
STRUCTURALISTS CONTRA SERIALISTS? CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS AND PIERRE BOULEZ ON AVANT-GARDE MUSIC¹

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Forty-five years ago, Claude Lévi-Strauss deemed the principles underlying serial music to be ill-founded. A casual reader of this critique might well have adduced *that serial music and musique concrète claim to be Structuralist projects; Lévi-Strauss is the very incarnation of structuralism; Lévi-Strauss denounced serial music and musique concrète; therefore, serial music and musique concrète are not genuinely structuralist projects.* The substantial space that Lévi-Strauss devoted to an acerbic criticism of serial music and *musique concrète* in the famous Overture to the *Raw and the Cooked* ([1964] 1969; surprising in a work devoted to the rites and customs of South American aboriginal groups) called into question the very foundations of the European avant-garde musical project of the time, symbolically situated at the International Summer Courses at Darmstadt and embodied in such figures as Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen. While Boulez and Stockhausen made abundant use of the much-fetishized word *structure* in their lectures and writings of the time (e.g., Boulez 1963 and 1991; also Stockhausen 1955), Lévi-Strauss seemed to imply that the musical movement of the serialists (as well as the defenders of *musique concrète*, whose chief spokesperson was Pierre Schaeffer, especially Schaeffer 1966) had nothing in common with the structuralist project besides their shared use of the word *structure*, which in the hands of the serialists conferred only a patina of pseudo-scientific rigour on a project erected on spurious foundations.

Nevertheless, despite this well-publicized critique, there seems to be a growing consensus today among music historians interested in the post-Second World War period that the avant-garde musical projects of Boulez and Stockhausen (or, for instance, of John Cage, René Leibowitz, as well as countless others) constituted a form of musical structuralism, that is, a musical counterpart to that paradigm-shifting intellectual current in the social sciences and the humanities.² It is certainly tempting to identify the musical approaches promulgated by Boulez and others with the equally radical intellectual project in the social sciences contemporary with it; doing so presents, nevertheless, a historiographic conundrum, since many developments in modern music actually preceded their formulation by structuralist thinkers. For instance,

¹ Parts of this paper form chapter 1 of Goldman 2011.

² See, for example, the title of Inge Kovács's book on Boulez, Cage, and Leibowitz, *Wege zum musikalischen Strukturalismus* (2003); see also Grant 2006.

radical works such as Olivier Messiaen's *Mode de Valeurs et d'intensités* (1949), Boulez's *Structures pour deux pianos* (1951), Karel Goeyvaerts's *Sonata for Two Pianos* (1950–51), or Stockhausen's *Kreuzspiel* (1951) were composed before the term *structuralism* was in broad use and before many of the seminal books associated with this current had been published.³ Another historical puzzle is posed by the way Boulez's music was highlighted by such figures as Gilles Deleuze and François Lyotard—writers who came to be known as post-structuralists.⁴

And yet the affinity between the project of the musical avant-garde, and in particular of the technique of total serialism, in which the variations of pitch, duration, intensity, and timbre are all subjected to the same principles of proportion, and the structuralist impulse, focused as it is on the implicit codes that govern human activities, remains striking, not least in the way both are interested in the analogy with language and with the creation and interpretations of codes. To refer to the serialist project as a manifestation of structuralist thought implies that the schism that developed in the early 1960s between (Boulezian) serialists and (Lévi-Straussian) structuralists might have hinged on a misunderstanding that obscured from view the fundamental similarity of approach between the intellectual movement on the one hand and the school of composition on the other.⁵ It is tempting to identify the links between the intellectual movement that extended Saussure's linguistic project to various areas of the social sciences, humanities, and fine arts, with a musical movement fixated on the challenge of constructing a musical language.⁶ In the writings of Boulez, for example, one finds, and not only during the golden age of structuralism in the early 1960s (an era in which structuralist rhetoric infused so much of public discourse in France that, as François Dosse recounts in his *History of Structuralism*, even the coach of the French national soccer team described the changes he was making to his organization as "structuralist"),⁷ but even well into the 1980s, a musical theory permeated by structuralist thought of the Lévi-Straussian variety. This article will argue that the serialist compositional project of the post-Second World War era, embodied primarily in the figure of Boulez, can be considered structuralist in the sense of the intellectual movement promulgated by Claude Lévi-Strauss, despite the latter's denunciation of serial music.

³ On the chronology of the first works of total serialism and a comparative treatment of these works, see Toop 1974.

⁴ See Campbell 2010, chapter 7.

⁵ Detailed discussions of Lévi-Strauss's polemics against serialism and *musique concrète* can be found in Donin and Keck (2006) and Nattiez (2008). The account laid out in the current essay owes much to the treatment by these three authors.

⁶ In a way, Umberto Eco embarked on such a project (1971) when he proposed a theory in which, as Edward Campbell describes it, "the series would no longer negate structure but would instead be the expression of a historical, self-questioning structure. For this to happen it would be necessary to find an articulatory level that would facilitate understanding of 'serial thought' in terms of 'structural thought'" (Campbell 2010, 130–31).

⁷ In the preface to Dosse (1991) 1997.

