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

Jonathan Goldman

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The Musical Language of Pierre Boulez

Writings and Compositions

Pierre Boulez is arguably the most influential composer of the second half of the twentieth century. Here, Jonathan Goldman provides a fresh appraisal of the composer's music, demonstrating how understanding the evolution of Boulez's ideas on musical form is an important step towards evaluating his musical thought generally. The theme of form arising from a grammar of oppositions – the legacy of structuralism – serves as a common thread in Boulez's output, and testifies to the constancy of Boulez's thought over and above his several notable aesthetic and stylistic changes. This book lends a voice to the musical works by using the writings – particularly the mostly untranslated collected Collège de France lectures (1976–95) – to comment on them. It also uses five musical works from the post-1975 period to exemplify concepts developed in Boulez's writings, presenting a vivid portrait of Boulez's extremely varied production.

JONATHAN GOLDMAN is Assistant Professor of Musicology at the School of Music, University of Victoria, and specializes in twentieth-century music history. Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Circuit, musiques contemporaines*, he wrote the preface to *Leçons de musique* (2005), a collection of Boulez's writings published in France.

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Preface

I first began working on this book at a time when it seemed as if with the close of the twentieth century, the historical judgement against modernist composers was definitive and without appeal. Two passages I came across brought this home to me symbolically. The first was a reference Susan McClary made in 2006 to the ‘hostile takeover of music studies by the serialist mafia’ in the 1960s.¹ The second was a passing reference made by Jonathan Dunsby in a 2007 lecture to the legacy of (academic) serial compositions:

Many critics of avant-garde twentieth-century Western Art Music – much as I may not personally agree with them – say that all the theorizing that took place, miles and miles of print in books and journals, not to mention letter after letter of tenure bestowal, was entirely misapplied since no one really wanted all those neurotic, atonal musical compositions in the first place, as I fear the twenty-first century is beginning to demonstrate to us.²

I started to get the distinct and unsettling impression that the predominant narrative of twentieth-century music in the English-speaking world ran something like this: abstruse, serialist autocrats had been superseded by postmodern pastiche-artists (or rock-inflected minimalists) who in turn ushered in the ultimate triumph of industrially produced pop music. According to this story, in the 1960s Pierre Boulez played the role of ringleader (one widely read critic even referred to him as the ‘Godfather’³), even if McClary’s remarks were directed against American academic composers, Boulez never having maintained close links with his tenured American counterparts. I felt that, more often than not, the reservations – even hostility – expressed by some critics and musicologists in the first decade of the twenty-first century were partially the result of an unjust portrayal of Boulez as a pointillistic serialist, whose aesthetic ideals could be entirely circumscribed by his works from the 1950s (and first and foremost the undergraduate analysis class workhorse, *Structure 1a* (1951–2)) as well as the corresponding polemical writings from the same period (‘Éventuellement’ (1952), and the famous proclamation of the uselessness of non-serial composers contained therein). These judgements seemed particularly unfair in light of the major aesthetic shift which Boulez’s art had undergone beginning in the 1970s, audible in musical works from *Rituel* (1974–5) onwards,

and ‘legible’ in the mostly untranslated writings from his years lecturing at the Collège de France (such as the seminal ‘The system and the idea’).⁴ The works from this period could be characterized variously by the presence of thematic writing, a return to vertical harmony (often consonant albeit always post-tonal, and with carefully chosen fixed registration) and formal clarity. In parallel, in the writings, one senses a great concern for the audience: for the way his works are to be perceived, not only the way they are conceived and then constructed. My goal in this book is to redress an imbalance which gives pride of place to the early years of the nearly seven-decades-long career of this important musician; in short, to affirm that Boulez should not be relegated to the historical dustbin of twentieth-century serial excesses. In the analyses, instead of stressing the complexity of the compositional procedures – it is all too easy to turn musical analysis into what one of my undergraduate mathematics professors used to call ‘proof by intimidation’ – I wanted to ensure that every compositional procedure described in this book could not only be explained to anyone with basic musical skills, but also heard (for example the six chords of *Dérive 1* or the four themes of *Mémoriale*).

