

***“Sometimes you discover
yourself!”***

Pierre Boulez



“Without doubt, you finish – and with doubt, you have the tendency never to finish.” Pierre Boulez

With *Le Marteau sans maître* Pierre Boulez established himself once and for all as a major composer. The way in which his composition techniques

developed, and how he sees this masterpiece today is the subject of an interview with Wolfgang Schaefler in Baden-Baden, where the world première took place in 1955.

Mr. Boulez, Le Marteau sans maître was premiered here in Baden-Baden in 1955. 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 the *Structures* beforehand, 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 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. Was it originally your intention to find a balance between these two schools?

Boulez: Yes, between the spontaneity of the one and the constructivism 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 its sound, 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 – cultures not of our world – 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 civilisation has its own sound.

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. 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. This sound harkens back to Bali and to the African sphere: 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.

“*Sometimes you think of the end long before the rest of the piece.*”

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

Boulez: 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, because the sound is so modified that it ends up being practically another sound. 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.

Coming back to Le Marteau: apart from revising the instrumentation immediately after having composed it, you have left it alone – which is very unusual for you. It is as if you recognise 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 – *Dérive 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 a way of structuring, of composing the work which was totally different to 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 are 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: I would especially like to finish *Éclat/Multiples*. That's one of the works which is almost finished, and, you know, I have practically doubled 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. Similarly, the concept of the end of *Dérive 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 – because the end was already there. Sometimes you think of the end long before the rest of the piece. When this happens I keep it in reserve.

When we look at the characters of Dérive I and Dérive 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 – *Dérive I* – was improvised, practically speaking. Sir William Glock, who was head of music at the BBC, engaged me, 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 only send the score at the last minute. And I think that in another *Dérive*, I will certainly use the scheme of *Dérive I*, but in a more complex manner; I already have *Dérive III* in my head, and I hope I will have the time to finish it.

“I am generally very sensitive to sound.”

There is a quotation of Gustav Mahler in which he said that the music composed him. Would you agree with that regarding Dérive 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 that the material in fact composes with you, and you compose with the material. It's an exchange.

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 it, I said “oh, that's interesting.” 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.

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

Boulez: Yes, it's exactly that: it's like you're an archaeologist discovering a civilisation – down, down and down. And then sometimes you discover yourself, progressively, just like archaeologists discover an old civilisation.

Interview: Wolfgang Schaefler



VIDEO

See the video version of the interview at www.universaledition.com/boulez-interview