

The 2009 Kyoto Prize Workshop in Arts and Philosophy

“Boulez in Kyoto”

Pierre Boulez

Composition Commentary (Interviewer: Ichiro Nodaira)

*(Nodaira)* In the first part, Monsieur Boulez played for us some excerpts from “Sur Incise.” It was a very kaleidoscopic piece of music, with various types of sounds imbued with a profound logicity. With his amazing powers of analysis, he made everything clear in his explanation without using a single difficult technical term. I felt as if I had experienced a magical moment.

“Sur Incises” was originally composed as a shorter work for piano called “Incises.” Using that instrumental architecture, Monsieur Boulez integrated this smaller piece into an extended framework of music that lasts about forty minutes.

Monsieur Boulez, you often use a technique that we might refer to as “magnification,” that is, creating a large piece of music such as this out of limited materials or resources. I believe that this concept of amplification can also be seen in some of your more recent works. For example, you used electronic acoustics to make another short piece “Anthèmes” for violins into a much longer timeframe perhaps lasting more than twenty minutes. I believe that it is safe to say that this method of amplification is playing a vital role in your recent compositions. Could you be kind enough to give us an account of this technique of amplification?

*(Boulez)* This design for amplification came from performing pieces which were very much longer than I had the habit to conduct and listen to. You know that in the French tradition, we do not have practically very long pieces. If you see by Debussy, all the works for the orchestra are rather short. Not to speak of chamber music, especially the last sonatas of Debussy, are rather short. They are concentrated; I think they are short because they want to express in itself a kind of short moment of time. But I think in Ravel, that is exactly the same. All the orchestra pieces are really generally rather short. There is only one piece which is larger. That is the ballet, “Daphnis et Chloé,” and of course, the anecdote of the ballet implies that music is longer. But that is it. I suppose many people know it also that not recently, but at least in 20 or 25 years, I have conducted much more longer pieces, either by Mahler in concert or “The Ring” especially by Wagner in Bayreuth, and then that suddenly gave me the

incentive to say why not would I also develop ideas which are the first, rather simple, rather concentrated and make them really worthwhile large development.

You know also, outside of French tradition, I do not want to put everything on the French tradition, I think that when you are young, you have many ideas but you do not know how to exploit them. You do not know how to derive from them. Some material is important, but you do not know how to take them really at the most of their productivity. Therefore, I think that playing Wagner and Mahler, specifically, I saw how they have sometimes very simple figures, very simple things, they could reduce quite a lot of consequences. And these consequences, I try to do myself. Therefore, I think that if you have a short piece, you let it first in peace for a while and then when you come back later, maybe years later, then you can find a way of using this symmetric material in much more interesting way than you would have done than at first, at least in my case.

I think with a small delay, then that you have certain distance also. You know what induced me also for instance to make orchestration of "Notations," especially from very early piano pieces, very extremely short pieces. But to see in Wagner, the cuts between second act of Siegfried and third act of Siegfried. It was a long period with big evolution of Wagner and you see that after, for instance, "Götterdämmerung," the exploitation of theme is much more refined, much more interesting than in the first two parts of "The Ring," because the maturity of Wagner was really able to reduce from his simple material, sometimes very simple material of the beginning reduction he would have not done, able to do even when he was younger. So this influence is recognized. That is not told stylistically, but that is how to reduce ideas from each other, how to prolong the richness of your imagination.

*(Nodaira)* That was a very interesting explanation. I recall Wagner once said that, when he composed "The Ring of the Nibelung," he had to struggle with the same materials for twenty-five or even thirty years until at last he went back to the same materials and developed the music in a different way. Am I correct in assuming that your experience of conducting Wagner's music influenced your technique?

*(Boulez)* It is correct. Well, it was a very strong influence on my development for 5 years between 1976 and 1980.

*(Nodaira)* Now, I believe that the term "Incises" is a medieval term, coming from the age of Gregorian chants. For instance, your masterpiece from the 1980s is named "Répons," which is another musical term from the medieval period or around that time when Western music originated. Can we understand that you attempted to realize the modernization of various terms from the roots of Western music in this work?

