

## 1 Introduction

As a contemporary music composer practising in the second half of the twentieth century, Pierre Boulez could not unreflectively accept the forms handed down to him by tradition. For most of the serious artists and thinkers of this period, the fundamental experience of the first half of the century was a profound sense of rupture with the past. Any discussion of avant-garde music of the post-war period must then accept that musical form was never conceived as the choice of an entirely constituted schema (binary, da capo aria, sonata) which is then ‘filled’ with a musical content. Pierre Boulez, that most rigorous of musical thinkers, would only accept a form which satisfies the condition of coherence in the strictest sense: one in which the smallest microscopic details are reflected in the macroform. These ‘smallest details’ are, I contend in this book, not so much notes, phrases, cells or series as very basic oppositional pairs. Two simple examples taken from Boulez’s ‘opus 1’ are in their way emblematic of all of Boulez’s output. The twelve *Notations* for piano, composed in 1944–5, when the composer was just nineteen, are Boulez’s earliest extant pieces, and have a special place in his catalogue: initially unpublished, Boulez revisited the score thirty years after their composition, and set about expanding them into large-scale orchestral pieces. Clearly, something about them retained Boulez’s interest across the decades. In their way, these twelve-bar miniatures anticipate the way Boulez elaborates form through the articulation of oppositions on various levels.<sup>1</sup>

Several levels of opposition in the fourth piece of the set (Ex. 1.1) can be readily observed. A first opposition: the left hand consists of an ostinato pattern, while the right does not; second opposition: the six-note ostinato pattern uses as many pitches (A, E, F, G, F sharp, A flat), thus partitioning the chromatic scale into two distinct halves. This partitioning of chromatic space into two equal segments emphasizes the opposition of the hands; a third opposition concerns the durations used in the left-hand ostinato pattern. The long note with which each of the twelve occurrences of the ostinato pattern ends is of variable length (expressed in sixteenth notes in Fig. 1.1).

This sequence of durations thus opposes identical outer patterns with a contrasting reverse pattern in the middle, creating a small ternary structure. A final level of opposition involves the order of the pitches. Whereas the left hand implacably repeats the same six-note ostinato pattern, the right hand realizes an ordered sequence of six notes in a more subtle, ‘circular’

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Ex. 1.1 *Notation 4*. Taken from the handwritten score with the notation in the typeset version slightly altered.



- 8 10 11 7 A
- 7 11 10 8 A retrograde
- 8 10 11 7 A

Fig. 1.1 Rhythmic structure of long notes in left hand of *Notation 4*

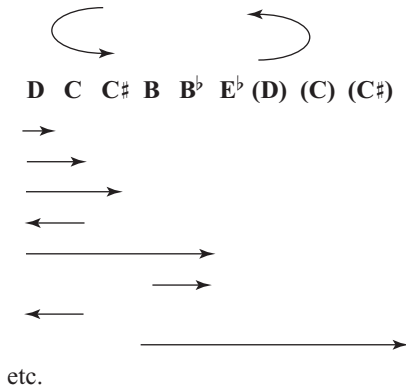


Fig. 1.2 Deployment of series in the right hand of *Notation 4*

manner in which the series is revealed only gradually, through the successive appearance of adjacent elements of the six-note series (Fig. 1.2).<sup>2</sup>

This final level of opposition, then, concerns the deployment of each half of the twelve-tone row (for that, of course, is what it is): in the left hand, the deployment is linear, whereas in the right hand it is ‘cyclical’.

Similarly, other, slightly subtler, categories of oppositions suggest themselves in the first of the *Notations* (Ex. 1.2). A first level of opposition suggests

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51490-3 - The Musical Language of Pierre Boulez: Writings and Compositions

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Excerpt

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Ex. 1.2 *Notation 1*. Taken from the handwritten score with the notation in the typeset version slightly altered.

*Fantastique. Modéré.*

$E^b_3$   $B^b_2$   $A_5$   $F_8$   $C\#_9$   $B_{12}$   
 $D_4$   $A^b_1$   $E_6$   $C_7$   $G_{10}$   $F\#_{11}$

Fig. 1.3 Two-voice texture of series in mm. 9–10 of *Notation 1*

itself on the level of texture by the linear deployment of the row in the first three measures (A flat, B flat, E flat, D, A, E, C, F, C sharp, G, F sharp, B), and its subsequent verticalization into a two-voice texture from the ninth measure onwards. For example, starting from the last chord of m. 9, this two-voice texture presents the above pitches, in which the order in the series is noted with subscripts (Fig. 1.3).

More fundamental, however, is a basic morphological observation. It could be said that each little motivic unit can be paired up with its mate, which is a kind of oppositional variation of it. For example, the thirty-second note triplet figure of the first bar finds its counterpart in the same figure with the same pitch-classes but with a partially inverted contour in

the last measure. Continuing this reasoning suggests a total of five pairs of oppositions in the twelve bars of Ex. 1.3.

