

1 Preparing the ground

Music and philosophy

Music and philosophy have been linked throughout the history of Western thought from the ancient Greeks onwards, and the history of musical aesthetics offers a rich panoply of creative encounters between sounding art and philosophical reflection. From the ambivalence of Plato's *Republic*, every period of music history has produced, together with the music of its time, a number of distinctive aesthetic concerns which have been pivotal for the creation and reception of its artworks. So it is that we can define a period in music history, at least in part, by the aesthetic issues surrounding the art of musical composition. From the time of the ancient Greeks to the Renaissance and beyond philosophers and musicians argued the relative merits of a rhetorical, language-based model for music as opposed to a mathematical paradigm. At different moments, questions of representation, musical expression, organicism, formalism, to cite only a few key terms, have assumed critical importance as composers have attempted to create a music for their time and as philosophers, musicians and theorists of less certain designation have striven to discuss new music conceptually and to define the issues which surround it.

The very word 'aesthetics', however, is rather slippery and difficult to pin down since aesthetic writings derive from more than one source. While aesthetics proper is a branch of philosophy, and many philosophers have produced aesthetic theories, we also speak of practising artists, writers and musicians as working on aesthetics when they attempt to articulate and conceptualise the aspirations and values within their creative practice. While philosophical aesthetics often attempts to produce a theory of art, albeit there are many radically different theories, practising artists and composers tend more to discuss the particular issues surrounding the production and reception of their works. While we can recognise significant aesthetic elements in the writings of ancient philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, modern philosophers such as Kant, Schelling, Hegel and Schopenhauer have produced much more systematic reflections, which attribute to music greater or lesser importance in relation to the other arts, and within their overall visions of the world. Furthermore, there are clear divisions within philosophical aesthetics itself, and today we can choose from a wide range of

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positions, from Adorno's dialectical aesthetic theory, Gadamer's hermeneutic aesthetics, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological aesthetics or even Scruton's approach from within the analytical tradition of philosophy, to name only a few.

Arising out of this spectrum of positions is the obvious problem that while philosophical aesthetics may be strong on philosophy, its practitioners are often less credible when tackling questions pertaining to specifics within the individual arts. So it is that not many writers have been equally competent in the fields of both music and philosophy, more commonly being either composers and/or music theorists or philosophers. The aesthetic theories of Kant, Schelling and Hegel, for example, all fall short in relation to music and it has more often been the case that their ideas have been applied later, with varying degrees of success, by lesser thinkers with greater musical understanding. The musical formalism which arose in the second half of the nineteenth century, and of which Eduard Hanslick is the best remembered exponent, is a case in point, having its roots in Kant's Third Critique, which found aesthetic form to be the most distinctive element within an artwork. Indeed, philosophers with acute musical sensibility and understanding have been rare, and Schopenhauer and Nietzsche in the nineteenth century as well as Adorno in the twentieth stand out as keen exceptions, with the second- and third-named also pursuing musical composition. The constellation linking Wagner with Schopenhauer and Nietzsche is particularly interesting in this regard and it provides a rare example in the history of musical aesthetics in which philosophers and composers may be said to have reached a high level of mutual understanding. In the normal run of things success is generally mixed when composers attempt to discuss their work from aesthetic or philosophical points of view, though this phenomenon has become more common among late twentieth-century or early twenty-first-century composers. While this may result, at least in part, from changes in educational practices, it may also reflect developing perspectives with regard to the nature of music.

Within musical modernism, composition is often accepted as a form of thinking which is intimately related to wider currents of thought, including philosophy. In a tradition of thought which may be traced to Schelling's philosophy of identity, and in particular to the work he produced between 1800 and 1804, a number of twentieth-century philosophers have articulated a range of views which, in common, recognise in art/music and philosophy two dependent and complementary elements. For Adorno, the analysis of new music should be fertile in producing philosophical insight

