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IRCAM/Radio-France Cassettes

Series 1: Pierre Boulez with Ensemble InterContemporain, *Le temps musical* (IRCAM/Radio-France), 4 cassettes, 50 fr. each

Series 2: Pierre Boulez with Ensemble InterContemporain, *Matériau et invention musicale* (IRCAM/Radio-France), 3 cassettes, 50 fr. each
obtainable by post from Cassettes Radio-France, 75786 Paris cedex 16

To an English ear there is something odd, and fascinating, about the French approach to music. Since the election of the socialist government in June 1981 there has sprung up like mushrooms a crop of independent radio stations, catering for the widest interests and sponsored by all kinds of organisation. Many of them play popular music of one kind or another. In Paris you can tune in to a *radio libre* and hear a relaxed and funny presenter swapping discs and wisecracks with a studio guest in a way never dreamed of across the Channel; he can be rude about what she chooses and she about what he chooses, but both of them are adventurous. It makes for fine radio, original and entertaining. On France-Inter Paris, a state station that plays an extraordinary range of music interrupted only by the occasional news bulletin or time check, I have heard songs that would make the BBC blush for a week and provoke angry correspondence for a month to come. But then the BBC wouldn't play them.

Shift along the VHF band and you come to France-Musique, a national institution: the élite catering for an élite, say a lot of people. Imagine a BBC Radio 3 presenter telling you that you're going to hear an outstandingly good performance of so-and-so's Fourth Symphony, with someone else chipping in to tell you what's so good about it. Often you get the feeling you're being talked down to, but sometimes it makes for more good radio. The published critics can wax very personal, and the replies are just the same: 'How dare Monsieur X presume to complain about my being over-polite to my studio guests, when he himself was once a producer for the network and never took a risk in his career?'

Yet the whole thing is a little tame compared with Radio 3—itself battered often enough for élitism: 'Not enough jazz', say some; 'Not enough contemporary

music', cry others; 'Too many tidy little packages', complain others again. Maybe they're right; but listen to France-Musique for a week or several, and slowly but surely you start to miss the grand follies of poor old Radio 3. Yes, there is plenty of jazz, at least an hour a day and well presented (never mind that few people are at home at lunchtime), and certainly you can get an earful of something new and even something ancient as often as you want it. But where is the six-part series on Vagn Holmboe ('70 last year'—the BBC's favourite reason for an effort like that) or one man's passionate view of 'Aspects of the Blues'? There are good ideas on France-Musique, such as a weekly recording made by listeners themselves and the regular magazine programme of music from all cultures, 'Chants de la terre'. This year there is also a splendidly ambitious series of half-hour programmes broadcast early every weekday evening called 'Repères contemporains', each presenting a 'key work' in the modern repertory in an attempt to bridge the yawning gulf between composers and the general public. The most retrograde listener must now be able to explain to you what a set is and why Schoenberg felt he had to invent it. Good stuff. But on the other hand 'Le matin des musiciens', the French equivalent of 'This Week's Composer', goes on not for about 50 minutes a day but around three hours! Sometimes one cannot avoid the impression that if the French adore music, they adore talking about it even more.

Who better to do so than Pierre Boulez, the wizard of IRCAM? In each of these two series of illustrated lectures he discusses a particular problem in music, analysing in some depth a number of works taken mainly from the 20th-century repertory. A principal aim of both series is to elucidate aspects of contemporary music for the benefit of people who find it difficult and off-putting. The first consists of recordings of four lectures given in February 1978 at Paris's futuristic palace of the arts and sciences, the Centre Georges Pompidou. In them Boulez looks at the question of time in music, devoting three sessions to works by himself, Ligeti, Messiaen, and Carter, and in the fourth taking us at a gallop through Western music from Guillaume de Machaut to modern times. The works discussed were performed in a concert at the Théâtre de la Villa on 23 February 1978, but no recording of that occasion is available. France-Culture, the radio network that sounds like a cross between Radio 4 and the Open University, used much of the material on the air, and Radio-France and IRCAM subsequently decided to issue the cassettes, which became available in February 1980. Fairly hard on the heels of that series came another, this time of three cassettes drawn from lectures on the relationship between composition and the materials available to the composer, from the string quartet to the digital computer. The works studied here are by Debussy, Varèse, Webern, Stockhausen, John Chowning, and York Höller. The musical examples in both series are performed for the most part by Boulez himself and his splendid band, the Ensemble InterContemporain.¹

