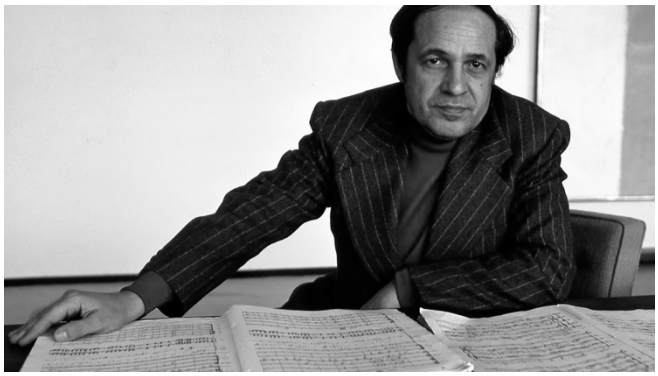
BOULEZ IS DEAD

A brief exploration of Pierre Boulez and his life, works and legacy



> "Exploration of the dodecaphonic realm may be bitterly held against Schoenberg, for it went off in the wrong direction so persistently that it would be hard to find an equally mistaken perspective in the entire history of music... Therefore, I do not hesitate to write, not out of any desire to provoke a stupid scandal, but equally without bashful hypocrisy and pointless melancholy: SCHOENBERG IS DEAD."

The publication of Pierre Boulez's 1952 'obituary' for Arnold Schoenberg was unsurprisingly met with scandal from the old guard. But to the generation of composers coming of age in the 1950's, "Schoenberg is Dead" was a revelation: an invitation to burn down the past – holding in it the so-recent betrayal by their forebearers that was WWII. And with this rejection of the past was a promise of complete reinvention. Boulez had not simply laid down the gauntlet to his peers. This was just a step in a vision of moulding the musical world into one devoid of fragments of the past, into a world that is liberated, original and of his own creation.

Now Boulez, like Schoenberg, is dead. One hundred years after his birth, most of the world still thinks of Mozart and Beethoven when it thinks of art music. Tonality reigns supreme with audiences. No major Australian orchestra has programmed a work of his in this centenary year. As we consign Boulez to the museum of dead composers he so wished to destroy, we are left to ask: what place does he have there?

To say Pierre Boulez had a complicated relationship with legacy is a simplification, as many broad statements about the composer, conductor, critic, firebrand, curator and leader are. "I shall be the first composer in history not to have a biography," he declared to his biographer, believing that history itself was something a musical society increasingly obsessed with conservation of the past must rid itself of. Boulez's life's work was to shape the development of Western music – not in his own image *per se*, but in the image of what he deemed was 'correct'. A subtle difference lies between the two. For it is all too easy to cast Boulez as "impenetrable" and "egotistical," to view him as closed-off and haughty. But this is the conclusion most easily formed by journalists and critics who were unable to get past the impenetrable wall between his musical and personal lives. Boulez was a man who never needed to demand respect, polite and gentle in rehearsal, and always dedicated to his music.

The son of a steelworks engineer, Boulez was to follow his father and nurture a gift for mathematics. Boulez describes his childhood as unremarkable, even bourgeoise, and refused to say even a word about it on most occasions. But from what interviews and researchers have managed to glean, two formational events from his youth stand out. The first event: at age five, finding the grave of an infant inscribed *Pierre Boulez* – an older brother he'd never known. Troubled at sharing his predecessor's name, Boulez saw himself as the realised "drawing" to the "sketch" of the dead Pierre. The second event: rejecting Catholicism, and the path laid by his father, and pursuing studies in music instead.

Listening to, performing or even understanding Boulez's music is not easy. He never wanted it that way. Informed by the systems and methods of his mathematical training and driven by this hunger for reinvention, Boulez's earlier published works were a shock to the

musical world and a delight to the experimentalists… if they could be played at all. This first block of works, written between 1945 and 1947, were an immediate distillation of the influence of teachers Olivier Messiaen and René Leibowitz (disciple of Schoenberg). These include the *12 Notations* and first piano sonata – both premiered soon after their composition by Yvette Grimaud, an early champion of Boulez – and the more intimidating *Sonatine* for flute and piano and monumental orchestral setting of René Char's *Le Visage Nupital*. The density and technical challenge of *Le Visage Nupital* meant it was not premiered until 1957, and it was Boulez himself who rose to the task of conducting it.

