

# Boulez - Spontaneity and Strictness, Programme Note for The Boulez Festival at the Southbank, September 2011

One of the ongoing themes of Boulez's work is the balance between spontaneity and strictness. He states: 'you really cannot just be constructive all the time; you have to be descriptive, as well. And I suppose that's the sort of combination between constructivism and spontaneity which I found to be very important.'

After his exploration of total serialism, in which all aspects of the music – from the order of pitches, to rhythm, dynamic and even articulation, were dictated by intricate systems, Boulez began experimenting in the 1950s with what he describes as 'controlled chance', referred to in his essays and lectures as 'alea' or 'aleatoric music'. Both *Domaines* (1961 to 68) and *Rituel in Memoriam Bruno Maderna* (1974 to 75) derive as a result of this early flirtation with aleatoric composition techniques.

Boulez' interest in 'controlled chance' was ignited by his companionship with John Cage, arguably the strongest advocate of chance music. The two men began a friendship in 1949, when Boulez was aged 24 and Cage 36. After their first meeting in Paris they began a significant and intense correspondence until August 1954, throughout which each expressed a desire to know what the other was thinking, creating and doing.

Whilst Cage was concerned with organizing his non-tempered sound world in a context where chance ruled for philosophical rather than musical reasons, for Boulez 'chance' offered a solution to his problem of how to marry the highly structured serial ideas of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern with the more descriptive spontaneity and flexibility of the French school – something expertly illustrated in his masterpiece *Le Marteau sans Maître*, first performed in 1955. He states: 'I began to develop a system in which freedom was possible, and I conquered my own freedom not only regarding the twelve-tone system, but also with regard to the general possibility of composing purely with a system'.

Where Cage used chance as a means of removing composer intention, giving performers the opportunity to create completely unforeseen sounds, Boulez, in contrast, limited choice to possibilities that had been written out and constructed in detail by the composer. *Domaines* presents a clear example of his use of this 'mobile form'.

Originating as a piece for solo clarinet, and later for clarinet and orchestra, *Domaines* allows the soloist to determine an order in which the musical gestures take place by choosing both the placement of the pages and by picking one of two pathways through the six musical passages presented on one page. The material is divided into two sets of fragments or 'cahiers': 'original' and 'mirror', the latter an almost exact reversal of the original set. In the later ensemble version of the work there are six accompanying groups of increasing size from solo to sextet. Each of the clarinetist's pages relate to one of the groups both spatially and within the musical material itself. The soloist plays a page next to an associated group who then play their material as the clarinetist walks away to choose another group until all six pages are finished and all six groups have played. In the mirrored version the ensemble plays first, with the conductor determining the order and the clarinetist following. The overall effect for the listener is a work of explosive virtuosity and excitement achieved through a careful balance of constructivism and structural spontaneity.

*Rituel*, Boulez's only finished work to emerge during the 1970s, is acknowledged to be one of his most accessible compositions. Written following the death of Bruno Maderna to whom the piece is dedicated, Boulez describes the piece as 'a ceremony of memory in

which there are numerous repetitions of the same formulas in constantly changing profiles and perspectives'. The piece is for large chamber ensemble divided into eight groups, each of which, excluding the brass, is supported by a percussionist who keeps the individual tempo of the group, thus creating several layers of rhythmic independence.

*Rituel* is a good example of how Boulez's early experimentations with chance and spontaneity worked as a catalyst to inspire the compositional approaches of his later period. The structure of the piece promotes fluidity and spontaneity through the incorporation of flexible chord spacing and lengths, percussion playing independent of the main tempo and the use of extended 'mobile form'. In particular segments of the piece the conductor cues each of the 8 groups in any order, the rhythmic arrangement of which falling anywhere between the two extremes of each group beginning one after the other and ending together, or all of the groups beginning together and ending one after the other. The work has a sombre tone and has a ritualistic effect for the listener that can be attributed to the ever-expanding repetition and development of the opening oboe material and the use of Eastern-sounding percussion.

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