

CHAPTER I

A Composer without a Biography
Family and Upbringing in Montbrison (1925–40)

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True biography fascinates and discourages, it propels us forcefully – even with spiteful violence – towards imaginary biography.¹

Boulez, in Henry-Louis de la Grange, *Gustav Mahler*

‘My passport says March 26, 1925, born in Montbrison in the Loire, which is a small town, of say 7,000 to 8,000 inhabitants. My family was not at all musical.’ Pierre Boulez introduced himself in this way in an interview with Micheline Banzet on ORTF in July 1960.² This quotation alone sums up the difficulty of the biographer in recounting Pierre Boulez’s childhood, through the parsimony of his testimony on this period of his life. As the composer’s nephew, Pierre Chevalier, remarked: ‘It is a terrible thing for the Boulez’s not to confide in one another. The Boulez’s are unable to say things.’³ This familial refusal to remember can also be understood in relation to the composer’s clearly articulated intellectual position regarding memory and the past in general: a refusal to fetishise memory, a desire to read the past in the light of contemporary creative developments. ‘I hate the past! I hate memory! That voice that I thought I heard just now, deep inside me, behind me. It is not back that it calls me, but forward; if it were back it would not have such bitterness and such sweetness!’⁴ This famous extract from Paul Claudel’s play *The Satin Slipper* (*Le Soulier de satin*), which Boulez quotes at the end of his tribute

¹ ‘La biographie réelle fascine et décourage, elle nous rejette avec force – voire avec la violence du dépit – vers la biographie imaginaire’. Translation by the author.

² ‘Mon passeport porte 26 mars 1925, né à Montbrison dans la Loire qui est une petite ville, disons 7000 à 8000 habitants. Ma famille n’était pas musicienne du tout,’ Boulez, Interview with Micheline Banzet, ORTF (Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Française).

³ Chevalier, *L’homme des possibles*, p. 37.

⁴ ‘J’ai horreur du passé! J’ai horreur du souvenir! Cette voix que je croyais entendre tout à l’heure au fond de moi, derrière moi. Elle n’est pas en arrière, c’est en avant qu’elle m’appelle; si elle était en arrière elle n’aurait pas une telle amertume et une telle douceur!’ in Boulez, ‘J’ai horreur du souvenir’, in *Regards sur autrui*, p. 64; ‘I hate remembering’ (in *Orientations*, p. 512).

to the late conductor Roger Désormière, can be read literally as an element of biography (the loss of his mentor and friend, his relation to his own past), but also and mainly a synthesis or a prelude to his numerous writings about memory and creation.⁵

The information that we can establish about the early period in Boulez's life from 1925 to 1940 is therefore based on a small number of primary sources (Pierre Boulez's interviews with Célestin Deliège and François Meïmoun in particular, the testimonies of close friends and family and a few childhood photographs) as well as on the biographies of Joan Peyser, Dominique Jameux and Christian Merlin.

In 1925, Montbrison was a sub-prefecture of the Loire department, located between the Monts du Forez and the plain of Lyon, and a small industrial town of just over 7,000 inhabitants. Pierre Boulez was born on rue de la Tupinerie, the town's main shopping street, in an apartment above a pharmacy. His father, Léon Boulez, the son of well-to-do farmers from the Morvan region of France, was an engineer. Christian Merlin sums up his personality as follows: 'Léon Boulez combines the precision of a scientist and the authority of a leader who does not hesitate to fight in the event of social conflict, with a powerful Catholic education, to which he remained faithful, in the spirit of a conservative provincial bourgeoisie.'⁶ Pierre Boulez's mother, Marcelle Calabre, was a native of Clermont-Ferrand, the daughter of Louis Calabre, the former SFIO mayor of Montigny-aux-Amognes,⁷ a small town in Nièvre, Burgundy. Her secular education and her personality which were more sensitive to the arts, stand in contrast with those of her husband. One of the rare testimonies that we have from Marcelle Boulez, who was otherwise reserved about her private life and that of her family, is to be found in her correspondence with the couple, Pierre and Marianne Souvchinsky,⁸ who, having befriended and supported the young composer, had also become friends of the family. Her letters regularly express her admiration mixed with humility for her son: 'We have had excellent feedback on *Le Visage Nuptial* from Le "Monde" and "L'Express", confirmed by Madame Tézenas and Stockhausen, and

⁵ See, for instance, Boulez, 'Memory and Creation', in *Music Lessons*, pp. 405–84 ('Mémoire et création', in *Leçons de musique*, pp. 471–556); and 'Style or idea? In praise of amnesia', in *Orientations* pp. 349–59 ('Style ou idée? Éloge de l'amnésie', in *Leçons de musique*, pp. 398–411).

