Pablo Heras-Casado on Pierre Boulez

<? echo $this->teaser; ?>

You are said to be Pierre Boulez' last master–class student. How did you experience his work with you?

Heras-Casado: The first feeling was a huge impression, having a living legend at your side. It's a feeling of having huge respect for someone, but at the same time the first sensation was having someone – as I said – at your side. And he never tried to behave like a big maestro, but as someone who was always talking about music and music and music. It was never about him, but always about the music we were working on.

How can we picture Boulez as a teacher?

Heras-Casado: Well, as far as formal lessons go, I studied with him for two years at the Lucerne Festival Academy. So we had the formal lessons with the orchestra, we had discussions with him and everything around these lessons and the repertoire. We also spent lots of time together privately, mostly talking about music; not only in the context of those classes but also in context of my own musical life and some projects in which I was conducting his music.

His main concern was always about leaving space to the music, leaving space to the score, not to overdo.

With regard to the master classes: every student one was completely different from the others. But Boulez would never – and he never tried to – change

anyone into something different. He never tried to convince or to persuade anyone to conduct like him, to do a given gesture or to have a special technique. He wanted us to transmit the score in a very precise, straight and clear way to the orchestra. I would say that about 80 percent of the focus of his lessons was always on the score, and how to transmit the content of the score in the most perfect and intense and pure way. This may sound quite simple and obvious, but it's actually a very big deal. And of course you have to be ready: more than just be ready to be in front of the orchestra, but to have complete control and consciousness of what is written and how it should sound. This was his main objective.

Did he talk about body language or tell you how to transfer the energy of the score to the orchestra? For example, would he tell you that this impulse comes from the shoulder or from the elbow? Was he teaching in a specific or in a more general way?

Heras-Casado: He was teaching more in a general way, he was never the kind of typical conducting teacher. I've had many of those in the past. Every school is good if you can take good lessons – and also bad lessons, so that you can decide whether something is bad or good for you.

Only in some particular moments, when he felt that someone was doing something against the clarity of the music, he would say something like "Well, you can use a bit more of your wrist." But nothing relating to a given technique. His main concern was always about leaving space to the music, leaving space to the score, not to overdo. To always do it in a reduced, condensed and focused way, because in his opinion – and I completely agree – the technique of conducting is very rudimentary. it's very basic, it's nothing too complicated.

And you can see it in himself: his repertoire of movements, even in the most difficult and complex scores, is really simple.

He never gave a great quote or big solutions, he was never patronizing.

It's nothing that is visually appealing in principle. His gesture in this picture [points at a poster of Boulez] is a perfect résumé of the way he conducted. He was always trying to keep it very clear, very visual, in contact with his own face, his own eyes, never using a baton. And when the technique is clear enough to see where the impulse is, where the one and the three are, leaving some basic signals to the left hand – that's it, that's everything. But of course everything comes from here [points at his forehead].

I recently talked to members of the Chicago Symphony, they all have it very fresh in their memories how Boulez was a regular conductor over two decades. And they all remember the intensity and the clear way in which he communicated and transmitted the score. That's what a musician wants in the first instant. And nobody was as clear in that mission as he was.

Did he talk about the strategy of rehearsal?

Heras-Casado: As I said before, there are no rules, there is no book or a list of things you have to do. But first of all, the strategy is, also in my opinion, a very simple one: everything starts with complete control and knowledge. You have to internalise the score – just think about conducting a piece like *Sacre du printemps*, which was one of the pieces that I started with him, or Stockhausen's *Gruppen,* which is very complex in terms of language and of orchestral geography and orchestration.

Think of a score as something consisting of "outer elements", like structure, rhythm and dynamics, and of the orchestration and harmonies of every single moment. You have to be able to put together everything at every level, only then do you have a strategy. You need to have a very clear notion of how this music is made, so that you can convey to the orchestra that you know this music. You know what this music needs for it to be clear in its message and in its structure. Of course the musicians are experienced enough to make that piece coherent in a natural way – but only when you transmit all those elements very clearly.

So the strategy is to have a very structured mentality, to put the elements together in a very effective and clear way, to give solutions to the musicians and to help them put together all those elements and pieces.

I've never heard him talk about contemporary music, or

modern music. He never used those labels. [] It's about music.

I think what distinguishes Boulez is that his control and analysis were complete. He could talk about the music and he had incredible ears, but after the process of making the score clear he had a second level of "letting the music happen". Did he talk about this?

Heras-Casado: He didn't talk about that aspect. He never gave a great quote or big solutions, he was never patronizing. But if you are intelligent enough and were with him you could take lessons from that – he would never say something like that directly, he would never talk about this freedom to the orchestra, but you would see it in his way of conducting and in what he demanded of his students and the orchestra. When you give the orchestra the feeling that everything is under control – so that we know what we are talking about, what we are playing – and don't try to intrude or to be invasive, then the music flows.

And he was very clearly doing that in his way of conducting. He was present, but never too present. He was doing everything that a musician needed, just to help put together his part with the orchestra. But he never tried to disturb your discourse, because everyone is a musician, everyone has notions about a given phrasing or a given tone and colour.

Maybe it's too simplistic, but in the end I think that it's the same with all kinds of repertoire. Maybe now we are talking about some complex scores in a more modern language, but I think that you can translate and transpose it to any music.

Whenever I realize that I know a score that I'm studying well enough – not only the notes, but also what's behind the notes, but still from only the text – I always think: "Well, this is it". There is no magic trick everything is already there, and what should I say more than that? Everything is there, and the musicians care about what is there. So what we do as conductors is complex and very deep and important, but at the same time it's very simple.

This seems easy for you to say – because you are always in control of the

action.

