

## Introduction: issues and perspectives

On Wednesday 7 May 1952 the Parisian daily newspaper *Combat* advised that a concert of chamber music was to be presented early that evening at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées. The event was the first of seven chamber concerts given in Paris during May 1952 as part of *L'Œuvre du XXe siècle*, an international festival of the arts presented under the auspices of the Congrès pour la Liberté de la Culture (Congress for Cultural Freedom). Among the works to be performed on 7 May was one described vaguely in *Combat* as ‘Musique (P. Boulez). P. Boulez, O. Messiaen’.<sup>1</sup> Details published in an earlier weekend edition of the same newspaper (26–7 April) identified the work as ‘“Structures” pour deux pianos (Pierre Boulez). Pierre Boulez et Olivier Messiaen (1re audition)’.

On 8 May *Combat* reported that the fifth in a series of nuclear tests carried out by the United States military in the spring of 1952 had taken place the day before in the Nevada desert.<sup>2</sup> After noting that the infamous mushroom cloud was visible four hundred kilometres away in Los Angeles the report concluded with the assurance that, presumably in contrast to recent practice, no troops had been exposed to the blast. It was more than mere coincidence that *Structures 1a* was given its première at a festival that was as much a product of the Cold War as were the American nuclear tests themselves.

This study explores how and why *Structures 1a* and other compositions performed at *L'Œuvre du XXe siècle* were drawn into the Cold War ideological conflict. The inclusion at the festival of Igor Stravinsky’s *Symphony in C* (1940), a work that might reasonably be regarded as the antithesis of *Structures 1a*, implies that they were invested with a similar ideological currency by the festival’s organisers. Irrespective of their diametrically opposite aesthetic foundations, both were championed as the products of societies in which intellectual thought and artistic production were free from political interference. The defence of these freedoms formed a sizeable part of the *raison d’être* of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which was dedicated to perpetuating a post-war world order that, with the United States acting as guarantor, maintained Western Europe as the bulwark against Soviet expansionism for some time to come.

*Structures 1a* and *Symphony in C* make interesting bed-fellows. The former was later aptly described by the man responsible for its inclusion in the chamber music component of *L'Œuvre du XXe siècle*, the Parisian music

critic and champion of the avant-garde Fred Goldbeck, as ‘a war machine devised to kill convention’.<sup>3</sup> *Symphony in C* is, on the other hand, an archetype of convention composed by a person who was, as Alexander Ringer has suggested, ‘perfectly attuned to the subliminal needs of the power elite’.<sup>4</sup> Taken at face value this breadth of repertoire would suggest a rather catholic approach to the programming of the festival, one that would be sufficiently transparent to fulfil the Congress’s aspirations. Yet the considerable difference of opinion between what the Congress intended *L’Œuvre du XXe siècle* to demonstrate, and what the bulk of French critical opinion judged it to have achieved, suggests otherwise. It also tells us much about the cultural and ideological turmoil that gripped France during the late 1940s and early 1950s.

The situation was aggravated by a number of factors, not least of these being the aesthetic preferences held by the Secretary General of the Congress, the expatriate Russian composer and academic Nicolas Nabokov. Nabokov’s lifelong antipathy towards serialism and, conversely, his embrace of tonal music, Stravinsky’s neo-classicism in particular, are encapsulated in his reaction to Stravinsky’s subsequent adoption of twelve-tone technique:

I did not, I could not, at least not fast enough, and not as wholeheartedly as I would have wished to, learn to love Stravinsky’s new ‘serial’ compositions, whereas I did spontaneously and instinctively love all of his music up until *The Rake’s Progress* and *Agon*... I remained, and I’m afraid will always remain, deeply rooted in the ‘tonal’ tradition of Russian music and am quite unable to acquire and exercise even to an infinitesimal degree Stravinsky’s phoenix-like gifts of change and rebirth without betraying my own Russian self.<sup>5</sup>