'Time is a function in music that is normally taken for granted', says Boulez. 'Musical education involves, for example, composition exercises, harmony exercises, and exercises in counterpoint, but rhythm has, until very recently, been considered a natural phenomenon, a given.' There are rhythmic figures that everyone knows, such as dance figures, and there is, more generally speaking, a rhythmic vocabulary to be drawn on, but Boulez investigates the question of rhythm more deeply, probed by the

much greater importance it is now accorded in relation to other aspects of music. In fact he has a very great deal to say about it, starting from the premise that Western music has a habit of going somewhere—from a beginning to an end—and finishing with some reflections on the role of the musician as the unpredictable, even irrational, element in performance. On the way he is by turns interesting, enlightening, and occasionally amusing. I should add at once that he is also clear and agreeable to listen to, apart from the rare moments when he steps away from the microphone. The fact that he speaks in his native tongue should not put off those willing and able to lend him an ear.

It is perhaps not surprising that Boulez is at his most expansive when discussing his own piece, *Éclat*, which occupies the whole of his first lecture on time and also part of the last. But the piece merits the attention anyway, as a work that breaks away from the tradition of music with a beat. As Boulez points out, there are two conceptions of time in music, the first related to physical activity, as in work-songs and dances, the second to the complexities of scholarly notated music. In both sorts of music, however, time is measured out in the beat, which can be subdivided into smaller units. Melodic elements are tied up with the rhythm, and this relationship identifies themes and accounts for the listener's recognising them as such; in some cases (such as the minuet, which was absorbed into Classical tradition) the rhythm may, to some extent, define the genre. But it is Boulez' opinion that with the advent of notation composers began to worry about music that looked as good as it sounded. In the Middle Ages, composers such as Machaut were already appreciated for skilful tricks that some people are surprised to find in use before the 18th century. By way of illustration Boulez plays an isorhythmic excerpt from Machaut's *Messe de Notre Dame*, in which at the mid-point the rhythm is reversed to become its own mirror image.

At the beginning of our own century there were two distinct trends in composers' attitudes to time. Schoenberg and Berg are among those who elaborated the harmonic language but tended to stick to old rhythmic formulae: as an example of this Boulez cites *Wozzeck*, in which a traditional rhythmic figure can dominate a whole scene. Stravinsky and Bartók, on the other hand, turned things upside-down, as in parts of *Le sacre du printemps* where the larger rhythmic units are made up of smaller ones. It is here that Messiaen comes on the scene: his series of piano pieces, *Quatre études de rythme*, jumps us into a new universe, where note values can be highly irregular, totally unrelated to bodily rhythms. We perceive time in music quite differently here: it becomes suspended, non-directional, like a slice out of something that goes on forever, from nowhere to anywhere—which brings me back to that lengthy discussion of *Éclat*.

Composed in 1964, *Éclat* is a work for chamber ensemble in which the composer seems to invite us to contemplate sound itself. Boulez takes us through the piece at times almost bar by bar (in so far as I may use the word). His explanation of how the ensemble is divided up and parts assigned reveals that remarkable sensitivity to the specialities and capabilities of each group of instruments that makes him a veritable French poet in timbre. In *Éclat* time is suspended, or at very least made of rubber. The sounds themselves, their birth and death, become the main point of interest. There are, for instance, rapid sequences for tuned percussion which, in their own right, are tight

enough, but which take on an ethereal, floating quality when played over layers of decaying sound from other instruments. The conductor acts as coordinator, being in a better position than the player himself to judge the exact 'dosage' of each sound, the point where it loses its efficacy. Because we are not worrying about a destination we can give all our attention to the interferences set up between different instruments, or to sounds whose persistence irritates, but which, when they stop, reveal a richness as they decay.

