BOULEZ ON MUSIC TODAY, translated by Susan Bradshaw and Richard Rodney Bennett
Faber and Faber, paperback edition, 1975 (£0.80).

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First published by Faber in 1971, *Boulez on Music Today* is a translation from the French of material originating in Darmstadt and subsequently published in French and German in 1963. As we are reminded by the German title, *Musikdenken Heute-1,* and by the text itself, the book was intended as only the first instalment of another of Boulez's 'works in progress'. Since the appearance of the English translation, the book has been widely read in this country; specific objections have crystallised as the dense content has been gradually assimilated. A convenient cue for reassessment is now provided by the appearance of the paperback edition.

To start with, we must acknowledge the remarkable ambition of the project. '. . . on music today' certainly does not overstate Boulez's intentions, which see him, in his own words, "ambitious enough to adopt a general and fairly exhaustive point of view" with regard to the whole 'problem' of contemporary composition. The survey proceeds from the personal soul-searching of a preliminary 'Interior Duologue' via 'General Considerations' to the final, and longest, chapter, which embarks upon a detailed, although stringently conceptual, exploration of 'Musical Technique'. Boulez gives a frank explanation of his ambition: "I feel that this is the most urgent work to be undertaken at present, for discoveries and ideas have followed one another with little cohesion".

So, as Bayan Northcott pointed out in his article at the time of the initial English publication, "This ... is indeed an attempt to interpret the situation whole and to deduce *the* logical plan of action".[1] The whole basis of the book rests upon Boulez's commitment to a general, although precisely defined, approach to composition, which he sees as comprehensive, integrated and essentially 'musical'. The intention is first to justify this approach — by considering recent tradition, analysing the contemporary situation and dismissing other alternatives — before proceeding to its description and demonstration.

Seemingly, it has been very easy to misunderstand, or even to forget, exactly what Boulez's intentions are, and what they are not; the fault for this lies partly in the book's failure to make its aims clear. The object is never to discuss precise musical instances, but to establish a general, axiomatic basis for the creation of a fertile, whole and proscriptive musical dialectic. However detailed the application may seem, the idea will be one of concept rather than isolated musical example.

Boulez begins by attacking what he sees as a "symptomatic mistrust of the intellect", at the same time quoting Baudelaire: "I pity those poets who are guided by instinct alone; I believe them to be incomplete ... Somewhere in every poet there must be a critic", and "The divine goal is infallibility in poetical creation". If such a "logically organised consciousness" points only one way forward, then other approaches become meaningless, as Boulez is quick to point out in his vicious attack on commentators who arrange music into " 'schools' . . . where 'tendencies' are indexed to the greater glory of tolerance" and on the "tribe of epigones" who play into the hand of such attitudes. Instead, Boulez believes that ". . . the living forces of creation are proceeding *en bloc* in one and the same direction" and that "a language is a collective heritage whose evolution must be taken over".

The details of Boulez's general approach to composition are specified more closely in the latter part of 'General Considerations' and in the first few pages of 'Musical Technique'. A basic contention here is that the new musical situation demands the formation of new structural principles appropriate to the true nature of the material: "New ways of dealing with material lead us far from traditional solutions. 'Harmonic' functions for example can no longer be thought of as permanent; the phenomena of tension and relaxation are not established on at all the same footing as before, and, certainly not in fixed and mandatory terms; tessitura, in particular, is a deciding factor here . . . Similarly, horizontal functions have few direct links with the old contrapuntal laws . . . the responsibility of one sound in relation to another is established according to conventions of distribution and lay-out. As with vertical relationships, they can be divided into three groups; from

point to point, from a group of points to another group of points, and finally the relationships between groups of groups . . . Because of this morphology, local and global structures — responsible for the form — no longer obey permanent laws. There is also an absolutely new way of conceiving large forms: homogeneity or otherwise of their different components, causality or isolation of their various events, fixity or relativity in the order of succession and in the hierarchy of classification, potentiality or actuality of the formal relationships".

At the same time Boulez emphasises the need for integrity of approach, pointing out the error of compositional 'speculations' which have remained merely 'partial' and attacking the use of 'anecdotal' ideas — both these false steps being typical of the 'epigonal' composers. Boulez favours the axiomatic method of constructing theories of 'pure' form which may be applied to diverse material, while at the same time demanding that such systems be founded upon exclusively musical criteria (rather than proceeding from numerical or graphic symbols).

Complementary to this are Boulez's 'local' and 'global' structures which are consequents of his belief in the unity of form and content. Here he quotes Lévi-Strauss: "The content draws its reality from its structure, and what we call form is the *structuraldisposition* of local structures, in other words of the content".

As a final item in this summary, I will quote Boulez's definition of the series and its structural function; the concept is in marked contrast to those definitions we have by Stockhausen: "The series is — in very general terms — the germ of a developing hierarchy based on certain psycho-physiological acoustical properties, and endowed with a greater or lesser selectivity, with a view to organising a FINITE ensemble of creative possibilities connected by predominant affinities, in relation to a given character; this ensemble of possibilities is deduced from an initial series by a FUNCTIONAL generative process (not simply the consecutive exposition of a certain number of objects, permutated according to restrictive numerical data). Consequently, all that is needed to set up this hierarchy is a necessary and sufficient premise which will ensure the total cohesion of the whole and the relationships between its successive parts. This premise is necessary, because the ensemble of possibilities is *finite* when it observes a controlled hierarchy; it is sufficient since it excludes *all* other possibilities".

The most persistent objections to the book seem to have been on two counts. The first arises from Boulez's position in the musical world: the style of the 'Interior Duologue' may be thought of as a literary ploy used to avoid a directness of assertion which would sound pretentious ("Did you expect a personal confession of faith from me? I have to disappoint you"), and the over-vicious polemical attacks of 'General Considerations' may be thought suspect. Secondly, it has been claimed that the book is incomprehensible. Bayan Northcott quite rightly reported that "Many terms appear . . . without detailed explanation, and sometimes without unambiguous support from context",[2] although this problem arises equally from Boulez's very characteristic prose style: one of Northcott's most penetrating observations was that of "Boulez's self-conscious emulation of [Mallarmé's] peculiarly French intellectual mystique" which goes hand in hand with "the immaculate image of the conductor, the rarefied qualities of the compositions and the doctrine of his book".[3]

Most of these problems will be resolved only by individual taste. One's attitude to the book will depend to some extent on one's attitude to the music it represents (presumably it may be taken to relate to Boulez's compositions of the late 50s and early 60s); if one considers the style of *Pli selon Pli* to have been one of those with the greatest 'potential' since 1950, then one would also be likely to respect Boulez's position and the content of the book. Likewise, sympathy for Mallarmé 'the dandy' would assure sympathy for its style.

Much of the incomprehension and frustration caused by *Boulez on Music Today* might finally be excused on the grounds of the book's intentions, which necessitate a general and conceptual approach. Besides the misunderstanding which has resulted from failure to appreciate these intentions, frustration has been felt by those who expect compositional recipes. As Boulez warns in his 'Provisory Conclusion': "We end our investigation of technique itself on the threshold of form . . . the real work of *composition* begins here, at a point where it is often thought that only applications have still to be discovered; all these methods must be given a *meaning*".

NOTES:

'Bayan Northcott, 'Boulez's theory of composition', *Music and Musicians,* Vol. 20, No. 4 (December 1971), p.34.

[2]Ibid., p.32.

[3]Ibid., p.36.