*(Boulez)* Do not give the title only at the beginning of my career. I used the words which were used at this time. In the sonata, I did not mean the sonatas always in the kind of classical shape. But sonata was a word very much in use and used it like the other ones. But at one point, I was really taken by the fact that some names have such strong connotations that it is impossible to use them without having a reference. If you use the word "sonata," you are using the same time all the heritage of the sonata, Beethoven sonata, Mozart sonata, Hayden sonata and so on. Especially Beethoven and Brahms sonatas are very important in the repertoire, and the connotation is extremely strong. So immediately this connotation is really an obstacle for me at least.

Therefore, I prefer names which in the same time, say something at the structure of the music and how you can see the music and at the same time, say nothing. If I say the word trope, I do not know if it is the same in English as French, I think it is. That was in the Gregorian, which was a way of memorizing the Gregorian chant with all this kind of flourishes they had at one point. Therefore, instead of just singing the flourishes, they added words to the text that they could remember and memorize the music. The words were, of course, religious but it has nothing to do with, for instance, Kyrie eleison, fons bonitatis, etcetera, etcetera. So there were some different words to be able to memorize the musical words. Tropus is exactly that. You have the text and then add some commentaries very much included in the text itself, but the text does not totally following. Only that, a way of giving dimension to the text that these text did not have at the very beginning. Therefore, I use like "Répons" also. "Répons" is in French also western soil, that is kind of dialogue between various sources; acoustical and hierarchical sources, for instance, you have priest and collectivity. You have the different levels of dialogue like that. I did not want to use only dialogue. I wanted to give kind of direction to this dialogue and to say that is really western soil. What better word to find than "Répons," which means exactly what it means and which has very vague connotation but not total connotation. And when these words are not vague exactly, they are precise, but they contain many different categories and I use these words which can contain various categories because it fits what I want to say and at the same time, it does not limit what I want to say.

*(Nodaira)* It seems to me that "Répons" is a very important work for you. I will come back to this piece later, as it makes use of computers. For now, the sound of "Sur Incises," which we discussed earlier, is very unique—something that only you can create. You mentioned this in your lecture yesterday for the Kyoto Prize, but you have gathered nine players of resonance instruments, which are your preferred instruments. Could you tell me what prompted you to use this particular composition of instruments to play "Sur Incises?"

*(Boulez)* Well, formation came not by chance completely, of course, but you know, this piece "Incises" which was the beginning of "Sur Incises" was commissioned

by an Italian organization where Mr. Luciano Berio and Mr. Pollini were very influential and had power of decision. They asked me to write a piece for a competition where they were patrons there. I said "yes, all right." What do you think about piano competition, you think virtuosity and sonority? So this short piece was about sonority at the very beginning, and virtuosity, the second half. So it was a short piece, let us say that it was a short piece. After that, it remained on my table for a quite a long time, without merely looking at it. After a while, I had a desire to write a kind of concerto for Mr. Pollini. Concerto, for me also, is a kind of connotation. Concerto for me is tied to literature in the 19th century. A beautiful literature but literature which goes with style of the music of the 19th century. The best examples are, beginning with Mozart, especially, and finishing with Brahms, and all this literature which is very important shows the soloist against the collectivity, against the group. More and more the individual soloists were, more and more the collective was an anonymous, let us put it this way.