Heras-Casado: Of course. But if I'm not in control, if I don't have a complete understanding and knowledge of what I'm doing, I don't have any reason to stand in front of those artists. You really have to be honest with yourself, and honest with the composer, because in the end it's about the composer and about the music. You are just there to give some coherence and cohesion to the ensemble.

So Boulez did not give a course tailored for conductors who specialised in contemporary music. It was about bringing music to life.

Heras-Casado: Exactly. I've never heard him talk about contemporary music or modern music. He never used those labels. Maybe by coincidence, for example when we worked on Stockhausen in formal lessons or when we worked on Stravinsky. But then afterwards, in the following eight years in which I've been in close contact with him, we've been talking just about music. We've talked about it at every level, from the conducting point of view and also from the more compositional, philosophical point of view. It's about music.

He would never hesitate to give good advice, but always in the same direction; focus, let the music speak. Don't impose yourself on the music.

Did he show you examples of how he would conduct some bars when he was teaching?

Heras-Casado: Yes, especially with his own music. I've been lucky enough to have had him at my side when I conducted his music. Many times he would just show little examples of how to beat some complex bar or some subdivision. He'd always show it in a very precise and clear way, always asking to reduce and to focus the gesture as much as I could. When you try to show

too much, you just show less. Rather show it in a smaller but more precise way. Always, always.

But your gesture, being small and condensed, also needs to show exactly and precisely what is inside the music. You don't need any arabesque or fantasy. But in every little moment, if there's a given pulsation, colour or electricity in the music, then everything will be there.

I remember that I was conducting the Royal Academy Ensemble in London when he was given an honorary doctorate, and he rescheduled his trip to London. He was in Aldeburgh, and he took a car at an earlier time because he wanted to be at our rehearsal. We were doing *Dérive 1* and *Mémoriale (... explosante-fixe ... Originel).* And he called, saying that he wanted to be at the rehearsal. There was a group of students of the Royal Academy and me, and he was giving some advice to the students – even to me, although I was the conductor and thus in charge. At that time I was conducting *Rigoletto* in Cardiff, I was doing a lot of things, but he would never hesitate to give advice – because he knew he could, of course.

A couple of years ago, in Lucerne, when I had to conduct two big programmes that included lots of his music, as well as Webern, Bartók, Berg and Berio, he was in attendance. That was one of the most intense and busy times of my professional life, but also one of the happiest ones, to have him there. And of course he was always very generous, and he would never hesitate to give good advice, but always in the same direction; focus, let the music speak. Don't impose yourself on the music.

It was important for him to work with young people?

Heras-Casado: Of course. The Lucerne Festival Academy has probably been the most important project of his last years; he has invested so much into the Academy, as a composer, as a conductor, as a teacher, as a human being. All day, every single day of the Academy period, he would dedicate himself to teaching, but also to being in contact with the young musicians. And he would never refuse a conversation, a question. He loved to be at every rehearsal, but not only of the Academy; he wanted to go and meet the artists of every visiting orchestra, to be at their rehearsals and concerts – it gave him so much energy and so much happiness.

It made him extremely young and vital to talk to a given instrumentalist or musician about a certain passage or a certain technique after a rehearsal. So from my position at that moment, when I had to take care of the whole

project of the Academy, of these two big programmes, he felt very much engaged and involved in every step of those three weeks.

He is not interested in anything banal or trivial or routine. This doesn't mean that he is someone too serious or that he has no sense of humour. On the contrary, he loves joking.

He would always be honest; he was always honest about his thoughts, his vision. I remember I conducted *Le soleil des eaux* in the same concert as *Cummings ist der Dichter*. And he was openly and clearly very, very happy about the performance; he even changed some dynamics in the score and some metronome markings, for more benefit and space to the flow and to the expression of *Cummings ist der Dichter*. He was happy, but he did say: "You just need more time with this piece." It's a very complex, long piece, with lots of sections, which compress different materials, and there are lots of transitions between those materials. And the flow was lacking in some way in the whole piece. He said: "You just need some time, you just need to do it a few more times to get the whole perspective of the piece and the transitions between the many tempo changes. It needs to be something a bit more organic." So he was satisfied with the concert, but he didn't hesitate at all to say "Yes, but. You will see, you will get more experienced with that piece and you will see what it needs." And that honest approach is a great present that he was offering.

I once asked him whether anything had changed in his approach to music between his time as a conductor in London and now. And he said that what he learned was that the flexibility in the tempi is a crucial point in his conducting. What he said about your conducting is exactly in this direction; he gives to the next generation what he experienced in his own career.

Heras-Casado: I think he was searching for that in his own music, that big line, the organicism and the fluidity, the music being ideally a permanent transition. I remember this experience very well; it's very vivid in my memory, especially with those two pieces of him. Being a conductor and

having him there for me, knowing the material perfectly was my main task. But after all, those pieces are big pieces, and he said, "Forget about the dynamics. There is a main line here, you need to hear that, so make this mezzo forte sound pianissimo if you need to, change it if you need to. Or give more time to this vocal line [gestures], if he needs some more time to go up. Just do it." So in the end he was looking for that natural, spontaneous way in his own music.

I think everybody is impressed that he never gives you the feeling that you are talking to a living legend. He always approaches you as one who is interested in music. If you are serious, then he will have energy and time for you.

Heras-Casado: He is not interested in anything banal or trivial or routine. You never have a conversation about the weather. It doesn't mean that he is someone too serious or that he has no sense of humour. On the contrary, he loves joking. I've shared with him lots of dinners and lunches, and he is the most generous and vital partner in such a situation. But he is not interested in just talking or filling the time: he is always curious, he needs to have a direction in every moment that you share with him.

—

Interview: Wolfgang Schaufler
Salzburg, January 2015
(c) Universal Edition