Le Marteau* paved the way for a completely new style of song cycle writing by many of his contemporaries. (This work was given an impeccable reading by the new music group Psappha at this year's ISCM world music days in Manchester and they will repeat this work on July 18th at Cheltenham.)

As Stockhausen forged ahead creating new forms and languages with each new composition, Boulez was slower to develop compositionally and more pieces emerged that were 'works in progress' or he often updated, re-polished and adapted works as years went by. He insists that while some compositions are definitely finished and remain untouched others are like a labyrinth which constantly change and become interrelated.

Boulez' gift as a conductor began to manifest itself and in 1953/4 he became musical director in the Theatre Concerts Marigney later to become Domaine Musical whose ensemble under Boulez performed a wealth of European contemporary music and, in my opinion, the best ever recorded versions of Messiaen's *Et Expecto* and *Couleurs de la Cité Céleste*.

In the mid 60s he became more and more sought after as a conductor of outstanding quality who's phenomenal ear and outstanding talent for interpretations of the most complex scores meant he was in demand on both sides of the Atlantic (most notably the BBC Symphony orchestra and the New York Phil). Inevitably, composing was forced into a back seat, however, Boulez saw it his job to programme as much contemporary music as politically possible in all the conducting situations that he has been in which has resulted in many works becoming repertoire pieces.

In 1969 President Pompidou decided to create a National Centre for Contemporary Art at the Pompidou centre Paris and Boulez was instrumental in persuading the French government to create an institution that would devote itself to the development of technology in music and science. This became L'Institut de Recherche et de Co-ordination Acoustique/Musique or IRCAM whose aims are many-fold but principally it is a purpose built establishment solely for the production and development of contemporary music using

information technology in all its forms. This differs from the old analogue studios of the 50s (e.g. Utrecht, NHK Tokyo, WDR) which were primarily radio or TV studios with a few tape recorders and effects where composers had to 'book in' and twist the arms of producers to use these facilities for their work. IRCAM has state of the art equipment and a 'moveable' performance area that can accommodate almost any acoustic situation and composers from all around the world are invited to work and research there. In 1976 IRCAM also spawned one of the greatest contemporary music ensembles in the world, Ensemble InterContemporain (ranking along side Germany's Ensemble Modern, Holland's Asko Ensemble and our own London Sinfonietta) and again Boulez was in on its inception attending all the auditions to choose the musicians, and performs everything from Varese to Frank Zappa.

Boulez' interest in 'live' electronics and computer interaction in works continued to develop in pieces such as ...explosante-fixe... which again first appeared in 1972 when technology was very primitive, reworked in 1989 for solo MIDI flute, electronics and ensemble and most notably Repons where the computer transforms, extends, repeats, re-distributes the notes in space that are played by the instrumentalists instantaneously.

In 1989 Pierre Boulez signed a long term recording contract with Deutsche Grammophon and has re-recorded many of this centuries masterpieces again with top orchestras such as Cleveland PO (Debussy, Stravinsky, Messiaen and Mahler), Chicago SO (Bartok & Stravinsky), Berlin PO (Ravel and Webern), Concertgebouw (Schoenberg) and Vienna PO (Mahler).

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