Then that is why I was not satisfied with the idea and when I began to think of that, I began to think of pianos. I did not know the number, but I thought first of the central piano and then pianos which were on each side as echoes of the main piano. So at the beginning, the piece was written for three pianos, but very shortly, I began to think that that is not enough. The sonority would be too short. Also, I was aware of the danger of the similarity in semblance with "Les Noces" by Stravinsky where you have four pianos, and with Bartók's "Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion." Therefore, I did not choose the word figure 3 because it was between 4 and 2. I simply choose because it gave me an opportunity to have this kind of mirror like structure of the music. Then after that, I added percussion first, because I thought the combination of especially very quick passages, it will be rich with another sonority and confusing maybe the instruments. You know, if you sometimes hear the "Sur Incises," the rapid places especially, that go so quick that you cannot make any difference between some notes of the piano and some notes of the vibraphone. That is impossible because it goes too quick and is too close to register. Therefore, this ambiguity that I wanted also, to have an instrument which can be confused sometimes and which can be individual at other times. And then after that, because I like the harp and I do not like the harp too much for the French style, so you know for, kind of nice glissando, for very nice sonority, I like the harp. I like the harp also for its hard side. Certainly in the Ensemble InterContemporain, we have the harpist, Frédérique Cambreling, best in touch for the harp, sometimes very hard, very harsh and I like this type of harp. I would like to add then three harps for the sake of having underlining the accentuation. That is not a principal instrument, but sometimes, to underline the accentuation, it brings something very, very strong. And then, sometimes also, I keep the harps but in the moment of the piece, you did not hear today. I like harps to be a kind of a texture, a kind of not underground but background of music. So you hear them, maybe not very loud, but you hear them as absolutely necessary to the sound of

the nine instruments. Then it gave me 3 groups; 3 harps, 3 percussions, 3 pianos. But it gave me also 3 groups of piano, harp and percussion: percussion 1 to piano 1, with harp 1, piano2 with harp 2 with percussion 2, and so on. So it gave me the possibility of having 3 homogeneous and 3 combination of instruments. That is very simple, 3 times 3 is 9. That was very easy, and more, it coincided with the 90th birthday of the Paul Sacher for whom the piece was written. But that is an anecdote. I did not choose the figure 9 because of that.

*(Nodaira)* It is very interesting to know how this instrumental composition was chosen. You previously mentioned one of your works from the 1980s, "Répons." As Dr. Choki explained at the outset, you have been involved in management and education at the Institute for Research and Coordination Acoustic/Music, or IRCAM, of the Centre Pompidou since the late 1970s. While holding that position, you showed a future direction for how computers should be used and how computers can be linked to music, and I suspect that "Répons" represented a key moment for you. A computer is a system that can convert and distort the sounds of instruments in real time, or more specifically, it can calculate electronic acoustics instantly. My question is, what do you think about the future of computer music, that is to say, how will it evolve and what are its future possibilities? You have already had experienced using computers for "Répons" and some other works, including "Anthèmes 2" which I briefly mentioned earlier. Could you share your thoughts on how such real-time computer systems will develop in the future?

*(Boulez)* Well, there are, in my opinion, at least two directions which are as important as each one. Because, first, the computer is involved with sound, pure sound. Let us say, synthesis, of course now with computer we can do in real time. Synthesis, which is very complex, very complicated and gives you very good results. Because for a long time, the calculation was very tight and it took a lot of time and it went to a certain limit. You were putting in face of the fact that the electronic sounds were much less interesting than the instrumental sounds and much less complex, much simpler and less interesting and not lively at all, totally dead. Therefore, now with the computer science which has gone miles and miles and miles ahead, so you can make sounds which are interesting. These sounds are interesting not only in time but in kind of color, kind of condition. You have possibility of drawing things which were not possible to draw. For instance, if you go from the tempo of the tam-tam to the tempo of the bassoon, you can have all the transition between that and you have a kind of continuity of time because our world of music in the instrumental color is based on the cut. Between oboe and bassoon, between oboe and violin, you have really a discontinuity. Therefore, computer can bring some continuity where always you were bothered sometimes by discontinuity. That is the first thing. The second thing is that you can make intervals very precise. For instance, I will give some of my experiences. I have written in some pieces, for harps with

microtones because I was interested in combination of intervals which were smaller than half tones, which is our western system, but many other systems do not belong to the western world. But I mean you feel the necessity of having smaller intervals. These intervals are impossible to do with our instrument either you can make the tuning properly stable. For instance, with the harp, with the condition like the hypsometry or temperature, the harp is out of tune very rapidly. That is very difficult to tune a harp with half tones, so with quarter tones, that is almost impossible because the quarter tones are immediately transformed into something which is closer to quarter tone but not quarter tone.