⁶ Merlin, *Pierre Boulez*, p. 20.

⁷ Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière, the socialist party founded in 1905.

⁸ Pierre Souvchinsky played a major role in the life of Pierre Boulez, not only through his support in the creation of the Domaine Musical, but also through the very intimate relationship he had with the composer from the post-war period.

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I am certain that you are as pleased with it as we are.⁹ These letters also show the unity of the Boulez family, notably just before the death of Léon Boulez in 1969, and the support given by his three children, including Pierre, even though he had just been engaged by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and was trying to negotiate the conflicting demands of a career on both sides of the Atlantic.¹⁰

The couple married in Montigny in 1919 before moving to Montbrison, where Léon Boulez had been appointed head of the design office of the Chavanne-Brun Frères metallurgical factory. In 1920, their first child, named Pierre Boulez, died at birth. The fact that the parents took the name of their stillborn child to baptize their second son should come as no surprise: this was still common practice at a time when infant mortality was not uncommon. Christian Merlin recalls that little Pierre did not speak or walk before the age of eighteen months, so much so that his mother went on a pilgrimage to Champdieu. While still a small child, he visited his younger brother's grave: Joan Peyser sees this as one of the keys to understanding the composer's personality. But although Boulez was probably marked by this tragedy, its real intimate consequences remain unknown to us. In 1922, two years after this tragedy, Jeanne Boulez was born, before the second Pierre Boulez in 1925, and then in 1936, Roger Boulez, which accounts for the fact that his elder sister had more to tell of his childhood than his little brother. His older sister, Jeanne, was particularly present in Pierre Boulez's life, from his childhood onwards and all throughout his life (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2). A protective figure, she assiduously followed his career and befriended certain personalities from the musical world, such as the Souvchinskys, later Karlheinz Stockhausen, or the cellist Jean-Guihen Queyras and his parents, who met her on the occasion of the foundation of the *Rencontres musicales de Forcalquier* in 1983.¹¹ Pierre Boulez, in addition to his main house in Baden-Baden and his apartment in Paris, also had a house built in Saint-Michel-l'Observatoire (where she lived). The composer went there occasionally to visit his sister or friends such as Claude Pompidou. Her son, Pierre Chevalier, also developed an equally notable admiration and affection for his uncle.

⁹ 'Nous avons eu par le "Monde" et "L'Express" d'excellents échos sur le Visage Nuptial confirmés par Madame Tézenas et Stockhausen et je suis certaine que vous en avez autant de satisfaction que nous,' in Marcelle Boulez to Pierre Souvchinsky, 31 December 1957, BNF Vm Fonds 148 BLZ-1 (187).

¹⁰ Marcelle Boulez to Marianne Souvchnisky, 16 June 1969, BNF, Vm Fonds 148 BLZ-1 (187).

¹¹ Queyras, *Les Suites en partage*, p. 96.



Figure 1.1 Portrait of Pierre Boulez, c. 1936. BNF, Pierre Boulez Archive, Res Vm Est-8 (11).

In 1929, the family moved within Montbrison to a house with a garden at 46 rue Alsace Lorraine in a more comfortable setting, befitting their social status. Pierre Boulez had his first musical experiences there when he began to learn to play the piano: ‘Half by chance, half by will. By chance, because I heard the sound of the piano that my sister played as a girl from a good family. At first I was very attracted by the sound. Then I was given piano lessons; I was seven or eight years old. I wasn’t particularly precocious.’¹² Roger Boulez identifies the influence of his mother in the decision to give piano lessons to the children.¹³ Following in his sister’s footsteps, Pierre Boulez took private piano lessons, the only possibility of learning to play the instrument in Montbrison, and continued

¹² ‘A moitié par hasard, à moitié par volonté. Par hasard, car j’ai entendu le son du piano que ma sœur jouait comme une fille de bonne famille. J’ai tout d’abord été très attiré par le son. Puis on m’a fait donner des leçons de piano; j’avais sept ou huit ans. Je n’étais pas particulièrement précoce,’ in Meïmoun, *Entretien avec Pierre Boulez*, p. 13.

¹³ Boulez. *A Life for Music*, video.