Nabokov’s devotion to Stravinsky was celebrated at *L’Œuvre du XXe siècle* with extravagant, high-profile orchestral performances at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées of no fewer than ten of Stravinsky’s tonal works. It was, as Nabokov recalled, ‘a glamorous affair’.<sup>6</sup>

Nabokov’s use of the words ‘change’ and ‘rebirth’ are in this regard telling. To a significant cross-section of French society in the immediate post-war period neo-tonal music was seen as a cultural manifestation of reactionary forces which sought to reinstate values that had brought Europe to the verge of apocalypse, and threatened to do so again. Worse still, to appropriate Stravinsky and other composers’ achievements in the name of a pro-Western, specifically American ideological agenda, and to celebrate the relationship on French soil, was to them an ill-disguised form of cultural imperialism.

Nabokov certainly was not alone in his hostility towards serialism. Boulez’s account of the situation that confronted young composers at the Paris Conservatoire in the immediate post-war years identified an enemy which,

from the French perspective, lay within: ‘very early on, differences began to appear among us, stemming from the fact that some refused, in the name of humanism and the need to communicate with others, to advance any further into territory where they risked not being understood – an ideology that filled me with horror, and that appeared to me above all to serve as a screen for conformity’.<sup>7</sup>

Boulez was alluding undoubtedly to his classmate Serge Nigg’s embrace of socialist realism, a *faux*-humanist cultural policy that espoused artistic conservatism and conformity in order to perpetuate Stalinism within the Soviet Union, and to promote it elsewhere. Although it offered Boulez cold comfort, *L’Œuvre du XXe siècle* was intended to counter socialist realism in general, and the perceived popularity of Stalinism in France specifically.

Yet the ideological opponents were unified initially in their embrace of a conservative musical aesthetic; the Soviets and their proxies in order to eliminate the possibility of subversion arising from pluralism; the Congress for Cultural Freedom in an attempt to ensure that its anti-Stalinist agenda enjoyed the broadest possible appeal. Avant-garde music based upon deliberate non-conformism, and conceived in the absence of what Boulez described as the need to communicate, was viewed with apprehension by both blocs because of its potential to detract from their efforts to win the hearts and minds of Europe. Whether a work composed in the absence of a will to communicate is necessarily devoid of meaning is a question revisited during the course of the volume. The fundamental issue is whether the absence should be interpreted as an act of defiance or, as Theodor Adorno believed, a condition imposed from without upon traumatised artists who ‘are no longer even permitted to articulate their condition’.<sup>8</sup>

Using *L’Œuvre du XXe siècle* as a backdrop this study describes how neotonal music was appropriated by the Congress in an attempt to promote what was in the political parlance of the day an ‘Either-Or’ (either the United States or the Soviet Union) stance that infused the body politic of those countries regarded by the United States as its allies. In the light of the trepidation shown towards serial music by the Cold War antagonists it will become apparent that *Structures 1a* can in this context be viewed as the manifestation of a ‘Neither-Nor’ sentiment, articulated politically in France by the so-called ‘Third Force’, which maintained that France should ignore the overtures of both East and West and pursue independent political and cultural agendas. At best, the strategy adopted at *L’Œuvre du XXe siècle* called into question the effectiveness of drawing such aesthetically and philosophically contrasting works together for a common ideological purpose. At worst, it succeeded in highlighting the futility of attempting to invest music with an ideological import.

The propaganda potential of avant-garde music was slow to be recognised in the Western ideological theatre, but once realised it was vigorously exploited. What began as outright suspicion on the part of Nabokov became, at *L'Œuvre du XXe siècle*, a qualified acceptance that arguably created more problems than it solved. A more wholehearted embrace, albeit one not without a slightly cynical motivation, was shortly to follow. Stravinsky's adoption of twelve-tone technique precipitated a revision of the way in which music was used in the Congress's thrust. Subsequent to *L'Œuvre du XXe siècle* the organisation identified strongly with the avant-garde on the basis of the more defensible rationale that, rather than attempting to identify with the supposed virtues of the actual creative outcome – a value judgement that is always a matter of opinion – greater propaganda value could be garnered by championing the creative freedom and sense of renewal that underpinned serial technique.

