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Ramifying Connections: An Interview with Pierre Boulez

DAVID GABLE

Pierre Boulez returned to the United States last year for the first time since 1977 when he left the musical directorship of the New York Philharmonic in order to devote more time to composition and to IRCAM, the research institute in Paris that he heads. In California, he led members of the Los Angeles Philharmonic in six concerts of his music, and that of Wagner, Debussy, Bartók, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Berg, Webern and Carter. The following interview took place on 3 June 1984, at the Ojai Festival, where Boulez conducted three of these concerts as music director of the Ojai Festival.

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David Gable: Rather than institutionalizing your taste, the concert series at IRCAM pursues the democratic policy of representing a broad range of contemporary music. For example, Ligeti, Maxwell Davies, the latest Stockhausen, Varèse, the new timbre-oriented French music, Schoenberg, your music, and so forth are all performed. Such American composers as Cage and the minimalists are represented as part of the spectrum. Nevertheless, to an American, it seems striking that an entire school of American composers is neglected in Europe. I am thinking of such composers as Roger Sessions, Milton Babbitt, and Donald Martino. Elliott Carter is a happy exception. Would you care to comment on this?

Pierre Boulez: That's not only my taste but also what people find important. I think Carter is really a very important figure, but that's not only luck: he has scores that are of interest to the musicians who propose them. We do try to establish a balance and I personally would like to see more works of Sessions performed as I did in New York.

Then, too, the balance between countries is always very difficult to establish. Whether you are speaking of American, French, or German music, if you are in Germany you play more German composers, in France more French composers, and so on. We play more music by French composers, although not that much more, and there is the complaint in France that the balance is too favorable to foreigners. To take the example of Italian music, we don't perform enough Petrassi in comparison to Dallapiccola, although he is a very good composer on the level of Dallapiccola. We don't perform him because the works of Dallapiccola suit the ensemble better, offering more to the soloists and singers who propose to perform them.

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Thus the proportion of Dallapiccola is finally greater than that of Petrassi, which doesn't mean that we deliberately ignore Petrassi.

Of course, there are people who are more important to a generation. The interest of musicians for a Ligeti or Stockhausen or Nono in my generation is greater than for other names, and I can understand why, because, finally, they are more important. We really cannot have an encyclopedia where everybody is represented; that would be deadly. I try to have as large as possible a choice which has nothing to do with my personal taste. I am the head of an institution and personal taste should not interfere. I must consider the importance of people—not only quality but the importance they have in the evolution of today's music. That we cannot escape.

We are quite aware of the gulf which exists between Europe and America, but there is an approximately comparable gulf between the East Coast and West Coast here. I regret that it is so difficult to be informed about this country. We keep up with activities in Germany via the German radio, for example. We are constantly in touch with what is going on in Italy or with the BBC. In Europe, there is a circle of information which spreads very quickly while with the States we have no such connection. I have tried to maintain contacts with New York, but I don't know the groups anymore and their activities are not publicized, so great are their difficulties merely to survive. You have either groups functioning within the universities which are barely known outside the universities while in the big cities there is a struggle for money which is enormous—more than in Europe. We have invited the Speculum Musicae of New York to Paris for next year and I am told by Elliott Carter that they have the greatest difficulty barely to survive, to put on only a couple of concerts a year.

D.G.: In Urbana recently, Milton Babbitt remarked that the future of music looked very different to him thirty-five years ago than it does today. He finds the "new pluralism" symptomatic of something unhealthy in the body musical. Would you comment on this?

P.B.: Oh, yes. I find no situation unhealthy. I cannot find an unhealthy situation. All situations are healthy because they grow naturally out of some circumstance. I don't think the future of music is really what we saw; it was never just one line. That was the utopia of Schoenberg, that there would be this one evolution from Bach to Schoenberg and nothing else. That was a typically nineteenth-century scientist's idea of progress, but we know that progress is not in a straight line. It goes through all kinds of developments and curves and sometimes even retrogradations. Progress is much more like a virgin forest than a line.

I am not at all disturbed by the variety of things myself. What disturbs me is the lack of real adventure. Either you have these trends, fashions which last one or two years, or you have these big retrogradations to an idea of Romanticism, which is not at all Romanticism, because Romanticism was made by people who were adventurers, discoverers. These people

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are only rediscovering the past but without any meaning. Their discovery is a pale imitation, very often with no *métier* at all, and I find that more distressing than anything else. They take refuge in a kind of small spot which is finally lifeless. When I hear a kind of pseudo-Wagner or pseudo-Mahler, I prefer to hear the real Wagner or real Mahler, who were real figures, while these people are simply fakes. It's like an antique shop with fake Louis XIV, fake Louis XV, fake Louis XIII.

