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Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Brown, George. 1977-1978. 'Review of *Pierre Boulez: Conversations with Celestin Deliege*, and *Boulez: Composer, Conductor, Enigma* by Joan Peyser'. **Contact**, 18. pp. 31-34. ISSN 0308-5066.

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PIERRE BOULEZ: CONVERSATIONS WITH CELESTIN DELIÈGE

Eulenburg Books, 1977 (hardback £3.00, paperback £1.50)

BOULEZ: COMPOSER, CONDUCTOR, ENIGMA, by Joan Peyser

Cassell, 1977 (£7.50)

GEORGE BROWN

One of my initial reactions on reading these two books was to wonder at which sort of reader the publishers could be directing them. If one were to scan them superficially, one would get the impression that *Conversations with Célestin Deliège* was another factually imprecise, open form, semi-anecdotal, semi-biographical, semi-everything series of mental meanderings of a famous victim faced with a genuflecting admirer, cast in the well-worn 'Conversations with ...' format. It does not contain a single music example, the translation is anonymous, the reader is left to find out for himself the identity of Célestin Deliège and Robert Wagnermée (who wrote the Foreword) and the book suffers seriously from the lack of an index. Coverseely, Joan Peyser's *Boulez: Composer, Conductor, Enigma* promises, in the words of the blurb,

a biography of Boulez from his origins through his days as an avant-garde composer in post-war Europe to his controversial conducting engagement with the New York Philharmonic... It details the professional friendships and rivalries, the struggles for recognition and power, the politics of success and failure, in an absorbing study of Boulez, the man and artist.

This book contains several music examples, informs the reader about absolutely everyone and has an index that is so comprehensive that it has nine entries under 'Opus' and twelve under 'Symphony'. How misleading first impressions can be.

Boulez' conversations with Deliège were originally recorded for Belgian Radio in 1972, edited into their present form in 1974 and first published in French in 1975.¹ The present edition, the first in English, was translated in 1976 and published in 1977. The conversations are presented in 18 chapters, which progress from Boulez' early life through to IRCAM and the problems associated with technology-based research programmes. It presents a genuine artistic biography of Boulez which is structured around his principal works and theoretical writings, arranged in chronological order. Although the absence of an index is infuriating, the contents page does list, in addition to the chapter headings, those of Boulez' works that are principally discussed in each section.

The book, like several others in the Eulenburg series, despite a rather 'soft-sell' image, seems to be designed for someone who is generally well-versed in the music of this century. I should have thought that to make maximum use of it one should already be highly conversant with both the music and the theoretical writings of Boulez. With the latter in mind, it seems an oversight on the editor's part that all the references in the bibliography refer to the *Relevés d'apprenti* collection, rather than Herbert Weinstock's English translation;² anyone who can cope with these articles in French will not require a translation of this book.

Boulez takes the opportunity in these conversations of correcting many incorrect assumptions that have appeared during the last 30 years. A number of these have been created by his detractors in a rather mindless way for political ends, while others have been promulgated by Boulez himself, largely for artistic reasons to support his

total commitment to his art. I get the impression that when Deliège faces Boulez with a problem or inconsistency from the past or a cause for which he is no longer the chief protagonist, he is quite happy to elucidate; but when faced with a current problem, he is still considering the total implication of any answer he gives and treats it as a function of his current aims (a point which Peyser seems not to comprehend). Boulez might no longer be the polemicist of 'Incidence actuelle de Berg', 'Recherches maintenant' or 'Aléa', verbally demolishing all before him, but he is still using his intellect, though in a more adroit way, for the progress of Western music as he sees it.

I think many will gain much from this book. Seen in relation to his earlier writings, it forms a development that must be of interest to students and academics alike. Boulez resolves such antinomies as his distance from Berg and Schoenberg (vis-à-vis Webern) professed in some of his theoretical writings and the sympathy patent in much of his own music and sections of *Boulez on Music Today*.³ There is a most interesting section where Boulez describes, often in a self-critical (but not self-deprecating) manner, the part he played in establishing the concept of total serialism and its subsequent modifications, reviewing the ideas which were germane to the pieces *Structures I*, *Polyphonie X* and later *Le Marteau sans Maître* and the articles 'Eventuellement' and 'Recherches maintenant'. Here, as in many other sections, I am impressed by the sincerity and vitality with which Boulez attacked these musical problems during that time, qualities sadly lacking in the syllogistic diatribes issuing forth from the band of journalists operating under the banner of Socialist Realism who bring with them a weight of unrealistic dogma which, perhaps, no art (as we know it) will be able to bear.

I can thoroughly recommend this volume to all composers, whether they are in sympathy with Boulez' aims or not. It contains no musical or technical exemplars which can be turned into effete effects, but conveys the impression that a composer of great integrity is explaining some of his solutions to some of his problems. I find this most stimulating as it often initiates a train of thought in one's own mind that makes one reconsider thoughts or technical processes in one's own work. If the results are diametrically opposed to those of Boulez, fine: it is not his piece!

