Boulez on Boulez

—

Mr. Boulez, for just a brief moment, at the beginning of the 1950s, it seemed that serial methods were asking to be extended across every element of composition. This represented the thrilling possibility that a new musical system might be found, but there was also the anxiety that music's creation would become as automated as heavy industry – allowing masterpieces to be made without a master, merely by the hammer of technology. But this sort of total organisation proved to be impossible – luckily so, one might say. It was shortly after this discussion that you composed Le Marteau sans maître*, which was premièred exactly 55 years ago here in Baden-Baden. Thinking back to when you began working on this composition: did you want to use* Le Marteau *to demonstrate that spontaneity and system can indeed coexist?*

Boulez: The fact is that when I composed *Structures* beforehand, I was totally responsible for that – because I wanted the composer to be anonymous. The composer was just a transmitter and nothing else. But very early on, I became aware of the fact that this was entirely impossible. It is possible in some cases, only some extreme cases, but not always; you cannot base a composition on that idea. But I did not want to go back to the twelve-tone system, because I found the twelve-tone system impossible as a way of constraining the available possibilities. So therefore, I began to develop a system in which freedom was possible, and I conquered my own freedom not only regarding the twelve-tone system, but also with regard to the general possibility of composing purely with a system. And therefore, *Le marteau* – even from the vantage point of 50 years later – was for me a beginning of sorts the beginning of a conquest, of freedom.

Le Marteau *appeared to be a link between two seemingly incompatible experiences: the strictly constructivist musical thinking of the German and Viennese school as mediated by Webern, and what one might call the more ornamental elements of French music, especially of Debussy and Messiaen. Would you agree with this?*

Boulez: Yes, I agree with the view that I attempted to unite two parts of the musical world which had previously been incompatible – and had even regarded each other with a sort of distance. I don't think that Schönberg was very not friendly to, but I mean: in agreement with Debussy's point of view, which he certainly found to be too free. Nor do I think that Webern or even

Berg were particular admirers of Debussy. They thought: too free, not constructive enough.

You know, I have a relationship with my work which is very sentimental – yes, certainly.

And I suppose that for me, on the contrary, the constructivism of the three Viennese was occasionally a bit of a burden, and I thought that the inventiveness and ingenuity, the spontaneity of a Debussy were very necessary sometimes. You really cannot just be constructive all the time; you have to be descriptive, as well. And I suppose that's the sort of combination between constructivism and spontaneity which I found to be very important.

Was it originally your intention to find a balance between these two schools?

Boulez: Yes, between the spontaneity of the one and the constructivity of the other. I really think that there was a balance to be established. And I was attracted to both sides. I must admit that sometimes, of course, the music of Debussy is very light. I won't deny that. Sometimes, I say. In his major works, however, certainly not – these are as deep as can possibly be. And the constructivism of the Viennese School, on the other hand, can also sometimes be viewed as burdensome. Therefore, you have to work with this constructivism in such a way that you are also free from it – and I suppose that's the liaison between constructivism on the one hand and spontaneity on the other. For me, these are the two elements of a musician.

Le Marteau *was praised highly for a new sound appearing in new music. What sound did you have in mind when you started?*

Boulez: Well, at the time I was very interested in other cultures and I listened to quite a lot of non-European music: Balinese music, African music, Japanese traditional music, Chinese opera and so on. I was similarly interested in the sounds contained in such music, and I do think that each civilization has its own sound. Bali, for instance, has a kind of metallic sonority. This sonority

goes with their music, which is expressed not only by the pitches, but by the way the pitches are produced – and that's via metal. And if you go to Africa, for instance, wood is one of the main sound-producing materials, and in that case the sound consists not only of the pitch but also of the sound of the wood. And so on and so forth. Therefore, yes: for me, remaining in the tradition of the Viennese School and the European school was too much, and I wanted to have another world. And I am generally very sensitive to sound. I think that sound should be a very important element of music, and not just something you "add" superficially afterwards. You therefore hear a different sound in my work – in the *Improvisations sur Mallarmé,* for instance.