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Boulez has been interested in composing an opera since the mid-60s when the playwrights who seemed to interest him most were Claudel, Brecht, Beckett, and Genet. After seeing a production of Genet's *Les Paravents*, he attempted to persuade Genet to collaborate on an opera, but it was only recently that Genet finally agreed. Some playwrights, said Boulez, such as "Beckett, have a very strong visual imagination but put it all into the text so that there is no room for anything else. The text has all its significance by itself and there is no empty space. But in the Genet plays you have empty spaces into which you could put the dimension of sound. . . .If you see *Haute Surveillance* or *Les Bonnes* of Genet, these are really closed plays, which reject any kind of intervention. From them to *Les Paravents* is a very big evolution. Suddenly, you have open space for every type of invention." (*Opera*, v. 20, pp. 1027–29, 1969)

D.G.: I understand that you are composing an opera. Patrice Chéreau is said to have renewed Jean Genet's interest in this project. Has Genet written a libretto for you?

P.B.: Well, there is certainly some truth in that. I have not seen Genet for a couple of months because he spends winter in Morocco. I plan to see him when I am back, but I cannot say much more.

D.G.: You don't know what shape the libretto will take?

P.B.: Oh, yes! That's for sure. We have had discussions about it, but I cannot say anything yet.

D.G.: You have said that you admire the exploitation of a "new theatrical space" in the work of directors Patrice Chéreau and Peter Stein. Will your opera make use of that?

P.B.: Certainly, because we have to be very pragmatic. For acoustic reasons, you cannot "invent" just any kind of space. If you want to use a certain number of musicians, you have to put them in a situation where the acoustics are good. You cannot just put them on stage and try to conduct them by monitor; that's impossible. So at the same time you have to be

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pragmatic and to be inventive. I think the stage director should be there from the very beginning. I can take charge of the acoustic problems, but we must work together from the very beginning so that the director is also aware of these problems.

D.G.: Then it's safe to say that this is a collaboration between you, Chéreau, and Genet from the very beginning?

P.B.: Yes, from the very beginning.

D.G.: You have conducted the *Ring, Tristan*, and *Parsifal*, all with the Bayreuth company, and have written several essays on Wagner. How will this experience affect your composition of an opera? (Of course, we've evolved a century here!)

P.B.: Well, direct influence, that's difficult to say! What attracts me in Wagner are these mythological characters. With Mozart and even more with Wagner, you have these characters who are prototypes. They are not only individuals but also mythic figures. That is for me the most important aspect of the theatre of Wagner. Of course, at the same time, I know it masks a kind of bourgeois theatre with all this marriage and pseudo-marriage—especially *Götterdämmerung*. But there is a background behind these characters which makes them not only natural characters but something else additionally.

There is an important aspect of Wagner which once provoked numerous jokes: repetition. He repeats the same story a thousand times, which helps to give roots to these characters. If you see these people only once, you know that they are in this situation for a scene and then disappear. When Wagner returns repeatedly to this story, that's like a plant. You plant the character in the earth. That's the difference between *Pelléas*, a work which nevertheless I like very much, and all the Wagner operas, even *Tristan*. The characters of *Pelléas* are non-existent shadows. On the contrary, the characters of *Tristan* have this large dimension because you know the story behind it. There is no story behind *Pelléas*, particularly, only this meeting and nowhere and no when either. That's not interesting because the characters evaporate very rapidly. Wagner's repetitive presentation of the characters, always returning to the origin at various stages in the story, creates a kind of density in the characters. Wagner's music works in exactly the same way.

D.G.: What will *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* have to do with your opera? Is there any influence there?

P.B.: Yes much more direct, in a way, because I think *Wozzeck* is the only opera where the level of the music is exactly on the level of the literature, especially owing to the marvellous play [by Büchner]. That's the

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only one for me, even more than *Lulu*. *Lulu* is very dramatic, but the quality of the *Wozzeck* text is extraordinarily impressive. If you look at all of the operatic literature, you may have Strauss with Hofmannsthal where the two levels are always similar. That is the only case where you have a solid literary quality, but that's not Büchner. Not only is Büchner of really very high quality, but Berg also benefits in that the Büchner piece was not finished; he could rearrange it according to his will. Berg could make his own *Dramaturgie*.

I also find in Berg that there are marvellous ideas which are almost never exploited after him, ideas of thematic form in which the form is the character itself—not only themes as in Wagner: the sonata form which is tied to Dr. Schön, for instance, or the sonata form which is tied to the situation in *Wozzeck* between Wozzeck, Marie, and the child. I find such correspondences of theatrical situation and form very interesting. The step forward with *Lulu* into thinking no longer in closed forms, the idea of forms which are intertwined, that is something very interesting. But in works which come after Berg, you never ever see that.

