

# *Michael Haefliger on Pierre Boulez*

“In his mind he has remained a young person.”

---

*What were the reasons behind your decision to appoint Pierre Boulez as Artistic Director of the Lucerne Festival Academy?*

**Haefliger:** The situation at the time was that we were holding masterclasses, but could see that they were not really generating any kind of momentum. When I became Executive Director, I knew that I wanted to set a clear signal with respect to modernism and the promotion of young artists. I spent some time thinking about who would be the right person for the job, and to be honest, only one person fitted the bill: Pierre Boulez. We got in touch with him and he agreed straight away, just like that, and we took everything else from there. It was an absolute stroke of luck, of course.

*How would you describe Boulez as a teacher?*

**Haefliger:** I have always experienced Pierre Boulez as Pierre Boulez himself, and not as a teacher or conductor, or as a composer in that sense. He has a universal personality that simply combines everything. He is very relaxed and natural, so you don't get the feeling that he's being a teacher. He has simply remained exceptionally true to himself, and he naturally has this incredible talent of being able to communicate knowledge without any fuss and bother, and with such determination because he is genuinely interested in the younger generation.

*Boulez is always clear, always transparent; that makes it relatively easy to work with him. He doesn't take too long to make a decision; he's a decisive person.*

*How would you describe him in his work with young people?*

**Haefliger:** Very intense, very open and very patient. During rehearsals he always repeats things, says them again. And he's always been interested in young people too.

*What were the main dramaturgical elements that the two of you discussed in regard to the Academy?*

**Haefliger:** Well, obviously the main elements were the works to be programmed. Then there was the selection process for the young composers, of course, and the conducting courses which he has also followed with great interest. Several leading figures, including Pablo Heras-Casado have been involved in them.

And of course there have been a few really special highlights: *Répons*, for example, which was played twice, where the audience changed seats before the second time through and there was a discussion with Boulez in between performances. Stockhausen's *Gruppen* also springs to mind, as does Mahler's *Sixth*, which was scintillating. And then *The Rite of Spring* and *The Miraculous Mandarin*.

Boulez is always clear, always transparent; that makes it relatively easy to work with him. He doesn't take too long to make a decision; he's a decisive person.

*I have the impression that Boulez considered it important for the Viennese School to be shared with a generation that might not have experienced it in their training, as it has played a central role in his own life.*

**Haefliger:** Absolutely, yes. On the other hand, however, he has repeatedly made reference to Debussy, and also to Ravel, and of course Bartók as well. He has frequently said that Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* could be regarded as the dawn of modernism. And one senses a very strong connection with his own French past.

*Boulez has worked with young students in Lucerne for ten years. Could you perhaps take stock of how things have developed so far?*

**Haefliger:** Many, many people have benefitted from the project. Around a thousand young musicians have worked here with Boulez, I believe. And not only with Boulez, but also with the Ensemble intercontemporain.

I'd say that every single one of them must have benefitted enormously from this. A tight-knit community of Lucerne Festival Academy members has developed in New York, and they are keeping the spirit alive as well.

Boulez has given musicians the opportunity to try out new formats: take *open stage*, for example. There was just a stage where they could play whatever they wanted to play, spontaneously. This gave birth to our early-evening series *40 Minutes*.

*So your relationship with Boulez goes back to your New York era?*

**Haefliger:** Well, I really only got to know him personally in 1998.

While I was in New York I admired him from a distance because his ideas for the *Rush Hour Concerts* made such an impression on me. Even as a student I hadn't liked concert rituals; I liked classical music, was a musician myself, but the staid and fixed rituals got rather on my nerves. Boulez was a great role model for me there.

And yes, we are trying to guide things in a similar direction here in Lucerne as well. We don't want to alienate anybody, but at the same time we want to show that there are new possibilities on offer. You can shorten a concert once in a while or you can simply premiere a work on its own, perhaps repeating it two or three times.

*I said that I was thinking of a moveable space, one that offers different configurations. And he went up to the first floor of his house in Baden-Baden and gave me the concept for Salle Modulable. It was incredible.*

*It seems to me that in Lucerne, Boulez has repeated his ideas from elsewhere with an increased focus: pushing back boundaries, opening up new perspectives. And I have the impression that this has given him incredible vigour. Would you agree with that, based on your personal discussions with him?*

**Haefliger:** Yes, Pierre Boulez has grown older, but in his mind he has remained a young person. Nothing has changed there. Being in a direct exchange with young people has also filled him with great joy on a personal level.

*The design of Salle Modulable has also been influenced by Boulez and his understanding of music theatre.*

**Haefliger:** Yes, that's absolutely right – in a manner of speaking, you could say that the broad inspiration actually came from him. It arose from the idea of music theatre that I had had for quite a long time. We have of course been a bit frustrated by the fact that there isn't anywhere really suitable for performing musical theatre in Lucerne. The Lucerne Theatre is too small and simply doesn't offer enough possibilities.

*He and his discipline and rationality disguise an incredibly emotional person.*

Our discussions with Boulez were crucial during the thinking and searching process in the course of the project, and it was he who handed me the drafts for the Salle Modulable. I said that I was thinking of a moveable space, one that offers different configurations. And he went up to the first floor of his house in Baden-Baden and gave me the concept for Salle Modulable. It was incredible.

I had no idea about that concept back then, and naturally I felt personally obliged – to Boulez as well – to bring the project to fruition. It would be wonderful for him to be able to experience it, of course.

*How would you describe Boulez as a conductor?*

**Haefliger:** He is an ideal example of a composer-conductor. In other words, he is always immediately immersed in the score, he becomes the score itself. And then he illustrates and expresses this fact through his movements, using his arms. That's not a conductor-conductor, it's a composer-conductor. He really reads the score like an X-ray machine, noticing all the details and the subtlety. And of course he has an amazing ear for music; he is highly talented in that respect. He notices everything and naturally grasps it immediately on both a rational and an emotional level.

The emotional aspect is also interesting, and not always visible. Many people have found him to be more of a rational person, and some have even described him as cold, commenting: "His face doesn't move at all", for example. And then there have been a few moments that really were extremely emotional. In 2007, when he stepped in to cover for Claudio Abbado in a performance in New York with the Lucerne Festival Orchestra, I was still backstage prior to Mahler's *Symphony No. 3*. He said to me: "I feel nervous." And I said: "Mr Boulez, you can't be nervous. You're never nervous." Then he said: "Yes, I am. This will need a lot of strength." And then he delivered an absolutely incredible performance of Mahler's *Third*. Afterwards I heard from the musicians that tears were actually running down his face in the final movement. Nobody knows this side to Boulez and he hasn't always shown it.

I was also present when he gave the address at Paul Sacher's funeral service. He simply broke off in the middle and left the stage because he was unable to continue. He and his discipline and rationality disguise an incredibly emotional person.