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just as philosophical reflection is intrinsically linked to the very condition of contemporary music.¹ In the work of Boulez and others, he acknowledges a necessary relationship linking reflective aesthetics with artistic technique, and philosophy and art are recognised as existing in a relation of mutuality whereby one serves to articulate aspects of thought which forever remain beyond what the other can capture. In this way philosophy ponders the truth content of art while art itself articulates those moments which evade philosophical expression. Adorno goes so far as to suggest that the composer needs a certain philosophical competence to enable her/him to work through the inevitable problems which arise in composition. However, he is also conscious of the danger whereby a composer or theorist may artificially inject into an artwork a dose of philosophy which can only remain extraneous to its working.² In a similar way, Umberto Eco considers certain works of modern art, including the music of the post-war avant-garde, to be 'epistemological metaphors', in that their structures present us with possible ways of knowing. For Lyotard, the preoccupation with space and time within avant-garde music, taken together with the frequent musical examples used to illustrate modern philosophies of time, clearly demonstrates the relationship of mutual support in which both activities are engaged.³ Finally, the rhizomatic image of thought conceptualised by Deleuze and Guattari, in opposition to the more traditional, arborescent image of Western thought, is similarly fleshed out in musical terms, and they contrast the arborescent, tonal system of Western music with a kind of 'generalised chromaticism' in which all of the sound components, namely duration, intensity, timbre and attack, are placed in 'continuous variation' and through which music becomes 'a superlinear system, a rhizome instead of a tree'.⁴ While John Cage is credited with having first produced such music, Boulez's metaphor of composition as the weed-like proliferation of musical material provides justification for Deleuze and Guattari to describe it also as rhizomatic.⁵

While it is clear that these writers differ from one another in significant ways, they nevertheless provide a philosophical basis for the present study in their common conviction that artworks and aesthetic reflection exist in a relationship which can be mutually illuminating. The fact that they have all also attempted, to greater or lesser degrees, to discuss Boulez's work philosophically or to use his concepts in new contexts lends further support to the view that his music and writings merit such consideration.

¹ Adorno 2002, 148. ² Adorno 1997, 341. ³ Lyotard, in Samuel 1986, 16–17.

⁴ Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 95. ⁵ Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 519.

Boulez and philosophy

Having provided a brief introduction to the relationship linking music and philosophy both historically and in the thought of some more recent figures, it must now be stated unequivocally that Pierre Boulez is not a philosopher. While he acknowledges having read works by Descartes, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida and others, it would be foolish to attempt to argue that he is in any sense a philosopher. From his early writings in the late 1940s, he has drawn upon a wide range of literary and artistic figures whose work has been absorbed into his own aesthetic, and whose ideas are much more likely to be cited by him than any philosopher. The poets René Char and Stéphane Mallarmé, as well as the artist Paul Klee, have been particularly important for him, but they take their place among a large number of creative figures whose influence he acknowledges. While Boulez’s published writings and interviews are fairly voluminous, explicit references to philosophers are rare. While there are occasional, and not always significant, references to Descartes, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Husserl, Sartre and Deleuze, such moments are often aphoristic and do not usually result in any kind of sustained exploration which could be described as genuinely philosophical.

Boulez has addressed the relationship between music and philosophy on several occasions in his writings, though not always in the most favourable of terms. He warns against the arbitrary connections which historians and aestheticians can all so easily make,⁶ while at the same time acknowledging ‘some equivalence’ between contemporary music and certain aspects of modern mathematics and philosophy.⁷ He is wary of the high turnover of philosophical ideas and of any suggestion that music is dependent on philosophy.⁸ Recognising that philosophy may be used surrogately to divert attention from a lack of musical meaning, he states that music ‘cannot undertake the task of expounding rational ideas’, and that it will be untrue to its own nature if it attempts to deal in concepts which are completely foreign to it. Having said this, he concedes that music can qualify our ideas.⁹ He theorises that each historical period is marked by ‘general lines of force’ which extend beyond the musical sphere and which characterise important intellectual movements.¹⁰ While he does not refer specifically to philosophy in this regard, it undoubtedly forms a significant part of the cultural constellation which he has in mind. At the same time, it is important to note that this is not a question of merely applying philosophical concepts to musical composition or of musical compositions acting simply

⁶ Boulez 1971a, 14. ⁷ Boulez 1991, 143. ⁸ Boulez 1986, 74.
⁹ Boulez 1986, 81. ¹⁰ Boulez 1986, 121.

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as conduits for philosophical concepts. Boulez has retained this ambivalence towards philosophy, in relation to music, right up to his Collège de France lectures (1976–95) and beyond. When questioned closely on philosophical matters he generally declares his lack of philosophical expertise, and he has spoken, for example, of his inability to keep up with Adorno when the philosopher embarked on more abstract discussion of aesthetic issues.