What followed at Rome in 1954 at the Congress's next musical outing, *La Musica nel XX Secolo*, was the equivalent in music to what Serge Guilbaut suggests had taken place some six years earlier in visual art, when many of the New York liberal, anti-communist intelligentsia who later held sway in the Congress conspired to 'steal' abstract art. Then, as at Rome, there came about a 'reconciliation of avant-garde ideology with the ideology of postwar liberalism'. It will remain to be seen whether what Guilbaut describes as the 'reconciliation of the ideology of individuality, risk, and the new frontier' that drew liberals to Abstract Expressionist art also effected a revision of their attitude to new music.<sup>9</sup> The shift in emphasis from the style of the music to the idea behind it is implicit nevertheless in Nabokov's idiosyncratic translations of the two festival titles. What was in May 1952 'Masterpieces of the Twentieth Century' became, in April 1954, a celebration of 'Music in Our Time'.

Rather than dealing with all the musical types that fell under the rubric 'avant-garde' during the early post-war period, the present enquiry for the most part restricts its terms of reference to serial music and its antecedent, twelve-tone music. The latter was described by French commentators as dodecaphony, or in combinations such as *dodécaphonique-sériel*, or *atonal dodécaphonique*. Owing to their eccentricity these terms are left untranslated. The distinction between twelve-tone and serial technique proceeds on the understanding that both are based upon a pre-ordained order of succession for a given musical parameter. When, as was the case initially, the order of succession is restricted to pitch alone, it is described as twelve-tone technique. As twelve-tone technique became more widespread it came to be termed serial, an appellation that was subsequently used to denote the application of an order of succession to musical parameters in addition to pitch.

Although Boulez later described as absurd the attempt to impose the number twelve on parameters other than pitch, this study is concerned with the period when the expansion of serial technique constituted a radical and uncompromising application of what was already regarded by its detractors as an anti-expressive and fundamentally flawed compositional method.<sup>10</sup> *Structures 1a* represents not only the culmination of expanded serial technique, but an act of defiance in the face of pressure to conform, both artistically and, as we shall see, ideologically.

The narrowing of the musical parameters in no way diminishes the importance of *musique concrète*, of Olivier Messiaen (his *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités* [1949], in particular) or of an individual who loomed as the significant other among the composers of Boulez's generation, Karlheinz Stockhausen (b. 1928). Rather, it recognises that there is ample documentary evidence to show that in France, at least, the expansion of serial technique was a matter of concern to cultural planners on both sides of the ideological divide.

The enquiry treats as primary resources newspaper entries, journal articles, essays and monographs written during and immediately either side of the period under review. Among the French-language sources, the Stalinist cultural weekly *Les lettres françaises* was, despite its obvious pro-Soviet bias, an important conduit for the ongoing debate in France regarding the role of culture in general, and music in particular, in the ideological theatre. *L'Humanité*, the official organ of the Parti communiste français (PCF), was never in any doubt about the significance of *L'Œuvre du XXe siècle*. In a diatribe that in one sweep embraces the main issues under review, the festival was deemed 'a pro-American, anti-Soviet fascist propaganda enterprise aimed directly at French culture'.<sup>11</sup> The communist evening paper *Ce soir* preferred to ignore the festival, and instead exchanged barbs with its opposite number, the right-wing *L'Aurore*, over a number of political intrigues that capture well the ideological rancour permeating Paris in May 1952. *L'Aurore*, like its sister paper *Le Figaro*, offered extensive coverage of *L'Œuvre du XXe siècle*'s higher-profile performances, Stravinsky's in particular. Aside from some complaints about the lack of French representation, both papers preferred to overlook the broader implications of the festival.

