

*Pierre Boulez Studies*

Edited by Edward Campbell and Peter O'Hagan

Cambridge University Press (Cambridge, 2016); 408pp, £74.99. ISBN 978-1-1070-6265-8

*Pierre Boulez and the piano: a study in style and technique*

Peter O'Hagan

Routledge (Aldington & New York, 2016); 344pp, £115.00. ISBN 978-0-7546-5319-6.

*Pierre Boulez – Die Partitur der Geste und das Theater der avant-garde*

Martin Zenck

Wilhelm Fink (München, 2017); 831pp, €100.00. ISBN 978-3-7705-5998-5.

Pierre Boulez (1925-2016) is an industry. The rise of post-modernism (a better word would sometimes be anti-modernism) and, more recently, his death haven't diminished in any sense the scientific study, his work much more than his life. And also this work has been investigated selectively. What's more, this selection confirms the choices made by the composer in his declarations or by his first advocates. Although Boulez has developed himself enormously, just as the world around him (the relation between them deserves a book), he still is, not just in the public eye, but also in the eyes of those experts who followed him during decades, to a large extent the man as he was when he came to prominence. Signs of it can be found in these three books. One sign is the continuing focus on the row in Boulez' oeuvre. The pianist Peter O'Hagan's book on the piano music is largely devoted to the treatment of this basic material. As soon as Boulez discovered the dodecaphony and its relevance for his own music, briefly after the war when he studied with René Leibowitz, O'Hagan portrays the other aspects of Boulez' music (if he treats them at all) often as derived from the treatment of rows. The most obvious example is his description of *Structures I* from 1951. Not only is rigidity the key word when describing Ia, as usual with this piece, the row is just as guiding in the other movements. The unpredictability of the form is the result of the less rigid application of the row in Ib and Ic. In this sense there is, it seems, no fundamental difference between Ib and Ic and the pieces Boulez wrote afterwards. About other aspects of the music, such as sound and rhythm, he is less informative. This partiality is the more remarkable, since O'Hagan gives a lot of attention to Boulez' pre-dodecaphonic pieces which he describes excellently (especially when talking about the influence of Messiaen), demonstrating he is perfectly able to describe Boulez' post-war pieces from another perspective.

In spite of these limitations the book has huge qualities. The first is the great attention to unpublished pieces and sketches from which large sections are printed. Second the exchange between composition and other aspects, such as his work for Barrault between 1946 and 1958, between his compositions and his writings and (though less) between composing and conducting. Boulez's writings, especially those from the forties and fifties, which always looked so abstract that they seem to tell you more about Boulez's aesthetic intentions than their actual realizations, appear to be much more revealing about his music than previously thought. If Boulez might have welcomed this research, he must have been ambivalent about the growing attention to sketches, unpublished and withdrawn

compositions, which O'Hagan mentions extensively. Just as it is true that Boulez didn't allow publication (anymore) since he didn't regard the music as up to his standard (rightly, I believe, to judge from the fragments), he nevertheless allowed researchers to study them and even allowed the appearance on CD of the recordings of the performances of withdrawn pieces such as *Polyphonie X* and *Poésie pour pouvoir*.

Unpublished pieces and sketches also feature prominently in *Pierre Boulez Studies*, a collection of essays on fourteen aspects of Boulez's oeuvre, divided in three parts: The Context of the Late 1940s and 1950s, The Evolution of a Style and Reception Styles. The editors Peter O'Hagan and Edward Campbell (the latter is the author of *Boulez, Music and Philosophy*) succeeded to a great extent in avoiding overlaps, mainly since the subjects are very different and can be discussed from a variety of angles. In part one Campbell's contribution deals with Boulez's correspondence and the way he build a network at the beginning of his career. Susanne Gärtner describes in full detail how the Sonatine for flute and piano, as we know it since 1956, is very different from the version presented in Brussels in 1947. 'Schoenberg vive' by Jessica Payette deals partly with the influence Schönberg had on pieces as *Le Marteau sans maître* and *Le soleil des eaux*. 'Perhaps the most important, and under-researched, element that aligns the music of Schoenberg and Boulez, and distinguishes it from that of Webern, is a penchant for composing purely instrumental music as a crucial means to project morphological formation.' (p. 81).

