Daniel Barenboim on Pierre Boulez

"Truly a man for the future."

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Mr Barenboim, would it be correct to say that the first time you met Pierre Boulez, it was a kind of blind date?

Barenboim: Not just "kind of", it was definitely a blind date. In 1963, I was invited to perform with the Berlin Philharmonic by its director, Wolfgang Stresemann. "A new concert hall is being built for us next year, the Philharmonie in Berlin," he said. That was roughly in May 1963.

He really opened the door to the Second Viennese School for me. I owe him for that.

He told me that the next season was already fully booked and that there was just one concert that hadn't been placed, with a young French conductor and composer named Pierre Boulez. He had already specified his programme, and if I wanted to play in this concert, I would need to learn Béla Bartók's *Piano Concerto No. 1*. I fell in love with the piece straight away. And that was my first performance with Boulez. To be honest, I have to say that I had never heard of him before and he had naturally never heard of me.

What was it like working with him?

Barenboim: The concert was in June 1964, a little more than 50 years ago, and we worked extremely well together. I was totally fascinated. He hadn't had

much experience as a conductor at that stage, and the way in which he handled the orchestra was very impressive. His mind seemed to work two hundred times faster than a normal person's.

Following that, he invited me to his concert series *Domaine Musical* in Paris. I'm not entirely sure, but I believe it was the first performance of Alban Berg's *Chamber Concerto* in France. And then he asked me to play Schönberg's *Piano Pieces* there, op. 11 and op. 19. I said to him, "I would be more than happy to play them, but you'll have to work with me because I've never played anything like that before in my life, and it's like a foreign language to me." He answered: "It would be a pleasure, please don't worry about that at all." He really opened the door to the Second Viennese School for me. I owe him for that.

What led to your commission for the Notations*?*

Barenboim: When I came to the Orchestre de Paris, one of the first things I did was to ask Boulez if he felt like writing a piece for orchestra. He replied, "Well, yes – when I was young I composed 12 little pieces for piano, called *Notations*, and I've been thinking about them for several years now. But I don't just want to orchestrate them; I want to completely transform them – an increase both in size and in complexity."

He has always had a great liking for complexity, and only came to appreciate music that is not complex at a very late stage. Take Bruckner, for example. He has always sought complexity and saw Mahler's music as a more prolific source of this than Bruckner's.

In Boulez's music you immediately hear everything that he has come into contact with – and that is an enormous amount.

I believe the premiere was planned for 1977 or 1978. However, he hadn't

finished the work by then, nor by the following year, and so it went on. In the end I said to him – we were quite good friends by then – "You know what, Pierre: we'll just play them when you've finished them." Then one day, he phoned me and said, "Alright, we can play four pieces." And that's what we did, in 1980 in Paris. I then waited 22 years for *Notations VII*, which was premiered in 2002 in Chicago.

And that's the story behind *Notations*.

You are the only conductor who performs the pieces on the piano as well as conducting them, in other words, who is also very familiar with the orchestral version. What has Boulez done with the music?

Barenboim: He has taken one tiny cell and made a whole monument out of it. He has developed, enlarged and scaled down the material, giving it thousands of different colours. It's really like a whole person being made out of a single cell. In a certain sense, it's not unlike Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*, which aren't actually variations, but rather 33 mutations. In the deepest sense of the word, the *Notations* are also mutations. By writing them for a huge orchestra instead of just the piano, he changed them in several different ways at the same time.

When I conduct the *Notations* for orchestra, I often play the piano version beforehand. The audience has always found this very interesting because it makes the mutation tangible.

You once said that "the orchestral colours are not 'the cream on the cake, they are part of the cake". Can you explain what you meant by that?

Barenboim: Although Boulez' music has a highly complex content, the tone colour is very French. There's no doubt in my mind that it is French music. Schönberg may have had a great influence on the music's content, but the colours – and sometimes also the harmonies – are from Debussy and Ravel. This French colour can be heard very clearly.

There is a bon mot that goes "Boulez is Webern sounding like Debussy."

Barenboim: In a certain sense that is true. I think there is of course more to it than that, but something about it is certainly true.

You once said that you consider Dérive 2 *to be Boulez's real masterpiece.*

Barenboim: Yes.

Why?

Barenboim: *Dérive 2* takes 50 minutes to unfold, so we aren't dealing with miniatures here. It has one big line. This is also true of *sur Incises*, which we are planning to perform next summer. The size of the piece also enlarges the content. It has more time to develop, to form contrasts within itself, and so on.

You once held an introductory session on Dérive 2 *in the Berlin Philharmonie and it was astounding how many words you used that stem from the traditional theory of form and harmony: reprise, a kind of coda, etc. It really shows how deeply Boulez is rooted in tradition.*

Barenboim: In my eyes, Pierre Boulez has always been and will always be truly a man for the future. Someone who is not truly a man for the future will either be unaware of the past, or simply not interested in it.