To redress this imbalance is not to deny that Boulez could be considered, as one writer called him, on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday, an ‘unreconstructed modernist’,⁵ but to assert that he can be appreciated and enjoyed even when the extremes of modernist fervour give way to a more inclusive account of twentieth-century music. In short, this book was written in the spirit of the wonderful title of a collection of readings edited by Arved Ashby in 2004: *The Pleasure of Modernist Music*.

This book concentrates on two aspects of Boulez’s multifaceted career – the composer and writer – and is intended to appeal to composers, music historians, theorists and music students, and indeed any reader interested in the history and aesthetics of twentieth-century music, musical manifestations of artistic modernism or French cultural history generally. One of Pierre Boulez’s chief preoccupations concerns the nature of musical form. Understanding the evolution of his thought on form is a step towards evaluating his musical thought generally; it also sheds light on his most recent works, which put his ideas on the subject into practice. The theme of form arising from a grammar of oppositions – the legacy of structuralism – serves as a common thread in Boulez’s output (and consequently in this book), and testifies to the constancy of Boulez’s thought over and above his several notable aesthetic and stylistic changes. This book, then, sets out in two directions: on the one hand, to use the musical works to exemplify concepts developed in Boulez’s writings (Part I); on the other, to lend a voice to the musical works by using the writings to comment on them (Part II).

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Accordingly, I first look at the concept of form as it is revealed in the writings of Boulez (while taking examples from his music), and then I study form as it is revealed in five of his musical works (making use of concepts derived from his writings).

One of the reasons for my focus on Boulez's output since 1975 is that it marked the dawn of a new theoretical, stylistic and aesthetic period for him as a composer and thinker on music. The first performance of the watershed *Rituel* (2 April 1975) was followed up a few months later by his nomination to the Collège de France. The works which followed dispensed for the most part with the stylistic tics that one associates with the first serial works – wide leaps of register, the preference for intervals of sevenths, ninths and tritones, pointillistic textures and so on.

Of course, in order to get a handle on the later period, it is necessary to make a foray, however brief, into earlier periods in Boulez's long career. After an introductory chapter, Part I begins with a look at Boulez's writings, especially those which address most clearly the problems of form, such as 'Éventuellement' (1952), 'Alea' (1957), 'Form' (1960), 'Necessity of an aesthetic orientation' (1963), and 'Periform' (1965). It goes on to examine, in Chapter 3, Boulez's writings on a single composer – Anton Webern – who stands for him as the 'threshold' of the new music, and the locus of many of his most intense reflections on musical form generally. This first part closes with a look at the later era of writings, those which came out of Boulez's appointment to the Collège de France (1976–95). These writings contrast considerably with the tone, subject matter and aesthetic philosophy of his earlier essays, and have thus far received little scholarly attention.⁶

Part II of this book looks at five works of relatively modest dimensions (except for the larger *Rituel – Dérive 1* (1984), *Mémoriale (... explosante-fixe ... Originel)* (1985), *Anthèmes 1* (1991–2) and *Incises* (1994; 2001) are all under ten minutes in duration) and could serve as a kind of listening guide designed to enhance and extend the concert-going experience. For each of these analytic presentations, I try to bring out the elements which are placed in oppositional relationships, and to show how these oppositions are superimposed in order to shed light on the 'form-bearing' elements of these works. This part is devoted to showing the manifold ways Boulez embodies the concept of form in these works, which have also received less sustained attention than Boulez's catalogue from the 1950s and early 1960s, such as *Le Marteau sans maître* (1952–5), *Pli selon pli* (1957–62; 1983; 1990) or the first piece of the first book of *Structures* for two pianos (1951–2). After an introductory chapter on the analysis of and by Boulez, Chapter 6 presents an analysis of the antiphonal form of *Rituel*; in Chapter 7, a study of the (eminently simple) harmonic material in *Dérive 1* (1984)