And my stop at the quarter tone is because the ear is able to appreciate very different kinds of intervals, smaller intervals. Therefore with the computer, with the machinery, you can have definition of intervals which is absolutely rigorous and which is maintained because there is no question of hygrometry or temperature there. If you have 550 Hz and 572 Hz, you hear the difference but you always hear the same difference. You have to have rather clear time for that but you can really decide what you want to hear. You can prepare a kind of scale like that, and then during the performance, you can change the scale and have a very different scale. That is the first thing. So sound, sound tempo, and sound as intervals.

Now, the second part which is important in the computer music is this kind of dialogue between the performer and the machine. Because what was bothering me during the electronic music time is the analogical one that you had to record what you want to do on a tape. And then you were prisoner of the tape once you were, I have made a quite a lot of 60s and 70s of these performances with the tape. All what you are concerned that to be synchronized with the tape. So all your kind of judgment, all your kind of freedom with interpretation has gone because you are completely under the pressure of time let us say; the time which is not your time but which is the time of the machine. That is not good at all. You have that and you have the fact that you cannot have a reaction of the machine compared to you.

Now, it is not totally convincing and it still has to be investigated much more, but we have what one calls score following. Score following, you play a score you have recorded electronically and then performer should trigger this score when he plays something very precise. But now, it is no more obliged to synchronize. The machine synchronizes for him, he can play a little bit slower, he can play a little bit quicker, he can play a little bit louder. The trigger will be there and then the kind of virtual score will appear in the loud speaker and you have this kind of dialogue with the machine and the performer and that makes the situation much more interesting, because there is also a psychological difficulty. I remember some concerts with electronic music, only electronic music in the 60s for instance. You are facing like you are now; you are facing me, I am facing you. But there they were the loud speaker and the loud speaker is not terribly interesting to look at for more than five seconds. So the light was

going down and you have the kind of atmosphere, a kind of very, very artificial atmosphere created, and that was not very exciting and you listen to a tape of 10 minutes or 15 minutes, and there was nothing to look at. There was nothing to pay attention to. If you do this type of music with just loud speakers, then let the audience circulate and have a kind of free space and move, really like you have installations like, for instance, plastic arts. I can agree with that but I do not agree when you have concert installation. Then you do not have a concert but something which is really very different from it.

So I think the dialogue I want to have with the computer, but that is not only a dialogue of two sources which are different but also the result is different. You have to be a part of the performance. Therefore, in the "Répons," you have the musicians that are not transformed. They are in the middle, and I am also conducting in the middle of the hall. Then you have the audience around and behind the audiences, you have the soloist and you can see them from far away but you are in front of them compared to the center and then the loud speakers which are bringing the transformed sound are behind the audience and you have a kind of spatial distribution, which is important also because the difference between the sound of the loud speaker and sound of an instrument. The instrument is in front of you and it is the source, and it does not move, you are concentrated on the source. But with the loud speaker, certainly, the sound can travel and that is important not only for the sake of it. Sometime, you need an effect like that, of course. But most of the time, that is to clarify polyphony, which can be difficult to perceive, and then this polyphony, you can perceive much more when it is distributed spatially and that we can do now. So conclusion of what we need is that concert hall, which are different from our concert halls, because what we need is kind of possibility to be flexible, certain flexibility, and not at all always this possibility to have the performers and face to face the audience. Then you have more and more pieces which are conceived for different type of space, not only imaginary space but real space and I think we have small halls like that in Paris. I hope that the hall we are building now is also conceived, not totally movable, of course, not totally flexible, but with a certain amount of flexibility, so you can use the space for instruments also, for distributing the instruments in space, but also for having circuits of loud speakers which can transmit the sound with the kind of mobility. So you see, the problem is very heavy, quite vague from certain point of view, but certainly we will go in this direction to have a kind of modification of space where the music will take place. That was a very long answer, I am sorry.

*(Nodaira)* Thank you very much for your valuable opinion on this subject. I regret to say it, but we are nearly running out of time. I wish that I could continue speaking with you for much longer, but allow me to ask you one final question. I understand that you are enthusiastically instructing young musicians at the Lucerne Festival. Specifically what do you do at the Lucerne Festival, and could you provide your comments on what you can do to help

young musicians grow?

