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## 'Each note he writes hits the mark'

Etty Mulder, professor emeritus in Nijmegen, musicologist and cultural historian, set up the Stichting Pierre Boulez (Pierre Boulez Foundation) in 1999, together with Marius Flothuis. This month, her study *Het Vruchtbare Land (The Fertile Land)*, on the affinity between Pierre Boulez and Paul Klee, will be published.

"Unfortunately, the unattractive image from the 1960s of Boulez as a cool rationalist and arithmetician still exists in the Netherlands. Although we are consumed by tablets and technology nowadays, we are reluctant to see those means used in the creation of art. This negative image is unwarranted and must be turned around."

"Rather than Boulez heading a particular artistic movement, he plays a pivotal role between French and German music: between Debussy and Schönberg. He encapsulates the historical roots of the music in his own compositions. In doing so, he challenges the beauty of music in its traditional sense, opens up orchestral sounds and adds dimensions of colour."

"The idea that music does not always have to provide pleasure and that above all you should set aside all prejudices when listening, might help people who want to learn more about Boulez. For me, hearing 'Pli selon pli' in 1964 was an extraordinarily intense confrontation with something I had never experienced before. Prior to this, I knew nothing of his work, but as an eighteen year old I understood that this was something that I would carry with me for the rest of my life."

"Whether he is the greatest composer of his time? That question may remain unanswered. He stands alone, as a composer he hardly had an impact on later composers. As a conductor, he purified – so to speak – the music of Wagner and Mahler."

"If our retrospective need to hype great works continues to exist, there will also be a place for Boulez in twenty years' time. I think 'Pli selon pli', '...explosante-fixe...', 'sur Incises' and 'Notations' then will still be performed, although I do have some doubts. In France, Boulez is highly respected for his contribution to cultural life, but there are no Boulez series there either. It might well be that the music of Boulez, just like Mahler's, will only be fully understood at a later point in time."

Peter Eötvös is a composer and a conductor. In 1978, at the invitation of Boulez, he conducted the inaugural concert of IRCAM and was subsequently appointed musical director of the Ensemble Intercontemporain, a position he held for thirteen years.

"As a composer and a conductor, I have worked with Pierre Boulez for over thirty years. He conducted and world-premiered many of my compositions. And I myself have conducted all of his works for orchestra and ensemble. During my time with the Ensemble Intercontemporain, we performed the complete ensemble repertoire of the twentieth century. Boulez and I hardly ever discussed music. We were building the future."

"As an institute for research in music and acoustics, IRCAM is just as important for the future as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston and NASA. The Ensemble Intercontemporain put IRCAM's new ideas into practice; they turned the ideas into sound."

"I never was one of Boulez's students, but when you have been working with someone for thirty years, you're bound to learn quite a bit. As a conductor, he was always very precise, just like Otto Klemperer, Fritz Busch or Arturo Toscanini. Boulez is one of the most important and prominent personalities of the twentieth century – not only as a composer and a conductor, but also as an initiator in cultural politics. He founded and directed many orchestras, institutes and festivals. His spirit and aesthetics have greatly affected culture in Europe."

"You should start listening to Boulez's music like you start listening to Bach or Beethoven: visit a concert and try to listen like a child, without prejudices. Then go to another concert to get to know the piece even better. And if there are too little concerts of Boulez's music, I recommend going to YouTube, where videos of his music are rather popular. 'Livres pour cordes', for instance, received 45,598 views in seven years and 'Le marteau sans maître' received 237,245 views, which is not bad."

"I know all of Boulez's works and have conducted all of the works for orchestra and ensemble. I have no favourite. I enjoy them all, because I enjoy music. But between you and me, professionals don't actually enjoy music; they create it."

Soprano Barbara Hannigan has been singing Boulez's music for over ten years. Her highlight is 'Pli selon pli' with the Ensemble Intercontemporain under the direction of the master himself, in 2011.

"The colours Boulez put in this piece are impossible to get out of my system. I felt an enormous sense of loss after the performances. The piece has something so romantic to it, it has to do with the flow and the shades of colour. To be a part of 'Pli selon pli' is a very powerful experience. Our collaboration was wonderful. Boulez was extremely kind, honest and respectful. And I could also be honest towards him; there was a feeling of mutual respect."

