

Hervé Boutry on Pierre Boulez

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Why can it be said that the post-war music scene in France would have been totally different if it weren't for Boulez?

Boutry: I believe that there was a really fundamental change in direction in the wake of the Second World War. Most people wanted to regain the beautiful sounds that they had been used to before the war, but Boulez fought against this trend. It was he who really engineered the complete change by attempting to raise awareness of international music among French audiences, and by finally succeeding in performing unknown works such as those of the Viennese School.

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He set up the Domaine Musical festival and arranged for many first performances in France. Composing, conducting and teaching were all part of a totally coherent mindset for him, even in those days. I believe he is an artist who found his feet at a very early stage, and who has maintained the same attitude to this day. I find that extremely impressive.

Boulez once recalled that when he heard new music in France around that time, he felt as though he had gone “cross-eared”. That’s how bad the performances were. The quality of the music in the Austro-German tradition – Mahler, Bruckner and especially the Viennese School – didn’t shine through at all.

Boutry: I believe he always thought beyond France. For him, the traditions in France were just not in the same league as the traditions in the German-language countries. His aspirations were always closer to the German-language traditions. I also had the impression that he naturally wanted to import these traditions, and he actually succeeded in doing so in the years around 1970 – first through conducting a highly successful *Ring* in Bayreuth, which he also helped to produce, and also because as a Frenchman who had left his country, he suddenly found himself in a prime position for establishing modernity and the avant-garde in music – something that was not at all a matter of course in France. There were art collectors and museums that displayed avant-garde works in the fine arts, but there was absolutely nothing at all in the music world.

And Boulez was suddenly given these incredible opportunities. The French learnt to appreciate him, at last. Everything prior to that can be labelled the “pioneering and campaigning years”. His breakthrough with the wider public in France came when he returned from New York and London, and following the success of the *Ring*.

What motivated Boulez to set up the Ensemble intercontemporain?

Boutry: Boulez focused on the Ensemble intercontemporain in a second phase, after IRCAM had been founded. I believe that he considered it important to research electronic music in conjunction with living performers – and composers, of course. It would have been impossible for him to have had an institute that produced concerts exclusively with electronics. He wouldn't have wanted the audience to merely sit in front of loudspeakers; that wouldn't have been enough for him.

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He first attempted to perform these concerts in Paris with the musicians that were already there. However, it wasn't much of a success because he was only dealing with freelance musicians who never had any time due to being in an orchestra themselves; they couldn't work continuously with the composer.

And so that's why he said that he really needed his own ensemble. He designed the concept for the Ensemble intercontemporain by drawing on inspiration from the London Sinfonietta and other existing ensembles. There was an additional element, however, namely that the musicians had a fixed contract.

The responsibility of the ensemble was to play and publicise unknown works. However, it can also be said that Boulez' work was also influenced by the Ensemble intercontemporain. Would you agree?

Boutry: Yes, definitely. He feels that the architecture of the institution goes hand in glove with compositional activity. In any case, in all his works he has always conceived something fundamentally new. And it's true that from 1976 he was composing for an ensemble of around 30 musicians. That said, every time, with each piece that he composed for us, he would basically unequivocally question the form of the previous work and even re-examine the ensemble's structure.

Take *sur Incises*, for example, which he wrote for three pianists, three harps and three percussionists. Ok, it's ideal. The ensemble is well known for its outstanding pianists and percussionists, but we only have one harp. He didn't consider himself subordinate to the institution in this respect. In all his works he attempted to stay away from fixed forms.

Perhaps there is something tugging him in a particular direction, something that only becomes abundantly clear right at the end. That's the freedom you have in virtuosity. I think virtuosity is always looking over his shoulder, so to speak. He writes for virtuoso performers, and the way in which he thinks is also extremely virtuosic. Virtuoso interaction between the musicians has increased so much, however, and I consider *Dérive 2*, his last composition for us, to be a fantastic example of how you can push virtuoso musical interaction to the most extreme levels of difficulty for a whole 45 minutes.

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sur Incises and Dérive 2 are works that do not use electronics. To what extent has his approach to electronic music changed?

Boutry: He has shown great interest in developing electronics in a way that corresponds to his interests as a composer. He has also played the role of a developer. I have the impression that electronic music was initially far more reliant on the composer's way of thinking, and then suddenly it enjoyed a much wider use and gained an incredible power. I believe that he has been consistently interested in thinking this power through to the end, but he still has too many works that are as yet unfinished. He simply wanted to focus on something purely instrumental now and again.

What is Boulez' significance for a generation of young composers through IRCAM as an institution and the existence of the Ensemble intercontemporain?

Boutry: Boulez has always been interested in young composers, artists and performers. He considers this a very important part of his work, not only because he wants to support young people, but also because he wishes to understand what they are looking for, what interests them, because that also benefits him.

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I believe he designed the institutions in such a way that they can really continue a process of renewal in their performances and creative work without his own input. I believe that in today's artistic world, the gap, or rather boundary, between these two tasks – between playing and communicating – is becoming increasingly nebulous. Boulez saw this coming, back in the days when he founded our institutions.

It was actually a decision that was shaped by incredible vision.

Boutry: Absolutely. You only have to look at the list of the composers or performers who have played with the ensemble for a few years and then continued on a successful career in order to understand that this institution is a real motor of inspiration. It's not about rigid perfection, but rather what is in motion. The same is true of Boulez' character. I think he hates nothing more than routine.

To what extent does this architecture reflect his personality?

Boutry: There is a need for constant flow and growth, but there is also an incredible aspiration for quality. He believes that raising standards to a certain level is an intellectual attitude, and he believes that music is one of the most beautiful ways of doing this. I think this is a profound element of his mindset, and he has always conveyed this ambition to his musicians and the composers with whom he has worked. I also think this applies to the level at which he thinks.

It has always worked that way in art, but in his case you could say there is an even greater intensity involved because of his incredible cultural knowledge and experience. I find that very important as well. He is somebody who has a tremendous culture across the board, including in history and in painting. He is interested in so many different fields, and that simply radiates an incredible vital energy.

For a long time Boulez was labelled a "cool analyst" – and to a certain extent he hasn't ever freed himself of that reputation. How would you describe him?

Boutry: It goes without saying that you can't build your perception of somebody like Pierre Boulez on a few TV images or a concert. Those who

have had the opportunity to work with him more closely are able to see that it is so important for him to share this incredible, vital energy with others.

It has a lot to do with visionary power, but also with the really basic elements of life. He is essentially a very jovial and humorous person, and you notice that when you talk to him. He radiates an incredible sparkle and elegance when he interacts with other people, and he also has the ability to really inspire musicians to produce stunning performances on stage. His personality really is complex. This is a side to him which might not have been particularly noticeable at first, as is to be expected of someone who has to fight a lot of battles, but it is one that will become increasingly clear to people now and in the years to come.



Interview: Wolfgang Schaefler
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