THE ORIGINS OF STRUCTURALISM

The story of the origins of structuralist thought is familiar, and the narrative need not be rehearsed here except in barest outline.⁸ Structural linguistics could be said to have emerged from the writings of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), godfather of the science of semiotics. Significantly, the French linguist Georges Mounin gave his book on Saussure the telling subtitle “le structuraliste sans le savoir.” Although Saussure himself favoured the word *system* to that of *structure*, his lectures, reconstructed as the *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916), greatly contributed to the development of the type of scientific reasoning applied to the social sciences and the humanities that came to be known, in the late 1950s, as structuralism. In these famous lectures, Saussure had the far-reaching intuition that the types of analyses that had already made great advances in the study of the linguistic sign (notably in the study of what later became known as phonology) could be applied more generally to any science studying signs or symbols; such an approach could be particularly fruitful in the social sciences, and to the study of culture in general. As Saussure noted, “a science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it *semiology*” (1986, 16).⁹ In his *Cours de linguistique générale*, he constructed a linguistic theory from the principle of difference: any linguistic unit had value only inasmuch as it was different from other units in the same system. In phonemics, for example, the study of the smallest units of linguistically distinctive sound peculiar to a given language, certain oppositions between sounds signal differences in meaning between words. The subject of phonology is then not the *sounds* of phonemes themselves, but rather this *relevant* difference. As Saussure writes, “What is important in the word is not the sound itself, but the phonic differences which allow for the word to be distinguished from all others, for these are what carry the meaning” (117).¹⁰

Structural anthropology, the first conscious application of Saussurian linguistic principles to the social sciences, would depend on this principle of relevant difference. Its beginnings can be traced to Lévi-Strauss’s having met linguist Roman Jakobson, founder of the Prague Circle, at the New School for Social Research in New York in 1941, where both were teaching.¹¹ Through his exchanges with Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss came to realize that the vast quantity of empirical data he had amassed on the social organization of various First Nation peoples could be “reduced to a small number of differential gradations, in the same way linguistics could express a language as a system of relations

⁸ This account is detailed more extensively in Goldman 2011, chapter 1.

⁹ “On peut donc concevoir *une science qui étudie la vie des signes au sein de la vie sociale*; elle formerait une partie de la psychologie sociale, et par conséquent de la psychologie générale; nous la nommerons *sémiologie*” ([1931], 33; emphasis in original).

¹⁰ “Ce qui importe dans le mot, ce n’est pas le son lui-même, mais les différences phoniques qui permettent de distinguer le mot de tous les autres, car ce sont elles qui portent la signification” ([1931], 163).

¹¹ Donin and Keck (2006, 113) recount the origins of structuralism in detail.

between phonemes.”¹² This founding gesture of structural anthropology would then go on to be re-enacted in a variety of fields, beginning in the early 1960s, allowing structuralist thought to permeate such varied cultural spheres as folklore, archaeology, or economics, in addition to Lévi-Strauss’s groundbreaking work on ethnology and myth.¹³ In each of these applications, the phonological principle of difference is employed in order to construct hierarchical systems built up from nested systems of oppositions obtaining between a finite number of elements. These elements acquire meaning not from any intrinsic properties that they may have, but through their relationship with other objects. Often these objects are defined through a series of binary observations, because, as Jonathan Culler observes, “Structuralists have generally followed Jakobson and taken the binary opposition as a fundamental operation of the human mind basic to the production of meaning” (Karl 1997, 17).

Since structuralists approach different types of symbolic systems as languages, it was inevitable that music, long considered a language, would be studied with the tools of structuralist linguistics. And in fact several notable analytical methods inspired by structuralist linguistics were proposed, beginning in the 1960s, most notably in so-called paradigmatic analysis, a form of musical chart, originally inspired by Lévi-Strauss’s analyses of myths, anticipated by the ethnomusicologist Gilbert Rouget, proposed by Ruwet, and systematized by Nattiez, in which synchronic similarities are mapped out through the placement of score fragments into columns.¹⁴ It is also noteworthy in this regard that aspects of Schenkerian analysis seem to anticipate structuralist approaches, even if Heinrich Schenker conceived of his analytical method long before structuralism had become common currency.¹⁵

Of course, if the structuralist impulse had a certain inevitability with respect to music analysis, it is not so obvious that structuralism could exert a similar influence on musical composition, i.e., the creative activity of the artist, rather than the scholarly activity of the musicologist or theorist. The reasons that it did in fact exert an influence on music composition are that, once applied to music, structuralist thinking tends to blur the line between analysis and composition, since both can be interpreted as varieties of symbolic activity based on the construction of a symbolic model of the object. This is why Barthes claimed in a seminal essay that structuralists like Granger, Gardin, Lévi-Strauss, or Troubetzkoy “are all doing nothing different from what Mondrian, Boulez or Butor are doing when they articulate a certain object—what will be called, precisely, a composition—by the controlled manifestation of certain units and certain associations of these units” (1972, 215).

¹² Ibid., 113.

¹³ See Nattiez 2008, chapter 4.

¹⁴ See Rouget 1961, Ruwet (1966) 1987, and Nattiez 1976; see also Donin and Goldman 2008.

¹⁵ Deliège (1965) enumerates a number of analytical methods in music that are inspired by structuralist thought.