*(Boulez)* Well, education is a very important thing. Certainly, music schools already have quite a lot to do and they cannot be very inventive and creative as far as contemporary music is concerned. They have no time for that. The younger instrumentalists should first learn the instrument, should learn the repertoire and when it comes to contemporary music, there is not much time left. There is no concentration of work within a limited time, which is important for me in the Lucerne Project. That is, you are concentrated into three weeks. And in three weeks, we do three to four programs. So there is a lot of work. Especially last year, for instance, we did programs which were very demanding. We did "Répons," for instance, with the students. We did also "Sinfonia" by Berio, we did "Déserts" by Varèse, we did "Kammerkonzert" by Berg and so on and so forth. So in very different directions, but music which is belonging to this century or to the previous century but which is very important and going into very different stylistic direction also. You cannot compare, for instance, "Kammerkonzert" by Berg with "Déserts" by Varèse and you cannot compare Berio with Janáček, the "Sinfonietta." Therefore, it is interesting that they cover a lot of space. I must say that I am interested in such concentrated pedagogy. My own teacher, Messiaen, was not a conductor at all but he was always interested, especially when he was younger, and he devoted to pedagogy, kind of regular pedagogy which was all year round. He remained there making progress, began with harmony classes and finished with composition classes. He was constantly taken by the Conservatoire de Paris, and having to do with some pedagogy which was running around certain number of works. Certainly some works you cannot avoid when you are teaching. I could not do that myself. I admire people who can be involved constantly with pedagogy. I did that for three years in my life, and I had practically enough. Because I could not see myself just as a perpetual teacher, let us say. Therefore, I prefer this kind of teaching, which is concentrated, which is short, but very intense because everyone is there from morning to evening. And then you have collectivity, which is only for three weeks but strong collectivity. People will know each other, appreciate each other, fit each other, that is very important.

So we have a kind of different levels of teaching: We have teaching of instruments which was done with instrumentalist of the Ensemble InterContemporain of Paris. They come to coach the young people, to tell them how to look at the part, how to perform, that is the preliminary. Then you have also the orchestral teaching when you have people who are unified temporarily at least to perform as an orchestra, or as a group, a chamber group, which is very important. After that, you have the conducting classes. You have a moment of conducting classes where I take the pieces which are on the repertoire of this year, for instance, and then I chose only two or three students because I want them to conduct and not to look at only. So we are very strict with that. We do not want five or ten people but we choose three, four maximum. Then they have

the opportunity to conduct the repertoire that we have on the program. We have the composition, and then I organize that in a way that it is impossible in the professional life to do. We were commissioning pieces. Especially there was a Japanese composer, Fujikura, and we commissioned him. For the first year, let us say, it was year A. The performance was planned for A plus 2. But A plus 1, he will bring sketches on the moment of his piece and it will be rehearsed. So he can listen to what he has done and correct what he has done or maybe change that. Of course, he cannot change every component but change things which are important. And then after this experience, he finished the score and A plus 2, we performed the score in the concert with the students. Therefore, the composer and the instrumentalist have the possibility of the dialogue and he knows and applies quite a lot of things then. Because to make dialogue with professional people, it takes too much time. The time pressure is such that we cannot have that, and also it costs too much. Economically, it is not viable. Therefore, encounter like this one of the composers with the performers, and generally speaking, the conductor is also part of it, of course, that is a good thing, because you try to unify the world of performance from the individual performer to the collective performer to the composer to the conductor and to the artist interrogator who runs everything. So that is the goal of the Lucerne and we will see how far we can go and maybe if some changes have to be done, we will make the change, to follow the years.

(Nodaira) That is truly a wonderful project. I hope that the Lucerne project will continue to make further progress. Finally, perhaps it is a bit awkward to say now, but please allow me to offer my most sincere congratulations to you once again on receiving the Kyoto Prize. The program schedule today was very tight, but I would like to thank you for your valuable comments. I sincerely hope that your future as a creator, conductor, and educator will continue to be extremely prosperous. Thank you very much for your time today.