When some poet like Mallarmé is so interested in the structure of the verse and of the sonnet, which are quite strict, then it's interesting to take that and to bring it into the musical content.

And in the works that followed, up to the most recent ones like *sur Incises* (which is unlike any other sound), you have forefathers. Let's take Stravinsky's *Les noces,* for instance: this is a forefather of the sound of *sur Incises,* but when I add the percussion, which is very important, and the harps, then the sound is totally different. And this sound harkens back to Bali and to the African sphere. And it is not at all of the European sphere. And that, for me, is very important, that we absorb other cultures: not only in terms of musical content, but also in terms of the way they are transmitted – and hence, in terms of sound.

This brings to mind Debussy, who was immensely influenced by the World Exhibition in Paris and the music which he discovered there.

Boulez: Certainly. But in his case, some of his work was influenced quite generally by the musical content, and some of these works were more superficial, with the pentatonic scale and so on. I like the world of Debussy when it's his own world – influenced by the outside, but still his own world.

You mentioned sur Incises*: you use steel drums there, but not for exotic reasons if I understand you correctly.*

Boulez: No, I like the sound of steel drums because of their innate possibilities: first in terms of the sound itself, but also because when you do a crescendo, or a very strong sforzato, you have a resonance which is very interesting in and of itself, because the sound is so modified that it ends up being practically another sound. And I like this transformation. If you play a sforzato on a grand piano, there's not that much change to the actual sound. But with the steel drums you have a modification of the sound which sometimes even approaches electronic sounds – putting it closer to an electronic sound than to the sound of a normal acoustic instrument.

Speaking of the use of the voice in Mallarmé*, Salvatore Sciarrino has remarked that you're one of the few composers to possess the key to music theatre – namely, a vocal style that is entirely your own. If you agree: is this style related to your understanding of how lyrics function in contemporary music?*

Boulez: Well, that depends. Of course, with the voice, you have two possibilities. You express the text directly, or you take the text as it is but extract from it the possibilities you want to extract. And you can destroy the text, too – in a positive sense, if I may say so. And in *Mallarmé,* especially, more so than in *Le marteau,* I worked with what I'll call the subtext. So, how many syllables? Eight. The number eight becomes very important, because the verse is composed of eight syllables. Rhyming is important, as well – whether you can transmit the rhymes via the structure. In the Second *Improvisation on Mallarmé* I do that very quickly. The first strophe is styled as a melodic line with a lot of ornaments. The second set of four verses I find to be syllabic, entirely syllabic. And then, when I come to the third set with its alternating rhymes, I constantly alternate the syllabic method of setting the text with the more melodic method. So in my musical structure I reflect the structure of Mallarmé's verses. What's interesting to me is not only the poetic aspect, but also the structural aspect of the poetry. And when some poet like Mallarmé is so interested in the structure of the verse and of the sonnet, which are quite strict, then it's interesting to take that and to bring it into the musical content.

You are no longer interested in composing or orchestrating lyrics, this being merely "lyrics and music"?

Boulez: Well, if you take simply the meaning of the poem, you miss quite a lot of the relationship which you can establish with the text. For me, it's important to establish not only a poetic relationship and a relationship of

meaning, as I put it, but also a structural relationship.

Coming back to Le Marteau*: apart from revising the instrumentation immediately after having composed it, you have left it alone – which is absolutely unusual for you. It is as if you recognize the special status of* Le Marteau. *Would you agree?*

Boulez: Yes, certainly, it was a period where a long-held doubt had passed. Without doubt, you finish – and with doubt, you have a tendency never to finish. And that's what moved me to refrain from touching certain works again. But there are some works which are unfinished not because I gave up, but because the reflection on the content of the work, on the structure of the work, was not very clear to me. Therefore I do return to works, but there are also some works which I don't touch again – *Derive II,* for instance,I will not touch again. It's finished because I worked on it for quite a few years, and then I discovered of way of structuring, of composing the work which was totally different than what I had done up to that point, a sort of narrative aspect of the work. It was then that I saw that this narration was finished, and that I could not add anything – the addition would have been totally artificial. There other works which I want to finish, and some other works which I don't want to finish. You know, I have a relationship with my work which is very sentimental yes, certainly.

