

Circuit: Why do you think that music has been able to advance much more rapidly than the other arts in this century?

Boulez: Because music is not burdened by any anecdotal features. In a novel, for instance, people will find nothing interesting unless it contains anecdotes.

Circuit: People like Queneau or Butor are trying to do this in literature. . . . Do you think that they are doing the same thing as you?

Boulez: Not exactly the same because this is impossible in literature, but they are going in the same direction.

Circuit: But your work has often been compared to that of Butor and the Nouveau Roman – do you not think this is a fair comparison?

Boulez: In some senses, yes. I am very attached to the formal structure of a work, but not only to that. Therefore I choose a lot of poetry to provide a significant structural relationship between the music and the words. I think that the formal structure exists only to express particular feelings; you see I like a precious stone, a diamond, for instance, to serve a practical purpose, not just to be a valuable ornament. And a knife is sharp in order to kill: the 'form' of a knife is not confined to the knife alone but depends on the uses to which it is put; it's the same with the formal structure of a piece of music.

Circuit: On television recently you said about Mallarmé – "The deep meaning of this poem by Mallarmé is that there is reality, and when you go beyond reality then you can see the *real thing*." Can you expand on this?

Boulez: This is a particular characteristic of Mallarmé's thinking. . . . It's an incidental fact to see this white table here. . . . There are so many aspects of whiteness. Mallarmé might choose ice, for instance, or use white as a symbol of

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virginal purity. But when you go beyond these things you grasp Reality much better and you really find the meaning of the world. For me reality is just like the surface of the water, if you don't go beyond, you don't have an experience of what water really is.

Circuit: Do you think that music is a way of expressing this Reality?

Boulez: Yes certainly. Music is the most acute medium for the expression of this mystery; even a painting cannot be so mysterious: you are obliged to consider a painting partly as a material object, whereas music is so 'without words'* that it is possible to orientate yourself; music is a kind of labyrinth where you can find your own way.

Circuit: You've spoken about improvisation which you've more or less dismissed as a form of regurgitation, and yet the musical form which is unique to this century and has such great popularity is jazz, which uses improvisation. Why do you think that improvisation can be used with one art form and not with another?

Boulez: Because jazz is based on a language which is completely assimilated, it's not creative. This language is not exactly a slang but a way of expressing oneself in the words of every day. For me that's not a very creative part of music, it's a part of incidental life like a window display. Something very useful for entertainment.

Circuit: What do you think of pop music?

Boulez: Well, that's just to be consumed like ice-cream. Even if you don't want to know it you hear it everywhere: whenever you go into a restaurant, especially in America. You have incidental music in every part of your life, it doesn't bother me at all. Although as far as I can avoid it I do.

Circuit: Do you think that this very high degree of commercialism forces a composer to be even more withdrawn?

Boulez: No, I don't think this is a problem which affects serious music. Pop music is to be considered as part of the environment, as a décor, no more. I would prefer people to use pop music as décor rather than classical music. Some people take their baths with Beethoven. I find that completely silly, but if they take their bath listening to pop music that's all right.

Circuit: Do you not think that your music will always be less popular than, say, Schoenberg, as Schoenberg is less popular than Beethoven and as Debussy is less popular than Tchaikovsky?

Boulez: I think it is always a question of degree in creative arts. Tchaikovsky appeals to a certain part of the human being which is not the best: exactly like Verdi. But the music of late Beethoven, for example, is on a different level and therefore will not be so popular. This doesn't happen just in music, in poetry it's exactly the same, you don't know whether Rimbaud is read by more than ten thousand people.

Circuit: Webern talks about how the average person listens to music. He says "They have to be able to cling to pictures and 'moods' of some kind. If they can't imagine a green field, a blue sky or something of the sort, they are out of their

* indescribable Ed.

depth".* Do you think that people listen to the wrong things in music?

Boulez: I don't think they listen to anything, they just want to have a source and an impulse for their own ramblings. They hear only parts of the music. It's just an excitement, like a smell or a colour, something for their sentimental life, and I think many people confuse their own sentimental life with the music. It's purely a stimulant like alcohol; they drink alcohol not for the taste, but just to get drunk; for this kind of person sound is intoxicating and makes them think about themselves.