SOURCES OF LÉVI-STRAUSS'S OPPOSITION TO SERIALISM

Returning to Lévi-Strauss's aforementioned denunciations of the serialist project in *The Raw and the Cooked*, how can it be explained that the spiritual leader of structuralism denounced the serialist project with such vehemence? More importantly for a music historian, can one nevertheless refer to Boulez's project as an expression of musical structuralism despite Lévi-Strauss's eloquent rebuke? It is clear that one of the reasons for Lévi-Strauss's antagonism to serialism had more to do with the irreducibly subjective matter of his personal musical tastes, rather than any more serious theoretical objection. Born in 1908 into a cultured upper-middle-class family, Lévi-Strauss, like many of his compatriots, was swept up in a wave of French Wagnerism; in the *Raw and the Cooked*, for instance, he speaks of "that God, Richard Wagner" (1969, 15). After Wagner, he discovered Debussy, which constituted a highly conventional progression in personal musical taste in the first quarter of the century. As Nicolas Donin and Frédéric Keck explain in a penetrating essay on Lévi-Strauss's attitude towards serialism, "Lévi-Strauss relies in the 1960s on a musical experience forged in the 1930s, in order to go beyond the mathematical and pictorial model of structural analysis in the 1950s, and also to anchor mythology in a potentially universal naturalness and affectivity; whereas musical structuralism aimed at collectively generating in an extremely wilful manner, rules and works, during the burst of artistic creativity in the 1950s, in reaction to an era of taste—the interwar period—which is precisely the era in which Lévi-Strauss forged his aesthetic categories."¹⁶

It is likely that Wagner exerted a lasting influence on Lévi-Strauss's intellectual development, given that his project of "anchoring" mythology in a "potentially universal naturalness" has much in common with Wagner's mythologico-operatic ideal. At any rate, Donin and Keck then proceed to show through historical analysis that this misunderstanding can be explained by their having been temporally and aesthetically out of sync. Nattiez too is no doubt correct in claiming that Lévi-Strauss's negative judgments emerged more from his personal tastes than from any theoretical objection when he observes that "the only musics that interest the anthropologist are those that, by analogy with tonal music, procure an emotion. In this, he feels close to the listener in the eighteenth century who was sensitive to 'expression,' that is, the way music is able to render situations and emotions."¹⁷

¹⁶ "Lévi-Strauss s'appuie dans les années 1960 sur une expérience de mélomane forgée dans les années 1930, pour dépasser d'une part le modèle mathématique et pictural de l'analyse structurale des années 1950, et pour ancrer d'autre part la mythologie dans une naturalité et dans une affectivité potentiellement universelles; tandis que le Structuralisme musical vise à générer de façon collective et extrêmement volontariste des règles et des œuvres, dans la période de foisonnement artistique des années 1950, par réaction à une époque du goût — celle de l'entre-deux-guerres — qui est précisément celle au cours de laquelle Lévi-Strauss a forgé ses catégories esthétiques" (Donin and Keck 2006, 102; author's translation).

¹⁷ "[...] que les seules musiques qui intéressent l'anthropologue sont celles qui, par analogie avec la musique tonale, lui procurent une émotion. En cela, il se sent proche de l'auditeur du XVIII^e siècle qui était sensible «à l'expression, c'est-à-dire la façon dont la musique parvient à rendre des situations et des émotions»" (Nattiez 2008, 129; author's translation).

Now, it hardly needs mentioning that serial works by Boulez, Stockhausen, or Barraqué are anything but expressionless or emotionless. But Lévi-Strauss was measuring mid-twentieth-century music by the yardstick of nineteenth-century aesthetics when he tied the content of musical expression to the representation of emotional states or situations. It is only in the nineteenth-century sense of the word that Boulez's music could be construed as lacking expression, whereas the words of the young Boulez, who wrote in 1948 that music should be "hysteria and magic, violently modern—along the lines of Antonin Artaud" (1991, 54)¹⁸ were clearly not intended as a repudiation of expression in music *tout court*. It is true, however, that if Lévi-Strauss were to judge Boulez by the yardstick of his opinionated encyclopedia entry on the series written for the 1958 Fasquelle encyclopedia—which concludes with the famous statement that "classical tonal thought is based on a universe defined by gravity and attraction; serial thought on a universe in continuous expansion" (236)¹⁹—he would have been struck by the absence of discourse on the emotions that all music, serial or otherwise, has the capacity to inspire. Whatever the causes of Lévi-Strauss's antipathy to serial music, it is certain that it discouraged many music historians from applying the structuralist moniker to the musical activities of the post-war avant-garde, a qualification that retrospectively seems particularly apt, replete as it is with considerable explanatory value.

From the beginning it is clear that in speaking of serial music, Lévi-Strauss refers almost exclusively to Boulez's writings on the subject, and first and foremost to his entry on the series in the Fasquelle encyclopedia. Similarly, when Lévi-Strauss speaks about *musique concrète*, he refers inevitably to the writings of the other Pierre, i.e., Schaeffer, author of the famous *Traité des objets musicaux* (1966). It is obvious that when Lévi-Strauss describes *musique concrète* as an art form in which sounds are assembled after having been first "de-natured"—cut off from their source—he is using the Schaefferian conception of acousmatic music. Now, it would be tempting to replace the term *serial music* in Lévi-Strauss's texts by *Boulez's thought* as well as *musique concrète* by *Schaeffer's thought*, but this would doubtless be overly simplistic, not only because there were many practitioners of both serial music and *musique concrète* at the time who did not adhere to the theoretico-aesthetic principles of either Boulez or Schaeffer, as the example of Bruno Maderna's serial music or Luc Ferrari's acousmatic works eloquently demonstrates. It is worth, nevertheless, stressing the fact that Lévi-Strauss bases his arguments not so much on the music of Boulez or Schaeffer, but on their respective writings. This point is crucial, since, to take as an illustration the principles of acousmatic music, as elaborated in the *Traité*, Schaeffer himself rarely applied them strictly to his own compositions, as the very obvious (locomotive) source of his famous *Étude aux chemins de fer* (1948) demonstrates. It is likely that Schaeffer was not Schaefferian in his musical practice, just as

¹⁸ "La musique doit être hystérie et envoûtement collectifs, violemment actuels — suivant la direction d'Antonin Artaud" (Boulez 1995, 262).