D.G.: A number of European composers have written interesting experiments in music theatre. Last fall you conducted two of these: a Ligeti piece [*Aventures* and *Nouvelles Aventures*] and Maxwell Davies' *Eight Songs for a Mad King*. While these works are serious attempts to realize a new musical theatre, don't you find the musical side rather thin?

P.B.: Not in Ligeti. I find that the musical side is not that thin after all. On the other hand, it is really the kind of jokes that were funny twenty years ago, which wear off when you hear them a couple of times. Since I was participating and could watch the rehearsals, I think the Ligeti work is really a concert work and not a theatre work, although he himself prepared the theatrical version. What is funny in the Ligeti is to see these three singers in a kind of oratorio situation making this peculiar kind of noise. The absurdity lies in the discrepancy between these three people in evening dress or in tuxedo on the one hand and what they are doing on the other. Eventually it becomes very disturbing, which is rather more interesting than this humorous aspect. You are disturbed and a very strange feeling is produced, because the joke is finally not such a joke. In the end, that's what is most absorbing about these Ligeti works.

And the second piece [*Eight Songs*]? Yes, I would say that's thin, but it is very well chosen dramatically. We had a production which was very clever because the young Australian [David Freeman] who directed it did not choose George III. He chose to put the action in a hospital ward where there was a madman taking himself for George III. It was much more interesting than just the plain story. Of course, the music is not the best Maxwell Davies, but it has an impact owing to the dramatic situation.

On the other hand, all of this—as we call it in France—"*Theâtre musical*" is generally very, very thin, it's true.

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D.G.: You seemed to have written *fini* on the score of *Le Visage nuptial* in 1951 and yet you have recently elected to revise it. There is a remark of Schoenberg that when he altered four or five passages of *Gurrelieder* in 1911, these corrections alone gave him more trouble than the composition of the whole work. *Visage nuptial* was written before the great divide in your work of total serialism. How can an, in essence, different Pierre Boulez take up this older work thirty years later?

P.B.: It isn't the composer who takes this up now. It has purely to do with the orchestra, in its practical aspect. When I wrote that, when I did the orchestration, I had no experience with the orchestra. I used register after a rather ''literary'' experience of the orchestra. I had heard scores but not all that deeply and I lacked the knowledge I have now. I took a rehearsal of *Visage nuptial* when it was supposed to be done two or three years ago and I was so unhappy with the orchestration; but I don't want to change the music. Now I know the weight of the instruments. I wrote in a register which was really not necessary for what I wanted. If you are writing for exceptional registers, you must really write something exceptional, but if it's only a chord and you put the third trombone there only because you need a high note, that's not really good. That is the first thing. Second is the thickness. You have a kind of utopia where anything goes and for the passages with two soloists it is much too thick. I must rewrite and reduce that. Again, this is not a musical task. If you have the two scores, compare the work I have done on *Soleil des eaux*, first version, and the *Soleil des eaux* I did in '65. The music is not changed at all, but as for the orchestration, now you can play it!

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Boulez's most recent large-scale composition is *Répons*, a work in progress first presented at Donaueschingen in 1981 in a twenty-two minute version but subsequently performed in London in a thirty-five minute version.* Boulez and his Ensemble InterContemporain will perform *Répons* when they tour the United States in 1986. The work is scored for a twenty-four piece orchestra (winds, brass, strings), which the audience surrounds. The six soloists (harp, piano, pitched percussion), who produce computer-modified sounds, form a perimeter around the audience.

D.G.: I was impressed with *Répons* as I became familiar with it through a tape of the Donaueschingen version. It strikes me as such a convincing unity that I was surprised when I heard the London version in which you detach that beautiful final woodwind chord and add ten minutes more music. How long, in fact, can a through-composed work in a non-tonal idiom be sustained and how do you view the overall form of *Répons*?

*A third version of *Répons* was presented in Paris on October 13, 1984.

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P.B.: Oh, that's already decided. What I did for *Répons* was to construct practically the whole work. As a matter of fact, the part which will come at the end was written first. I have taken this project from the two extremities, but the center keeps proliferating.

D.G.: No one has heard the end. You've written it but no one has heard it?