The lecture ‘Nécessité d’une orientation esthétique’ (1963) marks a moment when Boulez addressed the question of aesthetics more directly than at any other time. He begins with a frank acknowledgement of the grave suspicion harboured by the musicians of the serial generation towards the words ‘aesthetic’ and ‘poetic’ which led them to reject ‘all aesthetic speculation as dangerous and pointless’, while favouring the development solely of musical technique. While he suggests that this may be due to a ‘lack of “culture”’, to a legitimate reaction against ‘precarious’ philosophy and to a certain coyness on the part of composers in the face of more philosophically literate opinion, it may be that he believes there to be some validity in all of these charges.¹¹ It is clear from the round table discussions, in which he participated with Pousseur and Berio at Darmstadt in 1963, that aesthetic questions had finally arrived on the agenda. Recognising that his previous Darmstadt courses had focused on technical matters, he was now keen to redress the imbalance, and he expresses the desire that serial music be connected to wider aesthetic reflection and that it no longer be thought that the aesthetic work has been accomplished once the technical compositional problems have been solved.¹² While he perceives the technical and the aesthetic as enjoying a degree of independence from one another, they cannot be completely separated, and technical problems may in fact arise out of aesthetic considerations.¹³

While it has become almost commonplace to think of Boulez’s work in relation to literature and visual art,¹⁴ the present enquiry is based on the conviction that, despite his ambivalence, philosophical considerations are also significant in facilitating understanding of his music and ideas. To say so is not to make the present study dependent upon the extent to which he does or does not perceive philosophy to be integral to his compositional work, and it does not rely on the presence or absence of explicit philosophical citations.¹⁵

¹¹ Boulez 1986, 63. ¹² Nattiez 2005b, 26–7. ¹³ Nattiez 2005b, 29–30.

¹⁴ Stacey contextualises Boulez among ‘the painters, poets and musicians who were influential in the formation of his language and style’ (1987, p. viii). Samuel (1986) explores Boulez’s links with Mallarmé, Proust, Joyce, Kafka, Klee, Eastern music and a number of Western composers.

¹⁵ While François Nicolas minimises the place of philosophical thought in Boulez’s aesthetic (www.entretiens.asso.fr/Nicolas/IM/), the present study is in agreement with André Souris, for whom the relationship linking music and philosophy is independent of any ‘voluntary application of theories’ by composers (Souris 2000, 23).

This study is predicated rather upon two factors, which when taken together make the rather compelling case that Boulez's music and writings are implicated at a number of levels with philosophical currents in a way that merits exploration. These are, in short, the existence of a series of philosophically charged terms and concepts which he uses in discussion of his music. These terms, as will become apparent, are not culled from any one organic philosophical system, but rather reflect a range of encounters which he has had with a spectrum of philosophical viewpoints and personalities. Indeed, he has made significant contact with, or at least his music has facilitated a notable response from, some of the most influential figures and philosophical currents from the second half of the twentieth century. While Boulez may not be steeped in particular aspects of philosophy and his philosophical knowledge may be basic or heavily mediated by others, significant currents and concepts are nevertheless clearly present within his writing and shape his thinking.

Creative encounters

When Boulez's career to date is considered from the point of view of philosophical ideas, five discrete moments suggest themselves as worthy of investigation. In Chapter 2 we will explore the development of the new music within the context of those movements which marked Parisian intellectual life during his formative years, and the influence in particular of Pierre Souvchinsky, Boris de Schloezer, André Schaeffner and André Souris, four figures from an older generation, none of whom were professional philosophers, who were important in shaping his ideas. A number of related concerns can be identified which connect Boulez to some kind of dialectical philosophy. He uses the term 'dialectic' regularly in his writings, there are clear signs of negational thinking, particularly in his earlier works, and he employs a large collection of binary oppositions with which he conceptualises his practice throughout his career. He writes frequently of music having an evolutionary development and of a sense of historical necessity. This cluster of dialectical concerns will be considered in Chapter 3, as we explore their place within his aesthetic and how they may have been integrated within it from a number of musical and non-musical sources. Chapter 4 will then look to the specifics of Boulez's relationship with Adorno, whom he met at Darmstadt. Whatever practical problems Adorno experienced with the music of the post-war generation, he was, at least in theory, better qualified than anyone to think about new music in philosophical terms and to tease out its historical significance from a dialectical viewpoint. The development of serial thinking will be traced stage by stage

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as it unfolded in the contemporaneous writings of the serial composer and the dialectical philosopher, highlighting possible areas of influence, convergence and disagreement.

