

# Pierre Boulez talks to Martin Lodge

In 1988 Pierre Boulez visited New Zealand to participate in the International Festival of the Arts held biennially in Wellington. The Concert Programme of Radio New Zealand recorded an interview of a general nature with him (in English) for inclusion in a programme on his work and ideas prepared by Martin Lodge. This was broadcast later in the year to introduce recordings of the concerts given by Ensemble Intercontemporain directed by Boulez during the festival and which included some of his own compositions. What follows is a revised transcription of the interview, which was taped at Symphony House, Wellington on 23 March.

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*For some years now the Institute for Acoustic and Musical Research, IRCAM, of which you are director, has been pursuing some very sophisticated studies in its field, including the use of advanced computers. In broader terms, though, what do you see as the proper role of science and technology in music?*

The technology must *serve* the music. I don't look at technology for the sake of technology - that's important to me. Progressive technology must serve the imagination and the richness of the sound the composer wants to use. In the research at IRCAM, now, we have two goals.

The first is to have real-time calculation. I'm not at all uneasy about this scientific approach, because when you talk to a scientist, immediately he speaks to you in terms of speed and amount of work done by the computer within the smallest time possible. This is very good for music, because before, when you wanted to synthesize sound or to make a calculation of any kind you had to wait. To wait meant that you were not really grasping what was going on. You were expecting certain results, but if they turned out differently from what you expected, then you had to begin again from scratch. So it was very time consuming, and eventually you lost patience, and also lost contact with the imagination. Now, if you have real-time for the main operations you get the results immedi-

ately. It speaks to the imagination, and you can check each time, and very quickly, what you have. If you want to try a chord on the piano, you try the chord on the piano, but of course you don't try a chord on an orchestra because you can't have an orchestra play only one bar! With the computer it's approximately the same. For rather simple things you can have instant results, and for more complicated you must go through a process which is slightly longer.

So, we want real-time operation when composing - and also during performance. I think I suffered from this limitation before. If you have simply instruments playing with a tape, then you are a prisoner of the tape - of synchronism with the tape, and your performance can only be mechanical. But with the technology obedient to your wish and to your time and to your feeling for performing, then the musician doesn't have to worry about synchronism and all these kinds of trivial problems - and these were really very annoying sometimes.

The second goal is to make the language of the computer much more accessible. In the past you had to deal with a lot of numbers and that was really not speaking to the imagination of the musician. Now that we have graphics-translation, the language is easier to grasp and to understand. It means the dialogue between man and machine becomes much more productive and much more imaginative.

*How do you think the poetics of music is going to be affected by the new technology?*

I think we have a new territory, not only as the sound becomes increasingly more interesting, more complex, but also there are a lot of things you cannot do with our instruments - I was about to say *normal* instruments, because normally we use them - but technology provides us with instruments which will be normal very soon. For instance, if you want to have micro-intervals in the high register of a violin, you cannot expect to have them played properly because the fingers are simply too thick. You would have to cut up your fingers: not really something to recommend to any performer! There is also, for instance, the [theoretical] possibility of tuning a harp in an alternative way. But

you know very well that it is difficult enough to tune half-tones on the harp; and if you have humidity or a change of temperature the harp goes out of tune very rapidly. For a piano, which has more stable tuning, you can only act with great caution because the tension on the strings cannot be changed a lot – otherwise your piano will be dead very soon – and this tuning is fixed for a concert.

Now, let's say in our imagination we want, for instance, scales of different kinds available at any time: with a piano you have it tuned for the whole concert as I say, but with a computer you can have intervals as you want. You might have two minutes of music with one scale of intervals, and then you push a button and you can have a whole new type of scale. So the new technology is realising what the imagination is thinking of but cannot realise with present instruments. For instance, if you are sampling the sound of a bell, a very complex sound, you can analyse it and compose with the components of the sound of that bell – which you never could do in reality. So, I would say, technology opens the door to transgression. You transgress all the limits with which you are confronted right now. I think that's a very good thing, because it's a genuinely new field you are discovering.