P.B.: No, you have not heard it. It is written but not performed. You know, I always write the particell with quite a lot of [instrumental] notations, but especially for this work, which involves the technical aspect also, I very often change my mind. I expand some things more than I expanded them in the first version. The first version represents a reduced view of things. Then progressively as I orchestrate, I expand a lot but the form is preserved. The form is a spiral form in which you go through a similarity of developments, but each time it becomes either more complex or less complex. This idea has interested me for a long time. To some extent I realize it in *Éclat/Multiples*, but now in *Répons*, I really realize this form of a spiral. It's like a spiral staircase; you are here or there, but you see the stair, the floors, and so on.

D.G.: In Debussy's music, there is not so much a counterpoint of line as a play of opposed textures and contrasting sonorities. As a young man, you once criticized Debussy because, according to you, he never foresaw the renaissance of polyphony that the three Viennese would inaugurate. Now *Tombeau* [*Pli selon pli*], for example, is not Viennese music in any sense, but the contrast between the dense contrapuntal writing there and the prevailing heterophony of *Répons* is striking.

P.B.: Yes, absolutely. I was always struck by the fact that when you don't pay attention [in composition] to the overall envelope of the pitch, then you cannot follow anything. You are lost. Therefore, in *Répons*, especially where the tempo is very fast, the harmony is absolutely——not reduced, but very severely controlled. Then even when you have quite a lot of things going on, you can follow the envelope. I have heard it both while conducting and without conducting, and I think it's very clear. As the register moves up and down, you can very readily follow it, something which I think was missing in my first works. For instance, in my Second Sonata, which I still like very much as a kind of organized counterpoint, the registers were not only a little bit, they *were* anarchic. There was some direction but not enough control for me. Then when I began to work with total serialism and all the parameters, it was no longer possible to control anything. Now, either I have these effects of chaos, but only for a limited time, because perception cannot be disoriented for too long without the interest collapsing completely, or the interest is focused with some guidelines. Even when the guidelines are not especially apparent, or when one

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dimension is coupled with others, there will be a dimension which you can follow rather easily. Of course, the other dimensions may be less easy to follow. I find these envelopes of the various characters very necessary. Therefore *Répons* and even already *Éclat* tend in this direction.

D.G.: In the evolution of music after World War II, you and Stockhausen held an attitude toward time which has led to a static, floating conception of music. American composers have remained interested in more dynamic temporal structures that remain connected to the tradition of Beethoven and Schoenberg. Would you comment on this division between these two kinds of time?

P.B.: Maybe that's due to education, environment, and everything else, which I think is good, because if you were to compose the same music in all parts of the world [gestures negatively]...

As far as Stockhausen and I are concerned, I think that comes from one thing. I see that very clearly: the influence of all the music of Asia. It was very strong. I was always very interested in the culture of Asia and especially their notion of time, which seems so much more rich than our notion of time. In our Western civilization, we are always ready to go from A to B and when we get there through a straight line, we are always very happy because we think that that is the best solution. But I like to stop and listen to the sound only, although with a sense for logic and development. To have a marvellous score, good, that's a pleasure; but sometimes I think you don't have much more than simple pleasure in that.

D.G.: The order is fixed in the new version of the third Mallarmé *Improvisation* introduced last fall in Milan [1983]. Has your attitude toward the aleatoric question changed?

P.B.: It has become more practical. I wrote the Mallarmé at the very beginning of my experience with the orchestra, and I still had some utopian notions. Not that I want completely to suppress utopia! But in the Mallarmé, where you have thirty or forty people and you give them all some choice, you may be sure that there will be very many mistakes. Really, it's not worth the game. You can do this only with a very small number of people and for very precise things. Then, if you give a number of figures to play in any order, it's very easy on cue. Otherwise it's a complete mess.

The best thing is to write for a big group, but with some soloists who have special undetermined places, or to have a group of soloists alone. While that can be done and while I still like these ideas, I don't attach more significance to it than is necessary, nor as much as I attached twenty years ago. In *Répons*, for instance, all the soloists are tied to the center, but with very flexible ties, but that also has to do with the optics. The soloists are very far from the conductor and cannot follow a quick beat. Either I give a beat at the beginning that they are roughly able to follow so that they

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shift only slightly without remaining exactly synchronized with the main instruments, or I give them a cue from time to time and they pursue their own tempo. I very much like this kind of flexibility of relations where not everybody is always in strict meter.

D.G.: Are you working on any other pieces?

P.B.: First I want to finish *Notations* of which the second four are now ready. I want to finish all twelve. That will make a set for half a concert. Then I want to write a series of pieces for large orchestra, not on the model of *Notations* [recompositions for orchestra of early piano pieces], but an entirely new set which can be performed as a whole. I have always had this idea of a book of things from which you can detach a chapter or return it to its place. I have in mind a book like Joyce, where you can read a chapter in itself and it is absolutely coherent. Then you put it back in the book and there are all of these ramifying connections.

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