explores how the oppositions between note and appoggiatura, harmonic tone and ornament, act to emphasize as well as to obscure underlying metrical pulse. In Chapter 8, an exposition of *Mémoriale (... explosante-fixe ... Originel)* demonstrates how Boulez passes from a pre-compositional matrix to the realized work. The control of harmonic and durational values is regulated by means of matrices, a rigid structure within which Boulez gives his imagination free rein, thereby thematizing the dialectic of freedom and control. Chapter 9 examines how an underlying theme in *Anthèmes 1* (1991–2) for violin solo (as well as in its sister piece *Anthèmes 2* with added electronics) is always presented in fragmentary form, but constitutes the implicit model of the piece, thereby creating an opposition between the real and the virtual. Chapter 10 looks at thematic writing in *Incises* (1994; 2001) and specifically at the way the play of recognition and surprise of thematic characters is at the heart of the work's dramaturgy. Finally, Chapter 11 takes a comparative approach to form in these later works.

Far from being exhaustive, these analyses are above all in-depth descriptions of the works. It is important to emphasize that these chapters are not primarily concerned with sketch-study analysis, even though I did conduct research at the Fonds Boulez at the Faculty of Music of the University of Montreal as well as making a brief visit to the Paul Sacher Stiftung in 2009. I have also greatly benefited from recent genetic studies of Boulez's music, by such scholars as Robert Piencikowski, Pascal Decroupet, Jean-Louis Leleu, Peter O'Hagan and Paolo Dal Molin among others.⁷ Nevertheless, rather than adopt an approach which focuses primarily on sketches, in the five analytical presentations contained in Part II, I try to bring out the relative simplicity of Boulez's work on form by means of observations directly made about the five commercially available scores.

Of course, this study of form in the works and writings of Pierre Boulez does not set itself the impossible task of dealing with *all* of Boulez's works and writings. Rather, a selection of representative works and writings are submitted to a two-way approach: concepts explored in the writings are used to interpret the basic materials of Boulez's musical works, and, conversely, features of his music are used to exemplify abstract thoughts contained in Boulez's writings. Although no single overarching theme could credibly capture the contours of this multifaceted composer, whose production spans more than sixty-five years, several dozen compositions and several thousand pages of writings, when the writings and the works are viewed through the prism of the dynamics of oppositions which give rise to them, something of the creative impulse with which Boulez generates his kaleidoscopic sound world can be gleaned.

Moreover, since the later works represent a return to thematic writing, I take pains to describe and identify elements which are invested with a characteristic melodic, harmonic, dynamic, or timbral profile. Boulez supplies in these works auditory signposts (in French ‘points de repère’, which is, significantly, the title given to Boulez’s collected writings) which guide the listener through the labyrinth of musical form. Grasping how Boulez moves from the initial matrix to the realized composition, while integrating his predictions of the perceptive strategies which his future listeners will bring to the table, constitutes a step towards understanding the compositional processes at work in Boulez’s music. It is also my hope that these chapters will contribute to the reader’s appreciation of Boulez’s works as heard through recordings and performances. Most of all, in studying the leitmotif of opposition in the writings and works of Boulez, particularly in the later period, this book offers an essentially structuralist take on what is probably the most enduring trait of French music generally: the principle of contrasting sections. Even if, as Boulez has often stated, there is no single definition of a French tradition that could encompass at once the musical languages of Rameau, Berlioz and Debussy, perhaps the taste for contrast is a kind of ‘degree zero’ of this tradition. The goal of this book is to take that intuition seriously by applying it systematically to Boulez’s thought and music.

The bibliography at the end of this book is meant to be a tool for researchers and students. It contains a comprehensive list of most of the serious writings published on specific pieces by Boulez; these are then categorized by work.

My ultimate goal in this book is to show how, like a labyrinth (one of Boulez’s favourite metaphors), form appears simple when it is considered globally, as an entity which is entirely constituted and outside time; it nevertheless displays its richness when it is perceived within the context of musical time, with all the ‘accidents’ foreign to the initial system, through which Boulez reclaims his freedom as a composer.