America can't be discovered out of nothing. In Boulez's music you immediately hear everything that he has come into contact with – and that is an enormous amount. Even Bach.

When he felt at ease he also had such a fantastic sense of humour – we laughed together like children.

Which means his revolution has always had a sense of evolution?

Barenboim: It would be simply dishonest and wrong to say "I'm only interested in the future and don't want to find out anything about the past." You just can't do that. Boulez has recognised this process of transition from the past, and has adapted it to create his vision of the future. It's like in politics, where you similarly can't address a difficult situation by saying "the world is beginning today".

You have accompanied Boulez as a friend for the past 50 years. Boulez is someone who has always had to fight strongly for the modernist cause. Although he has always remained loyal to his ideals, the manner in which he has presented them has undergone a certain change. Not that he has ever lost sight of his goals, but he has become increasingly familiar with the industry and learnt how to reach his goals. How did you view this battle that was waged by Boulez? In 1976 he was almost a persona non grata in Bayreuth, and then he became such a celebrated conductor there. What did you make of this development?

Barenboim: Yes, he used to be excessively radical – as one must be in order to be radical at all. You can't be radical in a mild way. Sometimes he also said things in a way that shocked people, of course. It was something he did consciously: "Blow up the opera houses". And many other similar statements.

His conducting was also very radical, although it later became much freer. For example, I performed Berg's *Chamber Concerto* with him for the first time in 1965. He has conducted it again and again since then, right up into the 21st century. And his interpretation has become increasingly freer. He could afford to be freer.

You know, when you conduct the major works, you have two ways of proceeding: either you study the skeleton or you only see the flesh and blood. Boulez naturally belongs to the first group of people: in the *Chamber Concerto* he was initially somewhat overly strict and quick, as if being pushed by some intense pressure at the back of his head.

Few artists have such a strong, strict ethos, while people with strong ethics often have a less pronounced imagination.

And then, over the years, once the skeleton was in place, he could afford himself the freedom to slow down where it was appropriate to do so. Today, there is a certain flexibility to his conducting that was previously lacking.

You have both conducted in Bayreuth. Have you discussed your experiences with each other?

Barenboim: The first year I conducted the Ring, in 1988, Pierre Boulez came to Bayreuth during the first week of performances and stayed with us. It was the best thing that could have happened to me. He came to the performance every day and afterwards we would sit there until two or three o'clock in the morning.

He had studied the score as if he were conducting it himself. You couldn't talk to him in the morning because he was always studying. And then we would discuss everything until the early hours of the morning. He would ask me "Why did you do it that way, or like that?" "Oh, I particularly liked that; I haven't ever done it as well as that. I feel this was too slow, though," or whatever it was.

Oh, it was the best thing that could have happened to me, to have him with us that week. Unbelievable. When he felt at ease he also had such a fantastic sense of humour – we laughed together like children. It really was wonderful.

This is a side to Boulez that is almost unknown to the general public. He is a man with a great sense of humour, joie de vivre and deep emotions. But it seems to have taken a long time for him to show it?

Barenboim: I don't think he hid it consciously, but in this respect, as in everything, he was so radical in all that he did; superficial friendships have never interested him at all. He didn't have time for them.

He has mellowed as time has gone on, and has also become more approachable as a person. On occasions in the past you would get bitten, he was quite harsh, but his sense of humour has always been there.

He always dealt very impatiently with superficial behaviour and dishonesty. In my eyes, Pierre Boulez is the perfect combination of aesthetics and ethos – few artists have such a strong, strict ethos, while people with strong ethics often have a less pronounced imagination.

Boulez has always been convinced that works and their composers should be considered separately. Otherwise it would be impossible to perform Wagner's music, given his nauseous anti-Semitic writings. Boulez said "A good person does not necessarily produce good art – and vice versa!"

I have the impression that he intended to be radical and uncompromising in art, but always to remain faithful to his own, very high standards as a person.

Barenboim: Yes, absolutely, absolutely. He changed the music world by making the Second Viennese School accessible to everyone. He also conducted Debussy and Ravel in a new way. And we shouldn't forget that he is also a great man of the theatre. Just think about the directors he has worked with. He wanted to work with Wieland Wagner, but it never happened. And then his work with Patrice Chéreau. That was a piece of good fortune. His thinking could be very scenic, often discovering theatrical elements in the music. This is an aspect one doesn't otherwise associate with him, but which may have something to do with his early experiences with Jean-Louis Barrault, which influenced him a great deal in this respect.

In recent years Boulez has worked enthusiastically in Lucerne to introduce young people to the classic works of the 20th century in the Lucerne Festival Academy Orchestra. Has he ever spoken to you about what it means to him to work with young people?

Barenboim: Yes, he has often told me that Lucerne means the same to him as the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra does to me. I have also visited him there several times. It's a tremendous project.

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Interview: Wolfgang Schaufler
Übersetzung: Rosemary Bridger-Lippe
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