Circuit: You've given an analogy of a certain kind of musical experience: the astronaut in a space capsule orbiting in the void. It is like things Hindemith has said about musical space and Schoenberg talking about "the unity of musical space – no up or down, no forwards or backwards". Do you think one can experience all music in this way?

Boulez: No, in different periods of history you have different kinds of approach to music. I mean, now when you hear music of the middle ages you cannot approach it in a very genuine way. You no longer have the feeling for it and you must reconstitute a not completely natural feeling. On the contrary it's rather artificial and when you recreate this artificiality you can experience the original feeling. It's not peculiar to music – when you have literary texts of the middle ages to read, you really have to change your frame of mind. What we demand of literature is not at all what people of the middle ages demanded of it. And don't forget that for a long time and in other civilisations music was not written for an aesthetic purpose only, but more as an accompaniment to religion, for instance, or public festivities. Since the nineteenth century we treat music either as entertainment or more like, say, metaphysical research, which is now only incidentally connected with religion, if at all. For a long time music was not autonomous and in Indian civilisation it still isn't. In Greek culture music was only part of drama and religion.

Circuit: Many composers express religious beliefs. I don't know of any religious works by you, but Schoenberg, Webern, Stravinsky, Messiaen and even Stockhausen have written religious works.

Boulez: Yes, but that's personal religion.

Circuit: You don't think there's something in music which implies religious belief?

Boulez: Metaphysical more than religious. The metaphysical may coincide with the religious, but it need not do so. It would be completely silly for me to write a mass. The Church is in the greatest trouble now because it wants to change Latin into the vernacular and it is searching for a new musical literature, but this will be thoroughly artificial; the time for that has passed. It's not religion that's important, it's the metaphysical points of view. Religion as a collective duty and the music that accompanies it are over. Music is pleasure more than anything else now, on a very high level or on a very low level. . . . It's a very rare case when people experience music metaphysically.

Circuit: How do you regard religious works by people like Britten?

* 'The Path to New Music'

Boulez: I know this awful 'War Requiem' which for me is one of the most awful. . . . You see, I don't like the basic vulgarity which this kind of music has. It's true there may have been a sincere desire to compose a requiem for the victims of the war, but the work is vulgar in its realisation. Because there is only the outward manifestation of a cult, let us say, but no interior feeling at all. For me that's just incidental music for a film by Cecil de Mille.

Circuit: You couldn't comment on some sort of event like that yourself?

Boulez: No, I think that now one must have a much more self-conscious way of approaching this kind of thing. The vocabulary may be only part of the reflection, but when it's vulgar, when it's only film-music, it doesn't interest me at all. Because sincerity doesn't justify everything.

Circuit: What about Nono's 'Sul Ponte del Hiroshima' which I would have thought was not so very different in intent from the 'War Requiem'?

Boulez: That's true, but it's also rather artificial. To make a comparison that's perhaps more striking, the real spirit of the French Revolution is not with the people who wrote music for the festivities of the Revolution but in the '9th Symphony'. So long as you don't transcend circumstance, you only get an 'incidental' work.

Circuit: Audiences often seem to react to works as different as the 'War Requiem' and 'Sul Ponte del Hiroshima' on the same sort of level. But is there an emotional content in your music directly comparable to triadic music?

Boulez: No, I avoid this direct impact which is related not to the music but to sentiment. Because when people listen to such works they don't really hear the music, they think about the people involved. Well, it's all right to have that feeling, I have it also, only I don't need the music in order to have it.

Circuit: As I understand it, you wouldn't agree with Stravinsky that there is no emotion in music.

Boulez: No, not at all, I think that was the reaction of a period. No, I would correct Stravinsky and say that there *is* emotion in music, but it must be of a purely musical quality and not just 'beside' the music. Otherwise it would be expressed in another medium; in opera, for instance, you already have the mixing of two kinds of emotion, dramatic and musical.

Circuit: You seem to consider this purely musical emotion to be metaphysical: in this light how would you regard Stockhausen's statement* that "I would be very happy if I could write a piece that lasts for eternity".

Boulez: (laughs) That's an old German dream!

Circuit: Do you think that all contemporary music that refers to specific events has to be incidental music?