A different kind of 'timelessness' is felt in Ligeti's Chamber Concerto, the subject of the second talk. Here the audience is forced into 'statistical' listening: some passages are so fast that one cannot hope to distinguish particular rhythmic values or even instruments, but only the overall texture. Indeed, Ligeti puts texture right in the forefront in this piece: musical lines without firm rhythmic structure, neutral in themselves, together create an interesting amalgam; qualities such as timbre are often suppressed so that instruments sounding together have no individuality. Time itself can change the texture as instruments enter one after another, working in different tempos, their voices sometimes standing out from the ensemble and sometimes blending with it, creating layer on layer of sound.

Layers interest Elliott Carter too. He is the only composer to make a contribution to the series in person; he explains how his preoccupation with time in music developed from his reading of Proust, who superimposes the past on the present and vice versa, the two interacting with each other. In his third lecture, Boulez looks at two sections, 'Argument' and 'Sandpiper', of Carter's masterpiece for soprano and chamber orchestra, *A Mirror on which to Dwell*. He draws attention to groups of instruments, each pursuing its own rhythm but interleaving with the others; some play mechanically in unchanging tempos; some have parts that are almost improvisatory in their flexibility; the oboe in 'Sandpiper' catches the spirit of the bird in Elizabeth Bishop's text as he runs back and forth across the music in his own time. Boulez also discusses Carter's concern with 'metrical modulation'—an idea used by Stravinsky in *Les noces*—where the rate of the beat remains the same but the number of notes to the beat changes. These games with time help a highly evocative score.

The first part of that third talk deals with one of Messiaen's *Quatre études de rythme*, the influential *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités* (1949). Time is one of the four dimensions of the work—the other three are pitch, attack and dynamics—that are organised by a mode that remains fixed throughout the piece; notes cease to be part of a phrase but leap out as objects. As Boulez says, the use of such techniques is more rudimentary here than in Messiaen's later works (and I understand that the composer himself does not count the piece among his finest) but it is all the more clear for that. Boulez shows how Messiaen's rhythmic forms derive from the classical vocabulary and from his investigation over a long period of Asiatic music, particularly that of India—a study that was highly theoretical since recordings of ethnic music were few and far between in the 1930s. His rhythms may be based on the augmentation and diminution of units of notes, and as the process becomes more and more abstract and mathematical he lifts us out of time altogether.

Messiaen's experiments with time and mathematics in music helped a group of young composers in the 1950s to sort out their own thinking. In *Zeitmasze*

Stockhausen sought to escape the constraints of systematic composition by relying on the accidents of performance. After all, as Boulez argues, systems of organising time in music are essentially systems of constraint. People rarely think of the performer's role; he has to find expressive freedom within the scope of the score. Boulez wrote *Éclat* to bring out this element in music, moving away from the strict serialism which had been his main preoccupation, and which left the poor musician far too busy trying to find his way round the score to worry about personal expression. *Éclat* is a game: the musician has his score but there are still moments when he doesn't know quite what to expect from the co-ordinator. This keeps everybody lively and involved, which is very much the point of the piece, but, like the audience, the performer often has leisure to explore the sound, to take it apart and then put his memory to work to reconstruct the texture.

In the 19th century composers gave more and more of their attention to texture; the evolution of the orchestra itself goes hand in hand with this process, for an instrument is more than the servant of a musical idea. Composers started by notating pitch, then rhythm, and then nuances such as dynamics, but these days many are equally concerned with timbre. There are, in short, new relationships between the composer and his materials. Webern, the subject of the second lecture in the series *Matériau et invention musicale*, is a particularly interesting example of this. Boulez takes two works separated in Webern's career by nearly 30 years, the *Sechs Bagatellen* for string quartet and the Cantata no.1. With the first he suggests, Webern introduced 'global' or 'statistical' listening. It is totally chromatic, the intervals are strained, and successive notes in one musical line can be quite differently played—a trill followed by a harmonic followed by a *pizzicato*. The musical motifs are 'atomised', and because the instrumental parts cross each other continually and the tempo is sometimes too fast to permit aural analysis, the ear becomes disorientated. This, says Boulez, is the intention. As with Kandinsky's paintings of the same period (1912-13), there is a deliberate dissolution of form. Silence becomes important too, but the principal effect is the submission of the listener to textures which cannot be immediately analysed but in which individual elements fall into a coherent whole. Boulez claims that there is no repetition in the work because Webern was frightened of repetition, always varying material if he brought it back; his deep sensitivity to the individuality of each instrument, to the nature of sound itself, could not work itself out in traditional, repetitive forms.