¹⁹ "La pensée tonale classique est fondée sur un univers défini par la gravitation et l'attraction; la pensée sérielle, sur un univers en perpétuelle expansion" (Boulez 1995, 355).

Boulez was not strictly Boulezian in his.²⁰ The composer's writing is, after all, a symbolic form in and of itself, which functions independently of those other symbolic forms that are musical works: each has its own motivations and intentions, as well as its own strategies of production and reception.²¹ In short, it is likely that Lévi-Strauss finds fault in Boulez's and Schaeffer's *discourse* more than in their respective music ~~as such~~.

Another reason that Lévi-Strauss's criticism is difficult to accept without qualification lies in its very structuralist premises, rooted as they are in an oppositional logic that can verge on the Manichean. For example, he sets Boulez's and Schaeffer's thought in opposition, as if the "serial" and "concrète" approaches, while having similar goals, attack the problem from opposite ends:²² "Whatever the gulf between *musique concrète* and serial music in respect of intelligence, the question arises whether both are not deceived by the utopian ideal of the day: one concentrates on matter; the other on form; but both are trying to construct a system of signs on a single level of articulation" (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 24).²³ While it is an inspired move to superimpose the serial/*concrète* opposition over top of the form/matter one, these categories are no longer tenable without qualification. A half century later, it is difficult to continue to believe in the myth that electro-acousticians work "on the sound itself," as if it were possible to compose without mediation of any kind, even if versions of this idea are often maintained in discourse on electro-acoustic music to this day.²⁴ Moreover, it is equally difficult to accept that the delicate timbres of such works from the 1960s as Boulez's *Pli selon pli* (1957–63) or *Éclat* (1965) were the products of musical thought that turned its back on the materiality of sound in favour of pure form.

As it happens, Lévi-Strauss's famous critique was, in fact, an extension of arguments advanced earlier by the Belgian linguist and musicologist Nicolas Ruwet, and Lévi-Strauss's objections can be understood in light of Ruwet's earlier comments, which were published in a scathing 1959 essay—at the height

²⁰ Boulez has been known on occasion to insert material from one of his works into another one, the best known example of this being the *Première improvisation sur Mallarmé* (first version 1957), second movement of *Pli selon pli* (1957–62), in which Boulez used material from two of his *Notations* (1945) for piano (nos. 5 and 9) in the instrumental interludes that separate the strophes (Bassetto 2003, 40). A compositional practice consisting of musical borrowings between disparate works seems strangely at odds with a strict criterion of aesthetic unity to which Boulez seems committed in his contemporaneous writings.

²¹ On the semiological status of the composer's writings, see Nattiez 1990, 183–97.

²² Of course, while this might apply to the thought of Boulez and Schaeffer, it is certainly not generalizable to either serial music or to *musique concrète* as a whole; the example of some of the tape music of Stockhausen, such as *Gesang der Jünglinge* (1955–56), which is at once serial music and *musique concrète*, is telling in this regard.

²³ "Quel que soit l'abîme d'inintelligence qui sépare la *musique concrète* de la musique sérielle, la question se pose de savoir si, en s'attaquant l'une à la matière, l'autre à la forme, elles ne cèdent pas à l'utopie du siècle, qui est de construire un système de signes sur un seul niveau d'articulation" (Lévi-Strauss 1964, 32; also quoted in Nattiez 2008, 117).

²⁴ That this myth still has a powerful hold on discourse on *musique concrète* is evident in the persistent use of expressions like "working with sound" and "working with sonic material directly" by writers discussing *musique concrète*. Examples can be found in a 2007 issue of *Organised Sound* (Teruggi 2007) devoted to Schaeffer's Groupe de recherches musicales (e.g., Gayou 2007, 203).

of serial prestige—entitled “Contradictions du langage sériel.” In it, he claims that Stockhausen’s and Boulez’s musical theories were based on false conceptions of language and its mechanisms: “I think that their initial error, and their predictable failure, comes from the fact that they did not take into account the conditions that determine the possibility of any language (taking this term in its most general sense), and that, by neglecting these conditions, they failed to constitute a language.”²⁵

Lévi-Strauss launched similar rebukes when he claimed in the Overture to the *Raw and the Cooked* that “*musique concrète* may be intoxicated with the illusion that it is saying something; in fact, it is floundering in non-significance” (1969, 23).²⁶ By discarding the rules that link tones to each other, i.e., those that govern the organization of tonal music, it gives up the possibility of a first level of articulation “indispensable in musical language as in any other, and which consists precisely of general structures whose universality allows the encoding and decoding of individual messages” (24).²⁷

Ruwet had already raised these difficulties in his critical essay. He began, in the manner of Saussure, by defining a phonological system as a collection of a limited number of elements that acquire value “inasmuch as they are opposed to other elements.”²⁸ Taking musical examples from Stockhausen’s first and second *Klavierstücke* (1952), Ruwet began by accepting the claims of these serialist composers according to which music is a language, and that the composer’s task is to construct musical grammar. From there, after briefly describing how language is built up from overlapping oppositional systems, he argued that many of the works in the corpus he was examining failed on linguistic grounds, since they tended to set up too many oppositions. Further, and crucially, they tended, according to Ruwet, to define oppositions that are impossible for the human ear to perceive—for example, the subtle variations of duration and intensity observable in Stockhausen’s *Klavierstücke*. Despite the “contradictions” announced in the polemical title, Ruwet’s observations, taken another way, need not be seen as a fundamental critique of the serialist project, since he did not call into question the need for the composer to define systems of oppositions; he faults only certain serialist systems for their excessively fine—and hence inaudible—gradations of difference. In other words, Ruwet did not attack the foundations of the avant-garde project, only the means by which these premises were put into practice in its early days. His appraisal, like Lévi-Strauss’s, need not have called into question the conceptual project of musical serialism as a whole.