Figure 1.2 Léon, Pierre and Jeanne Boulez. BNF, fonds François Lesure.

thereafter in Saint-Étienne, where he worked on the compositions of the modern composers Debussy and Ravel and practiced chamber music with notable local musicians.¹⁴ In 1930, Léon Boulez brought back a radio set from a trip to the United States which provided further opportunities for listening to music: Pierre Boulez recalled later that he was impressed by the music of Stravinsky's *Le Chant du Rossignol* in Ernest Ansermet's interpretation. Boulez recalls his early interest in music, in a musically limited environment: 'it was not a belated decision taken after much hesitation, but one already deeply rooted in me as a result solely of my early musical education – very ordinary as it happened, since it took place in a tiny provincial town, without any contact with what one might call day-to-day musical life'.¹⁵

¹⁴ Jameux, *Pierre Boulez*, p. 17.

¹⁵ Boulez, *Conversations with Célestin Deliège*, p. 10; 'Ce n'est donc pas une décision tardive, prise avec beaucoup d'hésitations, mais bien une décision qui se trouvait déjà très profondément ancrée en moi; et qui, certainement, provenait d'expériences d'éducation musicale, assez banales d'ailleurs, puisque cette éducation a été faite dans une toute petite ville de province, et donc sans aucun contact avec ce qu'on peut appeler la vie musicale quotidienne'. Boulez, *Par volonté et par hasard*, p. 7.

From the age of seven up to the time of the first Baccalaureate in 1940 at fifteen, the young Boulez was educated at the Institut Victor de Laprade, a private school in Montbrison where the children of local notables were educated and which also served as a minor seminary for the children of peasants destined for the Catholic priesthood. There he met Paul Bouchet, who remained his friend in Lyon and afterwards in Paris, and whom the Boulez family regularly welcomed as he was a boarding student living far from his own family. The austere building, housed in a former seventeenth-century Ursuline convent, was the site of an academically demanding school with Spartan living conditions, where Boulez had to go very early each morning. Pierre Boulez received a religious education, which proved to be not insignificant for the future composer of *Répons*, *Anthèmes 1*, or *Rituel in memoriam Bruno Maderna*, works which, while not ostensibly religious, nevertheless display the imprint of aspects of Catholic liturgical principles. This education quickly offended his sensibility and that of his sister, as he later reflected: ‘What struck me most was that it was so mechanical: there was a total absence of genuine conviction behind it. It was a parody, and when you are young you feel this far more acutely because you want a way of life bearing some relation to your beliefs.’¹⁶

For all that, Pierre Boulez was a serious student, as both his teachers and his friend Paul Bouchet testified: ‘In high school, we were in the top tier in terms of academic results, but my indiscipline ... disqualified me from the Eucharistic crusade, reserved for model students like Pierre; unlike him I could not wear the big button that distinguished the “crusaders”’¹⁷ His name is mentioned in the list of awards of the Victor de Laprade Institute in the local newspapers (*Journal de Montbrison* and the *Mémorial*) in third class in 1938, fourth class in 1937, fifth class in 1936 and sixth class in 1935. Pierre Boulez’s sister describes her brother as ‘naturally disciplined rather than submissive’.¹⁸ Music had a prominent place in the minor seminary thanks to the choirmaster, Abbé Croizet with performance of works typical of the period, by Joseph Noyon or the Abbé himself, but also works by Franck, Handel, Bach or Gregorian chant.¹⁹ In 1940, Boulez obtained

¹⁶ Boulez, *Conversations with Célestin Deliège*, p. 11; ‘Ce qui m’a frappé le plus, c’est une espèce de mécanique qui ne recouvrait absolument pas de conviction profonde : une parodie, et, quand on est jeune, on le ressent d’une façon beaucoup plus violente parce qu’on aime les modes de vie qui correspondent à une conviction. Plus tard, on apprend à s’accommoder tant bien que mal.’ Boulez, *Par volonté et par hasard*, p. 9.

¹⁷ Bouchet, *Mes sept utopies*, p. 88.

¹⁸ Jameux, *Pierre Boulez*, p. 5.

¹⁹ The ‘Fiche de renseignements concernant les Maîtrises de France’, produced by the Professional Committee for musical art and the free teaching of music, gives us an idea of Père Croizet’s repertoire for the children’s choir. See Moysan, ‘Pierre Boulez et le Père Couturier’, June 2021.

his first baccalaureate and spent a year at the Saint-Louis de Saint-Étienne boarding school, where he passed his second baccalaureate (with honours) in 1941. Unlike his friend who joined the Resistance, Boulez said little about the outbreak of war (the Loire was in the free zone at the time) and the consequences this had on his life. In 1941, he entered the Institut des Lazaristes,²⁰ a Catholic school in Lyon: following in his father's footsteps, he entered the Cours Sogno in 'Mathématiques supérieures', to prepare for admission to a higher-level engineering college such as the École Polytechnique or the École des Mines in Paris, before his musical vocation took over, despite his father's reluctance.

