Pierre Boulez Was a Titan of 20th-Century Music. What About Now?

The legacy of this composer and conductor may not be in his rarely performed works, but in how we think about music itself.

By Joshua Barone
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Few musicians could be the focus of an architectural tour. Pierre Boulez is one of them. In the Fourth Arrondissement of Paris, next to the Centre Pompidou, you'll find IRCAM, the sound research center that Boulez founded in the 1970s. Not far away, on Place de la Bastille, is an opera house where he suffered one of the few failures of his long career. And on the outskirts of the city, at Parc de la Villette, his Cité de la Musique complex produces concerts, exhibitions and classes, a factory of culture where industrial slaughterhouses once sprawled.

The most recent addition to the Cité de la Musique is the Philharmonie de Paris, a concert hall whose main auditorium is named after Boulez. It was completed in 2015, a year before his death, at 90, but he never got to see it. Still, it stands today as a kind of monument to this titan of the past century's music, a composer, conductor, theorist and a canny political force.

Michael Haefliger, a friend and colleague from the Lucerne Festival, called Boulez "the Einstein of music." The conductor and composer Esa-Pekka Salonen, an inheritor of Boulez's ethos, described him as "one of the most influential people in music, period."

What exactly, though, is Boulez's influence?

A hundred years after his birth, and nearly a decade since his death, his legacy isn't necessarily as a composer. Celebrating his centennial at the Philharmonie in March, two performances of his "Rituel in Memoriam Bruno Maderna" were notable mostly for their rarity. His music, like that of his peers from the post-World War II generation of high modernists, like Karlheinz Stockhausen and Luigi Nono, is brilliant but out of fashion, and difficult to program.

Benjamin Millepied created a dance for Boulez’s “Rituel in Memoriam Bruno Maderna,” performed by his company, L.A. Dance Project. Credit. Benjamin Malapris for The New York Times

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To get a sense of Boulez's true legacy, look at *how* "Rituel" was presented. With an accompanying dance by Benjamin Millepied, the evening embraced experimentation, a hallmark of Boulez, a musician who tried to dissolve the boundaries between performers and audience members in the 1970s.

That is just one way in which, with lasting influence, Boulez changed how we think about music itself: how it is created, performed and heard, as well as where these things happen, from subterranean laboratories to IRCAM to the modular auditorium, a dream of his that has become the standard for new concert halls today.

"His vision," said Frank Madlener, the director of IRCAM, "is all over."

BOULEZ WAS A late bloomer. Born in Montbrison, France, a small town to the west of Lyon, he was passionate about music but bound for a career in engineering. Against his father's wishes, he spent his teens working to get into a conservatory. Not long before his 19th birthday, he was admitted to the famous Conservatoire de Paris.

There, his teachers included Olivier Messiaen (who, for comparison, entered the same conservatory at 11). Boulez quickly differentiated himself from Messiaen's convention-defying but tonally colorful vein of modernism; within a year, he was more under the spell of Schoenberg's dodecaphonic system of writing, which influenced his first proper work, the piano solo "Douze Notations."

Boulez, who seemed to hold only severe opinions, would later disavow and then again accept "Douze Notations." In one interview, he argued that early works mean little in the scope of a composer's career, saying, "It's not because you listen to 'Rienzi' that you are really going to comprehend 'Tannhäuser.'"

He became a conductor out of practicality. After learning to play the ondes Martenot, a pioneering electronic instrument, from its creator, he made a modest living with gigs at places like the Folies Bergère. In 1946, he picked up a music job in a production of "Hamlet" by the Compagnie Renaud-Barrault, where he spent the next nine years as the music director of a small ensemble.

It was through that troupe's founders that he started a concert series called the Domaine Musical, a place for the music he was hearing and creating with Stockhausen and others in his concurrent work at the Darmstadt summer course in Germany. But Boulez was also interested in conducting

earlier 20th-century music, as well as some established classics, particularly operas, which he took up to nearly instant acclaim.

For Boulez's centennial year, Deutsche Grammophon has released two boxed sets: a reissue of his complete works, and a nearly 90-disc collection of his albums for the label and Decca. Throughout the recordings, his defining trait as a conductor is clarity. He had a remarkable ability to render scores by Webern and Schoenberg legible, and few accounts of Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring" can match his balance of control and ferocity. When he found a kindred spirit in a soloist, like the soprano Teresa Stratas in Berg's "Lulu," the results were nothing less than extraordinary.

In 1971, Boulez succeeded Leonard Bernstein at the New York Philharmonic, where he programmed as much Stravinsky as Beethoven. His Rug Concerts, in which the seats of Avery Fisher Hall were removed and the orchestra situated in the center of the auditorium, became cult favorites. The series was a way to appeal to new audiences through a Woodstock-esque vibe of relaxation, with the spirit of a special event, something orchestras still strive for today.

Earlier this year, the Philharmonic revived a Rug Concert, unfortunately in a traditional setup. Even so, it was just as appealing for its musical choices as it would have been for Boulez's arrangement. A Brandenburg concerto followed by Schubert's Second Symphony, Webern's Symphony, selections from Boulez's "Pli Selon Pli" and Stravinsky's suite from "L'Histoire du Soldat": There hasn't been a more interesting or satisfying program at the Philharmonic this season.