By contrast, the Cantata, written near the end of a period of extreme discipline, uses the instruments to 'colour in' the musical thought, a completely different approach. Here the idea comes first, and the instruments add spots of colour to the vocal line, sometimes doubling and sometimes contrasting with it. Debussy, too, in his 'Étude pour les quarts', takes the 'idea' as a starting-point. Using an interval that has always been ambiguous in tonal composition, he creates a rich piece which shifts in and out of chromaticism and tonality, deriving colour from a melodic line that evokes exotic Oriental music. Varèse's *Intégrales*, which shares with the 'Étude' the first cassette in this series, is a work that springs out of the nature and character of the instruments used. Boulez offers fascinating and detailed accounts of both these works; he shows how Varèse creates blocks of sound with intense internal life, using the

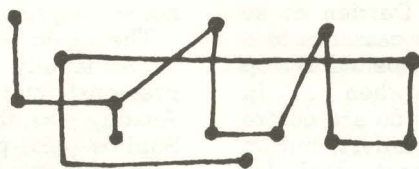
'hierarchical' relations of pitched wind instruments in contrast with the 'anarchy' of percussive sound.

There are two distinct approaches, then: the organisation of given material according to the demands of the composition; and composition dictated by the material that is taken as a starting-point. Both can appear in the same piece, and the problems of the composer in relation to his material are not only intellectual but practical. In the last of the three lectures, Boulez introduces us to the problems and potential of electronics in music. First there is an excerpt from *Stria*, a richly textured and meditative piece by the father of frequency modulation, John Chowning. Excerpts from Stockhausen's *Kontakte* (1960), in which piano and percussion move into foreground and background against the tape, are used to point up the relation between live and recorded sound; Boulez shows how this relatively early electronic piece makes us think about our preconceptions as to what constitutes 'civilised', ordered sound, and what constitutes 'noise'.

Finally, Boulez turns to a recent work by York Höller, *Arcus*, which was completed for an IRCAM commission in 1978. The 'R' in IRCAM stands, of course, for 'Recherche', and *Arcus* shows what can be done with a very expensive computer. Following a complex code of his own devising, Höller used the computer to modulate the recorded sounds of an orchestra, making a tape with fluctuations in sonority that could not be produced by other means; in performance the playing of live musicians is synchronised with the taped material, highlighting the differences between the 'real' and recorded sound-worlds. From the longish extract that concludes the cassette the piece comes across as interesting and attractive.

A recurring point in both series of talks is the role of the musician, whose 'accidents' are very important for Boulez. 'The musician's gesture, after all, does not exactly destroy the system, but it renders it bearable. All systems as such, strict and rigid, would be absolutely intolerable. You realise this if you create rhythm in an irreproachable fashion by means of a machine; if rhythms remain always the same they lose interest, in the same way as a timbre loses interest if no accident is involved.' There is plenty of accident in that sense in these recordings. It is a pity that not all of the works are performed in their entirety, for the musicianship throughout is extremely good; we have to be content with complete performances of the Messiaen study, the Webern *Bagatellen*, and *Éclat*, the only works short enough, presumably, to be included whole. The Groupe Vocal de France add a fine chorus to the instruments of the Ensemble InterContemporain in the first and third movements of the Webern Cantata, obliged occasionally to be pretty quick in providing Boulez with his illustrations. These examples are usually well placed, and every time you think 'I didn't quite catch that, could we have it again please?' Boulez obliges.