Which work would you love to finish?

Boulez: Oh, I would especially like to finish *Éclat/Multiples.* That's one of the works which is almost finished, and, you know, I have practically twice the length of the work as I play it now, and therefore I would like to finish because the concept of the end is already there.

Derive I is derived from the material I used for Répons, and I still have a lot of material I wrote for Répons which is unused.

Similarly, the concept of the end of *Derive II* was also already there fifty years ago, but it was too soon: so I composed it, and knowing that I would compose a long development in between, well, I jumped to the end – certainly, because the end was already there. And sometimes you think of the end long before the rest of the piece. And therefore I keep it in reserve.

Speaking of Derive II*, it was preceded by* Derive*. And there, as in many works, you used the Sacher hexachord. Can you say something about how you found this chord and why it became so important for you?*

Boulez: Well, I did not discover the chord myself – the series of six pitches.

That was given to me for a homage to Paul Sacher for his 70th birthday. For this I wrote *Messagesquisse,* which was very short, because it was meant to be played in a concert for which a great many composers had written very short works. So it was a short occasional piece. And it was while working on this piece that I finally discovered all of this chord's possibilities. In my composing, process is an important aspect. So I look and have some quite spontaneous reactions. After that, I look at what I've done, and I say: but with this material, I could do far more. And so it went with the Sacher material. I noticed progressively, while I was working on it, that there were possibilities I'd never used before. And those are in sketches. Because when I have such ideas or make such deductions, I write them down immediately, or as immediately as I can. Doing so is difficult sometimes, so one often ends up doing so after a delay. But I mean, that's spontaneity, I would like to say. And that remains – hence the name *Derive,* because it remains there, unused, and it's derived from things I have already written. And so *Derive I,* now – we're still speaking of *Derive I* – is derived from the material I used for *Répons,* and I still have a lot of material I wrote for *Répons* which is unused. And if you go to the Sacher Foundation, you can see this material. It's not kilos' worth, but there are many pages containing material which was used quite a lot after having been determined and found. So that's my way of composing.

So can we say that you found out only coincidentally that the potential of the Sacher chord is that immense?

Boulez: That was not completely by chance, but I used this material like I would use any other material. I mean by this that the point was not to make reference to Paul Sacher each time – certainly not, although *sur Incises* is dedicated to him. But I did not really write *sur Incises* just to dedicate it to him – I wrote it because the material was there, and because I asked myself what I would do with this material. I am very practical, so I don't like to invent something which gets lost. It's simply that.

When we look at the characters of Derive I *and* Derive II*: although they come from the same material, they are totally different*

Boulez: They do come from the same material, but they are totally different because the first – *Derive I* – was improvised, practically speaking. Sir William Glock, who was head of music at the BBC, engaged me for that broadcaster, and he was also head of a festival. And since he was about to leave this festival, the musicians – who knew that I was very close to him – requested an homage. It was just a short, last-minute piece. I remember being in Los Angeles, performing a series of concerts and working between the rehearsals so that I could send the score at the last minute. And I think that in another *Derive,* I will certainly use the scheme of *Derive I,* but in a more complex manner; I already have *Derive III* in my head, and I hope I will have the time to finish it.

