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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Suspense thriller

The 90th-birthday bash for Pierre Boulez, the master of the age, is enthralling

Paul Driver Published: 29 March 2015



THE
BBC

Barely repressed passion: Pierre Boulez (Ballesteros)

Symphony Orchestra's latest Total Immersion day at the Barbican broadcast the fact that the musical master-spirit of the age has turned 90. Pierre Boulez is the only remaining embodiment of a postwar avant-garde uniquely influential, intransigent and controversial, but this lone survivor happens to be its central pillar. While he is here, we can still feel vitally in touch with an intellectual endeavour that has been ready, as it were, to shoot off into history for some time.

This modernist project — the complete reinvention of musical language on the basis of Schoenberg's "serial technique", though refining the latter almost out of recognition — must count among the most energising of cultural facts, seminal even for the musicians who reacted sternly against it. It isn't just that there would otherwise be no plinkety-plonk "modern music" stereotype; there would be no minimalism, either. For it was dissatisfaction with what they saw as an aridly cerebral lingua franca that led Reich and Glass to make their strange return to tonality: strange not least in that their style, too, has its mathematical rigours.

For Boulez, growing up in Nazi-occupied France with a rebellious ardour rarely encountered, wiping the post-Romantic, post-neoclassical slate clean was clearly an overwhelming emotional necessity — and a barely repressed passion has always informed his music, no matter how apparently mathematical its surfaces. Violently disputatious in interview and print, yet ice cool on the podium, he was in person as controversial as his music: a man with a mission, or even several men (composer, conductor, administrator, writer) in one.

Yet his eventual mellowing became well known, and in old age he has endorsed a rather wider variety of composers than before. Scriabin turns out to be a favoured figure, joining heroes such as Webern, Berg and Varèse. The BBC day devoted to Boulez's own music was well devised to take us across the range of his sympathies. It was a pity he was too frail to attend.

The first music that we heard — Jean-Frédéric Neuburger's superb rendition of the formidable Second Piano Sonata (1948) — was not so much an introduction as a detonation, blowing pre-Boulezian history away. In this rhetorical *tour de force*, Boulez takes the Beethovenian sonata as a paradigm, only to reduce it, under the onslaught of his spiky, unremitting expressionism, to rubble. Yet Neuburger was able to invest the piece with an unexpected lyricism and, in his pacing of the long slow movement, even suggest that something of the power of a Beethoven *adagio* survives Boulez's destructive impulse.

At the other end of the composer's expressive scale, the Guildhall New Music Ensemble, in their afternoon programme under David Corkhill at LSO St Luke's, gave a performance of the seductively ornate, evanescent little sextet *Dérive 1* (1984), which made me think indeed of Scriabin and his fleeting piano *poèmes*.

Boulez's five-minute piano piece *un page d'éphéméride*, written for young performers in 2005 and here given by James Kreiling, also hinted in this direction, what with its flurries of grace notes, its weightless quality. It certainly didn't seem child's play.

The recital usefully — thrillingly — ended with Boulez's earliest published work, the 12 Notations (1945), piano miniatures each 12 bars long and 12-note in idiom. Five have been orchestrated and expanded (1978-97) by the always revision-obsessed composer, and these sizzling late displays of colour formed the first part of the BBCSO's concert under Thierry Fischer. But in Alexander Soares's brilliantly unbuttoned account, the crazed toccata of No 2 (for instance) had already sounded sufficiently orchestral.

The day reached its climax with the BBCSO's realisation of the large-scale early masterpiece — or near-masterpiece — *Pli selon pli* (1960), Boulez's five-part, layer-by-layer "portrait of Mallarmé", in which the poet's words were projected by the Korean soprano Yeree Suh, who was not to be faulted for steely precision. The most absorbing stretch, for me, was the big concluding *Tombeau*, a mostly orchestral movement, its sombre textural accumulations full of foreboding; a sort of metaphysical suspense, indeed, that is among the composer's most distinctive creative contributions.

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Alexander Soares ...

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