Boulez: Yes; you see the only country which has tried to dictate to composers is Russia, and that's the most awful music you can hear. It's far too much like film music for my taste. And it's the same with painting. You see, when the connection with events is too close, when there's no reflection on them, you just get old models rewritten according to the events of the day. Shostakovitch is Tchaikovsky rewritten in the idiom of Socialist Russia.

* at a forum in London, Dec. 1965.

Circuit: Some artists have managed to comment quite effectively, Picasso for instance.

Boulez: But that's not the best Picasso. I prefer the Picasso of 1913. The rest of his work has been completely dead for the last forty years, I would say. There is a mechanical phase in the life of a creative man, especially when he is very vital. It's like a star which we still see although it is dead.

Circuit: You've said of both Picasso and Schoenberg that you liked what they did before the 1920's: do you think that the work they produced then appeals to us in a certain way more than it did to their contemporaries?

Boulez: No, I think it rather depends on the individual. And as for Schoenberg I would rather compare him to Mondrian. I saw the great Mondrian exhibition recently in The Hague, and the parallel with Schoenberg was very striking. He has a long period of representationalism as Schoenberg had a long tonal period, and certainly it is very interesting, with all the trees and the sea-shore and so on. Then suddenly when he tried to introduce law into this improvisation part of his invention disappeared completely and his work became very academic. Until the very end, with the 'Boogie-Woogie', the last two paintings, one again has the feeling that there could be something interesting. In late Schoenberg it's exactly the same. The very last pieces, the String Trio for instance, are by far the most interesting. These people were in a very difficult position – they had to destroy a certain order completely. But after the destruction they *had* to reconstruct, they *had* to produce something more positive. And this need to be constructive curtailed the scope of their imagination. I myself know only two artists who remain interesting throughout their lives – Webern and Klee. These two attain the kind of freedom which accompanies a search for strictness.

Circuit: You have said that the period between the wars was unpleasant and uneasy and that the only example of real creativity in literature was Joyce. And yet surrealism was flourishing . . .

Boulez: Ah le surréalisme . . . That rapidly became unfashionable, it was only an outburst, relying on the energy of the moment; I saw a large surrealist exhibition after the war – it was like having chocolate and oranges which we had not had for five years. But after Stalingrad and Hiroshima one cannot have any more of this gratuitous game. In this sense I think that Hiroshima is important . . .

Circuit: One of Schoenberg's late works is precisely a Hiroshima-type work, 'A Survivor from Warsaw'.

Boulez: I don't think that the music for this is very good. Suppose you didn't know what the work was about, you wouldn't be at all impressed by the music itself. Of course when you hear the words "one, two, three", as they count the people, you think much more about the Ghetto than about the music. But if they were saying to the same rhythm the months of the year or the days of the week, it would make no impression whatsoever.

Circuit: In this case what are you doing when you use words in your own music?

Boulez: Well, I choose them especially carefully – I don't want to create an incidental work, you see. I try to avoid

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music which is purely anecdotal, even if the anecdote is a very dramatic one: in the concert-hall, that is. . . .

Circuit: About serial technique and your own music. Krenek* has said about 'Structures I': "Boulez has a rather mechanistic approach in assigning numerical values to the various magnitudes manipulated in his work", and "when music becomes the victim of an abstract number game, this is contrary to the nature of music".

Boulez: Well, he has singled out that work of mine in which I try out the mechanical aspect of serialism; everyone has spoken about 'Structures I', which is a purely automatic work, but I have not seen an analysis of the other two which are much more complex.

Circuit: In the retreat from total serialism do you, as Krenek does, rotate the rows, or do you have a more arbitrary way of achieving greater freedom?

Boulez: What interests me is achieving greater freedom within a very solid frame. The period after Webern was greatly concerned with discipline in writing, because it was necessary to find laws for a new vocabulary. But once these laws had been discovered it became more interesting to search for freedom within this vocabulary. Now my researches are directed

* in Seminar on Problems of Modern Music (Princeton Advanced Musical Studies)

towards finding a possibility at each moment to choose, to make my choice and not be obliged to make a choice. Don't forget that in music there have always been polar opposites, extreme freedom and extreme severity. I mean, for example, when people write strictly canonic works, this is just not inspiration. Music does not fall under one category only; it has many possibilities and many categories, this is only one of them and extreme freedom is another.

