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Boulez and the Modern Concept

Peter F. Stacey, *Boulez and the Modern Concept* (London: Scolar Press, 1987), £35

A lot of care has gone into the production of a book that would do credit to any well-endowed coffee table: its designer lay-out is printed on good-quality paper, unstintingly used to provide wide margins, an abundance of music-examples, diagrams (some of them too simplistic to be helpful), and all the poetry ever set by Boulez together with complete translations where applicable. The pleasing visual effect is only slightly spoilt by the fact that the manuscript music-examples – some rather crudely copied and not all in the same hand – are printed in a format disproportionately larger than the rest. Of its 143 pages (excluding selected work list, not fully up-dated, brief bibliography and index), only an estimated 85 or so form the actual text: £35 seems a considerable price to pay for what is in effect an extended essay.

Or rather, a collection of essays. It is not the author's fault that the dust jacket has BOULEZ writ large and the actual title, 'Boulez and the Modern Concept', disguised as an explanatory sub-heading. Dr. Stacey is impressively well-read around his subject. As an art historian he casts interesting light on the artistic mores of our time relative to one of its most innovative composers, drawing together the threads of 20th-century artistic endeavour as stated by the artists themselves and presenting them – as all good coffee-table books should – in easily digestible form.

Chosen to illustrate the influence of music on painting and poetry and – from Boulez's point of view – the other way about, a wide range of relevant quotations from those listed below are linked by commentary and paraphrase and grouped under chapter-headings that set Boulez within the context of his times: abstract art (Kandinsky, Klee and Mondrian), serial music (Schoenberg, Webern and Berg, Messiaen and Stravinsky), dramatic art (Artaud, Genet and Beckett) and, at much greater length (about half the total), poetry (Char and Mallarmé) – with specific reference to Boulez's vocal music. While not uninteresting as a subject in itself, it seems odd to devote the final quarter of a book ostensibly about Boulez to post-1945 text-setting in general, with examples from Ligeti, Berio, Birtwistle, Henze, Nono, Stockhausen and the concrete poets Gomringer, Döhl and Emmet Williams. At this point the overall aim of the book becomes confused in more ways than one: not even the amateur browser needs to be told that, 'Before a composer can commence a text-setting, he must choose the text or texts with which he is going to work', and that 'A great many different types of text are available to him'. A brief section on electronic music and the voice, included in this chapter, seems to allow Dr. Stacey to feel exempt from discussion of *Répons* (1980-), Boulez's work-in-progress, and any mention of developments at IRCAM later than 1977.

Whether Boulez himself had read quite so widely at the time he is credited with the all-round artistic awareness outlined in Dr. Stacey's introductory

chapters is open to question: most of his remarks on the subject of music in relation to the other arts were made retrospectively and, even then, he was to speak more of subjective inspiration – of sudden, mind-blowing experiences – than of any reasoned determination to be part of an artistic movement. Boulez's concerns in the Paris of the 1940s were, I suspect, strictly musical – much more so than were Schoenberg's in the Vienna of the 1900s; it was only towards the end of the 1950s that Mallarmé's typographical and formal innovations (together with the persuasive influence of John Cage, not mentioned by Dr. Stacey in this connection) were directly to affect his own ideas on form in *Pli selon Pli* and the Third Piano Sonata.

In any case, Dr. Stacey's research shows that painters and poets were able to make much more direct use of specifically musical concepts than were composers of visual or literary ones: poetry may indeed suggest music, but music can only absorb poetry as a part of itself. For this reason alone, he should be on much stronger ground when discussing the influence of other composers. Nevertheless his first music-example (curiously giving the twelve-note row from Webern's Concerto opus 24 followed by the opening bars of the Symphony opus 21) is misleadingly linked to the opening of Boulez's First Piano Sonata in order to show the greater variety of intervals it uses – while failing to mention that, as Charles Rosen points out [1], the latter derives from the sequential repetition of a four-note group: F sharp-D-F-E flat, E-C-E flat-D flat, D-B flat-C sharp-B. Extracts from Boulez's own writings are given to illustrate his attitude to the three Viennese composers during the early part of his career, and these are linked by a summary of his ideas relating both to them and to the rhythmic innovations of Stravinsky and Messiaen. (Four times in foot-notes at this point and in the index mention is made of a composer called Michel Faro – evidently a careless mistake, since so many consecutive misprints of the name Fano would seem unlikely. Otherwise the book is unusually error-free, so that a wrongly copied time signature in Example 14 – as 7/16 instead of 9/16, and a C natural copied as a quaver instead of a semiquaver in the previous bar of the same example – ought to have been corrected, as also should the spelling of the work listed as *Dévive* [*Dérive*]).

