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Pierre Boulez: Reflections on Symphony Orchestra Organizations

by

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Pierre Boulez: Reflections on Symphony Orchestra Organizations

Among the world's community of symphony orchestras, Pierre Boulez ranks as perhaps the most respected living composer and conductor. He is less well known for his creative thinking about musical organizations and his work as the founder and builder of three modern musical institutions.

Some 30 years ago, Pierre Boulez began to speak and write about the conservatism and rigidity of classical music organizations. The germ of Boulez's discontent with the organization of musical life can be found in his early days as an innovative composer of twentieth-century music. As early as 1953, Boulez felt strongly that the musical establishment posed a barrier between composers of contemporary music and audiences, each group eager to experience new musical insights.

In reviewing his historical observations about symphony orchestra organizations, let us "fast forward" to an interview with Pierre Boulez in Paris earlier this year. The occasion was a week-long master class workshop for some half-dozen young conductors from around the world, led by Boulez with the assistance of David Robertson, Music Director of the Ensemble Intercontemporain. The workshop was cosponsored by the Ensemble and the Cité de la Musique (see later discussion), in coordination with The Cleveland Orchestra which was in Paris as a final stop on its European tour.

During the course of the week, Boulez participated in a videotaped interview covering a wide range of topics, including his current thoughts about symphony orchestra organizations. Here is an edited transcript of that portion of the interview.

Paul R. Judy: Have symphony organizations much changed over the past decades?

Pierre Boulez: I think, unfortunately, they are about the same—because inertia in the musical world is really very strong. There are many reasons. For instance, if you have a group of 100 musicians, you will certainly have all categories of society and it's very difficult for everyone to be aware of the changing situation. Many have been in their roles for quite a lot of years and don't want to change the frame of their lives. And, of course, change should come from both sides.

Organizers should be more inventive and provoke musicians to think about their own situation.

PRJ: How do you describe the organizational evolution of the symphony orchestra?

PB: Well, as an overview, looking back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, you had various small groups of musicians. Even Bach wrote the Brandenburg Concertos for different groups. There was a kind of easiness with groups. Then the organization of society began to influence concerts and standards began to be adopted. The strictest standards came during the nineteenth century and that's when the orchestra got bigger and bigger. The hierarchy became very heavy, with concerts reflecting the hierarchy.

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In the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a kind of rebellion of composers. More than once, contemporary music was rejected by the big organizations. It was found to be more economical to use small groups. Money could be raised for these performances. And then there emerged opposition between the big institutions—a big mass of musicians—and small groups.

And nowadays, we see this evolution also in the classical department, with baroque groups, even groups playing music from the Age of Enlightenment and music composed in the beginning of the nineteenth century. And the field of action of big orchestras is being eaten up on both sides—and that's a danger. And therefore I think orchestras should think in terms of much more flexibility and more diversity in styles.

PRJ: Is there any evidence that change is taking place?

PB: Well, in 30 or 40 years, we have not gone very far. With small institutions like IRCAM, the Ensemble Intercontemporain, and the Cité de la Musique, we are going in new directions. It's only a beginning, but I wanted to have these organizations to show that it is possible. But certainly to introduce new directions into heavier institutions which have more inertia, because of the mass, is more difficult.

I have hope that we will arrive at some new ways because I notice now that some people in big institutions understand that it is necessary. They have not engineered the transformation yet, because it is not easy to do so, but they are aware of the fact that they have to change if they want to survive.

PRJ: What needs to be done to get orchestra organization leaders at all levels to consider more rapid change?

PB: What we need is a think tank, to say how we can organize differently and to propose models of organization for those who are unable to conceive of new

ways of organizing. We need to say “this is what you can do.” And then once they have practical models, they can think, maybe, of trying them out.



Now let us turn to Boulez’s historical writings and note their consistency with recent views and their relevance to current organizational issues. As Boulez said in 1963:

. . . I decided ten years ago to give concerts aimed at re-establishing communications between the composers of our own time and a public interested in promoting its own age.¹

Boulez implemented this decision with the 1953 formation in Paris of the *Domaine Musical*, a musical organization presenting eclectic, avant garde works and programs. With the *Domaine*, Boulez took on a new role—the direct leadership of a musical organization. Shortly, he embarked, on a self-educating basis, on his second career as a conductor of contemporary ensemble music, working with the *Domaine* players. He initially learned conducting through careful observations of Scherchen and Rosbaud, whom he regularly engaged as guest conductors of the *Domaine* ensemble.