There is a quotation of Gustav Mahler according to which he said: "the material composed him." Would you agree with that regarding Derive II*?*

Boulez: Yes, definitely. I think that if you have an interesting and productive relationship with the material, the material certainly will compose for you. But you must know how it is composed. And I find it wonderful to think of it such that the material in fact composes with you, and you compose with the material. It's an exchange. Because to me, this is just another way of expressing the idea of deduction. You have material. What do you do with it? It's not just spontaneity that is important, but the question of what you do with this spontaneity! And you invent in a sort of hyper-spontaneity – that's the real difficulty of composing. So if you look, for instance, at pieces which are in some way "derived" – such as the second of my *Notations* – and compare the length of the original piece and the final score then the work is ten times longer and the material is exposed much more forcefully than it was in the small piano piece. And thus you are confronted: I particularly like the experience of being confronted with material you invented sixty years ago, and you say: yes, I recognize this material, I composed it, that's my material. But I did nothing with it at the time so what can I do with it now? And I suppose that's the question that Wagner also asked himself when he was composing *Gotterdämmerung.* He must've thought:what can I do with material I invented for *Rheingold?* Twenty years passed in between. So you'll understand how I found that very striking when I conducted the *Ring* in Bayreuth. To see, to conduct the *Ring* from beginning to end – you finish with *Götterdämmerung,* and two days later you begin again with *Rheingold.* And yousee the immense difference between two pieces – especially between *Rheingold* and *Götterdämmerung* he could not possibly have composed that 20 years sooner! And the way he reflected on himself – it was something that

really struck me when I conducted the *Ring*.

But the interesting thing about the Notations *is that you had forgotten that these pieces existed.*

Boulez: I had not really forgotten – it all comes back spontaneously, after all. So I remembered them, and the fact that I'd composed them, that's for sure you never completely forget things like that. But I didn't really remember the text. And when I saw the text, I said: oh, that's interesting. And I generally didn't want to have the earlier works I'd composed viewed as "my" works. But these I did. I thought to myself: they're very simple, they're naïve, but they involved a process which I do not find uninteresting. On the contrary, I do find such ideas interesting, and I desire to magnify them.

But is it true that they were somehow lost, and that someone found them?

Boulez: They were. The manuscript got lost, and then it got lost again. I studied together with a composer named Serge Nigg, and I had not seen him for quite a while. It was around the time when I returned from my six years in New York that I received a letter from him to the effect that the radio wanted to organise a broadcast on the early students of Messiaen. They wanted to use the pieces those students had composed while studying, and Nigg asked me if I would allow it.

And so I said to myself, well, I can do this too. So I did twelve pieces of twelve bars each, and each piece begins with one, with two, with three, with four and so on.

I said yes in principle, but I didn't have a manuscript and wanted to see one – I told him that if he would send me a manuscript or a photocopy thereof, I would say yes or no. So he sent me a photocopy of the manuscript, and I said: yes, you can. I was a student of Messiaen when I wrote that, and it was perfectly justified to use it as an example. And later on he told me – or I

learned, I don't know through what source – that the manuscript got lost again after he sent it. I myself didn't have to send it back, of course, because I didn't see the manuscript, only the photocopy. And when they went to put it back in the library at the radio, they couldn't find it. So it was lost and then lost again.

You once told me that with these Notations *you wanted to make "fun" of twelve-tone composition.*

Boulez: Yes, because with Leibowitz, the academism of his analysis and so on was unbearable to me, and in a funny way particularly unbearable after having experienced Messiaen. While I did not agree with all that Messiaen was doing, at least he was inventive. And he had his own world. But Leibowitz, that was just kind of salt on nothing; it was so dry and so unimaginative, only one-to-twelve, twelve-to-one, six-to-one, one-to-seven and so on it was dreadful. And so I said to myself, well, I can do this too. So I did twelve pieces of twelve bars each, and each piece begins with one, with two, with three, with four and so on. I called that my system, but it doesn't sound like it. It just didn't. But the pieces were not fun. They were just spontaneous pieces, because I composed them within two or three days – I don't remember exactly. It was just before Christmas of '45.

Do you remember where you composed them?

Boulez: Where? In Paris, yes where I was living at the time.

And you never thought that their potential was so strong?