After this lengthy exploration of dialectical thinking we will shift in Chapter 5 to a brief consideration of a very different philosophical orientation, namely the tendency towards axiomatic, deductive thinking and the fascination with mathematics which is evident within Boulez's thought at the time of his 1960 Darmstadt lectures. Within these lectures he cites explicitly from the deductive axiomatics of Louis Rougier, from Léon Brillouin and indirectly from the mathematician Moritz Pasch. Deductive terminology has remained a standard part of Boulez's vocabulary since this time, but he has also, at times, been dismissed as an overly intellectual, blackboard composer and the accusation is made that his approach is somehow indecently mathematical, a charge which will be examined within this chapter.

Chapter 6 will consider Boulez and serialism in relation to the structuralism which came to dominate French thought in the late 1950s and 1960s. After identifying a series of concerns, for example with codes and structures, which, at least superficially, would seem to indicate some kind of commonality of interest between serialism and structuralism, the critiques of serialism produced by Ruwet and Lévi-Strauss, as well as the responses published by Eco and Pousseur, will be reviewed and evaluated. While Boulez does not respond on his own behalf in this debate, he is clearly a central figure as it is Boulezian serialism which mostly forms the basis for the discussion, and consequently, it is the epistemological and metaphysical nature of Boulezian serialism which is in question.

Structuralism was superseded in French thought after 1968 by a number of post-structuralisms which rejected codes along with traditional dialectics and posited instead the supremacy of difference over identity. Chapter 7 will briefly consider Boulez's relationship with the work of Foucault and Lyotard before providing a fuller reflection on certain aspects of Deleuze's philosophy which connect with Boulez in a number of ways. Boulez got to know Deleuze after his return to France in 1976 and it will be argued that some of the philosopher's concepts can be fruitful in understanding his ideas and music. It will also be shown how Deleuze, together with Guattari, adopted a number of Boulez's concepts which they integrated into their philosophy for their own purposes.

The final three chapters explore the working out of two key philosophical ideas in practice within Boulez's compositions, and mark a shift in emphasis from primarily philosophical/aesthetic discussion to the musical analysis of a number of scores. Chapters 8 and 9 consider Boulez's musical development from the point of view of the dialectic of identity and difference or more

specifically of Deleuzian difference, a reading which Boulez implicitly offers in his Collège de France lectures, where his music is theorised at a number of levels in terms of the concept of the virtual. Chapter 10 will then look to the dialectic of the continuous and the discontinuous as it is manifested in the dialectically opposing musical spaces and times which Boulez theorised in his Darmstadt lectures, and which are significant elements within many of his compositions.

It would be false to suggest that each of these moments exists unilaterally in complete detachment from the others and, as Boulez's career progresses, aspects from all of these moments are found as integrated elements within his discourse. In the Collège de France lectures, for example, references to dialectics and deduction are found together with mentions of codes, difference, repetition and identity.

We will consider the nature of the relationships linking Boulez with each of these intellectual currents and their key representatives, their impact upon Boulez's work and the responses of some of these thinkers to his music and writings, as well as critically evaluating the legitimacy and significance of such connections. In practical terms, we will consider the historical facticity of Boulez's involvement with these philosophical ideas, drawing, where possible, upon whatever source material exists in terms of published texts, interviews and correspondence. We will proceed from there to consider the key issues linking composer, philosophers and ideas, through a patient detailing of the principal arguments which, as will become apparent, involve Boulez to varying degrees, before discussing and evaluating the issues which unite and divide them. An attempt will be made to identify the sources whereby such ideas have entered into Boulez's vocabulary. At times this will involve viewing his ideas in relation to individual thinkers, philosophical traditions, other composers and creative artists as we attempt to form genealogies of influence. For example, the notion of binary oppositions will be traced from Boulez through a number of figures with whom he was familiar, either personally or through their writings, in this case, Souvitchinsky, Schloezer, Breton and Adorno, back to the German Idealist philosophers for whom such oppositions were crucially important. It is not claimed, however, that Boulez has been fully aware of this genealogy of influence.

