**Pierre Boulez**

Jonathan Goldman

French composer Pierre Boulez (b. 1925) is one of the most influential composers of the second half of the twentieth century. His personal development mirrors the history of Western concert music: an essential figure in the history of artistic modernism, he is perceived as leader of the musical avant-garde since 1945. In addition, through his international career as a conductor, he has sought to change the listening habits of the concert-going public by initiating them, through concerts and recordings, into the classics of modernism from the first half of the twentieth century (Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Webern, Bartók, Berg, etc.).

Boulez’s early works, such as the First Piano Sonata (1946) and the Sonatine for flute and piano (1946) testify to his assimilation of the serial language inherited from Webern and Schoenberg, into which he was initiated through informal lessons by the Polish-born composer René Leibowitz (1913–72), as well as an approach to rhythm which owes much to his teacher at the Paris Conservatoire starting in 1944, Olivier Messiaen (1908–92). It was with the publication in 1950 of the Second Piano Sonata (1946–8) that Boulez’s personality came to be publicly identified with the avant-garde. With its strident gestures and overlapping layers, the Sonata fulfils Boulez’s wish expressed at the time for music to be “hysteria and magic, violently modern – along the lines of Antonin Artaud” (Boulez).

In his brief but decisive phase of *integral* or *total* serialism associated with the frequently analysed first piece of *Structures* for two pianos, Book One (1951–2), Boulez explored the serialization of parameters other than pitch, and the ensuing proliferation to which it can give rise. Convinced for a time of the fruitfulness of this approach, Boulez originally gave the first piece the telling title At the limit of fertile ground, after a painting by Bauhaus artist Paul Klee. This attempt – ‘not lacking in absurdity’ as Boulez would later admit – issued from a desire to unify musical discourse, a goal to which Boulez would aspire by other means in later works.

His compositional path having been laid out along serial lines, Boulez invested much of his energy into the dissemination of his music and that of his like-minded contemporaries. In 1954, the Domaine musical produced its first concert of decidedly avant-garde leanings in Paris. The Domaine musical presented concerts of major works from the pre-war atonal repertoire (Schoenberg, Webern and Berg) as well as new compositions by a younger generation of composers.

In his major work from the 1950s–still his most famous–*Le Marteau sans maître* (1952–5), Boulez created a convincing musical equivalent to surrealist poetry (in this case, that of René Char, whose verses he had already set in two early cantatas, *Le Soleil des eaux* (1948, 1958, 1965) and *Le Visage nuptial* (1946; 1948/1951–3, 1986–9), creating a kind of musical surrealism. The exotic instrumentation of the *Marteau* was consciously chosen to evoke the traditional musics of Japan, Bali and Central Africa.

Another abiding characteristic of many of Boulez’s compositions is their unfinished character. This holds to varying degrees for *Répons* (1980–2– ), the Third Piano Sonata (1955–7; 1963), *... explosante-fixe ...* (1991–3), as well as many other works, and can be traced to Boulez’s fascination with Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*, as well as to Mallarmean poetics.

In *Poésie pour pouvoir*, an aborted attempt from 1957 to marry instrumental sound (that of an orchestra) with pre-recorded tape. This characteristic combination of instrumental and electronic sound was to be a perennial source of inspiration for Boulez. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that the unsatisfactory experience of *Poésie pour pouvoir* was the impetus for the establishment of IRCAM, a Parisian institution devoted to the development of interactions between musicians and technology. ‘Real-time electronics’, in which the sound of an instrument is modified and broadcast through speakers in the concert hall virtually instantaneously, remains one of Boulez’s chief preoccupations, one that he has put into practice in several works which combine instrumental and electronic sound, such as *Dialogue de l’ombre double*, *...explosante-fixe...*, *Anthèmes 2*, and especially *Répons*.

In works such as *Éclat* (1965), the second book of *Structures for two pianos* (1956/61), and *Domaines* for clarinet with or without ensemble (1961–8), Boulez explored the possibilities of various forms of open-endedness (what he calls ‘works of mobile trajectory’) already initiated, but in a very different way, by such American composers as John Cage and Earle Brown. Boulez’s labyrinthine Third Piano Sonata, along with Karlheinz Stockhausen’s Klavierstück XI (1956), inspired many mobile compositions in Europe in the 1960s, including Andre ́ Boucourechliev’s Archipels series (1966–71). Explaining his attraction to mobile forms, Boulez invokes the poetic ideal of Ste ́phane Mallarme ́, who had planned a Livre (Book), an immense unfinished project of poems that could be explored by the reader in a variety of directions, a project which was reconstructed with much aplomb in 1957 by Jacques Scherer. In a passage that must have struck the thirty-two-year-old composer, Scherer wrote that for Mallarme ́, ‘in order to eliminate [chance] even more radically, the Livre refuses the passivity of unilinear continuity and develops in a hyperspace in a great number of dimensions as it has been imagined by non-Euclidean geometry’.