Boulez retained his affiliation with the *Domaine Musical* until 1967. By the late 1950s, he was recognized throughout Europe for his leadership and professionalism in conducting contemporary music.

Looking back, Boulez remembered:

What our generation needed was to be able to acquire a sufficiently high level of professionalism to do justice to this music, which was our own, and to present it in the best possible conditions. That is how I gradually came to conduct, out of necessity, because if you write works and want them performed you must be able to do it independently . . . if you have to be professional you might as well strive to be the best . . . you must work sufficiently hard to be genuinely in the first rank and to give really good performances . . . It is in the realm of professional high standards that I have contributed to contemporary music.

. . . I myself learnt conducting by trying out what seemed to me the best thing and becoming increasingly sensitive to the responses I got . . .²

During the 1960s, Boulez’s role as a composer, conductor, and teacher continued to expand. His conducting engagements broadened and his recognition grew. During the years 1967 and 1968, while he was conducting at Bayreuth

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and then during the political upheaval in France, Boulez made the declamations for which he is most famous, “The Devil take all opera houses” and shortly later, “. . . set fire to all opera houses.” But it was also in 1968 that Boulez expressed, in a thoughtful lecture, his first comprehensive views as to the conservatism which hobbled musical organizations:

The creative artist and the public still communicate by means of what we call ‘concerts’ and there is of course a great gap between the creative artist and the mass of the concert-going public that interests itself in orchestral music and great artists. There is a deep discrepancy here, and I believe that music is perhaps the most conservative of all worlds, certainly much more . . . so than the museum world. A glance at the individual efforts made by museums (even in Europe and certainly in America) and by theatres, will reveal just how desperately music lags behind. This is because its organization is based on routines and contacts that are completely irrelevant to life as it is today. . . . It is obviously difficult to find a solution to this problem, or at any rate it is easier

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to solve verbally than factually. It is simple to say that new concert halls should be built, that orchestras should be reorganized or that the orchestra should be replaced by a kind of consortium of performers that could be drawn on for ad hoc purposes. All that is very easy to say; and it is true that solutions of this kind can well be imagined . . . [and of course] there is an economic factor in music, and this factor always tells in favour of conservatism. By this I mean that in any organization qualified for an activity of this kind it is very difficult to persuade people— simply from the point of view of intrinsic organization—that things can be organized differently without creating major problems in any well-regulated economy.³

Later in this speech, Boulez went on to say:

Try . . . simply as a matter of organization, to modify the constitution of an orchestra. You will see that you will almost certainly encounter deep hostility, from both public and players, who will tell you that it has worked very well as it is: why should it not continue to do so, with a few adjustments? The fact that must now be faced is that it will not continue unless a profound remedy is discovered—and how is that to be done?⁴

Two years later, in a 1970 interview in Montreal, as rewritten in 1980, Boulez reiterated these themes. He outlined a vision of an expanded, multi-purpose musical society which he had first expressed in 1969—a vision later shared by Robert Shaw and Ernest Fleischmann, among others. He opened his 1980 essay with these thoughts:

In the transitional period in which we are living the traditional function of the orchestra is largely a thing of the past. The orchestra as we know it today still carries the imprint of the nineteenth century, which was itself a legacy from Court tradition.

What we have to face now are problems of multivalency. I believe that our aim should be polymorphous groupings; within the larger group formed by the orchestra we should make it possible to tackle all the different repertoires - solo, chamber music, normal orchestra, very large formations and vocal ensembles of all dimensions. This would restore to the orchestra - which would in fact be a co-operative of performers - its sociological function, because it would include all the different sectors and in addition provide a certain mobility, an ability to move about. As things are at present, orchestras resemble spiders sitting at the centre of their webs, waiting for clients and pouncing on any that allow themselves to be caught . . .⁵

Two years later, while he served as Music Director of the New York Philharmonic, Boulez wrote an essay for the *New York Times* in which he described the programming constraints which music directors face, including working within “a system laid down by contract and necessarily implying clearly defined working methods.” His pungent conclusion was that music directors must make their decisions with “one overriding concern—ensuring vitality and movement in spite of being bound by restrictions that, although necessary, make for excessive stability and can lead to asphyxia.”⁶