*In the last ten years or so, much less has been heard from the group of 1950s avant-garde composers, figures like Stockhausen, Berio, Xenakis. In fact it sometimes seems as if you alone of that group continue to remain in the forefront of new music. In what way has the musical climate changed recently?*

I think everybody has gone his own way, of course; and, well, everybody has his own preoccupations. It's become very ecumenical, you might say. Sometimes people of my generation felt they were maybe too much involved in the research field, and they wanted to communicate more with an audience. And there were other preoccupations - Stockhausen with theatre, Berio with mixing quite a lot of styles to give more expressive power to the music, Xenakis with a lot of instrumental writing which was more related to traditional, even ethnic, music – of Greece, for instance; and I cannot blame them for having their own ideas about composition.

For myself, I'm always for trying to look for new fields. Maybe that's because I am also a performer, and for me history is not a problem at all. I know history inside out. I have performed a lot of historical composers, so they are, for me, in the library and I don't need to visit the library, or to be obsessed with the library any more. For me, the library is a place you can visit from time to time: alright it is there, and I don't deny that it is there, but I have to look for something else. For instance when I am playing the Schoenberg works I say: Alright, that's good, it was necessary at one time, I enjoy them, but I want to look for something else.

Because I am a performer I have no nostalgia at all, and I think that's the reason, the main reason, why I am always trying to go forward.

*That really brings us to another question concerning the pluralism of musical styles at present. With such a large number of styles in use by different composers, is there any likelihood of another common style, a serious vernacular, arising – perhaps from electronic equipment or acoustic research? Or are we doomed to this musical Tower of Babel stylistically?*

You know, seen from 40 years on, you may have the impression that the [avant-garde] style was unified, but this was not true, even at the time. It is just that certain people survived who had a kind of common style, or some features in common, I would rather say. It's like for instance, the way you had Picasso and Braque with features in common, and you had Kandinsky and Klee who had features in common because of the Bauhaus. So, certainly, Stockhausen and myself, especially, once had features in common. But eventually things go their own way: the last Kandinsky is not at all like the last Klee, the last Picasso is not at all like the last Braque.

I suppose when you are developing a style there is a kind of closeness of composers or of painters to each other because they are looking in one direction. When they have found, more or less, the basis of the language, and the main characteristics of the language, then individuality develops and is more important. Individual features become more significant than the general characteristics. I see features characteristic of a generation. You know the characteristics of my generation already, but take for instance, the generation which is now 40-45 in France, people like Tristan Murail, Gerard Grisey or Hugues Dufourt. This is a kind of middle generation. They had a shared preoccupation when they were younger because they were reacting to my generation, and they wanted to be much more involved with the sound itself and to establish a relationship between language and the acoustical side of sound. This preoccupation was very common with these people when they were 25-30. Now I see them being dispersed, and for instance, somebody like Grisey is looking for more contrast and a less "vertical" style. Murail, on the other hand, is going much more in the direction of realising a synthesis between "fabricated" sound – synthesized sound – and instrumental sound, of finding a junction between these two worlds. In contrast again the third one, Dufourt, is not at all preoccupied with technology, but only with instrumental sounds. You see, individual character is revealed progressively. They had something in common initially, but now they show more personal characteristics.

I can also see a third generation behind me now,

*Continued overleaf*



young people who are 25-27 and who are working in IRCAM. They are still very much in touch with the sound itself, but they want much more structural stability in their music, so they try to marry a strong structural organisation in the music with the acoustical proprieties of sound. For the moment this generation appears very unified: I am sure 20 years from now they, too, will have grown more individual.