This sentence is in a way further developed in part two of the book with chapters on Fragmentary Reflections on the Boulezian' *non finito* (Robert Piencikowski), Serial Organization and Beyond (Pascal Decroupet), The Quarter-Tone Compositions of Pierre Boulez (Werner Strinz), Alea and the Concept of the Work in Progress (Peter O'Hagan), Unpredictability and Free Choice in the Composition of *Pli selon pli* (Erling Guldbrandsen), Serial Processes, Agency and Improvisation (Joseph Salem), Listening to *Doubles* in Stereo (Jonathan Goldman) and Composing an Improvisation at the Beginning of the 1970's (Paolo Dal Molin).

Although the row still is the center in most of the investigations, more attention is given to the form and the various degrees of completion and openness, the role of improvisation in (not only) *Pli selon pli* and the positioning of musicians at the stage and in the recording studio. The actual information on details in all these texts is abundant and very welcome, but a fundamental problem remains. As Guldbrandsen writes in his contribution: 'If Boulez has been, at best, ambivalent in his rhetoric, widespread structural analyses of his music have been, at worst, methodologically one-eyed. To be sure, Boulez's many sources of inspiration – from literature and the arts, aesthetics, listening to earlier composers and rehearsing and conducting their scores together with musicians and ensembles – have been frequently though loosely mentioned, but their concrete impact has rarely been positioned right at the heart of his compositional method.' (p. 210) On this impasse Boulez and his researchers react(ed) incompletely, each in their own way. Boulez sometimes gives clear aesthetic indications, but he rarely describes (with as major exception *Penser la musique d'aujourd'hui*) how these ideas are materialized into notes. 'Music is an art that has no "meaning"; hence the primary importance of structures that are properly speaking linguistic, given the impossibility of the musical vocabulary

assuming a simply communicative function', as Boulez wrote in his *Orientations*. (p.43) Most of his researchers eschew the aesthetic implications and limit themselves to very detailed analysis, as if they regard it as too speculative to write about, as if musicologists trained in modernist analysis are still skeptical about hermeneutics and narratives. Fortunately several musicologists have tried to gap this bridge. One of them, Arnold Whittall, is the author of the final chapter in part three of *Pierre Boulez Studies*, called 'Pierre Boulez and the Suspension of Narrative' (the two other chapters in this part of *Pierre Boulez Studies* deal with Boulez as programmer in London and Edinburgh). Whittall writes hopefully: 'Just as musical modernism has not proved so rigorously anti-classical as to jettison all contact with tonal ways of structuring, so musicology has responded to the post-classical fascination with post-tonal modes of semantic characterization and syntactic continuity in ways which explore the possibility of keeping the effect of narrative in play, along with hierarchic or rhizomatic mode of formation.' (p. 361) While doing so, he challenges Boulez' remark on meaning and structure in music, which Whittall positioned at the top of his text. Whittall's article is an excellent essay on the theoretical aspects of narrative in contemporary music.

