Pierre-Laurent Aimard on Pierre Boulez

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Do you remember when you first saw or played the piano music of Pierre Boulez?

Aimard: When I lived in Lyon we had a very good class for New Music, because there was a music lover who had a passion for New Music and organized it on a private basis. There I heard the second book of the *Structures* played by the Kontarsky brothers and I heard the three *Sonatas* played by Claude Helffer; later on I heard them again when he made a spoken introduction. Well, then I bought the scores and tried to find my way. Later on I played some movements, I remember learning the third movement of the *Second Sonata* when I was about 15. I played it as an encore, it was my favourite encore for my piano recitals. And then a little later, I think when I was 17 years old, I learned – or tried to learn – the *First Sonata,* which is a piece that I've played many times in my life and which I adore.

Would you agree with the notion that the First Sonata *was a statement by Boulez to change musical life?*

Aimard: Yes, it is a statement, but incredibly natural and intuitive – it's impulsive. What is extraordinary is how he can find a language that is so radical, so pure, so "himself", so early. He expresses himself in such a rich way, and doing that he also finds his gestures, his sound world. His relation with sound and sound projection it's extremely impressive that he could make this kind of radical complete statement at such a young age.

"He had a way to serve his own music and other people's as well."

It's interesting that there is somehow a loss of orientation; there is no line that goes from A to B, and there is no harmony in the traditional sense.

Aimard: Well, he would later work on his language in order to define and master it more completely, but already at this stage he clearly invents a new sound world, a new discourse, a new space. He very clearly positioned himself as a major leader of his era.

He said that he used the piano because this was his instrument

Aimard: Definitely! And he played it in an extraordinary way, extremely original but also extremely controlled. I still remember the sounds that he produced; this was the way he heard the sounds and how he conceived them. They were both together incredibly targeted and at the same time widely and freely projected. That's very impressive.

Well, pianists are very thankful that this was his instrument, and everybody is very thankful that afterwards conducting has been his territory, of course.

To have two elements that are a big contrast is certainly not enough to yield a great masterpiece of music. I believe that in this case Boulez himself speaks about an illusion of polyphony that creates this kind of mystery, especially in the First Sonata.

Aimard: This music is made so fascinating by precisely these different layers, these mysteries you are speaking about. He is not somebody who gives you the text or the tools for playing his music, you have of course to think about what it means. For instance, when you are speaking about the hidden polyphonies in the *First Sonata,* I think that you refer to this two-part polyphony in the second movement in which the lines cross each other so much. The lines are climbing up and down with such fantasy, and the general thing is resonating in a kind of global harmony so that at the end you perceive a kind of global resonance that is hard for you to realize in real time.

Boulez knows very well where he is going and he loves

So somewhere there is a shift between what you see and what you hear, and we find these kinds of cases in many of his pieces. It is fascinating that somewhere you have different truths in this piece: what is written, what sounds, what is hidden. Of course the interpreter has to constantly think about these question marks, think about how one should deal with this acoustic, this instrument, the time, the situation, so that the audience will perceive this or that dimension. There's a permanent play with the meaning of the piece that is fascinating, certainly.

Talking about the First Sonata *and then about* Structures, *how did Boulez' approach to the piano change? Do you see a development in his writing for the piano?*

Aimard: I think that there is a permanent game between the thought, the concept and the gesture. And somewhere one is always stimulating the other. So in the *Third Sonata* the gesture somewhere is much more framed all the time by the formal project. On the contrary the gesture in the *First* S*onata* seems to guide the composition at all times. And we find this kind of dialectic all the time in *Structures 2,* where some parts of the piece are extremely under the control of the general order, and other parts, like the cadenzas of course, are extremely free. And it seems here that the wildness of the gesture grows at the end, it somewhere gets its own freedom out of the structural frame.

What's the biggest challenge in playing Boulez' piano music?

Aimard: I think that it is to have both the control of the general order and the freedom, if not the wildness in the gesture. And of course the style: the style is very special and very demanding. The style is as complex as the music. As with every complex style, if you really want to give sense and the right identity to this music, that's a very special thing to do.

Do you feel that Boulez himself knew what is possible and what is impossible?

Aimard: I think that that man knows everything [laughs]. Sincerely! He knows very well where he is going and he loves virtuosity – extreme

virtuosity. And of course he loves virtuosos as interpreters. He loves interpreters who are hard workers, who take risks. I think he likes to put the interpreters at the border of what's possible and what is not. If you like that, it's incredibly exciting. And then you are making permanent progress of course. I think this is somebody who made permanent progress in his life – I have found that extraordinary.

And onstage, some evenings, suddenly, you would face the burning masterpiece that he was presenting. That was miraculous, really.

I met him when he was 50 or 51. And for me he was already Mount Everest, the greatest musician of his time, who had earned the greatest achievements in any territory. But I've seen this man making progress all the time, more and more. I mean, he worked on himself permanently. And of course! Because he shared his passion – although very discreetly. I think people around him wanted to give their best all the time. I believe one can learn so much close to him.

Musically speaking, how did Boulez influence you?