Leaving aside the somewhat questionable coupling in the column on the right-hand side, a framework of oppositions articulates the form: four ‘themes’, each with two occurrences in the piece, in which each reappearance is marked by a contrast. A sufficient number of elements remain constant (general contour, rhythmic profile, horizontality or verticality, etc.) for their contrasting elements to be perceivable: in the first column the 32<sup>nd</sup> flourish reappears transformed through intervallic (and melodic) inversion; the ‘descent’ in the next column reappears with durations augmented; the ‘chord’ appears first *fortissimo* and then *pianissimo*, and the arpeggiation is retrograded, while the pedal ostinato figure in the fourth column reappears in the high rather than low register. In short, even in this youthful miniature, a typically Boulezian dialectic of invariance and contrast obtains.

These two miniatures have been discussed at length because they bring out the consistency with which Boulez shapes music through the creation of oppositions: he defines concepts by opposing one type of material against another, and thereafter having them interact with each other. The result appears flexible but relies on a fairly deterministic mechanism in order to achieve this effect. Pierre Boulez (who once penned an essay with the telling title ‘Constructing an improvisation’<sup>3</sup>) repudiates the alleged antinomies between freedom and determinism, between idea and system, between spontaneity and calculation, between automatism and individual will. In short, Boulez’s music presents a world of contrasts that propels it into life.

This book explores the way Boulez frames the problem of musical form, and the solutions that he offers both theoretically – in his writings – and practically – in his musical compositions. In his essays, Boulez’s reflections on the materials of music take place over decades, and address a varied readership: in the 1950s, cultured Parisian attenders of the chic avant-garde concerts of the *Domaine musical*, the concert society he founded in 1954 with theatrical directors Jean-Louis Barrault and Madeleine Renaud, as well as with benefactress Suzanne Tézenas, who would also stay abreast of musical matters in the pages of the *Revue musicale* or the *Nouvelle Revue française*; in the 1960s, his lectures and essays addressed the highly specialized avant-garde composers and performers who would attend the International Summer Courses for New Music at Darmstadt, or the Basel Music Academy; finally, from the 1970s until the 1990s, much of Boulez’s discourse is addressed to the audience of his Collège de France lectures, a highly literate but non-specialist audience. But the evolution of Boulez’s reflections on form is in some sense also a necessary corollary of the way his musical compositions evolve stylistically and formally throughout these

Ex. 1.3 Paradigmatic analysis of *Notation 1*. This method of representing the piece is inspired by a method known as paradigmatic analysis, in which objects appearing in vertical columns are considered identical with respect to some explicit criterion, and the normal order of the piece is restored by reading successive lines from left to right, top to bottom. It is discussed later in this chapter, and used extensively in the presentation of *Mémoriale* in Chapter 8.

The image displays a musical score for 'Fantasque. Modéré.' with four vertical columns of music. Each column represents a different transformation of the original material, connected by horizontal lines with descriptive labels:

- Column 1 (Original):** Labeled 'Fantasque. Modéré.' with dynamics *mp* and *pp*. It includes a triplet and a 'Péd.' (pedal) marking.
- Column 2:** Labeled 'Transformed through melodic inversion'. The music is inverted and includes a 'Péd.' marking and a 'strictement' instruction.
- Column 3:** Labeled 'Transformed through rhythmic diminution'. The music is compressed and includes a 'sans Péd.' (without pedal) marking.
- Column 4:** Labeled 'Transformed through dynamic inversion and rhythmic retrogradation'. The music is inverted, compressed, and includes a 'Péd.' marking.

Below the main score, there are two additional musical examples:

- Example 1:** Labeled 'Transformed through inversion of register'. It shows the original melody in a higher register and its transformation in a lower register, with a 'Péd.' marking.
- Example 2:** Labeled 'Transformed through melodic inversion'. It shows the original melody inverted and includes a 'Péd.' marking and a 'strictement' instruction.

periods, from the serial constructivism of *Structures* for two pianos, Book 1 (1951–2) to the mobile forms of the Third Piano Sonata (1955–7; 1963) and *Éclat* (1965), through the harmonic transparency of later works like *Messagesquise* (1976), *Notations 1–4* for orchestra (1977–80), *Dérive 1* (1984), *Dialogue de l'ombre double* (1982–5) or *Répons* (1980–2– ). It is unsurprising that works so different are also the expression of major shifts in Boulez's conception of music.