Since this essay is only 17 pages long, one accepts Whittall is only concerned with theory and not with supporting analyses of scores. Zenck's book however is much longer (726 pages, appendices not included), but is still partly suffers from the problem previously described by Guldbrandsen, though with omissions 'from the other side'. When creating, Boulez started, according to Zenck, with aesthetic assumptions, which Zenck takes as titles for the parts of his book: *Theatralität*, *Körperlichkeit*, *Intermedialität von Bild und Musik* and *Virtueller und Nicht-euklidischer Raum*. Within each part Zenck discusses as examples (un)published and (un)finished pieces in sometimes non-chronological order. Although Zenck's descriptions of these terms are fairly long, it sometimes remains rather unclear what Zenck actually means by these chosen assumptions. In the case of *Theatralität*, Zenck takes as starting point the compositions Boulez wrote for Barrault between 1946 and 1958 and tries to find elements from these pieces in other works. *Körperlichkeit* deals with the physical act of performing (not only in the compositions for ensemble and orchestra which Boulez himself performed as conductor) and the relation between gesture and expression. *Intermedialität* is about the exchange of ideas in music and the visual arts, especially the works from Paul Klee. *Virtueller und Nicht-euklidischer Raum* is about the separation from sound and the source where it comes from, the role in it from electronics and from the ideas of Boulez's friend Michel Foucault. In addition Zenck presents previously unpublished letters from Boulez to Barrault and lectures for the Collège de France plus Zenck's German translations from interviews and lectures in French.

The two major disadvantages of Zenck's book are also its major advantages. The first is a lack of clear definitions of the main subjects, which is the negative side of an abundance of ideas and interpretations, especially when compared with most of the chapters in *Pierre Boulez Studies*. Whether the focus in *Pierre Boulez Studies* is the starting point or the conclusion, all these chapters present transparent point of views with all their inherent limitations. The second is a certain lack of detailed analysis, compared with the *Pierre Boulez Studies* and certainly with O'Hagan's book, demonstrated in the much lower number of fragments from scores and the shorter descriptions of individual

compositions. But the positive side of this coin is a much greater attention to aesthetic impulses behind Boulez's oeuvre. The scores give a lot of ammunition to support his theories. Besides, Zenck is very extensive about the role unpublished and unfinished pieces have played in Boulez's development. Already in the modernist era, Boulez's music was perceived as too strong to accept Boulez's statement music was just music, even if one hesitated to describe it musicologically. As Whittall explains, narrative and rhetoric can and do appear in both modernist and other music. A step in this direction is the growing attention among musicologists for analysis with the ear in contrast and as supplement to analysis with the eye. What these musicologists observe in recent years, was already observed by interpreters of Boulez's music, most recently by Ralph and Raat<sup>1</sup> and in 1969 by Charles Rosen. When the latter recorded the Third Piano Sonata, mainly regarded as an exercise in open form and described by O'Hagan as a twelve-tone composition, Rosen wrote in his sleeve notes: 'A die cast will never abolish, and the game is to integrate a throw of the dice into a context in which its significance can no longer be a matter of chance.'<sup>2</sup>

Even if one disagrees with Zenck's aesthetic assumptions, his book has the advantage of presenting other approaches than just very extensive analysis. The distinction between Zenck and the other two books is not black and white but a matter of accent, but the difference is clear. Boulez's refusal to talk about it is no reason to ignore this path. My ideal book about Boulez's compositions would be starting with these aesthetic assumptions (presented more clearly than Zenck) and defending them with the analytical skills shown in the *Pierre Boulez Studies*. A study of this ambition will inevitably rival in size Taruskin's book on Stravinsky, certainly if one also wants to take into account the exchange with his biography, cultural context and his career as writer, conductor and programmer. In order to write that book, one not only has to go through many sources, some of them still not investigated, published or digitalized, one has to know the latest scientific ideas about artist and context and, above all, one must have, unlike Taruskin, the mind of a missionary with a basically modernist agenda, explaining why Boulez is still having so much influence on present-day culture and therefore remains an industry.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Preface to: Emanuel Overbeeke, *Een meester zonder hamer – Pierre Boulez (1925-2016)*. (Nijmegen, 2016), pp. 7-8.

<sup>2</sup> LP Pierre Boulez Piano Music vol. 1 Charles Rosen, CBS 72871. Reprinted in CD-box Charles Rosen, The complete Columbia and Epic collection, SONY 88843014762.

<sup>3</sup> When finishing this review, a new book appeared: Manfred Stahnke, *Struktur und Ästhetik bei Boulez* (printing on demand, 2017). 268 pp, € 38.24, ISBN 978-3-7431-8752-2.