Aimard: You know, if you have the privilege to work closely with such a giant, the influence spans many territories. It's not easy to realize how deep this influence can be. You could learn so much from him, there were so many bonds, not only in terms of professionalism and competence, but in terms of human qualities: the courage, the independence and the modesty. You know, somebody who could fight so much for others all his life long. Really – hats off!

Ultimately, that was maybe even the most impressive thing the great artist, the artistic intuition of the creator during the rehearsals, when he shared what he called the mystery of the music. Of course there was also professionalism.

And onstage, some evenings, suddenly, you would face the burning masterpiece that he was presenting. That was miraculous, really – and certainly the human qualities: so the artist and the human being, at the end.

Boulez had to fight for so many things. But I think that at the end of his career he could see that the fights had not been in vain.

Aimard: Well, he composed some of the greatest compositions in our history of art, discovered a new way to conduct and a new way to organise music, thought and wrote about music at the Collège de France, devoted his time and built institutions like IRCAM, the ensemble intercontemporain, and somewhere he was the key for the new concert hall in Paris – yes, I believe he can feel sure that his efforts were not in vain..

I think this defines Boulez; every piece is different. It's always pure Boulez, but he always discovers new territory.

Aimard: Well, he's one of those creators who have the need to search for the most meaningful every time. And there are some other cases in our history of music of course. You know we don't have thousands of pieces written by Alban Berg, for instance. But each one of them makes so much sense and really brings a dimension to our history of music. And I think that Boulez does this in a way, although in another culture and at another moment. Every piece is a new, deep question mark, and at the same time an answer to this question, that is so original and so renewed and regenerated in its own way.

How did you experience him as a teacher?

Aimard: He never considered himself a teacher, and he always said, "Well, I'm not a good pedagogue, I'm not a pedagogue at all." But almost every rehearsal was a music lesson, a way to discover a piece, little by little. At the end of the rehearsal you had the feeling that you had understood and absorbed the piece. But he was not the kind of person who would teach you how to play something, and if you played his music for him, he would not say much, but he would target the information [points with his finger], sing things or show things, or point you to somewhere, so that the message would go through.

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morality with the music. There was a passion, a man burning for music, irresistibly, that you could feel at any second of his music making.

There were two things that I found fascinating about playing in a group conducted by him. The first thing was the presence that he gave from the piece. He gave you a feeling that you heard the piece, lived the piece and understood the piece like with nobody else. And somewhere he caused you to hear better, make the music better, and feel the piece ever better, incorporating you into the big construction of the piece. Of course he did that because he had that ability, that eye of an eagle on a piece, and also because he had such profound humanity. He made it possible through the people who were sharing this experience with him.

I found that you could always be completely yourself with him. I say that because this is not always the image that he has. In my opinion, the image of him is very often wrong; it doesn't really reflect the man and the artist. But I always had the feeling that if he guided you, gave you a framework, directions and energy, you could breathe and live as you were, with your emotions and your personality.

And I have many, many similar memories that I will never forget – for instance the *Suite Op. 29* by Schönberg. It's a very difficult piece for everybody. But he really could give the shape, the phrases, the clarity of the polyphony, and the style of the piece. He could give to each player an absolute freedom for phrasing, for living the phrases, as if they would feel and speak them on their own. And that is a quality that I found really exceptional.

He is anything but a dogmatic person

Aimard: He has nothing to do with a dogmatic person, of course. He was much too critical all the time. Look at his compositions; every time when he established or tried a certain order, he was the first one to criticize this order in the composition itself, even with regard to his most experimental piece, *Structures Book I* for two pianos, which really was an experience for automatic writing. It was a Dada game, but half a century later. He tried to

understand what an automatic way to organize the music could really give as a result. Of course he reacted at once; even in the title itself he saw the limits of this exercise: the first title of the piece, *À la limite du pays fertile.* He sees at once, certainly impulsively and intuitively, the limits of the framework. So he was permanently organising, giving flexibility to the organisation and in life as well.

What was extraordinary with Boulez was his kind of morality with the music. There was a passion, a man burning for music, irresistibly, that you could feel at any second of his music making – of course, well controlled and somewhere almost behind the controller, but always there. He had a way to serve his own music and other people's as well. This is something that I think has influenced – and I hope will continue to influence – generations.

There haven't been many composers who fought so much for their colleagues; well, Liszt did very much for modern music in the 19th century. Some of us, but not that many. And this generosity and modesty, joined by this incomprehensible energy and capacity for work that he has done, explains why he has been consistently respected, admired and loved by so many colleagues.

And I think this was one of the most impressive things for young people. That somebody at this level of fame, somebody so renowned, who could do everything if there was a problem he would solve it with all of us. If there was a problem with music stands he would participate. If there was a problem of positioning the piano, he would come and help to move the instrument. If there was a problem of how to play a passage, he would come and show how to produce a sound, et cetera.

So he was always as ready as any other musicians to participate in the construction of the music. And I don't speak of course of the endless times he has conducted for so little money, or donated his fee so that something could be recorded or filmed for television. That's endless, anyway –a personality of highest morality.

And at the autumn of his career he gave it to the young students in Lucerne, which is remarkable as well.

Aimard: Yes, and speaking to him that moment, he said "Well look. Where are the priorities?" That was always his phrase. Well, the priority: the young generation. That's right. That's the right choice.

Interview: Wolfgang Schaufler
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