It is clear that Boulez does not, for the most part, refer directly to the traditions of thought or to the figures with whom he is linked in this study and, while he does not always acknowledge that he is engaging with their ideas, the contention, nevertheless, is that he is implicated with their discourses, albeit rather anonymously at times. He draws upon dialectical, deductive, structuralist and post-structuralist ideas without ever submitting

his chosen concepts to close scrutiny beyond the clearly prescribed musical purposes for which he commissions them. In the cases of Adorno and Lévi-Strauss he appears as a central figure within debates without becoming personally involved. While his early writings are undoubtedly polemical, it is not clear that he intended to become embroiled in the serious debates which arose from his citation of certain authors, as his application of their ideas or his borrowing of their terminologies was subjected to serious scrutiny. At times it is left to other, more willing respondents to take up the challenge and to subject the arguments of his critics to the kind of consideration which he consistently fails to provide for himself.

It may be that his fault is primarily one of omission as he rather casually adopts concepts and ideas without providing a clear interpretative framework. As noted already, in certain interviews he carefully avoids commenting upon the writings of philosophers and thinkers on the grounds that he is unqualified to do so. Despite such reserve, he draws upon terms such as *deduction*, *dialectic*, *code*, *language*, the *virtual* and *difference* without clearly defining their use or providing the kinds of references or context which would enable their less ambiguous interpretation. Consequently, it will be of interest to attempt to clarify Boulez's use of these and other key terms, to establish how consistent his usage is and what musicological and philosophical sense these terms have within his lexicon, finally to discern whatever difference these terms and relationships make to his music.

The connections linking Boulez with Adorno, Lévi-Strauss, Eco and Deleuze are largely unexplored in the literature, and there has been little mention of the role of early influences, such as Souvitchinsky, Schloezer, Schaeffner and Souris, certainly in English language studies. No study to date has explored these connections systematically, though some authors have considered certain aspects of them.¹⁶

To consider Boulez's ideas in relation to one of these intellectual currents would be difficult enough. To consider them in relation to several systems of thought, which cannot be easily mapped onto a common framework, complicates matters even further. That we cannot easily relate the dialectics of Adorno, Leibowitz and others, the axiomatics of Rougier, the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss and Eco as well as the post-structuralism of Deleuze and Guattari to one another indicates the difficulty in making sense of them within the context of Boulez's music and writings. In attempting to do so, the goal is not to smooth over differences and inconsistencies, but rather to present the complexities of Boulez's evolving aesthetic positions as faithfully as possible within the contexts in which they first developed.

¹⁶ See Stoianova (1978), Savage (1989) and Sweeney-Turner (1994).

2 Early influences and movements

Elders, colleagues and roads not taken

The key moments of Boulez's musical education in Paris in the mid-1940s are well known: that he came to the capital in the autumn of 1943 to become a musician; that he studied counterpoint with Honegger's wife, Andrée Vaurabourg, until 1945; that he was a member of Messiaen's harmony class in 1944–5, graduating with a first prize in harmony; that he attended classes with René Leibowitz in 1945–6 in which the elder composer conducted detailed analyses of works by the Second Viennese composers; that he broke with Leibowitz in 1946 and, finally, that he worked with the Renaud-Barrault theatre company as musical director between 1946 and 1956. It is the story of a deeply determined young musician who mastered his craft in a surprisingly short time to develop into a composer capable of producing works like his First Sonata for piano and his *Sonatine* for flute and piano when he was still only twenty-one years of age. Alongside the influence of his teachers, we can note the names of those composers who helped shape his trajectory, with Messiaen, Schoenberg, Webern, Stravinsky, Debussy and Varèse taking pride of place among his elders, while composers of the younger generation such as Cage and Stockhausen also contributed to his evolution as a unique creative voice. In a similar way, we can list a range of non-musical aesthetic influences with whom the young Boulez engaged, with the poets René Char and Stéphane Mallarmé and, to a lesser extent, Henri Michaux, as well as the artist Paul Klee, being the most important.

While this account covers some key moments in Boulez's early development, it gives no real indication of the wider intellectual life enjoyed in post-war Paris, or of the main currents of thought which shaped attitudes. The period from 1945 to 1960 in French philosophy is characterised as that of the 'three H's', in other words, of Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger, three German philosophers whose work was of central importance for French thinkers.¹ The surrealist movement, which had developed as a reaction to Dadaism in 1924, had succeeded in reintroducing Hegel to a French audience, as well as in promoting a greater interest in German philosophy in France. In addition to this initial impulse, the lectures of Kojève and Hyppolite in the 1930s

¹ Descombes 1980, 3–4.