²⁵ “[...] Je pense que leur erreur initiale, et leur échec prévisible, viennent de ce qu’ils n’ont pas tenu compte des conditions qui déterminent la possibilité de tout langage (en prenant ce terme dans le sens le plus général), et que, en négligeant ces conditions, ils ont échoué à constituer un langage” (Ruwet [1958] 1972, 25; author’s translation).

²⁶ “La *musique concrète* a beau se griser de l’illusion qu’elle parle : elle ne fait que patauger à côté du sens” (Lévi-Strauss 1964, 31; also cited in Nattiez 2008, 117).

²⁷ “Indispensable au langage musical comme tout langage, et qui constitue précisément dans des structures générales permettant, parce qu’elles sont communes, l’encodage et le décodage des messages particuliers” (Lévi-Strauss 1964, 32; quoted in Nattiez 2008, 117).

²⁸ “Dans la mesure où ils s’opposent aux autres éléments” (Ruwet 1972, 32; author’s translation).

BOULEZ'S STRUCTURALIST PROJECT

Once Lévi-Strauss's and Ruwet's objections are set aside, the question can be posed of the extent to which structuralist thought—omnipresent in Boulez's intellectual environment—exerted an influence on the composer of *Structures pour deux pianos*. What are the grounds for considering Boulez's aesthetic project a form of musical structuralism? If indeed the artistic production of a composer, following Barthes, can be described as a “structuralist” activity, nowhere does this term fit more convincingly than in the musical compositions of Boulez.²⁹ This structuralist perspective manifests itself in Boulez's works in the way in which form arises from a grammar of oppositions, a feature that, as I have argued elsewhere,³⁰ testifies to the constancy of Boulez's thought over and above his several notable aesthetic and stylistic changes. Boulez's music is characterized by a play of oppositions, analogous to Saussure's differential grammars, which are observable at once on the macro-level (the preference for antiphonal forms, like the relentless alternations between “*modéré*” verses and “*très lent*” refrains in *Rituel* [1975]) as on the micro-level (the play of recognition and surprise that arises from the unpredictable appearances of highly recognizable thematic cells, each given a characteristic melodic profile, dynamic marking, playing technique, etc.—i.e., all the things that Boulez terms the “envelope” of a musical unit).³¹

But Boulez's works could first and foremost be considered to have structuralist characteristics inasmuch as, following Barthes, any structuralist project involves the construction of a model composed of symbolic elements, and the definition of these elements in terms of binary oppositions (Barthes 1963, 214–15). This affinity with forms built out of an oppositional logic could also be seen as a manifestation of another structuralist conception of language: the theory of the double articulation of language expounded by the linguist André Martinet,³² who writes that a first level of articulation consisting of meaningful signs depends on a second level of articulation composed of meaningless building blocks, which are considered only in their opposition to other building blocks.

As far as Boulez's writings go, Boulez follows Lévi-Strauss in repudiating the timeworn distinction between form and matter as it applies to music. The composer quotes Lévi-Strauss, both in *Penser la musique aujourd'hui* and in his later essay “Periform” (1965), that is, both before and after the publication of

²⁹ The famous discussions of Boulez by post-structuralists like Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault do not in themselves place Boulez outside the province of structuralist influence. In *Boulez, Music and Philosophy*, Campbell (2010), for example, discusses the affinities between Boulezian thought and Lévi-Straussian structuralism (chapter 6) and Boulez's affinities with post-structuralism (chapter 7).

³⁰ In Goldman 2009 and 2011.

³¹ For examples of the use of themes in Boulez's music, see Goldman 2009.

³² Martinet 1960, 1.14 : “A language is an instrument of communication by means of which human experience is analyzed ... into units each of which is endowed with a semantic content and a vocal expression, i.e. monemes. This vocal expression is in turn articulated into distinctive and successive units, i.e. phonemes, which are of a given number in each language and whose nature and mutual relations too differ from language to language.” Cited in Akamatsu 1992, 4.

the famous attacks on serialism in *The Raw and the Cooked*, as saying, “Form and content are of the same nature and amenable to the same analysis. Content derives its reality from its structure, and what is called *form* is the ‘structuring’ of local structures, which are the content” (Boulez 1991, 32).³³ This passage is taken from Lévi-Strauss’s article “La structure et la forme,” published in 1960, which offered a critical examination of Vladimir Propp’s morphological analysis of folk tales.³⁴ Boulez appeals to Lévi-Strauss in an effort to demonstrate that since language has a structuring “meta” role that creates meaning by operating on smaller semantic units, in music, macro-structure is created from the combined effect of micro-structures. For Boulez, this would imply that new micro-structures cannot be housed within older, pre-existing frameworks, since those older forms are themselves the result of the combined effect of smaller units that no longer belong to the vocabulary of music. The creation of new forms resulting from oppositions laid down at the micro-level would become a fundamental axis of Boulez’s musical research in the 1960s and beyond, one that would lend a structuralist tone to his project.