During Boulez's years at the Philharmonic, he was lured back to France by the president, Georges Pompidou, who asked him to develop the research institute that would become IRCAM. It was the start of Boulez's era as a builder, navigating politics through changing administrations and tides of public opinion, while also transcending it.

While IRCAM was under construction, he founded Ensemble Intercontemporain, a group devoted to new music. The next decade, he was brought in as a leader in building the Opéra Bastille, which became a wellspring of disaster. Its original plans included what Boulez called a "salle modulable," a hall that could be reconfigured for different purposes, but as the budget and construction timeline ballooned, the space was scrapped. That idea was finally realized when Cité de la Musique opened in the mid-1990s; now, it is more or less the default.

During these decades of construction, Boulez held a chair at the Collège de France, where he delivered a series of lectures that, collected in one volume, look and often read like a lead brick. They are just a portion of his immense output as a writer, the largest since Berlioz's in the 19th century.

He was often provocative and absolute, only to change his mind and contradict himself with equal conviction. Laurent Bayle, who succeeded Boulez at IRCAM and Cité de la Musique, and recently published the book "Pierre Boulez, Aujourd'hui" ("Pierre Boulez Today"), said, "There is no ideologue in music like him."

Because Boulez was so powerful, his severity could be poison for any artist who didn't adhere to his worldview. He disdained vast swaths of repertoire, to the point where he could seem stubbornly incurious, as in his lack of interest in works by Philip Glass and John Adams. Salonen recalled watching Boulez virtually end the career of a composer after hearing his work, but he also said he was attracted, like many of his modernist peers, to the "concept of right and wrong" that Boulez offered.

"It was an ethics of contemporary music," Salonen said. "Young people want to know the right thing to do, and Boulez was like a moral beacon. He could make you feel like you belonged, like you were one of the good guys."

Perhaps surprisingly, Boulez is often remembered as a warm, wickedly funny presence. Despite his stature, he wasn't a haughty maestro. The French critic Christian Merlin, in his excellent but untranslated biography "Pierre Boulez," describes tours in which he rode in coach with musicians rather than business class, and stayed in the same hotels.

And there was a generosity in his last act, as the founder and leader of the academy at the Lucerne Festival in Switzerland, at Haefliger's invitation. Not long after taking over the festival, Haefliger called Boulez, who "knew exactly what he wanted to do," he recalled. "And I appreciate that this was it, rather than creating polished symphonies or looking for immediate success."

BOULEZ WROTE RELATIVELY LITTLE music. In Deutsche Grammophon's set, his catalog takes up only 11 discs. Salonen said that "we're too close still" to know what among his works will remain in the repertoire, but some are candidates for classics. And the masterpieces came early. Merlin wrote that with the monumentality of the Second Piano Sonata, "the young

Boulez didn’t hesitate to assume the legacy of Beethoven: At 22 years old, he wrote his ‘Hammerklavier.’”

“Le Marteau Sans Maître” (1955), a chamber setting of René Char poems for alto and six instrumentalists, appropriately remains an event whenever performed, proof that avant-garde music of its era can be as beautiful as it is intellectual. From there, the list goes on: “Pli Selon Pli,” “Répons,” the “Rituel” recently presented in Paris.

Why is Boulez’s music so rarely performed? His generation’s modernism, sometimes combative in its sound, has at best a cult audience today. Among his peers, though, Boulez stands a comparatively better chance of being programmed. His works may be challenging and idiosyncratic, but they are mostly written for traditional instruments. As Madlener said, “He was pragmatic, not utopian like Stockhausen.”

But Salonen said that Boulez’s music asks too much of traditional orchestras: They are written for oddly sized ensembles, which can trigger union complications that likely won’t be made up for in ticket sales. “It’s not the kiss of death,” he said of programming a Boulez work, “but it doesn’t help.”

Image

A Rug Concert at the New York Philharmonic in 1975; the series had a cult following.

Credit...

Jack Mitchell

Yet the Rug Concert revival in New York earlier this year played to a full house, and the two "Rituel" performances in Paris sold out. That may have less to do with the music, though, than with making them "events." Boulez, a believer in music as event, probably would have approved.

An orchestral concert made into a singular moment was among the many signs of Boulez's legacy in Paris during the week of his centennial, even when his music wasn't being performed. IRCAM and Ensemble Intercontemporain continue to thrive, with the spirit of their founder intact even if, as Madlener said, "there is no aesthetic connection to him at all" in the new works they produce. (Boulez had no interest in composers emulating his sound.)

Millepied, too, created a distinct aesthetic inspired by but not analogous to the sound of "Rituel," an antiphonal work in which eight small groups of musicians are spread throughout the

auditorium. (The dance, along with the rest of the Philharmonie program, comes to the New York Philharmonic this fall.) “I had this puzzle idea, where you see bits of material alone, and when they come together, your brain receives that it has seen all these pieces already,” Millepied said. “But while I started with a mathematical, nerd approach in how I wanted to make it, I ended up somewhere emotional.”

Boulez’s score was a starting point. But it evolved into something else, given to the public in an auditorium named after him, on the campus of a music center that he created, in the city where the monuments to his artistry live and breathe rather than gather dust. Not bad, as legacies go.

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