The start of his French and then international musical career did not mark an absolute break with his past life. In the post-war period, he met his friend Paul Bouchet in his apartment on rue Beautreillis in Paris. He also most likely met the Dominican priest, Father Couturier,²¹ an atypical figure from Montbrison, a defender of a religious art open to contemporary art, a patron of works of art and the editor of *L'Art sacré*, a modern review dedicated to art and spirituality. Besides, in 2008, Boulez sponsored the renovation of the chapel of Victor de Laprade College, with stained glass windows by the Spanish painter Francisco Bores and frescoes and paintings by Father Couturier. In the final years of his life, the composer also returned to Montbrison: on 18 March 1991, he went back to conduct a concert, then on 1 November 1999, on the occasion of the inauguration of the Pierre Boulez Music Center, which he sponsored,²² and finally to attend the concerts of the Ensemble Orchestral Contemporain, conducted by Daniel Kawka on 17 and 18 June 2011, visiting the places of his childhood and meeting with local officials. Perhaps by this late date he had secured enough distance from this past to accept his title of 'child of the country'.

²⁰ In 1625, St Vincent de Paul founded the 'Société des Prêtres de la Mission', which was located in the 'Clos Saint-Lazare' in Paris, hence the name of Lazarist.

²¹ Moysan, 'Pierre Boulez et le Père Couturier', June 2021.

²² The creation of the Music Center was sponsored by Pierre Boulez at the request of Marie-Jacqueline Couturier (daughter-in-law of Jean Couturier, the brother of Father Couturier). Their correspondence, preserved at the BNF (BNF, Vm Fonds 148 BLZ-1 (200)), testifies to Pierre Boulez's favourable reception of this project.

CHAPTER 2

*Boulez's Musical Education**Joseph Salem*

A number of previous authors have written substantial contributions on the subject of Boulez's early musical education.¹ Most, however, have drawn upon a limited number of sources. One reason for this may be Boulez's well-known resistance to biographical investigation, particularly regarding his youth. Another reason is the lack of strong primary sources relating to his early musical education and a third is that scholarly interest in the composer's musical training was influenced for the most part by 'emic' approaches, with little willingness on the part of scholars to challenge the composer's control over inquiries into his past.² Furthermore, the possibility of consulting those people who were close to Boulez in his youth, as well as access to institutional records and other such sources, has receded over time.³ As a result, even if some facts of his early education are verifiable, reflection on the nature of Boulez's musical education still requires a degree of speculation.

Why speculate? Inquiries into a composer's education (or training) are arguably fuelled by a desire to understand the blend of influence and autonomy in a composer's creative method. In the case of Boulez, his intelligence, autodidactic nature and progressive contributions to music are common refrains in discussions of his development. This combination of elements can minimise considerations of influence and maximise those of creative autonomy, sometimes to the point of promoting the idea of an

¹ The most relevant sources include: Goléa, *Rencontres*; Peyser, *Boulez*; Boulez, *Conversations with Célestin Deliège*; Glock, *Pierre Boulez*; Jameux, *Pierre Boulez*; Méimoun, *Entretien avec Pierre Boulez*; O'Hagan, *Pierre Boulez and the Piano*; Merlin, *Pierre Boulez*; and Potter, *Organised Delirium*.

² By 'emic' approaches, I am referring to the practice of becoming an insider or member of the cultural milieu under examination (as is common in anthropological and ethnomusicological studies of oral traditions). Notable exceptions to the inherent sympathies that sometimes accompany such accounts include Peyser, *Boulez*, and Born *Rationalizing Culture*.

³ Key to several accounts is Boulez's older sister by about three years, Jeanne, born in 1922. By contrast, Boulez's brother Roger was born in 1936, making him too young to recollect any of Boulez's early education first-hand.

avant-garde spirit whose genius was so strong that influences and teachers are described as obstacles to the composer's achievements. Revisiting Boulez's musical education from a twenty-first century perspective reveals how certain facts allow the correction of some established notions, while the lack of other falsifiable claims prompts a certain degree of scepticism when considering the blend of influence and autonomy in his artistic development.