Boulez: No. No, because once I came upon some sketch or other, and I put it in the *Improvisation sur Mallarmé,* as a kind of remembrance. And that was it. And I didn't have such luck with another piece which was likewise interesting to me. After my second piano sonata, I wrote a symphony concertante for piano and orchestra. I didn't orchestrate it right away. And then I went to Cologne to see Stockhausen at the studio there, and there was this *Putzfrau* who cleaned the room and the piece disappeared – totally. I hadn't even sketched it, nothing, and I remember only one bar. That's not enough, not even for *Derive.*

But to me, it seems that Notations *demonstrates your distance from any kind of dogmatism. Would you agree?*

Boulez: Yes. Yes, because it's strongly organized, but it's free. In none of the

works that I compose do I actually look for it, but if there is an accident – I mean, something which makes me take another route which I did not foresee – then I like it, and I just continue along this "byway". There's the Mahler quotation again, "the material composes for you." And you have to react to what the material proposes to you, which you have not seen before. And therefore, as I said, this kind of exchange between the material and you is very important. And it's in this sense that the *Notations* were important.

Could we say that Notations *for orchestra is a kind of* sur Notations*?*

Boulez: Yes, it's *exactly* that. Exactly that, and I like these superior opportunities; it's like you're an archaeologist discovering a civilization – down, down and down. And then you discover yourself, progressively, just like archaeologists discover an old civilization.

Even if it's not so common for a composer to speak about his own emotions while composing: are there moments of great refreshment when you discover a new dimension in your own work?

Boulez: Yes, certainly. I like this, because sometimes you are confronted with material, and you discover the solution very quickly. That can happen because you are oriented and have been working in that direction. But sometimes you are confronted with material where you just say "what can I do?" – and you sit there with it in front of you, finding absolutely no solutions that are interesting or worth it. And when you do discover a solution, you're happy and you run with it, certainly. And there are some *Notations* where I have precise ideas about what I want to do, but have not yet found a way in which to do so, to work with the material in a way that is satisfying to me. But it remains in my head. And sometimes you're not thinking about it, but rather about something else – perhaps you're even studying another score, not your own – and suddenly you say "ah!" Now that's the direction in which you have to go. You know, every moment in your life, if you are creative or in the creative process, can be fruitful. But you have to take the opportunity. And composing is also a matter of seeing the opportunity where other people see nothing. It's exactly that.

How will you proceed with the Notations*?*

Boulez: Well, I am finishing Number Eight for the moment – I have an order in mind. I have finished Number Five in short score, I have to finish Number Eight, I have Number Seven, which I want to modify (there are some questions of balance), and then I will do Six and then the next four pieces –

which are longer than the other ones. Number Eight is quite long. And maybe after the last four, it will once again be shorter. I suppose so. That's my idea for the time being, at least.

I'd like to come back to Derive II*. Daniel Barenboim introduced the piece when he conducted it in Berlin, and in his introduction he used sonata-form terms such as "coda", "reprise" and so on. What advice would you give a listener on how to approach this complex music?*

Boulez: They have to make their own analysis, and that's complex. I know I indicated the form which I had in mind. But, you know, I'm not fervent about the form I discovered or used there, because I think the form is stronger than you are – certainly in terms of what you can do until about halfway through the work. You have strict forms, strict rhythmical forms and canonic forms and so on – whatever you want to call them. They are strict forms, or obbligato forms, which are then interrupted more and more by free forms. And you feel that: "A-B-A-B-A-B-A" it's always the same alternation, with the interruptions at the beginning being extremely short. They're barely to be noticed, and then the interruptions grow progressively longer and longer until they become more important than the text itself. After that, things get more complex. I can't really explain it again you have the rhythmical structures of the first half, which are very strict. But despite this strictness, they are freer than in the first half. So you have a kind of balance between both halves, and then there's a long coda. That was how I operated there.

On Incises *and* sur Incises*. You once said that you learned from Gustav Mahler how to construct long forms.*

Boulez: Yes.