Technically the recordings are almost faultless and the linking of one section to another is handled by Radio-France's Jean-Pierre Derrien with a discretion I sometimes wish he could exercise on the air, especially when he is getting excited about Boulez. But for all their interest, I do have a few less favourable things to say about these cassettes. As with the programmes of France-Musique, it's sometimes difficult to judge for whom they are really intended. In the attempt to 're-establish the approach of today's composers within the main intellectual currents of the age', Boulez takes altogether too much account of the



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composers and too little of the currents. There is a great amount of unexceptionable theoretical discussion and analysis, but little effort is made to put the music in context, apart from a glancing reference to that writer or this painter. The cassette jackets give you dates as well as other pertinent facts and translations of texts, but Boulez and Derrien do so most infrequently. Playing one of the cassettes to a friend, I found myself occasionally compelled to stop and say, 'Well, you see, that all began when . . .'. In other words, you have to know where you are before you start. It's all a little heavy for beginners, but on the other hand there's not a great deal for professionals to get their teeth into. The level is more that of a student course, I would say, with some unusually interesting ideas thrown in. I find it difficult to picture the mainstream classical music lover sitting back in an armchair and shoving off mentally into new waters, with a dictionary of terms at hand to help him chart the unknown. It would also be useful to see what Boulez is doing with his hands on the one or two occasions he makes references to conducting technique! On the whole, though, these two series of cassettes embody a good idea. Would that the Arts Council and the BBC could get together and do something similar! But perhaps their problem would be to find somebody like Boulez who can teach as lucidly as he conducts.

¹ The contents of the two series are as follows.
Le temps musical cassette 1: Pierre Boulez, *Éclat*, 1964—
 cassette 2: György Ligeti, Chamber Concerto, 1969-70—
 cassette 3: Olivier Messiaen, *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités*, 1949 (Pierre-Laurent Aimard, piano); Elliott Carter, *A Mirror on which to Dwell*, 1976 (Deborah Cook, soprano)—cassette 4: 'Introduction à une histoire du temps musical de Guillaume de Machaut à nos jours' *Matériau et invention musicale* cassette 1: Claude Debussy, 'Pour les quartes', *Études*, 1915 (Alain Neveux, piano); Edgard Varèse, *Intégrales*, 1926—cassette 2: Anton Webern, *Sechs Bagatellen* op.9, 1913; Anton Webern, Cantata no.1 op.29, 1939 (Groupe Vocal de France)—cassette 3: John Chowning, *Stria*, tape, 1977; Karlheinz Stockhausen, *Kontakte*, electronic sounds, piano, percussion, 1960 (Pierre-Laurent Aimard, piano; Michel Cerutti, percussion); York Höller, *Arcus*, instruments, tape, 1978
 A third series, *L'oeil et l'oreille*, became available in February 1982.

Musical Time cassette 1: Pierre Boulez, *Éclat*, 1964—
 cassette 2: György Ligeti, Chamber Concerto, 1969-70—
 cassette 3: Olivier Messiaen, *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités*, 1949 (Pierre-Laurent Aimard, piano); Elliott Carter, *A Mirror on which to Dwell*, 1976 (Deborah Cook, soprano)—cassette 4: 'Introduction à une histoire du temps musical de Guillaume de Machaut à nos jours' *Matériau et invention musicale* cassette 1: Claude Debussy, 'Pour les quartes', *Études*, 1915 (Alain Neveux, piano); Edgard Varèse, *Intégrales*, 1926—cassette 2: Anton Webern, *Sechs Bagatellen* op.9, 1913; Anton Webern, Cantata no.1 op.29, 1939 (Groupe Vocal de France)—cassette 3: John Chowning, *Stria*, tape, 1977; Karlheinz Stockhausen, *Kontakte*, electronic sounds, piano, percussion, 1960 (Pierre-Laurent Aimard, piano; Michel Cerutti, percussion); York Höller, *Arcus*, instruments, tape, 1978
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