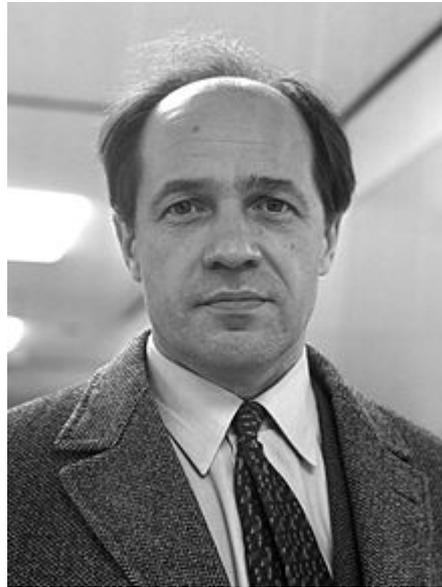


Pierre Boulez 1925-2016: A Personal Appreciation

By Andrew Glover-Whitley



Pierre Boulez in 1968

When one of your musical heroes dies, a man that you have looked up to and admired for decades passes away, it is bad enough, and you look back at what they did and what lasting legacy there will be of that persons work. It is much harder hitting and devastating when that person was the last of a generation that created an era that influenced thousands of composers as well as yourself, changed the course of music drastically and altered perceptions of what was possible.

Pierre Boulez was just such a man. What I have said above may seem fanciful and almost sycophantic but it is certainly the case in Boulez's instance. He was a generator of controversy compositionally, he was one of the great conductors of the 20th century. A musical thinker, philosopher and teacher with no equal other than John Cage. He became recognised along with others of a similar generation as the *enfant terrible's* of new, avant-garde contemporary music just after the war. Along with the likes of Karlheinz Stockhausen, Luciano Berio, Gyorgy Ligeti, Hans Werner Henze, Luigi Nono, Bruno Maderna, Boulez lead the way forward into the Brave New World of post Second World War musical thought and composition. They were nearly all devout revolutionaries not only in music but politically too and in the cases of Nono and Henze great supporters of Maoism and Stalinist Soviet Russia. Boulez was just a French Republican and chose to devote his revolutionary thoughts to that of music.

https://youtu.be/MS82nF85_gA

Le marteau sans Maitre

Boulez was the last survivor of these great names and was venerated as such for the last 20 years as one by one they passed away leaving only memories and their music as their epitaphs.

He was born in the Loire region of France in March 1925 and educated under Olivier Messiaen at the Paris Conservatoire; one of the main influences on him and his generation. It was through Messiaen's intense teaching and research into how it may be possible to develop Schoenberg's 12 tone, or Serialism, further that Boulez and the other composers that were being taught by Messiaen, such as Stockhausen, Berio etc that a new approach was sought and found. It was after the collapse of Europe and the new order imposed by politicians of the war that a new generation felt that they too needed to sweep away everything that had gone before and start anew. This new approach, implemented by Messiaen's students, was the way forward, and the new way included a new approach based on Schoenberg's theories; **Integral Serialism**. This is where everything is controlled and nothing is left to chance. Pitches, rhythms, dynamics textures, pitch registers etc all are bound by the laws of *integral serialism*. Some of this theory had been developed from the work of Schoenberg's student Anton von Webern who had been killed in 1945, just after the war had ended, and was now hailed as the great original, even though Webern was an almost unknown in musical culture and history at this point outside a few dedicated followers.

It was at this point that Boulez really came to the fore with such wide scoping works based on these principles of integral serialism. Works such as "Sonatine for Flute", "Le Marteau sans Maitre", "Pli Selon Pli", "Structures" the "Piano Sonata No.2". These works alone made sure that his name would not be a footnote in the annals of music history. These works swept all music before them in their revolutionary ways of performance and sound worlds. Taking a listen to any of these works today they still sound fresh, original and totally unique. They stand as a standard by which much new music was assessed for over forty years before the advent of the "anti-new music" found in the post-Modernist movement.

<https://youtu.be/u1lfuf2wUok>

Notations (complete)

To those of us who were brought up listening to and being taught the works of these composers, and in particular, Stockhausen, Ligeti and Boulez they were the figures of awe, adoration, and great deification in some cases. Their music meant so much to the generations that followed that it stated clearly and loudly that you were able to produce the music that you wanted to create as long as you were able to justify what and how you had done it. If that box was ticked then it was acceptable. It was in this atmosphere of anything, nearly, goes that I learnt to compose. I learnt from these composers the techniques that you did then. You learnt to justify everything that you wrote and if you were not able to 'justify' what you had just written you discarded the material and found another, more 'justified', way to your goal.

Boulez and the others gave us a freedom and an inalienable right to experiment and not fear reprisals for our efforts by the establishment that controlled access to performances.

It was in the 1970's and 80's that Boulez started to really show his greatness as an all-round musician and his conducting of not only the greats of new music but composers that he was not normally associated with such as Debussy, Mahler and even Wagner. On the centenary of Wagner's death it was to Pierre Boulez that the Bayreuth authorities turned to conduct a new and radically different production of "The Ring Cycle". It was a momentous production that when I first saw it on VHS as a student blew me away and I became a confirmed Wagnerian. His conducting of Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring" is still classed as one of the finest ever and stands alongside that of Stravinsky himself.



