
Drei Beiträge zum 90. Geburtstag von Pierre Boulez

Boulez and the Necessity of the Dodecaphonic Language

by Mark McFarland

The development of Boulez's early style is often told in a series of events: his initial studies at the Conservatoire, the elevation of rhythm to a status equal to that of melody and harmony, the change to an ametric rhythmic organization, his adoption of the serial technique, and his embrace of the athenatic texture of Webern, among other things.¹ This study focuses on Boulez's adoption of the serial technique and the works from his student years that preceded this change in order to explain the vast compositional ground Boulez covered between the years of his apprenticeship (1942–45) and the appearance of his *Douze Notations pour piano* (1945, orchestrated 1978). The most striking difference found in the works prior to the *Notations* involves a limited harmonic vocabulary, and the overcoming of this limitation sheds light on one of Boulez's most notorious proclamations regarding the necessity of the dodecaphonic language.

As Nemecek has written, Boulez's earliest works can be divided into three categories:

- 1) Tonal phase with tendencies to abandon tonality (1942–43);
- 2) Phase combining various atonal styles with the rhythmic cell technique of Stravinsky and Messiaen (1944–45);
- 3) Phase synthesizing twelve-tone technique and rhythmic cell technique (from 1945).²

The composer's development led to the *Notations* of 1945, a series of twelve short works for piano, and his first to use the serial principle. The works that precede this include a number of student exercises, songs, piano pieces, and a *Berceuse* for violin and piano.³ Bennett writes that in these works there is "a great deal of repetition, the accompaniment often alternates between two chords for long stretches, the melodic line is simple, and the

1 See, for example, Peter Heyworth, "The First Fifty Years" [1973], *Pierre Boulez: A Symposium*, ed. William Glock (London: Eulenburg, 1986), pp. 3–39.

2 Robert Nemecek, "Tendenz und Kontinuität im frühen Klavierschaffen von Pierre Boulez," *Mitteilungen der Paul Sacher Stiftung*, 6 (1993), pp. 18–22, esp. p. 18.

3 The drafts of these works are housed in the Paul Sacher Stiftung.

m. 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
A ₆ A ₁ A ₆ A ₁	A ₆ A ₁	A ₆ A ₆	A' ₆ A ₆	A' ₆	A ₆	A' ₆	A' ₆	A' ₆	A' ₈	A' ₆ A' ₁
12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	
A' ₆	A' ₁	A' ₆	A' ₁	A' ₈	A' ₁	A' ₈	A' ₆	A' ₈	A' ₈	

Example 2: Pierre Boulez, *Quatrains valaisans* (April 1943), mm. 5–6, and opening section (mm. 1–21).

the intervallic expansion and contraction of the trichords; they are primarily diatonic, but also include the whole-tone set that first appears in measure 11 and then returns to dominate the contrasting section of this work. Finally, *La Mort* from May 1943 repeats two chords throughout the work's main section so consistently that it must have served as the model for Bennett's description of the early works cited above.

The one example from Boulez's early output that does not fit this description is a student exercise written in the style of Stravinsky. *Example 3* provides a good indication of this greater range of melodic and harmonic activity: while the first four measures (not shown) are concerned with the rhythmic manipulation of an inner-voice ostinato, mm. 5–8 represent an overall stepwise chromatic descent, which results in a new sonority in each measure and the appearance of the wave-like "Firebird Lullaby" theme at four different transpositional levels. In spite of this radical change in quality, it must be noted that the greater musical activity found in this work comes from the emulation of a style rather than from any internal motivation. The *Berceuse* from 1943 goes even further in that it was not written in the style of another composer. Indeed, the polytonal organization of the work, one that consistently superimposes tonal centers related by semitone,

Example 3: Pierre Boulez, "Chant donné (à la manière de Stravinsky)," undated, mm. 5–8.



Example 4: Pierre Boulez, *Berceuse pour violon et piano* (around 1943), mm. 1–5.

allows for a varied harmonic syntax. This makes this work unique in Boulez’s earliest output (Example 4).

The *Thème et variations pour la main gauche* from June 1945 prominently features an ametric rhythmic organization. The opening of the theme reveals that although two repeated chords do not form the accompaniment, Boulez had still not broken away from the habit of introducing a sonority and building a harmonic syntax based on its transposition. Indeed, the quartal harmony is heard throughout the first seven chords encompassing the opening three bars, before giving way to another chord that is transposed four times in the fourth measure. A step backwards is found in two works. The first of them is the “Prélude” from *Prélude, Toccata et Scherzo* for piano (1945), which uses the BACH motive in the left hand within a repeating set of chords.⁶ The second work, one that shares the same limitation for clearly musical reasons, is the seventh of his serial *Notations*. This harmonic stasis is, however, part of the serial structure of the work: the repeated chords contain the sole four pitch classes heard in the left hand, while the right hand limits itself to the remaining eight. Much more common in the *Notations*, however, is a texture that is harmonically diverse, one that does not even transpose a single sonority but whose syntax is based on the presentation of the row, albeit not necessarily in order. For example, the opening measures of *Notation 3* present the row in the right hand, while the left hand presents a retrograde statement, albeit one in which pitch pairs are shuffled after the initial two pairs are presented (Example 5).

The preceding tour of Boulez’s development up to his adoption of the serial technique was intended to highlight not only the composer’s evolution, but more importantly the stylistic disparity between his preserial and serial works. More specifically, Boulez seemed limited to a narrow harmonic palette, one frequently consisting of nothing more than a pair of repeated chords or a single chord varied only by repetition. It is only in his

6 Susanne Gärtner, *Werkstatt-Spuren: Die Sonatine von Pierre Boulez: Eine Studie zu Lehrzeit und Frühwerk* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008), chap. “Pierre Boulez’ Lehrzeit,” pp. 17–127.



Example 5: Pierre Boulez, *Douze Notations pour piano*, no. 3 (1945), mm. 1–3.

serial works that the serial organization allowed him to break free from this restrictive model and write works that are much closer to the style of his *Sonatine* for flute, his first work given an opus number.

With the development of Boulez's style clarified, new meaning is revealed in his polemical statement from 1952 that "tout musicien qui n'a pas ressenti [...] la nécessité du langage dodécaphonique est INUTILE."⁷ This quote, from the leader of the postwar avant-garde, helped to make serialism the common musical language by converting Stravinsky to it, to name just the most famous example. While Boulez's statement has been taken as a manifesto for others, it can also be read as a personal statement. The composer must have realized that the serial technique freed him from the harmonic impasse of his early works and made his career in composition possible. This accounts for the vehemence of this statement, explaining as it does the key to Boulez's earliest compositional challenge. His struggle with the inherent limitations of total serialism lay in the immediate future, but this subsequent breakthrough would not have been possible without his earlier adoption of the serial technique and the expansion of his harmonic syntax that came along with it.

7 Pierre Boulez, "Éventuellement...", *La Revue Musicale*, no. 212 (May 1952), pp. 117–48, esp. p. 119; repr. *Points de repère* (see note 5), pp. 263–95, esp. p. 265.