

Pierre Boulez - l'enfant terrible

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FEW figures were cooler or calmer than Pierre Boulez on the podium. He conducted without a baton, lifting the phrases and flicking them away with long, elegant fingers. The rest of his body did not move, impassive and commanding as a man lightly trimming a hedge; his face was a stone mask, only his darting eyes revealing how he was excavating the music, uncovering the layers and rebuilding them in structures of crystal clarity. Many said he was the finest conductor-composer since Richard Strauss. Every inch of him suggested that he was well aware of that.

Inside the statue, though, was gelignite. Music, to him, was in permanent revolution; but since there had been no proper upheaval since the Renaissance, he was leading one. For 50 years he was at war, or in a state of uneasy truce, with the musical establishment, fighting to make the deaf, incurious or plain uncultured appreciate the works of their own time.

The composers of the 20th century—Schoenberg, Webern, Nono, Ligeti, himself—were woefully neglected and unplayed. This he vowed to change, first by challenging the canon known as “popular”. Opera houses, “full of dust and shit”, should be burned down. Original scores should be destroyed and accepted “masterpieces” vandalised, in order to recreate them. He cursed the grim custodians of the standard repertoire, and mocked his teachers at the Paris

Conservatoire: Olivier Messaien, who wrote “brothel music”, and René Leibowitz, who dared to “correct”, in red pen, his first piano sonata.

This was not a war he fought single-handed. He dragged into it, often kicking and screaming, great orchestras, audiences and even governments. Instrumental players were bullied out of their traditional routines, made to interleave their comfortable Haydn and Brahms with works based purely on the pitch of notes and their duration. In New York, where he conducted the Philharmonic from 1971 to 1977, horrified audiences found the Avery Fisher Hall stripped of seats for his “rug concerts”, and programmes spiky with unfamiliar stuff. He could chalk up victories, as at Bayreuth, where his performance of Wagner’s “Ring” in 1976 was booed on the first night and cheered for 85 minutes on the last. More often he left to sighs of relief.

Music as maze

In his pocket, primed like bombs, were his own compositions: in germination from his teenage years, when he had fallen under the spell of Stravinsky’s percussive, discordant “Chant du Rossignol”, and tested from 1946, when he was in charge of music for a decade for Jean-Louis Barrault and Madeleine Renard at their avant-garde theatre company. His works ranged from piano sonatas in which the whole keyboard was ravaged, plucked and battered to the delicate teaspoonfuls of notes dispensed in “Le Marteau sans Maître” (The Hammer without a Master, 1955), or the dreamy soprano wanderings of “Pli selon Pli” (Fold following Fold, 1958), his setting of poems by Mallarmé.

Ever seeking new sounds, he introduced Asian and African timbres, gourd and gamelan, and tried every newly invented electronic device in the hope that computers might play, in real time, with orchestras. When he had made peace with the French government (after telling André Malraux, the culture minister, in 1966 that he was going “on personal strike” against him), he was given his own music department in the Centre Pompidou, where he set up an orchestra, the Ensemble Intercontemporain, to play new works, and collaborated with scientists to try to expand the sounds of music into realms so far unthought of and unheard.

Paradoxes dogged him. He fought to set music free; but he also longed for order in it. He imagined the answer lay in Schoenberg’s serialism, where melody, harmony and counterpoint vanished, notes were related only to one another, and music “left the world of Newton for the world of Einstein”. But he soon found the dry 12-tone system a burden. The inspiration for “Le Marteau sans Maître” was his urge to weave colour, imagination and spontaneity into it—combining opposites to make music that was more like Debussy’s, and which opened up another world.

Both composition and conducting—to him an essential pairing, each informing and enriching the other—were explorations. Music was a maze through which listeners should wander freely, stumbling on the unexpected and not knowing the end. His own works were revised constantly; some were deliberately left unfinished, for in writing and making music he was also, he believed, discovering himself.

Of the private Boulez, almost nothing was revealed; he was a solitary, isolated by choice and cloaking his charm, much of the time, in arrogance. His favourite mental associates were bad-boy poets, Rimbaud and Baudelaire, or abstract painters like Kandinsky, all smashers of boundaries and shockers of the status quo.

When he composed, he once explained, he dug down through layers of himself towards the “core of darkness” from which, in extraordinary flashes, his music came. Though the music might be wildly radical, this core—another paradox—would never change. Towards that unknown, like Orpheus, he made the most tumultuous and controversial journey of any modern classical musician.