None of the musical influences listed earlier are followed up in the long chapter on Boulez's word-setting. Here, Dr. Stacey tiptoes up to the threshold of the music itself but quickly retreats to a fringe discussion of formal frameworks rather than content, of verbal imagery rather than the music itself. There is little to be gleaned as to why the music is what it is in terms of harmonic structure, let alone what it sounds like. While it is interesting to know that Char's poem *La Sorgue* is sub-titled 'chanson pour Yvonne' (I didn't), it seems perverse to illustrate the word-setting of *Le Soleil des eaux* with examples taken from the long-superseded 1958 version: at least one of his examples reads quite differently in the 1965 score. Again, he refers to the 'elements of indeterminacy' that make 'Improvisation III' from *Pli selon pli* the only one of the three to do full justice to its title, without mention of the fact that it has since been revised (1983-4) to exclude these elements – an omission that in turn leads him to say that Boulez sets only the first three lines of the Mallarmé sonnet (no longer true).

Since none of the works discussed by Dr. Stacey was written later than 1970 (although passing mention is made of . . . *explosante – fixe* . . ., 1971), the book gives the impression of being curiously out of date. And since the author's preface and acknowledgements are dated 1986, even the vagaries of publication dates do not seem to excuse the fifteen-year time-lag.

In order to promote his thesis that poetry played a large part in the development of Boulez's musical style, Dr. Stacey necessarily concentrates on the vocal works, but to discuss these mainly in terms of what he calls 'the various techniques of vocal emission' (rather than to explore – as he much more interestingly suggests in passing – the creation of independent musical forms) is to evade the issue. His superficial foray into the outskirts of analysis might have been more purposefully pursued with reference to Robert Piencikowsky's analytical study of *Le Marteau sans maître*[2] – not even listed in the bibliography: is it really true to say that, 'Although the length of the notes (in 'Bourreaux de solitude') is determined by serial procedures, the placing of the notes is governed by aesthetic considerations'? Much more likely, I think, is that they were governed by procedures supposedly explained in the enigmatic Example 4 from *Boulez on Music Today*.[3]

To conclude that 'Boulez was influenced by the rigour of Neo-Plastic art to create a musical language that was self-sufficient and made no reference to foregoing principles of organisation' (p. 141, a remark that has immediately to be qualified by a footnote excepting the influences of the Viennese composers, Messiaen and Stravinsky) is altogether too glibly dismissive of Boulez's importance at the forefront of a musical development that retains as much as it rejects of the recent past. To regard his achievements purely in terms of poetic reflection is to deny musical reality. When all is said and done, Boulez makes use of poetry for his own strictly musical ends – twisting it into shapes suggestive of musical functions as a basis for his abstract sound-structures. As far as the listener is concerned (and no matter what the composer himself may have said by way of a *postieri* explanation), these structures might just as well be in the form of a pear as in the form of a sonnet . . . neither of which has much relevance to the experience of music as it is heard.

[1] In his 1975 article on Boulez's piano music included in *Pierre Boulez, A Symposium* (London: Ernst Eulenberg, 1986).

[2] Robert Piencikowsky, 'Le Marteau sans maître', *Schweizer Beiträge zur Musikwissenschaft*, (Bern and Stuttgart: Verlag Paul Paupt, 1980).

[3] Pierre Boulez, *Boulez on Music Today*, translated by Susan Bradshaw and Richard Rodney Bennett (London: Faber and Faber, 1971).