By this time, Boulez had already raced forward in his own compositional development. Anton Webern had fully replaced the influence of Schoenberg (a key impetus for the infamous obituary), and a close friendship between Boulez and American John Cage had blossomed and been publicly thrown aside as the two diverged on the treatment of chance in music. This was but one of many dramatic rifts that Boulez fed with his inflammatory pen, publishing articles taking down composer after composer who did not follow his own vision for the future of music. On some level, there's a solitary melancholy to the story of a man who would burn every bridge in the fight for what he believed was the necessary evolution of music, even rejecting his own past works.

Webern too would eventually be repudiated (though more gently as an older, more measured Boulez reflected on the imperfect reality of perfect theoretical systems), but through the early to mid-1950's, Webern became the guiding light to Boulez and his growing cult of integral serialists. Schoenberg's "liberation of dissonance" was a step in, rather than a break from, tradition, keeping structure, development and triadic harmony. These "sins" were rectified in Webern, whose obsession with symmetry and system gave rise to serialism. Not only were all twelve tones used, but they were also structured into set rows and manipulated through systems ('retrograde' reversing in time; 'inversion' flipping pitches; and 'retrograde inversion' doing both). Integral serialism took this a step further, creating rows of duration, dynamics and effects, systemising as many elements as possible. Notions of melody, harmony and thematic development were obliterated. In its place: exhilarating texture and effect.

> "There is no point in pretending that I understand [Boulez]… yet again and again it has yielded moments of inner excitement. They have not been of long duration and I cannot account for them rationally, yet I recognise them as symptoms of an encounter with creative potency. To put it crudely, they tell me there is something there. My difficulty is that I cannot say exactly what."
>
> —Peter Heyworth,
> at the Edinburgh Festival (1965)

Between 1947 and 1952, Boulez's most notable completed works were the second piano sonata, *Polyphonie X* for eighteen instruments, and *Structures I* for two pianos. The second sonata reportedly made pianist Yvonne Loriod burst into tears at the thought of playing it (Yvette Grimaud gave the eventual premiere), and *Polyphonie X* had a raucously negative reception at its premiere. The working title for *Structures*, which was to be a grammar exercise in serialism to rival Johann Sebastian Bach's *Art of the Fugue*, was *À la limite du fertile pays* ('At the limit of fertile ground'), borrowed from a work of the same name by artist Paul Klee and indicative of how aware Boulez was of the intensity of the strict application of his serialist systems. *Polyphonie X* and *Structures* were soon after withdrawn by Boulez, who now regards these works as "documents" and "research" – intermediate and imperfect steps in testing the limits of these systems and theories.

> "Are we to become a generation of technocrats?"
> —Pierre Boulez, *…Auprès et au loin* (1954)

In his 1954 manifesto *…Auprès et au loin*, Boulez steps back from the precipice of the total systemisation of sound. "The solution" he first attempted in the two withdrawn

works "was far too summary… [and] their exploitation was too schematic to be effective." Dodecaphonism and system were still necessary in Boulez's mind, but each variable couldn't always carry the same weight, and some flexibility unleashed "universes". The immediately more popular *Le Marteau sans maître* heralded increased flexibility in Boulez's own treatment of his systems and was the stepping stone towards his adoption of chance.

"A book neither begins nor ends; at the very most it pretends to do so."
—Stéphane Mallarmé

Boulez cites influence from a rich pool of poets, authors and artists. None were more influential than late nineteenth century French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé. Two of his works, *Un coup de dés jamais n'aborila le hasard* ('A throw of the dice will never abolish chance') and *Le Livre* ('The Book', an unfinished magnum opus) were among an oeuvre decades ahead of their time in creating an 'open form' of words seemingly scattered (in fact meticulously arranged) across pages. Similar to James Joyce (another strong influence on Boulez), Mallarmé's use of language as an aesthetic of structures rather than strictly a vessel to convey meaning (much like in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*) gave fuel to Boulez's own compositional convictions, stripping away these eighteenth- and nineteenth-century beliefs of musical hermeneutics for an aesthetic devoid of this sentimentality.