Circuit: You have said that there is no creation without the unforeseeable becoming necessary. Do I understand by that that you lay down some serial technique which actually makes something happen, as it were?

Boulez: No, that's something much more general, nothing to do with the technique of the music. Generally when you see how works grew out of their historical environment you can appreciate that they were unforeseen; yet once they had been created they became a historical mark and therefore I think that any work of genius is at the same time unforeseen and absolutely necessary.

Circuit: I am still not clear as to how much of your music is serially determined. Take Schoenberg, for example: we know that he would often disregard the strict rule if he felt it to be too restricting. . . .

Boulez: With the simple rows Schoenberg used it's easy to see this. With my pieces it would be too complex to notice. But statistically when you have one wrong tone in a hundred the percentage is not important and it does not affect the language at all. And I find that Schoenberg's discovery of serial technique is academic and for me not very interesting. I like Schoenberg very much until the discovery of the series, but after that there is a discrepancy between his vocabulary and his feeling; the feeling is completely academic and he wrote works in sonata form – that's not interesting. Webern, on the other hand, discovered a new vocabulary as well as a new way of writing.

Circuit: But you still find a very emotional language in Webern's late works, say the 'Second Cantata'?

Boulez: Yes of course. But I don't say it's not emotional, it's just that he found a way to coordinate the emotional content with its intellectual medium.

Circuit: And it is an emotional content comparable to that of triadic music.

Boulez: Yes.

Circuit: This is not so any more with your own music. . . .

Boulez: Of course it is. I remember people's reactions twenty-five years ago when they first heard Webern. They didn't find any emotional content, they just heard discontinuous sound.

Circuit: I may be wrong, but I find 'Eclat' very much more direct and simple than your previous work.

Boulez: Yes that's true, though the 'Second Improvisation on Mallarmé' is not very complex. I've always thought that composers had a right to compose both works which are reflective and really intended for themselves, and works which make more impact on an audience. I have always had some works for which the vocabulary was already fully elaborated, in that sense the vocabulary was natural, it was just a matter of application. Similarly a writer can keep a diary and write plays as well.

Circuit: David Drew has written of your music* "everything in the music is significant to the composer, in so far as it is subjected to some kind of serial necessity which he has established, yet nothing is significant to the listener, who is incapable of divining that necessity and hence of relating each entity to the morphology of the whole". When you reach this degree of serialisation, isn't this going to be evident?

Boulez: No, because listeners need not experience consciously all the technical intricacies of the music; that's not the problem at all. The problem is to have an envelope for this technique and then people grasp something. But very few people indeed realize what's going on in music because it's a matter of technicalities. When you play 15th and 16th century music it's exactly the same, this isn't a specially modern problem. The technique is there to make some things particularly evident – you see there is not only light in music, there is a dark side as well.

Circuit: Ehrenzweig** said that the unconscious is capable of recognising inversions, cancrizans etc. Is this what you're referring to?

Boulez: No, the feeling is that when you make an inversion or a cancrizan in one vocabulary, harmonic relationships are not of the same nature and *that* you can recognize. You don't know how, but you do so immediately. It's the same in the contemporary idiom, you can tell whether the writing is strongly controlled or not.

Circuit: In the very highly controlled music, as Krenek says: "Serial premeditation produces audible results which were not visualised as the purpose of the procedure", and Ussachevsky says that electronic composition creates sound patterns that it would be hard to imagine in advance.

Boulez: Yes, that's true. You see you must accept the risk of the unforeseen.

Circuit: So you would admit that you can't necessarily imagine what the thing's going to sound like?

Boulez: No, you post-imagine. . . .

* in 'European Music in the 20th century' ed. Hartog.

** in 'Psychoanalysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing'.

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Some books, and articles . . .

Boulez: Penser La Musique Aujourd'hui/Editions Gauthier 1963
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Works

Deux Études – musique concrète/1949

Doubles – for large orchestra/1958 UE

Éclat – for piano, harp, celesta, cimbalo, vibraphone, bells and percussion/1965

Improvisation Sur Mallarmé, I – for soprano, harp, vibraphone, bells and percussion/1958

Improvisation Sur Mallarmé, II – for soprano, harp, celesta, piano, vibraphone, bells and percussion/1957