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Composing a Conversation with Pierre Boulez

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Phillip Huscher, writing in the program book of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, describes Boulez's process of composition as follows:

> An idea in one piece often grows into another composition altogether, works continually evolve and are expanded, amplified, and revised over time. Boulez's output resembles a sizeable extended family. Mahler is the best parallel from an earlier time: his first four Symphonies and the "Wunderhorn Songs" are all interrelated, mutually illuminating works. Each of Boulez's scores is a component in a magnum opus in progress.

Boulez himself has described this process when he said,

> "As long as my ideas have not exhausted every possibility of proliferation, they stay in my mind. . . . The different works that I write are basically no more than different facets of a single central work, with a central concept.

This following discussion is an excerpt from a book-in-progress of conversations with Pierre Boulez.

Boulez turned down twelve interviews recently in the Chicago area -- particularly the one-line, journalistic type of questionings by people not really connected with 20th-century music. He accepted the author's questions, he told the aforementioned program annotator, because he liked to work his way through the material. A conversation is the result first, an interview second.

The model for this conversation is the interplay between George Charbonnier and Levi-Strauss. The questions are lengthy, as are the answers.

DI PIETRO: What strikes me about your oeuvre is its consistency over the years. Even during your tenure as music director of the New York Philharmonic, one is struck by the steady flow of work which resulted. A rhythm of composing seems to have been set in place early on and you must have realized that this flow or rhythm was congenial to your native self. However, somewhere you must have asked yourself, what else will I do with my time? For example: Stravinsky composed about three hours a day, the rest of his time being taken up with various tasks.

At one point it was reported that "Boulez does not compose anymore." Even now, one hears from people that "Boulez has not written anything new, he just re-works old material."

Years ago, Bruno Maderna told me not to believe anything that was written in the press about you because none of it was true. In fact he said, "Boulez is always working, always composing, the misunderstanding comes from the WAY he works." And then Maderna explained, "The way of Boulez is to take two weeks (for example) and think about one or two notes of the viola part in a large score, to make sure they are exactly the notes he wanted (where and how placed in the score) done to the last detail of how it is to be played." If this is true, it is amazing how prolific you have been. Perhaps the confusion has something to do with artists like Picasso or Stockhausen, who so rapidly create such an enormous quantity of new and varied work. That approach perpetuates the myth that the artist must be a producer of constantly new and dazzling works and that anything less is indicative of creative decline.

Now, of course, Stockhausen has changed. He certainly seems to regard composition as one process, one work. It seems to me that you have always thought this way (I am thinking of Wagner). Beyond that, this approach of regarding problems of the entire oeuvre is a fundamentally different way of thinking, of conceiving music, than the one work at a time inspiration myth of artists portrayed in, say, Hollywood cinema. Even a painter like Jackson Pollock succumbed to the fear that he might be washed up as an artist if he passed even so brief a period as six months without painting. With all this in mind how is "Notations" coming along?

BOULEZ: Well, yes, this is the current problem of "Notations" and even more of "Visage Nuptial." It's true that I think about the work and the problems that the work itself proposes, for a long time. Certainly Maderna knew this. With the "Visage" it is a question of my first attempts being naive or premature because my experience of writing for the instruments of the orchestra was limited, and this contributed to my not being able to formulate my ideas completely. It resulted in my putting the work aside and taking it up later after I had gained the experience of working with the orchestra. As I said earlier, there are many ways of exciting the imagination and no single way when it comes to artistic creation. Of course I have composed works that have been more or less straightforward that have not been subject to this process of the labyrinth, but for the most part I have been involved in the larger perspective of the process of the entire oeuvre as you called it. This does not mean that works are never finished, but that it may take twenty years to find solutions to the problems the work itself has proposed is very real for me. I think the most interesting example I can give is the case of Proust, in which I find a model for the kind of thing we are talking about, I mean the work being one long process throughout life. In the "Recherche du Temps" you find that Proust gives one character a particular theme or motif, only to find that the motif has been taken up much later by another character and entirely transformed, even if it is several volumes later. I was inspired by this in my own work "Notations," where a seed from a piano piece is transformed and developed thirty years later into a garden-like expansion of the orchestral "Notations." This process of growth is very much like Proust, which I found to be very interesting as a model for my own evolution and perhaps the closest of anyone to my own way of working.

DI PIETRO: So if I understand you, you yourself are actually the ground of this garden which needed to be worked -- in this case the understanding of the orchestra which has grown incalculably since the 1950's -- before the ideas or seeds, planted earlier could actually bear fruit?

BOULEZ: Yes, certainly.

DI PIETRO: But only when the garden is ready.

BOULEZ: Of course, you have to prepare that.

DI PIETRO: The image of an "orderly anarchist" is for me very close to that of a master gardener; I know that you have thought of yourself more in terms of a gardener -- pruning, trimming, guiding the anarchy of creation...

BOULEZ: With "Notations" I wanted to put my orchestral experience into a work where I had nothing to compose, but only ideas to work on, originally very short pieces for piano, reexamined after more than thirty years and developed for orchestra, as Berio would say, of "transcription." I read around the same time that in some Egyptian tombs they found corn seeds and put them in water and then in the earth originally as an offering to the Gods, and the seed preserved after centuries produced again -- not that I am comparing myself to any ancient Egyptian. However, I think that's a little bit of what happened here: the seeds were there far away, and then I began to conceive of these seeds as something for new development. So of course if you are involved in this kind of process of composition of which we have been speaking, there will naturally be misunderstandings. For me the idea of one work at a time is a little superficial, since one's whole being is taken up with composition, not on every level at once of course, but over time.