*A feature of avant-garde music through the 1950s, 60s and 70s was a new view of musical structure, in particular there were ideas of "open form" which had wide currency. Pieces of music were not intended to be individually complete and finished products in themselves but were seen as part of something larger. To your mind, are such ideas still valid?*

Yes, they are still valid but I am not preoccupied now only with that. Certainly I imagine that some forms can be open, and especially for soloists. You know, in my utopia at that time I thought that even for a big group it would be feasible to have a kind of 'free' form, and especially freedom of choice. But there are too many mistakes because always some people take the wrong turn, let's say, and there is really no validity in having only one chance in a thousand of getting the right performance. But, on the contrary, a soloist or group of soloists is quite able to do it. As far as I can see, when you have the progression from one soloist to, for instance, the 110 people in a large orchestra, the possibility of freedom progressively diminishes – and for very trivial reasons. Because with an orchestra of 110 you cannot rehearse forever, you have a limited time and you have to give precise directions. You can do that, for instance, with the soloists of an orchestra – you can give them some leeway – they will be responsible for themselves and will react to you directly. You always see this with orchestras. The first clarinet, or first violin, or first trumpet, for instance, reacts individually, but you cannot ask the seventh desk of first violins to react individually because they are accustomed to following. You cannot say to them: 'Here, you may do that, if you want, or if you don't want to, you can take this other opportunity', because they will always be kind of lost and it will not produce anything worthwhile.

So, I write according to the possibilities I meet. For instance if I'm writing a solo piano or clarinet piece I still make different versions and the soloist can choose – and he can really choose, because he has studied the piece long enough to be aware of all the directions. The comparison I always make is with the map of a city. You know, you provide a map, and the performer can follow this road or this other road: he can make the connection between two points using one solution or another solution and it will always be valid – but he can choose according to a very precise plan. That's the case, for example, in my last work, *Répons*, which uses soloists.

I also use this freedom in another way, the performers having either a strong connection with me, or a weak connection with me as conductor. They may be completely with me, rhythmically, or they may be free but I will give the cues where they have to perform. That's the kind of freedom you really can have with a big group. So I think this idea of freedom has permeated everything. It is not as unrestricted a view as before. I retain the possibility of having this freedom of form but I keep also the possibility of introducing a freedom of direction, let's say, within a work which is absolutely directional.

*Your attitude to opera has changed considerably over the years. Since suggesting in the 1950s that the best thing to do with opera houses was to blow them up you've gone on to conduct historic performances of Wagner's Ring at Bayreuth during the 1970s, and today we read that you are at work composing an opera yourself. What's your current view of opera and what happened to change your view of the medium?*

Well maybe I had a distorted view of opera because I was brought up in France and in Paris especially, where opera performances were not on a high level – on the contrary. Firstly, there was no repertoire. *The Ring* of Wagner was not done in Paris for fifty or sixty years. Can you imagine that? When in London it was done under Solti, for instance, every year at the beginning of the season. The opera repertoire was only *Carmen* and *Traviata* and things like that. Mozart was rarely played, and of Wagner we heard only *Tristan* from time to time, and maybe *Lohengrin*. So not even the repertoire was done properly, and I developed a very critical view of the opera house.

When I came to Germany, of course, the repertoire was much more interesting but when I worked in one German house, that was Frankfurt, I saw that really the conditions were far from ideal. Sometimes, two days before the performance you did not even know who would be the leader, because they were always saying: "Oh, we have a substitute – so-and-so cannot do the performance but somebody else will jump in" and so on. It's this kind of persistent "jumping in" which is absolutely destructive to a performance. Also, the system of the orchestra which turns completely independently from the performances. So in one performance you have clarinet A but you have first oboe B, let's say, and then in the next performance you have first clarinet B, first oboe B, but bassoon A! So you could never ensure the homogeneity of the orchestra. And worse, there might be a performance given maybe three weeks or four weeks after just one or two rehearsals, which is absolutely dreadful. These conditions of performing would never be accepted in the concert situation because if the concerts were to be performed in such a sloppy way – as a performance can be in an opera house – you would not accept them for a second.

I am speaking from a purely musical point of view but can you imagine a production like that? Well, for instance, I remember being told by a singer himself that in Cologne they revived *The Ring* by Wagner in the production of Wieland Wagner – ten years after his death! That was in 1976. So, it went on the stage: ‘Do you remember what Wieland told us about this ...?’ ‘Well, no I...I don’t remember exactly, but I think he told us to do such and such..’ And that is called a revival of a production by Wieland Wagner! That’s cheating, I feel. I could not accept these conditions and therefore I was so brutal with the opera houses. To present such performances to an audience is a disgrace.