The sentiments expressed in *Combat*, a non-aligned Leftist daily newspaper founded by Albert Camus, were for the most part a reflection of the neutral Neither-Nor position which, although generally anti-Soviet, was also highly suspicious of American intentions. *Le Monde* appears to have been less concerned with the broader issue of art and ideology than with *l'art pour l'art*, a stance that reflected the interests of its target readership. Among the English-language newspapers, the *New York Times* is significant because its political commentaries gave a great deal of exposure to the anti-Soviet

position, but with regard to *L'Œuvre du XXe siècle* it was, thanks largely to Olin Downes, more objective.

By far the most valuable English language journal resource is the *Partisan Review*, an American Leftist periodical that published contributions by leading intellectuals and cultural theorists world-wide. Not surprisingly, and save for a number of exceptions that further confirm a French preference for the Neither-Nor position, the Congress for Cultural Freedom's French-language journal, *Preuves*, articulated the Congress's position. The music journals *La revue musicale*, *Contrepoints* and *Polyphonie* draw the opinions of composers into the ideological fray, something that their English-language counterparts, aside from Colin Mason in *Tempo*, seemed reluctant to do.

The restoration-versus-innovation cultural debate in France took place against a background of social tension and political anxiety. The recent verdict by Pascale Goetschel and Emmanuelle Loyer that serial music was a 'child of the war' is in this respect generally correct.<sup>12</sup> But it is in a report tabled in 1953 by Rollo Myers (for whom serial technique constituted a 'dehumanisation' of music) that we begin to appreciate the tense environment in which young serial composers extended the boundaries of their art.<sup>13</sup> In response to the question as to why many young French composers had adopted the serial idiom, Myers observed that 'In a country like France especially, the changing structure of society, accelerated and aggravated by the after-effects of war, has undoubtedly engendered a feeling of unrest and instability to which, of course, artists and musicians are especially sensitive.'<sup>14</sup>

One of the principal causes of the instability described by Myers, which highlights the importance of focussing upon developments in Paris, was not so much that the city described by Harold Rosenberg as the 'laboratory of the twentieth century' had been effectively closed down by the Nazis, but that it found itself at the epicentre of the potentially more calamitous Cold War schism so soon after its liberation.<sup>15</sup> It is in this respect significant that, thanks in no small measure to the combined agency of Nabokov, Stravinsky and Nadia Boulanger, neo-classicism enjoyed considerable prestige and popularity in Paris at the very time when French society was under considerable moral, social and economic pressure. This, coupled with the fact that France was the focus of unwelcome attention from the competing power blocs, each of which was conservative in its cultural outlook, meant that the restoration versus innovation debate acquired an urgency greater than may have otherwise been the case in a more stable period in history.

While ever mindful of the stridency of Boulez's position, which, it should be added, was generally no more defiant than many of his countrymen at the time, I have chosen him here to represent those avant-gardists who, in rejecting the outmoded values that had brought French society to its

impasse, embraced innovation. They did so with the reluctant support of an individual who acted as the conscience of the French intelligentsia in the early post-war period, Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre's contribution to the debate concerning art and its role in supporting ideology, and in particular his exchange with René Leibowitz as to the possible role of avant-garde music in helping to bring about change, strikes at the very heart of the conundrum. The same can be said of Adorno, who is an ideal devil's advocate in that he was equally dismissive of neo-classicism and serialism. In light of Adorno's generally pessimistic critique of high modernism, which colours our perceptions to this day, it is not without justification that serial music was for a time deemed ill-suited to the promotion of ideological agendas of either complexion.

Adorno's criticisms become all the more relevant when it is shown how his lament, that the increased popularity of serial technique was indicative of the general collapse of freedom in post-war society, was given an anti-Soviet import by individuals associated with the Congress, Myers in particular. Myers's background in the British diplomatic corps began with his service in the League of Nations' Secretariat following the First World War, and subsequently with the British Consulate-General in Paris. These postings, and his role as the British Council's music representative in Paris during the sensitive period following the liberation, suggest that political and ideological considerations may have coloured his critiques and, more importantly, his translations.