Another way in which Boulez’s project could be described as structuralist lies in his adoption of a formalistic and resolutely anti-hermeneutic stance on musical meaning. Boulez wrote that “music is an art that has no meaning” (1991, 32), and his position has shown no signs of wavering since. For instance, in one of the Collège de France lectures from 1978, Boulez reiterates that “music signifies *nothing*, it is not a kind of higher alphabet.”³⁵ In keeping with this formalist, quasi-Hanslickian aesthetic stance, Boulez tends to study immanent structures in the works that he analyzes, rather than concerning himself with the intentions of the composers who made them, most notably in his well-known analysis of the *Rite of Spring* in “Stravinsky Remains” (1951) in which he brazenly declared his cavalier attitude towards the composer’s intentions: “If I have succeeded in noting all these structural features, it is because they are there, and it therefore makes no difference to me whether they were put there consciously or unconsciously, or with what degree of acuity of conceptual intelligence” (Boulez 1991, 107).³⁶ This exclusive preoccupation with immanent structures (what Nattiez famously — and controversially³⁷—described as the “neutral level”) is in line with the structuralist impulse to study symbolic systems rather than get mired in the intentional fallacy that ascribes unknowable states of mind to creators of works of art.

Moreover, long after the intellectual fashion of structuralism had passed, Boulez would continue to think about music in well-nigh orthodox Saussurian

³³ “Forme et contenu sont de même nature, justiciables de la même analyse. Le contenu tire sa réalité de sa structure, et ce qu’on appelle forme est la mise en structure de structures locales, en quoi consiste le contenu” (quoted in Boulez 1963, 31; 1995, 359).

³⁴ Propp 1958. See also Nattiez 2008, 131.

³⁵ “La musique ne signifie *rien*, elle n’est pas une sorte d’alphabet supérieur” (Boulez 2005a, 74).

³⁶ “Si j’ai pu remarquer toutes ces caractéristiques structurelles, c’est qu’elles s’y trouvent, et peu m’importe alors si elles ont été mises en œuvre consciemment ou inconsciemment, et avec quel degré d’acuité dans l’intelligence de la conception” (Boulez 1995, 140).

³⁷ See, for example, Bernard’s methodological objections (1986, 208–9) to the neutral level of analysis in Nattiez’s analysis of Varèse’s *Density* 21.5.

terms. In a 1992 lecture at the Collège de France, Boulez observed that “the musical object in itself, or sound in itself, does not exist as a spontaneous component of language. This sound object can be beautiful, interesting, disagreeable, inert, it will have acoustic properties of a certain order, it will be appreciated as such, in isolation, but in the end it cannot, even in the best possible case, do more than furnish a hint of a language.”³⁸ Boulez’s words recall, of course, Saussure’s theory of the linguistic sign, with its emphasis on oppositional pairs as the building blocks of larger-scale systems. Saussure had written in his *Cours de linguistique générale*, developing the idea quoted in the beginning of this essay, wherein phonic differences and not sounds are taken to be the fundamental building blocks of language, that “it is impossible that sound, as a material element, should in itself be part of the language. Sound is merely something ancillary, a material the language uses” (1986, 116).³⁹

A similar reasoning inspires Boulez to define musical meaning in terms of compositional gesture without appealing, à la Varèse, to the organization of sound itself. In line with Saussure’s position on the role of sound in language—to which the modern linguistic distinction between phonetics and phonemics can be traced—Boulez retains a marked skepticism about the ability of sound itself to act as a generator of musical language, and a tendency to differentiate material on all levels of structure through a series of oppositions—a thoroughly structuralist, even Saussurian, tendency.

Nattiez, however, contends that Boulez’s debt to structuralism ought not to be overstated; for him, the affinity with structuralism owes more to Boulez’s close acquaintance with works such as Debussy’s Piano Etudes, Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, or Webern’s Cantata, op. 31, which had already put him in contact with “those aspects of music that are fundamentally structural in their modes of operation.”⁴⁰ Although there is certainly a musical tradition concerned with pure structure that antedates structuralist thought, the presence of this tradition does not fully account for the many ties that link Boulez’s writing, particularly in *Penser la musique aujourd’hui*, to structuralist thought. For example, Boulez implicitly distinguishes between *langue* and *parole*—the linchpins of Saussurian linguistics and, by extension, of structuralist thought generally. As Pascal Decroupet points out, Boulez “does in fact distinguish in his serial composition between a first, morphological, level, corresponding to *langue*, and a second, the articulation of discourse, corresponding to *parole*.”⁴¹

³⁸ “L’objet musical en soi, ou le son en soi n’existent pas comme composante spontanée du langage. Cet objet sonore peut être beau, intéressant, désagréable, inerte, il aura des propriétés acoustiques d’un certain ordre, il sera apprécié comme tel, isolément, mais il ne peut tout compte fait, et au mieux de ses possibilités, que donner l’indice d’un langage” (Boulez 2005a, 65; author’s translation).

³⁹ “Il est impossible que le son, élément matériel, appartienne par lui-même à la langue. Il n’est pour elle qu’une chose secondaire, une matière qu’elle met en œuvre” (Saussure 1931, 164).

⁴⁰ “Ce que la musique a de fondamentalement structurale dans son mode de fonctionnement” (Nattiez 2003, 67; author’s translation).

⁴¹ Boulez “distingue bel et bien au sein de la composition sérielle un premier niveau, morphologique, correspondant à la *langue*, et un second, d’articulation du discours, correspondant à la *parole*” (Decroupet 2003, 54; author’s translation).