The revolutionary open form of Mallarmé's works was a whole world of chance to Boulez – a *constellation* of paths that each formed their own journey. Though his most celebrated work, *Pli selon pli*, sets Mallarmé poems for soprano and orchestra and is rife with elements of controlled chance, the third piano sonata is the most radical step of Boulez's evolution, moving through five *formants* (or movements) from most structured to least. The central formant, named after this constellation of fragments, is the most visually striking on the page, similar to the published scattered words and phrases of Mallarmé's *Coup de dés*. The full sonata was never finished and only a few of the formants were published. In his essay *Sonate, que me veux-tu?* (Sonata, what do you want of me?) Boulez admits his struggles with fully conceptualising, let alone applying, his ideas of controlled chance in music.

The *Sonate* essay was first published in 1963, and it's easy to forget, considering the profundity of Boulez's ideas and the assuredness with which he writes them, that he's not yet 40 years old. Yet the bulk of his original compositional output now lays behind him as conducting became a focus. In part taken up to more accurately realise the complexity of his own works, in part to extend a curatorial streak that his presentations at new music festivals had sparked, Boulez found himself in high demand before the decade was out as the foremost interpreter of twentieth century works. The precision he demanded from performers, especially in intonation, allowed for uniquely crystalline performances of Bartok, Stravinsky, Webern, Messiaen and of course his own works, and fed the appreciation of Mahler and Debussy's masterworks. Though a ruthless curator, he frequently programmed works by composers he had publicly disparaged (such as John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen), seeking to present these as "documents" of compositional development and equally bring out their meritorious characteristics. The 1970's saw Boulez reach a form of world dominance, leading both the BBC Symphony Orchestra and New York Philharmonic. At first, Boulez treated these positions as an opportunity to finally present dodecaphony to the masses and win them over through careful curation. But as the years went by, subscriptions dwindled and reviews went from adoration of his boldness to doubt over his direction and criticism of alienating his audiences, and his concert repertoire slipped further into the past.

By 1977, Boulez had relinquished his posts at both orchestras and scaled back his conducting to found the Institute for Research and Coordination in Acoustics/Music (ICRAM) in Paris, on the request of Georges Pompidou. Boulez's compositional output had waned as

his conducting load had increased (though anecdotally, his light was often on until 3am working on music and words about them all through the 70's), but his tireless work for twentieth century music made him the obvious choice for this bold new research institution dedicated to contemporary works and electroacoustic composition.

It's counterintuitive then to see that, post 70's, Boulez returns to the acoustic medium – and returns to his past. More works that were previously published undergo revision or are withdrawn, most receiving extensive additions that give the density of his originality broader canvases to unfold. Boulez reflected on the imperfect nature of early dodecaphony, and with it the propensity of composers working in the field to produce miniatures and shorter forms. With time, development, and the liberation from exactitude Boulez found later in life, he was able to escape this supposed curse of brevity, and instead fall into an altogether different curse of endless reinvention. So fertile were these new grounds of his old ideas that works dating back to his youth received multiple revisions and expansions. Chief among those reimagined were 1960's *Pli selon pli* and a selection of his 1945 *Notations*. Works including *Messagesquisse*, *Derive*, *Répons* and *Initiale*, were derived from the SACHER hexachord during this period, and then themselves underwent late-in-life revisions which saw them expand in scope, duration and orchestration, often to increasing critical acclaim and a final metamorphosis of a lifetime of ideas, systems and theories.

Boulez seems a man out of time, so theoretically assured at a young age, and so energised to create at an old one, at all times with a perspective grander than just his lifetime. Who is Boulez? The complexities of the polymath go beyond a single essay, beyond any biography – and the ever-private man kept secrets to his grave. What mark does he leave? Perhaps Boulez has already found his place in eternity, both dissolved into anonymity against his seemingly Sisyphean life's work, yet undoubtedly to be remembered forever as the force that gave post-1945 art music direction and fire. His ideas and their repercussions will continue to intrigue, confuse and inspire for generations to come.

> "One final word. Form is becoming autonomous and tending towards an absolute character hitherto unknown; purely personal accident is now rejected as an intrusion. The great works of [Mallarmé and Joyce]... are the data for a new age in which texts are becoming, as it were, 'anonymous', 'speaking for themselves without any author's voice.' If I had to name the motive underlying the work that I have been trying to describe, it would be the search for an 'anonymity' of this kind."
>
> —Pierre Boulez,
> *Sonata, que me veux tu?* (1963)

Words by Alex Owens, Music Librarian, Robert Salzer Foundation Library

Image Source (front page): "The Sensuous Radical: Pierre Boulez at 90," npr.org, March 26, 2015