

## Paul Griffiths: Structures, sketches, silences

Paul Griffiths is the author, most recently, of *La musica del Novecento* and *Pavillon lunaire*, both of which were published last year.

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Pierre Boulez, who has done more for music in Paris than anyone since Louis XIV, has never had a very settled relationship with the city. He arrived there when he was eighteen, to study at the Conservatoire, and soon fell out with pretty much everyone, except a group of contemporaries he dominated - and Jean-Louis Barrault, who gave him a job. In 1954, under the aegis of the Barrault theatre company, he founded his first organization, a concert series devoted to new music and soon billed as the "Domaine Musical". In 1966, when his plans for a thorough reform of the state-run musical institutions were rejected by André Malraux, then culture minister, he left Paris for the south-west German spa town of Baden-Baden and washed his hands of French musical life.

President Pompidou brought him back by giving him what he had long been pressing for: a research facility, inaugurated in 1977 as the Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique (IRCAM) and boasting a house orchestra, the Ensemble InterContemporain, a reconstituted Domaine Musical. He was now in a position to press for more, and to gain it: a medium-sized concert hall, a music museum and a relocated Conservatoire all out at the north-east edge of the city, where lately the large hall he demanded has been added. The Opéra Bastille could also be regarded as, at least by intention, a Boulez project. Yet he kept his home in Baden-Baden and, as a conductor, preferred the orchestras of London, Berlin, Cleveland and Chicago to those of Paris, other than his IRCAM-based ensemble.

Paris, however, has known unrulier artists, and Boulez in the year of his ninetieth birthday is being honoured not only with concerts but also with a fascinating exhibition in the museum he instigated. Installed by the theatre director Ludovic Lagarde, the show uses tightly controlled lighting and narrow passageways to oblige the visitor to follow the trajectory of Boulez's career up to the mid-1960s. Downstairs, in a second big room, the space is wide open, and there at the entrance is Boulez conducting Mahler on a large screen. We have come from Paris, and the galloping development of a composer, to the international stage, and a career now largely as a conductor.

Conducting, of course, does not leave very many spectacular relics to put on display. Composition, in Boulez's case, certainly does, which must be one reason why the first part of the exhibition is so much more absorbing than the second. Right from the first, Boulez's musical handwriting was precise, and as tiny as he could make it. In the late 1950s, when he needed to identify particular segments in a score that had their own rules about how they could be shaped, he started to use different colours. Here is the main movement of his Third Piano Sonata, "Constellation-Miroir", with its streams and whirlpools of red and green, by now Lilliputian, flowing across several pages laid out in a long case - and while marvelling at the elegance, one can be astonished, too, at the force of Boulez's own playing, in a recording he made for Belgian radio in 1958.

Headphones provide not only the music, but also well-chosen extracts from interviews with the composer, allowing one to make one's own private journey, perhaps stopping off at booths where recordings of key works are being played publicly. The distinction, however, is not as appealing as it might be, because problems of sound insulation have not been solved, so Boulez's Third Sonata, crashing and scintillating on the headphones, is likely to take place against the muffled background of his Second, in Maurizio Pollini's recording sounding from one of the booths.

The sound clips that are most extraordinary in this context, however, do not come from works by Boulez, or indeed Mahler, but from Cameroonian drummers and a Cambodian singer, for the organizers have identified the recordings Boulez as a student heard at the Musée Guimet and transcribed onto a sheet of paper. In this instance alone, the sound precedes the physical object, and one can feel oneself, listening and looking, very close to the young musician at work. It also sets the mind racing to learn that Boulez was planning a trip to Cambodia when war broke out in the region at the end of 1946. Something of what he had missed was restored to him when, on tours of South America with the Barrault company in 1950 and 1956, he was able to attend indigenous ceremonies and talk to musicians, but if that direct contact with a different culture had come earlier, it might have gone even deeper. Even so, this single page of transcriptions is a powerful reminder of how much Boulez's signal work, *Le Marteau sans maître*, is embroiled in the music of the world.

Almost all the exhibits - music manuscripts, photographs, letters, diaries, the calligraphic register of the Paris Conservatoire in the 1940s, posters, a proof page of *À la Recherche du temps perdu* with supplementations and supplemented supplementations by the author (a model or an excuse for Boulez's habit of revising), paintings by artists whom the young Boulez keenly admired (Klee, Kandinsky) or who keenly admired him (Nicolas de Staël, André Masson) - are illustrated in the catalogue, which also includes short essays on a range of Boulezian topics. A chronology at the back is packed with detail, not least about the young Boulez's filmgoing (Eisenstein's *October* evidently made a big impression) and his reading, with Kafka an early lodestone.

Absent are the many works withdrawn or abandoned, for the exhibition, though not the catalogue, shows rare photographs of the special platforms set up for *Poésie pour pouvoir*, a piece for orchestra and tape performed at Donaueschingen in 1958 and never again, as well as a page of sketches for an unsuspected third book of *Structures* for two pianos. These silences, too, are part of the extraordinary Boulez story.