As a thinker and philosopher on music Boulez was an influential mind. His treatises on the subject would have gained him many PhD's, but still he remained a unique voice, a devout voice in his support of the modernist experimentalism as begun by Schoenberg and his pupils.

In the 1970's the French government was looking into the possibility of creating a centre of excellence for electronic music based in Paris that would be open to all composers and would encourage particularly the French musical world to become a front runner and leading nation in electronic and acoustical research into music composition. They turned to their chief composer, and main *enfant terrible*, Pierre Boulez, to establish this centre. He nearly single-handedly founded and became the first director of the ***Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique*** (IRCAM) or Institute for Research and Coordination Acoustic / Music in English. IRCAM has become synonymous with high quality experimental electronic and acoustic contemporary music over the years and to get an invite to go and create a work there was, and still is, something very very special. Its building is based in the Pompidou Centre and is

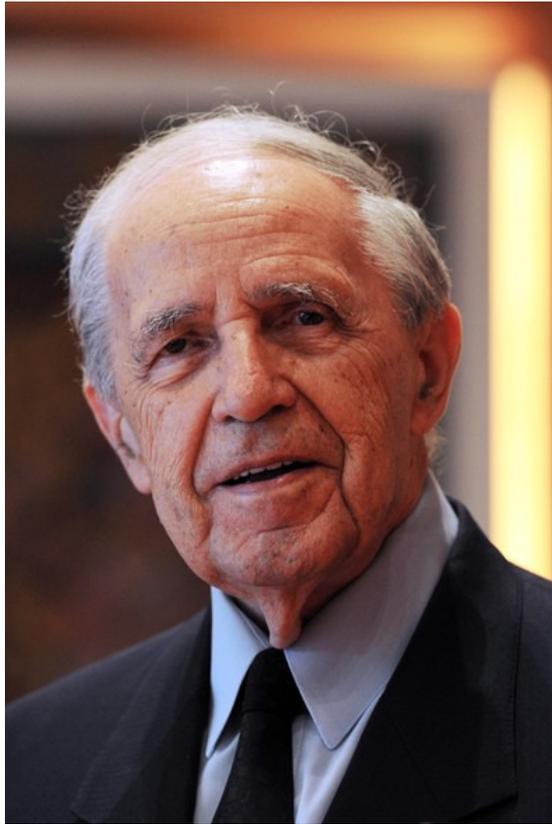
almost as revolutionary as the music it has created over the years. If there is no other memorial to Boulez his legacy of the IRCAM will suffice alone.

<https://youtu.be/iykiRX8ubZs>

Anthemes

By the 1980's when I was beginning to write, their style of technical and free a-tonalism was the norm and held sway over nearly all university departments. It was the public who had held back and not embraced the ideas expounded by Boulez and his ilk, and thus unknowingly at first, and unwittingly the days of great freedom of expression and technical experimentation was coming to an unfortunate close. Minimalism was starting to really make itself felt and a new simplicity was beginning to arise as some composers raised on the theories and philosophical thinking of Boulez and others tried to find a new way of expression that didn't include all the by then technical complexities and rules of musical compositional engagement.

When I was studying for my Doctorate in the early 1990's there was a battle of minds and souls as well as a philosophical war in music beginning to happen. The old experimentalist modernism as expounded by Boulez, Ligeti, Cage and Stockhausen verses the establishments wish to have pretty tunes and nice simple harmonies that didn't jar or make your teeth stand on edge, a movement towards a simpler less idealistic musical world was afoot. It came down to whose side you were on as to how well you succeeded in your career as a composer. Things have quietened down today but the legacy of this battle remains. It has left sharp divisions of thought and philosophy, as well as bitterness, on both sides. Boulez although esteemed and almost deified was seen after the 1990's as being almost redundant, almost irrelevant. The banalism, as then being espoused as something amazing and revolutionary, was the dominant movement in new music. This is certainly true in today's musical environment where the works of Ades, Talbot, pop star crossovers and others are held up as being as great as those of Boulez and Stockhausen, and as worthwhile. Questions have to now be asked as to validity of thought, philosophy and ideas in today's contemporary musical landscape if the likes of these post-modern works are supposed to be considered as valid or as good as the great technical and emotional works of the past generations of Boulez et al. Questions will be asked as to why this is the case in the years to come but few will ever attain the heights of someone philosophically and musically skilled as Pierre Boulez and his generation.



Boulez in 2015

In its obituary, *The New York Times* reported that "about his private life he remained tightly guarded" and that apart from his older sister, Jeanne, "few others were able to break through his reserve". This was Boulez all through. He was respected and revered by those that studied his work, adored by those that knew him personally and loved dearly by those very few that were in his intimate inner circle; and these were very few.

To me he was the last of my new music icons to pass, to most he was a classical music iconoclast. Whichever way you view him and his music he will be remembered in musical history as the last of his unruly, original, revolutionary, unique generation. All heroes must pass or fall. Now there are just us left in a more desolate musical landscape than before.