DI PIETRO: I was struck by several remarks of yours in the last essay of "Orientations" (a speech, I believe, upon receiving an award). The first was when you said "a large element of unconsciousness is needed to persevere along a path dictated by circumstances." Then you thanked the audience for "rewarding your gifts as a Sleepwalker." You had prefaced these comments with the idea that research (for you) is like hunger: "it cannot be satisfied once and for all." So, "The Hunger of the Sleepwalker," where the sleeper may engage in a variety of more-or-less coherent activities. These are extraordinary images that verge on the mystical. How can one balance the need to protect the unconscious aspect of creative life, with the conscious -- let's say, "more rational" -- forces of our everyday life? In other words, how do you do it? Is it a matter of what Maderna called "finding the CONFIDENCE to just write the music down, since the music has always already existed"?

BOULEZ: Well, when I think of myself as a composer, there are two things in me, the side of the performer and the side of the composer. That's the same person, of course. But the approach is not exactly the same

because, even when I conduct my own works I have some distance with them, not at all like when you are composing. As a composer, yes, you have to be at the same time adventurous, so you don't know what you will discover; I mean, you are on the path of a discovery and you know it. And you go about this in various ways. For instance, imitation or absorption is one way. You hear something. Or if you see something: a painting; or if you read a book, especially when you are in an overlapping configuration or discipline which is not musical at all. Like painting, for example. Suddenly you see someone's work who has found a solution to the problem and it may be that you can say, "Oh, for my problem that can apply also." Of course, you have to transcend that, to find your own solution. It can provoke a solution. That's what I call not imitation, really, but absorption. Another way is the technical approach, which can also be quite useful, because when you are thinking of something you have a goal. Of course at first it is still quite vague but you have a goal nonetheless. You say to yourself, "I don't know how to reach that." At that point you might make some kind of exercise -- a composition exercise. That will help you to find, perhaps, the solution to the problem you are thinking about, although it is still quite detached. At this point you are concentrating on a kind of technical problem and then, suddenly the ideas of the problem will coincide with what you want to express! So, you see, there are many ways of exciting the imagination; the sound can excite the imagination, without any other notion, for instance. Or, in a very abstract way sometimes, the idea of the form can excite our imagination. Then, that's exactly the contrary. When you have sound as the source of inspiration or the source of expression, you have to organize that in a way that the sound is not the only material. This material should be organized by some structure. And then, again on the contrary, sometimes when you think, directly, of the structure, you have to organize the sound to make it visual in the score and audible to the ear.

DI PIETRO: So the Sleepwalker is not so mystical?

BOULEZ: Oh, yes, I mean, you know, there is a kind of faith in what you are doing and this faith guides you, certainly. But I say each case is a new case. Sometimes you have the idea of the work, "I want that." Sometimes you discover the work when you are doing it. You have this approach of the labyrinth, I say. Either you construct a big perspective and then you are sure of what you are doing, so that you organize that, or you are organizing labyrinths. You are also discovering, possibly, according to this labyrinth, what you encounter also, say, in the resistance of the material. Then the kind of possibilities you see suddenly -- you know, possibilities (that you discover at the stage where it is possible to discover something) also have a big impact on you and the work. So, you have always to be very alert and sensitive to what you are doing.

Another way is that sometimes when you are composing a piece, the idea of the piece is constantly there -- which is closer to what you are talking about, but which is not quite the same thing as saying the music has always already existed. Therefore for instance, you will find (not only in yourself but in this encounter with other people) that suddenly something will click and it will give you an idea. And after that maybe a couple of years later, you are surprised by it yourself, but by then you have drawn some conclusions that you will not have had again when you looked at the work after that.

For me, when I compose, the package is very important, not the inside. The inside of the composition as you approach it more and more, when you are listening, will begin to make sense in its details. But for me, the package is important. For instance: the register, if you have a long segment in a register which is very tight and closed then this place will be a remembrance, not for thematic material, or for dynamics, but because it is in the frame. And then the next one will be in another frame, very large, for example. Then you know where you are. I think to compose you have to attach a lot of importance to what I call the envelopes. The envelopes can consist of the register, for instance (that's very important), or the dynamics, or rhythm (quick rhythm or very slow rhythm), and so on. You know, these categories are, for me, the envelope's categories. For the first perception you have of the work, it becomes especially important because it drives you, it shows you the way. From this point of view you can build your own story from the inside but you know where you are going. Or, you can make a kind of jigsaw puzzle the way I did in some works; pieces like "Symphonies of Winds" by Stravinsky -- which, for me, was a very big moment in 20th-century music -- which I used as a model. So, you have structures which come very precisely in the same way which are not varied, particularly, or have very little variation but are really quite solitary, recognizable even, because of the register and the way the register is being used. However, you don't know where such structures come in the chronology of the work. If you have A-B, you can have A-C, A again, C-B, and so on. So, you are recognizing these structures but, the moment when they come is absolutely unforeseeable. And then, you have a good perception of the piece, but at the same time your perception is always fooled. And I think, for me, the purpose of a work of art

is to make sure that you are perceiving something but you are never sure of how you perceive it and what you will perceive.

DI PIETRO: Such a composition is so rich then, that when you come back to the beginning of the work, you can appreciate it so many times in new ways.

BOULEZ: Yes. Because there is always an element of surprise and at the same time, you are reassured. That's a kind of contradiction or dialectic between sure / not sure.