Is Boulez's music indeed as complex as it sounds? "Yes, very much so. Boulez himself refers to it as follows: 'Look at a flower: nature is the most complex thing there is. It is the performer's task to make the music sound as natural as possible.' Maybe that is why the piece touches me so much: it is the most complex piece of music I have ever sung; yet at the same, after studying hard, it became part of me in a human and emotional sense. I try to be very disciplined in my preparation, so that I get to a point where I can be free and spontaneous. This is what I learned from him, he talked about freedom and spontaneity in music."

"Boulez's music is unique; it is comparable to nothing else. It is also very French – you can identify the colours and movements of Ravel and Debussy in it. You should try to listen to his work without expectations, but with an active ear."

"I will continue to sing 'Pli selon pli' for as long as I can. On the other hand, a part of me no longer wants to perform it, because my collaboration with Boulez was such a wonderful experience and I am not sure whether it can ever be surpassed."

Kees Vlaardingebroek is artistic director of the Stichting Omroep Muziek (Broadcasting Music Foundation). He is responsible for programming the *NTR ZaterdagMatinee* (*NTR Saturday Matinee*), a series of concerts Boulez has had a special relationship with for a long time.

"As a programmer, I like almost all of Boulez's pieces. His oeuvre is relatively small. He constantly refines every piece of his work, which can be frustrating. You might think, for example, that it will soon be possible to perform the entire 'Notations' in their orchestral version. But no, you must conclude that it was never finished. I have always had a great love for the lesser-known pieces, such as 'Messagesquise'. To me, it is the contemporary version of Bach's Brandenburg Concerto: perfectly composed and radiating pleasure. 'Pli selon pli' with Barbara Hannigan a few years ago: unforgettable. A piece like 'Rituel' is nice, because it can be easily combined with the great French repertoire, such as Debussy and Ravel."

"The value of Boulez's music lies in the unusual combination of severity and sensuality. It also has symbolic value: a composition must not be thought of lightly, it's not just some piece of music, there is long tradition behind it. To Boulez, everything you write should be a meaningful, that is, original response to tradition, whether you are opposed to it or not. He sets high standards, both for himself and for society, even at a time when the intrinsic values of music are under pressure."

"The way in which he expresses his responses with the greatest care has impressed me. Just like when he is on stage, using only minor gestures, he knows how to achieve fantastic results. Each note he writes, everything he says, hits the mark."

"During my conversations with him, I have been struck by how important colour and suggestiveness are to him. The last thing he wants is computerised precision. He is by no means an arithmetician, quite the opposite. The only way to do his music justice is to perform it at the very highest level. Then the unclimbable mountain – the complexity of his scores – dissolves for the listener."

"Boulez expects you to stretch as far as possible and to get the most out of the material you are working with," says composer Robin de Raaff. He and several other young composers took a masterclass with Boulez in 1995, when the latter visited the country to conduct Schönberg's 'Moses und Aron'. You can ask him anything about today's society; he will always have a relevant answer, which says something about his outlook on life."

"I was twenty-six when Boulez listened to my first composition, 'Athomus'. Its middle part, which apart from some slow and vapour-like chords consisted of almost nothing, enchanted him the most. With minimum means, I had tried to achieve a maximum of expression. This idea married with his own beliefs about music. Boulez was confrontational, but he did try to pass something on to you to help you develop in your own process of composition."

"Boulez is the last remaining modernist of the pioneers: the generation that sought a tabula rasa and discarded harmony and melody. Everything to do with the past was banned and an abstract approach to composing evolved. Even before the masterclass I was interested in his compositional style. I find his compositional skills phenomenal: his compositions for large ensembles are very transparent. In my piece 'Der Einsame im Herbst', you can hear his influence through the subtle orchestration and the certain level of transparency."

"Getting to the core of Boulez's music is no more difficult than getting to the core of other composers' music. To me, the secret is in listening a lot. The pieces I appreciate most are the ones that I have heard a lot. To listen once is not enough. Boulez composed 'Rituel' after the death of his colleague and friend Bruno Maderna. I think it is a great work: purist, but with an emotional undertone. Very moving."