### Boulez's compositional path

Pierre Boulez is unquestionably 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 and illustrious representative of the musical avant-garde since 1945. Having been appointed principal conductor of the New York Philharmonic and the BBC Symphony (both in 1971), as well as conducting countless other orchestras, he has always 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.). Pierre Boulez has also had a significant impact on the development of musical institutions, especially in France, having conceived projects that led to the establishment of the *Domaine musical*, the *Institut de recherche et coordination acoustique/musique* (IRCAM), the *Ensemble InterContemporain* and the *Cité de la musique*.

Boulez is also a prolific writer. His public declarations at important junctures in music history have had a decisive impact on subsequent developments, from his provocative eulogy on the death of the father of twelve-tone music, 'Schoenberg is dead' (1951), to his reckless indictment a year later of the 'futility' (typeset in aggressive small capital letters in the original) of any composer who had not felt the necessity of the twelve-tone language (in 'Éventuellement' (1952)).<sup>4</sup> But Boulez's stature, particularly in French-speaking countries, also owes much to the way in which his ideas, elaborated in many thousands of pages of writings, appealed to public intellectuals like Michel Foucault (who published an important interview with Boulez, and who had a hand in getting Boulez nominated to the prestigious *Collège de France*) and Gilles Deleuze (who wrote about Boulez extensively).<sup>5</sup> Boulez's music and writings also interface with philosophical, literary or art-historical themes and are informed by fruitful reflections on thinkers, poets and artists, from Paul Klee to René Char, from Paul Valéry to Henri Michaux, from Stéphane Mallarmé to James Joyce.

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The 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, to 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. This work in four movements is characterized by a dense contrapuntal style and requires formidable technical prowess. Erratic, fitful gestures infuse this score in a way rarely seen before in piano literature, reminding one that for Boulez, in order 'to create effective art, we have to take delirium and, yes, organize it'.<sup>6</sup> With its strident gestures and overlapping layers, the Sonata fulfils Boulez's wish expressed at the time (in the pages of the journal *Polyphonie*) for music to be 'hysteria and magic, violently modern – along the lines of Antonin Artaud',<sup>7</sup> a pronouncement which elegantly demonstrates the gulf which separates Boulez's thought from the musical rationalism which is sometimes imputed to him. Nevertheless, even in this Second Sonata, classical form is never fully evacuated: the model of the Beethovenian sonata is ever present, complete with a conventional scherzo movement with trio.<sup>8</sup>

In his brief but decisive phase of 'automatic' writing, the '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. The desire for total compositional control was certainly 'in the air', judging by all the other comrades-in-arms of Boulez who also flirted with total serialization at around the same time, yielding pointillistic works such as Karel Goeyvaerts's Sonata for Two Pianos (1950–1), Stockhausen's *Kreuzspiel* (1951), Jean Barraqué's Sonata (1952), or Michel Fano's Sonata for Two Pianos (1952).<sup>9</sup>

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, at the Théâtre du Petit-Marigny in central Paris. In the context of the conservative concert-going

habits of post-war audiences, the *Domaine* musical offered a decidedly avant-garde alternative, performing major works from the pre-war atonal repertoire (Schoenberg, Webern and Berg) as well as new compositions by a younger generation of composers, including, of course, those by Boulez himself. These works made use of tone rows or series, a principle which replaces tonality with pitch permutations, polarity with equal weighting of the twelve tones of the tempered scale, comforting familiarity with unpredictable rhythms and forms. Serialist technique was elaborated technically in the writings of Boulez, Boucourechliev, Barraqué and Pousseur, and metaphorically by the surrealist poet René Char, a regular at the *Domaine* concerts, who wrote portentously that ‘serial music today is the mobile, cruel, true mirror, at the same time interior and exterior, of a point of novel fusion of the enigma of men’.<sup>10</sup>

The repertoire performed at this first *Domaine* concert on 13 January 1954 already reflected something of the mission that Boulez set out for this new concert society, and, by extension, expresses his vision for post-war music-making generally:

Johann Sebastian Bach: *Musical Offering*

Luigi Nono: *Polifonica, monodia, ritmica*

Karlheinz Stockhausen: *Kontrapunkte*

Anton Webern: Concerto, op. 24

Igor Stravinsky: *Renard*<sup>11</sup>

This programme clearly conveys the following intentions: to bridge opposing pre-war avant-garde aesthetic tendencies (both Webern and Stravinsky); to introduce the new voices of those not yet thirty (Stockhausen, Nono); to champion pre-war dodecaphonic masterpieces (Anton Webern’s Second Cantata, op. 31 (1941–3), a key work in the development of post-war serialism, was premiered at the *Domaine* in 1956 (see Chapter 3)); and to connect with the polyphonic purity of Bach, as if the composer of the permutational splendour of the highly chromatic *Musical Offering* were the godfather of serialism (significantly, one of Boulez’s first published articles was entitled ‘Moment de Jean-Sébastien Bach’ (1950)).<sup>12</sup> As for the audience of the *Domaine* concerts, it mixed intellectuals and artists, as well as prominent members of the upper classes. Even such unlikely figures as Nadia Boulanger, champion of Stravinskian neo-classicism, and Jean Cocteau, spiritual leader of the decidedly antebellum *Groupe des Six*, attended the first concert.<sup>13</sup>