Anyone who comes to Peyser's biography after reading the Deliège discussions will be amazed at the amount of it he or she has already read. With one exception, all the quotations from Deliège are reproduced by the ever-eavesdropping Ms Peyser in a way that suggests they are all direct statements made to her by Boulez. I quote below a lengthy equivalent passage from both books to exemplify the differences between them. I think that these amount to more than a few discrepancies that result from differing translations. This passage is initiated by a question concerning Boulez' choice of the non-contemporary poet, Mallarmé, for *Pli selon pli*. I have also included some of Peyser's text in order to give an indication of the scope of her musical commentary.

Deliège, pp. 93-95:

PB: It was not a retrogressive step — it was probably even a progressive one. In Char and Michaux, whose works I used before coming to *Pli selon pli*, I found many sources of inspiration, but they were hardly obsessed with formal preoccupations. Char's main preoccupation is rather with the selection of an extremely pregnant vocabulary and density of expression; with Michaux it is the development of an extraordinarily original poetic imagery. Syntax itself, however, the concern for form, the arrangement of the words, their cohesion and sonority as such, are not a major concern. What attracted me in Mallarmé, at the stage I had reached at that time, was the extraordinary formal density of his poems. Not only is the content truly extraordinary — the poems possess a mythology that is very much their own — but never has the French language been taken so far in the matter of syntax. . . .

What interested me was the idea of finding a musical equivalent, both poetic and formal, to Mallarmé's poetry. This is why I chose very strict forms from Mallarmé in order to graft on to them a proliferation of music sprouting from an equally strict form; this enabled me to transcribe into musical terms forms that I had never thought of and which are derived from the literary forms he himself used.

CD: You have often spoken of this search for equivalent forms. Given the specific differences between the two languages, it might well be asked at what level they converge, if at all.

PB: There are various levels of convergence. The simplest and most emotional is the poetic one which I tried to achieve by using certain equivalent sonorities. Thus when Mallarmé uses words like 'green', 'white', 'absence', and so on, there is after all a certain sonority in music that is directly associated with such ideas — for instance, certain extremely long-held,

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extremely tense sounds, which form part of this sort of universe that is not so much frozen as extraordinarily 'vitrified'. It was this emotional, direct level that made me select certain poems rather than others. It was not simply because it had a very precise meaning for me.

A further level of correspondence lies in the construction of the poem. The sonnet is a very strict construction as far as its rhyme is concerned, and implies a particular structure for the music. For instance, for one masculine or feminine rhyme I use a closely related but different structure. So these *Improvisations* become an analysis of the sonnet structure, in a more and more detailed and more and more profound way. This is why I called them *Improvisations I, II, III*. The first takes a sonnet and uncovers only its strophic character, which is not very intense work; the second is elaborated at the level of the line and verse itself — in other words, it is already an analysis of the stanza; the third proceeds in the sense that the line itself has a particular structure in terms of its position within the sonnet.

I also made use of numerical relationships. There is a sonnet in lines of eight syllables, and, for instance, in a whole section of the second *Improvisation*, where the vocal line itself is at once syllabic and melismatic around a given note, the structure rests on the figure eight: in other words, all the important and most audible events relating to the enunciation of the verse itself have as their basis the figure eight, since the initial sonorities are eight in number. The very numerical structure of the sonnet served as a basis for the musical structure.

Peyser, pp. 144-145 (the only quote from Deliège with any acknowledgement — although the interviewer remains anonymous):

Before 1959, Boulez had set three works by René Char and one poem by Henri Michaux. He explains his shift to Mallarmé:

'I found many sources of inspiration in Char and Michaux, but preoccupation with form was not one of them. Char's interest was in an extremely tight vocabulary; Michaux's in the creation of an original imagery. But syntax itself, the arrangement of words and their cohesion and sonority, was not the obsession of either poet.

'What seduced me with Mallarmé was the formal density of his work. Not only is the content extraordinary — for his poems have a very particular mythology — but the French language has never been led further, from the point of view of syntax. I wanted to find a musical equivalent and that is why I chose the strictest forms.

There are various levels of convergence between poetry and music. The simplest is the conveying of the sense of the words. Thus, when Mallarmé speaks of 'absence', there is a musical sonority — a sound held for a long time — that can convey this idea. Another point of convergence is the form itself. The sonnet has a very strict form which calls for a certain musical structure. My purpose was to attribute a kind of form to each verse according to the rules of the sonnet itself. There is also a numerology here: one structure is based on the number 8 because it is a verse of eight syllables. Gradually these improvisations become analogous [sic] with the structure of the sonnet, but in a manner more and more detailed, more and more profound. That is why I call them *Improvisations I, II, and III*.'

Boulez's elaborate discussion of technique in the interview quoted above ... serves to hide from the listener the real 'meaning' of the work, which can easily be discovered in the words of the poetry.

Few listeners could pick up Boulez's devices, for the system is impenetrable. Few could even pick up the words, for they are virtually drowned in the music. What the listener will pick up is the dazzling instrumental color: *Pli selon Pli* is a remarkable work for its instrumental passages of great beauty, for its technique and proportion.

