

TRIBUTE

Pierre Boulez at 90

Precious few *Tempo* readers will be able to remember first hearing or reading the name of Pierre Boulez – a name, one may note, whose twelve elements (in two six-packs) exemplify only nine kinds, perhaps destining its owner to develop some sort of modal serialism, or serial modality, as indeed he did. In his earliest published pieces (*Notations*, 1945) Messiaen collided with Schoenberg, and out of the resulting undifferentiated dust (*Structures Ia*, 1951) there descended patterns, whether rhythmic or intervallic, shaping themselves as the hammer of extraordinary technique and extraordinary imagination forged its masterpiece.

‘I think that music should be collective hysteria and magic, violently modern’ (1948). And then a decade later, with a twist: ‘I increasingly believe that to create effective art, we have to take delirium and, yes, organise it.’

Exceptional among Boulez’s writings in their specificity as to aesthetic ideals; these statements seem to be aimed, forwards and backwards, at the defining work he succeeded in producing, as he wanted, before he was thirty: *Le Marteau sans maître* (1952–54). The magic of sibylline utterances – compacted poems by René Char – emanates from a hysteria so collective it draws on musical cultures from around the world. Fearsome organisation leaves its mark in wild heterogeneity, not constraining delirium but creating it.

Radically innovatory in so many respects – not just in compounding Asian and African with European traditions but also in dislocating the voice from pre-eminence, cross-cutting between distinct sequences and creating a harmonic-rhythmic-textural identity both new and versatile – *Le Marteau* also showed that an Artaudesque violent modernity could, contra Artaud, assume a classic form.

Recognition of this latter aspect came from the very heights, from Stravinsky, in a letter he wrote Nadia Boulanger after hearing the work in Los Angeles in 1957 – ‘an admirable, well-ordered score, despite all the aural and written complications’ – and still more so in one of his own next compositions, *Movements*, where

similar complications are by no means eschewed.

Equally attentive were composers then emerging, such as Birtwistle, who has been very clear about the decisive importance of *Le Marteau*, while Boulez’s contemporaries, including Ligeti, Berio, Barraqué and Stockhausen, each found it the key to an individual door.

But for Boulez himself, it seems to have shut the lock. Published in a revised edition in 1957, *Le Marteau* is the last work, a few miniatures aside, he was to regard as complete. Now could come only open labyrinths, represented most often by segments that might be further unfixed by variable possibilities of realisation, but instanced also in one case by a published draft, ‘...*explosante-fixe*...’ (1971), that could – and has been – developed by other musicians as well as by the author himself.

Of course, *Le Marteau* also turned its composer into a conductor. Boulez had been conducting scores of his own and others for the Renaud-Barrault theatre company since 1946, but it was the Paris premiere of *Le Marteau*, in March 1956, that brought him first to the concert platform. The door that opened in his case turned out, seemingly to his own surprise, to lead to the podium, and to a remarkable international career.

Using this as his opportunity to change the world, he made the great masters of the first half of the twentieth century – Debussy, Stravinsky, Webern, Berg, Schoenberg, Varèse and Bartók, later joined by Ravel and Mahler – central to his repertory, as they remained even after he had, in the early 1970s, taken command of the BBC Symphony Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic. The usefully paradoxical notion of a modern tradition, extending from these composers through his own generation to the next, he had projected through the *Domaine Musical* since 1954 and could now install globally. It is a notion that, though we might want to challenge or revise it, none of us can do without.

Le Marteau sans maître, meanwhile, had no successors, only a succession of glorious and often moving evocations of its finality – works many of them explicitly concerned with death:

Pli selon pli, rolling towards a massive dark cloud; *Rituel*, a funeral chant sung and resung; *Mémoriale*, which keeps dissolving into the same cadence. The mighty orchestral *Notations*, too, stamp out the youthful energies from which they spring.

Easily understood as a diversion, Boulez's conducting career was one solution to the problem of how to go on after *Le Marteau* had fulfilled the needs of a creativity impelled by search. The other was the creation of these monuments, to quote a Klee title in the form Boulez has preferred, 'à la limite du pays fertile' – at the edge of fertile country.

Zealous for change, Boulez brought it about compositionally in his late twenties and orchestrally in his thirties and forties. His example remains a towering challenge – and *Le Marteau* a work whose lessons have by no means all been learned, a time bomb ticking for almost six decades. As its composer now passes the age of ninety, he – and we – can look back on his unrivalled achievements, and contemplate the steadfastness of a life lived then in the afterglow.

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