

Simon Rattle on Pierre Boulez

“One of the greatest musicians of our time or any time.”

What is Pierre Boulez to you?

Rattle: So many people are going to be able to talk about Pierre as a great composer, and as a great man, and as an influence on both the 20th and 21st centuries. All I can do really is talk very, very personally, because I realize now, I've known Pierre for exactly 45 years, we're 30 years apart. But I met him for the first time as a 15 year old, and he's been a part of my life really non-stop since then.

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I think you can tell what a strange musician I was and probably still am, but as a teenager the three conductors I absolutely worshipped were Giulini, Kubelík and Boulez. And when I look at them I try to think of three more different musicians than you could imagine. But for all of us at this time, Pierre was an extraordinary kind of light in the darkness. And the idea as a teenager, that I'd have the opportunity to work with him in the National Youth Orchestra was close to beyond belief.

What were your first impressions of Pierre Boulez?

Rattle: We tend to forget how much Pierre changed the way everybody

played, a whole swathe of music. When I was growing up as a teenager for instance, the Second Viennese School of course it was played. But people found it so hard, and what one heard was only a struggle. Pierre taught us all what it meant, not only in terms of lucidity, but in terms of colour. And as a young musician in the National Youth Orchestra, what all of us remember was not only his extraordinary brain and his legendary ear, all of which we were very frightened of, but also the humanity, the humour.

I think so much with Pierre is to do with what is surprising and what is immediate, and what can create disruption and stop. And it seems to me that that can be almost like a metaphor for his own work.

And I think all of us, to this day, will remember the colours he taught us in Webern, the idea for instance of—in one place a clock winding down, in another place which he wanted to sound like the last drops of water coming out of a bottle—working on *La Mer* of Debussy for instance, and him talking to us about this extraordinary motion of a fish, where it moves fast and then suddenly stops. I think so much with Pierre is to do with what is surprising and what is immediate, and what can create disruption and stop. And it seems to me that that can be almost like a metaphor for his own work.

When did you meet him for the first time?

Rattle: When I was 15 I had planned to perform what was then considered to be his absolute masterpiece, *Le Marteau sans maître*. And he gave me an hour and a half of his time to take me through the score in incredible patient detail, and I kick myself to this day that I didn't really know what questions to ask him. But I ran and I could just about keep in touch with what he was saying.

And in the years afterwards we kept very much in touch. I was living in London, I went to many of his rehearsals and just simply saw him teach a generation of musicians – how his core repertoire went in his brain.

I also played the piano a number of times for auditions for him. He was always very warm, very friendly – I think one of the loveliest colleagues that there is.

I mean the idea that I would be going to have dinner with him in Baden-Baden at his home, in this extraordinary, almost undecorated place, but covered with – as I counted – nine Mirós, two Paul Klees on the wall. Characteristically Pierre said to me: “Oh no, no, I’m not a collector, no, not at all. These are just things people gave to me.” And as he said that, I noticed that one of the paintings had “To Pierre Boulez, with deepest admiration, from Joan Miró.” So, it’s interesting actually who gave him the paintings.

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Could you talk about Boulez and the Berlin Philharmonic?

Rattle: It’s one of the things I’ve been proudest of that I was able with the Berlin Philharmonic to rekindle the relationship with Pierre, which I know had been productive but difficult in the days before. And I think we were very lucky to have some more concerts with him in the years gone by on some very, very great occasions. I don’t think anyone will ever forget the concert full of the different pieces, *4 pieces*, *5 pieces*, et cetera, by Bartók, Webern, Schönberg and Berg.

And it’s been an extraordinary thing, because Pierre was of course a firebrand – I mean, he was an entirely intolerant, tough, thoughtless, wonderful creature immediately after the Second World War. And he talks about himself with an utter disarming frankness, where he says, he simply cannot believe how ridiculous he was. But in fact that person who wanted to create chaos, and wanted to destroy, with this messianic zeal, to say that music can be something else – somewhere this is still the same person, even if he looks back

at himself with a kind of wryness. He is still a revolutionary.

In what ways did he influence the music world?

Rattle: He changed music, he changed the way we thought, he changed the way we structure the music business. So many of the ideas which he put out and seemed revolutionary are now actually part of our musical life. And maybe this is one of the reasons why he has been able to become so mellow.

In the last years to watch him work with for instance the Lucerne Festival Academy, which he set up as a way to really train the next generation of musicians and what was needed, to see him there, to see him again with his wisdom and with his humour, and his absolute determination, to make everything sound, to make everything – oh, how would I put it – logical is unfair – even logically illogical, consequent I would say. This is one of the greatest musicians of our time or any time.

What about Boulez as a composer?

Rattle: In his works, which have become more and more beautiful, more and more sensual as time goes on – far too few pieces of course. He's always been a composer who has really struggled, who has gone back, who has revised. Some pieces are still unfinished and maybe will always remain unfinished. But he has provided a new type of light for music

I would say there are very few composers, or indeed musicians of any type, who have actually changed the entire discourse of music, but without any doubt, Pierre is one of those. Great composer, great man, wonderful colleague, and really a "Mensch". Through all this, through all his revolutionary fervour he's remained a Mensch, and he will remain close in the hearts of all of us, always.

In fact Pierre was willing to go right down to the bottom, pull it to pieces, make it worse and then do the slow, patient, important work of making it what it really should be. That's not a bad picture of what he did all throughout his

life.

What was his method of rehearsing like?

Rattle: In my early twenties I had one of the most instructive and humbling lessons of my life, preparing an orchestra for Pierre. I went back to the National Youth Orchestra, which I had only relatively recently left, and I prepared a programme for him. And having prepared this, then recorded *The Rite of Spring*. I mean, there was maybe a 20 year old conductor with an orchestra ranging from 13 to 19, so [laughs] all kids in a sandpit together. And for what we were, I think we did very, very well. So having finished recording, two days later Pierre turned up and he played absolutely all the way through *The Rite of Spring*.

And what I saw was Pierre conducting, and of course the orchestra playing – “Simon, almost, almost ideally”, and I felt very pleased with myself. That didn’t last for long. Because then Pierre started working, and started taking it to pieces, and started telling people what it should be. And what was absolutely fascinating is of course he was dismantling everything. I did everything that he did not want, and I heard it get worse, and worse, and worse. And I thought: “Now, this is really interesting.” And he patiently built it up, built it up over three hours. And I heard a point, a couple of hours in, where having got worse and worse, it started of course to overtake [laughs] anything I had ever dreamt of. And to watch him have the courage not only to destroy but to rebuild – most other conductors simply would have put some more makeup on it, or maybe changed a few little things. In fact Pierre was willing to go right down to the bottom, pull it to pieces, make it worse and then do the slow, patient, important work of making it what it really should be. That’s not a bad picture of what he did all throughout his life. That’s three hours of which I learnt a lifetime of lessons from, and very, very characteristic of him, and all done with the most utter good humour and patience and joy. Unforgettable.

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