So I always worked, myself, under very strict conditions. I asked for a certain number of rehearsals, always attended by the same people. I can understand that for a while the strings are not always the same but they must all have rehearsed, and of course the principals must always be the same – so those were my requirements. That, let’s say, is the problem of working conditions.

But today there is also the problem of bringing something new to the theatre. In the last twenty years or so some directors have changed even the physical aspect of theatre. They don’t want what we call the “Italian theatre”, with the stage at the front. They sometimes have settings where the audience is interspersed with the actors, or spread around, or in two different places; or maybe the audience goes and takes a seat after having stood for a while – there are many different ways of approaching the audience. Of course you cannot do that so easily with music because you have acoustical problems which don’t exist in the theatre.

I remember having seen a production by Joseph Losey, the movie director, of *Boris Godunov* in Paris. Of course he had very good intentions. It was his first staging of an opera, so he had no real experience of it – I don’t mind that – but he wanted the singers directly in front of the audience, like actors. He couldn’t stand the pit, you know, this very big hole between the singer and the audience. So the pit was covered and the singers could then go to the very front. It was, of course, very emotional, when you saw the king, Boris, going mad in front of you. But – and there was a very big but – the orchestra was put at the end of the stage. It was on a kind of platform which was supposed to represent a kiosk, a music kiosk with a crown on it, built right at the back of the stage. The contact between the singers and the conductor was very difficult, because it was only through monitors – the singers were behind the conductor – and when they were facing the audience they could not see the conductor, except on monitors. You don’t get a great deal of human contact through monitors. Moreover, when you had the singers alone, with the orchestra, you could hear the orchestra, but as you know Boris is a piece with a lot of chorus writing – it’s one of the main features. When the chorus went to the front of the stage – this big, mas-

sive chorus – you heard only the chorus and barely a sound from the orchestra. So you see that it is not possible, really, to make opera work under unsuitable acoustical circumstances.

Therefore, I really think you must think through the staging problems with a director first. If you want to make the stage possibilities more flexible, you can maybe disperse the musicians into small groups, or unify them somewhere different – maybe at the side, or something like that. It is all these problems I want to study now. If I’m going to present something I have to look at all those problems which are involved in the writing of an opera now.

Also I’m thinking about the treatment of time. In the modern theatre the use of time can be very variable. I remember some of Bob Wilson’s productions where you had a scene which lasted for only one minute or 30 seconds, and then in contrast you had a scene which expanded to fifteen minutes. I like this contraction or expansion of time. On the other hand, operas are generally made up of slices of quite equal time, so something has to be changed in this respect.

I also want to introduce new technology. For instance, just as you have the use of masks in classical tragedy, I think you can produce a mask of the voices with the new technology. You can make a highly dramatic impact if you use the voice as a mask and not merely as a normal voice. I was very struck, for instance, by a play I saw a long time ago. The first part had actors speaking normally, and you could recognise them because you could identify the characters: each was on stage at a particular spot and the voice was coming from that place. In the second part everybody was miked, and you were completely lost. You could distinguish women from men of course, but you could not locate, really, who was actually speaking because the sound was all over; so there was a kind of anonymity of voice, and that’s an effect I would like to transpose into an opera. You would have a number of very individual voices, and some kind of anonymous voice. It’s another aspect of mask.

When I saw the bunraku puppet theatre in Japan, I was struck by the fact that the puppeteer is visible and always moves parallel to the puppet itself. It is very striking. The words are said by somebody else again off to the side. So you have these three layers of comprehension of the play. Our theatre wants to be naturalistic, and I think that’s wrong. Opera is convention, and highly conventional, and I think to try to put the convention under the table is to make it very artificial. On the contrary, to use the convention is really the natural form of making opera.

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