And especially in sur Incises*. Could you explain it?*

Boulez: Well, I was always struck by the fact that musicians in general, even including the twelve-tone composers, were tending to compose in smaller forms – even if they were writing things like a symphony, with four movements. The form was already there. But even with Debussy, with *La mer,* one could say that he onlyused three patterns – with the scherzo in the middle, and a finale, a rondeau more or less, at the end. And that I didn't like. What I do like is narration: you tell a story – an abstract story, of course, I don't use *sur Incises* to describe the sea or anything like that. But it's still narration. And continuity means not consisting of small bits, but having the elements always there – albeit with variations, making them very

differentiated. You cannot compose a long work if you don't have material that is richer than the material you would use for a small piece. And therefore, in *sur Incises,* there is material – the first page provides half of the piece, as a matter of fact, because the material is very simple. You have resonant material and quick material. And the process is to mix both of them or not to mix them: at the beginning they are not mixed, and throughout the second half of the piece they are. And then the object is always finding a way to have the dialogue between quick and resonant, that being the material – it plays its novelty each time, and you recognise it, more or less. And that's a way of composing for me, and I actually do that now – maybe with the orchestration, or notation. I mean, the next *Notations*. Therefore they are longer, because the story to be told is longer. It's simply that.

How did you choose the instrumentation for sur Incises*? Is it because Bartók had already written something for two pianos and percussion, and Stravinsky something for four pianos?*

Boulez: So three pianos puts it in the middle, yes but seriously, I must say that I was always quite struck by both works. The Bartók was rarely performed back when I first heard it – I think that was in '45 or so – very rarely performed. And I remember that it was two Hungarian pianists. The two percussionists were French; perhaps they couldn't bring along their percussionists, I'm not sure exactly why. And then there was also a conductor for the piece. They had met something like one day before to rehearse, and it simply cannot be performed just like that. The world première, in Basel, was not conducted – that I know. So the performance that I heard was a rather haphazard one. But I also remember that the sonority was very, very surprising to me. *Les Noces,* on the other hand, I heard quite a lot and Messiaen was also very fond of it. He was also quite fond of Bartók's music for two pianos, and thus I've known these two pieces for quite a long time. They were part of my culture, practically.

Therefore, when my desire arose to transform *Incises* into *sur Incises – sur Incises* was further the last minute. I did not begin with the title, believe me. There was a kind of foundation in Italy which was organising a competition, a piano competition. Pollini was in the jury, as was Berio. And I thought that I might compose a piece for Pollini, a concertante piece for piano and orchestra – or piano and group, I didn't know exactly. And then when I began to really deal with the material – then I thought: no, that's not really the way to do it. I would like a piano, a piano with a first shadow and a second shadow. With the piano in the middle, giving his material to both sides. Symmetrical, although this symmetry was more complex than I'm indicating now. At the beginning, however, it wasn't complex at all. Now at the beginning I wanted

to have a sonority to enrich the piano's sonority, really also to treble the sonority of the piano or repeat the sonority of the piano. So I added the harps, three harps. And then I started on the marimba, because the marimba begins to introduce the quick thematic material. Finally I said to myself that if I have a marimba, I also need a vibraphone for the high register. And then the second vibraphone came at the last minute, because I could not find another instrument in the percussion section capable of matching the vibraphone and the marimba. So I had the vibraphone there, and then I went on to add steel drums, tympani, chimes and that's how the percussion is set up: one player on instruments which are totally chromatic, and one on instruments which are, let's say, specialized. So, it came progressively, while I was composing – that was necessary, that was necessary, that was necessary – and I ultimately ended up with three pianos, three harps and three percussionists.

But the pianos remained the principal instruments?

Boulez: The pianos remained the principal instruments, yes. But the other ones grow more and more important as the piece progresses – the sonority of the harp, especially. Not for the quicker movements, of course; there they simply underline the sorority. But in the resonant movements, the harps are certainly very important.

And the harps are extremely powerful, unexpectedly powerful in terms of sound, it seems to me.

Boulez: The harps are very powerful. I don't like harps the way the French composers handle them – you know, always very gracefully. I remember being on tour with *Jean-Louis Barrault* and hearing music in the Andes – it was Quito, or somewhere in Colombia I don't remember, one of these. And we were listening to music played by peasants, on small Andean harps. And these peasants produced a kind of very strong sonority on their instruments; they were really eating into the strings. And this kind of sonority stuck with me, remaining in my ears, and I think it was then that I knew that that is the way I want harps to sound. Harps can be very delicate, but they can be also very strong. And we have a harpist in the Ensemble who is perfect for that, Frédérique Cambreling – she has a very strong approach to the harp. I like that.