Decroupet is implicitly taking Ruwet's early criticism to task, since the latter specifically accused Boulez of having neglected the *langue/parole* distinction. According to Ruwet, the composer confuses in his writings the rules of a language with those of any particular speech act; in music, this would amount to the rules of a musical system versus their instantiation in any musical work or performance. Ruwet illustrates this with Boulez's use of the term *sound block* (*bloc sonore*) to replace the traditional concept of chord. For Ruwet, there is no need to prefer one or the other of these terms, since each corresponds to a different reality: *chord* is an element of language or *langue*, whereas *sound block* corresponds to that same reality, but considered only as a sound occurrence in a particular piece, i.e., *parole* (1972, 28–29). In other words, a given object can simultaneously be a chord and a sound block, whereas Boulez seems to imply that it ought to be considered only as a sound block. But far from seeing Boulez's theoretical apparatus as collapsing under the weight of the absent *langue/parole* distinction, Decroupet discerns an implicit distinction between the two in *Penser la musique aujourd'hui*, concealed beneath the distinction Boulez makes between what he calls *production* and *mise en place* ("placement") (Decroupet 2003, 52). By *production*, Boulez means the elaboration of a system of rules—the *langue* of Saussurian linguistics; *mise en place* is then taken to be the articulation of these structures into specific musical contexts, which would correspond to the *parole* of Saussurian linguistics. If Decroupet is correct, Boulez's project is more coherent than Ruwet or Lévi-Strauss might have suggested: particularly in his later works, Boulez, after defining a serial system (the musical *langue*), takes great care in articulating contours, characteristic dynamic profiles, phrasing, and the like, what Boulez calls thematicism, which might well constitute the *mise-en-place* of these structures, i.e., the musical *parole*.⁴²

It is conceivable, on the other hand, that Boulez's affinity with structuralist approaches to music is less the result of his familiarity with either Lévi-Strauss's writings or of his encounter with the structural preoccupations of early-twentieth-century musical modernism, but rather of his early acquaintance with the distinctly structuralist (or proto-structuralist) aesthetics of Boris de Schloezer's *Introduction à J.-S. Bach : Essai d'esthétique musicale*, one of the most important twentieth-century French-language books on musical aesthetics (Schloezer 1947). The Russian-born, Belgian-educated writer on music (1881–1969) was, along with Pierre Souvtchinsky, one of the earliest champions of Boulez's music. His book—in reality more of a treatise on aesthetics than a study of Bach—played a major role in disseminating among the avant-garde French musicians of Boulez's generation a kind of proto-structuralist aesthetics influenced by Gestalt psychology.⁴³ Boulez was acquainted with Schloezer at least as early as 1951 or 1952,⁴⁴ and continued to hold him in high esteem

⁴² Boulez's approach to the theme in his writings as well as his later works is explored in Goldman 2011.

⁴³ On the influence of the thought of Souvtchinsky and Schloezer on Boulez (as well as that of other figures, such as André Souris and André Schaeffner), see Campbell 2010, chapter 2.

⁴⁴ Boulez recounts this first meeting in 2005b, 671.

long after that.⁴⁵ When earlier it was noted that Boulez echoed Saussure in his belief that sound is not the basic element of musical language, it is possible that he assimilated this idea from Schloezer. Schloezer was arguably the first writer to make the unintuitive claim that sound is not the basic element of music: “You cannot say then that a musical work is made of sounds, that it is ‘in sound’ in the same way that we say that a building is made of bricks or a statue of marble.”⁴⁶

It could be that Boulez assimilated proto-structuralist thought through the filter of Schloezer’s aesthetics, since Schloezer conceived of a musical work as a hierarchy of systems. He writes that that musical work “appears to us as a hierarchy of (organic and also composed) systems nested one within the other, each one being form with respect to the ones it embraces and matter for those which are embraced by it.”⁴⁷

Influenced by Gestaltist psychology, Schloezer was eager to expound a theory of musical form that considered the whole as more than the sum of its parts. The notion of system, employed in the above passage, is close to what would later be designated by the term *structure*, and is particularly suited to describing musical works that, like Boulez’s, are predicated on a play of oppositions. It is easy to imagine how this dynamic conception of musical structure would have appealed to composers like Boulez who were engaged in the active pursuit of new forms. Boulez echoes Schloezer when he writes near the end of his 1963 essay “Necessity of an Aesthetic Orientation,” that “each work must absolutely and necessarily create its form out of the virtual possibilities of its morphology, in order for there to be unity at every level of language.”⁴⁸

Schloezer, who defined a work of art as “an object whose unity is both form and meaning; or else an object whose form is identical to its content,”⁴⁹ could easily have authored Boulez’s text. Boulez’s musical formalism has roots that can be traced to sources older than Schloezer’s writings — certainly at least as far back as Eduard Hanslick’s *On the Musically Beautiful* (1854). Nevertheless, Schloezer’s aesthetics contributed to the peculiar form that French modernist aesthetics took in the postwar musical avant-garde. Of course, structuralist thought permeates Boulez’s writings in the late 1950s and 1960s to such a

⁴⁵ Boulez went so far as to consider having Schloezer’s *Introduction à J.-S. Bach* republished in 1979, in the Christian Bourgois collection, which he co-directed with Jean-Jacques Nattiez. Information gleaned from a letter dated 27 March 1979 from Schloezer’s son addressed to Boulez alludes to a conversation to this effect with Pierre Souvtchinsky (according to a letter kept in the Pierre Boulez Archive of the Université de Montréal). Schloezer’s book was republished later that year—not by Bourgois, but by its original publisher, Gallimard.

⁴⁶ “On ne peut donc dire d’une œuvre musicale qu’elle est faite de sons, qu’elle est ‘en sons’ comme l’on dit d’un édifice qu’il est en brique, d’un statue qu’elle est en marbre” (Schloezer 1979, 212–13) (my translation).

⁴⁷ “L’œuvre musicale ... nous apparaît ainsi comme une hiérarchie de systèmes (organiques et aussi composés) imbriqués les uns dans les autres, chacun d’eux étant forme à l’égard de ceux qui l’embrassent” (Schloezer 1979, 101) (my translation).

