

Pierre Boulez

### “Notations I-IV”

PIERRE BOULEZ was born in Montbrison, France, on March 26, 1925, and lives in Paris. His “Notations I-IV” are orchestrations and expansions of the first four of twelve solo piano pieces that he wrote in 1945. The first four orchestrations (which were originally to include all twelve) were commissioned by the Orchestre de Paris, completed in 1978, and premiered under Daniel Barenboim’s direction on June 18, 1980, in Paris. Boulez made some revisions in 1984.

THE SCORE OF “NOTATIONS I-IV” calls for an orchestra of four flutes (fourth doubling piccolo), three oboes, English horn, E-flat clarinet, two B-flat clarinets, A clarinet, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, six horns, four trumpets, four trombones, tuba, percussion (eight players suggested, variously performing on: xylophone, vibraphone, marimba, glockenspiel, tubular bells, bell plate, glass chimes, bell tree, wood blocks, temple blocks, Japanese wood blocks, boobams, anvils, claves, timbales, cymbalettes, crotales, cowbells, maracas, large triangle, metal blocks, snare drum, bass drum, tom-toms, log drum, tablas, hand drum, congas, bongos, suspended cymbals, Chinese cymbal, sizzle cymbal, tam-tams, gongs), timpani, celesta, three harps, piano, and strings. For performance of “Notations I-IV,” Boulez suggests the order I, IV, III, II; the durations are: I. about 2:30; IV. about 1:45; III. about 4:00; II. about 2:00.

Pierre Boulez wrote his *12 Notations* for solo piano in 1945, when he was still a student at the Paris Conservatoire. They were premiered in 1948 by Yvette Grimaud, but weren’t published until almost forty years later, following the creation of the composer’s orchestral versions of the first four pieces. The *Notations* in 1945 represented a dramatic step forward for a composer who, upon his arrival in Paris from a decidedly un-cosmopolitan region of France to attend the Conservatoire, had virtually no exposure to contemporary music. By all accounts he picked up astoundingly quickly both the foundations of traditional music (particularly harmony and counterpoint) and the influences of the progressive composers he encountered in the capital. Most important of these was Olivier Messiaen, a middling teacher of counterpoint at the Conservatoire who happened to be one of the most original composers of the era.

Outside of his formal courses, Messiaen invited interested pupils to his own home for classes in analysis of modern works by Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Bartók, whose music received short shrift at the school. Another major acquaintance of Boulez, in some ways countering Messiaen’s predilections, was René Leibowitz, the most important proponent in France—perhaps in Europe at that time, Schoenberg himself having moved to the United States—of Schoenberg’s new techniques of twelve-tone composition. Between Leibowitz’s explications of the music of Schoenberg and (especially) Anton Webern, and the particular rhythmic and harmonic experiments of Messiaen’s own unique, relatively little-known music, Boulez began to find his way. The *12 Notations* for piano, along with the Sonatine for flute and piano (1946) and Piano Sonata No. 1, synthesized the approaches that in a few short years Boulez absorbed during his time at, and outside, the Conservatoire. By the time he was thirty, in 1955, he was considered the most formidable and uncompromising composer of the post-World War II generation and was well known as a sometimes-angry iconoclast, nihilist, anarchist (take your pick) determined to redefine musical culture itself.

More than fifty years later, much has changed, and Boulez is one of the most respected administrators and conductors in the world. As a conductor he held the chief conducting positions of both the BBC Symphony Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic (concurrently) and guest conductor positions with the Cleveland Orchestra and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and was admitted to the inner sanctum of Wagner’s Bayreuth, first by Wieland Wagner for performances of *Parsifal* and *Tristan und Isolde* in the 1960s, then for the centennial performances of the *Ring Cycle* in 1976. As an administrator and organizer he worked with the French government

to establish IRCAM, the most important state-supported initiative for advanced music education and research in the world, in the late 1970s.

These mainstream activities, paradoxically, have been a continuation of Boulez's wide-ranging vision of transformation for the world's musical culture. As a conductor of the great, established orchestras he attempted to introduce a counterposition to the masterpiece-centered program formula that he felt shackled those institutions, keeping them from freshening their approach and their audiences. In the process he came to realize the limits of his own interest in certain kinds of repertoire and the limits of his audience to accept the steady diet of the new (and, significantly, the "classic"-new of Schoenberg, Varèse, and other earlier 20th-century masters) that was the bread-and-butter of his early career and the fond hope of his major appointments. The successes of his performance career have largely depended not on his philosophy but on the strength of his musicianship, phenomenal ear, and clear technique, which earned him the crucial respect of orchestral musicians regardless of their own aesthetic positions.

The "Institut de recherche et de co-ordination acoustique-musical" (IRCAM) was the centerpiece of a broader retooling of French musical institutions that Boulez and others proposed already in the 1960s, only part of which came to pass. In the 1960s and early '70s Boulez lived in self-imposed expatriation in Baden-Baden, West Germany, finding himself at odds with much of the government's official attitude toward music. By forwarding Boulez's propositions Georges Pompidou, who became President in 1969, hoped to return the most famous and respected French musician to his home soil. Even before its opening in 1978, IRCAM was on its way to becoming the hotbed of training for advanced composers and sound researchers from around the world. IRCAM has also been central in developing hardware and software for music creation, helping to transform fundamentally the commercial and consumer markets in computer music. In addition, the Ensemble InterContemporain was created as the institute's resident ensemble.