Five broad topics are addressed in the following pages: the differences and similarities between socialist realism and Western cultural policy as articulated by the Congress for Cultural Freedom; the historical antecedents of the French socialist realist Progressiste movement and the impact of its Zhdanovian dictates upon Serge Nigg's artistic development; the location of *L'Œuvre du XXe siècle* and the music presented at it within the political and cultural ferment of early post-war France; the role of music within Sartre's idea of committed art, and the attempt by René Leibowitz to situate Schoenberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw* within it; and the potential of works such as *Structures 1a* to confront the Cold War cultural ideological status quo. An epilogue considers the implications of the Congress's Rome festival.

The study confirms that a well-balanced appraisal of a given mode of cultural expression cannot ignore the impact of socio-political ideologies that prevail at the time of its emergence.

## 1 Back to the future: Nabokov's selection criteria for *L'Œuvre du XXe siècle*

*L'Œuvre du XXe siècle* formed part of an attempt by the Congress for Cultural Freedom to seize the cultural and, with that, the political initiative from the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup> During the late 1940s and early 1950s the Soviet Union achieved considerable success in repairing the image of Stalinism abroad, and in discrediting those opposed to it. Of particular concern to the Congress, which included in its ranks leading intellectuals and artists drawn from the non-communist Left in Europe and America, as well as a number of disillusioned and highly motivated former Marxists, was the Soviet Union's apparent success in fostering a politically neutral stance amongst intellectuals, artists and scientists in Western Europe, and France in particular.

Addressing itself to Soviet attacks against so-called 'decadent' Western art, the Congress sought in this instance to counter the Soviet propaganda thrust by staging a festival featuring twentieth-century works of art deemed by Nicolas Nabokov to be 'the products of free minds in a free world'.<sup>2</sup> Although the festival featured exhibitions of modern painting and sculpture, and a series of celebrity-studded panel discussions of art and literature, Nabokov's professional background and his intimate understanding of the Soviet Union's proscriptions against its own composers ensured that music was the primary focus. The inclusion of works by Soviet composers who were at best openly criticised by their own government, and at worst silenced, was intended to reinforce the Congress's view that, in contrast to the 'gradual eclipse of culture behind the iron curtain', it was a measure of the robustness of Western society that in it all forms of expression were 'open to acceptance or rejection, praise or criticism, freely and openly'.<sup>3</sup>

The choice of Paris as the site for the festival pointed to a more assertive political agenda. Owing to the strength of the orthodox Stalinist Parti communiste français (PCF) France was seen by Western and Soviet strategists as the soft underbelly of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) alliance. The dual intention was to shore up French support for the alliance and, for international consumption, to stage a demonstration of NATO solidarity with France, literally at a time when an American-sponsored draft treaty calling for the formation of a single Western European defence force was being initialled at the Quai d'Orsay. This in turn generated a vigorous debate because in the eyes of many *L'Œuvre du XXe siècle* was, as the communist newspaper *L'Humanité* declared, 'a parody of culture to facilitate

the ideological occupation of France by the United States'.<sup>4</sup> The inclusion of music by French composers, which was criticised for being proportionally either too little or too selective, exacerbated concerns that French culture was being used as a pawn in an ideological struggle whose nature and course were beyond France's control. The result was that those in France who were opposed either to NATO in general or the United States in particular, or who believed it vital that France be neutral, were able to articulate their political concerns by targeting various icons appropriated by the Congress in the name of 'freedom'.