In the end, the historical importance of this concert society is in large part symbolic: attended as it was by intellectuals, ‘chic’ Parisians and government functionaries, it represented, as François Porcile has noted, a transitional step between the pre-war system of aristocratic benefaction (the likes of the



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Princesse de Polignac and the Comtesse de Noailles) and salon culture and the post-war system of state intervention in cultural affairs that would come to fruition under the presidency of Georges Pompidou (1969–74) and especially in the massive state-subsidized cultural projects of Socialist François Mitterrand (1981–95). Nevertheless, the mystique surrounding the institution of the Domaine, the concept of the series and the figure of Boulez himself in the ten years which followed the Domaine's first concert is indisputable, some going so far as to announce an imminent near-apocalyptic deliverance from musical mediocrity (and implicitly of the collaborationist taint of so many of France's musical institutions under Vichy during the war years). Pierre Souvtchinsky, the Russian musicologist and Parisian socialite, who would launch Boulez in the elegant circles that would lead him to his benefactress Madame Tézenas, wore his messianism on his sleeve when he wrote, also in the watershed year of 1954, of his young (unnamed) protégé:

It is certain that the reform and the reformation of concepts and of language in which *living music* is now engaged, irrevocably, had its precursors and its attentive and useful elucidators. But we had to wait for the ever troubling and unexpected appearance of a predestined musician, in order to allow this movement, this recruitment of a new generation, to become definitively conscious of itself, of its historical value; for it is always an event – a creator – who, through his arrival, his presence, the affirmation of his gifts, his judgement, makes everything near and far suddenly visible with renewed clarity.<sup>14</sup>

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 which had been attempted earlier in the works of André Souris.<sup>15</sup> In the *Marteau*, the exotic instrumentation (consciously chosen to evoke the traditional musics of Japan, Bali and Central Africa, and all occupying the middle of the register: guitar, marimba, viola, alto flute, vibraphone and percussion) is typical of the Boulezian instrumentarium, favouring as it does resonating instruments, that is, ones for which the musician relinquishes control over the sound once the note is attacked (which is the case for all of the *Marteau* instruments except the flute and the viola). The work also makes use of original methods of vocal declamation including *Sprechstimme* and humming, the exploration of the varieties of vocality becoming an abiding interest in later works such as *Pli selon pli* (1957–62; 1983; 1990) and *cummings ist der Dichter* (1970; 1986). Moreover, *Le Marteau*'s structure,

comprised of three interlocking cycles, foreshadows Boulez's lifelong interest in non-linear forms, including the so-called 'open work'. But most of all, the theatricality which breathes through every movement of *Le Marteau* is surely in part the product of the decade, beginning in 1946, which Boulez spent as musical director of the Compagnie Renaud-Barrault, one of the most influential French theatrical troupes of the twentieth century, composing and conducting music for the stage.

Another abiding characteristic of Boulez's compositions is their resolutely unfinished character, giving them the status of works-in-progress. 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. Moreover, his works sometimes resist closure in yet another sense: the performer is free to navigate through them in several different ways in these so-called 'open' or 'mobile' works, a compositional model which appealed to many other French (and non-French) composers of the 1960s. Boulez's works form clusters that share certain genetic similarities. The mother work (such as ... *explosante-fixe* ..., source of several smaller satellite-works) spawns compositional progeny of varying dimensions.

Other works exist in various versions, sometimes reworked over the course of many years or even decades: the successive versions of *Le Visage nuptial*, *Pli selon pli* or *Répons* demonstrate the way works are always potentially unfinished. Some works, on the other hand, remain purportedly uncompleted, but receive no subsequent extension or revision (for example, only two of the five movements of the Third Piano Sonata have been published, even though Boulez performed all five movements at its 1957 premiere.<sup>16</sup> Another level of inter-work connection is formed by borrowings from one piece to another, like the orchestration of two of the *Notations* for piano (1945) inserted into the *Première improvisation sur Mallarmé* (second movement of *Pli selon pli*) (see Ex. 2.1 in the next chapter). Finally, other works are withdrawn from the catalogue altogether, like *Poésie pour pouvoir* (1958), a work for which the coordination between the orchestra and the tape part was deemed inadequate by the composer following its first performance, their recordings being tolerated as nothing more than archival 'documents'.<sup>17</sup>

The example of *Poésie pour pouvoir* illustrates another opposition that sparked Boulez's imagination almost from the beginning of his career: the distinction between instrumental and electronic sound. 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