Does the character of the instrument – such as the harp – influence your material, how you invent it?

Boulez: Yes, certainly, because I could not have the harps competing with the

piano. They can do accents, they can do long tenuto, so they have their own possible material. But I know that they cannot, for instance, compete with the speed of the piano. So I use the various instruments to achieve specific goals, and I try to expand their *raison d'être,* but I know that it would be absurd to try hiding things where doing so would require constant damping of their sonorities – it's just not possible to do that.

But the sound-world you created is absolutely unique. Did you have it exactly this way beforehand, in your ears?

Boulez: No well, yes. I gradually knew more and more while I was composing, so even before I needed a performance, I knew better and better what I wanted. For sure. At the beginning it was simply a kind of echo of the piano, and by the end they were participating in the sonority. And at the very end they are every bit as important as the piano, because the chords they have are very strong in the middle, and then you hear that middle register more strongly than even the extreme power of the piano, for sure. So no, I became better and better informed by myself about the possibilities I had with this ensemble.

Incises is a very short piece, and *sur Incises* is one of your longest. Have you been surprised by yourself, by how long it became?

Boulez: Yes, I was surprised; although it really wasn't surprising, since it was my tendency during that period to get rid of short forms and go for long forms. So I was ready to organise a long form, for sure. And it was the same for *Derive II* – I wanted to make a long statement.

Will you be proceeding in this direction in upcoming ensemble works?

Boulez: I suppose that now, for me, the ideal would be to compose a work with long moments and very short moments. And for a long time now, I have been thinking about trying to find contrast within a piece itself – to have strong moments, very long, and to have light, concentrated moments I once said, when I was asked that question, that it was like marrying Bruckner with Webern.

How did your conducting of Bruckner influence your point of view on the long form?

Boulez: That was very important. I like his harmonic writing, which supports long development – at the end of the slow movement of the 9th, for instance

(when the melodic line repeats and it's very large). But this is less important to me than the segments which are there, because for me, the segments are too visible.

To tell the story, you have to be very careful with moments of tension, as well as with moments where the tension is not that strong.

But that's not only a point of view – it's a difference of centuries, not a difference of personalities. And I find that if the segments are too visible, you miss the point. And that's what's so interesting about the great moments in Mahler: I was very, very struck by the way he handles form – which is with movements, of course, but what I mean is how those movements are put together. I conducted the 7th Symphony recently in Chicago, replacing Riccardo Muti. I had not performed it in five years, so while it was not new, it was once again striking to me. And the last movement is indicative for the cohesion of the whole. I find that if you take the right tempo and properly relate the tempi between the various movements, then it is indeed very coherent. You must really have a kind of coherency in the tempi, and then it goes right along. Otherwise it's by bits and pieces, and that's certainly not what you want – at least I wouldn't imagine it is.

Mahler spoke about the flexibility of the tempi, and its importance in making a performance really vivid.

Boulez: Yes, the relations between the tempi really are important; that's what I call narration. You tell the story. And to tell the story, you have to be very careful with moments of tension, as well as with moments where the tension is not that strong, and so on. That's important. And even in the first movement, you have to be very careful with the relationships between tempi. But of course that's my problem, at this point.

But Bruckner's influence is surprising, since Bruckner wasn't part of French

musical culture – at least not while you were growing up.

Boulez: Bruckner wasn't even performed at all, and even as late as when Karajan brought along a symphony by Bruckner when he came on tour with the Berlin Philharmonic, the reaction in some of the papers was, "why did he bring this monster?" And even Messiaen – though you can imagine that there are some very strange ties between the universe of Messiaen and the universe of Bruckner – Messiaen said, "oh, Bruckner, that's a lot of bridges." Now in French, when you have a transition from one section to another one, you call that a bridge. And for Messiaen, Bruckner's music was simply one of transition after transition after transition. And that's very strange, and the French are indeed sometimes complete strangers to ways of musical thinking that are not native to their own practice. Even in the case of Mahler: now he's very popular, but France was that last country to rediscover him. England and the States were much more open to the influence of Mahler that the French were.