The cultural ramifications of the Congress's ideological stance become more apparent when the content of the festival's music programme is taken into account. As is also frequently the case with arts festivals today, the music programme of *L'Œuvre du XXe siècle* is best understood as a mixture of high-profile performances intended to entice the public to the box-office, and fringe events, which aroused the public's curiosity and, in the case of *Structures 1a*, its indignation.<sup>5</sup> The former, which comprised mainly symphonic and operatic works, were staged principally at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. These were, as Janet Flanner (Genêt) pointed out, 'presented and mostly paid for by well-intentioned wealthy Americans'.<sup>6</sup> The fringe events included a chamber music series at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées – described tellingly as the 'true festival' by the editor of *La revue musicale*, Albert Richard – and those events considered 'en marge', including three concerts of *musique concrète* given at the Salle du Conservatoire.<sup>7</sup>

Establishing who or what was to be heard on a given day was apparently not for the impecunious. According to Colin Mason the printed programme lacked specific details regarding programmes and performers:

These [details] were given on separate leaves inserted each night. These leaves however were not for sale separately, and any enthusiast who went to several concerts, and had bought a 'programme générale' at the first, had no way of finding out just what he was to hear, and who was doing it, except by producing another 350 francs. Charitably interpreted, this was bad organization. Less charitably one might call it disingenuous.<sup>8</sup>

The even less charitable regarded the ongoing expense as further confirmation that the festival was elitist. Rather than seeking a genuine engagement with those susceptible to Moscow's overtures it was thought to be more concerned with preaching to a converted that was in a position, materially and politically, to steer French domestic politics ever closer to the NATO camp.

Chosen by Nabokov himself, the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées programme generated the most publicity for the Congress. Paradoxically, in light of its relatively conservative outlook, the programme also attracted a good deal

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Excerpt

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of controversy. Given the ambitiousness of the title *L'Œuvre du XXe siècle*, or rather what the French composer and critic Henri Barraud termed its inaccurate translation 'for American promotional purposes' as 'Masterpieces of the Twentieth Century', Nabokov's programme could not have satisfied everyone.<sup>9</sup> Rollo Myers described the programming dilemma as follows:

The Festival naturally came in for a good deal of criticism in various quarters – criticism not always free from a partisan taint, either political or artistic – and the organisers were often blamed for what they had omitted rather than praised for what they had managed to include. That there should have been omissions in so vast a field as that of the entire musical production of a half a century is not surprising; nor is it surprising that opinions differed as to what should or should not have been selected among the masterpieces of the 20th century.<sup>10</sup>

The most frequently voiced criticism of the programme was that it was, as the music critic for the *New York Times*, Olin Downes, suggested, 'a lopsided affair . . . looking mainly at the past and little at the present and future'.<sup>11</sup> Like many observers Downes was concerned that, save for notable exceptions, there was a bias in favour of music that was either neo-tonal or drawn from the early twentieth-century canon or, inexplicably in view of the festival's title, even earlier in the case of Hector Berlioz's overture *Le carnaval romain* (1844), Richard Strauss's *Don Juan* (1889), and Claude Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1892). Given the stated aims, the inference drawn from this was that the defence of the so-called 'free' world against 'the rise and spread of totalitarian doctrine' was best served through an exhibition of cultural icons created at a time removed from the historical moment.<sup>12</sup> The stance added fuel to the debate already raging in Parisian intellectual and artistic circles concerning the avant-garde and its relevance to post-war society.

The retrospective nature of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées programme was underscored by the place of honour accorded Igor Stravinsky who, amid great fanfare, returned to Paris for the first time since the summer of 1938. Stravinsky's music had, much to the chagrin of Boulez and his classmates at the Paris Conservatoire, also been the focus of the 1945 commemorations of the liberation of Paris.<sup>13</sup> *Symphony in C* had also featured during the earlier celebrations, although the critic Roland Manuel was irritated by what he called its 'serious superficiality' and 'limpid refinement'.<sup>14</sup> An editorial appearing on the same page as Manuel's critique admonished the celebrations as an indulgence which, despite being 'an antidote for the Nazi poison', detracted from other, more profound attempts to restore the dignity of a fractured nation. Events leading up to *L'Œuvre du XXe siècle* suggest that