In later decades, Boulez’s work reveals a growing interest in large-scale form. The turning point might well be *Rituel in memoriam Maderna*, a work of some twenty-five minutes’ duration.

From serialism, open forms, the interface between instrument and machine, the concern with perceptibility, Boulez’s catalogue forms a rich and varied corpus. Although Boulez dispenses with total serialism after a brief but decisive period, his concern with the formal unity of a work of art remains a central concern.

**Works**

***Douze Notations***, for piano (1945)

***Trois Psalmodies***, for piano (1945), withdrawn

***Variations***, for piano left hand (1945), withdrawn

***Première Sonate***, for piano (1946)

***Quatuor pour quatre ondes Martenot*** (1945-1946), withdrawn

***Sonatine*,** for flute and piano(1946)

***Le Visage nuptial***,first version: for soprano, contralto, two Ondes Martenot, piano and percussion (1946); Second version: for soprano, contralto, women’s choir and orchestra (1951); Final version: for soprano, mezzo-soprano, choir and orchestra (1985-1989)

***Symphonie concertante***, for piano and orchestra (1947), unpublished; manuscript lost

***Deuxième Sonate***, for piano(1947)

***Le Soleil des eaux*,** for soprano, mixed choir and orchestra, on poems by René Char (1947-1965)

***Sonate pour deux pianos***, revision of the *Quatuor pour quatre ondes Martenot* (1948)

***Livre pour quatuor*** (1948-1949)

***Polyphonie X***, for eighteen instruments(1950-1951), withdrawn

***Deux études***, for tape (1951-1952), unpublished

***Oubli signal lapidé***, for twelve voices (1952), unpublished

***Structures pour deux pianos***, First Book (1951-1952)

***L’Orestie***, incidental music for the Aeschylus trilogy, for voice and instrumental ensemble (1955), unpublished

***La Symphonie mécanique***, for tape; music for a film by Jean Mitry (1955), unpublished

***Le Marteau sans maître***, for alto voice and six instruments (1953-1955)

***Structures pour deux pianos***, Second Book (1956-1961)

***Le Crépuscule de Yang Koueï-Fei***, Music for the radio play by Louise Fauré (1957), unpublished

***Strophes***, for flute (1957), unpublished

***Troisième Sonate***, for piano (1955-1963)

***Figures-Doubles-Prismes***, for orchestra (1963-1964)

***Poésie pour pouvoir*, after Henri Michaux for tape and three orchestras** (1958)

***Pli selon pli***, portrait of Mallarmé for soprano and orchestra (1957-1962)

***Éclat*, for 15 instruments** (1964-1965)

***Éclat/Multiples*, for 27 instruments** (1966-1970)

***Domaines***, for clarinet solo and six instrumental groups (1961-1968)

***Livre pour cordes*** (1968), string orchestra version of Ia and Ib of the *Livre pour quatuor*

***Pour le Dr. Kalmus***, for ensemble (1969; 2005)

***Über das, über ein verschwindelaren*** (1969), for a capella voices

***cummings ist der Dichter...***, for sixteen solo voices and ensemble(1970; 1986)

***Explosante-fixe* (1972-1974)** for ensemble and live electronics

***Rituel in memoriam Maderna***, for orchestra in eight groups (1974-1975)

***Messagesquisse***, for solo cello and six cellos (1976)

***Dérive***, for six instruments (henceforth *Dérive 1*) (1984)

***Notations I-IV***, for orchestra (1980)

***Notations VII***, for orchestra (1998)

***Répons***, for six soloists, chamber ensemble, electronic sounds and live electronics (1981-1984)

***Dialogue de l’ombre double***, original version for clarinet and tape (1985); version for bassoon and electronics (1985-1995)

***Memoriale (...explosante-fixe... Originel)***,for flute and eight musicians (1985)

***Initiale***, for brass septet (1987)

***Dérive 2***, for eleven instruments (1988-2006)

***Anthèmes***, for violon (1991) (henceforth *Anthèmes 1*)

***...explosante-fixe...***, for MIDI flute, two flute solos, ensemble and electronics (1991-1993)

***Incises***, for piano (1994; 2001)

***Sur Incises***, for three pianos, three harps and three percussionists (1996-1998)

***Anthèmes II***, for violin and electronics (1997)

***Une page d’éphéméride***, for piano (2005)

**Further Reading**

Pierre Boulez, ‘Propositions,’ in Polyphonie, No. 2, 1948, 65-72