My development really went backwards through time. I got to know Berg, I got to know Webern, I got to know Schönberg and then I got to know Mahler. It was totally reversed – because there was no tradition whatsoever.

*Due to Barbirolli and to Bernstein, I would say *

Boulez: Yes, exactly and Mitropolous before them. And Bruno Walter, because Walter was in exile beginning in 1936 or thereabouts. He didn't perform everything – he especially preferred Nos. 1, 4, 9, although I really don't remember this exactly. But he performed Mahler symphonies quite regularly. And they actually became popular with Bernstein. I was told by the manager of the New York Philharmonic that when Mitropolous played the Fifth or the Seventh, for example, the hall was half-empty by the end. And, Dimitri Mitropolous – that's the 1950s '51, '52.

Maybe that was the late Toscanini influence – because Toscanini was absolutely not a fan of Mahler's success in New York, so he worked against him.

Boulez: Yes, well, yes, at the beginning, but you know, Toscanini was active until the '60s or the late '50s, anyway. And he didn't perform anything of this kind. But he also definitely had no relationship at all with the Austrian school. He played Brahms – I think that's the latest Austrian music he played, the last step he took. Otherwise no, certainly not. But he did perform Debussy – who was born practically the same time, you know he was always performing *La mer.* He didn't perform the later works, such as *Jeux.* He performed *La mer,* and also the *Nocturnes*. And he performed *Pelléas* at first at La Scala – and at that time it was very new, especially compared with Puccini, or certainly with Leoncavallo sure

How would you describe how your approach to Mahler has changed over the years?

Boulez: Well, it didn't really have to change because it didn't even exist at first. And I remember, maybe the first – not only maybe! It was indeed the first symphony of Mahler I heard, the 4th Symphony – performed by Paul Kletzki, because at that time French conductors never performed Mahler's symphonies. And of course, the first time when I heard it, the sleigh bells – I said, "what's that?" or something. And I remember still being not in doubt, but not convinced, either, when I heard the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen.* I remember hearing that in Hamburg. I was there for a performance, for *Das neue Werk,* and there was a concert. I don't remember exactly who conducted, but I was at first not at all impressed. I said to myself, oh, well that's old ham or something. It's quite strange because I simply didn't know it, and my development really went backwards through time. I got to know Berg, I got to know Webern, I got to know Schönberg and then I got to know Mahler. It was totally reversed – because there was no tradition whatsoever.

Since you have known Mahler, has his music influenced your understanding of the Second Viennese School?

Boulez: No, because I knew the Viennese School right from the very beginning; I really began to become acquainted with the Viennese School in '45 – the spring of '45, as I recall. And I certainly had my own reaction to it. But you also mustn't forget that this music was performed horribly back then, horribly; I mean, it was either no tradition at all with people who knew how to conduct, or people who meant well but who were not good conductors,

that's how it was. I remember seeing performances by Leibowitz or by Max Deutsch which were absolutely terrible, where you were asking yourself "what were they doing?" I remember a performance of Opus 29 by Schönberg a-di-ya-da-ta-ta, a-ya-ta-ta but it was: aaaa-daaa-daaaa-daaa-taaa-taaa – can you imagine? That sort of performance lasted three quarters of an hour it was horrible. And I also remember a performance of the Symphony Op. 21; believe me, the beginning with the horns, it was something! But you cannot blame them, because they were amateur conductors. But the problem was that they were saying, "we have the truth!"

And you saw the route they were taking, and you thought that the truth was something different?

Boulez: Yes! Well, because when you read a score, you know more or less how it should sound.

—

Interview: Wolfgang Schaufler
Baden-Baden, December 2010
(c) Universal Edition