

OBITUARY

PIERRE BOULEZ (1925–2016)

The death, at the age of 90, of Pierre Boulez was announced just as this issue of *TEMPO* was going to press. In the future I am sure we will return to his work at much greater length but it seemed important, however briefly, to mark now the passing of a musician whose departure also closes a chapter in music history.

Boulez was the last survivor of the generation of young men who came to musical prominence in the 1950s – Maderna, Nono, Xenakis, Berio, Stockhausen – each with their own singular achievements, collectively a group of composers whose work unfolded a map of new expressive possibilities for music and musicians. But while his contemporaries are remembered primarily for their compositions, Boulez's legacy is threefold, as composer, as conductor and as a cultural politician.

To begin in that last sphere of influence, the significance of IRCAM as a laboratory for new ideas has been repeatedly questioned over the years, but its creation remains one of the great *coups des arts* of the last 50 years. It may have been a characteristically French *coup* – the absence of an IRCAM anywhere else in the world probably proves only that other nations are less inclined than the French to construct buildings around ideas – but it set in concrete and cabling a vision of music as a territory for innovation and excellence. Of course it was unnecessary, bureaucratic and elitist, but it has been a space for great music too.

In other lives the ability to pursue the political inside track and conclude that pursuit in an iconic building, with continuing state investment to match, would have been enough. But Boulez was also a great conductor. IRCAM became the home of the Ensemble Intercontemporain (EIC) and, if the institution as a whole represents a version of the composer Boulez might like to have been, then the EIC represents his painstaking devotion to raising the standard of new music performance.

This may not have been an entirely selfless act. 'My music is not modern, it is merely badly played', said Schoenberg, and Boulez's incisive, brilliant, uncompromising conducting of new music was an attempt to remove at least some of the grounds for such a complaint. As with any conductor, one might disagree with some of Boulez's interpretative decisions, but no composer, living or dead, could claim that a Boulez performance did not bring to life every detail of their music. In the repertoire he understood best – Berg, Messiaen, Varèse, his own works – Boulez changed the way we think about this music.

It is as a composer, however, that Boulez's reputation will continue to be defined and, because of the trajectory of his career, the process of definition began decades ago. Perhaps we will learn more, now that Boulez is no longer able to protect his privacy, about why his music changed as it did, why the visceral energy of early works like the Second Piano Sonata gave way to something more refined, why invention was replaced by revision, and why revision and proliferation seemed to be Boulezian synonyms.

In the end, these questions are not important when we have the reality of the music. The precision with which Boulez heard everything that he created means that his music is never less than an epicurean delight for the ears, but for some listeners his impeccably tasteful juxtaposition and blending of timbres may sometimes seem like an end in itself. Certainly, the early masterpieces – *Le Marteau sans maître*, *Pli selon pli* – have an expressive urgency that was diluted in the extended realisation of later works such as *Éclats/Multiples*. On the other hand, it is the exhaustive elaboration of figuration, harmony and texture that gives works like *Rituel in memoriam Bruno Maderna* and *sur incises* their cumulative power.

Now that there will be no new works, no further revisions, a misquoted title is perhaps enough to apostrophize this extraordinary musician: 'Boulez ist der Komponist'.

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