Countless people gave me help and encouragement in the preparation of this book. I wish to thank Arnold Whittall for his patience and innumerable helpful suggestions, and, of course, for choosing to include this book in his series *Music since 1900*. For their invaluable comments and suggestions I am grateful to Edward Campbell, Nicolas Donin, Jonathan Dunsby, Christoph Neidhöfer, Robert Piencikowski and John Rea, as well as to my copy-editor, Mary Worthington. I wish to thank the Université de Montréal for employing me as Research Assistant to Jean-Jacques Nattiez from 2001 to 2006, which notably allowed me to write the preface to Boulez’s *Leçons de*

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Preface

musique, and during which time I wrote the doctoral dissertation which was the starting point for this project. The assistantship also involved me in many other interesting Boulez-related projects. I also wish to express my gratitude to the Université de Montréal for having given me access to the aforementioned Fonds Boulez, located in the Faculty of Music, which was established by Jean-Jacques Nattiez and Sophie Galaise. Brief visits to the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel and the Music Department of the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris were also invaluable. I wish to thank Pierre Boulez for approving the use of materials and for being favourable to the idea of my book project, as well as his administrative assistants Klaus-Peter Altekruise and Marion Thiem. In addition, I was delighted when Jean Radel allowed me to use his wonderful photos in this book. Many of my ideas crystallized while teaching a graduate seminar on Boulez at McGill University's Schulich School of Music in 2005. My current faculty, the School of Music of the University of Victoria, has been incredibly supportive. Thanks also to Nicholas Piper for his help with the musical examples. I wish to thank my editors at Cambridge University Press, Victoria Cooper, Rebecca Jones and Thomas O'Reilly. Without my parents' support and encouragement, none of this would have been possible. Most of all, I wish to thank Jean-Jacques Nattiez who, through his intelligence, patience and generosity, made a musicologist out of me. This book is dedicated to him.

Abbreviations

WRITINGS BY PIERRE BOULEZ

- OR *Orientations*, trans. Martin Cooper, ed. Jean-Jacques Nattiez (London: Faber, 1986)
- PdR *Points de repère*, ed. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, 2nd edn (Paris: Christian Bourgois/Seuil, 1985)
- PdRI *Points de repère I: Imaginer*, ed. Jean-Jacques Nattiez and Sophie Galaise (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1995)
- PdRII *Points de repère II: Regards sur autrui*, ed. Jean-Jacques Nattiez and Sophie Galaise (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 2005)
- PdRIII *Points de repère III: Leçons de musique*, ed. Jean-Jacques Nattiez; prefaces by Jean-Jacques Nattiez, Michel Foucault and Jonathan Goldman (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 2005)
- PMA *Penser la musique aujourd'hui* (Paris and Geneva: Éditions Gonthier/Denoël, 1963); English trans., *Boulez on Music Today*, trans. Susan Bradshaw and Richard Rodney Bennett (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971)
- PVPH *Par volonté et par hasard. Entretiens avec Célestin Deliège* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975); English trans., *Pierre Boulez: Conversations with Célestin Deliège* (London: Eulenburg, 1976)
- RA *Relevés d'apprenti*, ed. Paule Thévenin (Paris: Seuil, 1966)
- ST *Stocktakings from an Apprenticeship*, trans. Stephen Walsh, introduction by Robert T. Piencikowski (Oxford University Press, 1991)

All translations for which no published versions exist are the author's own unless otherwise stated.

Note: throughout this book, the name of the individual Collège de France lecture is given, the year it was delivered, and its pages in *Leçons de musique* (PdRIII); for example, 'Thème, variations et forme' (1984), PdRIII, p. 200.

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List of abbreviations

FURTHER ABBREVIATIONS

- CDMC Centre de documentation de musique contemporaine (Paris)
GRM Groupe de recherches musicales
IRCAM Institut de recherche et coordination acoustique/musique
NEM Nouvel Ensemble Moderne
NRF *Nouvelle Revue française*

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1. Pierre Boulez backstage at the Auditorium in the Louvre, Paris, 19 November 2008 (photo Jean Radel)



2. Pierre Boulez in the TempPELLIAUKIO Church ('Church of the Rock'), Helsinki, 13 August 2009 (photo Jean Radel)

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3. Pierre Boulez in the Tempeliakio Church, Helsinki, 13 August 2009 (photo Jean Radel)



4. Pierre Boulez at the Cité de la Musique, Paris, 23 January 2007 (photo Jean Radel)