Later in his essay, Boulez reiterated his plea for a more flexible, free, and creative organization of musical life:

. . . we might be on the right road . . . if the relations between composer, performer and public were considered within a freer and more flexible organization, one less bound by formal constraints. As so often, the principle may be simple, but putting it into practice is quite another matter. Changing our attitudes is of course the most difficult part; a new frame of mind would automatically mean revising the way in which we organize our musical life. Any transition from one stage to another always needs a period of adaptation and that period might seem lengthy, but there would be no turning back once embarked on the new course. To put it in a nutshell, the ideal that we are pursuing is a greater variety in our approach to different audiences in a number of different contexts. What we are trying to escape from is the sterile standardization that imposes on the present—and indeed the future—norms suited to the past. We want the creative spirit to be re-established at every level of musical life.⁷

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Twenty years ago, Boulez recognized the effect of the bureaucratic environment of musical organizations on the lives of orchestral musicians. He was a pioneer in emphasizing the importance of personal and professional development of musicians if orchestral enterprises were to flourish:

“I personally think of all these different branches of musical activity as essential to any musician anxious to get away from the routine of the past and to avoid specialization . . .”

There is no doubt that our musical enterprises lack flexibility, and their rigid organization prevents any free expanding of the musical field, which ought to combine unity with diversity. How then should we ideally organize that field, so as to take into account musical life as it actually is today, and do it justice? First, I think, we should realize that all musical functions are inseparable and interchangeable, execution being only one part, however important, of a field in which other tasks are also capital. Execution, research, experiment, propaganda and teaching should all radiate from a single central point. Every musician should be able to pass from one of these activities to another in accordance with his own personal engagements and thus lead a varied and free-ranging life. I personally think of all these different branches of musical activity as essential to any musician anxious to get away from

the routine of the past and to avoid specialization, which represents a threat to the individual by its limited character - any musician, in fact, anxious to take part in a real musical culture rather than to be simply a cog in a machine that is cultural only in name.⁸

Boulez is now generally regarded as the world's leading conductor of contemporary orchestral music as well as being one of the most prominent composers of our time. His early collegial approach to orchestra conducting—a collegial leadership philosophy he still embraces—was captured in words he expressed in 1976:

. . . if instrumentalists make mistakes it is not because they want to but because they don't understand or have difficulties; so you must help them to overcome them . . . when you are conducting an orchestra you have to match your approach to the temperament of the players . . .

Sometimes we were equally at sea when confronted by some particular piece of music . . . which they were no more used to playing than I was to conducting. Thus we had virtually the same problems—problems of instrumental, technical and even aesthetic assimilation. You have to discover how an instrumentalist can play an isolated sound in a way that links it intelligently with what has gone before and what follows. You must make him understand the pointillist phrasing, not just with his intellect but with his physical senses . . .

An instrumental player produces an interesting sonority when he is a part of a whole whose constituent parts he more or less consciously understands.

When it came to passing from a mechanical to an aesthetically satisfactory performance the work was extremely rewarding, not simply for me but also for the instrumentalists; we each discovered the means of converging towards a single aim . . . reciprocity between the instrumentalist and—I wouldn't say the 'conductor,' a word that I find out-of-date in many cases—but the 'co-ordinator' . . .⁹

Boulez's humanistic involvement in ensemble performance has also influenced his approach to musical composition:

[In] a chamber music ensemble, at a social level there will be personal relationships with each of the players . . . [there is] an extremely subtle exchange . . . My work as a composer has been marked not only by [a] much increased knowledge of the . . . entire mechanics of instrumental music, but also by the fact that the relationships between the individual and the collective within a group of performers can be worked out in far suppler, far more effective and far more subtle ways than had been contemplated before hitherto . . . [these experiences have] influenced all my subsequent works.¹⁰

During the last 20 years, in addition to his active career as composer and international conductor, Boulez has been particularly devoted to the development of three unique Paris-based music institutions.