⁴⁸ “Il fallait absolument, et nécessairement, que chaque œuvre crée sa forme à partir des possibilités virtuelles de sa morphologie, qu’il y ait unité à tous les niveaux du langage” (Boulez 2001, n.p.).

⁴⁹ “Un objet dont l’unité est à la fois la forme et le sens; ou encore: un objet dont la forme s’identifie au contenu” (Schloezer 1979, 108) (my translation).

degree that is attributable to not only the proto-structuralist inflections of Schloezerian aesthetics. Still, other influences can be discerned in Boulez's pronouncements on music and language, not least the dialectical position of Theodor Adorno, most succinctly expounded in "Music and Language: A Fragment" (1992, 1–8). Adorno's prominent position in avant-garde musical circles in the early 1960s, as evidenced by his numerous appearances as lecturer at the Darmstadt Summer Courses, could certainly have played its part in shaping Boulez's musical *Weltanschauung*.⁵⁰ But it remains that Boulez's writings on music are remarkably consistent with structuralist thought, Lévi-Strauss's criticisms notwithstanding.

CONCLUSIONS

The lively exchanges sparked by Lévi-Strauss's comments on contemporary music involved many important figures in musical and intellectual circles of the time; the list includes such individuals as Henri Pousseur, Umberto Eco, Lucien Fabre, and Célestin Deliège. Nattiez (2008, 115–48), as well as Donin and Keck (2006, 103–18), has made critical contributions to the understanding of the roots of the intellectual conflict that pitted Lévi-Strauss against the avant-garde musicians of his time, and makes it unnecessary to rehearse the details of this debate here. In the end, Boulez's undertaking can be considered to have structuralist characteristics inasmuch as any structuralist project, according to Barthes, involves the construction of a model, or to use his terminology, a "simulacrum" of the real object, composed of elements set up in binary oppositions: "The goal of all structuralist activity, whether reflexive or poetic, is to reconstruct an 'object' in such a way as to manifest thereby the rules of functioning (the 'functions') of this object. Structure is therefore actually a simulacrum of the object, but a directed, interested simulacrum, since the imitated object makes something appear which remained invisible, or if one prefers, unintelligible in the natural object" (Barthes 1972, 214–15).⁵¹ This amounts to studying symbolic systems as languages and corresponds broadly to the theoretical project on which Boulez embarked with *Penser la musique aujourd'hui* ([1963] 1971). It is, therefore, not so implausible to refer to the avant-garde musical projects of Boulez and his contemporaries as structuralist, even if Lévi-Strauss publicly criticized the proponents of serial music.

⁵⁰ Boulez and Adorno notably participated together in a 1965 conference on musical form at Darmstadt, which also featured other participants such as György Ligeti, Carl Dahlhaus, and Earle Brown. In Boulez's lecture (1995, 397–403; transcription of extemporized second half published as Appendix A of Goldman 2006), he alludes approvingly to Adorno's contribution (Adorno 1966) to the conference.

⁵¹ "Le but de toute activité Structuraliste, qu'elle soit réflexive ou poétique, est de reconstituer un « objet », de façon à manifester dans cette reconstitution les règles de fonctionnement (les « fonctions ») de cet objet. La structure est donc un *simulacre* de l'objet, mais un simulacre dirigé, intéressé, puisque l'objet imité fait apparaître quelque chose qui restait invisible, ou si l'on préfère, inintelligible dans l'objet naturel" (Barthes 1964, 222–23).

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ABSTRACT

The adepts of serial music since the end of the 1950s seemed destined to ally themselves with structuralist thought—the broadly defined intellectual movement that profoundly marked the social sciences and humanities. The importance of the metaphor of language to the serialist project of Pierre Boulez in particular seemed sufficient to pave the way towards a conceptual alliance between avant-garde music and structuralist thought. Nevertheless, Claude Lévi-Strauss's acerbic pronouncements on serial music as well as *musique concrète* that appeared in the famous "Overture" to *The Raw and the Cooked* (1964) made it clear that Lévi-Strauss was no friend of the serialist project. Drawing on recent research by Jean-Jacques Nattiez, Nicolas Donin, and Frédéric Keck, this article will argue that the serialist compositional project of the postwar era, embodied primarily in the figure of Pierre Boulez, can be considered "structuralist" in

the sense of the intellectual movement promulgated by Claude Lévi-Strauss, despite the latter's denunciation of serial music.

RÉSUMÉ

Depuis la fin des années 1950, les adeptes de la musique sérielle semblaient destinés à s'allier avec la pensée structuraliste – mouvement intellectuel défini d'une manière très large qui a profondément marqué les sciences sociales et humaines. L'importance de la métaphore du langage pour le projet sérialiste de Pierre Boulez en particulier semblait suffisante pour ouvrir la voie à une alliance conceptuelle entre la musique d'avant-garde et la pensée structuraliste. Pourtant, les déclarations acerbes de Claude Lévi-Strauss sur la musique sérielle et la musique concrète apparues dans la célèbre « Ouverture » de *Le Cru et le Cuit* (1964) ont clairement signalé que ce dernier n'était pas un ami du sérialisme. S'appuyant sur des recherches récentes de Jean-Jacques Nattiez, Nicolas Donin et Frédéric Keck, cet article fera valoir que le projet sérialiste de l'après-guerre, incarné principalement par Pierre Boulez, peut être considéré comme « structuraliste » au sens du mouvement intellectuel mis de l'avant par Claude Lévi-Strauss, en dépit de sa dénonciation de la musique sérielle.