In the following, I provide a brief account of Boulez's musical education. I consider Boulez's formative period as a composer to extend to roughly 1962. This is far beyond his official education, which one might characterise as ending with his last official studies as a student in 1946. I extend this definition to include what we might call, in the case of Boulez, a period of musical apprenticeships which included intellectual mentorships, music direction and conducting. Throughout, I shift from a focus on Boulez's ambitions as a pianist to those as a composer, commentator, music director, conductor and lecturer.

Early Education

Boulez studied piano starting around age six alongside his primary school education at the Institut Victor de Laprade in Montbrison, France.⁴ His sister Jeanne also began lessons at the same time, this being more a reflection of their upper-middle-class status than an indicator of an especially musical household. Significantly, he also sang in the seminary choir until his voice broke, an experience that undoubtedly fostered the development of his legendary intonation and ensemble balance as a conductor.

Boulez's piano studies were typical for a talented member of a small community. He seems to have received adequate training for a private student in a smaller town. Anecdotal evidence suggests that he could play difficult compositions by Chopin at the age of nine and that he performed chamber music by Haydn, Schubert, Mozart, Fauré and Beethoven with local groups – even Saint-Saëns appears in some accounts.⁵ These experiences included song and opera repertoire. Given that several of Boulez's earliest works were for chamber combinations (a violin sonata, a number of *mélodies*), these experiences were formative.

⁴ Jameux, *Pierre Boulez*, p. 4. Boulez suggested later that his piano studies began at the age of seven or eight; see Meïmoun, *Entretien avec Pierre Boulez*, p. 13.

⁵ Jameux, *Pierre Boulez*, p. 4; Peyser, *Boulez*, p. 23. O'Hagan, *Pierre Boulez and the Piano*, provides even more detail on Boulez's likely repertoire and harmony studies post-Montbrison. See also Boulez, *Par volonté et par hasard*, pp. 10–11; and Meïmoun, *Entretien avec Pierre Boulez*, pp. 13–35.

Boulez's musical education developed further when he began studies in nearby Saint-Étienne. He started with piano lessons around 1939 before attending the Saint-Louis boarding school (a private lycée) for a year in 1940–1, which culminated in the completion of his *baccalaureate*.⁶ One assumes that taking lessons in Saint-Étienne was the result of an increased investment by the family in Boulez's musical potential, although at least one biographer stresses that his moving to the boarding school was perhaps more likely related to his aptitude in mathematics.⁷ A memorable anecdote from this period provides a visual memory of Boulez's enchantment with his new teacher: 'when the electricity failed, she lit the candles fixed to the piano, and it was by their flickering light that I first discovered the Beethoven sonatas, works by Debussy, Ravel, and so on'.⁸

Lyon and Paris

Boulez's early education in other subjects continued to be conflated with his musical training for at least one more year. In 1942, he began studies in Lyon. The move seems to have been intended as preparation for the later study of mathematics at the École Polytechnique but it was also around this time that he collaborated with the professional mezzo-soprano Ninon Vallin.⁹ Vallin helped to convince Boulez's family that Pierre should be allowed to continue more serious studies in music while in Lyon however he failed his audition for the Lyon programme. Instead, he studied piano and harmony privately with Lionel de Pachmann.¹⁰ Another major highlight from this time, which Boulez later recalled in interviews, was his discovery of Paul Landormy's historical survey *La Musique Française après Debussy* in Lyon around 1942, which was the first time he saw Schoenberg's name in print alongside the citation of an atonal melody.¹¹

Boulez moved to Paris in August of 1943. By this time, friction with the family was at its height, but the advantages of being in the nation's

⁶ Jameux, *Pierre Boulez*, p. 4; Merlin, *Pierre Boulez*, p. 22. Jameux suggests he completed his *bachot* in two stages, with the first before his move and the second after a year at Saint-Louis (Jameux, *Pierre Boulez*, p. 6).

⁷ Merlin, *Pierre Boulez*, p. 22.

⁸ Quoted in Jameux, *Pierre Boulez*, p. 6. See also Meïmoun, *Entretien avec Pierre Boulez*, pp. 39–40, where he mentions studying Bach through Debussy during these years, including *Poissons d'or*.

⁹ Jameux, *Pierre Boulez*, p. 7. Boulez stresses the nature of his courses in Boulez, *Conversations with Célestin Deliège*, p. 10.

¹⁰ Jameux, *Pierre Boulez*, p. 7. Pachmann, son of Vladimir de Pachmann, was a pianist, composer and founder of the Académie Frédéric Chopin in Paris.

¹¹ Boulez commented nearly seventy years later that he could still remember passages by heart (Meïmoun, *Entretien avec Pierre Boulez*, pp. 16–17).