- ◆ The Institute for the Research and Coordination of Acoustics and Music (IRCAM) was founded in 1974 and carried forward a vision formulated by Boulez over many prior years. IRCAM is housed in an underground facility adjoining Pompidou Center and incorporates an acoustically adjustable performance space and a number of acoustic studios, offices, and integrated computer systems. The professional staff of IRCAM is a collaborative of composers and scientists from around the world, working to develop new musical materials, and operating at the intersection of contemporary music composition, electronic instrumentation, software development, and acoustical research and experimentation. After serving as the active head of IRCAM for many years, Boulez transferred this leadership in 1992 in order to devote all his organizing energies to the development of two other institutions.
- ◆ The Ensemble Intercontemporain, an orchestral organization of some 30 or so musicians dedicated to the performance of 20th century music, was founded in 1976 under Boulez's leadership. This unique chamber orchestra performed principally at IRCAM until taking up residency in 1996 at the Cité de la Musique. The Ensemble performs 70 to 80 concerts annually in Paris and on tour and gives special emphasis to works composed in the last 20 years, including the

premiering of many new compositions. Boulez continues regularly to conduct the Ensemble and is its President.

- ◆ The Cité is a multi-purpose facility in the northeast part of Paris which encompasses the Paris Conservatoire, a state-of-the-art performance hall, a musical instrument museum, a modern library of musical materials open to the public, and the new residency headquarters of the Ensemble Intercontemporain. The Cité was planned under Boulez's vision and oversight and presents a broad and eclectic program of world music with emphasis on local community audience development, as well as serving a broader metropolitan and international visitor audience.

Over recent years, Pierre Boulez has therefore concentrated on the development of three modern musical institutions, infusing in them his long held philosophies about the organization of musical life, and the need for creativity, flexibility, and steady change and adaptation. And yet he still finds time to be a regular guest conductor of the world's leading orchestras, a mentor to many young musicians and conductors, and a leading composer of our time.

Through time, various words and phrases have been used to characterize Pierre Boulez—"revolutionary," "crusader," "evangelist," "enfant terrible," and "polemicist,"—some particularly oriented to his formative years. More recently,

"We should not complain too much about our problems: how dull life would be without them!"

such descriptions as "wise," "visionary," "brilliant and imaginative," "poetically precise," and "utopian with practicality" have been applied. In the final analysis, Boulez is an "optimist" and, despite the glacial rate of change in musical organizations, he still exudes the longer-term determination and hope he expressed in 1976:

We should not complain too much about our problems: how dull life would be without them! The word 'crisis' is too often used for situations that

are no more than necessary and inevitable transitional stages. Taking the long view simply means regarding our present situation as a link in the process of evolution; and if we identify past attitudes and their results, we must also clearly analyse what is obsolete and transitory about them. Only thus shall we be able to see the gradual emergence of those new lines of conduct and new lines of force that some of us welcome so gladly and others reject so timorously . . .¹¹

Contemporary Comment

In corresponding with Pierre Boulez about this essay and the interview transcription, we were pleased that he provided the following contemporary and consistently optimistic commentary about symphony organization issues.

As I said in Paris, matters have hardly changed. . . . I believe it would

be good to give reflection to the situation, not only by a few people, but by a gathering of people of good will and imagination from the different sectors who participate in the elaboration and the realization of the musical goals of our time. The revolution, or rather the evolution—whether generated internally or accelerated by external forces—cannot be the work of only one person or even of an elite group. Representatives from management, artistic administration, donors, musicians, and the public must unite, since all are concerned with the common problems of the future of our institutions. But, as is always the case, one person or group is needed who will take the initiative of organizing such discussions. Who will have the courage or indeed the audacity for such action? Let us be optimistic and hope for a future that is sufficiently near.

September 10, 1996

Notes

- ¹ Boulez, Pierre. 1963. "Ten Years On." In *Orientalions: Collected Writings*, edited by Jean-Jacques Nattiez. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 434.
- ² ———. 1976. *Conversations with Celeste Deliege*. London: Eulenburg, 72-78.
- ³ ———. 1967. "Where Are We Now?" *Orientalions*, 447-448.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 449-450.
- ⁵ ———. 1970. "Orchestras, Concert Halls, Repertory, Audiences." *Orientalions*, 467.
- ⁶ ———. 1972. "Arousing Interest in New Music." *Orientalions*, 472.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 475.
- ⁸ ———. 1976. "What's New?" *Orientalions*, 479.
- ⁹ ———. *Conversations*, 78-80.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.
- ¹¹ ———. "What's New?" *Orientalions*, 480.