As part of the general state reforms of the musical situation in Paris, in 1967 the Orchestre de Paris was created by the ministry and Charles Munch as a result of the dissolution of the orchestra of the Conservatoire and with the intent to bring together permanently the best orchestral musicians in the city. Its creation went against Boulez's ideas, and for many years he didn't conduct the major orchestra of Paris. A partial reconciliation came about in the late 1970s when Daniel Barenboim, whom Boulez had nominated for the post, became the Orchestre de Paris music director, and subsequently the ensemble commissioned the orchestral versions of the composer's *12 Notations*, which were little-known and had not yet been published.

Boulez's music, even those pieces widely acknowledged as masterworks—*Le Marteau sans maître*, the Piano Sonata No. 3, *Pli selon pli* (all dating from the 1950s)—is not nearly as well known in practice as in anecdote, and in some ways he is as well known for the failure of his austere polemic in integral serialism, *Polyphonie X*, as for his genuinely successful pieces. This has partly to do with his ascension in the ranks of the great conductors—not only the time required to devote to that part of his musical life (not to mention IRCAM and what that entailed), but the eclipsing nature of his conducting persona. Also, famously, he has rarely settled on finished versions of his pieces since *Le Marteau*, although he has nonetheless allowed their performance. The Third Sonata, in which he first explored indeterminacy via performer choice (under the influence of the poet Mallarmé), remains unfinished; the much larger *Pli selon pli* transformed over the course of forty-plus years to reach its (supposedly) final state; and several other works dating back to the 1960s are yet "in process." Since completing the first four *Notations* in 1978 (and revising them in 1984), Boulez has talked of two more groups of four pieces each as being in various stages of completion. To date only *Notation VII* has been published in addition to the first group.

Another inhibitor to the potential popularity of Boulez's sensual, brilliant, often ravishing music has been his interest in redefining the very media of performance, and for logistical reasons many organizations and ensembles avoid scheduling some of his more adventurous works. On the tame side, *Polyphonie X*, *Le Marteau sans maître*, *Éclat*, and *sur Incises*, for example, all require different non-standard performing forces, beyond which the orchestral works *Figures*, *Doubles*, *Prismes* and *Rituel in memoriam Bruno Maderna* call for unconventional

deployment of the orchestra onstage. Since 1980 his work at IRCAM has led the use of complex configurations of pre-recorded or live electronics along with acoustic instruments in such pieces as ...*explosante-fixe...*, *Anthèmes 2*, *Répons* (which won a Grammy!) and *Dérive 2*, all of which initially demanded the services of IRCAM-trained sound technicians (although now they travel more easily than they used to). So it is that *Notations I-IV* is without question Boulez's most popular work for orchestra, not least because it is technically conventional, in spite of its massive percussion requirements.

Boulez, in an interview accompanying David Robertson and the Orchestre National de Lyon's recording of *Notations*, recalls reading a report of 4000-year-old grain seeds taken from an Egyptian tomb and which, when planted, sprouted and grew. This, he says, encouraged his idea of returning to his student-era piano works. He had actually attempted orchestrations of eleven of the twelve piano pieces already in the mid-1940s; from what little I've seen of these withdrawn versions, they are scarcely more sophisticated than one would expect from a brilliant young composer with no experience writing for orchestra. In their sharply drawn musical character, both the piano pieces themselves and the idea of orchestrating them strongly suggest Boulez's familiarity with Schoenberg's Five Pieces for Orchestra, Opus 16, and possibly Webern's Variations for orchestra, Opus 30 (the latter particularly in the twelve-tone influence and the miniature scale of the pieces).

The 1978 (rev. 1984) versions of the first four *Notations* benefited from Boulez's vast experience with an enormous range of the orchestral canon from Bach to Berio. The new versions are not mere orchestrations but expansions and transformations of the original pieces, three minutes of original material becoming ten. Boulez had, in the meantime, also developed a much more refined approach to harmony and structure, and the new pieces reveal a lush bloom in contrast with the comparatively colorless total chromatic of the originals. Their strongly defined characters also expand richly in space and timbre in their new guise.

In *Notations* one can clearly hear the echoes in Boulez's orchestral writing of the music of Wagner, Debussy, Ravel, Bartók, and Schoenberg, with tendencies toward the metallic and the shimmering. The shimmering cascades of arpeggios of *Notation I*, *Modéré*. *Fantastique*, for example, are pure Boulez (one hears similar moments in *Rituel* and *Pli selon pli*) expanded from a tiny four-note piano figure. In *Notation IV*, *Rythmique* (which should always be performed as the second movement in this group of four), the profile is much more aggressive, with brass predominating. In the third piece, *Notation III*, *Très modéré*, the orchestra is a resonant body, sustained harmonies buoying and also obscuring a central melodic line. The original piano *Notation II*, *Très vif*, is the most radical and aggressive of the piano pieces. Its blurring of pitched sound and noise (glissandi, cluster chords, and tremolo) in the original are pushed further in the use of much unpitched percussion and insistent brass, driving forward in mechanically insistent pulse.

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