The form adopted by Peyser for this biography is the now fashionable one of psycho-biography. This approach often works when the investigative journalist probes into the inner life of some well-known politician who adores any publicity. But when the person being interrogated thinks, as Boulez does, that most of this is irrelevant, the idea falls flat. Rather than abandon this journalistic approach in favour of some methodical research, Peyser goes on, with the aid of some questionable psychology, to relate the fruits of her endeavours to Boulez and Composer and Conductor and then deduces the Enigma.

After a rather ponderous introduction, Peyser progresses through the story (for that is how it is told) of Boulez' life in a vaguely chronological way. I say 'vaguely' because Peyser quite often becomes so carried away with other characters in her drama and develops them with such gusto, that she loses sight of her principal theme, quite often making en passant comments about events and pieces which she has yet to explain. Does Peyser really think it necessary to

inform her readers who Stockhausen and Pousseur are? Her pièce de résistance is an amazing six-page miniature biography of John Cage: this is to show the cultural disparity between a European and an American background!

Peyser continues in this manner until she reaches the 1970s. We are then treated to a long, detailed description of the political background to, and the later ramifications of, Boulez' appointment to the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. Peyser concludes that Boulez failed in his attempt to change the musical aspect of New York. In this respect it is a shame that the author could not be bothered to acquaint herself more fully with the changes Boulez brought to London's concerts, for many of Boulez' ideas which 'failed' in New York were very much more successful here. The ideas about IRCAM put forward in Deliège's five-year-old book are naturally exiguous; however, Peyser's more up-to-date information is no less amorphous.

Peyser is at her best when she is recalling other people's anecdotes and jokes about, or confrontations with, Boulez. Some of these are interesting, most are superficial and a lot are just plain irrelevant and boring. To single out any for quotation would be pointless, considering their number. As entertaining as some of this is, I cannot overlook the nature or content of the musical commentary. The quotation which follows (pp. 67-69) is typical. The description of the Messiaen work is careless and somewhat misleading, while that of the Boulez is not very helpful.

In 1949, before Boulez began *Polyphonie X*, Messiaen had published his *Quatre Etudes de Rythme* of which the second, entitled *Mode de Valeurs et d'Intensités*, was probably the first European composition which extended the serial principle beyond pitch to the other musical elements. The work was organized in this way: a melodic series of thirty-six notes, a rhythmic series of twenty-four durations, a dynamic series of seven attacks, and an additional series of seven intensities. (The work is for piano, therefore timbre does not undergo permutation.) This fourfold determination is then set into three-part canon. Despite the imposition of such mathematical formulas, the *Mode de Valeurs et d'Intensités* is full, expressive, extroverted music. Messiaen used his formulas in a free and romantic way. After the completion of this work he chose not to pursue the path of total organization.

It was left to Boulez to remove the trimmings, to make music 'from scratch', to go, in a sense, bone dry Boulez did not merely adopt Messiaen's technique; he complicated it considerably. In place of a rather straightforward method, Boulez developed a most intricate mechanism which appears to have been designed to transmute his private anguish and joy into something distant, universal, and cold. In *Structures* even the smallest aspect of each musical event undergoes a perpetual transformation. Thus each pitch never recurs with the same duration, the same intensity, or the same attack. A staggering multiplicity of combinations occurs.

I was puzzled by the inclusion of several pages from *Boulez on Music Today*. These deal with such technical points as the isomorphism of the subsets in 'Tropes', the second formant of the Third Piano Sonata. This would be beyond the comprehension of the reader at whom this book is seemingly aimed, and seems included only in an attempt to support Peyser's various hypotheses e.g. 'Thus Boulez's method of making music can be seen as one in which some kind of mathematical equations have displaced man as the centre of art. Purpose and invention have capitulated to structure and system. Boulez's ties to both can be traced, perhaps, to Catholicism and his early rigid life.' (pp. 152-153)

The aforementioned index is certainly copious, but does not cross-reference works by anyone but Boulez, i.e. to find a reference to the Webern Symphony, one can either wade through the 27 entries under 'Webern', or remember it is under O as 'Opus 21'; we are spared an entry under 'Symphony'. The music examples seem to be quoted for their intrinsic artistic beauty as they have only tentative links with the text. Incidentally, not all the manuscript ones are in Boulez' own hand. It is not surprising that there is no bibliography.

No doubt this book is fully satisfying for the New York trendy, but for those with a real interest in the music and ideas of Boulez it is not sufficient. Considering that Ms Peyser spent several years accompanying Boulez from place to place in the manner of a somewhat high-class groupie, I find the result totally execrable and most irritating to read.

NOTES:

¹ *Par volonté et par hasard: entretiens avec Célestin Deliège* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975).

² *Notes of an Apprenticeship* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968).

³ Susan Bradshaw and Richard Rodney Bennett, trans., *Boulez on Music Today* (London: Faber and Faber, hardback 1971, paperback 1975).

[The text in this column is extremely faint and illegible, appearing to be a continuation of the notes or a separate column of text.]